

The Shiites versus Lebanon A Strategic Plan or a Case of Misunderstanding?

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Many Lebanese are puzzled these days by what is happening in Lebanon particularly vis-à-vis the hard-line adopted by representatives of the Shiite sect in government and society.

What seemed in the beginning as a mere political opposition, to some governmental policies, led by the ministers of Amal and Hezbollah (the two main Shiite parties) evolved into a sectarian crisis as the "Highest Muslim Shiite Council" declared illegitimate all Cabinet sessions held in the absence of the five Shiite ministers of Amal and Hezbollah and banned all other Shiites from bypassing these two groups in dealing with the Cabinet.

On the surface, the problem seems a struggle for power-sharing within the executive branch. The National Reconciliation Charter (colloquially known as the Taif accord) and subsequent constitutional amendments, which organized government functions among the sects in Lebanon, promulgated solutions for power-sharing crises but these seem to have become irrelevant for the Shiite ministers. Why?

Many observers relate the Shiite opposition to a revisionist attitude of the Taif accord prompted by regional changes and demographic considerations. Others fear that the Shiites in Lebanon have become hostages of regional powers, namely Iran and Syria, who over the past fifteen years fueled the Shiite community in Lebanon with money and arms.

Political Shiism and Taif Revisionism

Application of the Taif accord (or misapplication thereof) under Syrian occupation between 1990 and 2005, has given the Syrian occupant unlimited control over every aspect of political, economic, social and military life in Lebanon; a formula that benefited many who accepted the occupation and allied themselves with it; among those are the two Shiite parties Amal and Hezbollah. The Taif accord ended what many described as "Political Maronism"; however, the Syrian occupation that followed prepped the grounds for what many perceive as the substitute: "Political Shiism".

Political Shiism and all that it represents (allies of Syria in Lebanon of all sects) were neither a Lebanese invention nor a product of the Taif accord and certainly not an expressed goal of the Lebanese Shiite community. Political Shiism is at best a byproduct

of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon and the Iranian expansionist plans in the region. Political Shiism emerged of the corrupt governments that were instituted by the Syrian occupation and that ruled Lebanon since 1990. These successive governments benefited a few Lebanese power-holders who sought to strengthen their grip on the nation by hijacking the state and dismantling its institutions. State institutions were replaced by a system of individual favoritism reinforced by receptivity to the will of Syria and Iran.

The Shiite community through this "Political Shiism" gained tremendous political, economic and military power and assumed command (with the blessing of the Syrian occupation) over most of Lebanon's governmental institutions and vital harbors from the Presidency of the Republic and all that it controls to the foreign affairs, to the internal affairs, to the Sureté Générale, etc.

Throughout this process, Hezbollah evolved from a radical group of terrorists into a radical organization accepted by mainstream politics in Lebanon under the rubric of resistance but still on the list of terrorist groups in the West. Hezbollah's power swelled in 2000 as Israel made a unilateral withdrawal from South Lebanon (similar to its withdrawal from Gaza recently) following guarantees to the security of the Israeli northern towns¹. This Israeli withdrawal gave the so-called resistance movement an opportunity to claim magnanimous role in the liberation of Lebanon and to become the uncontested armed wing of this new "Political Shiism."

As Syria was forced out of Lebanon following the assassination of former PM Hariri and under pressure from the international community (UNSC Res. 1559) and an outraged Lebanese street (March 14th 2005), the Political Shiism found itself orphaned and its resources (financial and military) threatened. The Taif accord as far as liberating the occupied Lebanese territories from Israel has been fulfilled and UNSC Res. 425 has been fully implemented². Hence the need for the armed resistance movement was legally nullified. Add to that UNSC Res. 1559 requires among other things, the disarmament of all militias in Lebanon, which meant Hezbollah's. All these nullified claims of legitimacy of the arms of Hezbollah and its need for financial support from Iran and military cover from Syria.

These developments were coupled with unspoken suspicions that Hezbollah's extensive security and intelligence apparatus was privy to the Hariri assassination scheme. They also explain the Shiite frantic attempts to hold on to power (by holding on to Lahoud) and to derail the international investigations (objecting to the International Court and to the expansion of the investigations) even if that effectively meant doing away with the Taif accord and destabilizing Lebanon. Sayyed Hassan Nassrallah, Hezbollah's leader, made it clear time and again that the Shiite demographic supremacy will continue to accept the Taif accord only in a context similar to Political Shiism as described above. Against this background, one can explain the Shiite pro-Syrian demonstration of March 8th 2005, the boycott by the Shiite ministers of the Cabinet meetings and the recent riots in Beirut on January 14th 2006 instigated by Hezbollah.

Many analysts express grave concerns over these developments particularly the recent riots in Beirut, during which thugs carrying sticks and rocks attempted to invade the Grand Séraille where Prime Minister Seniora was meeting with US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Mr. David Welch and attacked in the process the Lebanese security officers. Observers contrast these riots with the peaceful sit-ins organized by the anti-Syrian groups and with more restrained demonstrations of Hezbollah in the past and wonder whether the pro-Syrian Shiite demonstrators were trying to inflict physical harm on Mr. Seniora and his American guests. Hezbollah has a history of hostage-taking in Lebanon and many Lebanese fear that the Party of God will stop at nothing to maintain its power.

Political Shiism and Regional Powers

Regional changes that took place since 2000 in the Middle East including the war on terrorism and the fall of the Baath regime in Iraq have triggered a cascade of changes in the sectarian balance of powers in the region giving the Shiites a number of political victories at no cost: 1) Al-Qaeda has reclaimed the title of master terrorist from Iran and Hezbollah, giving these two a break from international scrutiny; 2) Iran's arch-enemy and the Shiite oppressor in Iraq, Saddam Hussein, was thrown in jail and his regime in the abyss; 3) The US attack on Iraq has seemingly tied the American military hands in the region and given some the misperception that the American leadership in the world can be sidelined. With allies in southern Iraq (Iraqi Shiites), in Syria (The Assad Regime) and in Lebanon (Political Shiism), there is nothing to stand in the face of Iran's expansion towards the Mediterranean and its goal to become the regional superpower (rivaling Saudi Arabia and Israel), a goal that Iran is trying to balance by fulfilling its nuclear aspirations.

In light of these regional changes, observers are left to wonder if the Shiite community in Lebanon is free to join its Lebanese counterparts in the independence-from-Syria movement and the rebuilding of a modern state, or if it is owing to Iran and its local brokers (Syria and Hezbollah) and therefore must remain opposed to efforts aimed at bringing Lebanon into the 21st century, or at least remain on the fringes of these efforts.

The Shiite boycott of the Seniora Cabinet has already had its international repercussion and its toll on the Lebanese economy. The international conference of the granting nations that were to take place in Beirut this year has been postponed, many fear indefinitely, leaving the Lebanese market a chip in the hands of Iran to bargain with for Russia's and China's support, and also leaving the Lebanese economy at the mercy of a sole source (Iran) whose money trickles to a sole recipient (the Shiites) for a sole purpose, to exert pressure on Israel and the USA. Non-Shiite Lebanese will have to starve to death in Lebanon, emigrate to find jobs abroad and sustain their families back home, or become slaves of Political Shiism.

Political Shiism and the International Matrix

In the international framework, the choice for the leaders of Political Shiism in Lebanon seems clear today as it has always been historically: it is a choice between an eastern camp and a western camp. The eastern camp led by Russia and China, with Iran as the regional broker, is trying to guarantee itself a piece of the global economic pie in the Middle East. The western camp, led by the USA and Europe who won the cold war, feels it is only right for it to claim the world. They prefer the Eastern camp as they believe it represents more their values. This equation may have been valid in the 1980s and early 1990s when China and the former Soviet Union were wooing revolutionary Iran by playing up to Iran's hostility to the West and offering economic, military, diplomatic, and technical assistance. In the 21st century, the equation has changed. America is firm in its goals in the Middle East; the Bush administration will not waver. China and Russia are concerned over their share of the international global market but realize that the cold war is over. If China's interests are satiated in the Far East and Russia's worries are appeased in Chechnya, an agreement over market allocations and oil distribution will be in order. This will render Iran obsolete as a regional broker in the new global equation, and those who bet on it will find themselves short-changed.

For ordinary Lebanese, the choice is simply one between speaking English or speaking Farsi; wearing like Jacques Chirac or like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Most Lebanese, including most Shiites, will chose English over Farsi; they will prefer to study and work in the USA and Europe over Iran and Syria, and given the financial means they will purchase a "Chanel" suit and an "Armani" tie for their socials. For most Lebanese including most Shiites, the choice is clear. The Shiite leadership, however, remains on the other bank.

¹ The understanding of April 1997 masterminded by the late Rafic Hariri

² Taif Accord:

Third Section:

Regaining the authority of the State up to internationally recognized Lebanese borders requires the following:

- a) Pursuing the implementation of Resolution No. 425 and all Security Council's resolutions promulgating the total elimination of the Israeli occupation.
- b) Adhering to the Truce Agreement signed on March 23, 1949.
- c) Taking all necessary measures to liberate all the Lebanese territory from the Israeli occupation, extending the authority of the State over all its land, deploying the Lebanese Army along the internationally recognized Lebanese borders and pursuing the reinforcement of the existence of the International Security Forces in Southern Lebanon so as to ensure the withdrawal of Israel and to allow for the return of law and order to the border zone.

* *The voice of one... or maybe of thousands.*