

Lebanon's Shiite-Maronite Alliance of Hypocrisy

by Hilal Khashan

On February 6, 2006, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah and leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) Michel Aoun signed a memorandum of understanding, ostensibly to build a consensual Lebanese democracy on the basis of transparency, justice, and equality.¹ However, a careful examination of the agreement shows that its real goal was the neutralization of Sunni political power, especially after the 2005 assassination of the powerful Sunni statesman and former prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

The memorandum's allusion to limiting the influence of money on politics and combating business and bureaucratic corruption hinted at the Sunni leadership's vast financial and entrepreneurial assets. Conversely, its insistence on the right of Lebanese expatriates to participate in the country's elections sought to enlist the support of the mostly Christian immigrants in the Americas. Similarly, its attempt to link Lebanese national security to Hezbollah's arsenal aimed at legitimizing Shiite militarism.

Little of this had to do with Lebanon as a nation-state as much as with the attempt to preserve Shiite and Maronite power against the perceived Sunni threat. The result was a deeply unequal arrangement that has brought Hezbollah further into Lebanese politics while limiting Maronite options.

SHARED LEGACY OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Neither Lebanon's Shiites nor Maronites felt at home under Ottoman domination, and Sunnis relegated both communities to inferior social status. Both communities found relative freedom in their mountain enclaves although they occasionally suffered from both the ex-

cesses of regional governors who burdened them with taxes and their local feudal leaders who impoverished them and denied them education, especially in the case of the Shiites. The strong Maronite church moderated some of the adverse effects of feudal leadership, mainly because it took it upon itself to contribute to the education of the community, building numerous schools as early as the eighteenth century, especially the famous La Sagesse school in

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¹ *Memorandum of Joint Understanding between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement*, Feb. 6, 2006, *Mideast Monitor*, trans.

The creation of Hezbollah with Iran's help enhanced the Shiite community's political standing within Lebanon.

1875.² The church also played a crucial role in maintaining the cohesion of the community and preparing it for statehood. For example,

Patriarch Elias Huwayik was instrumental in promoting the creation of Greater Lebanon, and in 1919, he travelled to the Versailles Peace Conference to pursue his objective.

The Shiites were less fortunate since they did not have their own religious establishment to take care of basic communal needs. The Sunni Ottoman state did not even recognize a separate communal status for the Shiites. Many Shiite clerics had modest education, and they generally had little impact on the affairs of the community. Shiites had to wait until 1926 to have their own religious court, thanks to the efforts of the French High Commissioner in Lebanon, Auguste Henri Ponsot, who wanted to empower them as a countervailing force to the Sunni community's growing pan-Syrian orientation. The Shiites only won their separate clerical institution in 1969 when Imam Musa Sadr established the Shiite Higher Islamic Council,³ despite Sunni protests.

SLOW SHIITE ENTRY INTO SECTARIAN POLITICS

Under the French Mandate, Lebanon's Sunnis opposed the country's creation in 1920 and continued to demand reunion with Syria until after the Coastal Conference of 1936. During this period, the Maronites came to believe that they needed to foster good relations with the Shiites in order to provide "an ideological alternative to the Sunni-pan-Arab conception of Lebanon."⁴ But the Shiites, who had languished

under feudalism and Ottoman governors, remained quiescent.⁵

The Maronites eventually reached a settlement

with the Sunnis in what became known as the National Covenant of 1943.⁶ Most of the resources of the Lebanese political system were then divided between the Maronites and the Sunnis. The Shiites felt excluded and marginalized, and their sense of dispossession was articulated by Sadr upon his arrival in Lebanon in 1959 with the determination to politicize the Shiite community and to integrate it into the Lebanese political system on a par with the others. His ideas converged with the Maronites' vision for Lebanon, and they saw him as a "rising Muslim leader who readily and unconditionally identified with Lebanese nationalism."⁷

Among Sadr's contributions was the creation of the Amal movement in 1974, whose leader Nabih Berri became the speaker of the Lebanese parliament. Amal was the gateway to Shiite recruitment into the Second Republic after the signing of the Ta'if accords, a compromise brokered by Saudi Arabia and endorsed by the Syrian government, which ended the 15-year Lebanese civil war. Sadr disappeared in Libya in 1978 before he could see the full fruits of his contributions to Lebanese Shiites.

The creation of Hezbollah in 1982 with the help of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps⁸ and the group's military successes against Israel also enhanced the Shiite community's political standing within Lebanon. During the later phases of the Lebanese civil war, Hezbollah allied itself with Syria and was exempted from the general disarmament negoti-

5 Ibid., p. 51.

6 *BBC News*, "Lebanon Profile: A Chronology of Key Events," Jan. 11, 2012.

7 Kamal S. Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War: Lebanon 1958-1976* (Delmar, N.Y.: Carvan, 1976), p. 63.

8 "Terrorism: Hezbollah," International Terrorist Symbols Database, Anti-Defamation League, New York, accessed Mar. 22, 2012.

2 "Un Développement Équilibré," Université La Sagesse, accessed Apr. 2, 2012.

3 Thomas Collelo, ed., "Lebanon's Geography: Islamic Groups," Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Dec. 1987.

4 Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam: Musa al-Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 91.

ated under the 1989 Ta'if accords thanks to the Syrian regime's insistence on labeling it a resistance movement. For several years, Hezbollah chose not to enter fully into the Lebanese political system, but it began to slowly involve itself in local politics as early as the parliamentary elections of 1992.

Hezbollah jumped into national politics in 2005 after Hariri's assassination and the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon in April of that year. At that point, Nasrallah earnestly began to search for a major Maronite ally to help him navigate the turbulence of the country's politics.



Politics makes strange bedfellows as Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah (left), a Shi'ite, joins Michel Aoun, a Christian Maronite and leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, 2006. The two may detest each other personally but find it convenient to ally themselves against the Sunni Arab population of Lebanon.

FROM SECTARIANISM TO PAN-SHIISM

Southern Lebanese Shiites sought to join the Lebanese state in 1920, but a nation-state mattered little to the Shi'ite clans in the barren hills of the northern Bekaa Valley. Their feudal and clannish leaders regarded the idea of Lebanon as either ephemeral or secondary. This may help explain why Hezbollah—with its deep commitment to Iran's supreme leader—was born in the Bekaa and not in the south. Nasrallah is the party's first secretary-general from the south. Since his ascendancy, Hezbollah's upper echelons have been splintered along the long-standing Bekaa-southern divide despite the appearance of party cohesion. In sharp contrast to Shiites in the Bekaa, who looked outside the borders of Lebanon for identification, southern Lebanese Shiites were hardly attracted to Arab nationalism or pan-Syrianism and, instead, immersed themselves in local politics.

It was Nasrallah's personal decision to ally Hezbollah with Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement. His two predecessors, Subhi Tufaili and

Abbas Musawi, both from the Bekaa, were less involved with Lebanese politics and worked primarily with Tehran and its representatives. The coming together of Nasrallah and Aoun did not signify ideological affinity or a sense of common cause: Their true perceptions of each other ranged from hostility to lack of interest. Nasrallah once described Aoun as a man "who only thinks of himself and his sect, and views members of other sects from the perspective of Maronite racism."⁹ Less than six months before signing their memorandum, Aoun said he had two reservations that prevented him from collaborating with Nasrallah: "His intolerable preconditions for dialogue, and his relations with Syria and Iran."¹⁰ Overcoming these perceptions to work together was a matter of practical politics against a common enemy. In reality, Hezbollah has given less and gotten more than the Free Patriotic Movement.

Maintaining the Shi'ite-Maronite alliance

⁹ *An-Nahar* (Beirut), Nov. 6, 1989.

¹⁰ *Al-Balad* (Beirut), Aug. 14, 2007.



The flag of Hezbollah flying over this missile launcher is a grim reminder of the largely unrestrained military might of the Shiite group. The joint memorandum of understanding signed by Nasrallah and Aoun aimed in part to legitimize Shiite militarism.

nominally requires concessions from both sides. For example, Hezbollah's 1985 manifesto specifically states the goal of building an Islamic state in Lebanon.¹¹ In view of Hezbollah's strong ideological orientation, there is no reason to assume that it has shelved the idea. But Hezbollah's domination of Lebanon was unthinkable in the 1980s when the movement's manifesto was written, and its leaders, especially Nasrallah, have learned the necessity for deemphasizing ideology in the name of politics and long-term strategy. For these reasons, Hezbollah tolerates Aoun's demands for expensive infrastructure and development plans, reform of state finances and the civil service, and the questionable biographies of some of his officials. Since the alliance with Aoun serves Hezbollah's long-term plans for Lebanon, the group also tends to downplay the involvement of Lebanese Christians in working with Israel. Thus, Hezbollah refrained from commenting on

11 Hezbollah manifesto, Beirut, Feb. 16, 1985, For a Better Lebanon, trans., Feb. 18, 2008.

the high profile treason and espionage case of Fayez Karam, a senior official in Aoun's FPM, and influenced the military tribunal to give him a lenient sentence.¹²

Aoun is not oblivious to Hezbollah's strategy but feels his alliance with it will eventually secure the presidency for him.¹³ He seems willing to tolerate Hezbollah's messianic religious ideology as long as it can help him maintain his status as the principal Maronite politician. Still, he appears uneasy about his alliance with Hezbollah; despite leading a bloc

consisting of ten cabinet members and twenty-seven parliamentary deputies, Aoun realizes that failing to heed Hezbollah's dictates will cause a falling out with Lebanese Shiites and the Syrian regime.¹⁴

TENSIONS ABOUND

Despite their political alliance, there are clear conflicts of interest between the two partners. Hezbollah expects the alliance will eventually enable it to deconstruct the Lebanese political system and recast it in its theocratic mold, but the FPM needs to give the impression that Hezbollah is part of a national alliance and to make sure that the government does not question its military component. Hezbollah's need to operate with both Shiite and Sunni fac-

12 *As-Siyasa* (Kuwait), Sept. 8, 2011; *as-Safir* (Beirut), Jan. 25, 2012.

13 Ali Abdul'al, "Ta'haluf Aoun-Hezbollah," *Az-Zawiya al-Khadra* (Beirut), Feb. 9, 2006.

14 *Al-Akhbar* (Beirut), Dec. 13, 2012.

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tions has led to conflicts with the FPM. For example, Hezbollah decided to join Prime Minister Najib Mikati in voting against the FPM-backed minimum wage increase which, if passed, would have created major financial burdens on Lebanon's sluggish economy. But to attenuate Aoun's fury at Hezbollah, the movement instructed its labor union activists and school representatives to participate in a one-day general strike to protest against the vote.¹⁵

Aoun did not seem to fully comprehend the extent of Hezbollah's commitment to keeping Mikati's government in place.¹⁶ In fact, Hezbollah invested heavily in facilitating the formation of Mikati's cabinet and went so far as coercing the Amal Movement to give up one of its cabinet portfolios to Mikati so that he could appoint another Sunni from Tripoli, his hometown.¹⁷ Mikati's is the first cabinet since the 1989 Ta'if accords that includes more Sunnis (seven) than Shiites (five). This was the price that Shiites had to pay in order to form an apolitical cabinet to maintain the status quo that favors Hezbollah. In contrast, the FPM seems persistently outmaneuvered.

In post-Ta'if Lebanese politics, the Syrians encouraged the extension of the term in office of the Lebanese president for three years, in addition to the regular six-year term, on the basis of a constitutional amendment on a one-time basis. The reelection of President Elias Hrawi in 1995 was uneventful, but renewing the term of President Emile Lahoud in 2004 was met with stiff opposition, and calls for his resignation mounted after the Hariri assassination and the formation of the March 14 coalition. While Lahoud could understand why Sunnis would oppose his reelection, he expressed dismay at Christian leaders in the coalition who demanded his resignation: "It is regrettable that those

Christians do not appreciate the strategic importance of my alliance with Hezbollah and the Syrian regime."¹⁸ Lahoud implied

that he was allied with the Alawite leadership of Syria.

Shiites in Hezbollah and Amal have endorsed the Maronite church's proposal to enact the draft electoral law for transforming Lebanon into one electoral constituency, which would allow each community to elect its own parliamentary deputies.¹⁹ Better known as the Boutros Commission, the draft law would, in effect, prevent the predominantly Sunni voters in Beirut, Tripoli, and Akkar from deciding which Christian candidates would win in the elections. This explains why Sunni politicians and civil society activists have fiercely denounced the draft electoral law.

PROBLEMS FOR CHRISTIANS AND SHIITES

The present alliance between Nasrallah and Aoun coalesces rural Shiites and Maronites against urban Sunnis, bringing together the legacy of Shiite dispossession and Maronite incipient sense of political loss. Unlike previous Shiite-Maronite alliances, such as the one between feudal Shiite leaders and Maronite politicians (1920-58), and Sadr's rapport with the Maronite political establishment (1959-78), which were based on mutual strategic interests, the present one between the FPM and Hezbollah is an alliance of hypocrisy. Less than a year after the two sides signed their memorandum of understanding, FPM parliamentary deputy Ibrahim Kanaan told then-U.S. ambassador in Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman that Aoun was "the last person in Lebanon who wants to see

15 Ibid., Dec. 15, 2011.

16 Ibid., Dec. 10, 2011.

17 Naharnet (Lebanon), June 14, 2011.

18 *Al-Mustaqbal* (Beirut), Feb. 18, 2006.

19 *The Daily Star* (Beirut), Dec. 21, 2011.

Maronites view the Arab uprisings as an unfolding disaster for Middle East Christians.

Hezbollah's militia keep its arms."²⁰ But long-term trends suggest problems for both Christians and Shiites.

Neither Nasrallah nor Aoun seem to understand the extent of Lebanese Sunni frustration and their amenability to radicalization. Sheikh Muhammad Hassan, leader of the little known Free Shiite Trend, unsuccessfully implored Hezbollah to use reason and dialogue in communicating with the Sunni mainstream.²¹ Instead, the movement chose to invade Beirut in May 2008 and topple Saad Hariri's cabinet in 2011. Nevertheless, Aoun, who often makes imprudent statements to describe Sunnis, believes that "a Shiite-Maronite alliance provides the only means to confront their threat, especially after the beginning of the Syrian uprising."²²

Similar warnings for Hezbollah are appearing from other Lebanese factions. Maverick Shiite cleric Hani Fahs warned the movement's leadership against taking advantage of the weakness of the Lebanese state to monopolize political power to the detriment of society at large, and Sunnis in particular. He urged them to "avoid letting the Shiites face the fate of the Maronites."²³ Sunni writer Abdulhamd Ahdab urged Hezbollah to "revamp itself and decide to become an integral part of the Lebanese state, instead of scheming to steal it."²⁴ Later, he predicted that the "Shiite awakening is bound to lead to the rise of a counter Sunni awakening that can only lead to the disintegration of the state."²⁵ Former Hezbollah secretary-general Subhi Tufaili disparaged Nasrallah for unnecessarily antagonizing Lebanese Sunnis. He argued that the latter's policies risked undermining Shiite achievements of the past three decades, predicting that when the Sunnis mobi-

lized politically, "Nasrallah will find himself compelled to ally himself with Israel against the Sunnis."²⁶ Clashes in Tripoli between

Sunni Lebanese factions supporting the Syrian opposition and Alawites aligned with the Assad regime, and the presence of Sunni Hizb ut-Tahir and other radical caliphate groups, threaten to renew wider sectarian conflict throughout Lebanon. Neither Shiite nor Sunni commentators, however, are expressing much concern for the Maronite community or for Middle Eastern Christians.

THE SHIITE-MARONITE NEXUS AND THE ARAB UPRISINGS

Hezbollah's support for the Arab uprisings has been perfunctory at best. The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt advanced Sunni Islamist groups to the center stage of their countries' politics. Morocco did not witness an uprising, yet its general elections clearly demonstrated the strength of the Islamist movement. The Arab uprisings have revealed the strength of Sunni religious sentiment, and a Sunni revival is not something that Hezbollah welcomes, seeing this as something bound to stimulate Lebanese Sunnis, especially if the Syrian uprising leads to the ouster of the Assad regime.

By and large, Hezbollah's comments on the uprisings, including the unrest in Syria, have been muted, but in October 2011, Nasrallah made a rare public appearance to express support for the Assad regime and its "reforms."²⁷ In March 2012, he issued a statement on video warning of civil war in Syria and calling for both sides to seek a political solution. These comments must be seen in the context of the alliance between Hezbollah, Damascus, and Tehran—which has

20 *Ya Libnan* (Beirut), Oct. 3, 2011.

21 *Al-Mustaqbal*, Mar. 7, 2007.

22 *Now Lebanon* (Beirut), May 20, 2011.

23 *An-Nahar*, Nov. 24, 2009.

24 *Ibid.*, Jan. 13, 2006.

25 *Ibid.*, Mar. 3, 2007.

26 Subhim Tufaili, interview, MTV (Beirut), Jan. 30, 2012.

27 *The National* (Abu Dhabi), Oct. 26, 2011.

been strained by the Assad regime's violent repression of the uprising—and in the context of world and Lebanese opinion. At the same time, reports that Damascus continues to transfer weapons to Hezbollah and to train its operatives in the use of advanced weaponry²⁸ suggest that the organization's military needs ultimately trump its concerns regarding peaceful politics within Lebanon.

Maronite reaction to the uprisings has been similarly unenthusiastic, viewing them, by and large, as an unfolding disaster for Middle East Christians. Former Lebanese president Amin Jemayyil's response to the Syrian uprising has been lukewarm, and he appeared mostly concerned about its effects on Syria's Christian minority. Maronite patriarch Bishara al-Ra'i has ridiculed the notion of the "Arab spring," preferring to name it the "Arab winter." He considered the Syrian regime "the closest Arab political system to democracy."²⁹

For his part, the prominent Lebanese Christian writer Michael Young has lamented the Maronites' alliance with Hezbollah and their antipathy to the Arab uprisings. In the fall of 2011, he wrote:

Maronites have the institutions, talent, and memory to reverse their community's steady mediocrization. What they don't have is the self-assurance required to reinvent themselves in the shadow of their demographic decline ... [They] have adjusted to this decline by accommodating the view that their minority has a stake in allying itself with other minorities, no matter how repressive these may be. Such is the path to communal suicide.³⁰

28 *The Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 23, 2012.

29 *As-Siyasa*, Mar. 14, 2012.

30 Michael Young, "Maronites Pray to a Dispiriting Trinity," *The Daily Star* (Beirut), Sept. 22, 2011.



Maronite reaction to the Arab uprisings throughout the Middle East has been largely unenthusiastic although neither Shi'ite nor Sunni commentators seem worried for the Maronite community or for Middle Eastern Christians. But Maronite patriarch Bishara al-Ra'i (above) has ridiculed the notion of an "Arab spring," preferring to call it the "Arab winter."

It is indeed ironic that the Lebanese Maronites who, in the nineteenth century labored hard to plant the seeds of liberal Western values in the Arab east, chose in the second decade of the twenty-first century to digress and dissociate themselves from the Arab uprisings, especially in Syria. Columnist Jihad Zein has expressed bewilderment, asking "why those educated and suave Christians treat the region's most modernizing era in many decades with reservation, if not outright hostility?"³¹

The short answer is that Lebanese Maronites are worried about the implications of the Arab uprisings for their own fate as a minority group whereas Shiites dread the consequences the upheaval might have on their pan-Shiite project. This unease bodes ill for Lebanon as a whole.



31 *An-Nahar*, Sept. 14, 2011.