



ONCE HEZBOLLAH HAD TO COMMIT TO IRANIAN STRATEGY, THAT WAS THE END OF IT.

Yezid Sayigh



Yezid Sayigh is a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, where his work focuses on the Syrian crisis, the political role of Arab armies, security sector transformation in Arab transitions, the reinvention of authoritarianism, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and peace process. He was also an adviser and negotiator in the Palestinian delegation to the peace talks with Israel from 1991–1994. Sayigh is the author of numerous publications, including most recently *Dilemmas of Reform: Policing in Arab Transitions* (March 2016); *Haidar al-'Abadi's First Year in Office: What Prospects For Iraq?* (September 2015); *Crumbling States: Security Sector Reform in Libya and Yemen* (June 2015); *Missed Opportunity: The Politics of Police Reform in Egypt and Tunisia* (March 2015). The interview with Dr. Yezid Sayigh was conducted by Dr. Murat Tinas on June 13, 2017 in Ankara.

ORSAM: Prof. Sayigh, first of all, we are honored to host you at ORSAM and pleased to have an interview with you. Considering your schedule in Ankara, since this would be a quite short interview, I think it might be a good strategy to focus on one issue. I wonder the current debate in the Shia community in Lebanon, especially the one about the leadership and the role of Hezbollah in Shia community considering its involvement in Syria. How do you see the Shia community and the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon in this respect?

Sayigh: I think Hezbollah still enjoys very strong standing among the Shia in Lebanon; it is still trusted and popular. Although many Shia may disagree with it politically, they feel - along with many Lebanese including Christians - that Hezbollah has protected them from "takfiri" jihadists. Of course, Hezbollah created that narrative and contributed to the circumstances that produced the jihadist threat in the first place. I mean, if Hezbollah had not been involved militarily in Syria, that threat would probably not have developed in the way it did. Nonetheless, the party claims that they were there (in Syria) to defend Lebanon,

and this became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For many Lebanese who ended up very scared of their environment and who want to get rid of Syrian refugees, security became the number one issue. So in that way, Hezbollah actually gained a lot of understanding, support and gratitude. That is very true for the Shia because many Shia has accepted Hezbollah's argument that there is a Takfiri threat to them.

There is also another implicit narrative or agenda which has always been there, not just now with the crisis in Syria, which relates to the fact that Shias were, or felt they were, second or third class citizens in Lebanon until the 1975-1990 civil war. It's only after that, with the rise of the Amal movement and of Hezbollah and the liberation of south Lebanon from Israel in 2000 that the Shias have finally asserted themselves as equal in Lebanon. If you look at the economy, investment, ownership of property, and the share of Shia capital formation, the Shia have finally come to account for a significant share that is proportionate to their number.

So there has been a very important transformation. And in a way, Hezbollah plays on the idea that "if we don't protect ourselves and if we don't remain armed, we

could be pushed back to becoming a second or third class citizens.” There has always been this idea; although it is not spoken openly, I think it still runs underneath. So the question then becomes: will Hezbollah demand increased Shia representation (in parliament, government posts, etc) in return, for instance, for laying down its weapons? Some people claim that this is what Hezbollah wants, but it says “that’s not our concern.” I think this dynamic is a part of the wider picture.

However, Hezbollah faces other problems. One is day-to-day issues in areas it controls of crime, drugs, car theft, and water and electricity supply, which are controlled by mafias that operate electric power generators and so on. These issues have become apparently very severe in the Dahieh, the southern suburb of Beirut. People look to Hezbollah to deal with these problems and these gangs. But Hezbollah says “look, we are not the state, we don’t want to replace the state.” And it is important for their narrative to say that “we support the Lebanese state, we are not weakening it.” So, in a way they are stuck. In order to prove their own narrative, they do not get involved in governance issues. But Lebanese state agencies aren’t really strong enough to oper-

ate in their areas of control. But if Hezbollah won’t get involved in governance issues, this means that gangs can take advantage. Sometimes they join Hezbollah, but mostly they are just strong families and clans that are armed and ready to fight to defend themselves. Hezbollah has been very careful about entering into open conflict with them, because they don’t want a war inside these areas. It’s very difficult for them to know how far to go in suppressing this criminal gangs and groups, although recently Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah openly warned that the party would finally be forced to take direct action.

Nonetheless, when the collectors of electricity bills go on strike for things that are unrelated to Hezbollah, they get protection from Hezbollah just because a lot of them are Shia. Hezbollah, on the one hand, says “we want reform and we want improved services,” but then it protects people who try to block reform and changes of systems. Whatever they do, there is going to be a price.

This ties into a final issue. Hezbollah has joined the parliament and the government. However, it does not have thousands of members in the civil service, in the state apparatus, not even in the army. This is partly because they re-

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gard the Lebanese state as corrupt and partly because, the other Shia movement, Amal, joined the state apparatus and took over key ministries and departments many years ago. So, if you want a job or if you want a special privilege, you go to Amal not to Hezbollah. Hezbollah is very weak in that respect. It can't offer those services to people.

Is it because Hezbollah doesn't want to involve in this affair or is it because Amal prevents Hezbollah from involving in it? Let's say, how do you evaluate the current power balance between Amal and Hezbollah? And the role of Nabih Berri?

Mostly, Hezbollah ideo-

logically does not want to become part of any state too deeply because they think it will corrupt them. They prefer to recruit people who will join them as activists, revolutionaries, and cadres in the military and so on. Actually, that ironically means that you won't necessarily find as many Shia or Hezbollah supporters in the army as you might expect because someone who supports it strongly will simply join Hezbollah instead of going to the army. But you may find Shia who generally supports Hezbollah and Amal going to the army because they don't want to join Hezbollah's military. So in a way, Hezbollah cannot do without Amal because Amal controls a lot of real power within the state apparatus.

Consequently, Nabih Berri, the Amal leader who is also

Speaker of the Parliament, is probably the strongest person in Lebanon politically today. He is one of the two people who, constitutionally, can stand up to the president. The other one is the prime minister. In fact, the prime minister has almost no power anymore because of the agreement that all sects and parties have to be represented: This means that everyone has a veto and the prime minister is helpless. So, actually the speaker of the parliament is more important than the prime minister politically.

Under the Taif Accord of 1989, the president's power is also limited. Currently the new President Michel Aoun is strong because he is that kind of character. Unfortunately, in order to be strong, he is playing the "Christian card" to mobilize Christians separately from everyone else. He is using the election law campaign to demand a new law in which Christians vote only for Christian representatives in parliamentary elections so as to prevent the Muslims from tipping the balance by voting for their preferred Christian candidates. But this makes him weak; Aoun can only be strong by being president for all Lebanese regardless of sect. In contrast, Nabih Berri now presents himself as a person who stands against sectarianism. He uses a sectarian polit-

ical base, but presents himself as someone for all Lebanese.

At the beginning of the interview, we talked about the narrative of Hezbollah, you know, 'protecting Lebanese against Takfiris.' I will come to that, but first I have another question about Hezbollah's narratives. The strongest narrative of Hezbollah is the resistance against Israel. How do you evaluate the effects of its involvement in Syria on this resistance narrative in the eyes of Lebanese people?

It has already weakened Hezbollah. Well, not military, but politically. It has weakened among the Arab population generally. Hezbollah faces a dilemma. It claims legitimacy for fighting Israel, but now it is fighting in Syria. However, it found a new narrative to legitimize its involvement by saying "we are fighting against jihadist, Takfiris and still fighting against American imperialism." It links all these together as one threat: American imperialism, Zionism and Takfirism.

Is this argument accepted by the Lebanese?

No. Basically many Lebanese, as I said earlier, are grate-

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ful and happy that Hezbollah has actually, in their view, kept the danger away, but I don't think many Lebanese buy the narrative that Hezbollah needs to stay there (in Syria) and to retain its weapons in order to resist Israel.

I think most Lebanese, I should say most Sunni and most Christian Lebanese, think that "ok, you were great, we respect what you did and you got rid of Israeli occupation in South Lebanon (in 2000) but that is finished, it's over now; we cannot have a situation where you can start a war with Israel anytime you want, because we all pay the price." So, I think Hezbollah has lost that battle.

I think this is a permanent dilemma., in which Hezbollah has been stuck for a long time. On the one hand they

are a revolutionary party; on the other hand, they want to assure their supporters that they won't bring constant war. So, they want support from the Shia, but after many wars and the loss and rebuilding of their homes, the Shia of Lebanon don't want their homes destroyed in yet another war. It's a paradox. I think Hezbollah will always face this dilemma: it has to say on the one hand that "we represent the resistance and that's why we have to continue and be autonomous from the state;" but at the same time it must also tell people "we are the resistance, we are against Israel, but don't worry, we are not going to start another war." So, how long can they go on playing that?

For now, what's happening is that Hezbollah is gaining



more of a regional role. Although we don't know whether there is an internal debate, one wing of Hezbollah may be looking to get involved in Iraq. Despite a lot of talk about Yemen, I don't think they are an important player there, but I think they are gaining interest in Iraq.

This regional role costs too much for Hezbollah. There are some scholars who argue that there is a rising discontent within Hezbollah's supporters due to the significant casualties in Syria and we would see the effect of this rising discontent in the elections?

If the elections happen... First of all, there are people who have always made this argument about the costs to Hezbollah; whether in Lebanon or outside, they are always looking for proof of their argument. However, I talk to my Shia friends who have relatives in Hezbollah, who go to their village communities, who have friends or relatives in the army and I ask them what the atmosphere is and what people are talking about and so on. The impression I get is that so far the Shia, the ones my friends and contacts know anyway, are generally still loyal to Hezbollah or at least generally still accept the

narrative. The losses have not reached the level where people are actually rethinking this view.

I also think that, despite its losses, Hezbollah is also gaining enormous experience. They have become partners of Russia in Syria, which is big gain for them. So it's not clear whether the balance of losses is heavier than the gains.

Going back to what people are saying, it is true nonetheless that for the first time other Shia candidates ran against Hezbollah in the local elections of May 2016, in the south for instance. That was new. So I think there is an emerging trend of open divergence and confidence. But I do not think we are close to a significant shift within the community. There are so many different factors. Even if they don't vote for Hezbollah, most Shia are going to vote for Amal - and both parties remain partners in government. Furthermore, most people in Lebanon, whether Christian or Muslim, still go to sectarian leaders or political parties or corrupt officials to get whatever they want like services and electricity or whatever. These things are also important as people tend to vote for their relatives or whoever gives them services. So people may disagree with Hezbollah on one issue, but whether that means they oppose it depends

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on other calculations. It is not purely about supporting the party politically or not.

Moving onto the last issue in this interview, how do you see Nasrallah's choice in the Syrian crisis by taking the crisis as an existential challenge for his organization? He somehow linked Hezbollah's fate with the fate of Bashar al Assad completely, not even any other person from the Syrian regime. Isn't it too much investment for Hezbollah to link everything about itself with the fate of Assad?

That is logical, I agree. From an outsider position, it's easier to suggest there would have been better option. But if you think back historically, Hezbollah's position in Syria was quite different for approximately a year and a half at the start of the crisis. Then, Nasrallah spoke in public at least twice calling on the need for reform and for dialogue with the opposition. But, I believe, at a certain moment, Iran came and said "look, you cannot play these games. We are in an alliance and you don't have a choice."

From then on, I think that Hezbollah really wasn't given the choice of taking independent line in Syria. Once it had to commit to Iranian strategy,

that was the end of it. Since then, everything has been an attempt to make the best of a bad deal. I think, Hezbollah is not happy about being there (in Syria). Hezbollah's members who come back don't respect the Syrian army. They think that it is full of thieves and corruption. Hezbollah fighters, I think, are proud of themselves, maybe too proud, as good fighters but they also genuinely believe that they are revolutionary ideological fighters.

Some of them are also Islamic jihadist, you know, a different kind of jihad compared to the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, but nonetheless they are not happy about fighting for a secular regime. Hezbollah just doesn't want to be in Syria, but now that they are there, they are stuck. If they pull out and Iran wants them to fight for the regime, what do they do? That is challenge for them. If they want to leave after all this war, there are going to be a lot of people in Syria who don't like them. Also, the regime might want to open talks with the Americans and could simply turn around and say to Hezbollah "thanks so much but right now we need other friends." How does Hezbollah guarantee itself against that? Actually, it can't. That is another dilemma for them. So, I think, all they can do is to keep winning today's battle

and worrying about tomorrow's battle tomorrow.

So many challenges and dilemmas for both Shia community and Hezbollah in addition to many crises around Hezbollah. Before closing our interview, may I also ask your comments in brief about the internal debate in Hezbollah and the leadership of Nasrallah even though it is a closed community?

Look, not many people know anything. I believe there is a debate about several things. One of them is about what we do about

these internal challenges like corruption in their ranks and crime in their neighborhoods, and also about policies. I think all these things are being discussed, but I don't think there is division or crisis. That would be my guess.

Dear Professor, I would like to thank you again for accepting this interview and sharing your comments which, I believe, will shed light on our readers who are interested in the current Middle Eastern politics. Thank you.

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