

Nabih Berri: Fearing the Syria Effect



Berri says he is confident of Syria's ability to overcome its tribulations. (Photo: Haitham Moussawi)

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“The world is fasting” says Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, just back from Wednesday’s Army Day celebration, “so I’ll get straight to the point.”

He begins the interview. “The question on everyone’s lips today is about the contract workers. I’ll tell you what my position and view is: I gave permanent jobs to contract workers in the Tobacco Regie in the 1980s, and the number of Christians was tens of times the number of Muslims. You can’t accuse Nabih Berri on that count. That’s first. Secondly, I’ll let you in on a secret: I was asked to intervene to resolve the contract workers’ issue, even by MPs from the Change and Reform bloc. So I intervened. They wouldn’t talk with the contract workers themselves.”

The speaker continues: “Michel Aoun is a good, decent and courteous man. That’s what I’ve said whenever I’ve been asked for my personal opinion of him, and I still do. What happened at the parliament session about the contract workers has become well known. I let (Minister Gebran) Bassil speak for over three quarters of an hour to explain his position. A vote was

taken, and then what happened happened. At the vote, Lebanese Forces MP Antoine Zahra was supposed to be by my side on the podium. When I looked and did not find him, I said to myself: So that's what it's about."

He recalls the good old days of Hafez al-Assad, and reminds that it was Syria which armed the Lebanese resistance.

Nasser Charara: What political conclusion have you drawn from the whole contract workers' affair?

Nabih Berri: Write this down with confidence: The contract workers issue is an electoral ploy and a misplaced attempt to regain Christian support.

NC: You were just with the president. Is it true that he supports an election law based only partly on proportional representation?

NB: Not at all. The president is going along with proportional representation.

NC: And you are for proportional representation, of course?

NB: I am the pioneer of proportional representation, and support it even on the basis of Lebanon as a single constituency.

NC: Did you discuss the issue of the Rmeileh cell?

NB: Yes, and what the story behind it is.

Berri reaches into his pocket as though he has suddenly remembered something and produces a small piece of paper. "This is another matter that is not linked to the Rmeileh cell, but it resembles it, and both show that the country is in danger."

He proceeds to quote from the document: "AJ contacted MM and asked him for news of progress in his group's efforts to assassinate Berri. The latter told him... (Berri reads on silently, until he gets to the last few words).... The important thing is that you continue making the necessary efforts to carry out the operation."

NC: Is this new information?

NB:Yes. There is connected information about plans to assassinate me and the commander of the army. The man who wants to assassinate me, according to the information about him, is maybe using a false name. But there are people around who want to throw a lighted match on flammable ground.

NC: What about the situation in Syria?

What frightens me most is that there could be a preexisting international plan or scheme to participate in Syria. I wouldn't rule out that such a plan is part of the backdrop to what is happening in Syria, Lebanon, and many other places.

NB:My thoughts these days are preoccupied with the situation in Syria and the region, and of course in Lebanon.

At this point in the interview, Berri gives the impression of being fully preoccupied, heart and mind, with developments in Syria. He recalls the good old days of Hafez al-Assad, and reminds

that it was Syria which armed the Lebanese resistance.

“In the days of Imam Moussa al-Sadr, the Amal Movement was provided with weapons, expertise and training by the Fatah movement. Many people don't know that it was Yasser Arafat who named the Lebanese resistance brigades “Amal.” But under me, the only people who armed Amal's resistance against the Israelis were the Syrians. They provided us with everything from guns to training. Algeria helped to an extent, but I do not recall anyone else,” he says.

“When Kofi Annan came to see me, I told him that the way out is via a four-way meeting between Iran, Turkey, Russia and America. Agreement could be reached on a domestic roadmap for Syria, and then an international conference called to give this map its blessing...Anything other than this is just a waste of time. A few days later, the American envoy (William Burns) visited me, and I repeated my proposal. I told him: don't use not sitting down with Iran as an excuse. What else are you doing at the 5+1 negotiations?”

Berri says he is confident of Syria's ability to overcome its tribulations, “but at the same time I fear that it might suffer partition, and I fear the consequences of that for Lebanon. What frightens me most is that there could be a preexisting international plan or scheme to participate in Syria. I wouldn't rule out that such a plan is part of the backdrop to what is happening in Syria, Lebanon, and many other places.”

Berri produces another piece of paper. “I have not confirmed the accuracy of this information yet. I will ask someone who can.” The gist of the information is that a European head of state notified a Lebanese party some 15 days ago that “Lebanon is headed for Swiss-style federalism, and all Lebanese forces must be rational and not oppose this project, as opposing it will shake stability in Lebanon.”

He adds: “Because the dangers are on such a large scale, I devote most of my time at this stage to playing a calming role and drawing attention to the big dangers, and to the fact that the fires are spreading quickly, and it would be wise to extinguish them at the outset.”

Berri abruptly turns the conversation to the situation in North Lebanon.

“I told a brother in Tripoli: I fought the Israelis in the South to protect Lebanon's unity, and now Lebanon's unity must be protected from Tripoli,” he declares.

“When things went up in flames in Tripoli, I was in Musaileh. A top Tripoli and Islamic figure contacted me and told me: ‘As I am speaking, a shell is falling on the city every minute.’ He asked me to intervene to end this tragedy. It was 1am. I immediately called the head of security, and went with him to Beirut. I arrived at around 3am, woke up the entire country, and by 6am we succeeded in ending the shelling and shooting. Afterwards, a dear political friend called from Tripoli. He said: ‘Do you think you have managed to end the fighting?’ I asked him nervously: ‘Didn't the shelling stop in the morning?’ He replied: ‘Yes, but do you think you've managed to end the fighting permanently? For your efforts to succeed permanently, you have to impose a cease-fire not just on the gunmen, but on the people up above too.’”

He continues: “I raised this issue at the latest National Dialogue session, this issue of the ‘people up above’ in the events in Tripoli. I asked and inquired, but this is not the place to discuss this.”

We have to have social, human, national and Arab policies for dealing with the Palestinian refugees, not just a security policy.

He is keener to discuss the issue of the Palestinian refugee camps, which he says he raised in the second session of the dialogue.

“I said that this is something we must tackle, because it poses a danger at this time and at all times if we do not deal with it properly. I said we have to have social, human, national and Arab policies for dealing with the Palestinian refugees, not just a security policy. I listed the Palestinians’ urgent demands which were behind the current problems in the camps and with the security forces, and I endorsed them. Minister Walid Jumblatt also took a good stand.”

However, he adds: “When the Palestinian factions asked for appointments to meet me, I told them to come and see me as one delegation. But they insisted on separate appointments, and when I began receiving each faction on its own, the other side got upset. At the last meeting, I was frank with them. I told them that they have lost touch with the Palestinian street in the camps. I fear that they no longer represent the new pulse on the ground. This is a real problem. At the dialogue session I proposed a mechanism for building trust between the Palestinian refugees and the Lebanese state, army, security agencies, etc. When the president of the republic appointed someone new to take charge of dialogue with the Palestinians, I sat with him and informed him of what we need to do. We are determined to change the relationship between the security forces and the Palestinian camps, and build one of confidence based on the common cause and on pursuing an agenda to end their suffering in terms of living and social conditions.”

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