

The Lebanese Christians: Unsuspecting Victims of a Sunni Shiite Cold War in Lebanon

Sin El-Fil: the 17th Christian Neighborhood Targeted by the Death Machine since Hariri's Assassination

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On September 19, 2007, Sin El-Fil, a Christian neighborhood in East Beirut was the scene of a large car bomb that targeted the car of MP Antoine Ghanim killing him with 9 other innocent bystanders and injuring more than 60 civilians.

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The attack on MP Ghanim in Sin El-Fil is the eighteenth in a series of terrorist attacks that hit Lebanon after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February 2005. Similar previous attacks aimed at the assassination of prominent leaders and public figures (*Samir Kassir, Georges Hawi, Elias El-Murr, May Chidiac, Gebran Tueini, Pierre Gemayel, Walid Eido and Antoine Ghanem*) and at creating mayhem and killing innocent civilians in different areas of Keserwan, Metn and Beirut (*New Jdeideh, Kaslik, Sad El-Bouchrieh, Broummana, Jounieh, Monot, Zalka, Jeitawi, Ain Alak and Sin El-Fil*). Except for the assassination of MP Walid Eido, seventeen of the eighteen acts of terrorism targeted Christian civilians, leaders, members of Parliament (MPs), public figures, and civilian and business targets.

The cliché response adopted by the Hariri bloc and its supporters has constantly and consistently accused the Syrian regime of masterminding these attacks to weaken the resolution of the Lebanese people and their aspiration for sovereignty and independence and to rob the parliamentary majority led by Mr. Hariri (a Sunni) of its control over the government, in order to ultimately derail the international tribunal instituted to try the assassins of his father.

The opposition's cliché, on the other hand, has been to avoid making "political accusations" in the matters of these attacks (not even against their usual suspect, Israel), and to indulge in international conspiracy theories; for example, creating chaos perhaps to derail the Islamic Resistance from its mission and engage the arms of Shiite Hezbollah in an internal war that only serves the interests of America and Israel. Opposition leaders do not hesitate to accuse the "forces of the authority" of exploiting the attacks to strengthen their grip on the government.

Between the Sunni rush to judgment and the Shiite conspiracy theories, the truth is lost and the politically diverse Christians (some regard them as divided) are paying a heavy price, unaware that they may be the unwitting player, the fuel consumed, in a Sunni-Shiite conflict, in reality a cold war simmering slowly in their front yard.

Elements of the Sunni Shiite Cold War in Lebanon

Supporters of the late US president Ronald Reagan often brag about Reagan's genius in winning the cold war with the former Soviet Union "without a single shot being fired." What they neglect to mention, inadvertently or deliberately is that the war between the USA and the former USSR may have been cold in Europe and North America but was undeniably hot and blazing in many other areas around the world including Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, ... and of course Lebanon.

The golden rule of a cold war is for the main players to fight it "diplomatically" on their turf, and to use alternative territories, those of friends, allies and alter-egos to warm it up every now and then as it becomes necessary. Such is the status of the current cold war between Sunnis and Shias in Lebanon.

It may be hard to trace the exact origins of this Sunni Shiite conflict; some "scholars" link it back to the historic rift between Sunni and Shia Islam; "analysts" with a regional panache prefer more recent precipitants such as the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s, the growing threat that Shiite Iran poses to the Sunni Arab World today, or an expansion of the Sunni Shiite war in Iraq, which many regard as part of the larger conflict between Iran and the USA; on the other hand, many "experts" in Lebanese politics prefer to give it a rather national dimension and frame it in the context of a power struggle between two political-sectarian** groups for the control of the Muslim role in the Lebanese Government and subsequently of Lebanon. These causes are not mutually exclusive.

Regardless of its exact roots, the conflict began to escalate in the year 2000 after the Israeli withdrawal from South Lebanon. Key events over the last 3 years have plainly outlined this conflict and defined the phases of this cold war within a clear political framework:

The 2004 Presidential Elections and UNSC-R 1559:

In the summer of 2004, the Sunnis in Lebanon having fallen in disfavor of the Alawite Syrian Regime that controlled Lebanese politics, may have sought help from their regional and international friends. The United Nations Security Council passed UNSC Resolution 1559; it called for independent presidential elections and disarmament of all militias in Lebanon including Shiite Hezbollah. But lacking real power on the ground, then Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri - a Sunni leader and a wealthy businessman with access to powerhouses all over the world - opted to tactically stay in the Syrian realm, amended the constitution, and voted to renew the appointment of President Emile Lahoud, Syria's choice and a pro-Shia Maronite. Simultaneously, Hariri started a gradual drift from the Syrian orbit. In October of that year, Hariri's ally Marwan Hamadeh survives an attempt on his life. On February 14, 2005, Rafik Hariri is assassinated in Beirut.

Phase 1 is over; except for UNSC-R 1559, the Shias seem to have won round 1.

The assassination of Rafik Hariri marked the end of an era in Lebanon. Up till that point, the Lebanese Christians had stood alone - as outcasts - in demanding freedom, sovereignty and independence of Lebanon from the grip of the Syrian regime. Their participation in politics was merely symbolic; the few independent ones were alienated and the ones in government were deemed "pets" of the Muslims in power (Lebanese or Syrian).

The 2005 Parliamentary Elections:

In March 2005, droves of Shiites and Sunnis took to the streets of Beirut on 2 separate occasions (March 8 and March 14) in shows of mass power and in support of a wide number of slogans; yet a concealed reason for those demonstrations may have well been to determine who among the two groups (Sunni or Shia) gets to name the Christian representatives in the coming parliamentary elections. The Sunnis and their allies adopted for the first time the Christian slogans of sovereignty, freedom and independence; their demonstration attracted a large majority of Christians, including the supporters of the Free Patriotic Movement (Tayyar; the most popular Christian movement then).

Soon after, the Christian towns of New Jdeideh, Kaslik, Sad El-Bouchrieh, Broummana, Jounieh ... became the targets of deliberate bomb attacks. Thus a new cycle of violence against the Christians began. This cycle continues and has so far claimed the lives of more than 100 civilians in total, and 5 prominent Christian leaders [the latest being the attack in Sin El-Fil (number 17), which claimed the life of Maronite MP Antoine Ghanem]. Two other Christian public figures survived assassination attempts. Of note, the perpetrators remain at large (not to say unknown) more than 2 years after the first attack.

In May 2005, Sunnis and Shias reached an agreement on the electoral law, to the exclusion of key Christian decision makers and against the expressed will of Bkérké and its "political bureau", and they took the country to parliamentary elections.

In June 2005, a new Parliament convenes with Sunni majority control. Sunnis and Shias agreed on the name of the only Shiite candidate Nabih Berri - sitting speaker for more than 15 years and a close friend of Syria. The main Christian bloc in Parliament led by General Michel Aoun did not vote for Berri.

Phase 2 is over; except for the appointment of Nabih Berri as Speaker, the Sunnis seem to have won round 2.

The International Investigations and Tribunal:

In the summer of 2005, the newly nominated Sunni PM, Fouad Siniora, forms a Cabinet of 24, with 6 pro-Shiite and 18 pro-Sunni Ministers. The largest independent Christian parliamentary bloc led by MP Michel Aoun is excluded from the cabinet and becomes the nucleus of a new opposition movement.

Explosions continue to target Christian towns and public figures (Elias El-Murr attempt, Monot, Zalka and Jeitawi explosions and May Chidiac attempt). The attacks on Christians would continue as the investigations into the Hariri assassination waxed and waned and as the quest for an international tribunal makes its way to the UN Security Council.

In December 2005, as discussions over the request to institute an international tribunal to try the suspects in the Hariri assassination become heated, Christian MP Gebran Tueini is assassinated. The Cabinet meets in an urgent manner, and over the objection of the Shiite ministers, makes a request to the UN to institute an international tribunal. The decision is taken by the pro-Sunnis in the cabinet after the Shiite ministers withdrew from the meeting.

Subsequently, in February 2006, Shiite Hezbollah and the Christian Free Patriotic Movement reach - across the wide political and ideological divide that separates them - an "*entente cordiale*" on a number of key issues, including the arms of Hezbollah.

A round table dialogue was called for in March 2006 by Shiite Speaker Nabih Berri. After several months of meetings with no results, the dialogue was stopped as Shiite Hezbollah launched an attack on Israel across the border.

The summer of 2006 was really hot in Lebanon. The Hezbollah-Israeli war lasted more than a month during which more than a thousand Lebanese were killed and more than a Million Shiites were displaced from their homes. In the first days of the war, key Sunni Arab states - Saudi, Jordan and Egypt - and the government of PM Seniora criticized the actions of Hezbollah as a rash adventure. This led many Shias to regard the Israeli aggression as a Sunni attack with Jewish tools. At the end, despite Hezbollah's claim of victory, the Sunni government negotiated UNSC-R 1701 and took control of South Lebanon militarily through the Army, technically suspending the legitimacy of the Shiite Hezbollah arms.

Following the war, pro-Shiite ministers resigned from the Cabinet claiming disagreement over the rules, bylaws and regulations negotiated to control the international tribunal for Lebanon. The Cabinet has become now all pro-Sunni; pro-Shiites tried to make a constitutional argument that it is illegitimate and in violation of the constitution and the political customs in Lebanon, but their arguments fell on deaf Sunni ears. The Shias and the pro-Shiite camp suffered subsequently a major political loss.

In November of 2006, as the negotiations to get the Shias back into the Sunni Cabinet reached a deadlock, the Shias "formally joined the opposition." The rhetoric continued to heat up between Shia and Sunni over the approval of the international tribunal's law; Christian MP Pierre Gemayel is assassinated. The Sunni Cabinet swiftly approves the law of the tribunal.

A very eerie apprehension takes over many Christians; all of sudden, it seemed as if a prominent Christian public figure had to be assassinated every time the Sunni Cabinet had to overcome a snag. The Sunnis rushed to assure the Christians that Tueini and Gemayel were killed simply because they were pro-independence and opposed to Syria.

The winter of 2007 saw some of the most violent direct confrontations between Sunnis and Shias following a call for strike by the pro-Shiite opposition. The strike failed as did the attempts to overthrow the Sunni Cabinet; but an opposition sit-in began in Downtown Beirut. The pro-Shiite President Emile Lahoud refuses now to sign any decisions made by the Sunni cabinet including the decision to approve the treaty of the international tribunal. The Sunnis request international support; the United Nations Security Council passes resolution 1757, instituting the tribunal under chapter 7 of the UN charter, bypassing thereby the need for Shiite approval and for presidential signature.

Phase 3 is over; except for the Shiite sit-in in Beirut, the Sunnis seem to have won round 3.

The 2007 Presidential Elections:

As Lebanon was getting ready to enter the 2007 presidential election season, a whole new "feature" emerged on the Lebanese scene. The Army, under orders from the Sunni Cabinet was called upon for the first time in its history to fight a war against Fateh El-Islam (a Sunni terrorist group allegedly trained in Syria) in the refugee camp of Nahr El-Bared in North Lebanon. Hezbollah initially declared both the Army and the camp as red lines but eventually took no sides in the war. The war displaced more than 30,000 Sunni Palestinian refugees. Despite the Army's victory, the repercussions of this war on the Sunni society remain yet to be seen. During this war Sunni MP Walid Eido was assassinated in the only terrorist attack on a non-Christian target since Hariri's assassination. Although many in the Sunni camp saw in the assassination retaliation against UNSC-R 1757 - as proof, they cite the Shiite celebrations and an incident with the Shiite TV channel NBN - several analysts regard the assassination as reprisal by Fateh El-Islam against Lebanese Sunnis, who by and large stood by the Army.

As Lebanon is about to enter the 2-months constitutional period for the election of a new Maronite President of the Republic, Sunnis and Shias differ again on the choice of candidate. They frame their disagreement in constitutional arguments about the quorum; but the main reason for the dispute is who gets to control the presidency. Currently, the Shias have a firm grip on Emile Lahoud.

In the heat of the debate, the Maronite Bishops issued on September 19, what Marwan Hamadeh described as "another historic declaration." The declaration called upon all MPs to participate in the parliamentary session to elect a president; it also criticized without naming it, a large sect in Lebanon for retaining arms and trying to build a state within a state. The tone of the declaration was clearly pro-Sunni not to say anti-Shia. Within hours of the declaration, Maronite MP Antoine Ghanem was assassinated in a huge explosion that rocked the Christian neighborhood of Sin El-Fil. In an immediate reaction, pro-Sunni groups requested the support of the Arab World and the UN in conducting the presidential elections; a pre-packaged request that has been floating in the political atmosphere for few weeks.

Once again, that very eerie feeling creeps into the Christian psyche. It remains to be seen if the UNSC will issue a new resolution leveraging the Sunni hand in Lebanon, one more time, or if the Shias get to retain some control over the new president, if there is going to be one.

Either way, the Christians have little if any to say in the upcoming election of a new president; a post customarily reserved for them. For all one knows, an agreement between Sunni Hariri and Shiite Berri similar to that of 2005 is capable of generating an all Muslim momentum, large enough to appoint a new Christian President - without the Christians.

Phase 4 is not over yet; the winner remains to be determined.

The Christians' Sour Options

Except for the lone assassination of Walid Eido, all 17 attacks since March 2005 took place against Christians; not to forget the Sunni burning of Ashrafieh streets and churches on February 5, 2006 following cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed published in Denmark, or the Shiite attack on Christian neighborhoods also in the Southern Suburb and Ashrafieh following an episode of *Basmat Watan* (a political satire program) on June 1, 2006, which depicted Hassan Nasrallah (a Shiite cleric and Hezbollah's Leader) in a comic character.

Without detailing the chronology of all the other events and reviving the sad memories of each one, it is safe to say that they all happened around key decisions where Shias and Sunnis in government did not see eye to eye. Instead of heating up the war between the two groups directly, someone found an easier alternative and a less costly target: the Christians – their blood may be cheaper.

This is not to say that there was an executive decision by the Sunni political leadership or by the Shiite political leadership to kill the Christians; but both Sunnis and Shias have, in their cold war, created a fertile environment for the forces of darkness to further their agendas; be it pro-Syrian, pro-Iranian, pro-American or pro-Islamic. The only agenda that certainly does not seem to be furthered in Lebanon today, is pro-Lebanese.

Some may hint at a pro-Christian agenda behind the assassinations, furthered by ultra right-wing zealots and ex-cons released from jail in recent years; but this seems a bit far fetched. Since 1990, the Christians have become the weakest minority in Lebanon, marginalized in all political decisions. Many of their leaders are chosen on their behalf by the Sunnis or the Shias and act as alter-egos for the Muslim decision-makers; this has rendered any pro-Christian scenario unlikely, and made the Christians and their communities easy targets for the extremists on both sides (Sunnis and Shias), who desire to send messages across the Islamic sectarian divide.

This does not negate the need for a pro-Christian agenda given the seeming impossibility of building a truly secular state, or at a minimum one that guarantees the civil and human rights of its citizenry, before the end of the Sunni Shiite cold war. This is not at all a call for exaction of revenge against the Muslim communities in Lebanon; it is however a call to raise awareness among the Lebanese in general and the Christians in particular of the real threat conveniently ignored by many.

Given the intensity of the Sunni-Shiite conflict in Lebanon and its regional and possible international dimensions, the Christians of Lebanon lack the means needed to appease the tensions and to bring about a resolution. On the contrary, they seem to be caught in the crossfire between the two camps and risk being dragged, divided, in a civil war not of their making and in which they may find themselves killing each other one more time.

The Christian civil and religious leaders and their supporters should realize by now that their communities are being used as fuel in this unrelenting Sunni-Shiite war. Instead of continuing to be mercilessly killed by a "ghost" – to borrow a term from the Sunni Interior Minister Sabeh – and wept over sometimes with crocodile tears, most Christians would rather opt-out. They can no longer afford to play this intermediate role in Lebanon; their communities are divided and constantly targeted and those among them who can afford it are immigrating to no return. Many of them have become convinced that their best bet is in fact to opt-out of the game and perhaps of the current "*formula of Lebanon*." ***Sometimes in order to save a people, you must break a nation*** – or at least its political system.

A number of independent Lebanese Christian thinkers have begun to call upon other Christian politicians and political groups to withdraw from "national" coalitions and bilateral agreements with non-Christian groups and to come together as Christians to develop a strategic plan that promotes the **safety** and **interests** of the Christian communities independently of other groups in Lebanon, reverting back to a famous adage of the civil war: "*Security of the Christian society supersedes all other priorities.*"

*** N.B. The terms Sunni, Shiite (or Shia), Maronite, Christian, Muslim or other religious indicators can reflect sectarian or political affiliation in Lebanon interchangeably.*

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