

Alerts, Views and Background from Lebanon

[A Hayya Bina project]

Edited by Inga Schei and Lokman Slim

“Poor Saad” and the Malaise of Lebanon’s Sunni: An Orphaned Community with a Causeless Leadership

On April 14, 2019, a partial parliamentary election took place in Tripoli, Lebanon’s largest Sunni stronghold. Mrs. Dima Jamali, one of the female figures/candidates through whom Hariri had hoped to highlight his “new look” during the 2018 general elections, and whose election was subsequently cancelled by the Constitutional Council, in 2019, has now been confirmed in her parliamentarian seat as one of Tripoli’s MPs. Without delving into all the details surrounding the cancellation of Mrs. Dima Jamali’s May 2018 election, some elaboration of the circumstances of her reelection provide significant updates about the state of Saad Hariri’s leadership and the growing malaise within the Lebanese Sunni community.

Confronted with the decision of the Constitutional Council to cancel the election of *his* candidate, Saad Hariri could have opted for one of two strategies: to consider the partial election as “a big deal,” and the possible loss of a member of his bloc as a catastrophe, or, more wisely, to let this partial election run its course without heaping so much importance on it, and to admit that the possible loss of a member of his bloc would not be so ruinous—especially in view of all the losses he has already incurred over previous years

and the many concessions, paramount to losses, which he has made to his foes and rivals.

Clearly, Hariri opted for the former of these strategies. In fairness, one must admit that, from the perspective of naïve and simplistic wishful thinking, he was entitled to do so. In appearance, favorable conditions were gathered to undertake, at low cost, a PR campaign with an all but guaranteed easy “victory”: the electoral law according to which the partial election was to be held was a majoritarian one, transforming the “election” into a simple operation of “vote collect.” The main leaders of the city, including Ashraf Rifi, the troublemaking General and former minister, who, some years ago, broke from Hariri under the pretext that the latter is too accommodating towards Hezbollah, came back into the fold and publicly supported Saad’s candidate. Most significantly, Hezbollah didn’t seem willing to push its Sunni Tripoli’s *fifth column* to defy Hariri in this election. However, once again, Saad Hariri blundered either by miscalculation or by having accepted to be ill-advised, or perhaps both. Not only did he opt for a confrontational strategy but, amid inflammatory statements from several individuals from his entourage, he took the pain, a few days before the elections, of visiting Tripoli himself in support of his candidate. Unfortunately for him, the dismal vote count garnered by Mrs. Dima Jamali, proved that engaging his own credibility in her election was indeed the wrong choice. Worse still, it proved that the whole Sunni leadership backing him in this election was unable to mobilize its respective constituencies.

Understandably, the main grievances

expressed during Election Day were the worsening economic situation, and a shared disbelief in the promises made by politicians. When we recall that Tripoli is home to a host of billionaires, former Prime Minister Najib Mikati at their forefront, we can better understand the crux of these grievances.

These elections should certainly send an alarming message to Lebanese Sunni leaders in general and foremost to the Tripoli natives among them. But they must equally be heeded by the international community, which injected hundreds of millions in funds into this city and into North Lebanon more broadly, over the last years, in the hope of relieving one of the poorest city of the eastern Mediterranean, formerly a hotbed of tension at the peak of the Syrian revolution, and now home to tens of thousands of Syrian refugees.

While this election in Tripoli, with its very low voter turnout (less than 15%) and its clear messages of disallowance vis-à-vis the political class in general, and vis-à-vis Saad Hariri, is self-telling, it would be short-sighted to isolate it from the weakening of Saad Hariri and the general situation of the Sunni leadership at large.

The chronology of Saad Hariri's downturn more closely resembles a soap opera than a heroic struggle. Let us consider the following developments: in the fall of 2016, he relented his harsh opposition to the election of General Michel Aoun, Hezbollah's candidate for presidency, at the high cost of appearing ready to make any concession in return for serving his interest and of triggering a dissidence within his own constituency. Upset by this over-leniency towards Hezbollah and Iran, Hariri was summoned, in November 2017, to the Saudi capital from where he was

forced to submit a televised resignation. Saad Hariri's prodigal return to Lebanon from his friendly captivity in Saudi was due largely to a series of regional and international interventions, grounded in the fear that toying with his fate would compromise Lebanon's stability; it did not, however, mitigate the deep disturbance within Hariri's close milieu, and the puzzlement of the Sunni community generated by these events. The general elections of May

While Saad Hariri's leadership is in free fall, no other Sunni leader seems to take advantage of this situation, to emerge as a possible figurehead for the Lebanese Sunni community and carry the flag of its eventual aspirations, or even of its deep frustrations...

2018 reflected arithmetically this ongoing decline: the Future bloc was reduced to 21 MPs, from its previous bloc of 33 MPs; among those 21, at least three individuals can be counted as historically unaligned with the Hariri establishment, and were accepted out of necessity by Saad in his tickets in order to neutralize their electoral weight and indulge their patrons. The facts are that, in Tripoli, the *Tayyar al-Azm* of former Prime Minister Najib Mikati proved capable of greater mobilization than the Future Movement, and that, in Beirut, where he himself ran, Saad Hariri collected less votes than Hezbollah's candidate did. Furthermore, appointed to form a new government on May 24, 2018, it took Saad Hariri nine months and a full surrender to Hezbollah's conditions to be able to succeed in his mission.

We can multiply *ad infinitum* the indicators hinting that Saad Hariri's hardships are not

conjectural setbacks, but rather indicative of the end of the “dynasty” founded by his father, slain Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. Still, the point is not to lament the misfortunes of “poor Saad”, an increasingly fashionable moniker even within his own milieu, but rather, to acknowledge that the scope of this issue reaches far beyond him and the future of the Hariri dynasty. The matter is that no other Sunni leader is taking advantage of Saad’s weakening to emerge as a possible figurehead for the Lebanese Sunni community and carry the flag of its eventual aspirations, or even of its deep frustrations. Were Lebanon not a country which relies on the absolute minimum of civil values, the weakening of Saad Hariri and the breaking of a political monopoly, such as the one set up by his father Rafic, should be good news. But since it is a country where sectarian affiliation prevails over any sense of national belonging, the continuing and irreversible weakening of Saad, coupled with the absence of any local or regional will to encourage the emergence of a “moderate” back up leadership, will eventually leave the Sunni community in a state of orphanage, and, consequently, vulnerable to risky “soul-searching”.

A comparison between the situation of both Sunni and Shia communities might perhaps explain this state of orphanage. The Shia community has endured in the past years, and particularly, since the outbreak of the Syrian Revolution, and again, since the Donald Trump’s election, bloody and financial hardships due to Hezbollah’s self-enslavement to Iran. Despite this, and despite Hezbollah mobilization of portions of the Shia community into mercenaries at the service of Iran’s agendas — whether this be through fighting in Syria or through absorbing the impact of American sanctions — it’s not

realistic to say that the Lebanese Shia, both pro- or anti-Hezbollah, are lacking a cause to fight for. For the pro-Hezbollah, “resistance” and “victimhood” are valuable currency. For the anti-Hezbollah, regardless of the overtness of their antagonism, preserving the gains that the Shia community

achieved over the last decades, which they consider threatened by Hezbollah adventurism, is a minimal common ground. This is to say that the Lebanese Shia community is driven by some causes and that

The utmost ideals invoked by Lebanon’s Sunni public leaders are repeated calls for “stability” and “moderation.” In short: full submission to Hezbollah and its diktats...

its leadership and elites are connected to more or less identifiable agendas. Conversely, a survey of the Sunni community, will show that the utmost ideals invoked by its public leaders are repeated calls for “stability,” “moderation”, or, in short, full submission to Hezbollah and its diktats: to put it bluntly, Lebanon’s ongoing “stability” is not the result of the famous “Disassociation Policy” to which Saad Hariri continuously reiterates Lebanon’s commitment, but, rather, is obtained by turning a blind eye to the hegemony of Hezbollah over the Lebanese State and its civil and military institutions. Clearly, those Sunni leaders under the spotlight, be they political officials, regional notables or clerics, and regardless of whether they are defined as “pro-Hariri” or “pro-Hezbollah”, are not the only leaders of the community. But these *causeless leaders* are the only ones who are tolerated to operate out in the open. Others, promoters of a so-called “Sunni cause in Lebanon”, who tried

to play on Sunni regional contradictions, mainly the Saudi/Qatari ones, and exploit these contradictions to address the feelings of trauma and of frustration within the Sunni community, are, nowadays, either marginalized or imprisoned. This further antagonizes the orphanage of this community, enables Saad Hariri and other Sunni leaders to be its default leaders and mouthpieces, and ultimately greatly reduces these leaders' actual representativeness.

By inertia, by default, or by the convergence of the egoistic wills of both Hezbollah/ Iran and the "international community," Saad Hariri may survive as Prime Minister. Nevertheless, his and his supporters' hope, that remaining in this position, would allow him to recover the attributes of leadership, or even help the Sunni community, which has nearly doubled in size due to Syrian asylum, heal from the trauma of its orphanage, is definitely a delusional and far-fetched one.

English text edited by **Nai Zakharia**.