

A Dialogue With Lebanon's Ayatollah

Contributed by ROBERT L. POLLOCK, Beirut, WSJ
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"I have not found in the whole long history of the Arab-Israeli conflict even one neutral American position. We used to love America in the region in the '40s. [President Woodrow] Wilson's principles [of national self-determination] represent freedom facing a Europe that was colonizing us. But America now is living a policy worse than that of British and French colonialism."

So said Muhammad Hussein Fadhlullah early one morning last week, and I suppose I should not have been surprised.

We met in a nondescript -- but heavily guarded -- office building in south Beirut. On my way there I had noticed, as in the Bekaa Valley a day earlier, numerous posters celebrating Hezbollah "martyrs." According to many, the Grand Ayatollah Fadhlullah is Hezbollah's spiritual leader. He is not actually a member of the famous Lebanese Shiite organization headed by Hassan Nasrallah. But his interpreter tells me the Israelis bombed his house during their 2006 air campaign in Lebanon. There is no doubt someone -- the CIA and the Saudis, according to a detailed account in Bob Woodward's book "Veil" -- targeted him in 1985, when a massive bomb aimed in his direction killed nearly 80 civilians in Beirut.

Terry Shoffner That, readers may recall, was not long after alleged Hezbollah suicide bombers directed by the late Imad Mugniyeh -- one of the "martyrs" celebrated in the posters -- murdered hundreds at the American Embassy and Marine barracks. And it was in the midst of the hostage crises that would define Lebanon in the minds of my own generation of Americans. Outside of the Iranian theocrats, no group did more than Hezbollah to associate Shiism, once known for its political quietism, with radicalism and terror.

And what of Mr. Fadhlullah today? The aging cleric (born 1935), sports the requisite black turban and a disarming twinkle in his eyes. He is often described as a "progressive" religious thinker because of views such as his egalitarian outlook on the role of women in Muslim society (he is online at english.bayynat.org.lb). Yet there can be little doubt the Ayatollah's views have also shaped, and been shaped by, the fragile and often violent country he has called home since the mid-1960s.

The Lebanese-born scholar Fouad Ajami draws my attention to Mr. Fadhlullah's preface to the 1984 edition of his book, "Islam and the Logic of Force": "Civilization does not mean that you face a rocket with a stick or a jet-fighter with a kite, or a warship with a sailboat. . . . One must face force with equal or superior force. If it is legitimate to defend self and land and destiny, then all means of self-defense are legitimate."

I decide to start our interview by asking what people mean when they describe him in "progressive" terms. "When man thinks," he tells me, "he should live in his own age, not think through the past. . . . When I am in dialogue with anyone, I attempt to study their mind and to speak to them in the language of their mind, not to address them in the way I think but rather in the way they think. On this basis we begin this dialogue with you."

Mr. Fadhlullah tells me that though he is originally Lebanese, he was born in Najaf, Iraq, where his father was a teacher at the Hawza, or religious seminary, from which he would eventually earn his current distinction. (He holds the same rank as Iraq's Ali Sistani; Shiites recognize a small number of "grand ayatollahs" who issue religious rulings known as fatwas and serve as objects of "emulation.") He says his international upbringing shaped his way of thinking.

I ask if he thinks Iraq is better off now than it was under Saddam. Iraq had a problem with "dictatorship," he concedes. But this "dictatorship had a relationship with the former American administration," he says, pointing to Saddam's invasion of Iran and other actions that allegedly "serv[ed] the American strategy. . . . Saddam Hussein was an employee of the CIA but his job was finished by the end." He accuses the Bush administration of pursuing a policy of "constructive chaos" during the occupation.

Mr. Fadhlullah's fellow Shiite scholars in Najaf have been heard to complain about such sour pronouncements, but I see no reason to belabor the point. There is a rivalry of sorts with Mr. Sistani. And when it comes to the upcoming parliamentary elections in Lebanon -- the country shook off Syrian occupation in 2005, some say inspired by Iraq -- Mr. Fadhlullah even points to the West as a good example:

"We hope that that the elections will be as free as in civilized nations. Our problem in the Arab world is that people fear their rulers and therefore fall short of changing them, whereas the natural course of things is that rulers should fear their peoples. . . . We appreciate the way elections are run in America or the West; the Americans or the Europeans are not

frozen over one personality. They study the success or failure of this president or this administration, and therefore they change it from time to time."

I point out that many people associate political Shiism with Iran and a concept known as Welayat al-Faqih -- or Guardianship of the Jurist -- which has been used to justify the authoritarian regimes of the Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khomeini.

"I don't believe that Welayat al-Faqih has any role in Lebanon," Mr. Fadhlullah says without hesitation. "Perhaps some Lebanese commit themselves to the policy of the Guardian Jurist, as some of them commit themselves to the policy of the Vatican [Lebanon's large Maronite community is Catholic]. My opinion is that I don't see the Guardianship of the Jurist as the definitive Islamic regime."

When a Muslim goes to vote should he care more about a cleric's opinion than anyone else's?

"He should care about his own stance The Islamic idea says: When you cast your ballot, you have to watch for God because God will hold you responsible for the results of this ballot. If the person you voted for was unjust, God will hold you accountable for participating in his injustice. . . . Hence, the Americans who voted for George Bush are responsible for all the blood shed in his wars and occupations."

That seems as good an opening as any to broach the subject of Hezbollah. Does he think it's healthy that Lebanon's Shiites are increasingly associated with such a party?

His answer, in effect, is that Hezbollah is a force for modernization: "Hezbollah is a group of Shiites who are university educated. We know that you will find at universities, whether here in Lebanon or in the West, many who agree with the thought of Hezbollah." True enough, at least as concerns attitudes toward Israel.

Then the answer gets more interesting: "We do not reject the West. But we disagree with some Western administrations. We believe that America is not the administration ruling America. America is rather the universities, the research centers and the American people. That is why we want to be friends with the American people with all their variation. I was the first Islamic figure to denounce what happened on September 11. I issued a press release after four hours saying that this affair is not acceptable by any mind, divine law or religion. What these people did was directed to the American people not to the American administration."

I can't help but interject. Hadn't he just told me the American people were in fact responsible for the actions of the leaders they voted for?

He responds that the people bear "a responsibility," but concedes they can't predict their leaders' future actions. "What I am trying to say," he continues, "is that perhaps we want to be friends with the American people to engage them in a dialogue about their choices as they engage in a dialogue about our choices. Friendship does not mean adhering to whatever your friend commits to and does. Dialogue strengthens friendship; it does not annul it."

What does the Ayatollah think of President Obama? Does he think he might improve relations between the Islamic world and the United States?

Again, an interesting answer: "I think that some of his statements show that he believes in the method of dialogue. But here is an important point: America is not ruled by a person, it is ruled by institutions. The question is what is the influence of institutions like the Congress and others on the president. Can the president, if he has private opinions, can he carry them out facing institutions and conditions challenging the administration? We, in the Arab countries or in the East, we don't have institutions. The ruler is one person or one family. Therefore the people cannot object.

"We wish that President Obama tries with all his mandate to confirm the slogans he launched while still a candidate, that he tries with all power to make the world a field of dialogue not a field of war. We don't have a problem with any American president, but our problem is with his policy that might affect our strategic interest. We love freedom, therefore we are with whoever lives with us on the basis that we are free."

But didn't George Bush say that he wanted to bring freedom and democracy to the Middle East? Was he not sincere in those words?

"Does occupation . . . ?" He pauses. "Could democracy be forced upon peoples? Does occupation represent a title of democracy for people? Democracy sets out from the free choices of peoples. Therefore President Bush managed to get America hated everywhere in the world. His policy was the mentality of war, not a humane mentality. He might have spoken about 'peace,' but he saved 'war' inside the word 'peace.' That is why he was even rejected by American public opinion."

I raise Hezbollah again. Does the Iranian-backed group have Lebanon's best interests at heart? Or does it have

ambitions outside Lebanon? For whom is it working?

"I don't think that the Lebanese Hezbollah has a project beyond Lebanon. Because it does not have the capacity to do so Hezbollah emerged in Lebanon as a reaction to the recurrent Israeli aggression over decades. The Lebanese army is weak with regard to its power of deterrence. Therefore it cannot face any Israeli aggression. Hezbollah is supplementary to the Lebanese Army defending the country. If the Lebanese Army reaches a level of strength enabling it to defend the country, there would be no longer a need for the resistance."

And what about the posters, I ask? Imad Mugniyeh didn't just fight Israel, he killed a lot of Americans. Does he think the children of the neighborhood should look at the posters and think Mugniyeh is a hero?

"I think that the stage Lebanon lived [when the Americans were killed] was one without clear limitations. It is very natural that the American policy was interconnected with the Israeli policy. The stage when this took place was one of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West. Therefore the issue was not setting out from a person, but from the conflict between the East and the West, and through the political and security anarchy in Lebanon. In my own belief, this stage is no longer existent, but the problem remains that the American policy is 100% identical to the Israeli policy. We have not found an American position condemning the massacres in Palestine and particularly in Gaza. The missiles launched by the resistance were a reaction to the Israeli aggressors, who own American fighter jets that are never used but in massive warfare

"We in the region therefore consider the American policy responsible for whatever Israel does, because there is a strategic alliance between Israel and America in all the aggressions carried out by Israel. There is an impression in the Arab region, that might be controversial, that Israel is the one ruling the United States and not the other way around. America is one of the Jewish colonies."

Does the Ayatollah believe that?

"I am close," he says. "Anyway, we believe that Obama lived in a poor and disadvantaged environment. He was poor. Therefore, we might listen to some of his statements trying to alleviate taxes on the poor and impose them on the rich. We say to him: Be with the disadvantaged, be with the poor, be with the people living and seeking their humanity, and you will be the best American president in history. Be humane."

The interview is over. We pose for pictures and the Ayatollah presents me with an English translation of one of his books: "Islam: The Religion of Dialogue." He signs it for me in Arabic: "With my affection and prayers."

Mr. Pollock is the Journal's editorial features editor.

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