

"Junblatt: Syria Proposes to Guarantee Israel Security in return for Leb..."

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On July 27, the Saudi-owned newspaper Asharq Al Awsat carried an interview with the leader of the Democratic Gathering and of the Progressive Socialist Party Walid Junblatt, by Th’ir Abbas: “Walid Junblatt, MP, leader of the Democratic Gathering, has accused Syria of "using Lebanon to improve the conditions for negotiation with Israel." He said "the Syrian regime does not recognize the Lebanese entity." He said the Syrian regime "is now doing what it did in 1975, proposing to guarantee security for Israel in return for its returning to Lebanon."

“Junblatt criticized the recent stand of Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah and called on him to be "a leader who rises above Syrian and Iranian dictates so that we can shake hands." In an interview with Asharq al-Awsat in Beirut, Junblatt expressed optimism "in the long run."

“However, he was very cautious in talking about the possibility of the success of French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner -who is visiting Beirut today -in bringing Lebanese leaders together. He said so far the opposition has not put forward the possibility of accord over a new president of the republic on the basis of "respect for international resolutions and respect for the decisions of the dialogue."

“He said that after "commitment" a "settlement" could be reached. However, he personally insists on a president from the 14 March forces and says he is not ready to accept a president from outside them, without ruling out the possibility of reaching "some kind of a settlement" as he is consulting with his allies on the matter. Following is the text of the interview:

“[Abbas]: “The French are seeking to bring together the first tier of leaders once again. Has their endeavour been successful?

“[Junblatt]: “I have no information. We will see if the mediation succeeded in bringing the leaders together. It will be a good thing if (Nabih) Birri agrees on resuming the dialogue.

“[Abbas]: “Have you in the 14 March forces informed the French of your stand?

“[Junblatt]: “We are completely ready. We were equally ready when (Arab League Secretary General) Amr Musa came to Lebanon. But Amr Musa then had to wait long hours before the answer came (from the opposition) rejecting even the principle of a meeting. Has the climate changed? We hope so.

“[Abbas]: “A dialogue on what conditions and under what ceiling?

“[Junblatt]: “The givens of the national dialogue on which we had agreed before the war. Of those, the international tribunal has been achieved, after lengthy discussions and enormous financial losses as a result of the sit-in (in central Beirut).

“There remains the matter of diplomatic relations with Syria, the demarcation of the border, and Palestinian weapons outside the refugee camps. After the battle of Nahr al-Barid refugee camp it transpired that some of the weapons in the refugee camps have nothing to do with Palestine. There remains the issue of the presidency which during the dialogue we called "a crisis of government."

“[Abbas]: “Can we say the present crisis is a government crisis and a presidency crisis?

“[Junblatt]: “No, because there has been an operations order to topple this government which -when Amal and Hezbollah ministers were in it -was a "resistance government" as Nabih Birri called at the time, reflecting the speech of (Syrian President) Bashar al-Asad, and then (Ayatollah Ali) Khamene'i who wants to thwart the US plan in Lebanon. Ever since that time the government stood fast and neither sit-ins nor the resignation of the Shi'i ministers succeeded in toppling it.

“It is this government which unanimously agreed to Resolution 1701 in the presence of Hezbollah and Amal ministers. What Sayyid Hasan (Nasrallah) is saying is a fallacy. The multinational force has no connection with the United Nations. The multinational force comes when one or more states decide to send forces.

"It has no connection whatsoever with the United Nations. The UN decision was to strengthen the UN emergency force -and under Chapter VII [of UN Charter] which we called Chapter 6.5, after we, (prime minister) Fuad Siniora, Nabih Birri, and all Lebanon rejected Chapter VII.

[Abbas]: "Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah says Hezbollah did not agree to the seven points?"

[Junblatt]: "Prime Minister Siniora's memorandum is clear. Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, who at the time directed the battle skilfully and calmly, was forced yesterday to visit (the Shi'i religious authority) Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah. The meeting ended with a fatwa for Hezbollah supporters to refrain from firing shots [in the air] and burning tires. He who can threaten Tel Aviv cannot control undisciplined elements in Al-Shiyah (Beirut's Southern Suburb) and elsewhere?"

"That is a serious matter. Let him be modest, because what happened some days ago in the form of action and turmoil in the streets under the pretext of an electric power cut does not augur well. Thank God Hezbollah's security apparatus compelled him to go to Sayyid Fadlallah to issue a fatwa to calm the street. It would have been better if they had issued a fatwa to end the sit-in. It is shameful for this important leader to say the sit-in is a detail. It is not a detail: tens of thousands have been made redundant from work because of the sit-in. It is not a detail.

[Abbas]: "What can the 14 March forces offer regarding the presidency issue: accord over a compromise candidate?"

[Junblatt]: "The principle of accord was not put forward in all the discussions. They (the opposition) say a national accord government, nothing more and nothing less. They have not even mentioned the president.

[Abbas]: "What are the specifications of an acceptable president?"

[Junblatt]: "Respect for international resolutions including the resolution on the international tribunal, and at the same time respect for the resolutions of the national dialogue. Welcome. Then we can embark on a settlement and look for a president who meets those requirements.

[Abbas]: "Is it true you have informed French Foreign Minister Kouchner that you accept a president on which there is accord?"

[Junblatt]: "No, when Kouchner visited me I said to him that after the Paris meetings we want the French mediation to succeed. We want the French mediation to succeed, but in line with the principle of respect for international resolutions and the resolutions of the consensus reached in the national dialogue. So far, there has been no negative or positive reaction.

[Abbas]: "Do the 14 March forces want a president from them?"

[Junblatt]: "It is our right and duty to agree on one candidate, and then we can see what the circumstances are. However, we cannot forfeit our legitimate right to have a candidate regardless of the fact we have a parliamentary majority. They are a minority and they have nominated -and they did not nominate -Michel Awn whose nomination by the opposition is still ambiguous.

[Abbas]: "Are you prepared to give up having a candidate from the 14 March forces as a price for a settlement?"

[Junblatt]: "I personally am not prepared to do that. However, this matter is subject to consultations with my allies. It is a matter I cannot decide on my own.

[Abbas]: "Do you see a possibility for the resumption of the national dialogue in the light of the existing election fever?"

[Junblatt]: "After the obstruction of the Constitution several times - and regrettably by Nabih Birri when he closed the Chamber of Deputies unconstitutionally, and by President Emile Lahhud when he refused to sign the by-election decree when MP Pierre al-Jumayil was assassinated -we have to hold those elections. However, it is regrettable that there should be a candidate to challenge Amin al-Jumayyil, the forbearing man whose son was assassinated.

[Abbas]: "Is it a presidential mini-election?"

[Junblatt]: "No, it is an election for the Al-Matn region, and so that the Al-Jumayil family can regain the parliamentary seat after an irredeemable loss. When I see what I see on television, I feel sorry that there is no longer in Lebanon the minimum level of political ethics which Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah always lauds and insists that his ally Michel Awn has. We hope that Sayyid Fadlallah's fatwa will have an effect.

“[Abbas]: “Do you expect a hot summer?

“[Junblatt]: “Summer is hot to begin with. The Lebanese Army is daily fighting epic battles similar to the epics of Wadi al-Hujayr and Marun al-Ra's (in southern Lebanon). From the beginning I said there is no difference between the Israeli aggression and the aggression by Fatah al-Islam. We wish the army all success in those epic battles that are daily claiming martyrs or wounded.

“[Abbas]: “Do you fear the worst on 24 November 2007 when the president's term expires?

“[Junblatt]: “I cannot speculate. However, I say we have stood fast in the face of assassinations and bombings, and in a confrontation with Fatah al-Islam. I am optimistic in the long run, notwithstanding the great human, material, and economic losses.

“[Abbas]: “Will the stand of the Maronite Patriarch (Nasrallah Sfeir) and some members of the 14 March forces on the two-thirds quorum for the election of a president impede your moves?

“[Junblatt]: “There are some constitutional "explanations" we could have done without. I will not say more.

“[Abbas]: “What is your view of Sayyid Nasrallah's latest statements?

“[Junblatt]: “I was the first person to say -when Al-Jazeera Channel hosted me by chance -that the resistance has won. I asked to whom will he present his victory, and he replied he presents the victory to the Lebanese people and the Arab and Muslim nation. Yesterday he gave the same answer. He did not present the victory to the Lebanese State. And that is the point of disagreement. I would have like him not to have defended Syria as he did when our country is burning and when we have lost 1,400 dead and more than \$4 billion, and when there have been 1 million displaced persons. Yet he says Syria almost entered he war.

“[Abbas]: “What did his remarks about Syria being ready to enter Al-Biqa' to confront Israel suggest to you?

“[Junblatt]: “It confirms to me that the Syrians were not prepared to do that, regrettably. I distinguish between the sacrifices and military heroism of the resistance in Bint Jubayl and Marun al-Ra's and between a resistance that is perhaps made use of to improve negotiating conditions with Israel. It transpired later that the Syrians were using the southern Lebanon card at the expense of the inhabitants of southern Lebanon in order to improve negotiating conditions through Ibrahim Sulayman and others.

“It is said one of the messengers was Abdullah Gul, now a candidate for the Turkish presidency. That is regrettable, and it reminds me of what is happening in Iraq and how the Iraqi arena is being used by Iran and the Americans in order to negotiate. Very recently a joint security committee was formed at the expense of the Iraqi people.

“[Abbas]: “Do you not fear a deal at Lebanon's expense?

“[Junblatt]: “Until this moment our steadfastness has been greatly miraculous in the face of the ugliest forms of terror and killing. It is the same serial from the attempt to assassinate Marwan Hamadah until Nahr al-Barid. We have stood fast so far. We'll see later.

“[Abbas]: “In his recent speech Syrian President Al-Asad ignored Lebanon. Do you see anything positive in that?

“[Junblatt]: “I am not surprised that he ignored Lebanon, because Syrian philosophy -especially the philosophy of Syria's totalitarian Ba'thist regime -does not recognize Lebanon to begin with. One of the reasons for the war is the avoidance of the national dialogue's consensus, in addition to the preconceived intentions of Iran and Syria through Hezbollah to send messages to the United States through Israel.

“On the other hand, the war went on for long because the United States thought it could destroy Hezbollah through Israel. We have the international tribunal. However, there remains diplomatic relations (with Syria) which mean recognition of the Lebanese entity and recognition of the Lebaneseness of the Shab'a Farms. The Syrian logic says there is nothing called a Lebanese entity.

“[Abbas]: “What does Syria lose by supporting Hezbollah?

“[Junblatt]: “Nothing. Syria allows the passage of all the required and possible quantities of arms. On the other hand investments are increasing in Syria, and there is stability in Syria -and we support that -and the economy is growing in Syria. Lebanon alone is paying the tax because Syria does not recognize Lebanon.

“The Syrians reiterate every day what they did in 1975 when they were asked by the United States to enter Lebanon to destroy the PLO and to secure Israel's northern border. Today the Syrians are trying to say they guarantee the security of northern Israel, therefore let us go back to Lebanon.

“[Abbas]: “Are you not convinced by the pan-Arab slogans raised by Syria?

“[Junblatt]: “That big lie never convinced me. There is no decision to confront. There is a decision to use the Lebanese arena. When you read what Hasan Nasrallah says you will see that for him Lebanon is a military arena and a military map. I hope he will be a leader who rises above Syrian or Iranian dictates, for then we can shake hands, strengthen Lebanon, and build a defence strategy for Lebanon.

“[Abbas]: “Are you not prepared to shake hands with him now?

“[Junblatt]: “He has his security circumstances, and I also have my circumstances.” - Asharq Al Awsat, United Kingdom