

THE BIG SALE: The True Cost of Maintaining Lebanon's "Stability!"

On April 19, 2014, a meeting chaired by Lebanon's March 14 (and more precisely by pro-Future, Sunni Minister of Interior Nohad al-Machnouk) was attended by the head of the state security services and the most senior figure in Hezbollah's public intelligence organization (Hajj) Wafic Safa.^{1,2}

Officially, the intent of the meeting was to discuss the challenge presented by Tufeil, a Lebanese enclave just inside Syrian territory.³ Despite reports probably leaked by Machnouk's own entourage that he addressed Safa as "a de facto force in Syria," the photograph taken of the meeting told a markedly different story. In the tastefully appointed conference room, the



The Minister and the Hajj

This photograph of the April 19 meeting between Interior Minister Mashnouq and Hajj Wafiq Safa (circled, second from left) was not the first "amicable encounter" the two have had. The initial public conversation between the minister and Hezbollah's chief spy occurred March 25, when they visited together near the site of an explosion that day in the Bir Hassan area (which targeted the Iranian cultural center). But while the dramatic circumstances of that first rendezvous obviated any real criticism, an anecdote circulating in Dahiyeh helped underscore the perceived "pecking order" between the two

¹ It is particularly difficult to categorize Nouhad Machnouk. Ideologically, he is part of the loose March 14 coalition, but technically, he is also a member of the "Lebanon First" parliamentary bloc, which is typically referred to as the Hariri bloc. Machnouk has always sought to distance himself from the Future/Hariri mainstream either by taking substantially more—or remarkably less—radical positions on disputatious issues. For instance, his nomination as Minister of Interior in the newly seated joint Lebanese government was seen as an opportunity to boost the impact of a Beirut-based Sunni figure capable of reclaiming some of the Sunni constituency lost in recent years due to the mediocre performance of Saad Hariri. These same characteristics apply equally to General Ashraf Rifi, formerly the head of the Internal Security Forces and now the incoming Minister of Justice (who is *not* actually morally indebted to the Hariri establishment, but to former Prime Minister Najib Mikati for his advancement). Of note, Rifi's nomination is generally seen as an attempt to regain control of the Sunni Tripoli street. It is no secret that both Machnouk and Rifi aspire to become Lebanon's prime minister.

² Hajj ("pilgrim") is a title typically given to anyone who has accomplished his pilgrimage duty (*Hajj*).

³ Lebanon's most remote village of Tufeil has a population of approximately 4,000 Lebanese and thousands of Syrian refugees. It has also been expecting it would host a battle between Hezbollah/Syrian forces and rebel fighters. In the past year, Hezbollah has secured all avenues into the town to prevent the flow of arms and rebels into Lebanon, and Tufeil was shelled recently by the Syrian army. Since being cordoned off, the town has been without utility services and public health and safety assistance, and its food supplies are dangerously low. While the Red Cross has succeeded in providing some relief to the town, its location near the Ram al-Marjouha pass—home to a Hezbollah training area—means that such relief convoys are minimally provisioned and arrive infrequently. "It is unclear if Hezbollah will permit further aid missions to Tfail. If the route to Tfail remains sealed, residents could find themselves stuck in a war zone with no means of escape." *The Christian Science Monitor*. Encircled and alone, Lebanese village braces for Syrian assault. April 23, 2014. <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2014/0423/Encircled-and-alone-Lebanese-village-braces-for-Syrian-assault>.

men: When Minister Mashnouq was late in arriving, Hajj Wafiq supposedly phoned to admonish him: "Hurry up, Nouhad. I have bigger fish to fry than wait for you!" Aside from such crass humor, it is particularly interesting to note that none of the charts which purport to describe Hezbollah's organization (at least those we know of) include any reference to *wihdat at-tansiq wal-irtibat*, the "Coordination and Liaison Unit" supposedly led by Hajj Safa. Yet, based on the numerous roles he has played domestically and internationally over the years (such as his involvement in the machinations that facilitated the exchange of prisoners and corpses between Hezbollah and Israel), Safa has always been either on the front lines or in the shadows. Thus, the omission of that Safa-led coterie from organizational charts and other Hezbollah-related literature is indeed interesting. According to a NEW TV broadcast that was aired January 17, 2010, Wafiq Safa was born September 1, 1960 in Zebdine, South Lebanon (which makes him just a day younger than Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah). He became affiliated with Hezbollah in 1984 following a previous association with the Amal Movement. In 1987, he was appointed head of Hezbollah's "security committee," which was renamed during the Taif Agreement period to "Committee for Coordination and Liaison." Safa became a "public figure" in 1996 due to his involvement with the Israelis in the exchange of prisoners, and his persona gained strength in 1998 following the negotiations he led to recover the remains of Hadi Nasrallah. Since 2005, when he switched from negotiating with Lebanon's enemy to dealing with its domestic opponents, he has been a regular actor on the political scene. He supposedly commanded Hezbollah's May 2008 punitive campaign against opponents throughout Lebanon, and the notion has been advanced that he is associated with the scandal involving Salah Ezeddine.

Hezbollah representative was essentially granted peer status to the other state representatives in attendance.⁴ As a picture is worth a thousand words, the treatment accorded Mr. Safa prompted reprobation from journalists and individuals affiliated with March 14.⁵

The apparently pro forma meeting, accompanied by the patently

incriminating photograph, are in fact just the tip of the iceberg. After all, that escarpment seems to obscure the myriad "facts" that have been trumpeted about political life in Lebanon since the beginning of the year. Amidst Lebanon's unpredictable security situation in early in 2014, signs of rapprochement began to appear between the opposing camps (primarily Hezbollah and the Hariri establishment). Those signs solidified to a degree when a new government, presided over by Tammam Salam, a weak, Beirut-based Sunni figure, was finally formed, an outcome tantamount to an internationally blessed regional agreement on the preservation of Lebanon's so-called stability. Ultimately, however, those actions reduced Lebanon's priority on the list of regional concerns. Importantly but unfortunately, more effort was invested in maintaining Lebanon's *appearance* as a country with functioning institutions, with particular attention given to its military and security services. That "maintenance" effort centered on providing Lebanon the funding and "moral support" it desperately needs to "host" more than a million Syrian refugees in addition to the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who already call Lebanon home.⁶ To date, however, no genuine effort has been made to stop the steady flow of refugees into Lebanon by attempting to foment a solution to the ongoing Syrian tragedy. Similarly, no worthwhile effort has been made to disassociate Lebanon from the crisis in Syria by pressuring Iran to terminate Hezbollah's involvement in that country's civil war.

⁴ Mashnouq calls Safa "a de facto force in Syria." Now. April 21, 2014. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/lebanonnews/544114-mashnouq-calls-safa-a-de-facto-force-in-syria>

⁵ Others who criticized Mashnouq include pro-March 14 "hawk" Fares Khashan, who wrote a piece titled "Resign" (<http://youkal.net/2012-12-02-14-05-23/24-30/45585-%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%86%D9%88%D9%82-%D8%A5%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84>) and Hazem al-Ameen, who titled his piece "Wafiq Safa" (<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/ar/analysisar/544345-%D9%88%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%A7>).

⁶ The current number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon can be viewed on the UNHCR website at <https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

The first public signs of the rapprochement between Hezbollah and the Hariri establishment appeared last January (2014) when Mohammad Raad, who heads Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc, and Saad Hariri offered conciliatory statements that opened the door to the formation of a new government.⁷ However, cryptic signs of that development were noted earlier because of ongoing engagement between senior political figures including Fouad Siniora (former prime minister and head of the Future parliamentary bloc), Nabih Berri (head of the Amal Movement and parliament speaker) and Walid Jumblatt (leader of the Druze). But less public figures were also involved in that process, such as businessmen (of all stripes) who share an interest in sustaining their businesses.⁸



Yet, while the Lebanese public was following the debate over retaining or excluding the keyword "Resistance" in the Ministerial statement, relations between the Hariri establishment and Hezbollah were warming.⁹ News of that "progress" vacillated between remaining discreet and being released in a blatantly public manner, such as the visit made several days before the formation of the new government to Brigadier General Samir Shehade (head of the ISF office in Saida) by the same Wafic Safa mentioned above.¹⁰ That particularly public visit

took on substantial meaning in view of General Shehade's curriculum vitae. Specifically, while Shehade was serving at the ISF Intelligence Office (a partner to the international investigation into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri) in September 2006, he was the target of an assassination attempt that killed four of his bodyguards.¹¹ According to some sources, the investigation into that assassination attempt disclosed that the bomb was similar to those used previously against anti-Hezbollah ministers Marwan Hamade and Elias al-Murr. After the attempt on his life, General Shehade relocated to Canada for several years before eventually returning to Lebanon in the course of 2013, apparently part of a deal brokered after the assassination of General Wissam al-Hassan.¹² Although General Shehade officially leads the ISF head office in Saida, he is reputedly the real boss of the ISF intelligence department.

At this point, it is important to recall that Hezbollah considers it as important to control Saida (Hariri's hometown) as it does to control Beirut and other key points in Lebanon. From the perspective of the Hariri establishment, Saida is the stronghold in which their leadership was questioned by the Salafi trend represented by Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir (who remains vocal despite having been ousted in a military operation conducted in June 2013).¹³ From Hezbollah's

⁷ Raad made his statement on January 13, while Saad Hariri gave his on January 16 following the opening session of the STL.

⁸ Such assurances require the tacit blessing of the Lebanese political cartel and/or far more blatant intercession by *mouhathatha* (the "pie-sharing system"), which imposes its rule over almost all of Lebanon's public and semipublic sectors, and often extends to the private sector as well.

⁹ Rival ministers spar over issue of resistance in policy statement. *The Daily Star*. February 21, 2014. <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Feb-21/248029-rival-ministers-spar-over-issue-of-resistance-in-policy-statement.ashx#ixzz303AFOTYs>

¹⁰ Two weeks after visiting Shehade, Safa visited General Ashraf Rifi to congratulate him on his new ministerial portfolio. During that February 18, 2014 visit, Safa also called Machnouk to express similar congratulations! *Al-Akhbar*. March 11, 2014. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/202353>

¹¹ At the time, General Wissam al-Hassan, who was assassinated in October 2012, headed the ISF Intelligence Office. March 14 blamed Hezbollah almost immediately for his death.

¹² *An-Nahar*, January 24, 2014.

¹³ Before March 23, Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir had only released audio clips. On that date, however, he appeared in an audiovisual message. Notably, it was the first time al-Assir had been seen since being ousted by a military operation, and the video countered assertions

viewpoint, Saida is a critical gateway to and from south Lebanon that must remain open. Of note, the Saida region also includes Ain el-Helwe, the largest of Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps, which is home to an increasing number of radical Islamists as well as smaller Palestinian camps and pockets. The area also serves as a sounding board for the heated debates over internal Palestinian affairs between President Mahmood Abbas and his opponents. Further, it is a consistent source of headache for everyone, including nations that contribute soldiers to UNIFIL, since several attacks against that international peacekeeping body originated in Ain el-Helwe.



Indeed, the Hezbollah-Hariri political-cum-security entente seems to extend well beyond Lebanese issues to encompass Palestinian considerations as well. A particularly bloody illustration of that extension took place on April 7 in Mieh-Mieh, a small Palestinian camp located four kilometers east of Saida. On that date, the Palestinian group “*Ansar Allah*” (The Allies of God), known to be on Hezbollah's payroll, decimated another Palestinian group.¹⁴ The attack, which killed 9 and injured 10 more, was a premeditated attempt to exterminate the Palestinian group “*Kataeb al-Awda*” (The Legions of Return). The latter group is headed by Ahmad Rashid, a vocal supporter of the Syrian uprising, close to the former leader of Fatah in Gaza Mohammad Dahlan and *bête noire* of Hamas and Mahmoud Abbas.

As described in some reports (specifically *an-Nahar*), various Palestinian sources stated that the attack against *Kataeb al-Awda* was conducted after Ahmad Rashid “opened the path of membership in his Legions to people from Fatah as well as Syrian refugees who he [had begun] training and arming and who represented a [genuine] danger not only to the camps [at large], but also to Syrian security.”¹⁵ Other Palestinian sources quoted by *Janoubia* stated that the attack was “similar to the [one that] dissolved Sheikh Ahmad al-Assir's group in Saida [last June]. [As a result,] Hezbollah now enjoys full control of the Saida region and the camps [located there].”¹⁶

In apparent confirmation of the fact that this brutal strike was green-lighted by a higher authority, and despite its alarmingly high death toll, neither the Lebanese nor the Palestinian authorities have commenced any meaningful investigation into the event! Interestingly, some media reports indicated that a member of Assir's group was caught in Mieh Mieh following that attack.¹⁷

While the strike derives clearly from the atmosphere of entente, it also reflects intra-Palestinian developments occurring within camps in Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza to control or at least contain events in Ain el-Helwe and its smaller cousins in south Lebanon. That area will remain a common interest as long as the détente between Hezbollah and the Hariri establishment perseveres.



In view of the foregoing, it is clear that

made by various sources that he had been killed or captured in Yabrood. In the March 23 message, he seemed in complete control of his skills in rhetoric and argumentation. Briefly, the message called on Sunni officers and servicemen of the LAF to defect. It also accused the Hariri establishment of having condoned the June 2013 attack against him, which made him an outlaw.

¹⁴ <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/features/mieh-mieh-refugee-camp?id=140>

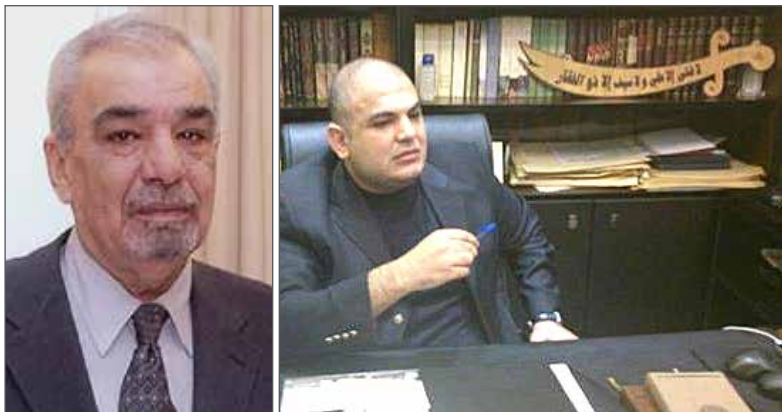
¹⁵ *An-Nahar*, April 9, 2014.

¹⁶ Wafic Hawwari, "The fall of Mieh-Mieh: Hezbollah takes hold of all of Saida," *Janoubia*, April 8 2014. <http://janoubia.com/169878>

¹⁷ <http://mulhak.com/show/Leb/138600>

the “security entente” illustrated by Safa's visit to Shehade, and the picture of him sitting amiably among the leaders of Lebanon's security apparatuses, is but one element in a comprehensive policy based on the general orientation of each side. For instance, if we accept the assertion that the Hariri establishment/Future Movement represents (or purports to represent) “moderate Sunni Islam in Lebanon,” and we acknowledge that Hezbollah rages against radical Islamists, then radical Islamists are an enemy common to both organizations. As this particularly comprehensive policy is actively encouraged by the patrons of the Hariri establishment/Future Movement and Hezbollah (Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively), the decreased support being shown by the Future Movement/Hariri establishment for the Syrian uprising and its relative silence on Hezbollah's involvement there becomes easier to understand—despite the Future Movement/Hariri establishment having originally championed support for the Syrian opposition.

Overview of the Eid Dynasty



Rifaat Eid (right), was likely named in honor of Rifaat Assad, who was his father's (Ali Eid, left) patron. Displayed prominently behind the younger Eid is a replica of *Zoulfikar*, the mythical, double-bladed, Shia sword believed to have been given to Ali bin abi Taleb by the Prophet Muhammad, who was near death. Reproductions, such as the one shown here, are typically adorned with the saying, "There is no hero like Ali, there is no sword like *Zoulfikar*."

The emergence of Lebanon's Alawi community was enabled by two specific factors; namely, Hafez al-Assad's 1970 seizure of power in Syria and the intra-

Lebanese dynamic that facilitated the emergence of an elite core within Lebanon's young Alawi community. In 1973, a group of young Alawis banded together under the name "Youth Alawi Movement" (YAM) (حركة الشباب العلوي). That association was backed for a variety of reasons by Suleiman Frangieh (the late president of the republic and unswerving Assad family ally) and Sayyid Moussa as-Sadr. As-Sadr, who headed the High Shia Council (HSC), worked to include Lebanon's Alawis within the Shia community and establish an Alawi Islamic council that was functionally similar to the HSC.

From a historical perspective, the Lebanese civil war devolved several different times into a conflict between the Assad regime and Yasser Arafat's PLO. YAM leader Ali Eid (the son of a wealthy Alawi trader from Jabal Mohsen who earned a degree in chemistry in the United States) sided with his rising fellow religionist al-Assad. However, his neighbors in Tripoli's Sunni quarters (known collectively as Bab et-Tebbeneh) chose to ally with Arafat.

By 1976, a coalition of pro-PLO organizations invaded and occupied Jabal Mohsen and destroyed Ali Eid's home. Several months later, however, Syrian troops officially entered Lebanon (as part of the Arab Dissuasion Force) and retook Jabal Mohsen and Bab et-Tebbeneh. Ali Eid reinvented himself under the extant Syrian rule and in 1978 launched a cross-confessional movement known as the National Confrontation Front (NCF) (جبهة المواجهة الوطنية). As was the case with many other organizations of the time, the NCF operated under the extremely broad, pro-Assad, Syrian umbrella. In the early 1980s, after having earned favor from Hafez al-Assad's brother Refaat, Ali Eid founded a paramilitary organization known as "The Red Knights." He later established the Arab Democratic Party (الحزب العربي الديمقراطي), for which the Red Knights served as the military wing.

In 1983, following the relocation of Arafat's PLO from Beirut to Tripoli and its merger with Tripoli's nascent Islamist movement, demarcation lines were again drawn, and heavy clashes resumed between the city's two opposing sides. That conflict seesawed until mid-September 1985 when the Syrian army launched a broad attack against Tripoli's pro-PLO quarters. The Syrian-led violence, which included wanton massacres, killed hundreds of

people and prompted the arrest of an indeterminate number of individuals and their lengthy detention in Syrian prisons.

Based on the constitutional amendments mandated by the Taif Agreement, Lebanon's Alawi community was granted two seats in parliament, one of which was occupied by Ali Eid (via nomination in 1991 and by election in 1992). However, the Alawi council (mentioned above) did not become an official entity until 2005.

Nevertheless, as new and wealthy Alawi figures began to emerge during the period of Syrian tutelage and in the shadow of the "Hariri System," the Eid "dynasty" and Ali Eid's Arab Democratic Party lost substantial size and influence. However, that recession was overturned dramatically when the first round of violence erupted following Hezbollah's May 2008 mini-war against its Lebanese opponent. Among other deleterious effects, that violence brutally reopened all of Lebanon's past wounds.

The information contained herein is based on several open sources. However, it derives chiefly from the report assembled by Ghassan Rifi, which was published by *as-Safir* on August 31, 2012 under the title "Wars Institute the Eid Leaders of the Alawi Community."

Moving away from the south, it is evident that something similar happened in the north. While no convincing explanation has yet been given for the 20th round of violence in Tripoli (among the most violent and lethal examples to date), few Lebanese doubted that the government's security plan for Tripoli (which was adopted by Tamam Salam's "national interest" government) would fail. Contrary to previous approaches, assurances of the effectiveness of the most recent plan were based on the certainty that the interests of Hezbollah and the Future Movement would indeed converge again—with the blessing of their regional and international patrons. Nevertheless, a somewhat droll twist in this "certain" security plan occurred when the names of everyone being sought by the authorities were leaked 48 hours *before* the plan commenced, which enabled most of them to escape.

Equally surprising, however, was that Hezbollah abruptly dropped its association with the Eid clan, al-Assad's longstanding Alawi pawns and protégés in Tripoli. Today, Ali (father) and Rifaat Eid (son) are under arrest warrants, and their residences were raided by the Lebanese army.¹⁸ From a cultural perspective, both suffered a debilitating humiliation and were forced to flee as submissively as the Sunni "front leaders"

(*kadat al-Mahawer*) in Tripoli against whom they were pretending to defend their "people." Clearly, Hezbollah's actions relative to the Eid family and the comparatively low-key approach it took when it equated the father-son duo to what its media outlets always described as trivial gang leaders would have been impossible had it not consulted previously with the highest Syrian authorities. Similarly, the Assad regime's acquiescence to Hezbollah's actions would not have occurred absent a logical *raison d'état*. Obviously, the only entity able to impose its will on Hezbollah and the Assad regime is Iran, and it was the Iranian *raison d'état* that prompted Hezbollah to both accept the formation of a national interest government and downgrade the Eid family to a band of outlaws—among other formal "concessions." The supreme leverage exacted by Iran thus becomes a key to understanding Lebanon's so-called stability and the patently miraculous functioning of its governmental institutions.

Assuming that abandoning the Eid dynasty and consequently Jabal Mohsen represents a lofty price that can only be paid via a comprehensive *raison d'état*, it becomes clear that the underlying rationale was twofold in nature. First, the Syrian army and its allies (including Lebanese and Iraqi militias and possibly other nationalities as well) would assume control of the Qalamoun region near the Lebanese border. Second, the Hariri establishment and its Saudi patrons would agree to abandon Orsal, which for years was praised as a Sunni bastion in the northern Bekaa.

Ultimately, the fall of Yabrood, Syria (located in the Qalamoun Mountains adjacent to the Lebanese border)

¹⁸ Of note, prior to this final sequence of events, both father and son had already been scrutinized by the Lebanese justice system but were still enjoying "political immunity."



The stretch of the Lebanese/Syrian border over which the Syrian army and its allies, Hezbollah mainly, recovered "official" control.

and Qala'at al-Hosn, Syria (Krac des Chevaliers) (situated along the northern border) opened the door to substantial Lebanese development. While the reduction of those two strongholds certainly prompted an influx of refugees to Lebanon, it also meant that the crescent that stretches from the Mediterranean Sea to northwest Lebanon to Yabrood and then to the east (ranging past Tall Kalakh and al-Qusayr (which fell in June 2013)) is now largely controlled by the Syrian army and Hezbollah (and probably other pro-Assad fighters as well). *Those developments consequently decreased Lebanon's importance as a hinterland for opposition Syrian groups that relied on areas within Lebanon (e.g., Orsal, which faces Yabrood, and Wadi Khaled, adjacent to Tall Kalakh) for support.*



Finally, in a very atypical move, Lebanon's civil and military judiciaries recently released three individuals. They included two Shia clerics, Sayyid Mohammad Ali and Sheikh Hassan Mchaymech. Al-Husseini was arrested in Lebanon in May 2011 while Mchaymech

The Alawis of Syria and Lebanon and the "Shia fold"



The Alawis are the Shia of Ahlu-l-bayt

Sayyed Hassan ash-Shirazy

According to a missive written about the relationship between Lebanon's Shia community and Syria's Alawi community, Sayyed Musa Sadr must be credited with having facilitated the incorporation of Alawis into the Shia community. Yet that dispatch falls short of telling the full story. From a Shia perspective, the idea of returning the Syrian Alawi to the Shia fold stemmed in large part from intra-Shia political, ideological and personal rivalries. In contrast, actually assimilating the Alawis into the Shia community was elemental to the policies advanced by Hafez al-Assad. The booklet, written by Sayyed Hassan Mahdy ash-Shirazy and published in Beirut in 1392 (*Higri* form, which equates to 1972), is part of the collection held by UMAM D&R. The title of the piece is indicative of its inherent message: "The Alawis are the Shia of Ahlu-l-bayt." Here, the Arabic use of "Shia" implies (among other things) "supporters," while "Ahlu-l-bayt" refers to the "Family of the House of the Prophet" (from which the Imams are derived, the infallibility of which, according to Shia beliefs, represents the cornerstone of Shia theology). The subtitle of the work reads, "a description of the Alawi creed by a group of truthful Muslim (Alawi) clerics in both Syrian and Lebanese Republics." The substance of the booklet flows from the findings of a trip made by Sayyed Hassan ash-Shirazi "[as...] head of a clerical delegation [... undertaken that year according to...] the instructions of my brother, Marjaa Sayyed Mohammad ash-Shirazi [to] our Alawi brethren in the Arab Syrian Republic [and] then to Tripoli, Lebanon." The findings noted above summarize the Alawi creed Sayyed Hassan ash-Shirazi allegedly obtained verbally from several of their *Ulema*. Regardless of the underlying Alawi issue, Sayyed Hassan ash-Shirazy (including his tumultuous relationship with the Assad regime and the roles he sought to play on the Lebanese Shia scene), deserve further investigation—especially since he was assassinated in May 1980 on the streets of Beirut!

For further information about this issue, see "Syria's Alawis and Shi'ism" by Martin Kramer at <http://www.martinkramer.org/sandbox/tag/shiism/>



Sayyed Musa Sadr and Hafez Assad, March 11, 1975

The Assad-Sadr Deal: Religious Legitimacy against Protection

“ Back in the 1973, Sayyid Musa had rendered the Syrian minority regime an important service. Hafiz Assad had risen to power in a coup d'état of 1970; in February 1971 he had become Syria's first Alawi president. The Syrian hinterland— rural, impoverished, religiously heterodox— had subdued the Sunni cities and had done it through the instrument of the military. But the Sunni majority could not accept the change with equanimity. The Alawis were the bearers of an esoteric faith which Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, put beyond the pale of Islam. Rebellions broke out in early 1973 in the principal cities of Syria when the regime released a draft constitution that omitted the standard

reference to Islam as the religion of the state. Taken aback by the depth of the disaffection, the Syrian regime sought religious sanction, a ruling that the Alawis were a legitimate branch of Islam. This was where Sayyid Musa, then head of the Higher Shia Council in Lebanon, stepped in and provided a fatwa that the Alawis were a community of Shia Islam. The fine points of scripture and doctrine, the fact that the Alawis carried the veneration of Ali, the first of the twelve Shia Imams, beyond the strictures of Islam, he set aside. In the words of a deft summation by political historian Martin Kramer, "the regime of Hafiz al Asad needed quick religious legitimacy; the Shi'is of Lebanon, Musa al Sadr has decided, needed a powerful patron. Interests busily converged from every direction.”

Fouad Ajami, *The vanished Imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon*, Cornell University Press, 1987, p. 174.

was originally taken into custody on July 7, 2010 along the Lebanese-Syrian border by Syrian security but reappeared in Beirut in October 2011 in the custody of the ISF. Both men were accused of collaborating with Israel, and both were sentenced by the first-degree Lebanese military court. The third individual, Salah Ezeddine (dubbed by Lebanese and foreign press outlets as “Hezbollah’s and Lebanon’s Madoff” due to the financial magnitude of the affairs in which he was involved) was arrested in September 2009.¹⁹ The release of these three individuals indeed raises a number of questions. As noted in an article published April 25, 2014, this unique development has prompted questions and suspicion.²⁰ But aside from the likelihood that the release is a component

of a larger deal, two inherent features are worth being mentioned. First, this surprise development proves yet again that decisions made by the Lebanese judiciary are always highly politicized. Second, this attempt to close yet another file as part of a political deal is simply the latest interpretation of the enduring Lebanese propensity toward *closing*, rather than *completing* files, a uniquely Lebanese “habit” that influenced the way Lebanon’s war was ended.

The international community may be relieved to see Lebanon achieving this level and type of “stability.” In response, its representatives in Lebanon can continue to clap Lebanese officials on the shoulders for their stalwart performance in the cabinet or parliament. Although

¹⁹ A recapitulation of the events surrounding the apprehension, repatriation and ultimate conviction and imprisonment of Sheikh Hassan Mchaymech can be found on the *ShiaWatch* website (<http://www.shiawatch.com/on-the-shelf/19>).

²⁰ During an interview, Lokman Slim observed of the release, “The timing is interesting... [At] least in the cases of Mchaymech and Husseini, [it] could have happened several months ago... so now that we’re seeing a new honeymoon between [...] Hezbollah [and...] its opponent, the files that are no longer useful can be discarded. Moreover, the alleged deal represents a net gain for Hezbollah.” Sudden prisoner releases raise suspicions. *Now*. April 25, 2014. <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/544684-sudden-prisoner-releases-raise-suspicious>.

improbable, in the final weeks prior to expiration of the mandate of Lebanon's current president, Lebanese MPs may succeed in electing his successor. So now that Lebanon has reduced itself to this form of "stability," the international community will no longer be required to pay extra attention to the issues of a country that has so often caused problems on the global stage. Nevertheless, the Lebanese people and the global community should both be aware that this brand of stability is a very short-term bet that comes at an extraordinarily high price. Perhaps the best description of the cost involved can

be summed up by the words of Itamar Rabinovich, a renowned connoisseur of Lebanon:

Hizballah is more powerful than the Lebanese state and does not accept its authority. It participates in the governmental coalition and exercises its influence over the Lebanese army. At this point, Hizballah and its Iranian patrons prefer to keep the shell of the Lebanese state as long as they enjoy full freedom to pursue their policies and as long as the Lebanese government does not take any action that is not acceptable to them.²¹

²¹ Itamar Rabinovich. "The End of Sykes-Picot? Reflections on the Prospects of the Arab State System." Middle East Memo, No. 32. February 2014. Saban Center, The Brookings Institute.