

The meeting was important for several reasons. I first met Sheikh Naim at a conference he held about a quarter of a century ago. I presented a rather unusual paper comparing the US and Iranian constitutional systems from the point of velayat-e faqih and the rule of the jurist as Supreme Court in America. We did not meet again until now. We discussed three major issues: the position of Lebanon toward Israel, the presidential process, and the person of the president. I published a short press release on the meeting on the Lebanese priorities with regard to Israel and the unacceptable claim to normalize relations before giving their full rights to the Palestinians under international law, including the refugees in Lebanon.

On the presidential process, Hizbullah continues to support exclusively Minister Sleiman Franjiyye, their preferred Christian ally in Lebanon. The process is blocked, however, because no one party or parliamentary coalition can impose their candidate. In light of this, I explained to Sheikh Naim that to resolve the constitutional deadlock and for a candidate to succeed, first in getting elected, he must not be vetoed either by Hizbullah or by the Lebanese Forces. They can both undermine the candidacy put forward by the other party simply by boycotting parliament during the key electoral session.

This is the constitutional reality. As importantly, a president who does not have the support of both is unable to govern. Without a common understanding, his government would be blocked. This is the political reality. A president of compromise, a so-called 'third candidate', is the only way forward.

As for the person of the president, well you can imagine what my argument was with the Sheikh.

How are your relations with other parliamentary groups and president Nabih Berri?

My family and the Joumblatts have carried a closeness in the worlds of letter and politics for more than 150 years. Walid Joumblatt put my name forward as his "preferred" candidate. I have developed cordial relations with Dr Geagea since I publicly denounced his continued incarceration in the late 1990s. It was an argument that no-one had had the courage to make: that, whatever the rights and wrongs of the case, he, Geagea, was the only armed participant in the Lebanese civil war to be tried and jailed.

As you know, 128 MPs elect the president. I have a good relationship with most of them. Among the "MPs for change", Dr Melhem Khalaf, a distinguished lawyer and former president of the bar, has endorsed me publicly. Several others in the group have expressed their support, prime among them MP Paula Yacoubian, who has a distinguished career in journalism. Other groups, notably in the Sunni community, are also significant. I have enjoyed a privileged relationship with former minister Ashraf Rifi since the Sabra and Shatila case, and recently met with President Nagib Miqati. I know most Lebanese Prime Ministers, Sheikhs Rafic and Saad Hariri of course, and President Salim al-Hoss, who on two key occasions helped me advance justice in Lebanon and in the region. In Christian circles, the leader of the Phalange, Sheikh Sami Gemayyel, has expressed his readiness to elect me if parliament leans in my direction. I have met several remarkable MPs whom I did not previously know. Some are impressive.

Of course, a major Lebanese figure is the president of Parliament, Nabih Berri, and I remain in close touch with his close advisor, Ali Hamdan, who was a colleague in college. Berri is known for his acute political open-mindedness and would be a key protagonist for any successful national policy if my presidency were to succeed. We have had political disagreements in the past, but there has been a rapprochement since. Hopefully this will translate into President Berri's support at the critical moment.

You say that you are also in touch with other leaders in Lebanon over the presidency, among them Samir Geagea, the head of the Lebanese forces, and Sami Gemayyel, lawyer and leader of the Phalangists. Do you think their position can be reconciled with that of Hizbullah?

I have mentioned my ties to both. In the case of Samir Geagea, a key intermediary is Dr Ghassan Hasbani, who is an enlightened policy maker. Sheikh Sami was a student of mine, and a talented and endearing one at that. Like Hizbullah and all the other factions, all want an end to the terrible war in Gaza. All want an end to the war in South Lebanon. Many disagree on the military involvement of Hizbullah, but for the moment, it is the two first policy objectives that matter. They are rejected by the Israeli prime minister.