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LEBANON

AMAL LEADER INTERVIEWED

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[Interview with Nabih Berri, of the Amal Movement, by Claude Khoury, date and place not given]

[Text]

Nabih Berri, leader of the predominantly Shiite Amal Movement, revealed last week that Syria had warned Amal, the leftist National Movement alliance and the Palestine Liberation Organization that it would pull the Arab Deterrent Forces out of Beirut and the suburbs if they did not stop their armed clashes.

The warning, Berri said in a private interview with *Monday Morning*, came while Amal was engaged in fierce battles with some National Movement and Palestinian organizations in West Beirut, the suburbs and South Lebanon last month.

He said that although the clashes had stopped, the situation remained "highly dangerous" and must be defused immediately — not by the usual emotional reconciliations but by a clear agreement that defines a framework of action for all groups involved.

Berri charged that, contrary to repeated statements by the PLO leadership that the Palestinians were not involved in last month's clashes with Amal, "most" Palestinian organizations took part in the battles.

He said that in the preliminary meeting in Beirut of the Higher Coordination Committee, which groups Amal, the National Movement, the PLO and Syria, agreement in principle was reached on two points:

— That the PLO should henceforth not involve itself in Lebanese internal security matters, which concerned Amal and the National Movement only, but concentrate on "strategic security" -- defense against Israel.

— That the Higher Coordination Committee should consider ways of handing internal security matters in South Lebanon over to the Lebanese Internal Security Forces.

A third point on which no agreement was reached but which Amal was insisting on was that all arms and gunmen be removed from Beirut and the suburbs, where there was no direct Israeli threat to justify the present abundance of weapons, Berri said.

These matters would be the subject of discussion in the next meeting of the Higher Coordination Committee in Damascus, he said, but that "quadrilateral" meeting would not be held until the consequences of last month's clashes were eliminated and until a minimum level of agreement was reached in the current "bilateral and trilateral meetings."

Berri confirmed that he had submitted his resignation as leader of Amal two weeks ago. He said his move had been prompted by the failure of "the other parties" to implement the decision of the Higher Coordination Committee in Beirut that the consequences of the clashes be eliminated — in other words, that all gunmen be withdrawn from the Southern villages that were the scene of violence so that all the displaced Lebanese can return to their homes.

He said he withdrew his resignation when it was rejected by the Amal leadership council and when action was taken to apply the Committee's decision.

On other subjects:

ISRAEL AND THE LITANI: Berri said that Amal would consider the South Lebanon cease-fire broken if there was confirmation of repeated reports from the South that Israel was preparing to pipe water from the Litani River to Galilee.

"I am saying this for the first time," he stated. "If it is confirmed to me that Israel is exploiting the waters of the Litani, I will call an urgent meeting of the Amal Movement's Command Council, consider this matter a violation of the cease-fire and act on that basis. I will act on that basis to bring woe to everyone — because it is impossible for us to stand idly by as Israel takes the waters of the Litani, which would be the first step toward an Israeli take-over of the South."

He added that if Israel invaded the South, all Amal members and Southerners had orders to stay in the South and fight.

"We will stay, and new Palestinians will be created who will pose a threat not only to Israel but to the thrones of the Arabs as well," he warned.

SECTARIAN WAR: Berri said that the recent wave of assassinations and other attacks aimed against religious leaders and places of worship were obviously aimed at fragmenting Lebanon further by setting sect against sect.

The same objective, he said, was behind the talk about Sunnite-Shiite confrontations which accompanied every clash between Amal and the National Movement — rumors which were totally illogical since the "majority" of National Movement members, like the majority of Amal members, were Shiite.

The nationwide solidarity which was demonstrated after the attacks on religious men and places was the best response to the people behind this plot, Berri said, adding: "I do not fear the eruption of a sectarian war in Lebanon."

LOCAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS: Berri suggested that last month's clashes between Amal and the National Movement were precipitated by Amal's rejection of the National Movement's plan to hold elections for "local councils" in West Beirut.

"Although we studied the matter a great deal before we said no to the local councils, there was fighting," he said.

Repeating his party's rejection of the local council project as "a form of autonomy" which would encourage the partition of Lebanon, Berri said that the council elections had been cancelled, explaining: "I believe our brothers in the National Movement are now convinced that it would be difficult to apply the local council idea.

The local council elections were to be held on April 25. The National Movement has stated that the elections have been postponed pending the creation of "better circumstances" and the preparation of similar elections in all other leftist-controlled parts of Lebanon. The Movement, which has consistently denied that the councils are an attempt at establishing West Beirut autonomy, explained the project to *Monday Morning* in an interview which was published in the April 19-25 issue of this magazine.

INTER-SHIITE RELATIONS: Berri said that although there were good relations between the Amal Movement and the Higher Shiite Council, there were often differences in views between the Movement and the Council. This, he said, was only natural and it did not imply that there were "contradictions" between the two bodies.

Nabih Berri stated that during last month's clashes, "something like a warning was sent by the Syrian leadership to me, to Mr. Walid Junblatt (leader of the National Movement) and to Abu Ammar (PLO chief Yaser Arafat), stating that if the fighting continued, Syria would be forced to pull the ADF out of Lebanon, or at least out of Beirut and the other battle scenes."

The warning, he said, reflected "the extreme embarrassment to which the clashes subjected Syria, which has special relations with the Amal Movement, the Palestinian Resistance and the National Movement."

It was out of the question for the Syrians to stop such clashes by military means, since that would entail Syrian military action against one or all of its allies in Lebanon, Berri said.

"They try to avert these clashes through meetings and coordination, and whenever anything happens, we all turn to the ADF to calm things down," he said. "But the Syrian position (warning) last month was very logical. In effect, what they said was this: since they found themselves unable to take military action against the belligerents and unable to remain idle as the clashes continued, the only thing they could do would be to leave the Lebanese arena, or at least the scenes of the battles."

PALESTINIAN

Berri said that although Arafat had denied Palestinian involvement in last month's Amal-National Movement clashes, "the information at our disposal indicates that most Palestinian organizations took part in the fighting. Their participation may not have been ordered by the Palestinian leadership, but the fact remains that they did participate, and the leadership of any party is responsible for the actions of its members."

He refused to name the Palestinian organizations which Amal is convinced backed the National Movement parties in the clashes, stating that all the information available to Amal had been placed at the disposal of a special commission of enquiry made up of one ADF officer, one National Movement officer, one PLO officer and one Amal officer. The four-man commission, formed at the Higher Coordination Council meeting which brought the clashes to an end, was charged with the task of determining the extent and circumstances of each organization's involvement in the fighting, he said.

Berri warned that despite the cessation of hostilities, "the present popular and psychological atmosphere is highly charged and very dangerous. It is an extremely delicate situation, especially in the South."

The Southerners' patience, he said, had been stretched to its limit by a variety of factors, including "Israeli information" dispensing threats of invasion, infiltrators who were instigating clashes among the various factions in the South, and the Arab countries' total neglect of the South's predicament.

ARABS

"The Arabs are treating the South as if it were not part of the Arab world, as if it were a province of China or India," Berri said. "Every once in a while, they send a few piasters to ease their conscience. But we don't want the Arabs' money. What the Southerners want is one of two things: either an Arab decision to wage war, and the Southerners are prepared to go to war along with the rest of the Arabs, or an Arab decision to preserve the South. We can face the possible loss of the South in the context of an Arab war, but we refuse to risk the South for no reason at all. The Arabs' decision now is to give themselves peace at the expense of peace in the South. Most of the Arabs have peace with Israel, and they want the South to remain the only pressure vent. This is something which we can no longer tolerate and which can eventually harm us, the Palestinians and the Arabs — because if the South is taken by Israel, Lebanon will be partitioned, and if Lebanon collapses, the entire Arab world will suffer."

The Arabs, Berri charged, were adopting false nationalist postures at the expense of the South. "They support the South verbally to score points in Arab nationalism while the people of the South are paying the price of the Arabs' so-called principles in blood. What are Kuwait and Iraq and

Saudi Arabia and Jordan and others doing for the Palestinian cause? One Jordanian magazine went so far as to describe Amal as 'the Devil of Lebanon' after a small problem between us and the Palestinian Resistance. Can you imagine the Jordanians saying this, and forgetting all about Black September? No Arab has done more for the Palestinians than the South Lebanese have done: the South took the Palestinians in when all the others were driving them out. No Arab can teach us any lesson in nationalism."

But the Southerners who sacrificed so much for the Palestinians and were ready to sacrifice more expected not to be punished by the Palestinians for these sacrifices, Berri said. "The Southerners expect not to have their villages shelled as a reward. The shelling of villages is tantamount to crossing the Southerners' red line. It has raised tension to a very dangerous level, and it is imperative that this situation be dealt with in a different way — not with the usual emotional, kiss-and-make-up way, but in a serious manner."

Serious efforts to settle the problems that were repeatedly leading to clashes between Amal and the forces of the National Movement and the Palestinian Resistance had actually started in the meeting held last month at the Beirut residence of the leader of the Syrian Baath in Lebanon, Assem Kanso, Berri said.

RESIGNATION

At that meeting, which was attended by representatives of all four members of the Higher Coordination Committee, it was agreed that a framework of action should be worked out for all parties that would prevent future clashes — but only after the consequences of the April clashes had been eliminated: all militiamen should be pulled out of the villages where the clashes occurred to allow the villagers to return to their homes.

It was because action to eliminate those "consequences" was delayed that Berri decided to submit his resignation as leader of the Amal Movement.

"The agreement on the Southern villages was reached in the presence of the top leaders," Berri said. "Later, however, I noticed that the other parties were delaying the implementation of this agreement, to an extent that suggested that the agreement was not going to be applied. That left us no choice but to fight again. And since I knew that fighting would do neither Lebanon nor anyone else any good but would only raise tension and lead to partition, I felt I must give up my duties.

"However, many contacts were made with me, there was a popular rejection of the resignation, the Amal leadership council also rejected the resignation, and the other parties started to implement the agreement — all of which prompted me to withdraw my resignation."

Now that the "consequences" of the April clashes had been eliminated, preparations were under way for a Higher Coordination Committee meeting in Damascus to arrive at a "formula of action" that would be binding on Amal, the National Movement and the Palestinians and that would hopefully avert a recurrence of clashes, Berri said.

The preparations were taking the form of attempts to arrive at a "minimum level of agreement" on the proposed formula through "bilateral and trilateral meetings" among the four members of the Higher Coordination Committee, he said.

He added that the broadlines of an agreement were tentatively approved during the meeting in Kanso's residence last month.

AGREEMENT

"For instance, agreement was reached on the principle that the Palestinian Resistance has nothing to do with internal affairs in Lebanon and the South. The Palestinian Resistance has an agreement with Lebanon to preserve its strategic security, and in this we all support it, but it has nothing to do with Lebanon's internal affairs. Internal affairs are the business of Amal, the National Movement and the Lebanese citizens in general, but not the business of the Palestinian Resistance. Agreement was reached on this point,

and we consider this a very important development.

"Another thing that we agreed on was that no matter what problems arise in the future, nothing could justify the shelling of villages. On that basis, we are all considering ways and means to bring the legal forces, and especially the Internal Security Forces, into the South. In other words, everyone agrees that no one can replace legitimacy.

"In addition, I have suggested a third point which is being discussed but has not been agreed upon yet: that all armed men be pulled out of Beirut and all weapons in the capital be collected. I say that over 90 percent of the problems that crop up in Beirut and the suburbs are caused by the abundance of arms in the city. Weapons may be justified in the South, where there is a constant danger from Israel, but what are they for in Beirut? I am calling for the collection of all weapons from all armed organizations in Beirut.

"If agreement is reached on all these things, most of the major problems will have been eliminated."

Berri intimated that last month's clashes were sparked by Amal's rejection of the National Movement's plan to organize the election of local councils in West Beirut.

"Why were there clashes over this matter?" he asked. "In this particular case, I don't believe the Amal Movement was responsible for the fighting. Why? First, because this subject was never discussed by the Higher Coordination Committee; the National Movement took the decision without Amal's knowledge. Had they consulted us, we would have convinced them to stop thinking of those local councils. Instead, we found them taking the decision on their own and imposing their view without consulting us. Why should we impose our views on people? Why not ask the people what they think?"

"And then, when they asked us what our position was, we said our position on such matters was well known, but because we did not want it said that Amal wants violence — as you know, there is fighting whenever we say no — we took our time in giving our answer. But although we studied the

matter a great deal before we said no to the local councils, there was fighting. This is unacceptable."

Amal's position on the local councils had not changed, Berri said. "Anything that can lead to the partition of Lebanon is unacceptable to us, and the local councils are categorically rejected because we consider them a form of autonomy that can lead to partition."

He added: "I know why this plan was proposed in West Beirut. It was proposed in imitation of East Beirut. But why should we imitate the wrong things that are being done in East Beirut instead of constantly demanding that these wrong things be eliminated?"

"Incidentally, I have heard many voices raised in East Beirut rejecting the local councils in West Beirut and calling on the West Beirutis to resist them. How can they demand the rejection of something that they themselves are doing? In Hazmieh, taxes are being collected for the Phalangist Party. Why? By what right has the Phalangist Party taken over the Port of Beirut? By what right has it taken over various government departments?"

"I ask Sheikh Pierre Gemayel, in his capacity as president of the Phalangist Party: Why are local councils unacceptable here and acceptable in East Beirut? I am a person who represents what is perhaps the largest Lebanese community, and in that capacity I demand that East Beirut stop imposing taxes. I refuse to have a citizen who wants to register a piece of real estate in Baabda or elsewhere pay a tax to the Phalangists. I refuse to pay a tax to the Phalangists whenever I want to register a car. I refuse to pay two or five pounds to the Phalangists whenever I want to attend a play at the Casino du Liban.

"As a Lebanese citizen, I demand that East Beirut abandon its autonomous administration."

Berri said that the Amal Movement "has consistently held, and still holds, that the local council plan will not go through. And I believe our brothers in the National Movement are now convinced that it would be difficult to apply the local council idea. I believe they have postponed it; indeed, they have cancelled it."

SECTARIAN

Berri stressed that differences of view between Amal and the National Movement must not be seen as sectarian differences, despite all the talk about Shiite-Sunni confrontations which accompanied every clash between the two movements.

He pointed out that Amal's main demand was the abolition of sectarianism in all State institutions, especially in the Lebanese Army.

"Furthermore, although the majority of Amal members are Shiite, we have many Sunni members. And all the other parties in Lebanon have a majority of Shiite members, just as we do. Most members of the National Movement are Shiite. Mohsen Ibrahim (leader of the Communist Action Organization and secretary general of the National Movement) is a *sayyid*, which means that he is more versed in Shiism than I am, and most of his party members are Shiite. So how can a clash between Amal and that party be

portrayed as a Shiite-Sunni struggle? "

The Amal Movement, Berri added, had good relations with the Higher Shiite Council and its vice president, Sheikh Mohammed Mehdi Shamseddin, but their views were not always identical.

"We try to maintain relations of understanding and harmony with all sides, and especially with the Higher Shiite Council, which we respect," he said. "Don't forget that Imam Musa Sadr is the leader of the Amal Movement and the president of the Higher Shiite Council. In his absence, the council is headed by Imam Mohammed Mehdi Shamseddin, with whom we try to remain in agreement. However, his views on many matters do not always coincide with ours. And it is only natural that the Shiite Council's positions differ from ours. Perhaps its horizons are wider: it is an official institution concerned with all the Shiites in Lebanon, whereas the Amal Movement is for the Shiites and the non-Shiites. That does not mean that there are contradictions between us; it merely means that our views are not always identical."

The Amal Movement, Berri added, had equally good relations with the conservative Sunni Islamic Grouping. "There are contacts and consultations between us — perfectly normal relations. I'm not saying all this to deny the talk of Shiite-Sunni confrontations. It is not a question of Shiites and Sunnis. Our relations with the Islamic Grouping are not based on Shiite-Sunni considerations. We consider the Grouping not a sectarian body but a political weight."

Talk of Sunni-Shiite confrontations was aimed at the further fragmentation of Lebanon, he said. That was also the aim of those who over the past two weeks had mounted murderous attacks on Moslem and Christian religious leaders in West Beirut, Alay, Tripoli and Aramoun.

"They are trying to destroy all vestiges of Lebanon's sectarian coexistence," he said. "The best response we can give is to demonstrate our solidarity, and that, thank God, is what we have all done. This kind of response is the only thing that can convince the conspirators that they are wasting their time, that they cannot get a sectarian war started here.

"I do not fear the eruption of a sectarian war in Lebanon."

The greatest danger posed to Lebanon was not the danger of sectarian war nor the Palestinian danger, Berri said.

ISRAEL

"The information trend these days, the rumors and the propaganda, are all aimed against the Palestinians. This is a big mistake, because we are forgetting the greatest danger posed to us, which is Israel. The Palestinians have observed the cease-fire with Israel since last July. When Israel mounted its air raids last month, I and other people asked the Palestinians not to respond, because we feared that the response would be taken as a pretext for an invasion of the South. The Palestinians cooperated in this and did not respond, thus demonstrating their concern for self-

preservation and for the preservation of Lebanon and the South."

Berri said he failed to understand how the world could accept Israel's logic in South Lebanon. "If an Israeli is killed in Paris, they say this is a violation of the cease-fire in the South. If one is killed near Jordan, they say it is a violation of the Southern cease-fire. Stranger still, if an Israeli enters Lebanese territory and drives over a mine, they say this is a violation of the cease-fire and they send their planes to attack Palestinian positions in Lebanon. While all this is happening, the world is watching idly. I have already talked about the Arab states' attitude, and we all know what the rest of the world is doing — especially the United States."

"When President Reagan's special envoy came to Lebanon last, Berri said, he brought with him nothing but Israeli warnings: "Watch out, he came to say: anything you do may precipitate an Israeli occupation of the South. That is why I refused to meet with him. As the leader of a movement which considers the South its major concern and as a South Lebanese citizen, I refuse to receive such warnings."

In contrast, the Lebanese State was heeding the warnings to the extent of allowing Israel to control its actions in the South, Berri said.

LITANI

"I can understand the need for wisdom in a State's behavior in these circumstances, but I don't believe wisdom can justify the State's abdication of its decision-making prerogatives in its own land — in the South," he said. "There is now almost total Israeli hegemony in the South. Lebanon does not even dare to make use of the waters of its own Litani River for its own people, because it is afraid that this might anger Israel. The State is not making more use of the Litani because it is afraid of Israel; I say this with certainty, and I defy anyone to deny it.

"What has the result of all this been? What have the State's efforts to please Israel produced, and how has Israel reacted to the Palestinians' lack of response to their attacks? You have read the press reports about the Israeli decision to start taking water from the Litani, and I believe there is some truth to these reports. Is this not a violation of the cease-fire? If Israel takes over the Litani without firing a shot, does it mean that the cease-fire has not been broken?

"How do we react to this? We all know how the State will react. It will go to the U.N., and everybody who does not want to regain his rights goes to the U.N.

"I will tell you how I will react, and I am saying this for the first time. If it is confirmed to me that Israel is exploiting the waters of the Litani, I will call an urgent meeting of the Amal Movement's Command Council, consider this matter a violation of the cease-fire and act on that basis. I will act on that basis to bring woe to everyone — because it is impossible for us to stand idly by as Israel takes the waters of the Litani, which would be the first step toward an Israeli takeover of the South."

The Amal Movement would not deal with Israel as it was dealing with the Palestinians, Berri said, because there was no room for comparison between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

"The Palestinians have made mistakes, and there are two ways to deal with those mistakes: we either deal with them patiently or we fight. We tried fighting in 1975, and what has it brought us? The destruction of Lebanon. So we deal with the Palestinians' mistakes in patient talks. But it is not possible to deal with the Israelis as we deal with the Palestinians: the Palestinians are our Arab-brothers, but the Israelis have proved themselves to be the arch-enemy of Lebanon, posing a greater danger to this country than they pose to any other Arab country."

Berri added that if Lebanon allowed Israel to help itself to the Litani's waters, the Israelis would not stop at that: "I am certain that they would go another step further" towards a total takeover of the South."

If the Israelis did invade the South, they would not discriminate between Lebanese and Palestinians, Berri said. "Such an invasion would turn us into new Palestinians, with one difference: we will not leave our land. All members of Amal and all the people of the South have orders not to leave their land. We will stay, and new Palestinians will be created who will pose a threat not only to Israel but to the thrones of the Arabs as well."

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