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He's a 'hakeem' worthy of the name

By Adib F. Farha

Maybe it was the 11 years of incarceration, solitary confinement and profound introspection. Or maybe it was one of the lessons of the Cedar Revolution. But the new political agenda of the Lebanese Forces as expressed by its leader Dr. Samir Geagea at a rally organized by his supporters in Paris earlier this week is a landmark event in Lebanese politics.

After years of advocating federalism in the tiny nation-state that would entail carving out a Christian canton, which would extend from the so-called Christian East Beirut to the northernmost town in Mount Lebanon, the Hakeem, as Geagea's supporters like to call him, announced a radical shift in the LF's political agenda.

"We used to describe our territory in the past as stretching from Kfarshima to the Madfoun and we can say nowadays it stretches from Kbayyet to the Kleiaa," said Dr. Geagea.

Kfarshima and Madfoun would have represented the northern and the southern tips of the canton the LF dreamed of establishing, while Kbayyet lies in the extreme north of the country and Kleiaa is practically on the Lebanese-Israeli border. Even to his former opponents, the Hakeem proved that he is worthy of his nickname. Hakeem is Arabic for "wise man" although Dr. Geagea originally earned the nickname

because the term is also used to refer to a physician.

The Hakeem's declaration is perhaps the most significant event in Lebanon's recent history. It is no less significant than the withdrawal of Syrian military personnel from Lebanon on April 26 of this year.

Angered by the excesses of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon during the late sixties and the early seventies and frustrated by the support that the PLO had amongst Lebanese Muslims, whose leadership saw in the PLO a Trojan horse that they could ride to well-deserved broader political participation, the Christian Lebanese Forces gave up on the idea of a united Lebanon in which they could live side by side with their Muslim compatriots. The outcome was 16 years of bloody civil strife that cost the country 170,000 lives, hundreds of thousands of maimed and injured citizens and nearly \$100 billion in direct and indirect damages, according to a World Bank estimate.

The Civil War ended officially in 1989 with the execution of a new National Accord at an internationally-sponsored conference in Taif, Saudi Arabia. Regrettably, the Accord also relegated the enforcement of the fragile peace to neighboring Syria, a country and a regime that has never accepted Lebanon as a stand-alone state.

It soon became clear that Syria's role extended far beyond what it was intended to be. It turned Lebanon into a client state, controlled out of Anjar, a small town in the Bekaa Valley, by the head of Syrian intelligence who transformed his job into that of Lebanon's high commissioner. He is also thought to have become the leader, or at least the point man, of a joint Syrian-Lebanese mafia that raped the country and its economy.

Fearful of the LF's agenda and suspicious of its history of collaborating with Israel, Syria framed Geagea in 1994 for a

crime of which he was later cleared. Despite an amnesty law that covered all acts of violence preceding its enactment, it masterminded multiple death sentences against him for crimes he had allegedly committed during the war years.

For 11 years, the Hakeem was held in solitary confinement in a dungeon at the Lebanese Defense Ministry, three floors underground. His cell was smaller than two-and-a-half meters by two-and-a-half meters. Since he was not allowed to receive newspapers, magazines or political books, the Hakeem spent his time reading up on theology, philosophy and history; in prayer; and on introspection.

In the aftermath of the Cedar Revolution Parliament enacted a new Amnesty Law last month that ended Geagea's prison nightmare. His first appearance after his release revealed a frail and almost breathless ageing man - but he was feisty as ever. The major difference from the Geagea of yesteryear, however, was that the man's thinking had clearly evolved dramatically.

Even before his release, the LF had started to reach out to its former enemies. They demonstrated shoulder to shoulder with former Muslim and Druze militiamen during the March 14 rally; ran alongside them on common slates in the parliamentary elections in June and July; and demonstrated a newfound determination to forge a lasting Christian-Muslim partnership. The LF had realized that Lebanon is too small to be partitioned and that it is the destiny of all Lebanese to unite if Lebanon is to stand on its feet again.

The battle for the de-Baathification of Lebanon and for the full restoration of freedoms is far from over. Nevertheless, the Hakeem's wisdom is bound to speed it up. His new outlook deserves to be recognized, reciprocated and supported.

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