

interview / Fr. Abdo Raad

“The agreement is unrealistic; Lebanon still has no future”

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Ten days after the signing in Washington of the “[tripartite framework agreement](#)” between Lebanon, Israel and the United States, the State of Israel is maintaining its troops in the south of the Land of the Cedars and continuing military operations there,

which are legitimately intended to last “until Hezbollah has been eliminated”. The Israeli Defence Forces’ (IDF) bombardments, demolitions and house-to-house searches in pursuit of Hezbollah terrorists **have never ceased** within the “forward defence zone” unilaterally established by the State of Israel in southern Lebanon.

Nor has the list of Lebanese killed by Israeli fire ceased: **according to the latest bulletin from the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health**, there have been 4,303 victims of IDF action since 2 March, 73 of whom have been killed since the entry into force of the *ceasefire* contained in the agreement – 4,230 victims had been recorded **the day before the signing**. Iran, which in the **Memorandum of Understanding signed a few days earlier with the United States** and, implicitly, with its ally Israel – which, however, opted out – had the cessation of military operations in Lebanon included as a condition for peace, is currently occupied with **the funeral of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei**, who was killed by the allies on 28 February in Tehran; on the sidelines of the ceremony, the Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, called on the US to respect the Memorandum of Understanding which, as far as Lebanon is concerned, conflicts with the agreement signed with Israel.

The Nuova Bussola Quotidiana interviewed Father Abdo Raad, a Lebanese Melkite Greek-Catholic priest from the Diocese of Sidon, who has been in Italy since 2021. Active for many years in Lebanon and Syria, and founder and director of the **charitable association Annas Linnas** (*people for people*), Father Abdo is currently serving as a *fidei donum* priest in the Diocese of Campobasso-Bojano.

Father Abdo, have you read the text of the ‘framework agreement’? What do you think of it?

Yes, I have read the 14 articles of the agreement. There is a problem here: what is said and published is not always the whole truth. Another, even bigger problem is how to interpret it. On the one hand, as I am a man of peace who does not wish to wipe any state off the map, but who wants Israel to recognise a Palestinian state, I believe the agreement could bring an end to the conflict between Israel and Lebanon, as – on paper – it contains a *ceasefire*, mutual recognition of sovereignty, a commitment to resolve disputes solely through bilateral negotiations, a phased withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon – although it does not specify when – and recognition of the Lebanese Army as the sole legitimate armed force in the country. We have been at war with Israel for almost a century and the war has solved nothing; on the contrary, it has made everything worse, so it is time to say ‘enough is enough’. As a ‘beginning of beginnings’, as US Secretary of State Marco Rubio put it, the agreement is not bad: we need a starting point to emerge from the total darkness in which Lebanon finds itself.

On the other hand, I do not find the agreement realistic, as it does not resolve the problem – now seemingly forgotten – that lies at the root of the conflict: the Palestinian question. Let us remember that there are more than 400,000 Palestinians living in dire conditions in Lebanon.

What are the Lebanese people's views on the agreement?

The Lebanese are traditionally divided on political issues, as the party system is sectarian, complete with armed forces that answer to the leaders of the religious parties, the main one being Hezbollah. Consequently, what the Lebanese think is linked to their sectarian affiliation: the majority of Sunnis – represented by Prime Minister Nawaf Salam – and Christians – represented by the President of the Republic, Joseph Aoun – are in favour of negotiations or a de-escalation of the conflict and see the agreement as a good start. The Speaker of Parliament and leader of the Amal Party, the Shia Nabih Berri, is, on the one hand, part of the government engaged in dialogue with Israel and, on the other, an ally of Hezbollah; his position is therefore somewhat unclear. For its part, Hezbollah – which refuses to hand over its weapons to the Lebanese state – naturally describes the agreement as ‘humiliating and shameful, a surrender’ and therefore rejects it *in its entirety*.

As for the Lebanese population, I believe it is divided into three groups: one that wants to continue the Resistance against Israel; a second that wants a definitive peace with Israel and the handover of weapons to the state; and a third that wants stability and peace, but is unsure what to say.

You speak of opinions linked to sectarian affiliation, yet it would appear that opposition to Israel is rather widespread across Lebanon, at least judging by the protests that followed the signing of the agreement; it was not only Hezbollah supporters who protested, but also people of every sect and every political party who, particularly in the south, have lost everything because of the war.

It is true that the agreement has caused an intellectual *shock* in Lebanon, forcing a re-evaluation of relations with neighbouring countries – particularly Israel – as well as the very concept of the state, the unity of the army and the management of weapons. That said, it is important to understand that not everyone in Lebanon who is opposed to Israel (perhaps 95 per cent of the population) is necessarily opposed to this agreement or to the agreement as a whole; they may be opposed to one clause and not another, or to one part and not another. For example, supporters of the Christian party *Free Patriotic Movement* (founded by former President Michel Aoun, ed.), the Armenian Christian Tashnak Party and the Druze Progressive Socialist Party are in favour of strengthening

the Lebanese state and army and opposed to the existence of independent armed militias in the country, but when it comes to endorsing the agreement with Israel, their stance is far less clear-cut. Broadly speaking, supporters of the Christian parties the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb, the Future Party – the main Sunni party – and the majority of the remaining Sunni parties are generally in favour of the agreement. Opposed to the agreement, in addition to the Shi'a of Hezbollah and Amal, are the Christians of the Marada Party, the secular communist parties, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party – which is also secular – and the Sunnis of the Islamist Jamaa al-Islamiya party.

What does the future hold for Lebanon?

In the near future, the standoff will continue between two camps: the radical camp, based on the ideology of the Resistance, deterrence and the elimination of Israel; and the pragmatic camp, which calls for security, stability and reconciliation with the enemy, regardless of the problems the latter has with neighbouring countries, notably Palestine. I would therefore say that Lebanon is a country without a future, with a perpetually chaotic present, in the grip of constant political paralysis and obstructionism. What future can there be with an economic crisis for which no one is willing to accept responsibility, exacerbated by the destruction and damage caused by the war? What future, in a country led by corrupt leaders who continue to abuse their power without anyone being able to hold them to account? The future remains a hope: the spontaneous hope of a people who wish to break free from the cycle of perpetual fear and move towards a future of life and prosperity. When the Lebanese agree to forge a new social contract, then the future will begin. As a priest, even though I am disillusioned by all this, I would like the present and the future to be marked by divine hope, because only by seeing ourselves as brothers and sisters of a single Creator and children of the same land can we emerge from conflict and enmity.

What are the immediate needs of the population?

The main need is for the refugees to return home. I remember that my family was forcibly displaced from the *Chouf* (a mountainous region in central Lebanon, the scene of severe clashes during the civil war, ed.) for more than ten years, due to the wars and massacres targeting Christians. During those years, my father would ask us every day when we would return home, and sadly he died without ever seeing it again. There is also a need for a just government that will root out corruption, punish the corrupt and bring stability to the country. There is a need for 'bread' in every sense of the word: that is, for jobs, medicines, functioning schools, food security and the reconstruction of the country. Finally, the most important need is to renew hope in the face of suffering, to rediscover the human and divine values of peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and

cooperation.