

relationship with Syria. The second trend, represented by Masha'alani and backed by the Phalangists, takes a seemingly more flexible stance towards Syria. In actuality, therefore, the situation revolves around overt and covert attempts to abort having any serious, tangible relation with Syria, as was set out in the tripartite agreement (signed in December 1985 by Walid Jumblatt of the Progressive Socialist Party, Nabih Berri of the Amal movement, and then commander of the Lebanese Forces, Eli Hobeika).

The agreement has remained unimplemented since its inception due to the many differences and military clashes it had given rise to in the fascists' ranks. The January 15th battles this year culminated in the ousting of Hobeika by Samir Geagea. The former had gone too far in his pro-Syrian leanings in the tripartite agreement, according to Geagea and Amin Gemayel. At that time, Geagea and Gemayel joined forces to oust Hobeika. Gemayel aimed to reinstate himself as the sole strongman in the Lebanese arena, while Geagea's motives stemmed from a desire to reinforce his position in the Lebanese Forces, once Hobeika - a strong competitor - was out of the way.

Since then, Geagea has been making speedy efforts to convert the Lebanese Forces into some sort of regular army - the so-called Free Christian Army. The first class of retrained elements was to graduate in mid-August. Despite Geagea's many declarations of good intentions, the real reason behind reorganizing the Lebanese Forces was to weed out Hobeika's supporters and others whose position was not clearly pro-Geagea in the January 15th battles. Those who saw their livelihood threatened by these maneuvers rose in armed protest in the mid-August battles.

On the other hand, the Phalangist Party loyal to Amin Gemayel, attempting to capitalize on the conflict in the Lebanese Forces between Geagea and Masha'alani, supported the latter through Elie Abu Nader. However, when it became evident that Masha'alani was unable to stand up to Geagea's bloody onslaught, the Phalangists reconsidered their decision and assumed the role of impartial mediator between the two warring sides. The Phalangists were able to achieve two things in the process of engineering the truce:

(a) to have Masha'alani retain his position within the Lebanese Forces. Thus, the Phalangists would be able to keep a foothold within the Lebanese Forces and use Masha'alani when the opportunity arises in the future.

(b) to convince Geagea to suspend his plans for converting the Lebanese Forces into some kind of regular army and integrating them into the Phalangist Party structure. The Phalangists

prefer to keep these forces separate, subordinate and on hand when needed, rather than integrate them in the party structure.

Thus the Phalangists emerged from the August battles with the appearance of remaining the most qualified and authorized to make decisions in the name of the Christians.

However, the truce achieved between the two warring sides did not bring about a final solution to the core of the conflict, which is the power struggle between Geagea and the Phalangists, each equally anxious to wrest, once and for all, the sole right to represent the Christians. On the one hand, there is Samir Geagea, a strong opponent of the so-called privileged or special relations with Syria. Moreover, due to his strong Zionist backing, he supports open cooperation with the Zionist entity, as well as the division of Lebanon into cantons. On the other hand, the Phalangists loyal to Amin Gemayel hesitate to openly cultivate their relationship with 'Israel' at this stage. They refrain from openly colliding with Syria, while trying to avoid being restricted by a 'special relations' agreement.

There were several other factors which contributed to the rising tension in East Beirut and the consequent battles. Gemayel had suffered numerous rebuffs from the Syrians for not implementing one clause of the tripartite agreement. He was anxious to make a show of striking at the Zionist-backed Lebanese Forces, not because of an awakening of nationalist conscience however. Gemayel intended to give Syria the impression that he does not intend to reconsider the tripartite agreement, but did wish to curb the influence of the Lebanese Forces and their efforts to reinforce themselves.

Another factor was the election of George Sa'adeh to the position of secretary general of the Phalangist Party. His position was neither for one side nor the other. This did not change the balance of forces decisively, and thus had the effect of prolonging buried conflicts instead of deciding them.

Finally, the imposition of new taxes and new payments of protection money on civilians by Geagea's men, the waves of car bombs and the escalating propaganda war, all indicated the inevitability of the bloody battles in East Beirut.

Despite the truce, the Lebanese Forces still retain sufficient military power to constitute a force which Gemayel must reckon with. Thus, the military option for resolving the conflict remains open. This unresolved situation led to reignition of the old-new battles in East Beirut towards the end of September. Again it is a new attempt to trim Geagea's feathers. Hobeika's men, disguised as Phalangists, infiltrated East Beirut and clashed

with Geagea's men. The latter brutally and swiftly retaliated. The final toll, 200 wounded and 65 killed, left Geagea as the still uncontested strongman. Moreover, unconfirmed rumors are circulating that Masha'alani, the Phalangists' betting chip, has been kidnapped. And the military option is still open.

THE DILEMMA OF DIALOGUE

On another level, the Lebanese cabinet convened on September 2nd, as the Committee for Dialogue, for the first time since October 18, 1985. Glorious aims were declared at the end of this two-hour session «safeguarding Lebanon's unity, stressing its Arab identity, reforming its political system and liberating the South.» However, the main issues of differences remain and probably will remain unresolved, e.g., abolition of political sectarianism, reduction of presidential prerogatives and defining what is exactly meant by 'privileged or special' relations with Syria. These issues always spark fierce discussions which never result in concrete decisions.

In an interview with the Kuwaiti newspaper, *Al Watan*, prominent national figures in Lebanon commented on this much discussed Committee for Dialogue. Lawyer Sinan Barraj, head of the Defense Committee for Democratic Freedoms, said, «What is needed is a democratic national system, not sectarian solutions.» The head of the Arab Cultural Club, engineer Mohammed Qabanni, stated, «The government dialogue will lead to a truce... not a comprehensive solution.» MP Najah Wakim was most direct: «The government does not represent the people...»

On the whole, however, with the events in southern Lebanon now taking ascendancy, the discussions of this committee have been pushed to the back burner.

The year 1988 looms ahead as an important convergence point for three decisive deadlines - Lebanese presidential elections, US presidential elections, as well as Israeli general elections. This imposes the element of urgency on many forces to achieve some semblance of stability in certain hotbeds of turmoil. Such a semblance of stability conducive to imperialist designs for the region, necessitates consolidation of the pro-US and Zionist elements in Lebanon, before the whole area is subjected to a political reshuffling. The prediction of events is impossible, but one thing is certain: There will be vicious attempts to resolve the labyrinth of contradictions and conflicts in Lebanon in a form satisfactory to the US-Zionist-fascist engineers.