

The East Beirut Battles

The results of Eli Hobeika's late September attempt to return to East Beirut highlighted the suicidal nature of the Lebanese fascists' sectarian 'dream'. It has never been viable for a minority (in this case, Lebanon's Maronite Christians, among whom the fascists have based themselves) to rule over the majority. Lebanon's particular experience has accentuated the hopelessness of such a project. Over a decade of civil war, and frontline struggle against Israeli aggression and occupation, has brought two facts to the fore. One, the deprived and dispossessed, whether Lebanese or Palestinian, will not accept their plight forever, but are constantly rising up against their national and class enemy. Two, if the Lebanese cannot unite on internal reform and a clear position vis-a-vis 'Israel', the whole future of Lebanon is called into question.

These two facts directly collide with the fascists' historical policy of monopolizing state power in order to promote the economic interests of the elite, rather than of the country, and of allying with the Zionist enemy, if need be, against the Lebanese and Palestinian masses' militancy. The internal struggles within the fascists' ranks over the past two years are due to the differing factions' ideas of how to adjust to, or resist, these realities.

In March 1985, Samir Geagea forcibly took command of the Lebanese Forces militia, in what was widely seen as a 'revolt' against the traditional Phalangist party leadership, and the possibility of Lebanon's rapprochement with Syria. In May of the same year, Hobeika ousted Geagea. Then, contrary to the course charted by President Amin Gemayel (also of the Phalangist Party), Hobeika opted for reconciliation with Syria, and signed the tripartite agreement for political reform of the Lebanese system. In January 1986, Geagea and Gemayel banded together to oust Hobeika from East Beirut, in a bloody onslaught. Evicting Hobeika did not, however, resolve the internal contradictions, as seen in the two rounds of fighting this fall between Geagea's forces and those more inclined to Hobeika's line of conciliation. (See *Democratic Palestine* no.19.)

In Geagea's original 'revolt', the heavy aggression was turned against the Palestinians of Ain Al Hilweh and Miyeh Miyeh camps, in an aborted attempt to spread fascist control in the Sidon area. However, the ensuing power struggles have demonstrated the fascists' willingness to murder, pillage and generally wreak havoc in the Christian community they claim to

represent. This was especially clear in the latest round.

On September 27th, 300 militiamen led by Hobeika moved from West Beirut into the East, with the stated purpose of correcting the abnormal situation prevailing there and saving the population from Geagea's iron grip. It is noteworthy that this is the first time any military force has crossed the 'green line', established to divide East and West Beirut, as a result of the fascists' campaign in the mid-seventies, to 'cleanse' the Christian areas of poor Lebanese Moslems, Palestinians and progressive Christians as well.

Hobeika's men managed to cross this line without initially meeting resistance, and take up key posts in Ashrafiyeh. Expectedly, Geagea's forces reacted savagely, and a bloody battle ensued. Artillery engulfed the area, with shells also falling in West Beirut, and as far away as Zahle in the Bekaa Valley, where Hobeika has his headquarters. After ten hours of intense battle, Hobeika's men were forced to retreat, chiefly because of the Lebanese Army's intervention, with tank fire being directed indiscriminately in East Beirut residential areas. This development had not been anticipated by Hobeika, but it served to show how President Gemayel and major portions of the army use their power to protect Geagea's extreme fascist tendency.

Initial counts indicated 65 dead and 200 injured, many of them civilians, and over \$10 million in material damage to homes and businesses in the East. The next day, the Lebanese Army foiled another Hobeika attempt to advance, but the bloodshed did not stop there. Not content with Hobeika's withdrawal, Geagea's men maintained the state of siege and launched a massacre in their own communities. Prisoners taken in the battle were summarily

executed, as were suspected Hobeika sympathizers. The internal purge continued for two weeks, with at least sixty people killed in cold blood after cessation of the battle. Reports poured in about the discovery of mass graves in the villages outside East Beirut.

Though Geagea maintained his hold on East Beirut, a serious blow had been dealt to his and the Lebanese Forces' credibility, and that of the fascists generally. Initially, the East Beirut population was shocked by the penetration of the 'green line'. The Lebanese Forces' much-vaunted security was exposed as a paper tiger before Christians who have been indoctrinated to think that the dividing line is necessary for their protection against the 'Moslem enemy'. Then, residents of the East were treated to murderous examples of the real meaning of fascist 'security' and 'stability'. The fascists' cruelty to 'their own people' exposed the disarray in the Christian ranks. The Maronite Patriarch issued a statement condemning the bloodshed, including a thinly veiled criticism of Geagea's Lebanese Forces. The fascist parties, the Phalangists and the National Liberals of Chamoun, maintained an embarrassed silence, hoping nobody would remember that it is their policy over the years that has built up to such disasters for the Christian community.

Above all, these events illustrate that the way to break fascist dominance in East Beirut, or Lebanon as a whole, is not through betting on one faction or another. Only the national democratic program forwarded long ago by the Lebanese National Movement holds out a solution. All those wanting to promote Lebanon's unity and liberation from Zionist occupation, would do well to give full support to that program.

