
Renewed Civil War?

With joint Arab efforts underway to solve the Lebanese crisis, internal fighting erupted on both sides of the main political demarcation line, as various forces scrambled to strengthen their hand in the event of a pending settlement. By March, prospects for a solution seemed dim as major battles erupted between the nationalist forces and the army units of General Aoun's military government.

There have been many attempts to resolve the Lebanese crisis in the past, but all have failed because they couldn't resolve the contradictions between the nationalist forces and the reactionaries who are tied to the Israeli and US plans for the region. For years, there has been no joint Arab role vis-à-vis Lebanon, chiefly due to the contradictions prevailing among the Arab states. In fact, the role of some Arab states added to Israeli and US intervention in Lebanon, has further aggravated the problem. Finally, however, the Arab governments decided to take action, setting forth a solution, at least in theory.

THE ARAB LEAGUE COMMITTEE

Arab foreign ministers met on January 12th in Tunis, and decided to form a seven-man committee, headed by the Kuwaiti foreign minister, Sabah Al Ahmed, and including the foreign ministers of Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Sudan, plus Secretary General of the Arab League Qlibi. This committee was assigned responsibility for contacting all the parties involved in the Lebanese conflict, to discuss their ideas and suggestions for a solution based on national reconciliation. As stated by the committee, the Arab League had come up with this initiative based on «desire to aid Lebanon maintain the unity, independence, sovereignty and security of its territory... We confirm the Arab countries' willingness to give all forms of support Lebanon needs to confront the Israeli aggression against Lebanon's sovereignty... and to help the Lebanese state impose its actual authority over all of Lebanese soil.»

Throughout January, the seven-man committee was convened in Tunis, holding a series of meetings, some with Prime Minister Selim Hoss and Parliament Speaker Hussein Husseini, representing the legitimate government of Lebanon; and others with General Michel Aoun, head of the military government appointed by the outgoing president, Amin Gemayel. Husseini and Hoss stressed the necessity of coupling new presidential elections with political reform. Aoun, on the other hand, insisted on the priority of Syrian withdrawal from Beirut. Clearly, the general was trying to cover up his rejection of political reform of the sectarian system, and to avoid discussing the effects of the Israeli occupation on the Lebanese crisis.

Though these meetings did not result in any compromises that would make a solution between the two rival governments possible, the committee arrived at six basic principles regarding a solution for the political and constitutional crisis, which can be summed up as follows: It is necessary to link the Lebanese presidential elections with political reforms; the Lebanese problem is basically an internal one, but has been aggravated due to its connection to the overall Middle East crisis, external intervention and the fact that some parties have resorted to outside help to strengthen their position internally.

In February, the committee carried out a series of meetings with Lebanese religious leaders. A final round of meetings was scheduled for mid-March in Kuwait, to be attended by the leaders of Lebanon's major political parties and militias. However, parallel to these meetings, three rounds of fighting occurred in different areas of Lebanon.

NO WINNER, NO LOSER

The recurring conflict between the Amal movement and Hezbollah broke out again at the beginning of this year, focusing on Iqlim Al Tuffah, a district in South Lebanon between Sidon and Nabatiyeh, near the Israeli-occupied zone. The bloody conflict resulted in 173 killed and 340 wounded; 15,000 people were driven from their homes.

This unholy war pitted the two main Shiite parties in Lebanon against each other, competing for control of political decision-making in the Shiite arena in the South, as a step towards controlling the whole Islamic arena in Lebanon. Historically, the two parties have had differing views of the future of the South, the solution to the Lebanese problem and the Palestinian presence. Meanwhile, the impoverished masses of the South have been the victim of the conflict, added to constant Israeli aggression and the harassment of Lahd's militias.

There have been many calls for a ceasefire, but these always turned out to be temporary truces wherein the two sides took a breather and prepared to start the war anew. Amal is determined to remove Hezbollah from the South and establish its own hegemony, politically and militarily. It wants the South as a card in its hand to be played unilaterally in the case of efforts to resolve the Lebanese crisis. Hezbollah, for its part, seeks to consolidate its military positions in the South, which would augment its political influence as well as that of its main backer, Iran, in Lebanon.

This war contributes to the Lebanese crisis that is entering its fifteenth year. The only benefactors of such fighting are Israel and its agents, the Lahd militias, who are exploiting the chaos to enact mass expulsions, seeking to change the demographic composition of southernmost Lebanon. Seventy-four southerners were expelled from the occupied zone in January alone, in punishment for refusing support to Lahd's militias. Added to this are the Israeli air raids, targeting the Palestinian resistance and Lebanese national movement.

On January 30th, Syria and Iran sponsored a «comprehensive and final» agreement, signed in Damascus by ►