

Nabih Berri for the Amal movement, Abbas Mousawi for Hezbollah, and the foreign ministers of Syria and Iran. The essence of this agreement was ending the state of war, providing for a ceasefire and the return of residents who fled their homes during the fighting. Amal and Hezbollah agreed to form a joint coordination committee and a joint operations room to coordinate resistance against the Israeli occupation. They also agreed not to endanger the lives of the UN troops or the personnel of international organizations present in the South. According to the agreement, Amal is in charge of security in the South, but each party has the right to its own political and cultural activities.

Once again, the «no winner, no loser» formula prevailed as has so often been the case in resolving clashes in Lebanon. Amal's conditions were met as were those of Hezbollah. The alleged killers of three Amal leaders last autumn will be turned over to Amal that also gained charge of security in the South and Hezbollah's withdrawal from the areas they moved into in the latest round of fighting. On the other hand, Hezbollah will have their detained members released, the siege lifted from their positions, and the right to resist the Zionist occupation from the South.

If implemented, this agreement would enable the two parties to unite efforts against the Zionist occupation and its agents in the South. This would also open the possibility for better cooperation with the Palestinian resistance in the struggle against occupation, and provide more security for the residents of the South. On the other hand, failure to abide by this agreement will lead to the continuation of unjustified bloodshed and prolong the sufferings of the masses.

CONFLICT IN EAST BEIRUT

In view of the Arab League efforts to find a solution in Lebanon, General Aoun has been especially intent on presenting himself and his part of the Lebanese Army, as the sole authority in East Beirut and the surrounding area controlled by the rightist Christian militias. Thus, he hoped to improve his chances of becoming president of all of

Lebanon. In the process of trying to impose his control over the militias, Aoun involved himself in a power struggle with the most powerful of these, the rightist Lebanese Forces, led by Samir Geagea. This triggered a new intersectorial battle in East Beirut in the second week of February. In bloody clashes that left 76 dead and 200 wounded, Aoun's army gained the upper hand; the general accepted a ceasefire on the condition that the Lebanese Forces withdraw from East Beirut's streets and government facilities. In late February, the Lebanese Forces were reportedly replaced by Aoun's troops in the 5th basin of Beirut's port from which the Lebanese Forces had derived their main income by collecting customs duties in lieu of the Lebanese state; a number of checkpoints where the Forces had collected illegal taxes were also withdrawn from.

This enables Aoun to claim that he has reinstated state control in a «militia-free» East Beirut, in order to enter into an administrative reunification of Beirut, whereby he would aim at disarming the Lebanese national movement and the Palestinian resistance in West Beirut and other patriotic areas.

This scenario does not, however, mean that there has been a decisive break between Aoun and Geagea. Both need the other in their common campaign against Syrian presence in Lebanon, which is really just another expression for their aim to eliminate the Lebanese nationalist and progressive force, and block any real reform of the sectarian system from which the Maronite bourgeoisie draws its privileges. The joint committee formed between Aoun and Geagea actually accords the Lebanese Forces a recognized status, alongside Aoun's Lebanese Army units. This impression was reinforced by Geagea's declarations in early March, that the Lebanese Forces will not withdraw from East Beirut. There are moreover reports that Aoun has given the Lebanese Forces alternative income sources to compensate for their loss of the port.

RENEWED CIVIL WAR

Subsequent events made it quite clear that Aoun, in concert with the Lebanese

forces, was ready to ignite a new war in Lebanon, rather than accept political reforms. In early March, Walid Jumblatt, president of the Progressive Socialist Party, a main force in the Lebanese national movement, correctly surmised that Aoun and Geagea were only working to maintain their privileged position in the sectarian system. Jumblatt thus declared his intention not to attend the meetings in Kuwait, urging the Hoss government and other nationalist forces to beware of making concessions on the need for political reform. Amal leader Nabih Berri also expressed reservations about the prospects of the talks.

On March 6th, ten days before the talks in Kuwait were to convene, Aoun ordered a blockade of all ports in Lebanon except the one in East Beirut, which he controls. The nationalist forces quite rightly regarded this as tantamount to a declaration of war, for it meant a de facto economic siege of other parts of Lebanon, as all incoming goods would be detoured to the East Beirut harbor. In the following days, the coast guard of Aoun's government impounded two tankers carrying fuel to ports south of Beirut. At the same time, artillery battles broke out between the nationalist forces and Aoun's Lebanese Army on the frontlines at Souq Al Gharb, in the mountains southeast of Beirut. This fighting continued, and in the following days, Aoun imposed the closure of Beirut airport, further escalating the crisis.

On March 14th, major artillery battles erupted between East and West Beirut, judged to be the heaviest such fighting in two years. Aoun confirmed the seriousness of the situation by proclaiming the beginning of the battle to drive the Syrian forces out of Lebanon. As we go to press, the Arab League initiative appears eclipsed by this new round of war. However reasonable this initiative may have been, events have shown that resolving the conflict in Lebanon will, in the last analysis, always depend on the attitudes of the conflicting Lebanese parties. If any one of them says *no*, things will return to point zero. It is now obvious that the rightist forces in East Beirut have again said *no* to political reform which is the key to any solution of the crisis. ●