

Aoun's Suicidal War

The Lebanese civil war entered its 15th year amid the most relentless artillery battles ever between the reactionary forces led by General Aoun, and the nationalist and progressive forces. This round of the conflict threatens to formalize the country's partition and preclude the possibilities of a political solution.

As the six-man Arab League committee was supposed to hold its third meeting with Lebanese political leaders on March 17th, Lebanon witnessed a qualitative political and military escalation, with heavy artillery duels across Beirut's green line. These clashes erupted two days after Michel Aoun, head of the military government, imposed an air-and-sea blockade on March 6th, against the ports in the nationalist areas: the Jiyeh port run by the Progressive Socialist Party, led by Walid Jumblatt, and the Ouzai port run by the Amal movement, led by Nabih Berri, both south of Beirut. In response, the nationalist forces closed the crossings linking East and West Beirut, and fierce battles ensued. Between March 8th and mid-May, over 400 people were killed and approximately 1,500 wounded.

The peak of the fighting occurred on March 14th as people were heading for work, and children for school; 39 were killed and 96 wounded in the day-long shelling in the Beirut area. Most of the casualties occurred in West Beirut; among the dead were two school children. It was the worst single day of violence in the civil war since 1985. Electricity plants were heavily damaged, leaving some areas in total darkness, while others had only a few hours of electricity daily. At least 50,000 people were evacuated from the area around the main fuel depot in East Beirut after it was shelled, due to the danger of explosions.

AOUN'S DRIVE FOR POWER

The situation in Lebanon returned to the same cycle of violence, provocations and arbitrary shelling, causing Arab and international efforts for a settlement to fail. The war of the ports disrupted the efforts of the Arab

League committee to reach an interim solution for the Lebanese crisis, or at least remove some of the complications. The major reason for this escalation was General Aoun's drive for power.

In the «What will happen if we build another Beirut?» speech delivered by Aoun on March 25th, he expressed his determination to carry on his dirty war against the Lebanese people and the nationalist and progressive forces, vowing to fight even at the risk of destroying the capital. Despite appeals from Lebanese and non-Lebanese leaders and bodies to end the fighting, Aoun and his isolationist allies in the army and Lebanese Forces persisted in their campaign which acting prime minister Salim Hoss described as «this shameful massacre, this new cycle of mad violence.»

The battles between Aoun's forces and the nationalists took on a new dimension on March 14th, when Aoun declared a «war of liberation against the Syrian army,» saying there would be no peace in Lebanon until Syria withdraws its troops. Aoun declared, «The battle has already begun,» raising many questions: Why did the general declare this war? Does he wage this war in order to attain the presidency? Examining the latest developments and their background, one sees that in the months preceding the fighting, Aoun behaved according to the logic of a politician striving to prove his worthiness to be president and present a real solution, according to his view, for the Lebanese crisis. He evaluated that the political situation was ripe for selecting a president who would be capable of resolving the crisis by any means. Thus, he worked for internal and external acknowledgement of his worthiness.

Aoun has made no secret of his presidential ambitions. His fortunes seemed to improve in February when he cracked down on the Lebanese Forces who are notorious for their connections to Israel, their opposition to political reform and their chain of violence against anyone who disagrees with them. Syria, for example, praised Aoun's moves against the Lebanese Forces as a step towards resolving the political stalemate. Now, however, Syria appears determined to confront Aoun's efforts to extend his authority to all of Lebanon and demand Syrian withdrawal. Aoun blockaded the nationalist ports in order to tighten his control over the entire Lebanese coast, so as to impede the Arab League's peace efforts. Objectively, this creates conditions which maintain the status quo. To the same end, Aoun rejected Hoss' proposal to set up a joint committee from the fractured Lebanese Army to find ways of enacting and monitoring a cease-fire. Instead, Aoun insisted that such a committee be drawn from the Lebanese and Syrian armies with a mandate to enforce a cease-fire, and to set a timetable for a Syrian pull-out. Hoss rejected Aoun's contention, saying the Syrian presence in Lebanon was legitimate: «The Syrian army entered Lebanon in 1976 at the request of the then reigning Lebanese government. This request was later endorsed by the Arab League of which Lebanon is a founding member.» Hoss said that any demand for a Syrian pull-out should be made by a united Lebanese government which does not now exist. He accused Aoun of taking «unilateral decisions that are pushing Lebanon to the brink of a disaster.»

Aoun also reacted negatively to the statement issued in Bkirki by 23 Christian members of parliament, calling for an immediate stop to the fighting. Although Aoun himself now heads the reactionary forces who have blocked political reform which would make Lebanon a normal parliamentary democracy, he dismissed the statement of his fellow Christians by saying that these deputies were elected 17 years ago. On the same occasion, he told the public, «Don't worry if the presidential elections do not take place. If there is no president, the people will impose the ►