

# On the Brink of Disaster

For the first time in the 15-year-old civil war, the Lebanese crisis is being regarded as a regional conflict, heading towards further complications. Failure to resolve the internal conflict has opened the way for external factors to play an increasingly larger role, so that they now appear to dominate the situation.

Since March, Lebanon has been subject to a bloody and bitter conflict, leading to the death of hundreds of its citizens. This conflict was punctuated by weekly and sometimes daily cease-fires which the isolationist forces, led by General Aoun, never honored, but rather exploited to serve their tactics. Ever since Aoun, the head of the military government, plunged Lebanon into this bloody war, the country has been suffering more lethal bombardments. Arbitrary shelling has become part of the daily routine, while the Lebanese have been observers-witnesses to the fragmentation and destruction of their country. Thousands of Beirut's 1.5 million inhabitants have fled the city since the battle between General Aoun and the nationalist forces broke out on March 8th. The fire is still raging, grinding toward a brutal military climax; Lebanon is farther away from a political settlement than at any other time.

Developments in Lebanon are tragic for all concerned. The internal conflict between the isolationists and the national progressive forces has been exacerbated by outside interference. As each group sought to strengthen its position by appealing to outside forces, the conflict has become increasingly regionalized and internationalized.

## «No Red Lines Anymore»

Since March, more and more Lebanese have come to support the demand of the nationalist forces for political reform. In June, the Arab League's three-state committee suggested that the Lebanese parliament meet outside the country to draw up a document on political reform, to be discussed at a subsequent meeting of

the parliament in Lebanon, when conditions would permit. A number of Maronite MPs residing in East Beirut publicly expressed their readiness to attend such a session. However, they were publicly attacked and threatened by General Aoun, and consequently silenced. In July, the Maronite patriarch Sfeir called for reform and the equality of all sects in Lebanon, in the interests of a political solution. He was planning a meeting between political figures from East and West Beirut, to prepare for a session of the Lebanese parliament. This move was also blocked by General Aoun and the continuation of the war.

The nationalist and progressive forces were in fact quite patient in relation to Aoun's criminal isolationist plan. They had hoped to avoid a devastating total confrontation. However, Aoun persisted in his mad war, refusing dialogue or a cease-fire before the pull-out of what he calls the «Syrian occupation.» In Aoun's words, «Frankly speaking, I am not prepared to reach understanding with anyone who tries to negotiate with me on reform before liberation» (*Al Qabas*, Kuwait, July 3rd).

When it became clear that Aoun has no intention of stopping, the nationalists took action. Suddenly, Aoun and his isolationist allies found themselves in a critical situation in Beirut and the surrounding hills, as Souq Al Gharb was attacked by the nationalist forces. In mid-August, 16 Lebanese organizations that oppose Aoun joined together in the Lebanese Nationalist Front, supported by Syria and Iran.

This escalation was presaged by the deadend in the efforts of the three-state committee (Saudi Arabia, Algeria and

Morocco), formed at the Arab Summit in Casablanca in May. After three months, the committee had still not been able to enforce a comprehensive cease-fire in the fighting between Aoun's forces and the Lebanese nationalists. In a move that almost everyone now regrets, the committee announced its failure on July 31st, and the guns of Lebanon sounded again in a desperate 'war of survival' as described by Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Progressive Socialist Party (*International Herald Tribune*, August 25th).

In the statement issued at the end of the meeting of the three states' foreign ministers, the committee expressed «great disquiet at the loss of human lives and the untold suffering caused to the Lebanese people.» It announced that its mediation efforts had come to a «deadend in both the political and security fields,» mainly because «Syria's concept of spreading (the Lebanese state's) sovereignty is different from that of the committee» (*Al Safir*, Lebanon, August 1st).

Damascus, in reply, accused the committee of failing to heed an agreement to halt arms supplies to both sides as part of a deal to allow Lebanon's warring factions to build a new unified government. In a letter to the committee, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq Al Sharaa said, «Aoun and his allies are responsible for the committee's failure,» accusing the general of trying to partition Lebanon into mini-states along sectarian lines (*Al Safir*, August 7th).

The relative optimism that prevailed when the Arab committee began its efforts in the early summer, vanished in August, to be replaced by bitter military confrontation. The nationalists' ground offensive against Souq Al Gharb on August 13th came against a background of four days of incessant shelling. Souq Al Gharb, in the hills southeast of Beirut, is the frontline position guarding Aoun's forces at the Presidential Palace and the Defense Ministry, five kilometers away. Three hundred fighters of the Lebanese nationalist forces attacked Aoun's positions there. Although there