

From War to War

«My brother in the eastern area, I can guarantee that I am not going to declare war on you, but I cannot guarantee that the war is not going to explode again... We have learned from past experience that wars simply explode without anyone declaring them.» Lebanon's Prime Minister Salim Hoss, (Associated Press, December 18th).

With the Hrawi government's failure to move against General Aoun's stronghold in East Beirut, fighting broke out in the eastern areas on January 31st. Aoun's separatism, and the de facto partition this caused, generated a new war, this time in the heart of the Christian community.

The current situation shows that partition is the crucial problem facing the people of Lebanon. Between war and partition, citizens are killed, homes destroyed, families separated, and the future is something to be feared.

Aoun's isolation

The fighting in East Beirut has its roots in Aoun's continued refusal to accept the Taif accord and President Hrawi's legitimacy. The other major power in East Beirut, Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces, had accepted Hrawi's presidency, and proposed a federated state of sectarian cantons rather than either partition or the unified, reformed political system laid out in the Taif accord. In view of his increasing overall isolation, Aoun could tolerate no dissent in the so-called Christian camp. The whole country, even his supporters, had begun to realize that it is Aoun and his actions that are blocking the drive for peace and reconciliation.

In this situation, Aoun provoked the latest round of fighting by ordering the Lebanese Forces to disband, ridiculously charging Geagea of waging «war against the army with American blessing to enforce implementation of the humiliating (Taif) agreement» (*Al Safir*, February 9th).

Geagea defied Aoun's order, vowing that he would «respond to each shell with 10 shells,» not to «allow those blinded by the lust for power to slaughter the Lebanese Forces» (*The Economist*, February 3-9). In the ensuing fighting, over 600 people were killed and 2,000 wounded, in the first half of February. Artillery fire hit hospitals, schools and churches in addition to homes. Several hospitals warned that they would not be able to continue functioning for more than two or three days as water, blood and oxygen supplies were being exhausted. Thousands have left their homes and fled to safer areas in West Beirut and northern Lebanon, where the legitimate authorities have maintained stability. The new round of fighting in East Beirut is the worst since February of last year, when Aoun moved against the Lebanese Forces to exert his authority over the Christian areas.

In view of the new round of death and destruction he has unleashed, the mad general can no longer maintain the image of the «saviour of the Lebanese Christians» which he had worked to cultivate in the local and international media. Even in the rightist Christian camp, there are few Lebanese who continued to fall for his lies about the «war of liberation», because Aoun has become «nothing but a television show,» in the words of Prime Minister Hoss (AP, January 29th).

In the light of the unanimous popular support for the Taif accord and the government of national reconciliation, the dictatorial general and his sectarian campaign have been reduced to absurdity. Accordingly, he even declared war on the press, declaring «from now on, critical tongues shall be cut off... They (journalists) have committed many crimes in the name of freedom, which has become chaos» (*Al Safir*, January 18th). The media had defied his ban on referring to Elias Hrawi as

president of Lebanon or Salim Hoss as prime minister. Aoun then shut down *Al Diyar* and *Al Bayrak* newspapers, along with *Akhbar Al Yom* newsletter, all published in East Beirut, for a week.

More fragmentation

Adding to the picture of infighting was a new round of violence which broke out on December 23rd, between Nabih Berri's Amal movement and Hezbollah, in Iqlim Al Toffah, between Sidon and Jezzine in South Lebanon. As a result of this inter-Shiite fighting, at least 98 people have been killed and 290 wounded. The two sides are vying for control of Lebanon's Shiite Moslem community, and both ignored the ceasefire called by the Algerian mediator, Mohammed Taher, on January 29th, despite having expressed readiness to withdraw their fighters to the pre-conflict lines.

Other obstacles to stability

Since coming to power, President Hrawi has taken a series of measures to pave the way for restoring Lebanon's unity and stability, and further isolate Aoun. In this framework, he paid a visit to Damascus on January 21st, seeking a mechanism to guarantee implementation of the Taif accord. This was his first trip outside Lebanon since his election in November, and the first leg of a planned tour to the states of the Arab tripartite committee which brokered the Taif agreement (Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Morocco), aiming to revive their efforts to support his government. In Damascus, Hrawi agreed with President Assad on a security plan for the western part of Beirut, the airport road and the coast. In addition to a gradual withdrawal of Syrian troops from West Beirut to the southern outskirts of the city, the plan would ban militias from the city, aiming to create an atmosphere of security