

No to the Phalangist regime

On the political level, the head-on confrontation led the opposition to sharpen its platform. In the face of efforts to enact a security plan prior to any political solution (actually a cover for the army's planned offensive), PSP leader Walid Jumblatt, on January 31st, accused the regime of amassing its troops. Terming the security plan a "waste of time", he predicted, "The decisive battle is forthcoming and inevitable. A solution with the Phalangists is impossible." By February 4th, the National Salvation Front had specified its conditions for a ceasefire: withdrawal of the US and other MNF troops; neutralization of the Lebanese Army; unconditional Israeli withdrawal and abrogation of the Lebanese-Israeli accord; commitment to national dialogue; and abolition of Phalangist hegemony. Amal leader Nabih Berri's call for patriotic ministers to resign precipitated the end of the Wazzan government. By February 6th, both Jumblatt and Berri were calling for Amin Gemayel's resignation, strengthening the political platform uniting their respective military forces' joint struggle. Also, in this round, the nationalist leadership directly called on soldiers to desert from the fascist-controlled army.

This signified a definitive crystallization of the national forces' standpoint: That the only way to abrogate the May

17th agreement and prevent fascist hegemony in Lebanon is to remove Amin Gemayel from the presidency. It is he who represents the Phalangists' hold on state power, and this is irreconcilable with Lebanon's unity, Arab identity and democratic development. (See interview with Comrade George Hawi for further discussion of this aspect.)

Mass desertion

The enemy forces' most fatal miscalculation was totally overlooking the social factor, and its link-up with the political and military aspects. On February 2nd, as the army was besieging the southern districts of Beirut, a high Shiite religious leader, Qabalan, warned that the use of the army in these areas would "create a revolt in the soul of the soldier, who could not side with the authorities against his people." However, what the sheikh could easily foresee seemed an unknown factor to the Reagan Administration militarists, who think that all conflicts can be resolved by brute force.

Under the impact of the all-out confrontation, the Lebanese Army experienced disarray in its ranks no less extensive than its break-up during the 1975-76 civil war. In the battle for West Beirut, 90% of the soldiers surrendered their arms to the nationalist forces. Over 6,000 went over to the nationalist side. Ibrahim Shaheen, a deserting officer, called for changes in the military's struc-

ture, so that it will do its national duty in the South, and not against the people.

It was estimated that one-third of the Lebanese Army was incapacitated, yet Reagan persisted in blaming Syria for the nationalist advance, ignoring all internal Lebanese factors. The US aid to the army — heavy shelling from the Sixth Fleet — was destructive enough for the Lebanese land and civilians: On February 8th alone, the New Jersey indiscriminately fired almost 300 one-ton shells into the mountains. However, this made no dent in the internal balance of forces favorable to the nationalists. In retrospect, it appears as a show of sound and fury, to cover the Marine's subsequent retreat to the warfleet.

By the time the nationalist forces took Khaldeh, several hundred soldiers of the Lebanese Army 4th division were fleeing across the Awali River to the protection of the Israeli occupiers; others had deserted in favor of the nationalist forces. The brigade itself was surrounded in Damour and eventually retreated without much of a fight, in order to be evacuated by ship to the fascist harbor of Junieh. The 4th and 8th brigades had been the only evidence a White House spokesman could find on February 9th, to back up the US claim that the Lebanese Army had not collapsed.

The Reagan Administration's policy of supporting local dictators, without regard for their lack of popular support,

In a Nutshell - Causes of the Crisis

In an interview with Françoise Chipaux and Lucien George, printed in "The Guardian", February 21st, Amal leader Nabih Berri very succinctly pinpoints the crisis between the fascist controlled regime and the population, which led the nationalist forces to decide to liberate West Beirut.

Asked why the battle of West Beirut began in the southern suburbs, Berri replied: "Twenty-five per cent of the Lebanese population (roughly 700,000 people) live in this suburb at the entrance to Beirut. The great majority of the people living there are Shiites, but there are also a fair number of Christians...in addition to Sunnis and Druze. All these people have one thing in common - they are poor and underprivileged...The army, 'Phalangized' by the government, treated the people the way the South African regime treats the blacks. The Lebanese Forces entered the suburb and even opened offices...operating under the cover of the army.



Using peaceful means, I tried to warn the government against establishing such a presence. It was necessary to prevent a repetition of the tragedy that took place in Nabaa, another poor Shiite neighbourhood where the inhabitants were chased out by the Phalangists in 1976. I organized meetings, gave news

conferences and brought the matter to the public's attention. But still with no result.

"When on February 2nd, the Mar Mikhael church, held by the Lebanese army, was taken by our militiamen, I expected the army to counterattack... Instead of fighting, the army shelled the poorer neighborhoods of the southern suburb for 18 hours, using 60 tanks, and 170,000 people had to leave their home. It was a monumental crime..."

When asked why the battle was so violent, and if there was a plan to invade the southern suburb, Berri answered: "You can't invade the southern suburb. The idea was to terrorize its inhabitants and force them to flee, and thereby whittle down the population's socio-political clout which the government finds irksome.

"These people are against religious sectarianism, against the proprietary interests representing them in the parliament and against the Lebanese-Israeli agreement of May 17, 1983. They are determined to liberate Lebanon, starting from the south."