

The Islamic Meeting and the National Program

On July 9th, 13 Lebanese Muslim leaders meeting in Damascus with Syrian Vice-President Khaddam agreed on a plan entitled «The National Program for Solving the Lebanese Crisis». This program proposes to end the sectarian structure of the Lebanese state and institutions, enabling equal opportunity, rights and duties for all. It calls for reorganizing the army and formulating a new constitution, stressing Lebanon's unity as well as its Arab patriotic identity and role. Also agreed on was a security plan for West Beirut: withdrawing all armed men from the streets, closing militia offices and assigning security duties solely to the Internal Security Forces and the Lebanese Army, with Syrian observers monitoring implementation.

Participants in the Damascus meeting also agreed to form the Front for National Alliance, grouping the parties of the Lebanese National Democratic Front (LNDP), the Amal movement, the National Political Council for Saida, and a number of other patriotic forces and figures. This front sets a precedent, for Amal has previously refused to enter a formal alliance with the national and progressive forces. The impetus for the new program and front was common desire to end the disorder and internal strife plaguing West Beirut in the recent period. This had assumed sectarian dimensions with one group striving to dominate the nationalist areas, and secondary conflicts taking precedence over the struggle against the main enemies. Muslim leaders met in Damascus to end this situation, for it threatened the unity of the nationalist forces at a time when Lebanon still faces lingering Israeli occupation and the fascist forces' divisive plans. The agreement reached is a minimum for tackling the Lebanese crisis which has become steadily more complicated and deep-rooted. Ending the sectarian system requires radical change, not simply a reshuffling to create a new kind of «balance». The forces advocating democratic reform must themselves leave behind every vestige of sectarian thinking and practice.

Participants in the Damascus meeting

Prime Minister of Lebanon, Rashid Karami

Education Minister Salim Hoss

Transport Minister Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Progressive Socialist Party and the LNDP

Justice Minister Nabih Berri, leader of the Amal movement

Defense Minister Adel Osseiran

Mufti of the Republic, Sheikh Hassan Khaled

Jaafarite Mufti Sheikh Abdelamir Kaban

Vice-President of the Higher Shiite Council, Sheikh Mohammad Mahdi Shamseddin

Druze Sheikh Akl Mohammad Abu Shakra

House Speaker Hussein Hussein

Sidon Deputy Nazih Bizri

Mustafa Saad, General Secretary of the Saida Nasserite Organization

Director General of Dar al Fatwa, Hussein Kuwaty.

If the stated goals are ever implemented in practice, the consensus reached in Damascus would be «a turning point in the history of relations between Syria and Lebanon's national forces», as it was characterized by the Lebanese Communist Party. In any case, by uniting their ranks and reasserting demands for democratic reform, the nationalists put the ball in President Amin Gemayel's court, again testing if he will act as Lebanon's President or the President of a particular sect. The Damascus meeting is intended as a prelude to new attempts at inter-Lebanese reconciliation, leading to dialogue with Lebanon's President and Christians.

«The «National Program» faces a range of obstacles to implementation. One obstacle is seen in the concept of «Muslim-Christian» dialogue, for the fascist forces lay claim to representing the Christians. Amin Gemayel tried to belittle the Damascus accord without directly contradicting it: He equated it with the principles adopted by Karami's

national unity cabinet in 1984, which have remained ink on paper in great part due to Gemayel's own handling of the presidency in the interests of his party, the Phalangists. The main components of the fascist Lebanese Front, the Phalangists and Chamoun's National Liberal Party, openly criticized the accord. Chamoun interpreted it as «auto-security» for the Muslims, justifying the fascists' «auto-security» in predominantly Christian areas. The fascists are betting on the nationalist forces' failure to reorganize and unify their ranks. Thus the fascists could again avoid the renewed demand for reforms.

Fascists close ranks

At the same time, the fascists scuttled to reunify their ranks in the face of this new attempt to abolish the sectarian system on which their privileges rest. The procedure charted by the Phalangist Party for resolving its tactical differences with the Lebanese Forces militias was not due for completion until a congress this autumn. However, on July 15th, the Lebanese Forces announced that their military forces had united with the Phalangist militia loyal to Amin Gemayel. One can question whether this has truly ended the internal contradictions that led to Geagea's revolt in the spring and recurring, though usually unreported clashes in East Beirut. Yet the closing of the ranks was intended to put the fascists in a better position to sabotage «The National Program» whether by Amin Gemayel's political maneuvering or by unleashing a new round of violence.

Patriotic readiness

The obstacle posed by the fascist forces was directly addressed by LNDP leader Walid Jumblatt: As the security plan was about to be implemented in West Beirut in mid-July, he declared: «What is happening may be useful and may lead to a truce, but it will not lead to a solution...There can be no solution as long as the Phalangist Party exists.» The nationalist forces cooperated with implementation of the new security plan