

## SPECIAL REPORT

# Lebanon Near Revolution; Syria, Israel, NATO Paralyzed

March 20 (IPS) — A revolutionary process in Lebanon, led by the Lebanese Communist party and the pro-Iraqi Arab Baath Socialist Party, has transformed the political battle in that country into the focus of a regional mass strike that has begun to threaten both the NATO-controlled Syrian regime and Israel itself — and NATO is virtually powerless to stop it. Barring a suicidal U.S.-ordered intervention into Lebanon by Israeli or NATO forces, the Lebanese events will help to establish the conditions under which the CIA-manipulated Arab-Israeli conflict can be brought to a rapid conclusion, through a settlement based on regional economic development.

As a result of a heavy-handed Syrian military intervention into Lebanon in recent weeks, a major transformation of the Lebanese left and the Palestinian movement has occurred. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), headed by Yasser Arafat, has come out openly against Syria, and is firming up its alliance with the pro-Iraqi Popular Front (PFLP). Kamal Jumblatt, leader of the complex coalition of leftist and pseudo-leftist parties called the Lebanese Progressive Front, has been forced to drop his social-democratic stance and adopt a revolutionary posture, a signal of the power of the Communist Party and the Baath over his base. So strong is the pressure on Jumblatt that he refused an invitation to visit Damascus from the Syrian president, Hafez Assad, this week. Even Syrian puppets Abdel Aziz Adab and Ahmed Khatib, leaders of the two rebel army forces made up of deserters from the disintegrated Lebanese army, have been denounced by Syria, and their forces have already fought limited skirmishes with Syrian troops stationed in Lebanon.

Qualified sources report that the paramilitary Syrian-controlled Saiqa commando group, the Palestinian branch officially part of Syrian Military Intelligence, is split over the Syrian police role in Lebanon. The Saiqa split indicates that the Syrian army is becoming unreliable as Assad is forced into open support of the Lebanese rightists to stabilize the country. The Syrian regime has stretched itself to the limit in trying to disorganize and crush the Lebanese left and Assad has mobilized the full extent of Syrian diplomatic and military pressure into preventing revolution in Lebanon. Over the past four days, Assad has met round-the-clock in Damascus with leading Lebanese politicians, searching vainly for a formula to re-establish bourgeois order in the neighboring country.

In Lebanon itself, there is not the shred of any functioning central or regional authority with anti-Syrian feeling running extremely high throughout the country. The army is shattered, with most of its rank-and-file troops having deserted to the renegade Lebanese Arab Army under Khatib, which has entered into a loose alliance with the left and Jumblatt. This was symbolized yesterday when unidentified guerrillas near Beirut airport fired two grenades into a plane that was about to take off carrying Prime Minister Rashid Karami, former Prime Minister Saab Salam, and two officials of the ex-

tremist Christian Falangist party to Damascus for a meeting with Assad. The passengers escaped unhurt, and an angry Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam, whose manipulative "mediation" visits to Beirut have fueled the civil war in Syrian interests, warned that Syria "will cut off the hand" of those responsible — a clear warning to the left.

Even the New York Times, which for 11 months has reported the Lebanese civil war as a "Christian vs. Moslem" RAND scenario, yesterday finally admitted the truth. Syrian President Assad, reported the Times, "fears that a leftist-dominated Lebanon would seek autonomy through support from his Iraqi Baathist rivals," and Syria is "bound to throw all its weight into the balance to suppress the threat of an ultramilitant Hanoi in Beirut."

### Echoes in Jordan, Israel

The developments in Lebanon have already had an immediate effect throughout the region. On the Israeli-occupied West Bank of Jordan, Israeli Defense Minister Shimon Peres ordered thousands of Israeli paratroops and military police into emergency action on the West Bank March 18 to quell an outbreak of nationalist riots and strikes that have paralyzed the West Bank for weeks. Cadre of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in alliance with the Jordanian and Israeli Communist parties, are leading the West Bank revolt, the most serious rebellion in the area since its was occupied in 1967.

The joint participation of the Communists and the PLO creates an immediate potential for a regionally coordinated development push that, along with Lebanon, could easily topple both Assad and the Israeli warhawks. Last month, representatives of the PLO and the Israeli Communist Party met in Moscow. On March 30, Tewfik Zayyad, the Israeli Communist mayor of Nazareth, has called for a nationwide general strike which some Israeli newspapers have begun to compare with the 1936 mass strike which almost ousted the British from Palestine.

The PLO, long an instrument of U.S. policy through the influence of certain Arab regimes such as Saudi Arabia, is itself undergoing a revolutionary transformation, largely the result of its membership in Lebanon being radicalized by the Lebanese revolution and the role of Iraq in backing the Lebanese left. As a first step, informed sources report, the PLO is considering whether to expel Saiqa, the Syrian regime's "Palestinian" outfit.

A March 14 editorial in Falastin ath-Thawra, newspaper of the PLO, warned:

"The revolution will dismiss from its ranks all the opportunists who hope to change their stands and their programs in the hope of realizing cheap gains. If imperialism is betting on those whom it calls 'Palestinian moderates' it is bound to lose." The reference to "opportunists" is a reference to Saiqa, according to Palestinian sources. By expelling Saiqa, and thereby officially condemning Syria, the PLO would provide the trigger for Assad's radical and pro-

Iraqi opposition in Damascus to move against the Damascus regime.

Throughout Israel, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, a revolutionary front is developing, backed by Iraq and the USSR, that can force a complete reorganization of middle east politics. The London Economist, a bankers' weekly, reports that for the first time Israeli Arabs and Arabs on the West Bank, via the Communist parties, are collaborating, and appealing to the PLO.

#### **NATO Paralysis**

To halt this process, the Atlanticists must somehow act to block the left in Lebanon, the catalyst in the region and the chief focus of the region's mass strike. However, NATO and its allies have few, if any, workable options.

The chief possibility — a NATO-ordered Syrian invasion of Lebanon by huge Syrian forces — is highly dangerous. Any attempt by Assad to annex Lebanon to Syria would almost immediately backfire into Syria itself. Already there are reports that Saiqa is on the verge of a major factional split, a cleavage that must travel back into the headquarters of Syrian Military Intelligence.

Should Assad attempt to increase the deployment of police forces into Lebanon, he will instead risk inviting an expansion of the Lebanese conflict to the heart of Syria. Last

month, in a warning aimed at Syria, Iraqi President Bakr stated explicitly that under no circumstances will Iraq permit the destruction of the Lebanese progressive forces.

An Israeli invasion of Lebanon, or even a renewed Arab-Israeli war, is also unlikely. Sane NATO strategists realize that the Soviet Union would immediately respond to such an adventure, with the risk of nuclear war within days. Furthermore, the delicate balancing act now being handled by Egyptian President Sadat since his pro-Western turn would be fatally upset, and according to one former RAND analyst, would probably cause the collapse of the Sadat regime.

Direct intervention by the U.S. Sixth Fleet is almost unthinkable. The most likely policing result is a continued effort by Syria to delay any decisive result, combined with low-intensity policing of strategic points in Lebanon. Limited concessions — such as the forced resignation of President Frangieh, an extreme rightist, and his replacement by a liberal like Raymond Edde — could be added to the package in an attempt to win the mass base of the left away from its newly consolidated alliance with the left-wing cadre parties, the CPL and the Baath.

Should this patchwork effort come apart in the next week or so, NATO will be forced to make across-the-board concessions to the left, conceding Lebanon to the revolutionaries and hoping to contain it.