

Will Lebanon be cradle of national revolutions in the Middle East?

by Thierry Lalevée

The Middle East was only a secondary matter at the just concluded summit between the superpowers in Malta; however, there is no doubt that both powers have a comprehensive Middle East agenda. They may be at odds concerning the timing of particular diplomatic initiatives, but they converge as to the general line concerning the policy contents over the next decade till the next century. Initiated in the very last few weeks of the Reagan administration when, in an abrupt reversal, the State Department began an official dialogue with the Palestine Liberation Organization of Yasser Arafat, there has been a policy of well-tuned balance between both powers. American dialogue with the PLO has been paralleled by closer relations, albeit not diplomatic ties yet, between Israel and the Soviet Union and other East bloc countries.

Soviet pressure on Syria for more “moderation” in the Arab world, have been compensated by American pressures on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to reconcile with both Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi and Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad. Pressures on the Sudanese and the Eritrean rebels to cease their hostility with Ethiopia has been complemented by the Soviet decisions to back the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Ethiopia and Israel, and a halt to shipment of military supplies to Ethiopia. Closer relations between North Yemen and Moscow have meant a “glasnost” process in South Yemen and fueled talk of Yemen unification.

Each country and area of the region, extending well into North Africa and the African continent generally, will have been subjected to these dual pressures, whose final aim is to ensure that the superpowers are in control of all events in the region, at the expense of any European role, and at the expense of any national interests. And no one is talking about “Middle East peace” at all. The agenda of the Bush administration implies that no serious negotiations should be held before a hypothetical second Bush administration; a comprehensive solution for the Israeli-Palestinian problem, in whatever form, is not even considered a serious possibility before the second half of the next decade, and probably not before the next century.

Actually, most of those concerned, with few exceptions, have expressed displeasure and anger at this grinding process

which leaves them with no room to maneuver. Yet, only a few are considering directly opposing this process, and even fewer have the actual means to do so without endangering their national survival. Among those with the means is Israel, whose footprints can be found behind a series of political and intelligence scandals targeting the Bush administration.

Lebanon, the rallying-point

However, true to the Middle Eastern origins of the biblical story of David and Goliath, it is an even smaller force than Israel which is challenging this condominium. The months ahead will tell whether it is a serious challenge to the entire structure that both Washington and Moscow are striving to build. Yet, as of now, it has already become a formidable thorn in their side. In brief, the national Lebanese resistance led by Gen. Michel Aoun is holding a flag of revolt and resistance for anyone around who wants to rally in defense of his national interests. There is more than merely poetic justice in the fact that Lebanon, which has been the country most destroyed over the last two decades, has become a center of resistance.

From the very late 1960s, Lebanon was deliberately engulfed in a process of self-destruction at the initiative of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, which served several aims, not the least being to sever close cultural and linguistic ties between the Middle East and Europe. The process aimed at dividing a nation into its ethnic and religious elements as a staging ground for a similar process to spread throughout the region. And indeed, it was the Lebanese civil war in the mid-1970s which groomed the Islamic fanatics who were later unleashed in Iran. The same war was used to groom the terrorists who have been active all over the world ever since.

The end-game of that process was to be reached in September 1988 through the infamous “Murphy-Assad Agreement” (for U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy). Presented as a miraculous recipe putting an end to more than 13 years of civil war, the agreement meant that the atomization of Lebanon into rival communities under the general protectorate of the Syrian empire was to become official—President Assad was to be crowned as the ruler of Greater Syria.

Not only did that not work, but as of February, a small

group of Lebanese gathered around Michel Aoun decided to unleash a "National War of Liberation against the Syrian Occupation." What was then derided as ridiculous and said not to have more than a two-week life expectancy, has lasted well into the end of 1989, and shows no sign of weakening. Confronted with an almost constant artillery barrage from Syrian and allied forces, the inhabitants of East Beirut refused to surrender. Ultimately the international community had to intervene, and Syria had to back down.

Yet in late summer, the international community rallied around a "Taif agreement" named for a meeting place in Saudi Arabia, which, under cover of a potential withdrawal of Syrian troops in a hypothetical period of two years, was nothing but a modified version of the older Murphy-Assad plan. Denouncing its blatant violation of Lebanese sovereignty, Aoun and his supporters rejected the plan, despite advice from friends and foes alike that their opposition to Syria was doomed to failure. Syria went ahead in sponsoring its own presidential elections, expecting the new puppet to give them legitimacy for a military intervention. Rene Moawad refused. Less than two weeks later, he was blown up by a bomb. The attempt by Damascus to lay the blame on Aoun soon backfired. Another election was organized; Damascus announced the result of the vote—40 minutes before it took place.

The new puppet President Elias Hrawi immediately gave General Aoun a 48-hour deadline to desist and leave the Baabda presidential palace. On Nov. 26, Syria started massing 10,000 troops for an assault. By Dec. 1, unable to launch such an attack, Damascus started talking about a "political solution."

Mass mobilization of citizens

Behind Aoun's ability to survive a challenge against one of the best-organized and best-armed armies of the Middle East, only defeated by Israel so far, there is no secret. It has been the mass mobilization of the Lebanese in support of their nation which defeated the Syrian tanks, in a move which is only paralleled by ongoing events in Eastern Europe. Indeed, as Syria was massing its troops, some 200,000 Lebanese rallied around the presidential palace as an unprecedented "human chain" to protect Baabda and its general, Aoun. Could Syria afford to throw its tanks against such an unarmed mass of people at a time where the Berlin wall was being torn into pieces? For Assad, there was no problem, yet, for Washington and Moscow, there was. The proponents of glasnost and international détente could not be seen sponsoring a major massacre.

Yet, while no one has been able to miss these events, their contents have been systematically subjected to a campaign of slanders and disinformation aimed at portraying Aoun as just another leader of a "Christian militia." Indeed, few are ready to admit that the reason Aoun has become such a real danger for Syria and the superpowers, is that his movement is break-

ing through more than 15 years of rigged social manipulation based on ethnic and religious sects. For the first time since the liberation struggle against the colonial powers, there is again a national movement developing. Many among Aoun's supporters are Shi'ite or Sunni Muslims. Few have been able to express it, except those who deliberately quit West Beirut to join the demonstrators in East Beirut. It is a national movement in the true sense of the word, which has naturally looked to other national movements for help; witness the display of Polish Solidarity badges in the Beirut demonstrations.

As Aoun himself stressed in recent speeches, can it be that walls are being destroyed in Berlin for new walls to be erected in Beirut? Can it be that tanks are being defeated in Poland or elsewhere, to rule in Lebanon? Can the United States of George Washington be the sponsor of a dictatorship in Lebanon?

The fight is obviously not over, and ultimately is not expected to be over until Assad's death. Michel Aoun himself is living under a permanent death threat from the Syrians and others. However, there is little doubt that the seeds of national revolt which have been sown in Lebanon in recent months, will not wither. Its importance for the region has yet to be fully grasped by many, at a time when sectarian religious organizations are gaining ground in Jordan, Egypt, and throughout North Africa.

But after all, Lebanon was the home of the first nationalist and revolutionary movements at the very beginning of the century which paved the way for the later independence of most of the countries. Egypt's Nasser owed much to the Lebanese thinkers of the 1910s. It is only natural that Lebanon has become once again the staging ground for a movement which could not only defeat would-be local empires like Syria, but even stalemate the would-be *world* empires.

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