

Lebanon's Aoun, Syria's Assad Meet In Spirit of Westphalia Treaty

by Christine Bierre

PARIS, Dec. 7—The visit to Syria Dec. 3-7 by Gen. Michel Aoun (ret.), the former Lebanese military commander, prime minister, and acting President, was an important step toward reconciliation with the country that forced him into exile in 1990, after 30 years of civil war and Syrian and Israeli occupation.

Aoun lived in France under home surveillance for 15 years, returning to Lebanon only after the Syrian withdrawal in April 2005. In spite of a tumultuous existence at home and abroad, including courtship by Dick Cheney's neoconservatives in their campaign for "regime change" in Syria, Aoun has emerged as a leading force in Lebanon, the Christian head of the Free Patriotic Current (CPL), which has allied itself with the mass-based Shi'ite Hezbollah, which turned back Israel's invasion.

After the UN demanded, and secured, Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, the General returned home, and to the surprise of many, promptly called for the normalization of relations between the two countries, as perfectly sovereign states. This embodies the spirit of the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War in Europe, with agreement by all parties to respect one another's sovereignty, not to seek revenge for the atrocities perpetrated by all sides, and to proceed in the spirit of "the benefit of the other."

A major election victory in 2005, primarily in the Christian areas, allowed Aoun to constitute a 22-Deputy bloc in the National Assembly, which consists of 128 Deputies. In early 2006, Aoun's CPL broke with the pro-Cheney, pro-British forces determined to smash Syria, and signed an entente memorandum with Hezbollah, an ally of Syria and Iran. While Hezbollah's militia has generally been at the center of all accusations of terrorism from the British and the neocons in the Bush Administration, nothing is ever said about the fact that in this memorandum, Hezbollah agreed not to use armed force except as a defense against Israel, and

pledged to dismantle its militia whenever the Lebanese Army became strong enough to defend the country. Both parties endeavored to re-establish neighborly relations with Syria, and to fight for the return from Israel of the captured Shebaa Farms.

In July 2006, during the Israeli invasion and its carpet-bombing of Hezbollah and civilians in southern Lebanon and the Shi'ite suburbs of Beirut, Aoun maintained his alliance with the Shi'ite movement. The Doha Declaration, concluded among Lebanese factions in May 2008, with mediation of the Arab League, paved the way for the country to finally elect a President, Gen. Michel Sleiman; it also reinforced the role of the opposition (Hezbollah, Aoun's forces, and others), thereby creating the conditions for normalization with Syria, and for Aoun's recent visit to Damascus.

A Red Carpet Treatment

According to Lebanese sources, the reception given by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to General Aoun was warmer and more impressive than that given to any head of state or of government, replete with symbolic gestures. Aoun was brought to Damascus on Assad's private plane, and, in a breach of protocol, during the first *tête-à-tête*, Assad invited his Lebanese guest to sit on his Presidential chair, while he sat on that traditionally accorded to the guest. The Syrian President allowed Aoun to report alone on their talks, at a joint press conference, while Assad sat among the guests. Aoun was enthusiastically welcomed by the Syrian population; thousands were unable to squeeze into the hall at Damascus University where he gave a public presentation, and had to follow it on large outdoor screens.

The tone of discussions between the two leaders was, according to some journalists, on a high political, as well as philosophical and even spiritual level. Clearly, there is mutual respect between the two former adversaries. "Your national positions have acquired for you



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Gen. Michel Aoun (right), who battled the Syrians and was exiled by them for 15 years, traveled to Damascus recently to restore relations. Here, Aoun is shown with his political ally, Hezbollah head Hassan Nasrallah.

the sympathy not only of the Lebanese, but also of all the Arabs,” said Assad during the first meeting. “Even when you were our enemy, you were noble and dignified. Our problem is rather with those enemies who are undignified.” Unlike many others, he said, you don’t use a “double language.”

From Aoun’s side, the time has clearly come for pardoning past grievances. Said a source close to the general’s political movement, “What has happened is only comparable to the visit by General de Gaulle to German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in 1962.” That meeting symbolized the healing of the wartime animosity between France and Germany, under two great leaders acting in a Westphalian spirit. “The past—we will not forget it,” declared Aoun, “but we don’t want to be its prisoners. We must do everything so that it doesn’t repeat itself. It’s the most beautiful gift that we can give to our martyrs, whom we will never forget, and with whose memory we must live permanently. We want to reassure them that their grandchildren will not live through what we did.”

Answering the question of whether the Syrians had asked to be forgiven for their occupation of Lebanon, Aoun responded generously: “They honored me. But before asking them to excuse themselves, it would be necessary for Lebanese leaders to present their own excuses to their people.”

During his public statements, the General did not avoid delicate issues. On the question of Lebanese mil-

itary prisoners held by Syria, for example, he noted that a Syrian commission of investigation has been constituted and is going through the names presented by the Lebanese. Aoun said he hoped that its work “will not take too long.”

Speaking at Damascus University, Aoun pressured Israel, noting the difference of approach between those in power in Israel, and his own approach and that of his allies. “They believe in techniques and in material superiority, which they use to violate rights. We believe in man and in his will to defend those rights. We have the force of law; they have the law of force.”

It should be noted that President Assad has been pursuing peace discussions with Israel, at some internal political risk to himself.

Defense of Christian Communities

The trip to Syria will give Aoun the opportunity to pursue his defense of Christian communities in South-west Asia, more broadly. Numbered at about 20 million at the beginning of the 20th Century, many Christians have left their homelands or changed their identities. The situation facing Christians can be very diverse, as can their political roles. In Lebanon, where Christians traditionally held greater political and economic power than did the Muslims, some Christian currents became agents of influence of the most extremist currents in Israel. This occurred in the Civil War (1975-90), including the Israeli green light to, and protection for the 1982 slaughter of Palestinian civilians at the refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila, by right-wing Christian Phalangist forces.

It is in this context that Aoun is attempting to defend, develop, and unify the Christian Arab communities of the region, to live in peace with their Muslim neighbors.

In Syria, he visited the magnificent Umayyad mosque, which also houses the tomb of St. John the Baptist; and in Aleppo, he went to the tomb of Saint Maron, patron of the Maronite Church of Lebanon (to which Aoun belongs), where an open-air mass was celebrated.

His trips to Syria, and to Iran in October, where he was also warmly received by the authorities, have helped make Aoun a central figure for the May 2009 parliamentary elections in Lebanon.