

## Lebanon Crisis "Desperate" for U.S., Syria; Left Maintains Stand in Uneasy Ceasefire

April 3 (IPS) — A crucial test of strength is underway in Lebanon between the revolutionary leftist-Palestinian coalition and the combined forces of the U.S., Syria, Israel and the Lebanese right in the wake of an uneven ceasefire accepted by both sides in the civil war April 1. The leftist forces, holding firm after decisively crushing the NATO-backed militia of the largely Christian rightists in recent fighting, now face a struggle to turn their military victories into tangible political gains. The complex coalition of leftists and Palestinians has so far maintained its cohesion despite intense pressure from the U.S. and Syria, who are coordinating a series of threats and promises aimed at disorganizing the left.

The consolidation of the leftist victory in Lebanon will fuel a mass strike now erupting throughout the region, including Israel, Jordan and Egypt, and would almost certainly topple the regime of NATO puppet Hafez Assad of Syria. The ripple effect of the Lebanese revolution has already transformed the entire Middle East, and promises to break the U.S. stranglehold over the immensely rich and strategic Middle East region. The U.S. as a result has launched a panicky effort to salvage Lebanon and prop up the crumbling regime of Syrian President Assad.

### U.S., Syria Losing Grip

Running NATO diplomacy in Lebanon is L. Dean Brown, the special envoy of President Ford hurriedly dispatched to Lebanon three days ago. According to sources close to the State Department, the Brown mission was a "desperate act to prevent a leftist takeover," following the collapse of the Lebanese right. Brown, who gained counterrevolutionary experience while serving as U.S. Ambassador to Jordan during "Black September" 1970 when Jordanian troops massacred Palestinians, was assigned the task of implementing the so-called Syrian plan, proposed by Damascus in January, which would make Lebanon a virtual colony of Syria. The plan, which also called for paper reforms and the resignation of hated Lebanese President Suleiman Franjeh, an ally of the right, was overwhelmingly rejected by the left last week.

The April 1 ceasefire followed brutal threats by Syria against the Communist and pro-Iraqi left. In a statement issued just hours before the ceasefire, Damascus Radio broadcast an overt threat to invade Lebanon, noting the firm refusal of the left to accede to Syrian dictates. Syria accused the left of "escalating the fighting" and charged that the left was involved in a "conspiracy against Lebanon and the Arab cause." Therefore, "Syria is warning them and holding them responsible for the consequences of their stubbornness." At least 17,000 Syrian troops are massed on the Lebanese border.

The fate of the Syrian regime hinges directly on the outcome in Lebanon. The shaky Assad dictatorship has suffered an unequivocal defeat in Lebanon, and there are reports that the pro-Iraqi forces in Damascus are set to topple Assad. According to the Washington Post April 2, Assad's security

police arrested 200 opponents of the regime during the week. As one Middle East expert bluntly put it: "If the Brown mission fails, Assad falls in 48 hours." The highly delicate — and dangerous — nature of the situation is directly tied to the weakness of Assad; the collapse of his regime would tempt the Atlanticists into an insane military adventure to block a mass-strike wave throughout the Middle East.

The Soviet news agency TASS today reports that the Soviet government has sent an official request to Washington demanding an explanation for the buildup of U.S. Sixth Fleet forces in the waters off the Lebanese coast.

In Washington meanwhile, King Hussein of Jordan told Congress April 2 that the Syrian army was the "best police force" available to keep order in Lebanon. Hussein urged Congress to look favorably on a possible Syrian invasion of the country to crush the left. Hussein, who was speaking after a private meeting with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, was trying to convince a skeptical Congress to tolerate an escalation of the Middle East conflict. Most Congressmen and responsible U.S. officials — unlike the Kissinger faction — are opposed to any Syrian invasion, well aware that any such action might trigger a chain reaction of military moves and countermoves which, given the unpredictability of the situation might lead to a U.S.-Soviet nuclear showdown.

In fact, an invasion of Lebanon by Syria might lead to exactly the result such an action would be designed to prevent — the fall of Assad. The prestigious London weekly, *The Economist*, was most explicit, saying: "If Assad decided to send his men to fight Lebanon's Moslems, his own officers might well join with the left wing of Syria's powerful Baath party to throw him out." Syria is thus reduced to making impotent threats to intervene while paralyzed and unable to act without gravely endangering the government's stability.

### Cohesion Of The Left

It is already apparent that the leftist forces are solidly resisting attempts to split their ranks by the U.S. Brown mission and Syria. The chief target for pressure is Kamal Jumblatt, the nominal leader of the Lebanese left, and like Palestinian chief Yassar Arafat, an opportunist who can likely be persuaded to accept Syria's terms. But the radicalized base of support for Jumblatt and Arafat are in no mood for token reforms, and are not going to accept any compromise with Syria worked out by Jumblatt and Arafat.

The nature of the ceasefire itself indicates the strength of the left. Unlike past ceasefires, the leftist forces did not retreat from ground captured during the fighting. Furthermore, the left demanded that the paramilitary Syrian forces now in Lebanon not participate in the peace-keeping forces, a measure of the extent of anti-Syrian sentiment in Lebanon. Various leftist spokesmen have indicated that the left has no intention of accepting anything less than a revolutionary restructuring of the country's political system.

Both the Lebanese Communist newspaper *An-Nida* and the PLO-controlled *Voice of Palestine* have attacked the Brown

visit, citing Brown's role in the 1970 Jordanian massacre. Such criticism puts the heat on Jumblatt, who met yesterday with Brown. Should Jumblatt move toward the Syrian position, expert analysts agree, his leftist supporters might bolt — and Jumblatt would find himself without an organization.

Jumblatt, something of an historical anomaly, is the founder of the so-called Progressive Socialist Party and the leader of the Druze Moslem sect. By no means is Jumblatt an actual socialist however; he is one of Lebanon's richest and most powerful feudal leaders. An eccentric Hindu mystic who travels annually to India for a meditation, he constantly professes that "Ideas — and people — are rarely what they seem."

A high-level Washington source outlined the problem earlier this week. If Jumblatt accepts the Syrian terms, as he is pressured by Brown to do, then a very uncertain situation will develop. Lieutenant Ahmed Khatib, the leader of the

rebel Lebanese Arab Army of regular Army deserters, might bolt leaving Jumblatt virtually powerless. On the other hand, should Khatib, a fervent nationalist, support Jumblatt, the Iraqis will reportedly pull all their forces out of the left coalition, precipitating a crisis that could give the pro-Iraqi Lebanese forces complete control of the left. Further complicating the situation is the Palestinian position. It is in this complex web of Byzantine forces that NATO and Assad are trying to maneuver to break up the unity of the left.

Such a scenario was described by several thinktank sources in New York and Washington this week, including an ex-RAND Corp. analyst. He predicted a long extended period of complicated negotiations, with interminable talks, intermittent fighting, Syrian threats, Israeli threats, and U.S. mediation over a stretch of weeks or months — a scenario for wearing down the left. Over such a long-term period, NATO portate the mass strike sentiment that is now cohering the Communist and pro-Iraqi-dominated left.