

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Assad sets off new Lebanese battles

The "peace accord" is already under attack in Lebanon. Did Syria itself manipulate the Christian revolt?

The "peace agreement" signed in Damascus on Dec. 28, 1985 between the various Lebanese factions, has paved the way for another round of domestic fighting, as opposition to the Syrian-imposed settlement surfaced immediately. Two intertwined developments are now considered likely: a new large-scale massacre of the Christian communities, and a limited confrontation between Israel and Syria over Lebanon. Such a confrontation has been in the making for weeks, since the "missiles crisis" when Syria deployed, then withdrew, its missiles from Lebanese territory.

The Israeli political faction of Ariel Sharon is now openly discussing using such a "limited war" to provoke an early collapse of the government of Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, clearing the way for Sharon's long-nurtured power bid. Syria may just be tempted now to seize the bait, as on Jan. 22 it expressed outrage at the London negotiations among Peres, the U.S. State Department's Richard Murphy, and Jordan's King Hussein. The same day, Syria's daily *Tishrin* warned King Hussein, newly reconciled with Syrian President Hafez al Assad, that a deal with Israel, exclusive of Syria, was "out of the question."

Whether Assad expected the Dec. 28 agreement to be fully implemented within Lebanon is dubious. The accord signed by Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Nabih Berri of the Shi'ite Amal group, and Elie Hobeika of the "Lebanese Forces" called for far-reaching constitutional reforms, ter-

minating the 1943 agreement which specified that Lebanon's President should always be a Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the parliament, a Shi'ite Muslim.

More than merely taking away from the Christians the post of the presidency, such an agreement would put them in the uncomfortable position of being *Dhimmi* within an Islamic-dominated state. A *Dhimmi* belongs to a "protected minority," with a very uncertain future. As opponents of the agreement quickly pointed out, this also meant that Lebanon, a secular republic, could quickly become an Islamic state—Sunni or Shi'ite.

With Damascus promising that it would guarantee a fair status for the Christians, Hobeika, who has been for a long time associated with Syria's intelligence services, went ahead and signed the accord. Ten days later, he was forced into exile in France, as his "Lebanese Forces" were decimated and the Christian leadership overtaken by Samir Geagea.

President Amin Gemayel and Geagea—"El Hakim," as he is nicknamed—both opposed the Damascus agreement. Gemayel, whose record in defense of Lebanon's sovereignty has been close to nil, reacted out of personal opposition to the Assad/Hobeika relationship. Geagea, a commander close to the Christian rank and file, had already imposed himself as a national commander in the spring of 1984, fighting against the compromises made by Gemayel with Syria's Assad.

More than six months of fighting followed within the Christian community, as no one was able to seize the mantle of former commander Beshir Gemayel. A later political compromise imposed Fuad Abu Nader as leader of the "Lebanese Forces," until he was himself pushed out and replaced by Hobeika, whose credentials included the fact that he led those units deployed by then-Israeli Defense Minister Sharon and Syria, in the massacres perpetrated against the Sabra and Chatila Palestinian refugee camps in September 1982.

There are strong indications that Syria, which must have expected a revolt, placed its agents on both sides, betraying—as usual—its new ally, Hobeika. A decisive blow to Hobeika was the execution of his 40 closest associates: All were shot in the head while sleeping. Though associated with Hobeika and accepting the Damascus agreement, they had been trained in Israel. Syria's intelligence service may have used the fighting to cover its own assassination plans.

Meanwhile, by Jan. 22, Syria began sending its commando units into Lebanon to surround the headquarters of Amin Gemayel, unleashing the first round of fighting with the Christian sections of the Lebanese Army. At the same time, it convened its Lebanese Muslim protégés in Damascus to discuss how to impeach Amin Gemayel for "high treason," a legal process which requires a two-thirds majority vote in the parliament.

However, Assad cannot allow the Christian revolt to go unchallenged, out of fear that other Lebanese or Palestinian factions would then feel free to question what Damascus considers as its "natural" leadership over the country. Legal actions may be a step, but the Syrian way is always military, in the last resort: a very bleak future for the Lebanese nation.