

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

The Vatican plan to save Lebanon

The Maronite Church and its Catholic allies have a proposal for preventing partition of the country.

Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir's visit to Moscow at the invitation of the Russian Patriarchate, mooted for months, finally began on Oct. 21. For the Russian Orthodox Church, it is one of many visits by church leaders worldwide, to prepare for next year's millennium celebrations. In recent months, there were the visits of Lebanese Greek-Melkite Patriarch Hakim, and Constantinople Patriarch Dimitrios. But for the Maronite church, representing the largest group of Lebanese Christians, the future of Lebanon is at stake.

Officially invited at the end of last year, Patriarch Sfeir postponed his visit several times, in part because of Lebanon's political crisis, and in part because of the negotiations involving Beirut, the Vatican, and Moscow. Although they are Syria's main sponsor, the Soviets have made overtures to the Lebanese Christians, through their ambassador, Vladimir Kolotucha. Were the Maronites to recognize the Russian Orthodox Church as *primus inter pares* in the Middle East, notably in its efforts to gain "spiritual" control over Christian sites in Jerusalem, the Soviet Union would take them under their protection, and keep the Syrians at bay. This was the substance of Moscow's message earlier this year.

Such a deal cannot be accepted by the Uniate Maronites, associated with the Vatican for centuries, but it cannot be rejected out of hand either.

In response, the Maronite church and the Vatican have been busy working up an alternative proposal. Only when the general shape of that initiative was ready, was Nasrallah Sfeir

told to consider making his visit to Moscow, the first-ever by a Maronite patriarch. On July 1, a special Council of the Maronite Bishops convened in Bkerke. Officially, according to the proceedings published in the Vatican-linked *Osservatore Romano*, the Council focused on Lebanon's economic crisis. It especially warned that the collapse of the Lebanese economy allowed "outside forces" to buy Lebanese land at cheap prices. Between the lines, a three-point initiative was taking shape: 1) to guarantee the national integrity of Lebanon, 2) to sponsor a fundamental economic reform aimed at developing Lebanon's rural areas, and 3) to pave the way for a national unity government.

Not yet elaborated, the third point has most bearing on the present situation. Intelligence sources report that in order to maintain Lebanon's national integrity, especially to avoid a partition between Syria, Israel, and the various militias, the church is considering a reform of the presidential system. While nominally keeping the presidency in the hands of the Christians, it is considering backing a Greek-Orthodox or Greek-Melkite candidate for the 1988 presidential election.

Immediately after the Council of the Bishops, Nasrallah Sfeir embarked on a religious diplomatic mission to non-Christian communities in Lebanon. Local reports indicate that he gathered some support among predominantly Sunni Muslims, who are victimized by the Iranian extremists or Nabih Berri's Shi'ite militia.

It was to report on that diplomacy that Sfeir flew to the Vatican in early

October to attend the Synod, then went to France to attend the Council of French Bishops in Lourdes. In Moscow, he does not expect either support or neutrality on the initiative. Given that the Russian Orthodox Church is the protector of the Greek Orthodox Church in Lebanon, he expects to be involved in tough bargaining.

Though the initiative has met with mixed feelings within the Christian community of Lebanon, it remains the only one which envisions a way of preventing Lebanon's partition. Indeed, besides Israel and Syria, which each has its designs on the country, the initiative directly challenges Washington's unstated policy. In recent meetings at the U.N. General Assembly, U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz told the Syrian foreign minister, Farouk al Sharaa, that Washington considers Lebanon to belong to the Syrian sphere of influence. Intelligence sources report that Washington has indicated to Syria that it can do whatever it wants with the Lebanon, after the Nov. 8 Arab Summit.

Indeed, the U.S. government does not want the Lebanese issue discussed at all. When Lebanese President Amin Gemayel dared to call for an international peace conference on Lebanon, he was accused by U.N. Ambassador Vernon Walters of trying to "damage the new understanding between Washington and Damascus." Nothing could be clearer. However, neither the Lebanese Christians nor the Vatican are ready to accept Lebanon's disappearance. Public and less public diplomatic rows with Washington are to be expected. This might be tied to the sudden mention of the name of U.S. State Department consultant, Michael Ledeen, in course of the ongoing trial of those responsible for the August 1980 Bologna railway bombing, which killed 84.