

# U.S. seen splitting Lebanese Christians

by Philip Golub

According to the authoritative French daily *Le Monde* of April 21, the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and Ambassador McCarthy, rumored to be affiliated with the CIA, have initiated a campaign to split the Christian camp in Lebanon. The April 20 call of 23 Christian parliamentarians for negotiations with Syria and Syria's local allies is a direct result of this campaign, says *Le Monde*.

This development confirms the known pro-Syrian slant of U.S. diplomacy, reaffirmed in March by Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger when the new round of fighting broke out in Beirut following Gen. Michel Aoun's bold decision to close down the ports through which Syrian intelligence's narcotics traffic has transited for more than a decade. Subsequently, as the fighting intensified, General Aoun appealed to the West to defend Lebanese sovereignty in what he called a "national liberation war" against foreign occupation. The only answer he received from Washington was a flurry of leaks blaming him for "causing the crisis."

In fact, Washington was profoundly irritated by Aoun's determination to fight, and even more irritated by the growing success of Aoun's effort to internationalize the Lebanese crisis. Since the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, the U.S. State Department has considered Lebanon at best as a "sideshow," at worst as a negotiable pawn in the larger issue of the Mideast balance of power. A concocted and hypocritical "anti-colonialist" touch was given to Washington's abandonment of the principle of Lebanese sovereignty—Henry Kissinger and his heirs adopted the propaganda from Damascus that Lebanon was an "artificial creation of French colonialism." This patently false argument—France's protective role of Christianity in the Near East and Lebanon in particular goes back hundreds of years—was merely a veneer used to coat Washington's now-prolonged flirt with Syrian President Hafez Assad, the "Metternich of the Mideast" according to Kissinger. Some State Department "Arabists" went so far as to argue that Christianity and Islam could not co-exist in the Near East, in spite of evidence to the contrary. The specious nature of the argument is evident when one knows that the present Alawite Syrian leadership is considered "heretical" within the main body of Sunni Islam. Syrian Alawism is a particularly hermetic derivation of Shi'ism; the Alawites, once a persecuted minority in Syria, now rule dictatorially over a country which is 90% Sunni. If the much-used argument, that the Christians now represent a "minority" in Lebanon and are therefore not representative,

were applied to Syria, one would come to interesting conclusions (the mass emigration of Christians over the past decade has much to do with their present so-called minority status—they represent nearly 45% of the population).

## What of Lebanon's sovereignty?

Over the years, Washington's Syrian "card" was rationalized in a number of equally unconvincing ways: One day it was argued that the U.S. was trying to gently coax Syria away from Soviet Russia, the next that Syria was an indispensable "partner" in any durable peace negotiation in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Whatever the face value of these arguments, the practical effect of the overall policy was to abandon the principle of Lebanese sovereignty.

Aoun's decision to challenge Syrian hegemony, the first serious challenge since the election of President Beshir Gemayel in 1982, was well calculated. It struck a strong chord in France which, albeit in an improvised and initially ineffective fashion, has "internationalized" the Lebanese crisis. France's multiple, noisy, and somewhat haphazard initiatives made it impossible for the rest of the international community to pretend that nothing was happening in Beirut. Furthermore, France counted upon and received encouragement from the "anti-Syrian" axis in the Arab League—Cairo, Baghdad, and Amman.

This has created a diplomatic problem for the Bush administration, but an even more serious problem for Damascus, which intensified its bombardment of Beirut in the week of April 17. Syria, after all, "entered" Lebanon in 1976 as the main body of an Arab League interposition force and upon the invitation of the Lebanese government. Presently, the Arab League is split, and it is possible that the Arab League Foreign Ministers' meeting to be held at the end of April will call for a "pan-Arab" intervention force to replace "foreign forces" in Lebanon. This would imply a resounding diplomatic defeat for Damascus. Iraq, which for historic reasons (going back to Mesopotamia and Babylon, and more precisely to the split in the Baath parties in the postwar period) is the main adversary of Damascus in the Arab world, is supporting the Christians militarily, not so much because Baghdad supports the Christian cause, but for the eternal reason that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Egypt, fully reintegrated into the Arab League, represents by its size, influence, and prestige a further threat to Syrian political and military hegemony within the Arab world. Aoun's "liberation war" has thus made transparent once again the natural lines of fracture in the Arab world.

The fighting goes on. Secret Soviet-American consultations are ongoing over Lebanon. The United States wishes to reestablish the *status quo ante* prior to the outbreak of fighting. The Soviets have once again the opportunity to "show their good will" by pressuring their Damascus ally. Yet the question raised by Aoun will not go away: What will become of Lebanese sovereignty?