

# Syria delayed in Lebanon aggression

by Thierry Lalevée

Diplomatic efforts spearheaded by France, and the deployment of a French naval task force off Lebanon's coast, have forced Syria to shelve its original plans for a fullscale onslaught against the Lebanese national resistance forces led by Prime Minister Gen. Michel Aoun. Even though the French task force was deployed on "purely humanitarian grounds," it is a mighty deterrent against any Syrian adventure.

Worse for Damascus, since Moscow entered the diplomatic arena for its own reasons, under the guise of joining French efforts, the Syrian leadership has been forced to decide not to try crossing the "Green Line" between East and West Beirut. Such a move is obviously a far cry from the necessary withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon, and a political settlement to the 15-year civil war; yet it is a badly needed respite.

Intelligence sources report that the French deployment, in diplomatic and military terms, may not have been the only leverage over Damascus. It seems that Iraq was seriously contemplating a military intervention in support of Aoun's forces, had Syria advanced further. Originally proposed as a joint intervention of Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq as part of the Arab Cooperation Council, the military action fell on Iraqi shoulders after it was turned down by Cairo. Cautiously, Jordan advocated that the threat of an intervention should be conveyed to Damascus, to allow the Syrian leaders to think twice before committing their forces to a point of no return.

Syria did think twice. Unsure if this was a mere ploy by the Iraqis, or if such a move would have regional and international backing, Syria decided to freeze on its position. The ostentatious deployment of the Iraqi Air Force over Jordan—nominally as overflight of the Israeli-Jordanian borders, but close to Syria's own borders—played a role. Not underestimated in Damascus either, has been the ambiguity surrounding the relations between the two arch-enemies Israel and Iraq, which happen to be on the same side in Lebanon. It is no secret that many convoys of Iraqi supplies were delivered to Michel Aoun under Israel naval escorts.

Reportedly, Moscow also took seriously the threat of a Syrian-Iraqi conflict over Lebanon. It would upset its carefully laid diplomatic plans to be friends with everybody, from Israel to Damascus, Baghdad, and Teheran. Aside from their desire to better relations with the Vatican by wooing the Lebanese Christians, the threat of a new regional conflict

forced the Soviets to step diplomatically into the crisis to safeguard their regional assets.

These converging events dealt Syria's Hafez al-Assad a serious blow. Residents of East Beirut have been increasingly exposed to Assad's frustration, expressed in intensified artillery bombardments.

## Washington's double talk

Reports on the ongoing American-Syrian discussions on Lebanon show Washington as frustrated as Damascus. U.S. Ambassador Edward Djerejian assured Syria privately that Washington did "recognize its legitimate security interests" in Lebanon, and he even accused Aoun of "having his priorities wrong." This is not the time to speak about withdrawal of foreign forces, but to "talk about a political settlement. Only when there is a strong centralized political leadership, can there be a withdrawal." (Aoun and other Lebanese have refuted this argument by pointing out that as long as there are foreign forces, they will influence the various Lebanese political factions, and prevent national sovereignty and unity.)

American frustration over the Lebanese imbroglio stems from what it considers as *its* main foreign policy priority in the region—normalizing relations with Iran. Washington could welcome the fact that while there is so much focus on Beirut, few are paying attention to the ongoing secret American-Iranian negotiations under the pretext of freeing the hostages. However, the crisis also means that Iran cannot afford to make any spectacular gestures toward the West right now. Likewise, even though the temptation is strong in Washington to welcome the long-expected formation of a "moderate" government in Teheran by a good-will signal, a U.S. decision to unfreeze Iran's American assets is simply impossible now.

While backing the French initiative in public declarations, Washington is leaning heavily toward Syria. American diplomats in Paris and Rome have been heard saying that after the Syrian commitment not to attack East Beirut, the other side should make a gesture too; Aoun should withdraw from the political scene. An interim organization should be established to start political negotiations with Syria. While such proposals are backed by attempts by Washington, Damascus, and Moscow to split the Christian camp to provoke Aoun's removal from within, these are unlikely to succeed in the present period.

However, as long as the Syrian demand for the removal of Michel Aoun receives discreet support from the two superpowers, there will be no solution to the crisis. An alternative may be for Aoun to force *Assad's* political removal. The diplomatic mediation cannot go further, unless Syria is forced to pull out, at least from Beirut and its region in a first stage, and Lebanon as a whole in a second. Anything less, means that very soon, while being physically destroyed, Lebanon could become the launching pad of a new regional war which, officially and for the time being, no one wants.