
Lebanon

Syria's scheme for an 'Islamic Republic'

by Thierry Lalevée

Underlying the recent terrorist bombings in southern Lebanon and Beirut is the rapid transformation of the region into a fundamentalist Islamic Shi'ite Republic modeled on Khomeini's Iran, as well as Syria's drive to finally grab "its share" of the country.

This process was demonstrated when the Israelis withdrew from the southern Lebanese port of Tyre a few weeks ago. After a few hours of euphoria as the Lebanese Army entered the town, life in the city quickly turned into a nightmare that some compared to the 1975 takeover of Phnom Penh by the troops of Pol Pot: The Iranian Shi'ite mob of the Hezbollah (Party of God) had arrived. First blending in with the cheering crowds and ephemeral display of national unity, the Hezbollah quickly turned to impose their own law. Less than 48 hours after the Israeli withdrawal, the inhabitants awoke to the noise of shop windows being smashed, restaurants and cinemas being destroyed, and the all-too-familiar rattle of machine-guns executing "Israeli collaborators."

The Israeli dilemma

The Israelis realize by now that they are paying dearly for a policy imposed on the country by Ariel Sharon in 1982. It is no secret that, in complicity with Syria's President Hafez Assad, Sharon and his advisers played the "Shia card" against Yasser Arafat's PLO. Under the pretext of creating a security buffer-zone against Palestinian guerrillas, they first fostered the development in southern Lebanon of the Shia militia of Nabil Berri. According to Sharon's way of thinking, local Shi'ites were to be considered "anti-Palestinian Lebanese nationalists." This strategy fell apart when Sharon and his associates allowed Iranian Shi'ites to grab control of the region, as part of Sharon's drugs-for-arms deal with Teheran. Two years later, Israel is now faced with a region which is free from Palestinian followers of Arafat, but swarming with Iranian Shi'ites and radical Palestinian "rejectionists" of the Habash, Hawatmeh, and Abu Musa variety.

Is it a coincidence that this mob went into a full frenzy of "holy war" terror activities against Israel only after the new Labor-dominated government of Shimon Peres came to power, and when the Israeli decision was made to withdraw?

Indeed, Israel's withdrawal is a disturbing factor for Pres-

ident Assad of Syria who, as PLO chairman Arafat underlined in an interview with the Paris-based weekly *al Watan al Arabi* March 8, had been negotiating with the Sharon crowd a quiet partition of Lebanon. Assad is disturbed because an Israeli withdrawal will mean a closer relationship between Egypt and Israel, and a bigger chance for success of the peace initiatives launched by Egyptian President Mubarak and Jordanian King Hussein. Syria's Foreign Minister al Sharah told reporters in Tokyo on March 6, "Syria is opposed to any peace process as long as the balance of forces has not changed in the Middle East." Damascus wants another Middle East war, wants to be recognized as the principal power to be reckoned with in the region, and wants to eliminate its challengers before imposing a *Pax Syriana*.

Damascus has therefore decided to create an Islamic Republic in Lebanon, at least in the south, and is giving military and logistical aid to the Hezbollah of Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, provided the group sticks to its own assigned zone of influence. The Hezbollah are to be given the south, and a free hand to fight the Israelis and to eliminate their rivals—as they did March 4 when the Mosque of Maraakah exploded, killing the local chieftains of the Amal militia. The Hezbollah blamed the bombing on Israel, prayed for the martyrs, then moved swiftly to fill the vacuum of military leadership left by the death of Mohammed Saad of Al Amal. But they will have to accept the stipulation that Beirut is Syria's own province. The bombing of the Shi'ite mosque in Beirut on March 8 may have been a Syrian reminder not to forget what belongs to whom.

Beirut is already part of Greater Syria. Abandoned by many so-called friends, especially the United States and those Europeans who had boasted of privileged relations with the country, the Lebanese government of Amin Gemayel and the main Christian political parties has to bow entirely to Damascus's demands. A spectacular demonstration of this was the first visit since 1978 of the head of the Falangist party, Karameh, to Damascus at the beginning of March. This was an acknowledgement that decisions implemented in Beirut have to be made in Damascus, and that Syria's mafia-style protection is the only guarantee, however fragile, that the Christian community will not be massacred by the Hezbollah.

This has a price, of course, as shown by the Lebanese government's support for Iranian terrorist actions against Israel, with Lebanese state radio on March 10 hailing the terrorist who killed 12 Israelis as a "national hero," who died in a "Lebanese patriotic war against the Israeli occupiers"; or the decision of the Falangist party on March 12 to expel those who protested against the Lebanon-Syria alliance.

As Syrian Vice-President Abdul Halim Khaddam discussed in Beirut on March 8-10, Lebanon's "national reconciliation" is on the way to being achieved—provided that Gemayel accepts the role of local Syrian satrap of a province whose size is rapidly dwindling.