

America joins Syria against Lebanon

by Thierry Lalevée

The Sept. 6 decision of the U.S. State Department to close down the American embassy in Beirut had, at least, the merit of clarifying American policy toward Lebanon, and of exposing Washington's empty rhetoric about "not taking sides" in the ongoing war between Syria and the forces of Lebanese Prime Minister Gen. Michel Aoun. American-Lebanese matters are now to be handled by the American ambassador in Damascus, Syria, Edward Djerejian. Washington has thus given open support to Syria's long-held desire to swallow up neighboring Lebanon. In fact, the United States is behaving just like Syria itself, which has never sent any diplomatic representative to Beirut, in refusal to recognize Lebanon's national independence and sovereignty.

The closing down of the U.S. embassy in East Beirut and the evacuation of all of its staff by helicopter to Cyprus followed by less than 24 hours a peaceful sit-in in front of its premises by Lebanese Christians. Under the leadership of some local journalists, 400-500 demonstrators had announced the previous day that they would blockade the embassy as long as Ambassador John McCarthy refused to present his diplomatic credentials to Prime Minister Aoun, and as long as Washington did not send a special envoy to the region, following the French and Soviet examples.

Back in Washington, State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler denounced the alleged threat of "Christian terrorism" to justify the evacuation of the embassy.

However, the rapidity with which the embassy was evacuated underlines that the operation had already been planned for some time. Received by Lebanese Christians with angry declarations to the effect that "Syria's Trojan Horse has finally left Lebanon," it followed several weeks of bitter polemics between Aoun and the American administration. In a Sept. 2 interview with the French Daily *Le Figaro*, Aoun charged that the United States was not behaving as the leader of the Free World, but as "a state which respects the strength of Syria." He said that Washington was pressuring France and other friends of Lebanon to cut off Aoun's military supplies, and bitterly pointed out that the United States does not apply similar pressures on such states as Syria and Iran, which have sponsored the kidnaping of American hostages. "Maybe if we were to hold American hostages, Washington

would cease its pressures," he added sarcastically—a comment which was seized upon, days later, by the State Department as a justification of their move.

Though U.S. media outlets are at pains to quote Lebanese Christians in order to prove that Aoun has gone too far in "forcing" the closing down of the embassy and to show that this move has provoked a "split inside the community," the reality is otherwise. The Christian camp, made up of several factions with often diverging philosophical and political outlooks, is united behind Aoun, both politically and militarily. Sure of that support, Aoun has counterattacked against the State Department. On Sept. 8, he issued a formal appeal to the "American people, to ignore the policy of the State Department and to support all the Lebanese—Muslim and Christian—in our war of liberation, as their own forefathers did in America some 200 years ago."

Implications for the region

The regional consequences of these steps will be felt for some time. Not unrelated was the timing of the announcement that the planned visit of Saudi Arabia's King Fahd to Washington, D.C. for Sept. 14, was being canceled. King Fahd had postponed his visit once before on July 27, warning that the events in Lebanon required his presence in the region. Similar reasons were again presented, with an added bitter implication that since America's traditional ally Saudi Arabia is chairing the Arab League's tripartite committee attempting to negotiate an end to Lebanon's crisis, the U.S. should behave otherwise.

The American move has underlined two important developments in the emergence of a superpower "condominium" between the United States and the Soviet Union. First, the level of cooperation between the superpowers has already gone far enough that when Soviet Special Envoy Gennady Tarasov visited Damascus and Beirut in the last week of August, he was doing so as effectively a *joint* envoy of both the United States and the Soviet Union! This was the message transmitted by Tarasov to his interlocutors, and the meaning was not lost on some of Moscow's traditional allies. Hence, while Lebanon's traditionally pro-American Christian community has been forced to turn against Washington, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt on Sept. 5 authored a virulent denunciation of Soviet policy toward Lebanon, calling Tarasov's visit "a mission of betrayal."

At the same time, this behavior by the United States highlights the administration's belief that nothing can be done for the Middle East, and nothing will be done. In the words of an Israeli specialist, "Washington and Moscow have decided that the Israelis and the Arabs should cook in their own juice for some time." While the pretext is that "positions are so far away that they cannot be bridged for the time being," the underlying reality is Washington's overtures toward Iran. There can be no success with Teheran, unless Washington can maintain good relations with Damascus.