

Lebanon: national resistance or slavery

Surrender or be shot: Such are the terms of the agreement reached in Taif, Saudi Arabia at the end of October, after more than three weeks of negotiations between Lebanese Christian and Muslim parliamentarians under the sponsorship of the Arab League triumvirate of Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Morocco. The agreement provides at best a respite of a few weeks, during which an unstable ceasefire will be in effect. But in reality, the agreement is an attempt to neutralize Lebanese opposition to the Syrian military occupation. In the words of Lebanese Prime Minister Gen. Michel Aoun to the French daily *Le Figaro* on Oct. 25, it was the result of "the American conspiracy" on Syria's behalf: "They could not achieve it in Lebanon, so they shipped the members of parliament to Saudi Arabia."

Of course, one can only welcome any initiative which calls a halt, even if only momentary, to the Syrian drive to wipe out Lebanese resistance to its occupation, through systematic and blind bombardments against the civilian population. In the words of Maronite Patriarch Sfeir on Oct. 24, it is necessary to prevent the emergence of "a Lebanon without Lebanese." But it is another thing to sacrifice Lebanese sovereignty to Syria, with Lebanon becoming merely the colony that Damascus has been coveting for the past 20 years.

Concretely, the terms of the agreement are the following: 1) the parliamentary election of a Maronite President by early November, setting into motion the forming of a new government; 2) constitutional reforms whereby the prime minister, a Sunni Muslim, will be the actual ruler of the country. The President will no longer have veto rights in the cabinet and will require a two-thirds majority of the cabinet to dismiss his prime minister; and 3) parliamentary changes bringing the number of deputies up to 108, equally divided between Christians and Muslims. The chairman of the Parliament, a Shi'ite Muslim, will be elected for two years instead of the present one year.

What took three weeks of negotiations was the crafting of a carefully worded document which avoids any precise reference to Syrian military withdrawal from Lebanon. In its stead is the vague commitment that within two years after the implementation of the above political reforms, negotiations would be started between Lebanon and Syria. Within such negotiations, a calendar for a complete Syrian withdrawal would be established.

Can anyone in his right mind believe this will ever happen? That Syrian intelligence will not ensure the elections of its own corrupt candidates, who will "unanimously agree" that Syria has to remain in Lebanon? Syria, having never held a single democratic election, is unlikely to bless one in another country.

One can only conclude that what has occurred is one of the most cynical sellouts ever. What pressures the parliamentarians meeting in Taif were submitted to, will only be known when they return to Lebanon. Clearly some of them are not too proud of their action, and are fearful of facing the angry protesters which gathered by the tens of thousands in support of Michel Aoun and of his rejection of this "crime against the Lebanese nation."

Behind the sellout

There are several factors which may have played a role in the sellout. First, what has been the role of Saudi Arabia? One of Saudi King Fahd's main concerns from the beginning has been to prevent the Lebanese crisis from leading to a confrontation between Syria and Iraq. Yet, the byzantine maneuvers within the Saudi Royal Family have added other considerations. Crown Prince Abdullah is maneuvering to eliminate Prince Sultan, the defense minister and leader of the Sudairi clan, who is officially set to become crown prince when Abdullah becomes king. Abdullah is reportedly striking a deal for a representative of the Faisal clan to become crown prince instead. Consolidation of closer relations between Riyadh and Damascus are part of these negotiations. Saud al-Faisal has been a mere mouthpiece for Syrian interests in Lebanon.

Why did the Christian parliamentarians in Taif endorse such an ill-fated deal? Corruption in some cases, blackmail and fear in others, perhaps. The real answer may have come from General Aoun himself, when he addressed his supporters on Oct. 23 and called on Lebanese youth to take up their own responsibilities. Who are these parliamentarians after all? Life-long politicians who were last elected in the mid-1970s, and whose status has not been questioned since. The fear that an official and definite challenge to Saudi Arabia and Syria would call into question their social and feudal status, and that they would be replaced by younger elites, seems to have played an important role.

Indeed, if the Taif agreement has any meaning, it is to underline that the political structures of Lebanon as they have survived in the last 15 years are corrupt and obsolete. The real challenge that Aoun has correctly addressed, is the need for the younger generation of Lebanese, Christians and Muslims alike, to unite in a national resistance against the foreign occupier; hence to put the issue of national resistance and the defense of national sovereignty above any loyalties to feudal clans. The behavior of the parliamentarians in Taif has just driven the point home. It will not be easy, obviously; but is it worth living in slavery?