

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Syrian defeat in Lebanon

There are visible lessons to Western governments here—not least concerning the hostages held in South Beirut.

The Malta summit arrived just in time to distract international attention: While all the cameras were aimed at Bush and Gorbachov, Syria was able to lick its wounds in peace, far from the glare of publicity. Because no matter what the Damascus mouthpieces are saying, Syria took a psychological beating comparable only to its systematic defeats at the hands of Israel.

Thanks to the death of the puppet President of Lebanon René Moawad, which Syria instigated, Syria had placed all bets on the rapid election of a new puppet President, Elias Hrawi, cynically invested with “legal” and “legitimate” powers, and set on a clear offensive against the Baabda Palace where Prime Minister Gen. Michel Aoun, the nationalist leader whom the Syrians are seeking to displace, was ensconced with forces loyal to him.

Without firing a single shot, Aoun and his supporters defeated the Syrian plan. One element was the international sympathy which the moral stance of Aoun was winning. Even as the Malta summit was taking place, a delegation of 33 deputies of the French parliament, who flew on planes supplied by the French government, visited Lebanon in a show of support for the anti-Syria resistance.

Hrawi told the BBC that his plans to oust Aoun militarily would only involve Lebanese troops, and would occur after international efforts at mediation have been exhausted. “We don’t want there to be a military operation against residential areas and to kill in-

nocents and destroy houses,” he said, according to press accounts. In fact, military experts averred that a joint Syrian-Lebanese initiative would be required to unseat Aoun.

To save face, the Syrian ministry of “information” announced on Dec. 7 that it was to protect “innocent lives” that Syria had decided not to attack East Beirut. The mere fact that Syria’s government felt the need to make such a statement shows its embarrassment.

More than 30,000 troops in Lebanon, of whom 10,000 around Beirut alone, most of them from the so-called special forces better known under the nickname of Pink Panthers—both for their sexual exploits and the color of their uniforms—were not able to bring down the resistance of Aoun and that of a growing part of the Lebanese people, to the Syrian occupation.

There are some visible lessons here for the Western governments which have consistently preferred to accommodate to, rather than confront, Syria. If a few thousand peaceful, unarmed demonstrators can disrupt the plans of the second strongest army in the region, what does that say about the Western powers?

Lessons can especially be drawn about the fate of the Western hostages held in Lebanon by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah terrorists. For years now, Syria has been privately and publicly declaring that it cannot free them, but can only negotiate as an intermediary with the kidnapers. Damascus has insisted that any Syrian effort to penetrate South Beirut would only end up

in the massacre of the hostages. But how long will they keep saying this?

Since the Syrians had to send in troops to massacre the population of East Beirut, the Iranian-controlled Hezbollah withdrew to their positions in the southern suburbs in under 48 hours. In less than 48 hours, Syrian troops occupied the entirety of strategic positions in the region. Did Syria take advantage of this to free the hostages? Evidently not—but that should surprise no one.

There are still, obviously, military dangers to the Aoun-led Lebanese national resistance. Hrawi, uncomfortable in his position as a puppet, is already threatening to resign before he undergoes the fate of his predecessor (assassinated on Nov. 22), when Damascus decides to elect yet a different President. Even if there is an offensive against Aoun and his resistance, the movement has gone too far to be totally destroyed. The Lebanese resistance, though militarily weak, is politically strong.

And what about Hafez al-Assad, the Syrian President? Sure of his situation, he engaged his Army, and got personally committed to the affair—and he lost. More than a political and psychological loss of face, he may have lost the game.

Although it is controlled by an immense repressive apparatus, the Syrian Army is rife with discontent. It is not accidental that the special forces and not the regular Army troops were sent for the offensive against Aoun. In reality, these special units had no real combat training, but they are loyal to their master.

The Army is no longer unified, and its dissidents feel encouraged by certain events, such as those occurring in East Germany. The most generous of them think that the arrests going on in East Berlin represent, perhaps, a precedent for Damascus.