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FIGHTING IN LEBANON CAMPS DISCUSSED

Background, Prospects

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[Article by Mustafa Zayn]

[Text] What is the background to the struggle over control of the Palestinian camps in Lebanon? What is the role of the Lebanese parties and sects? What is Syria's role in the matter? Also, why has the Palestinian fighting force become united in the face of the militias? And why has the Amal movement undertaken to liquidate the armed Palestinian presence in Lebanon independent of the rest of the Lebanese parties?

Finally, what are the regional and international dimensions to what is going on on the Palestinian scene in Lebanon?

In this report, AL-MAJALLAH tries to answer all of these questions.

The conflict that has erupted today in Beirut and in the south between the Palestinians and a Lebanese faction is not something new to the Lebanese scene; rather its history goes back to the first years when the Palestinian resistance began its military activity against the Jewish state from the south. Perhaps it goes back to long before that, to the forties of this century, when the Palestinians were forced to leave their villages and towns and head for Lebanon. The tribal and sectarian shortsightedness which gripped the Lebanese, and still does, saw the Palestinians as foreigners and strangers, despite the presence of a common enemy and a common destiny, and despite the historical relations that existed between the two peoples and which go back thousands of years. The Palestinians, according to this narrow view, belong to another sect and to other, different tribes. This narrow-mindedness is not limited to the Lebanese alone, but it is general and encompasses the Palestinians themselves and non-Palestinian Arabs. It was the mentality that prevailed within the Arab army of deliverance that went into Palestine in 1948 and which was not able to stand up to the organized Zionist troops. Because of Lebanon's delicate and sensitive sectarian structure, some of its sects believed that the presence of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Lebanon would strengthen the adversary's position, and the Christians believed that this strong presence would upset the sectarian balances of power in the country

and considered it to be a direct threat to the political structure of Lebanon that was based on delicate and sensitive sectarian apportionment. According to this view, the Palestinian Muslim majority would side with the Lebanese Muslims whenever fighting broke out among the Lebanese. The Lebanese Phalangist party built its political philosophy on this basis, whether with regard to the Palestinians or to all other Arabs and their problems. Therefore it was not surprising that during the civil war and before the Israeli invasion and shortly after it, there was a rapprochement between Amal and the Phalangist leadership, because both sides had a common "enemy." But that did not prevent secular Lebanese parties with Christian leaders from forming strong alliances with the Palestinian resistance as soon as it emerged, and with the Palestinian leaders before that. Palestinians have attained leadership positions in these parties that have national aspirations, but in the midst of the turbulent sectarian current, these parties continued to have a limited effect, especially since they were faced with hostility from all sects.

In spite of the well-known Palestinian activities in diverse areas, and in the economic and social fields in Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world, the Palestinian camps continued to exist on the outskirts of Lebanese cities, under miserable health and living conditions. Keeping the camps on the outskirts and isolated had been a deliberate policy disguised by the revolutionary liberation slogan which says that the Palestinians must not be absorbed into Lebanese society so that they will not forget their problems of returning to their occupied land.

Because southern Lebanon is an impoverished region, according to the prevailing political view, and because of repeated Israeli attacks on Lebanese villages after the resistance movement arose, in addition to the fact that economic activity centered on the capital, Beirut, and was in need of labor--because of all that, large numbers of southern Lebanese emigrated to the suburbs of Beirut to live under conditions similar to those of the Palestinians, and some of them lived in the camps and still do. The southern and eastern suburb of Beirut, along with the camps, formed a belt of true misery around the Lebanese capital. However, this misery shared by the Lebanese emigrating from the south and the Palestinians was not able to unify them against the causes of their misery, rather it increased the "enmity" between them because of the competition for job opportunities, and because the emigrating southerner believed that his presence in the belt of misery was the price he paid for the Palestinian problem.

Since its establishment, the Palestinian resistance has naturally concentrated its activities in the confrontation states, and following violent and bloody confrontations with the Lebanese authorities, it was able to sanction its lawful liberation activity in the plain agreement known as the "Cairo agreement," which allowed the Palestinian resistance to launch attacks against Israel from within southern Lebanon. This increased the severity of the Israeli reaction against both the Palestinians and the Lebanese, and added fuel to the fire of the official Lebanese information campaign against the resistance, in which the Lebanese authorities covered up their failings in and neglect of the south with flimsy excuses, and they set up vicious units of the Lebanese army consisting of local people to fight the Palestinians. All this happened during the seventies, before the Amal movement became a force to be reckoned with.

## Amal Movement and New Balances

After the Palestinian resistance left Beirut right after the Israeli invasion the Amal movement began to play a military and political role on the Lebanese scene, benefitting in the popular mind from its role in resisting the Israelis alongside the Palestinian resistance during the siege of Beirut. The differences between Nabih Birri and the Amal leadership in the south came close to an actual conflict, because Birri was determined to resist Israel while the leadership of the movement in the south took the position of observing a truce. That was until the Lebanese National Resistance Front arose, with which Amal became affiliated in order to resist the Israeli army in the south, and to form subsequently the principle military force on the scene.

But what happened so that Amal launched its latest attack against the camps?

In spite of the official accounts from both warring sides which agree that the fighting started because of a single incident, and despite the fact that conditions were ripe for an outbreak of fighting, there were reasons relating to the new balance of power in Lebanon and to the strategies of each of the two sides. Also, there were local and regional dimensions that had an obvious effect and that played an effective role in stirring up the Lebanese and Palestinian sides.

After the second stage of the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, the Amal leadership announced through one of its commanders, Da'ud Da'ud, that it would stand against any military operation aimed at Israel after its withdrawal to the international border with Lebanon, and observers have noted that operations by the Lebanese National Resistance have recently decreased in quantity and in nature. AL-MAJALLAH has learned from reliable sources within the Resistance Front that elements from Amal have fought fierce battles with groups belonging to the Front that had been heading out to carry out their tasks. In addition to that, Da'ud Da'ud, an Amal commander, says that he will not permit any party or organization to exist in southern Lebanon, and he believes that it was his movement alone that liberated the south and that it is responsible for security and for putting things in order.

On the other hand, Nabih Birri, head of the Amal movement in Beirut, stated that he would not permit anyone to return things to what they were before 1982, that is, before the Israeli invasion when the Palestinian resistance had the principle role in Lebanese politics. As for fighting Israel, Birri believes that the liberation of Palestine must be a joint Arab responsibility, and on all fronts, "primarily the east Jordan front."

Thus if we add the historical background to the strategic goal that the Amal leaders talk about, we will understand the local Lebanese reasons behind the situation erupting, which can be summarized in the following points:

- The Amal movement, having established itself as a primary force on the Lebanese scene, will fight any party that tries to take away its gains.

- There is a basic contradiction between Amal and the Palestinian resistance regarding their stance towards commando operations against Israel. For while groups within the resistance are determined to fight Israel after it withdraws from the south, Amal believes that its task ended with the end of the Israeli occupation, and that the liberation of Palestine must be a joint Arab responsibility.

- Any political or military force in Beirut that tries to have an effect on the new balance of power will clash decisively with the Amal movement, which considers itself to be the major victor and the most numerous. For this reason, last month it fought battles with the Murabitun movement, the organic ally of the Palestinian resistance, as Ibrahim Qulaylat told AL-MUJALLAH. And for this reason, it tried successfully to seize the reigns of power in the Lebanese capital in preparation for holding political unity talks from a position of strength.

It should be pointed out that among the ranks of the Shi'a sect there are those who oppose the direction Amal is taking. Perhaps Shaykh Muhammad Fadlallah is the most active in his opposition, and he is playing an essential role in talks between the Palestinian resistance and the Amal leadership. He believes that Israel must be fought until Jerusalem is liberated.

#### How Did the Palestinian Factions Unite?

What is striking about the "war of the camps" is that the Lebanese parties allied with Amal, such as the Progressive Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the National Socialist Party, did not participate in the attack against the camps, and Junblatt played a role as mediator. Informed Lebanese sources believe that these parties have begun to review their positions and that sooner or later they will reconsider their alliances with Amal, for most of them are secular parties that were forced by the circumstances of the occupation to ally themselves with a movement that represents a sectarian viewpoint. These sources expect there to be a fierce and bloody struggle between Amal and the aforementioned parties.

Even more striking was the fact that the Palestine Salvation Front joined the battle alongside Fatah, and also that the artillery belonging to this front's units shelled Amal's positions from positions in the mountains where the Syrian army is located.

A source close to Mr Yasir "Arafat believes that the unity among groups of the Palestinian resistance under these "delicate circumstances is natural, because the Palestinian presence in Lebanon is threatened and it is in no one's interest to stand aside watching." On whether there had been any contacts between the Salvation Front and the PLO leadership in Tunis, the source himself says that up until last week there had been no contact, and that the PLO was ready to talk to any party that "wants to rejoin under the legitimate leadership." This source praised the statements that the leaders of the Salvation Front made and the positions that they took when they met last week with "Adb-al-Halim Khaddam and asked him to intervene quickly to stop the attack on the camps.

The question still remains: Will the Salvation Front's position lead to a dialogue among Palestinians and to patching the rift, or will things remain limited to an alliance for self-defense only? Also, what will be the formula for ending the battles that have taken place and that are going on?

With regard to the first question, it may be premature to speculate on an answer, especially since the PLO, led by 'Arafat, is sticking to its alliance with Jordan and to carrying out its line decided upon in its representative agencies. That is a profound difference that cannot be removed simply with statements from here and there, even though they might be an indication of a change within the ranks of the Salvation Front.

As for an interim solution to the problem of the camps in Lebanon, those in the Palestinian leadership in Tunis see it in the following manner:

- The Amal movement cannot be allowed to take over the security of the camps after what has happened.
- There should be an immediate cease-fire, and talks should take place under Arab and national Lebanese auspices through which a formula would be arrived at that would preserve the security of the camps and agreement would be reached concerning the defensive weapons in them.
- The PLO will not accept any Syrian solution.

These are the essentials of any quick and imminent solution, as those in the PLO see it. The battles might continue for a long time before any one of these items is achieved unless Syria intervenes quickly and puts a halt to what is going on.

#### The Syrian Role

Those who have been following Syrian policies in Lebanon since 1975, that is, since the civil war began, believe that the Syrian leadership is trying to achieve a balance between the warring Lebanese factions and sects. When the war began, it sided with the Lebanese National Movement against the Phalangist party and parties of the Lebanese Front. When it felt that the balance of power had been upset, and after the Syrian army's entry into Lebanon when the Lebanese parties and the Palestinian resistance fought fierce battles against the Syrian army, Damascus during this phase took the side of the Phalangists and their allies, but it was not long before they resumed their support of the National Movement in order to maintain the balance of power. After the Palestinian resistance left Beirut and after the 17 May agreement between a Lebanese and an Israeli delegation was signed, Damascus once again renewed its support of "national forces and parties" against the central authority until the aforementioned agreement collapsed, and so far it is still supporting the Amal movement and the parties allied to it. Thus, so far Damascus has not allowed any Lebanese to be victorious over another group, because the total victory of one sect or party, according to what Syrian sources say, would mean the division of Lebanon and foreign states regaining the influence they previously had on internal Lebanese policies.

The observers believe that Damascus is not far removed from what is happening in the camps, for the Amal movement is one of its faithful allies, and that the Syrian capital is very interested in curbing the PLO in Lebanon and in curbing the Palestinian forces loyal to "Arafat, for these forces, according to Syrian sources, are an obstacle to the Syrian solution and are trying to keep Syria busy in the Lebanese arena so as to keep it from opposing the well-known Jordanian-Palestinian alliance.

Whether or not Syria knows what will come out of the attack on the camps, and that is unlikely, Damascus will try to reap the fruit of what will happen. Well-informed Lebanese sources believe that the intention behind curbing the PLO and the attempt to weaken "Arafat is to turn the camps in the Lebanese capital over to the Palestinian National Salvation Front that is allied to Damascus, especially since the leadership of this front, following its active stand against the Amal movement, has come to be appreciated in the eyes of the Palestinians. These sources do not think it unlikely that that will happen after the Amal movement is restrained and curbed in its turn.

When we consider the latest Syrian movements on what pertains to the Lebanese problem, and the news that confirms Damascus' determination to sign a security and defense agreement with Lebanon, and the news which confirms the return of the Syrian army to Lebanon--if we take all that into consideration, we will understand why the various sides are being curbed. For whether its army returns, or whether it signs a security agreement with Lebanon, it is important to Damascus not to return to the stage of the seventies, when the militias on the Lebanese scene obstructed its role and turned its army into just a police force for settling disputes. It is interested in returning after the various groups have been weakened so that the solution that it wants can occur. If that happens, Lebanon will have entered a new phase of its history, and a part of Damascus' dream of a Greater Syria will have been achieved, in preparation to launching into what the West calls the Middle East problem from a position of strength. We will be able to perceive this Syrian scenario better when we have read what Nabih Birri said in a news conference of his, in which he listed the Syrian conditions for the return of the "deterrent" forces to all of Lebanon. These conditions can be summarized by the following points:

- A Lebanese political and security agreement.
- The agreement by all sides to the return of the Syrian army.
- Agreement on a formula for allocating power in Lebanon far removed from the formula of 1943 that is based on the sectarian balance.
- A defense and security agreement that ties Lebanon to Syria and to its Arab surroundings.

Therefore Syria is determined to end the war in Lebanon in its favor, and the weaker the Lebanese and Palestinian parties that oppose Syrian policies become, the closer Damascus gets to achieving the solution it wants.