

to increasing the number of seats in the Lebanese parliament from 99 to 108, to give Moslems equal representation, the document stated :«The tripartite Arab committee has reached full agreement...with Syria for ending its security duties (in the Beirut area) within a period not to exceed two years» (*Al Safir*, October 25th). It also called on the Lebanese parliament to meet in Lebanon no later than November 7th, to ratify political reforms agreed on, and to elect a new president for Lebanon.

The big challenge

The broad-based agreement in Taif served to accentuate Aoun's isolation and the fact that his «war of liberation» had been a disaster, since he managed neither to win it, nor to turn it into an all-Lebanese war against Syria, as he had planned. Tactically, the general initially announced his acceptance of the Taif talks, hoping they would fail. His dilemma lay in the fact that if he rejected the plan, he would thereby be defying the Arab and foreign states that had backed such a accord. Yet, to accept it meant relinquishing his aims and admitting that the fighting and suffering of the past six months had been in vain. When the accord was adopted, it was obvious that Aoun was the big loser, and he stepped up threats against Christian members of parliament and religious figures who had backed reconciliation. According to Aoun, «The people will not have mercy on those who are negligent» (*International Herald Tribune*, October 16th). His isolation even in the «Christian camp» was further exposed when 24 of the Christian deputies held a private meeting in Taif to discuss Aoun's stance. They issued a statement, saying: «It was a choice between a continuation of the destructive war and peace (the Taif accord)...It was a wise choice if compared with other negative rejections» (AP, October 24th). Aoun rejected George Saadeh's challenge to a televised debate, saying: «There is no need for any dialogue about the Taif

accord. I shall not allow it to go into effect» (*Al Safir*, November 14th).

Due to uncertainty as to what Aoun might do, the majority of MPs stayed out of the areas of his control until the parliament session; East Beirutis delayed their return to Lebanon until the session itself, lest the general hold them hostage to prevent a quorum for electing the new president. When the parliament finally convened at the Qlaiaat air base in northeast Lebanon on November 5th, and elected Rene Mawad as president, Aoun's supporters attacked the residence of the patriarch, Nasrallah Sfeir, the highest Maronite authority in the country, because of his support to the presidential elections. They insulted him and forced him to kneel and kiss a poster of Aoun.

Seventeen days after being elected, President Rene Mawad was assassinated in a bomb attack that killed 23 other people in West Beirut. Many suspect that Aoun and Israel were behind the killing. He had refused to recognize the legitimacy of the new president on the pretext that he himself had dissolved the parliament prior to the elections. Aoun further vowed to block the formation of a new government, warning Christian politicians not to join the government which Mawad had mandated Prime Minister Salim Hoss to form: «No one will form a government of national unity...Those who take part in the Hoss cabinet had better stay in the land of Hoss» (AP, November 15th).

Despite the atmosphere of terror and despair which the assassination was intended to create, the Lebanese parliament reconvened two days later and elected Elias Hrawi as President of Lebanon. A few days later, a broad-based cabinet was announced as the result of Hoss' efforts to bring representatives of the various political factions together in the government, in line with the compromise reached at Taif. Still, Mawad's assassination and Aoun's continuing threats give an idea of the uncertainty which the national reconciliation process is facing. Aoun

continues to refuse to vacate the presidential palace at Baabda, to allow the new president to take up residence there.

Many questions can be raised about the future tasks of the newly formed legitimate government in Lebanon, but there are some immediate tasks that cannot be avoided. Prime among them is the removal of Aoun, who has been officially fired and replaced as Lebanese Army commander, but has yet to abdicate. The new government is charged with determining how to depose him, and this is a task which will enjoy the full support of the vast majority of Lebanese, since it is obvious to all that Aoun is the main internal obstacle to reuniting and stabilizing the country.

Yet however urgent, this task is only a beginning to pave the way for reforms in the unjust, sectarian political system whose disintegration allowed the recurring rounds of violence, and the interference of outside forces, which aggravated the internal crisis. Israel, of course, stands as the external force with greatest interests in Lebanon's disunity and weakness. It was not by coincidence that Israel escalated air attacks on Palestinian positions in Lebanon in the days between Mawad's assassination and the election of Hrawi. In view of Aoun's untenable position in most of Lebanon, there is a possibility that he will embark on more direct coordination with Israel and its proxies in the so-called South Lebanon Army. For all these reasons, enforcing Israeli withdrawal from all of Lebanon would be the greatest single step towards unity and stability that the new government could take. However, past experience shows that enforcing Israeli withdrawal is too great a task to be accomplished by the diplomatic endeavors of the Arab League or Lebanese government alone. This, coupled with the fact that the Taif accord provided for partial reform, but not abolition of the sectarian system, set limits for what the new government can accomplish, despite all its good intentions.