

Aoun Offers a Vision Of a Unified Lebanon

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It is not at all certain that Presidential elections will take place in Lebanon on Sept. 15, as scheduled. They have been placed in question since the government of Fouad Siniora was thrown into crisis in November 2006. But more broadly, in addition to the internal politics of Lebanon, the entire region will go up in flames, as American statesman Lyndon LaRouche has warned, should the Anglo-American interests behind U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney pull the trigger on an Iran war.

Well-placed Israeli and U.S. intelligence sources have warned *EIR* that in order to “neutralize” any asymmetric warfare response by Hezbollah in Lebanon, in reaction to an attack on Iran, there will be an Israeli strike against Hezbollah positions in Lebanon. If Cheney is not stopped, the entire region will be engulfed in war, and, with the Anglo-American pressures on Lebanon, driven by hypocritical United Nations resolutions, Lebanon’s future will once again be dominated by war.

Nonetheless, recent efforts by the different ethnic and religious factions in Lebanon to fight for a unified nation, in the face of the destabilizations driven by the Cheneyacs, is a major development. (In the Lebanese system, the President must be a Christian, the Prime Minister, a Sunni, and the Parliament Speaker, a Shi’ite.) On July 25, speaking in Berlin, Gen. Michel Aoun, head of the Free Patriotic Movement, and a candidate for the Presidency of Lebanon, laid out a vision that could be the solution to the sectarian crisis.

Stage Set for Crisis

In November 2006, six Cabinet ministers in the Siniora government, all Shi’ites, quit in protest against the government’s plan to accept the establishment of an international tribunal, through the United Nations, to investigate and prosecute defendants in the case of the 2005 murder of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, and later assassinations. Since that time, the government has been virtually paralyzed, and the political process radically polarized between the majority around the March 14 group led by the slain Hariri’s son, Saad, and the Siniora government, on the one side, and the opposition, led by the alliance of Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) of Gen. Michel Aoun.

Among the many efforts launched by outside forces, including the Arab League, and a joint Saudi-Iranian initiative, to bring the opposing camps together, a French-brokered

meeting took place in Celle Saint Cloud, outside Paris, in mid-July, and yielded some results. Representatives of all 14 political factions came together and, although no concrete agreements were sealed, an atmosphere of open discussion prevailed. One of the issues raised during the two-day closed talks, was the elections.

Among the leading candidates to replace Emile Lahoud, whose Presidency began during the period of Syrian occupation, is Aoun, a former chief of staff and member of Parliament, who left Lebanon during Lebanon's war with Syria in the late 1980s, and lived in exile in France from 1991 to 2005. In May 2005, after having returned with guarantees from the Siniora government, Aoun was elected to Parliament and his party, the FPM, netted 22 seats.

On Feb 6, 2006, General Aoun, a Christian, sealed a crucial political alliance with Shi'ite Hezbollah. A memorandum of understanding was signed by the two political movements, calling for the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Syria, on the same level as with other states; the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied Shebaa Farms; the liberation of Lebanese prisoners held in Israeli jails; the development of a civil society in face of religious sensitivities; and the replacement of Hezbollah's military force with a national army, in the process of being built. This established the opposition as a principled political force with a clear agenda for Lebanon.

Creating a Nation-State

The candidacy of General Aoun, who has been touring Europe, is an historic development, in that he has taken on the fundamental problem which lies at the root of every conflict that has broken out in Lebanon in recent years: the sectarian or confessional structure of political life which makes up the Lebanese system. In his recent book, *Une certaine vision du Liban (A Certain Vision of Lebanon)*, Aoun stated unequivocally:

"It is time to have society evolve, to sensitize it, that is, to educate it to respect difference. It is not a matter of a 'dialogue of cultures' or 'of civilizations,' but of the necessary invention of a new model of society based principally on the respect of the difference of the other. It is in this that Lebanon is the messenger-country."

Further on, he writes:

"The confessional system has had very perverse effects, transforming political questions into splits among different communities... In Lebanon, political thought coincides often with one's belonging to a certain religious community, and every political division is utilized to create a confrontation between the various communities... This is the reason why I wish to make the Lebanese state a secular state, transforming political confessionalism into the sense of citizenship."

Aoun explains his alliance with Hezbollah, which had provoked cries of protest from certain Christian forces, from

the standpoint of the need for a national identity.

"We did not try to win. We established a political framework which allows us to overcome certain important contentious issues among the Lebanese. One of the points of reproach I had vis-à-vis Hezbollah, was its military commitments outside of Lebanon. Now, we have achieved substantial progress on this question. Hezbollah has committed itself to participate in the building of a strong and democratic State, and to limit its use of arms to the occupied territories and the liberation of prisoners held in Israel..."

Furthermore, he identifies the common social bases of the two movements, which come primarily from the middle class; both seek a sovereign democratic government.

Aoun presents a sensuous picture of how such an understanding between the two movements and their social bases can change the subjective state of mind of citizens from the different communities.

"Why is it that I now can walk alone down the street, among the Hezbollah people? Because they now longer fear competition with me, they know that I would always be on their side. The wall of fear has fallen..."

Further, commenting on a speech delivered by Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrullah in September 2006, Aoun writes:

"I was particularly satisfied with the part of his speech which made reference to the construction of the State and which conforms to paragraph 4 of our memorandum of understanding... It is a revolution in the literal sense of the term which we are witnessing. Christians are leaving their fears behind, they are reaching out to the Shi'ites, while the Shi'ites are moving beyond their traditional references. To accept, minimally, reflecting on the construction of a modern and secular state of law, by encouraging the institutions of civil society, is a considerable advance for the Shi'ites of Hezbollah, whose main demand has been the establishment of an Islamic republic. They go well beyond the reflection on this point; they accept the principle. What more does the world want after a couple of months of dialogue, in terms of rapprochement and the establishment of reciprocal trust?"

Such an approach challenges the entire method of political and social control that has been exerted over Lebanon (and indeed, large parts of the Arab and Islamic world) by imperial and colonial powers throughout history. Even long before the British and French divvied up the region in their 1916 Sykes-Picot Treaty, foreign powers wielded influence in the region, through their control over religious communities. As one Lebanese government representative told *EIR* some time back, the problem of Lebanon's confessional system is not only to be understood in terms of the dynamic of internal conflict that it fosters, but also from the standpoint of outside manipulation. This diplomat reminded us of the fact that under the Ottoman Empire, before Lebanon was carved out as a state, each religious community in the region had its foreign protector: Russia protected the Orthodox Christians;

France, the Maronites; England and Germany, the Protestants of different stripes, and so on.

Aoun's approach, therefore, paves the way not only for national reconciliation, but in so doing, pulls the rug out from under those foreign powers, in the United States and Great Britain, for example, who have used their hold on religious factions to manipulate political developments. General Aoun is fully aware of the fact that his approach is revolutionary:

"The Christian is a rebel, a revolutionary. Christ was punished and crucified because he had rebelled against the established order, whether political or religious, and also against fixed laws, which did not take Man into consideration."

The established order in Lebanon, he identifies as made up of three forces: "political feudalism, represented by the traditional notables, the sectarian warlords reconverted to politicians, and the financially corrupt political class." Sectarianism constitutes the source of political power of these three forces, and the means by which they maintain and reproduce their power. The contemporary history of Lebanon is in large part the history of the permanent conflict among the different components. . . . They have transformed the Lebanese political system into a system of low-intensity civil war. Lebanon has become the hostage of these elites, who are veritable forces of inertia, and who are ossifying their political system. These forces are grouped today in the camp known as the government majority. This camp, in reality, is the symbiosis of king money, sectarianism, and the militias."

The Political Challenge

How does Aoun intend to translate his ideas into reality? *EIR* raised this issue in a July 25 exchange with the general, in Berlin, who, following meetings with German government officials, also met with some representatives of the Arabic press. Quoting from his book regarding the perverse effects of the confessional system, Muriel Mirak-Weissbach of *EIR* asked him: "How do you intend to pursue this transformation to a secular state? And how do you envision the implementation of the memo of understanding with Hezbollah?"

Aoun answered: "About this precisely, and encouraging the political party of Hezbollah, this is a prelude, you know, to implement the transfer of a confessional society to a secular one. But we have to respect some steps. Right now, instead of having a confessional conflict in Lebanon, we consider the conflict from being confessional to being a political one. This time, it divided Lebanese society into two parties, where Muslims and Christians opted for a national policy. And the second step, for reforms, how many years it will take, I don't care. What I care about is that the process has started in Lebanon, and maybe it will take some years, but then it will benefit everybody. But we have to continue to encourage Lebanese people to think nationally and not confessionally."

Aoun stressed that, if elected President, he would indeed

stick to the memorandum of understanding with Hezbollah, which, he said, was not only for Hezbollah, but for all political parties in Lebanon. The memorandum, he said, should be used as an instrument to unify all the Lebanese people. Regarding Syria, he said that diplomatic relations would be important, to protect both countries, and emphasized, regarding the accusations of Syrian involvement in the Hariri and other murders, that no proof has been provided yet.

EIR also asked General Aoun about outside interference: "Many Lebanese sources, including political people, have told me," said Mirak-Weissbach, "that they believe that all the Lebanese factions could come to agreement and solve all problems, if they were left alone. But the problem that arises is that, whenever a solution is on the horizon, there is interference from certain circles in the U.S.A. This interference aims not only to sabotage a national unity government, but also, according to our reports, these circles are supporting covertly groups like the Fatah al Islami and others. I wonder how you evaluate this, given that these same circles, identified with Vice President Cheney, are also talking about a new war, this time against Iran."

Aoun started off, saying, "There is some point about this question. We are following the international press and the American press, and we are waiting to know the conclusions." But, he added: "What you have said is so important and so grave, that we cannot comment on it directly. So we have to wait, because, as I said, it is very dangerous to give a comment before knowing all the details. We have heard it, we have read [investigative reporter] Seymour Hersh, we read some American sources who went into the camp [at Nahr al Bayed]. We have heard of some interference also from some Arabs. So we have to have all the details, and then certainly you will have our opinion at that time."

Aoun has defined a daunting task for himself, whose historic implications are clear. As he wrote in his book: "I have reached an age where one does not seek fortune or prestige; as far as power is concerned, I want to stress, I have occupied the highest functions of the State and in very tormented times. The realization of what I have set out to accomplish, if it succeeds, will be the most beautiful gift that I could leave my compatriots, my family, my children, and my friends. If I leave behind me the capacity rendered to this beautiful Lebanon, to unite, and to perpetuate its vocation as a messenger-country, I believe that my life, even in its last hours, will not have been useless."

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