Tripoli

A War Out of Context

Over two weeks of murderous battles in Tripoli, North Lebanon, ended in early October with an agreement signed in Damascus, under Syrian auspices, between the warring parties. The nationalist forces and the Islamic Unification Movement thereby agreed on the removal of all heavy weapons and the right of all parties to political activity in Tripoli. Though the terms of this agreement sound reasonable enough, there are grounds for questioning the motives of this battle and the implications of its outcome.

There are two distinguishing features of the Tripoli war which make it the first of its kind: For one, it was the first internal Lebanese conflict where the nationalist forces were mobilized against patriotic Islamic forces who, in principle, oppose the Lebanese fascists, Zionism and imperialism. From an objective point of view, these patriotic Islamic forces should be allies, although their undemocratic positions have made cooperation extremely difficult. (The Islamic Unification Movement had previously attacked progressive forces and enforced a ban on all others' political activities in Tripoli.)

The second distinguishing feature of the Tripoli war was that the belligerents displayed unconditional determination to wipe each other out, militarily and politically. This is an unprecedented phenomenon which did not even occur in 1976, when the Lebanese National Movement was very close to decisively defeating the Lebanese fascists.

Before the decisive phase of the battles, Syria broke off mediation efforts, and the nationalists reinforced their ranks militarily. Some nationalists thought this signalled a decision to totally eliminate the Islamic Unification Movement after it had rejected disarmament and the deployment of Syrian troops in Tripoli. (The Movement's conditions were that all parties should be disarmed simultaneously within the framework of a comprehensive settlement.) Others had previously thought that if a war erupted in Tripoli, it would be a limited, passing battle to pressure the Islamic Unification Movement to accept negotiations.

The actual events disproved both these suppositions. Militarily, the Lebanese nationalist parties succeeded in taking control of sufficient positions to

enable them to exert pressure for negotiations. Yet the fighting continued without any political efforts being made. It became a battle of «life and death» on the part of the Islamic Unification Movement and one of martyrdom and political heroism for the nationalist forces, totally out of context with reality. Then, in the end, a settlement was reached which preserved the Movement.

Why the escalation?

In the past, there have been recurring battles between the Arab Democratic Party and the Islamic Unification Movement. This time, however, the majority of Lebanese nationalist parties entered the battle against the Move-

Devastation in Tripoli

ment. This raises questions about the motives and results of such escalation, especially if one contrasts with other developments in Lebanon. When the war erupted in Tripoli, political efforts were already well underway for the National Unity Front to find a political solution with the Lebanese Forces led by Elie Hobeika, through Syrian mediation.

Why then was it necessary to sacrifice scores of lives and inflict extensive damage on Tripoli which has historically been a nationalist stronghold?

If the aim was to eliminate the Islamic Unification Movement militarily, in order to eliminate it politically, due to its past wrongdoings, then this was not in line with the present balance of forces. If, however, the aim was to contain the Movement so that it could not hamper implementation of security measures, such a military escalation would only produce the opposite results. Even if the fighting ceased, the least incident could spark a new eruption, as is the case between the opposing sides in East and West Beirut. In Tripoli, such a situation would only serve to distract both sides from the main battle for abolishing confessional privileges and the lingering Israeli occupation in the South. The only beneficiaries would be the Lebanese fascists and their regional and international allies.

In any case, the expectations that preceded the battles of Tripoli were overturned. Furthermore, the implications of this war are not limited to Tripoli, or to the Islamic Unification Movement in particular. Notice has now been served as to what will happen to any force that does not concede to the plan that has now been determined for Lebanon, in accordance with the regional balance.

In contrast, a political solution is being persistently pursued with the Lebanese Forces who are steeped in anti-patriotic policies, fascist terror against the masses and collaboration with Zionism. So why was it considered futile to find a non-violent solution with forces that are, at least, not pro-Israeli? Continuing antagonisms and internal battles within the nationalist-Islamic ranks will weaken the role of the nationalist forces and have a negative impact on the situation throughout Lebanon. Unrest in any area will reflect on another. The Lebanese nationalist forces have for a long time been defending the principle that a political solution should take priority. It would seem logical that this was the appropriate time to put this principle into practice. A political campaign should have been launched first, to end the negative role played by the Islamic Unification Movement. This would have been in line with resolving contradictions in the anti-fascist, anti-Zionist ranks, in order to pool all efforts in the struggle for a democratic Lebanon, free of confessionalism, Israeli occupation and imperialist interference. ●