



The Lebanese Society: *modus operandi*

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Unity, reform and independence are most certainly the three themes around which political life in Lebanon revolves and for which fighting resumes periodically. For the past fifteen years of devastating war, and even before then, political groups have been trying to identify with one or the other of these three themes to the exclusion of other political groups.

Those holding official positions tend to present themselves as the sole defenders of the country's unity against the many groups insidiously undermining government institutions. The classical left, and the Muslims in general, claim to be the defenders of the country's unity against what they perceive as Maronite (and to a lesser extent as Druze) separatist schemes.

Those accused of separatism generally prefer to be presented as the defenders of the country's independence. Bashir Gemayyel saw himself, and was viewed by many Lebanese, as the hero of the country's sovereignty. This meant the liberation of the territory and the victory over various other groups accused of willingly sacrificing the country's independence, and its existence, because they were paid by outside forces to undermine Lebanese sovereignty or out of religious and/or trans-state ideologies such as pan-Syrian nationalism, pan-Arab nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism or some identification with the Palestinian cause.

These self-proclaimed defenders of Lebanese independence could not be daring reformers of the system as well. Even when they showed some willingness to introduce certain changes, their enemies could only perceive them as staunch defenders of the *status quo*, camouflaging the defence of their unjustly large share in government under the guise of patriotic slogans.

Reformism was Muslim (mainly Sunni) when the slogan of *musharaka* (participation) was fashionable in the late 1960's and in the 1970's. Reformism was leftist with Kamal Junblat and his National movement. Reformism took clear Shi'a colours with Amal and its attempts to eradicate political sectarianism. Reformism was rarely Christian or more precisely Maronite: Maronite politicians were seen as staunch conservatives (Chamoun, Franjeh) and sometimes as pure reactionaries. An example of this trend was given by the *Rabita maruniyya* (The Maronite league), which published an eight-page memorandum explaining (what a discovery!) that the so-called Damascus Tripartite Agreement of late 1985 could not be acceptable since it is contrary to the letter of the Lebanese constitution!

Quest for *ghalaba*

Unity, Reform and Independence were very often perceived as unattainable, being mutually exclusive goals. Each of these three goals became in a way the protected trademark of one faction or the other. Lack of mutual trust—a very old feature of our political culture—led each group to perceive the other as a false reformer, a mere thirst to establish its own *ghalaba* (domination).

The working hypothesis I will submit is that a struggle for domination, the Khaldunian *ghalaba*, is indeed taking place in Lebanon on a wide and complex scale between factions more or less defined by their sectarian affiliation. However, looking for an acceptable compromise could not be solely based on this statement of the obvious. Among those factions, some compromise should be found on the three basic goals I have mentioned so that they all come to consider that a certain degree of national unity is feasible, that a number of reforms are unavoidable and that a certain amount of national independence is desirable. To reconcile these three goals has become a formidable task during the last year since the summer of 1988, in which unity has been disappearing before our eyes, almost no institutions are left for us to reform, and the struggle for independence has come to mean more violence and devastation. After being mutually exclusive, the three basic goals seem to have become impossible.

Since the beginning of the war, the Lebanese have tried to overcome this predicament and many attempts have been made to find a common ground—all of which were bound to fail. I will concentrate my analysis on the most recent years, where several different *modus operandi* to reconcile the three goals have been tried. The first three attempts form the background to the present and sickening period. For the time being, the country is divided on the way this latest phase is to be viewed. Many people think that it is yet another episode of an open-ended war; they are leaving the country or planning to leave. Others tend to consider this last phase as final or penultimate stage and they consider the dramatic events taking place since September 1988 as the door to a lasting agreement, or to a mere *fait accompli*.

The first *modus operandi* was used in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of 1982. It led to the election of Bashir and then of Amin Gemayyel to the presidency of the republic, and the beginning of a new *'ahd* (a six-year presidential mandate). This first phase, despite a large wave of optimism, did not last a year.

Reform was certainly not a central target for the new regime. On the contrary, public opinion was immediately sensitive to clear nepotist activities taking place, and more specifically to the appointment of friends and business partners to sensitive positions such as the newly created Council for External Economic Relations, the presidency of the Banker's association or the Deuxième Bureau. More important was the real disdain with which *musharaka* (participation in decision making) was viewed. Instead of using a really favourable opportunity to open up the system and strengthen its legitimacy, an attempt to establish a clear-cut presidential system was made. A second rate Sunni politician was named as prime minister, Kamel al-Asad was confirmed as speaker of the House, and the Druze's complaints about the Phalangist presence in the Shuf were ignored. The conduct of the negotiations with Israel, as well as foreign policy in general, was done in the presidential palace. The most important economic, military, social and educational matters were also dealt with up

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there. The cabinet was formed of generally unknown technocrats, and the president was almost free—and very eager indeed—to govern through legislative decrees, pushing the cabinet as well as the parliament to a marginal role in the system.

Coming after Elias Sarkis' low-key presidency (1976-1982), and after two decades of Muslim complaints about the imbalance between the president's powers and his constitutional irresponsibility, this presidential system was hardly acceptable. Cosmetic initiatives could not hide the fact that far from introducing changes to the system, the president was trying to restore a presidential power which had gradually eroded since the country's independence in 1943. It has been a Phalangist *leitmotiv* to consider that previous presidents were always willing to sacrifice their prerogatives under pressure in order to save their own position. The two brothers Gemayyel (Bashir and Amin) naturally thought that a president coming from Phalangist ranks should not fall into the same trap. His dearest mission should be to save the country by re-establishing a strong presidency.

Naturally, this practice did not lead to a constitutional discussion of the compared merits of parliamentarism versus presidentialism. The sectarian system is actually organised in a way which leads to the considering of reassertion of the presidential prerogatives as a triumph of the Maronite political establishment. This was clearly shown in the Sunni frustration with the regime, which would lead many Sunni politicians to join the Berri-Junblat challenge to its authority.

Unity was heavily asserted as an important goal during 1982-1983. It was a *leitmotiv* in the president's speeches: unity of the land, of the people and of the institutions were repeated as sacred goals. While one may believe these goals of unity were genuine, the fact is that a year and a half later, the country reached the height of disintegration. This was well illustrated by the continuing of the Christian militia control over East Beirut, the Metn, Kesrwan and Jbeil, the establishment of an exclusive Druze zone in Aley and the Shuf in September 1983, the collapse of a unified Beirut in February 1984, not to mention the Syrian-dominated Beqaa, the Israeli-occupied south, or the born-again Islamic Tripoli.

What went wrong? Foreign factors were paramount of course, but the president's own view of his role also exacerbated sectarian feelings. His

conception of unity basically viewed it as a government policy. In this case, unity meant preeminence of the State, its army, its institutions and its role in the economy.

In view of the deep sectarian and political divisions in the country, it was indeed a very outdated and technocratic view of what national unity could or should be. The regime seemed unable to follow a sensitive policy of reunification. How could the state reunify the country while its legitimacy was so widely contested? How could it speak of "national education" when so many private schools were diffusing such different ideas? How could it speak of "national economy" in a country where all the state's attempts to regulate the economy were successfully challenged by a powerful private sector? How could the regime think of a national army when its enemy could not be clearly named? How could it speak of national media when newspapers and other media were so dependent on foreign sources of funds for their mere survival? In such a segmented policy, a reassertive presidency ceased to be an instrument of reunification, it was actually accelerating the process of disintegration.

Independence in 1982-1983 was considered as the first priority. It naturally meant the liberation of national territory from foreign forces. How to reach this objective? Amin Gemayyel at the beginning had a very debatable answer which could be summarised as follows: put yourself under the American umbrella and Washington will save Lebanon. Independence was to be American-guaranteed. This proved to be yet another miscalculation, probably the result of a post-mandate fascination with America which was prevalent in the ranks of the French-educated Christian establishment. The regime tended to ignore its internal opposition, while the latter considered this American input as a support to the president's rule and not a push to liberate the country.

A hasty equivalence was made about foreign forces: Palestinians, Syrians and Israelis were to leave together. The equivalence was clearly mistaken since it ignored the heavy Palestinian civil presence as well as the old and still unresolved problem of Syria's self perception of their influence and position in Lebanon. A real contradiction took place between the American efforts to get the Israelis out of Lebanon and those aiming to make them accept the Reagan Plan, announced while the Israelis were still in Beirut. These two undertakings were mutually exclusive: the Israelis would not help on the Lebanese case, until the Reagan Plan was dropped. Finally, a real ignorance of the limitations of American interventionism in an area like the Middle East was prevalent.

The presidential system established in fall 1982 was very vulnerable to both local and regional challenges. It did not last more than a year. In June 1983, it was obvious that the regime was going into an impasse, but it would take Lebanon a year to move on to another formula. This led to a retreat from presidentialism, from unity through and by the government, and from



American guaranteed independence in view of the loss of the Shuf, the disintegration of the army, the withdrawal of the multinational force, the re-establishment of the green line in Beirut, and the growing resistance to Israeli occupation in the south. Under local and Syrian pressure, Lebanon moved in the spring of 1984 into a new phase, which then looked promising albeit uneasy.

Big talk

This second phase was characterised by a very complex political framework, designed to create a locus in which formal institutional legitimacy would meet with newly emergent forces to manage the state affairs and govern the country. This was to be attained in two ways: A cabinet of national unity was to be established as a collegial structure of government by consensus. On the other hand, new members of parliament were to be co-opted to add the militia's new blood into the ageing legitimate representation. Salvation should have been possible thanks to this mixture of legal and extra-legal factors and to Syria's blessings.

This ambiguous formula proved to be a new failure. It was soon obvious that in spite of their position as ministers, leaders of the militias would not behave accordingly. Lack of confidence persisted, civil strife went on and the economy began a serious decline. Even in terms of crisis management, the formula was a complete failure, since the cabinet quite rapidly ceased its meetings. The constitutive document for this formula had been the Karameh's cabinet Declaration, a reflection of the balance of power which prevailed in mid-1984. The opposition, with Syrian backing, had scored many points, but the regime still had many means to resist the change. How were the three basic goals viewed in that document?

Unity was viewed through a compromise: the government's institutions would have to remain unified, but some degree of decentralisation was promoted. The number of governorates (*mohafazah*) was to grow; each of them was to be administered by an elected council, and it was implicitly understood that these governorates were to retain their dominant sectarian colours. Many undefined prerogatives were to pass from the central government to these local authorities.

Reform was based on the Constitutional Document signed in 1976 by former President Franjeh in Damascus: equity in the civil service, equality in the allocation of parliamentary seats, and the horizon ambiguously opened toward de-confessionalisation of parliamentary representation. The executive authority remained in the hands of the president, but the paramount role of the cabinet was affirmed. At the same time, the custom of giving a leading role to the prime minister, which developed on the margin of the constitution, was consecrated.

The same compromise spirit presided over the way *independence* was viewed. The slogan used in the preceding period, "withdrawal of all foreign forces", was replaced with the formula "liberation of Lebanon from Israeli occupation". Inter-Lebanese differences were recognised, together with the foreign interferences, and a happy compromise between the competing theories of "civil war" and "external war" waged in Lebanon was found. Arabism, non-alignment and support for UN forces were to be the new bases of foreign policy, following the withdrawal of the multinational Western forces.

Why did this relatively happy compromise on ideology and on the institutions fail? One reason can be found in the struggle for power raging in the Christian ranks at the time. The Christian militia was seriously hindering Amin Gemayyel's compliance with the Declaration. In order to avoid alienating his own camp, the president was not very helpful in implementing what was, after all, a sensitive and feasible compromise. Quite to the contrary, the idea of a deal with the Syrians re-emerged. The deal would have included substantial concessions to Syria in the Lebanese-Syrian bilateral relations, in exchange for Syria's support of the existing political arrangement.

A deal of that sort had been struck in 1976 when the Syrians had stopped pushing for the implementation of the so-called Constitutional Document reached with Franjieh in February of that same year. The Maronite establishment thought that the same formula could be applied again: they went to Damascus, got rid of the visible anti-Syrian advisers, stopped the "big talk" about shelling Damascus, accepted the departure of the multinational force and, more importantly, cancelled the May 17 agreement with Israel. The prize the Maronite establishment was seeking was Syrian neutrality in the domestic debate concerning the political system, which this establishment thought would allow it to consolidate the political *status quo*.

This was a serious miscalculation. Major differences existed between 1976 and 1984 which were not sufficiently noticed by Maronite leaders. First, the opposition was fighting mainly to get a new power-sharing formula, while in 1976 freedom of movement for the PLO was probably more important than any constitutional reform. On the Syrian side, the regime had been able in 1976 to take the risk of helping the Christians, less than 3 years after the 1973 war and the nationalist aura it still benefited from. This was no longer the case, for internal Syrian reasons, some years later. After what happened in Hama, Tripoli and elsewhere, the Syrian regime could not afford to be portrayed as the

protector of Israel's allies. Finally, while in 1976 the Syrian government had not promised anything to its Lebanese allies, this time it would have lost its credibility with them by pushing them to think that they had to help Syria topple the May 17 agreement whereas Syria was not compelled in return to help them enforce a new domestic arrangement. In 1984, Syria could not but press for real constitutional reforms, and the Christian leadership did not seem to be aware of this new reality: that Syria did have allies in Lebanon, and that it could not ignore their demands.

Strategically complimentary

Hence the first year of national disunity cabinet led to a third phase, which was provoked by a rebellion against President Gemayyel in the Christian sector. The Lebanese Forces' militia re-established its autonomy vis-à-vis the President and the Phalange Party. After a rather bad experience in South Lebanon which led to a military defeat and to withdrawal from the Sidon area, the Lebanese Forces, under Elie Hobeika's leadership, took a 180° turn.

Instead of playing the brake to Amin Gemayyel's rapprochement with the Syrians, they followed a pro-Syrian line; instead of criticising Gemayyel's opening to the opposition, they dealt with it. They offered constitutional concessions which they had never offered before. An agreement signed by the Lebanese Forces, the Amal and Druze militias in Damascus on December 28, 1985 was the outcome of this quasi-revolution in Maronite ranks.

In the Tripartite Agreement, as it was called, unity, reform and independence were redefined in a completely new manner. *Unity* was to be strengthened with the commitment to allow all displaced persons to go back to their homes. The end of political sectarianism was to encourage social integration by following a detailed schedule. All attempts at partition were officially divorced, including confederacy, federalism, political and economic decentralisation and cantonisation. But popular representation on the *mohafazah* level was retained, as well as the principle of administrative decentralisation.

Reforms were to be implemented, and these were radical in their scope. The president's prerogatives were curtailed and a number of collective councils were to be established, beginning with an inner cabinet, a Council of ministers, and a council for each of the provinces, not to mention parliament and a senate. Presidentialism was indeed replaced with an unreasonable diffusion of

prerogatives that would have made government a mission impossible and would have probably led to a continuous reliance on foreign (Syrian) arbitration to settle the numerous problems triggered by an incredibly complex structure. Rapid de-confessionalisation was to accompany this collegialism in the Executive branch.

Independence is stated as a general principle but the document's fourth chapter leaves no doubt as to its meaning. Lebanon was to become in military, security, economic and even educational terms some sort of a Syrian satellite. It is stated in as many words that "special relations between Lebanon and Syria are the best way to translate Lebanon's Arabism." A "strategically complimentary" rapport was to be established between the two countries, with a high level of



coordination in all matters, and a number of specific bilateral agreements. The stationing of Syrian forces in Lebanon, coordination in security affairs and other such means were to link the future of the two countries in an inextricable manner.

In other words, reform was viewed in terms of a collegiate exercise of the President's prerogatives. Unity came only second, attempting de-confessionalisation which could lead to integration. But the whole process was paradoxically in the hands of the militia leaders whose policies had been so detrimental to the country's unity in the first place and who implicitly confirmed a paramount position in their traditional areas of influence. Independence was in a way the victim of this arrangement, or at least its poor third, since an exhausted Lebanon was pushed into an intimate embrace with an overpowerful Syria. "Reform" went far, unity remained ambiguous, sovereignty was largely sacrificed. The Tripartite Agreement was a stillborn enterprise.

Reforms for the worse

By 1988, we Lebanese had known three *modus operandi* to attain the three basic goals: a reaffirmation of presidential powers, the formation of a national unity cabinet and an arrangement among the three main warlords. None of the three succeeded and Lebanon remained an open arena for a Khaldunian competition for power, triggered, maintained and manipulated by a multiplicity of foreign actors. These three failures in as many years led to the rise of religious extremism, the blocking of the institutions and the collapse of the national economy.

Despite these hardships, 1988 looked like a promising year. The national currency was stabilised, some radical groups were crushed by the Syrian army and shelling became rare. Most important of all, a dialogue had begun between Syria and the United States and Lebanon was to occupy an important place. Unity, reform and independence seemed to be possible again, and the *modus operandi* to produce them had a name: the Syrian-American dialogue. In 1976, eighteen months of civil peace had been produced by a similar deal.

But this dialogue was soon to stumble on the now infamous *reforms*. Syrian demands were again those favoured by the most radical Muslims, and no Christian could dare satisfy them. It is absolutely surrealistic to see the Syrians

and the Americans struggling to have a Maronite elected to the presidency from its prerogatives in a way very reminiscent of the Tripartite Agreement. According to the document, executive authority is to be vested in a council of ministers, headed by the prime minister. The president can attend meetings but his objections can easily be overcome. He would pose his right to select the prime minister, the ministers would have been eventually chosen by the prime minister, and a presidential objection could be overridden by a parliamentary vote.

On the question of confessionalism, the Syrian government viewed “de-confessionalisation as a national necessity and an objective for which work must be undertaken to achieve because it contradicts Lebanon’s interests and its national unity because confessionalism is a malignancy that Lebanon has been plagued with and it must be eradicated”. This part of the agreement, so badly written anyway, was refuted by Amin Gemayyel before its study by the American side.

In other words, the American-Syrian dialogue began with an agenda determined by the Syrian side. This agenda did not include the Syrian-Lebanese bilateral relations or the liberation of South Lebanon, but quite awkwardly, two issues both selected by Damascus: the devolution of the president’s powers to a collective body of government and de-confessionalisation. In other words, the *reforms* were no longer the primary goal as in the Tripartite Agreement. Rather they had become the sole preoccupation to the detriment of unity and of independence. This narrowness in determining the objectives condemned the movement from its very inception. Clearly, Syria was trying to sell the Tripartite Agreement, but this time with an American blessing.

This approach was unacceptable to most Christians and it brought about a deadlock. Only a Maronite president ready to accept the 1985 Tripartite Agreement or the 1988 Syrian-American understanding could have circumvented this opposition. The other alternative was institutional discontinuity, i.e. non-election. The failure of the first method led to the second. The whole exercise has been counterproductive, leading to the reunification of Maronite ranks thanks to Syrian intransigence and against it. This fourth Syrian-American episode could just be a variant of the third *modus operandi*, performed this time by two external tutors, instead of three militia warlords. Too much intransigence on one side, and some complacency

on the other have led us to where we stand now: the failure of the latest *modus operandi* i.e. a bilateral Syrian-American understanding on “reforms” as well as on a “candidate”.

Recipe for disunity

Looking into the future, the same three goals will need to be reconciled and simultaneously sought, if a lasting settlement is to be found.

How to define *unity*? Unity through a strong presidency has been and will always be, a failure. Unity based on a patchwork of legal and extra-legal forces has not succeeded either, although it could have with other actors. Unity through the collusion of three militia leaders was stillborn. Unity with a dual external tutorship was a disappointment. What do we try now?

Federalism, though still a taboo, is not a solution. A heavily decentralised authority, diffused among a number of cantons with a loose federal authority to coordinate among them is the basic defensive posture of the Maronite community. A centralised authority such as the one that emerged from the French Revolution *per se* is not better than the federal one that emerged from the American one. The problem is not legal, it is in the kind of powers retained by these sectarian-defined cantons. Such frail entities will continue to rely on foreign forces, and a unified security and defence policy seems difficult to achieve, at least as long as the Arab-Israeli conflict continues. On the other hand, problems of internal borders will remain acute in view of the important geographical losses by the Maronites. Finally, a federation based on growing economic inequalities will remain vulnerable.

I do not foresee a national unity emerging from rapid social integration. This had been a possibility in the pre-war years where many encouraging signs such as the multiplication of inter-sectarian marriages and the creation of modern parties and unions were emerging. Unfortunately, this is no more the case. A wall of ignorance and preconceived ideas has been built, and a long time will be needed to overcome it.

Finally, unity imposed *à la syrienne*, by a regime with a deep sectarian structure pushing secular slogans is neither feasible nor desirable. A glimpse at the 1978-1982 events in Syria—when an Islamic-led urban guerilla war erupted in many Syrian cities and was crushed with an atrocious amount of

severity causing the death of at least 12000, notably in the city of Hama—and at the kind of criticism voiced by the opposition in Syria against the Alawi-dominated regime are enough to convince any neutral observer that the sectarian issue in Syria is far from settled.

The kind of unity the Lebanese could seek is again a compromise. Since the creation of modern Lebanon, the Lebanese have been wise enough to recognise the primordial loyalties they profess. They were, on the contrary, quite uninspired in the solidification of these loyalties, so that with demographic changes, imbalances became unacceptable. De-confessionalisation is in itself a myth. The objective should be to implement meritocracy in unelected positions and to maintain sectarian political representation. A de-confessionalised administration and a sensitive, balanced, egalitarian representation probably are the two foundations for a feasible reunification. Unity is therefore strongly linked to the preservation of popular representation and indeed to democracy.

Independence is a second unattained goal. American-guaranteed sovereignty ended in a debacle in 1983. Syria was not really helpful when a compromise was found in 1984. The Tripartite Agreement in 1985, and the way Michel Dahir was pushed into the front stage in 1988 with a Syrian heavy hand (“Dahir or chaos”) were very serious blows to the country’s independence.

What kind of independence could the Lebanese seek now? They should first keep in mind two realities. The first is that no small states in the modern interdependent world can look for more than a relative sovereignty, notably in hot areas like the Middle East. Second, they should recognise that since 1920, independence has meant legal sovereignty as well as a distance enforced between Lebanon and Syria.

Independence today means three things: a joint effort to push the Israelis out of the whole territory, an acceptance by many Lebanese leaders and factions that their undignified compliance with Damascus’ wishes and pressures has had disastrous effects on national unity, and the realisation that independence of the whole will never be accomplished by the various segments relying on foreign forces, which would in turn be mutually neutralising each other. Otherwise, Lebanese are right in trying to liberate their territory from the Israeli occupation and in attempting to reduce Damascus’ influence on them. If Israeli occupation is unacceptable and if Israeli interference is illegitimate, Syria’s attempts at satellisation are the best recipe for national disunity.

Finally, what kind of *reform* is feasible? On this issue, one voice has not really been heard since 1984, that of the moderate Muslims. I would tend to submit that without the active participation and the advice of the Sunni and Shi'a moderate establishment, no reform is feasible. They are the necessary link between the excessive demands of their base and the *status quo*-minded Maronite establishment. Their voice has been silenced by Maronite intransigence, Muslim militia extremism and Syrian policies. Taking them out of the equation means deepening the gap between the factions. Leave the reform matter to the militias and they will produce an agreement like the Tripartite Agreement where the institutions hold little power and the *de facto* forces become over powerful. Leave the matter to the Syrians and they will naturally and understandably duplicate with a few cosmetic variations their own regime. Leave it to the old establishment alone and the lack of imagination, courage and stamina will re-emerge.

New priority

Is reform needed? Certainly so. Is it feasible under duress? Certainly not, even when the US is involved. No reform is feasible without a prior reaffirmation of the will to live together, and a certain limit to the heavy Syrian hand in Muslim areas. Sought independently from the two other goals, reform has looked more like a militia scheme to steal legitimate power or as a Syrian ploy to satellise Lebanon.

In any case, reform should include a complete de-confessionalisation of the administration and of the army and a recognition that to recognise political sectarianism is better than to hide it. The melting pot is not the only road to integration. Anthropologists tell us repeatedly that negating primordial loyalties in Lebanon are sectarian, try to ignore them and you will partition the country. To de-confessionalise the administration is something, to ignore centuries-old identities, fears, loyalties, frustrations, is completely different.

More importantly, reform is not a devolution of power from a corrupt political establishment to an ever more corrupt band of thugs who owe their vulnerable power to their inhuman practices and to foreign support. New blood should certainly be transfused into the old establishment, but not the blood of those who have too much of it on their own hands. The politicians we need are those who think that, to be attainable, unity, reform and independence are to be sought together, at the same time. To sacrifice any one of these three goals is to

remain where Lebanon's impotent and unimaginative politicians have brought it: on the list of dispensable states and forgettable nations.

The constitutional vacuum is, however, the first thing to be dealt with. Since September 1988, Lebanon has an additional problem to care for: the existence of two rival cabinets (though the administration itself remains largely united). In this vacuum, the army has emerged as a candidate to replace both the old establishment and the new militia leaders. The army's commander-in-chief, General Aoun, embarked on a project aiming at the destruction of the militia power as well as at the liberation of the country. Since mid-March 1989, this policy has put General Aoun and his followers in a direct collision with Syria. Shelling resumed on a very large scale and Lebanese died by the hundreds. Tens of thousands had to flee from their homes and the civilian's life is again disrupted.

There is a real echo to General Aoun's call for liberation of Lebanon as the country's first priority. But General Aoun, a Maronite himself, and a candidate to the presidency, could not avoid the two basic issues of reform and unity. His views on these topics are nuclear, though he insists he is ready for both of them, once the territory is liberated. But liberation means the joining of forces of Christians and Muslims, and to bring the latter into a liberation war some reassurance as to their place in the system should be given. Add to that the fear of a military rule that could be imposed if this "liberation war" were to succeed, that would disrupt the subtle "constitutional democracy" which is the country's *raison d'être*.