

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

The deal over Lebanon

Shultz would guarantee Syria's military control, and Syria would agree to curb the militias.

With all eyes focused on an unbalanced "Shultz plan" for settling the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, little attention has been paid to the recent spate of U.S.-Syrian negotiations. George Shultz's repeated visits to Damascus were just as significant as his attempt at a Kissingerian "shuttle diplomacy" between Jerusalem and Arab capitals. He went to the Syrian capital at a time when Syria was one of the top countries on the State Department list of terrorist havens, a "no man's land" for any American citizen. No sooner had Shultz left Damascus than the director of the Levant department of Foggy Bottom, Mrs. April Glaspie, arrived there in the first week of March, to continue talks.

Officially, negotiations have gone nowhere. Syria has not minced words in denouncing the Shultz plan. At 25th anniversary festivities for the ruling Baath Party, Syrian President Hafez Assad warned in March that no one "should be fooled by these talks about peace. Whether it will be through border skirmishes, demonstrations, stonethrowing, or a direct military confrontation, the war [with Israel] will continue."

Radical postures aside, Damascus likes its American connection. The Syrians expect to be taken off the State Department terrorism watch list, and also look for a steady influx of official U.S. investments—beside the unofficial aid which has been conduited over the last year and a half, such as \$350 million extended last fall for Syria's goodwill gesture of destroying a few acres of opium in Lebanon.

Crucial to this deal is an agreement between Damascus and Washington over the upcoming Lebanese presidential elections, and the future of Syria's military presence in Lebanon. Local sources say the six-point agreement includes:

- First, the presidential elections will be held, constitutionally, between July and September, to elect a Maronite Christian President.

- Second, before the elections, Syria will agree to the formation of a new Lebanese government.

- Third, there is a consensus in both capitals in favor of Lebanon's present chief of staff, Michel Aoun.

- Fourth, while Syria will ensure the support of Muslim leader Nabih Berri and Druze warlord Walid Jumblatt, Washington will get the support of President Amin Gemayel.

- Fifth, Syria will guarantee that Lebanese territory will not be used to make a direct security threat against Israel.

- Sixth, the United States will ensure that Israel ceases interfering into Lebanese affairs, and that the Israeli Defense Forces ultimately withdraw from Lebanese territory.

What it means is simple enough: Syria's military control of Lebanon becomes guaranteed by the United States, and Syria will be given the chance to control a politically stable country, instead of the present chaos. In return, Syria has to crack down on the militias, especially the Palestinians in the South.

Whether the deal works out will be seen in coming weeks, if and when

a new Lebanese government is actually formed. There has been none since the resignation and later assassination of Prime Minister Rashid Karame last July. The new prime minister is expected to be Takieddin el Solh, a well-known international businessman whose family has provided prime ministers before.

There are quite a few unsettled issues. The agreement calls for Syria to control the local militias. This presumes Washington's decision to give Damascus a green light to destroy such militias as Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces. It's easier said than done, and will likely lead to major conflicts in and around Beirut.

Then there is the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, run from Beirut by the local station chief of Iran's Savama secret services, Ali Asghar Mohammedi. The Hezbollah, which is bidding for control of all of southern Lebanon, does not feel bound by such deals. Syria is expected to deploy Nabih Berri's Amal militia against them, because considering its strategic relationship with Iran, Damascus cannot afford to have a head-on clash with Hezbollah.

Syria is eager to bring the Hezbollah under its control, but to maintain their existence at all costs. Indeed, the Hezbollah deployments against the "South Lebanese Army" of General Lahad and against the Israelis directly, as well as the activation of the Hezbollah networks in the West Bank, have become an important bargaining chip for Damascus, which can disclaim responsibility for any of their actions.

As long as the deal rests on Syrian "sovereignty" over Lebanon, there is no easy solution. Not consulted on the matter, the Israelis, like the Hezbollah, have made it clear that unless they get a better deal, they won't go along.