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A LONG WEEK

A Letter from Charles F. Gallagher

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PHILLIPS TALBOT
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

It has been some time since the Arab world has seen so many developments in one week. The pace of events is so fast and the situation so fluid that detailed comment is difficult and prediction dangerous, but it seems worth while to pause momentarily to record the direction in which things are moving and to consider the American reaction to them.

Since Monday last we have witnessed the smouldering of internal revolt in Lebanon, the first great psychological crack in the French position on Algeria, the official consecration of the Hashemite Union between Iraq and Jordan, and the consolidation of the neutralist policy of the United Arab Republic with the return of Gamal Abdel Nasser from the Soviet Union. Of these happenings the internal troubles of Lebanon are the most immediately crucial.

As I flew into a shuttered, strike-bound and bomb-strewn Beirut on Saturday, the speed with which Arab dissatisfactions were being transmuted into political action was brought home. As late as May 10, when I had left Beirut for Cairo, the chances for a solution of moderation (see AUFS letter CFG-4-'58, "Reconduction and its Repercussions") seemed at least even. But the assassination of the editor of the opposition paper At Telegraf was the spark that set the country on fire. Who killed Tayeb Metni? This was the question asked not only by the Lebanese security police, and by the numberless foreign intelligence agents here (some of whom surely know with the knowledge of complicity), but by President Nasser in his Friday speech in Cairo -- he disclaimed all responsibility.

It might have been government supporters, outraged by opposition attacks; it might have been hired hands of the pro-Nasser groups, or Communist agents; or, as would be suspected in any good detective story, it might have been the opposition itself. For the first sure result of the situation is to make the re-election of President Chamoun impossible.

But the question is largely academic now. It has been superseded by the more pertinent query: What force sent the Muslim population of Tripoli and Beirut, the mountaineers of the Syrian border regions, and the Druze followers of Kamal Jumblat into violent insurrection? The government, maneuvering with great skill for its life and unwilling to admit the degree of hostility to which it has given birth, claims outside interference. There has undeniably been external support for the opposition from the UAR; its press has attacked the Lebanese government vehemently, its consular agents here are commonly considered to have supplied money for arms, and there is every suspicion that the Syrians have connived officially to pass weapons across the border. Much of the activity of the Solh cabinet in the past week has been directed toward proving UAR responsibility and preparing a complaint for presentation to the nearly defunct Arab League or the United Nations' Security Council.

There is, however, a difference between abetment and instigation, which should be clearly made in this case. It is easy for a foreign power to buy terrorists, often simple-minded adolescents who enjoy throwing bombs, but it is impossible for the UAR to buy the resistance of the entire city of Tripoli, or all the Muslim quarters of Beirut, where the populace has set up barricades, dug trenches, and laid dynamite fields to prevent the entry of government security forces.

As the general strike, enforced by the threats of the terrorists, enters its second week, an unofficial siege of the dissident quarters continues. The depth of the resistance shows the bitterness of part of the population, and its location shows the true division of the Lebanese on a religious basis.

To speak of confessional differences here in a frankly open manner is still rather taboo; it is like talking about sex in middle-class America a generation ago. But the present crisis cannot be understood unless the religious problem, with its economic, social, and psychological overtones is faced up to. Thus it was a salutary shock to read the declaration made public at the end of the week by the Muslim Deputy from Tripoli, Sheikh Nadim Jisr, in which he laid responsibility for the revolt in his sector squarely on the discrimination practiced against Muslims, and noted the fact that, ". . . after the declaration of independence and

CHARLES F. GALLAGHER has since 1951 been a student of the affairs of Northwest Africa. He started his higher education at the University of California just after Pearl Harbor and soon was shifted to the Japanese language school at Boulder, Colo. He served out the war as an officer in the Navy and then became fine arts advisor on Japanese cultural property during the occupation of Japan. In 1949 he entered Harvard University to major in Far Eastern languages and history. He was graduated *summa cum laude* in 1951. Subsequently he was twice offered Harvard-Yenching fellowships to continue in the Far Eastern field, but decided instead to study Islamic society. Under Fulbright and Ford fellowships, he worked for two years in Paris and three years in North Africa. After completing his research in Rabat, he settled in Tangier to write a history of Morocco and a grammar of Maghrebian Arabic. He joined the AUFS in July 1956 as a staff member and participated in the 1956-57 program of visits to member institutions. In the summer of 1957 he returned to North Africa under AUFS auspices.

the laying down of the National Charter which proclaimed Lebanon an independent Arab state, the Muslims accepted the Lebanese structure and voiced their support of it, hoping to attain rights they could not attain during the rule of the mandate. But the era of independence did not bring about any changes in these delicate matters and the authority, 'all the authority,' remained in non-Muslim hands."

The fruit of this inability to form a true association of all the Lebanese now ripens with the rioting and revolt, and the gulf between the Maronites and the Sunni in particular grows each hour. The Muslim quarter in the Basta area of Beirut is an encircled fortress, sheltering within it the opposition leaders. The eight o'clock curfew is strictly enforced on its edges to keep dangerous individuals from leaving the area (in fact the blockade is pretty ineffectual). But in the Christian district of An Nahr the curfew is quite liberal and even occasional happy spirits stumbling along at midnight under the influence of too much arak are undisturbed by the gendarmes. Beirut is becoming physically and spiritually two cities.

Unfortunately the propositions of the Tripoli Deputy for solving the crisis are less convincing than his analysis of its causes. They include a policy of 'positive neutralism' toward all countries, meaning Arab states, too; [but at the same time] a strengthening of relations with the UAR, because "Muslims in general will not accept a cool policy toward their brethren in Egypt and Syria." And his proposal to "strengthen equality between the two religious parties in all aspects of Lebanese life" by making clear in the constitution "that the presidency would not be open to one religious party and not the other," is a suggestion which would only convince the Maronites that their rights were in considerable danger. Perhaps the greatest value of the internal contradictions in Jisr's program lies in its very underlining of the contradictions that beset the Lebanese state as a whole, and the formidable difficulties of arriving at a solution which will be something more than an uneasy, sullen truce.

As the revolt-strike ends its first week, the military position is another reflection of the delicate balance of power in Lebanon. This has been, so far, a gentlemanly battle -- in spite of the losses which now run to more than a hundred dead. Neither side has begun an all-out campaign; it may be impossible for either to do so. It appears that the government hesitates to order the army into a general attack to end the uprising, both because of the moral cost of such an operation in terms of Lebanon's future, and because of the fear that a part of the troops would refuse to take the step which would turn the dissidence into a real civil war. So no action is taken and the stalemate continues. Meanwhile, truces are arranged for the rioters to carry off their casualties, opposition leaders are granted safeguards to meet with government emissaries and consider compromises; the wife of one prominent opposition figure is stopped in the mountains with a very large sum of money on her -- the money is confiscated but she is allowed to continue her journey; and persons arrested for bearing arms are given sentences of from one to six months. Even the airport, which earns a good deal of revenue for the state, remains open, and, for a country whose dramatic moments are making world headlines, Lebanon remains incredibly tolerant: there was not the least searching of incoming baggage when I arrived from Cairo on Saturday. One is tempted to agree with a seasoned foreign observer who remarked drily, "There'll always be a Lebanon."

It is with these complexities and vagaries of the Lebanese political picture in mind that the reaction of world opinion and the attitude of the great powers should be measured. Initial reaction was highly alarmist, and the hasty talk of sending elements of the Sixth Fleet and C-124 transports, and scattered references to the possible necessity of moving troops, was most unfavorably viewed here -- by many government supporters as well as by the opposition. It is one thing to speak of protecting American lives and property and another to talk laconically, as some American military commanders did, of other action "if needed." American lives, and as I write this I think quite naturally first of my own, are in no danger now, but an outbreak of anti-Americanism in reaction to the arrival of a task force off the coast, might well endanger them.

The political implications of such a step, unless the Lebanese government were far more desperate than it actually is, would be equally disastrous. It has taken a year to live down the overspectacular dispatch of arms to King Hussein in Jordan last April, a move which converted a courageous, personal triumph into an 'imperialist plot' in the eyes of many Arabs. The result in this case would be the same or worse. A Western diplomat in Cairo said simply, on reading press accounts of these air and sea movements: "There goes your month-old co-operation with Nasser."

Another immediate effect of Western statesmen leaping in to internationalize the Lebanese affair (and the Foreign Office spokesmen in Whitehall are considered here the grossest blunderers) was the opportunity thus afforded the Soviet Union to intervene verbally. The Tass communique was, 'as is well known' here and everywhere, an outrageous distortion of facts, but it should occur to Western chancellors that once again, as so often in the past in this region, it is they who opened the floodgates to Russian meddling. And the speed with which the challenge was taken up is a sign of how pleased the Soviets were to have a new chance to decry imperialist intervention.

In the past twenty-four hours it has been a satisfaction here to hear both Mr. Murphy and Mr. Dulles discuss the situation in more reasoned terms, and specifically to have the ready-made label of communism disassociated from it. If there is one thing the Lebanese revolt is not, it is a communist-inspired revolt. To pretend that it is, and some of the reporting from Beirut in recent days has seriously misrepresented the peripheral Communist effort to take advantage of the troubles by suggesting that it is the cause of them, is only to do a profound disservice to world public opinion. To suggest that there is an active, co-ordinated plot between the UAR and the USSR threatening Lebanon's independence is as serious an error and one which runs up against an accumulating body of evidence suggesting growing strain between the Egyptian government and the Kremlin.

It is impossible to judge how events will develop in the next few days and weeks, but efforts toward compromise continue, and the government has not yet used its reserve of power. For the United States to become involved now in support of one faction in an essentially family quarrel would be a grievous mistake. Non-involvement is a difficult path when involvement may be desired by others for their own reasons, and it is an unrewarding path at times -- on the same day that Arab nationalists burnt the USIS Library at Tripoli, anti-Arab European nationalists sacked the same institution in Algiers -- but it is the most prudent path in the interests both of Lebanon and United States policy in the Middle East.

Charles F. Gallagher