

# Lebanese student writes WSWS about recent protests against Israeli bombings

2 March 2000

*The following letter was sent by a student from the American University of Beirut about the political situation in Lebanon and the recent demonstrations against the Israeli military attacks on the country.*

I was happily surprised to find a fair and comprehensive analysis on the explosive situation in Lebanon. I would like to add some information that would complement the report, particularly about protests by Lebanese students against the ongoing Israeli attacks on the south and the American policies that directly support Israel. Needless to say that the escalation of protests was barely covered by the international media, which is not very surprising at this point.

On February 15 students protested at the American Embassy and many were hurt in a severe clash with the Lebanese policemen who were protecting the embassy. On that same night, the American ambassador David Satterfield was attending a classical concert at the American University of Beirut (AUB) “to promote American culture after years of absence” in Lebanon. Some 30 students gathered outside the assembly hall and protested his presence on campus, demanding that he leave the country. They encircled the hall until he, Satterfield, left campus in the middle of the concert.

Meanwhile, the student body was preparing a strike for the following day in cooperation with other students from different private and public universities. On February 16 a march started around noon with thousands of students gathering at AUB and addressing several news agencies. The escalation reached its peak on February 17 when students from all over the country marched from a popular eastern part of the city to the city-center. Three thousand students were stopped at the American embassy by security forces that dispersed them with tear gas bombs and water from the fire brigades.

The main organizers of this march were the labor movement and many other non-governmental organizations. It is worth mentioning that the slogans raised at this march of thousands of people were quite diverse. There were secular and religious banners especially those of Hizbollah and Amal (another Shi'a based militia) who always succeed in mobilizing the biggest number of people from all age groups. After two hours, many students, especially leftists belonging mainly to the Communist Party and to other independent student movements, headed towards the CNN office in a busy commercial street in Beirut. The police closed all the streets that led to the CNN offices for cars just to allow the march to proceed. But this attitude suddenly changed as soon as we got to the commercial center where the offices are. We were around 1,000 students, but as soon as we arrived, the police started throwing tear gas bombs.

But the crowds were not dispersed easily. After serious confrontations with the police, a couple of students fainted from the effect of gas. It was then that the crowd headed to the residence of Prime Minister Hoss who joined us and insisted that the government is doing all it can to pressure Israel to withdraw from the south or at least abide by the April Agreement of 1996.

The current political situation of Lebanon is quite complex. Many important questions like democracy and secularization are now being postponed until the full withdrawal of the Israeli troops from Lebanon. This same withdrawal would also raise an extremely serious issue of nature and the future of the Syrian military presence and political influence in Lebanon that has been taking part in the evolution of the Lebanese politics since 1976. On another level, the sudden peace talks between the Israelis and the Syrians was a complete shock to the Lebanese public opinion that was not—and is not being—prepared nor addressed about the

negotiations. Ironically, as the Israeli daily attacks on Lebanon increased, the current debate on a possible normalization of relations between the two countries was taking place on the pages of the major Lebanese newspapers. This exact state of anomie or chaos can describe the sociopolitical conditions of the country.

As an interpretation of the new past Hariri regime, it is worth mentioning that Lebanon is drowning in a dangerous \$20 billion in debt. Hariri's main motto in 1994 was to turn Lebanon into "the Singapore of the East." It is a policy that leads the country to a severe (mainly internal) debt trap from which Hariri himself was benefiting (he owns 30 percent of the shares in local banks). He launched a master plan of reconstruction of the Beirut city-center by privatizing the whole area believing that it would attract foreign capital that would eventually play a role in rebuilding the whole country. Hariri was proud of the new construction plans that would help get investors from the new airport to the new city-center in just 8 minutes. Not only they are exclusive, these plans will deepen the marginalization of the postwar middle and working classes that should be included in the reconstruction of a war-torn country, both on a psychological and physical level.

In sum, Hariri had two options when he first gained power: to promote fast economic growth at the expense of human development or to conduct an opposite policy to develop the human resources that are Lebanon's only riches. He opted for the first option. Needless to say, in order to apply these policies, Hariri surrounded himself with a loyal political elite that heavily participated in the civil war. Democracy was threatened and corruption prevailed.

Last year's "white coup" brought to power Prime Minister Hoss, who was known for his personal integrity. He appointed technocrats in the cabinet who were also known for this, as well as their loyalty to the prevailing pro-Syrian political system. The Hoss regime has continued the irreversible policies of Hariri on one hand and conducted an anti-corruption campaign on the other. At the same time the economic situation has become quite difficult in Lebanon where the rise of the debt problem is causing more insecurity in the local markets while foreign capital has avoided investment in a destabilized country.

As a conclusion, I must confirm the vitality of the

student movements that had been previously known for their internal divisions: they will surely play a major role in the evolution of Lebanese politics internally and externally and in the pre- and post-peace era. It goes without saying that our last hope lies in the withdrawal of the Israelis from our country that will allow us to launch crucial debates concerning democracy, human rights and the nature of our relationship with the Syrian regime.

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