

Walid Phares: A Forgotten Lebanese battle against Terror

Contributed by Walid Phares
 Sunday, 14 October 2007
 Last Updated Sunday, 14 October 2007

By Walid Phares: Because it takes time for historians to research and register.

It was 6:55 AM, October 13, 1990..Lebanon, 17 years agoA jet sound shrieked in the skies over Beirut and the Presidential Palace in Baabda. It was flying over the mountainous Matn and Baabda districts; a Soviet built Suhoi bomber heading towards the Ministry of Defense and the seat of the interim Government, then headed by General Michel Aoun. The Syrian Air force, for the first time ever, had flown its jet over Lebanon in two waves to bombard the enclave still resisting its occupation army since June 1976. The last round of confrontation between the Syrian forces and the Lebanese Army had begun in March 1989. Fierce battles have taken place for the control of Lebanon. Hafez Assad was determined –along with his Iranian allies- to occupy the last free areas of his neighbor. In September 1990, Secretary of State James Baker gave the green light to the Syrian dictator to launch an invasion into Mount Lebanon in return of his participation in the Gulf War against Saddam. By October 12, twenty thousand Syrian troops with hundreds of Special Forces, dozens of artillery batteries, 300 tanks and with the support of pro-Syrian militias and Hezbollah have encircled the enclave. The Lebanese Army, trained mostly by the US had lined up about 4,000 soldiers and few old tanks with the support of batteries, dispersed in the valleys. At 7 AM the full fledged invasion began. After the Sukhoi raids, a Syrian barrage covered almost every position of the Lebanese Army. The latter resisted on all fronts and counter attacked at least on the main axis of Jamhour, north of Yarze (Ministry of Defense). The Soviet-trained Syrian commandos assaulted the Lebanese Special Forces, Maghaweer, in Beit Mery. Until 8 AM, not one single front was pierced despite the massive bombardment. At 8:10 AM the Lebanese state radio aired a brief statement by Prime Minister Michel Aoun. He –stunningly- gave the orders to his army to surrender to the Syrians. Practically he asked them to follow the Syrian appointed commander of the surrogate Lebanese Army, none else than General Emile Lahoud, who will be gratified eight years later by being selected as the pro-Syrian President of Lebanon. A page in Lebanon’s history has turned by 8:30 AM that day. Not yet.For in the following eight hours a battle will ensue between the headless Lebanese Army and the invading forces: A battle which will be led by anonymous officers who refused to surrender to a regime sponsoring terror and about to conquer another country member of the United Nations. That day a short war with terrorism lasted few more hours but would allow the Lebanese soldiers and officers who refused abdication to resist the onslaught and to show –without witnesses though- that a determined, small but brave force can do miracles. Indeed, despite the orders to surrender given by Aoun, young officers decided to continue the war on their own. On the Beit Mery axis, the Syrian Special Forces were pushed back down the valley. Meanwhile the Lebanese artillery was waging a counter battery forcing the Syrian armor to stop. But the most illustrious episode took place at Dahr al Wahsh, east of the Presidential Palace. The Lebanese units executed a maneuver, allowing the advancing Baathist forces to move forward before they were encircled and destroyed. More than 300 Syrian attackers were eliminated, their ranks broke, and the Lebanese units were on the counter attack. Regardless of the fact that Aoun and his two ministers took refuge in the French embassy in East Beirut, a war room was still operating at Yarze (Ministry of Defense) until about 3 PM. From the headquarters of the Syrian headquarters in Anjar in the Bekaa valley, Syrian intelligence chief Brigadier Ghazi Kanaan (he allegedly committed suicide in Damascus in 2005) was extremely nervous as President Hafez Assad was awaiting a full victory phone call in Damascus. No one in the pro-Syrian camp in Lebanon seemed to believe that a headless Lebanese Army was still fighting the giant Syrian force and the pro-Iranian Terrorist organizations. At a very high altitude, two Israeli jets were observing the fight without intervening.According to Lebanese army officers the night before, resisting the Syrian offensive for 72 hours would suffice to break the will of the attackers. But with a balance of power 5 to 1, and all supplies roads cut off by land, air and sea, the Lebanese Army had no reason to survive the blitzkrieg. However in reality the battle of October 13, 1990 showed that those units were able to withstand the Syrian and Hezbollah forces combined, even without the guidance of a commander in chief who quit the battlefield and considered the war over. Undoubtedly, historical documents will explain to those interested why did the General leave his Palace at 7:30 AM and surrendered at 8:10 AM that day. There are lots of versions, but this would be left to future discussions. But what would be interesting to learn about from military historians is how were few battalions of the Lebanese Army capable of holding the lines –after the surrender order by Aoun- against all odds and the entire Syrian expeditionary corps in Lebanon, flanked by Hezbollah, the pro-Syrian paramilitaries and local militias opposed to Aoun at the time. For until 3 PM that day, and despite a cataclysmic shelling by hundreds of artillery pieces of all civilians areas and military zones, the Syrian offensive had failed and the first 12 of the 72 hours were about to pass as a victory by Lebanese military. Besides, by that evening, had the Lebanese military opposition to the Baathists and their allies persisted, a civilian resistance was about to emerge in many neighborhoods. It would have been odd to see a free enclave still up and running on October 14, while it’s Government has sought political asylum at the French embassy. But the Lebanese didn’t wake up to see such an ironic situation.As of 2:30 PM phone calls were being made to the Lebanese officers who were holding their positions or commanding the artillery units. They were told that “their” Government was disbanded and that the Prime Minister has left his office and took refuge in the French embassy, that the Syrian were sending more forces to join the battle, that Hezbollah controls the lines south east of Baabda, and more importantly that no international force would come to their rescue. The phone calls made also to the remaining war room in the Ministry of Defense said the United States had blessed the Syrian operation and no one else from the free world would come to help the resistance against Assad’s terror regime. At that point, the

decision was made by these anonymous officers (their names will be revealed in a historical documentation) to stop. Some among them, we were told, spoke to their former commander at the French embassy and confirmed that the fight was really over. But the drama was not over yet. The Syrian forces have a tradition of reigning terror and revenge after they capture enemy positions. At first, they used Lebanese military under their control (and commanded by the future President Lahoud) to convince the Lebanese Army to surrender to the Syrians. However, as soon as they did, particularly in Dahr al Wahsh, the Syrian officers and soldiers lined up the Lebanese prisoners and executed them. Reports from that time mentioned torture against a number of Lebanese officers and their troops. Hundreds of civilians, including two monks, were kidnapped, tortured and killed. Many citizens and soldiers were transferred to the notorious Syrian jails, some have vanished since. October 13, 1990, seventeen years later, remains a moment in the history of that little country deserving re-reading: A dictatorship sent its army and terrorist forces to invade a free country with the blessing of the leader of the free world (or at least their diplomats at the time). A small brave force, resisted the onslaught, despite being abandoned by the international community and by its own Government. A real story from a war with terror that has begun 11 years before Bin Laden attacks New York. But history is a strange phenomenon. Seventeen years later, a second generation of that same brave little force engages al Qaeda in Nahr al Bared and defeats the terrorist group, at least the local cells in that area. But now things have changed: The Lebanese Army is praised by Washington and Paris; it is supported by its Government and has won that challenge despite Hezbollah's warning not to enter the camp or else. Dr Walid Phares is the director of the Future Terrorism Project at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies in Washington. He was one of the architects of UNSCR 1559

*****Following are pictures from 1990 (and some from 1989) showing scenes from clash between Lebanese armies. The pictures are taken from various open sources. Syrian Army Invading Lebanon The Syrians executed one of the officers, Emile Boutros, by forcing him to lay down on the road and then driving a tank over him.