

How Moscow has regained the Middle East initiative

by Thierry Lalevée

Initiated in early February by the visit of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia to Washington, the momentum for peace in the Middle East received what can be characterized as a death blow when, on May 29, the American administration refused to formally answer proposals for renewal of peace negotiations by Jordan's King Hussein. Meeting with President Reagan at the White House, Hussein presented what he had described as "the last chance for peace"—an official recognition by the Palestine Liberation Organization of United Nations resolutions 242 and 338, which recognize Israel.

President Reagan, who had been told by the State Department that this would be a routine meeting, was visibly unprepared for such an offer, and remained speechless. American officials publicly expressed reservations over the proposal, implying that they would wait for PLO head Yasser Arafat to say it himself.

This posture is more than cynical, given that American officials have always insisted that Hussein act as spokesman for the Palestinians!

In short, the State Department is acknowledging the success of Moscow's—and their own—wrecking job against the very foundations of the September 1982 Reagan peace plan. As the talks between Undersecretary of State Richard Murphy and Soviet diplomat Vladimir Polyakov last February in Vienna revealed, there has been active complicity between the State Department and the Soviet Union in this process. "You want Lebanon? Take it!" Murphy told his Soviet partner—at the very moment that the White House was considering a several-billion-dollar development offer for Lebanon from Saudi Arabia's King Fahd!

Murphy and company concluded an "understanding" with the Soviet Union: Both superpowers will refrain from direct involvement in any way in the Middle East. Naturally, this completely undercut all White House negotiations with Arab leaders—Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Jordan's King Hussein, Algeria's Chadli Benjedid. Each one went to Washington with significant, not to say excellent proposals for relaunching a peace process in the Middle East, and each returned to his own capital empty-handed.

So, while America's policy toward the Middle East has sunk into non-existence over recent months, despite the repeated pleas from Arab leaders that Washington take leadership, the Soviet Union has had little difficulty in shifting the situation back in their favor. No miraculous feats of diplomacy or financial offers did the job. Rather, given the State Department's complicity, Moscow has used sheer terror, organized around the consolidation of a Tripoli-Damascus axis, with Teheran as a junior partner.

Then, Moscow gave the green light to Syria for the final assault against the Lebanese nation, during the visit of Bulgarian party chief Zhivkov to Damascus in the days immediately following the first Warsaw Pact summit to be chaired by Mikhail Gorbachov. Shi'ite and associated militias began massacring Palestinian civilians in Beirut. On May 31, Syrian President Assad agreed to put Syrian troops into Beirut, after besieged Lebanese President Amin Gemayel begged him to do so, in Damascus. Syria's final take-over of the country will achieve Damascus's long-held ambition of integrating it into the "Syrian Nation," as the Syrian foreign minister told an understanding French government on May

23 in Paris. But it is also aimed at sending a signal to pro-American Arab governments: "You could be next on the list!"

This, of course, also implied a green light from the State Department, and from the government of Israel, which is very much a party to the "understanding" worked out between George Shultz and the Russians. Israel has engaged in a series of negotiations of its own with Moscow, directly and through intermediaries, leading up to the current new atrocities by Syrian-controlled militias in Lebanon. On the public record alone: Yitzhak Shamir met with Andrei Gromyko at the United Nations in November 1984. KGB billionaire Armand Hammer visited Moscow, and then, former Austrian Chancellor and Socialist International celebrity Bruno Kreisky paid a call, both on the Israelis' behalf. Seagram's magnate Edgar Bronfman held talks with Soviet officials—in his capacity as a spokesman for Israel's "Lansky mob," the drug-running and casino-grambling crowd now virtually in control in Jerusalem. Then, on the early-May occasion of celebrations of the end of World War II, the first Soviet military delegation since 1967 visited Israel, in a "private" capacity.

The upshot: The Soviet Union will allow a growing stream of Russian and Eastern European Jewish emigration to Israel, to help populate the West Bank, and Israel will allow Syria to have a free hand in Lebanon.

Muammar Qaddafi also played a key role. Libya, which claims to be the defender of the Palestinians and called for an end to the fighting in Beirut—after the massacres had already occurred—was essential to Syria's success. This became public knowledge on May 18, when the Syrian and Libyan cabinets met in joint session in Damascus to discuss a "merger" between the two countries.

Few could have any illusions that this proposal is meant seriously; most know that neither Damascus nor Tripoli nor Moscow actually want it to occur. The two countries have specific roles to play in different regions of the projected Soviet imperial domain. Both satrapal governments also know that massacring Palestinians in Beirut will not be enough to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization of Yasser Arafat, which represents a powerful challenge to Syria's claim to regional domination. While Damascus and Moscow need the radicals of the so-called Palestinian National Salvation Front of George Habash, they also need some means of keeping channels open to the PLO. That is Qaddafi's role.

According to intelligence sources, the subject of the discussions in Damascus was not an illusory Libyan-Syrian unity, but a joint reactivation of the Abu Nidal terrorist network against Arafat, Hussein, Fahd, and Mubarak. This will involve a merging of the terrorist capabilities represented by the numerous entities spawned by Syria in Lebanon over recent months.

On May 23, Egyptian intelligence narrowly averted an Abu Nidal-network operation in which terrorists trained in Libya and Syria were about to drive a car-bomb into the U.S. embassy in Cairo. In the same vein, "Islamic Jihad" kidnaped two Frenchmen on May 23, and the director of the American

Hospital in Beirut on May 28. They now threaten to execute these hostages unless members now jailed in Kuwait are released. In preparation for such operations, Libya in recent weeks has purged more than 200 members of its intelligence service considered unreliable; this has included Minister of External Security Col. Belkacem Younes Ali. Syria did the same last February, when it strengthened the capabilities of the Syrian Security Council led by the president's brother, Rifaat al Assad.

An evil choice

Faced with the terrifying absence of any initiative whatsoever from Washington, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are now being presented with a very simple choice by Moscow: Either break with Washington or be destabilized. The careful coordination and timing of terrorist threats and diplomatic offers has never been clearer than in the Russian client-states' current behavior toward the Saudi Kingdom and the Gulf countries in recent weeks.

First was the diplomatic show which saw Muammar Qaddafi arrive, unannounced, in Jeddah for a meeting with King Fahd, and then go on to Mecca. In Jeddah, he proposed to the King joint cooperation to help the new regime in Sudan—which the State Department, with noteworthy timing, has both pressed for compliance with genocidal International Monetary Fund programs, and cut-off from arms aid in the face of a guerrilla offensive in the south. In Mecca, Qaddafi conducted a public prayer calling on the Kingdom to break with America.

Twenty-four hours later, two bombs, claimed by "Islamic Jihad," were detonated in Riyadh, just as Prince Saud al Faisal, the foreign minister, was conducting his first visit to Teheran since the beginning of the Gulf war more than five years ago. At the same time, just to emphasize that compromise with the Soviet client-states is the most judicious path, a Saudi diplomat kidnapped by "Islamic Jihad" in January 1984 was returned to Riyadh, profusely thanking Hafez al Assad for his personal efforts in securing his release!

It is not then difficult to guess the tenor of Saudi discussions with Soviet diplomats a few days later at meetings in Kuwait. Perhaps the Saudis were not cooperative enough, for on May 25, a kamikaze-car-bomb nearly killed the Emir of Kuwait. Next time, Riyadh, too, may expect, not mere bombs, but kamikazes.

For the first time in a decade, Saudi Arabia, like other Gulf countries, is facing a severe economic crisis with attendant social instability, especially among foreign workers. Under such circumstances, it may not be long before the princes choose sides. The Saudis notably refrained from extending support to the February agreement between Arafat and Hussein which implied PLO recognition of Israel and made the Jordanian King spokesman for the Palestinians. And, on the massacres of Palestinians in Beirut, Riyadh's silence has been deafening. This is nothing less than a gesture of good will toward Assad.