

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

The Damascus Road of Soviet policy

Sudden "disagreements" between Syria and the Soviet Union reflect no weakening of ties, just a shift in their common policy.

President Hafez al Assad's visit to the Soviet Union Oct. 15 was a very strange diplomatic summit. As soon as he arrived, the Western press began reporting that "deep disagreements" had emerged between Damascus and Moscow, and that Assad had requested the emergency visit to obtain "explanations" regarding Soviet policy. That all such reports emanated from Western correspondants quoting "well-informed Soviet sources," was the tip-off. The Soviets themselves organized the press campaign, but for what aim?

Reading the final communiqué and glancing at the list of Soviet personalities who received Assad, there is also little doubt that Soviet-Syrian relations are as good as ever. To begin with, *Pravda* ran a front-page picture of Assad, heralding him as a "renowned leader of the Arab national liberation movement." From Soviet leader Chernenko, Assad went on to meet with Prime Minister Tikhonov; Foreign Minister Gromyko; his deputy Korniyenko; newly appointed Red Army Chief of Staff Akhromeyev; ideological trouble-shooter Boris Ponomaryov; Karen Brutents, controller of Middle East and Central American terrorist movements; Vladimir Polyakov, the former ambassador to Cairo, now head of the Middle East department of the Foreign Ministry and a recent visitor in Cairo, Amman, and Kuwait. Then, Assad met with Leonid Zamyatin of the Central Committee, and others.

Of special importance, however, were talks between Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas, a Soviet mili-

tary-academy graduate, and his Soviet counterparts, which led to "concrete decisions . . . for further Soviet military aid to strengthen the defense capabilities of Syria." A communiqué expressed "common concern for the lack of unity" among the Palestinians, which in Syrian parlance means "down with Yasser Arafat."

The disinformation campaign reflects two preoccupations of the Soviets and the Syrians: First, the fear that the recent reconciliation between Cairo and Amman could strengthen these countries too much, rendering useless the net Moscow has cast out to ensnare the Arab moderates; second, the realization that, as U.S. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger proceeded from Tunisia to Egypt to Israel to Jordan, leading elements in the United States have no intention of giving the Middle East away, and are considering a new peace initiative in the area which would reduce to nothing months of Soviet diplomatic activity.

Hence, it served a common purpose for Moscow and Damascus to display supposed disagreements. Moscow could appear toward Cairo and Amman as ready to sacrifice its more radical ally, to maintain its diplomatic gains and extend them toward Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Such a game would also strengthen those forces in Washington around Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State George Shultz, and his assistant Richard Murphy, who have been trying to convince the Reagan administration that Assad's Syria is really pro-Western and the key to the Middle East. The Kis-

singer policy is to divide the region between the Soviet and a so-called "Western sphere of influence," and to lure Washington into deal-making with the Syrians to that end.

Indeed, as we reported last week, Richard Murphy went out of his way to meet with the Syrian-backed Palestinian rebels of Abu Musa during his October visit to Damascus. Such a meeting took place less than a week after the bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut!

But there seems little chance of the Kissinger plot functioning now, as Moscow has realized. The green light has been given to both Syria and Iran to unleash new terrorist attacks on U.S. positions in Lebanon and elsewhere, perhaps Cyprus. There was no other reason for Gen. A. Diyab, Syrian national security director, to meet at length with Brutents in Moscow.

Now, a new explosion in the Gulf war is being prepared, with Syria and the Soviets playing complementary roles. On Oct. 20 Iraqi Prime Minister Tariq Aziz arrived in Moscow to request more military support. Moscow is expected to agree, in exchange for Iraq playing the role of a Soviet Trojan horse within the moderate Arab camp with Egypt and Jordan.

Hafez al Assad's public prestige may have suffered a little bit, but there is no doubt that he shares Moscow's ultimate goals. After all, it was Hafez al Assad, then Syria's defense minister, who connived with Henry Kissinger in 1970 to destroy a weak Nixon administration peace initiative, by launching a false-start invasion of Jordan surrounding the "Black September" events. Moscow is only giving Assad official licence for the kind of doublecrossing in which he has an expert ever since that first collaboration with Kissinger, the man who put him into the Syrian presidency.