

# U.S.-Iraq agreement boosts peace effort

by Thierry Lalevée

In early February, Iraq and the United States will announce the signing of a major military deal, according to the *Economist* of London. How substantial the hardware involved will be is not so important. The first of its kind between the two countries in decades, the deal may have more political meaning than actual military consequence.

The *Economist* reports that the agreement, which was negotiated during the visit of Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz to Washington last December, was prompted by the increasing economic and military support given to Iran by the Soviet Union and its allies. This is certainly true on the Iraqi side. While Moscow has failed to give Iraq any of its sophisticated weaponry, Syria has been used by Moscow as a regular channel of delivery to Iran. Furthermore, at the point that Iraq intended to blockade Iran's Kharg Island, Moscow warned Baghdad against thus sabotaging a deal between Iran and East Germany for up to 1.5 million barrels of oil.

But the agreement has consequences which go much further than the immediate military crisis in the Persian Gulf. Indeed, it represents a new quality of commitment by the United States to defend the moderate Arab nations from the Khomeini threat and the blackmail potential it provides to the Soviets.

However, most immediately, the agreement affects the Israeli-Arab conflict by opening the way for a more stable U.S. peace initiative in the region. Implicitly, it rejects the assertion fostered by the State Department and the crowd around Kissinger Associates that Syria is the key to peace in the region. The absurdity of this line has made it more and more difficult to hide the fact that those promoting it simply intend to hand the region to Moscow as per "New Yalta" agreements. Yet, this line was reiterated on Jan. 10 by Kissinger Associates representative Joseph Sisco, then visiting Israel. Stressing Syria's role, Sisco, as if he were an official of the American government, asserted that Israel had to "sort out its economic problems first before receiving more aid" from the United States—a declaration which must have given much comfort to Syrian leader Hafez Assad, who was then chairing the congress of his Ba'ath Party and pouring out one denunciation after another of the "Zionist conspiracy" behind the Egypt-Jordan reconciliation and "traitor" Yasser Arafat of the PLO.

No one will deny that there is an ongoing conspiracy in the Middle East region and that it aims at a peace settlement. The public aspect of this conspiracy is the repeated declarations by the Egyptians since early January that they want to launch their own peace initiative.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak unexpectedly flew to Jordan in the second week of January to meet King Hussein. Later this month, Yasser Arafat will once again visit Cairo to chair a conference in solidarity with the Palestinian people; he will without doubt take the opportunity to meet with Mubarak.

Mubarak received Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi in late December and has received a score of Italian and other European ministers since. He even went to Greece on Jan. 16 in an attempt to draw Andreas Papandreou away from his radical and "rejectionist" friends in Libya and Syria.

After Egypt's foreign minister, Abdel Meguid, as well as his deputy, Butros Ghali, are deployed to consult with European governments, Mubarak will fly to the United States in the first days of March, meeting with President Reagan on March 12. He will be in a position to present the American administration with a comprehensive report on the Egyptian effort and international reactions to it.

Obviously, an Iraqi-American military deal can only strengthen such an initiative.

What gives Egypt its special position is that, while a direct party to the conflict in the region, it has contacts with both sides and is accepted by all sides, including Israel. The matter of a summit meeting between Mubarak and Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres thus becomes a crucial matter, with Israel's announced plans for a pull-out of Lebanon making this increasingly likely.

In an interview published in *U.S. News and World Report*—and reprinted in the *Jerusalem Post* Jan. 7—Mubarak stated: "Last year when Israel was choosing its prime minister, I was really anxious for Peres to take over. I have been very optimistic since he came to power. I want to say that he is a very good man. I think that as long as there is good will between us, we can use the 20 months he will be in office to achieve things. I am sure of this." Asked about a meeting with Peres: "I have no objections to such a meeting, but people here would be expecting good results. I have already told Peres several times—and I think he is convinced of this—that we must advance toward a meeting in gradual steps. I want to go ahead with Peres. I am looking forward to meeting him in the near future."

While the Egyptians are building a peace front with Jordan and the PLO, discreetly backed by the Saudis and the Gulf countries as well as Iraq, Shimon Peres has the task of building domestic support for peace. This is certainly not an easy task with Yitzak Shamir as deputy prime minister, Ariel Sharon's public bid to be Israel's next prime minister, and George Shultz's self-appointment as "economic czar" of Israel.