

Second crisis in Middle East leaves pro-Western regimes in mortal danger

by Thierry Lalevée

Less than 10 days after a crisis in friendship between the United States and Tunisia, a second crisis has been triggered between the United States and the other great friend of America in the region, Egypt. The two events appear to be different: an Israeli raid against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) headquarters in Tunisia, and the American intercept of a 737 Egyptian Boeing carrying the four Palestinian terrorists who had hijacked the Italian *Achille Lauro* cruiser. However seemingly disparate, both episodes had the same aim: to drive the United States out of the region.

At the root of what can be described as an unfolding drama is Moscow's unchecked diplomatic offensive through the Middle East and Mediterranean region, and ominously growing signs of an Israeli-Soviet deal to cover the entire area. As revealed by the Israeli press, the Oct. 2 meeting between Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachov and Israeli ambassador to Paris, Avaraham Sofer, was only the tip of the iceberg. Among the preparations for that meeting was the visit in September of World Jewish Council chairman Edgar Bronfman to Moscow, carrying Israel's official proposals. While Sofer was meeting with Gorbachov, discreet Israeli negotiators arrived in Paris to transmit concrete proposals to the Soviets. Based upon the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries, Israel offered Moscow a deal with Syria—an exchange of the Golan Heights for the West Bank.

How such a deal is to be implemented, remains to be worked out. However there is little doubt that it is sponsored by all of Israel's main political factions, right and left, and has direct bearing for the Middle East peace process in which the PLO's Yasser Arafat, Jordan's Hussein, Egypt's Mubarak, and America's Reagan have been involved. Not only are such peace initiatives obsolete in the framework of an Israel-Soviet deal—they are an obstacle. The aim of the deal is to wipe out Arafat, to end any further motion toward a peace settlement.

Washington has become a pawn in this game, so easy a prey to Israeli intelligence manipulations that the United States is immersed in policy contradictions from one day to the next. An example was President Reagan's de facto recognition of the PLO as a government-in-exile on Oct. 10 as, hours after the four terrorists surrendered; he told reporters that he ex-

pected the PLO to try and punish them—a function only a government can exercise. According to intelligence sources, the full meaning of Reagan's declaration was not lost on Israel and its friends in Washington. A few hours later and under extreme pressure, Reagan retracted his statement, saying that "I was mad. . . . I was thinking only in terms of revenge," before calling on the Egyptian authorities to hand over the Palestinian terrorists to authorities which could judge them. This statement managed to cast doubts not only on the PLO but on Egypt's ability to try the terrorists. Later the same night, he ordered the U.S. Sixth Fleet to intercept the plane carrying the terrorists.

What Reagan saw fit to describe later as a "slip of the tongue," has been in fact the crux of the fight within Washington and in the Middle East: Should the PLO announce the creation of a government-in-exile and seek worldwide recognition before sitting down to negotiate? PLO sources insist that Arafat, who is expected to speak later in October at the U.N. General Assembly, may just make that step. Others caution that the PLO chairman won't cross the Rubicon before having received serious indications that the United States is ready to dialogue with a joint Jordano-Palestinian delegation. The first test of such willingness, it is said, will be the American reaction after the first round of talks in London between the British foreign secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, and the two Palestinian West Bank representatives. To cross the Rubicon now, insist Palestinian sources, would imply for the PLO a definitive break with Damascus-based radical elements, and with their ally, Moscow, while it would not assure the PLO of U.S. recognition.

Washington is far from having sent encouraging signs. Key was its behavior toward Israel's raid against Tunisia, immediately approved by Reagan at the risk of rupturing U.S.-Tunisian relations. Only the Oct. 5 American decision to abstain at the U.N. Security Council, on a Tunisian-sponsored condemnation of Israel, avoided the worst: Had America vetoed the resolution, President Bourguiba was ready to announce a break in diplomatic relations between the two countries. Although that didn't occur, Tunisian Prime Minister Mzali stressed: "We now know that when America has to choose between us and Israel, it chooses Israel." Relations between the countries continue, but trust is just not there.

Furthermore, while President Reagan, in his Oct. 5 week-

ly radio address, praised Tunisian President Bourguiba, he again defended the Israeli raid, not once referring to the obvious fact that Tunisian sovereignty had been violated by Israel. As observers commented, in any normal world this would mean war between Israel and Tunisia, but this is no "normal world." Going further, a British diplomat was quoted commenting that the American approval of the raid meant that London would be justified "to bomb Dublin in retaliations for the operations of the IRA in Northern Ireland."

Such behavior left many friends of America stunned with disbelief, and has created a situation where most of them are being undermined and set up for overthrow. In the days following the Israeli raid, all of the Arab capitals were hit by anti-American demonstrations, more than anti-Israeli demonstrations. In Libya and Syria, this was a normal sight. In other places, like Cairo, these were organized by the secular and Islamic opposition, using anti-American ferment as a way of striking, again, at the government in power. In others, as in Tunisia, the government itself led peaceful demonstrations to express its anger, and prevent extremists from using the occasion.

The climate has been provided for the Muslim Brotherhood—the Islamic fanatics who engineered the Khomeini takeover in Iran and the assassination of Egypt's President Anwar Sadat—to mobilize throughout the region, with marching orders to strike at Israeli, Jews, and Americans whenever they can. On Oct. 5 an Egyptian soldier, later described as "mad," machine gunned seven Israeli tourists. On Oct. 8, a Tunisian policeman machinegunned several Tunisians around the Synagogue of the Island of Jerba, killing three, including two Tunisian Jews. Though the spotlight has been focused on Palestinian terrorism, Israeli retaliations, and counterretaliations, these two actions are ultimately more important.

If they go unchecked, it is the Tunisian, Egyptian, and other moderate Arab regimes whose survival will be at stake. Compared to a northern African region dominated by fundamentalists of the ilk of Qaddafi and worse, the present violence may begin to look like child's play. There may be very little time before the secular forces with whom a peace process can be developed either fall prey to the fundamentalist onslaught, or decide to join Moscow.

Trilateral plan: after Tunisia, Nicaragua?

President Reagan's quick endorsement of the Israeli military strike against U.S. ally Tunisia on Oct. 1 was read abroad as a sign that the United States plans similar action against Nicaragua, and thus could not criticize Israel's justification of its raid as a strike against terrorism. Radio Jerusalem broadcast on Oct. 5 that Reagan "wanted Israel to set a precedent that he can do the same in Central America."

New signs suggest the Trilateral Commission bunch has sold the U.S. administration on the idea that now's the time to take a "tough stand" in Central America. A provocation from Soviet assets in Nicaragua is to be watched for.

The Trilateral's ex-director Zbigniew Brzezinski floated a "new" proposal for a U.S.-Soviet deal in the Oct 6 *New York Times* Oct. 6: "a trade-off on Afghanistan and Nicaragua." Jimmy Carter's old national security adviser wrote, "contrived arrangements" between "the superpowers" on these two regions of the world are "the *sine qua non* for any wider Soviet-American accommodation."

He suggests that the Soviets might agree to let Afghanistan, now used for Soviet live war games, be policed by "international peace-keeping forces" made of troops from Islamic countries "not unacceptable to the U.S."—

such as Libya!

The State Department began gearing up propaganda to justify U.S. action against Nicaragua as a strike against "terrorist bases" in August, when it issued an unclassified document detailing Nicaragua's ties to Middle East radicals, playing the well-established links of Nicaraguan Sandinistas to the PLO as proof that Nicaragua is an "international terrorist haven."

A group of "neo-conservatives" around former U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick is promoting Brzezinski as a "talk tough" hardliner, promising to publish a longer version of his proposal in the first issue of their new magazine, *The National Interest*.

However, the "Afghanistan/Nicaragua" exchange is not exactly original with Zbig and his boosters. Soviet leader Yuri Andropov had made the *same proposal* in April 1983, in an interview with a West German weekly. Andropov said that the Soviets could accept U.S. security concerns in Central America, if the Soviet Union were granted similar privileges in countries along its borders, such as Afghanistan. Andropov's "offer" meant the United States had Soviet "permission" to run amok in the Western Hemisphere, while the Soviets seized domination of the Middle East, Europe, and Southeast Asia.

The Soviet game centers on enticing the United States into a military redeployment out of Europe, and into a Western Hemisphere crisis zone. Ibero-American leaders have warned Washington that U.S. military action in Nicaragua will hand the region over to the Soviets, provoking continent-wide "anti-imperialist" revolts.