

# Crisis in Yemen: Moscow 'stands back'—and reaps the benefits

by Thierry Lalevée

In the midst of one of its most important diplomatic and military offensives since the election of Mikhail Gorbachov last year, the Soviet Union has engaged in a successful deception ploy since Jan. 15, when fighting broke out in the Politburo meeting of the South Yemen Socialist Party. The crisis there has to be seen in the context of Moscow's diplomatic offensive toward Europe and the U.S. Congress—with Gorbachov's latest proposal for nuclear arms reductions—as well as the ongoing, discreet takeover of the entire Middle East and Horn of Africa. The very fact that these diplomatic moves are occurring simultaneously on all fronts, should have alerted those analysts who were so quick to proclaim a Soviet "defeat" in Yemen.

Can it be a coincidence that three days before the Yemen crisis erupted, Soviet Deputy Defense Minister Gen. Vladimir Govarov arrived in Kuwait, at the head of the highest-ranking Soviet delegation in the region ever? The visit concluded with a \$300-million arms deal, and is expected to lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Moscow and the United Arab Emirates, and then between Moscow and Saudi Arabia. According to well-informed diplomatic sources, General Govarov warned the Kuwaitis to expect trouble in Yemen.

But Govarov's visit has only been the tip of the iceberg of the Soviet diplomatic offensive. Days before, Moscow's trouble-shooter Karim Brutents of the Central Committee Secretariat had toured Kuwait and the Gulf. Brutents, an old specialist in the Central American crisis and a controller of Armenian terrorism, belongs to the inner foreign-policy circles of Mikhail Gorbachov and Geydar Aliyev, together with Yevgenii Primakov, now the head of the IMEMO institute in Moscow. His trip coincided with new closer relations with Iran, as well as an intensification of warfare against Pakistan.

Meanwhile, the lack of American foreign policy initiatives in Eastern Africa has also led to significant developments in Moscow's favor. A regional conference to coordinate efforts to stem the drought held in Djibouti, led on Jan. 18 to a reconciliation between Ethiopia's Mengistu and Somalia's Siad Barre, as they decided to renounce claims against each other's territory. On Jan. 20, it was announced in Sudan

that the deputy chairman of the ruling Transitional Military Committee was leaving for Moscow. A spokesman for the TMC revealed that the delegation would request the good offices of the Soviet government to mediate a reconciliation between Sudan and Ethiopia, as well as an honorable settlement in the civil war between the central government and the southern forces of Colonel Garang.

## Disinformation in the West

Oddly enough, most Western analysts have failed to establish any relation between these Soviet moves and the Yemeni events. Either Western foreign ministries and intelligence services were totally blinded, or they deliberately decided to accept Moscow's rules of the game. Indeed, Western propaganda about alleged Soviet weakness in the Yemen crisis, provides Moscow with its best cover. The Kremlin has decided to stay publicly on the sidelines, transmitting policy initiatives only through the South Yemeni prime and foreign ministers, who reached Moscow by Jan. 15. Meanwhile, Soviet military advisers have been advising both camps.

This "hands-off" ploy has supplied badly needed ammunition to those European appeasers who, given a choice between Qaddafi and Reagan, have chosen Qaddafi because of his relationship with Moscow, or for those American congressmen who, blushing with pleasure at Gorbachov's latest blandishments, swallow any and all Soviet propaganda on Moscow's "weakness" and sincere desire for peace.

The British Foreign Office, whose policies may not entirely represent those of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, is playing a leading role in such antics. With the appointment of Stephen Day of the Middle East Desk of the Foreign Office as "crisis manager" for the duration, London has established direct channels to Moscow, concealing the deal behind a display of chauvinistic outbursts. No one bothered to ask what Queen Elizabeth's private yacht *Britannia* was doing just off the coast of Aden at the time that the crisis erupted. One answer may have come from the British security officer in Aden, who told the London *Times*, "We certainly knew that the Army was split, and we expected it to happen." If the British knew, so did the Soviets—and so did everybody else.

The true concern of Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe was not with the evacuation of British citizens from Yemen, but with establishing a special relationship with Moscow. As the London *Times* editorialized on Jan. 20, "It will be noted, however, that East and West are capable of crisis management after an event of this kind." Was it a coincidence that Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Nikita Ryzhov appeared in London just at this time, to prepare the March visit of Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze? Ryzhov's presence gave birth to an indecent display of Anglo-Soviet solidarity, with the Foreign Office stressing how "impressed" it was by "Soviet readiness to exchange information and play a central role in an international operation."

### The Yemeni coup

If only because of such diplomatic successes, the Yemeni caper was worth the trouble for Moscow. Whether or not the Soviets determined the precise timing of the Yemen war remains to be determined, but is not the most relevant question. The countdown began in February 1985, when Abdel Fattah Ismael, a founding member of the Yemeni National Liberation Front and President of the country from 1978 to 1980, left his self-imposed exile in Moscow to return to Yemen. By the time of the Congress of the Yemeni Socialist Party in September 1985, he was reinstated as a member of the Politburo in charge of the ideological reorganization of the Party. This appointment was an indication of Moscow's displeasure at the more pragmatic policies of President Ali Nasser Mohammed.

Though Nasser's policies of dialogue and regional détente with Oman and North Yemen did play an essential role in the present Soviet diplomatic successes, there are serious indications that Moscow wanted tighter control of what has become its closest military satellite in the entire region. There were, for example, visible signs of tensions when, in 1984, Nasser Mohammed decided to lease for \$25 million a year the Island of Kamaran, off the coast of North Yemen in the Red Sea, to the Palestine Liberation Organization of Yasser Arafat, instead of giving it to Moscow. Not only the Soviet Union was displeased; Syria's President Hafez al Assad considered it a betrayal from a member-country of the Rejection Front, and the Israelis were enraged. Citing these developments, some intelligence sources have suggested that Israel, which is one of the few countries apart from Britain to know the Yemeni tribal system from the inside, may have had a hand in triggering the current crisis. Fattah Ismael, a close friend of Assad, will take no time to expel the PLO from Kamaran.

However, Fattah Ismael's coup may even have other and more dramatic reasons: Moscow's willingness to show that it is ready to take risks to strengthen its military power in the region, from Afghanistan to Ethiopia—a decision prompted by the fact that even if Nasser Mohammed were to win the

battle today, he could not end the Soviet grip over his country, short of calling for Western military help—which would likely not be forthcoming.

Already by early 1981, less than two years after the signing of a 20-year friendship and military cooperation treaty with the Soviet Union, South Yemen was described as a "land-based Soviet aircraft carrier." The Soviets can only rely on their political and military control over the capital city of Aden, the other coastal city of Mukalla, the island of Socotra and Perim, whose inhabitants have been forcefully evacuated since 1980, to control a country the size of Italy, with a little more than 2 million inhabitants. Indeed, as a heritage of British colonial rule, the hinterland or tribal territories have never been involved in national politics, and have no say in the decisions taken in Aden. A look at a map shows that Soviet military presence in Perim can block the Bab el Mandeb strait any time, and complements Soviet military bases on Ethiopia's coast. The mere presence of a few cannons on Perim was enough in 1973 to prevent any ships from going to Israel. With Socotra, the Soviets have at their disposal a military base equal to the U.S. base on Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean; they are able to monitor traffic from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. According to the latest information, the base Socotra is manned by Soviet, Cuban, and East bloc—especially East German—military advisers. Reports that the Soviets may have had no more than 1,000 military advisers, should be treated with caution, as more than 3,000 Soviet families had reached Djibouti by Jan. 20.

No one outside the Kremlin can accurately predict how the fighting will end, but it is a safe guess that the conflict will lead to another Soviet offensive in the region. The rise to power of radical hardliner Fattah Ismael is unlikely to scare the Gulf countries into a closer relationship with the United States, unless Washington were to pose a real policy alternative to Moscow on the issues of Gulf security and Middle East peace. Instead, the United States has backed away in recent months from taking decisive actions, such as against Iran's mad Ayatollah Khomeini. Instead, Moscow can be expected to use the threat represented by the new regime of Fattah Ismael, as a blackmail threat to force Saudi Arabia, the last piece of the Gulf puzzle, into a deal. Indeed, Fattah Ismael has gone on record over the last 20 years as an advocate of forced reunification of the two Yemens—under his leadership, of course. This card, Moscow is likely to play close to its chest. As the Saudis' increasing financial support to Qaddafi's Libya demonstrates, Riyadh is always ready to pay a high price for its own security.

Quite a successful outcome all around, for a crisis that the Jan. 22 issue of the London *Financial Times* described as "probably little more than a hic-cough [for Moscow] and one, through its assistance in evacuating other foreign nationals, which has even won it international credit."