

## The Peres plot: an investigative report

by Maxim Ghilan

*The following article originally appeared in Mr. Ghilan's Israel and Palestine magazine, one of the most reliable sources of inside information on this strategically crucial region. EIR thanks I&P for permission to reprint the article. I&P is published by Magelan, 5 Rue Cardinal Mercier, 75009 Paris; subscription U.S. \$30/year.*

### Introduction

This is the first comprehensive description of the strategy developed by Shimon Peres and applied by the State of Israel and certain sectors of the Ronald Reagan administration, as well as certain events which were totally distorted and occluded by the media. Obviously, some of our details are sketchy, some dates are not as precise as we would wish. Nonetheless, the general thrust is correct and the scheme—the first phase of which seems to have failed—is described here in exhaustive detail.

*I&P* wishes to express particular thanks to all its contributors, inputs, and correspondents who helped put together this special investigative report. Our warmest thanks go to those inside the Reagan administration and inside the Zionist Establishment (both in Israel and in the United States) who found it necessary to counter, and thus denounce, the Peres plot.

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In the first eight months of 1985, the advisers of Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres devised a comprehensive scheme aimed at:

- Ensuring the re-election of Shimon Peres as the head of a Labor majority government which would exclude the Likud and allow Peres to renege on his agreement, according to which he has to hand over the premiership to his coalition partner, Likud leader Itzhak Shamir, in September 1986.
- Allowing the State of Israel to keep indefinite control of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.



*Shimon Peres, outside the Israeli embassy in Washington after a news conference in October 1985.*

- Neutralizing Soviet opposition to Israel.
- Dragging the U.S. administration into a “New Yalta” deal concerning the sharing of power in the Middle East between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.
- Formalizing the unofficial and secret agreement which now regulates Israeli-Syrian relations and arriving at an official peace agreement with Syria.
- Signing another, separate peace treaty with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.
- Excluding the PLO (and, indeed, any independent Palestinian leadership) from the forthcoming bilateral negotiations between Israel and the various Arab States.
- Destroying the moderate elements inside the PLO, starting with the assassination of Yasser Arafat and the more moderate PLO Executive members—Muhammed Milhem and Eliya Khoury being the foremost among them.
- Ensuring that the West Bank becomes, to all practical purposes, Israeli—through settlement in that area of from one to two hundred thousand Soviet Jews, who were to be brought to Israel within the framework of the plan.
- Preventing the prospective new Soviet immigrants from stepping off on their way (as is done by most Soviet Jews in Austria, now) by railroading them directly to Israel with the help of President Mitterrand of France and Air France.

The scheme, whose conceptual framework is both innovative and dynamic, was adopted after a number of inputs contributed to it. Among them:

- An international cartel of Jewish financiers, who have gathered to elaborate for Peres a “new economic policy” in order to save Israel’s economy from continuing disaster. This group of advisers, which includes the main international fi-

nancing experts of the two top American investment banking firms—Salomon Brothers and Goldman, Sachs—was put together by the Moroccan-Spanish Jewish tycoon Mauricio Hatchwill-Toledano.

- The “Peres boys”: a group of special, young, personal advisers, working out of the prime minister’s office in Jerusalem and advising Peres on a daily basis. First and foremost among them are:

- Dr. Yossef Beilin, Uri Savir, and Amnon Neubach;
- Labor-oriented Mossad advisers, said to include Uri Lubrani, former Israeli coordinator in Lebanon and now dealing with Syrian problems;
- A number of army intelligence specialists close to Peres;
- World Jewish Congress President (and alcoholic beverages tycoon) Edgar Bronfman, and his aide, Dr. Israel Singer.

### **Internal considerations**

In spite of the side scope of this plan, its bottom line is, for Peres, domestic: If he cannot hold on to power and expel the Likud from the present uneasy “national coalition,” he won’t be able to carry out any schemes at all. Thus, the first priority of the prime minister’s advisers was to fashion an apparent “peace process” (in reality a power takeover) that would be so popular inside Israel that it would ensure Peres’ re-election—after he has created the conditions for a coalition breakup.

Two situations would ensure Peres being re-elected by a relatively huge majority of voters: if his government is victorious at war—and if it seems to be holding the key to real peace with the Arab neighbors of the Israeli state.

The Peres plot includes venues for both alternatives. A victory in case of a short, swift attack on the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is envisaged—an attack which would be patterned on the 1967 “Six Days War” or Blitzkrieg, and whose corollary would be the expulsion of from one to three hundred thousand Palestinians from the West Bank into Jordan and the creation of a quisling-like pro-Israeli government in Amman. After these aims have been achieved, Israeli troops would withdraw.

But Shimon Peres is aware that the Israeli public is weary of war and has not yet digested the defeat in Lebanon. Thus, the war alternative—while still valid and operative—is considered as a viable option only if Peres is unable to win over the Israelis with his peace plan.

In order to do so, success must be clearly shown; and elections should follow swiftly afterwards.

Moreover, emotional elements such as “peace with the neighbors,” “immigration of our Jewish brethren from Russia,” and “ensuring that the U.S. does not drop us” have to be included if electoral victory at home is to be overwhelming.

Finally, the Likud and the extreme right-wing opposition have to be neutralized. Therefore, the Peres policy has to appear to be (and actually has to be) more intransigent towards the PLO than the policy of Shamir and Sharon.

### **Phase one: an offer to Moscow**

All through the summer, meetings took place between special Israeli envoys, belonging to the intelligence services and to the Peres entourage, and special envoys headed by the Syrian chief of special services Rifaat el Assad, brother of the President. Rifaat el Assad did not necessarily participate in all the meetings held, a series of which occurred in Cyprus; the last known one occurred on this island on or around Nov. 8.

The Israeli side tried to obtain a Syrian assurance that Damascus would not intervene, if a war broke out between Israel and King Hussein of Jordan. Moreover, it was suggested that Syria should participate in the overall picture, by sharing (secretly or overtly) the arrangements worked out between the Israelis and the Jordanians. As a prize, Israel offered Syria the return of one-third of the Golan Heights, conquered by Tzahal in 1967 and officially annexed by Israel in December 1981.

According to certain Israeli sources, Syria demanded the return of all of the Golan Heights, as well as previous agreement to the scheme by Moscow, which has been strongly opposing direct Israeli-Jordanian talks.

On Sept. 11, after a number of previous contacts and negotiations, World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman traveled to Moscow and tried to work out a “package deal.” The Soviet authorities bargained for:

- Transfer of Western technology to the Soviet Union;
- Sale of large quantities of Western (primarily American) wheat to the Soviet Union;

- A stop to Israeli anti-Soviet propaganda, particularly in the United States and among Soviet Jews;

- A stop to Soviet-Jewish emigration to the United States, Canada, and Europe, as the Soviet leaders consider that any emigration of Jews elsewhere than to Israel opens the door for demands to emigrate on behalf of other minorities inside the U.S.S.R.;

- Re-examination of Israel’s willingness to install and operate Voice of America transmitters broadcasting anti-Soviet propaganda inside the Soviet Republic’s southern borders;

- Israeli pressure on Washington, aimed at replacing Reagan’s confrontational policy in the Middle East with some kind of “share and share alike” arrangement, to which Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Syria would be parties and, indeed, guarantors;

- Israeli agreement to an international conference with Soviet participation, or to efforts under international auspices which would include those of the U.S.S.R.

For such a package, Bronfman suggested the Soviet Union should:

- Renew diplomatic relations with Israel;
- Instruct its allies in Eastern Europe to do likewise;
- Open the doors of the Soviet Union to all Jews who wish to emigrate to Israel, starting with the some 150,000 men and women the Israelis claim to have expressed a desire to go there, including an estimated 60,000 Jews who have been sent Israeli passports after having indicated, so it is said, their wish for such travel documents;

- Back the secret Israeli-Syrian agreement;
- Eliminate all support to Yasser Arafat’s PLO, and concentrate its support to other Palestinians, including the pro-Syrian dissidents and extremists;

- Allow bilateral peace negotiations between Israel and some Arab States at war with Israel, i.e., Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, within the framework of an international peace conference with Soviet participation; or, alternatively, under the joint auspices of the United States and the Soviet Union—possibly accompanied by the other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council—Britain, France, and China.

### **Phase two: convincing Washington**

Shortly after Bronfman’s return to the American continent, the Israeli diplomats, headed by Peres himself, started selling the newly-proposed scheme to Washington’s power centers. Basic to Israel’s U.S. moves was the fact that President Reagan is ill and weakened, and would like to leave office in a blaze of glory, shortly after one crowning success. Given the fact that his health is deteriorating rapidly, this has to happen soon—and the success is obviously meant to be the Geneva talks and a successful Reagan-Gorbachov meeting. The Soviets are willing to oblige in respect to form if they get substantial gains. The administration has become in all respects a transition team in which the Vice President’s

men are replacing Reagan's teams in various critical areas—such as intelligence—with men trusted by Vice President Bush and National Security Adviser Bob McFarlane. Intelligence, Foreign Affairs, the CIA, the DIA dealing with space intelligence—all have become nuclei of Bush supporters. Only the Pentagon and the armed services, under Caspar Weinberger, still hold out and even desperately try to hold out, to the extent of developing parallel diplomatic activity, particularly in the Middle East and Arabic-Persian Gulf, using for that purpose personnel of the former rapid deployment force.

This is a situation which is tailor-made for experienced men in the service of Israel, both foreign and American. They can explain to the incoming team—which has also the need to prepare a new Bush candidacy to the Presidency in just two years' time—that the Israelis, not the outgoing team, have the keys to future victory. This is even easier to do in view of the fact that the Bush team is largely "Trilateralist" or "Atlantist" in character, i.e., willing to apply power through local power centers (such as Israel or Morocco's King Hassan) rather than directly through the use of armed American economic or diplomatic clout—as the Reagan and Weinberger boys would like to do.

In the wake of the Soviet-Israeli talks, Israel succeeded in influencing both the White House team, headed by Regan, and State Department circles, which have been sifted and renewed, with a considerable input of former Kissinger aides being noticed. In short, Israel convinced these circles that:

- The Soviet Union would be willing to forego hostile action in the Middle East if a package deal was worked out;
- Israel would be able to prevent anti-U.S. terrorism, anywhere, if the PLO was actively pursued and destroyed, starting with the assassination of its leader Yasser Arafat. To make the point, a top Mossad team of about a dozen anti-terrorist specialists was dispatched to the U.S., to "advise" the intelligence Establishment. The administration obligingly put this team in close cooperation with the ICTE—Washington's Inter-Agency Executive Committee for Covert Activity—causing American views to be influenced still more by the disastrous political analyses of Israel's spooks—the same kind of political *opinion* rather than facts, which gave Mossad blessings to Sharon's catastrophic adventure in Lebanon;
- Syria should be the United States' other privileged partner, rather than Saudi Arabia, since Syria was both "realistic" and "held real power" on the Mideastern scene;
- The U.S. should not allow King Hussein to bring in the PLO or pro-Arafat Palestinians. Instead, Hussein should be forced to go for a separate peace deal with Israel. If Hussein refuses, other Jordanian circles should be used and the King deposed. Under no conditions should Jordan be given defensive and sophisticated weaponry such as the surface-to-air missiles needed to protect Amman and El Salt from Israeli air strikes;

- The U.S. should supply the covert and economic help which will allow Shimon Peres to throw off the shackles of the "National Unity Coalition," refuse to hand over his seat to Itzhak Shamir as per the coalition agreement, and allow Peres to win anticipated elections;

- Any separate and diverging diplomatic activity, be it by the CIA or the Pentagon, should be curtailed and nipped in the bud.

## The Reagan veto

At first, the Israeli offensive succeeded only too well. The U.S. Defense Establishment was partially muzzled in the Middle East. Orders were given to "ignore" the Israeli planes flying to bomb the capital of a country friendly to the U.S.—Tunisia—in spite of uncanceled undertakings by the White House to prevent Israeli attacks against Palestinian bases on Tunisian soil. Such undertakings were mentioned by the U.S. President and State Department in 1982, at a time when the White House was keen for the evacuation of a beleaguered Beirut by Arafat and the PLO's forces.

Moreover, after the Israeli air force made several runs over the PLO enclave at Hamam Beach, the U.S. shrugged off what amounted to an American-Israeli attempted assassination of Arafat, saying—against common sense—that it had been "unaware" of Israel's raid.

Everything worked out fine—except Reagan himself. While quite agreeable to the anti-Tunisian double-cross or the assassination of Arafat, Ronald Reagan simply did not accept a deal with the Soviets worked out by the Israelis. Neither did a variety of aides, for a variety of reasons which had nothing to do with international, but rather with *internal* American politics. Also, the renewal of Israeli-Soviet relations did not seem a good thing to the White House since it would diminish Israel's dependence on the United States; the emigration of all Zionists and discontented Soviet Jews from the U.S.S.R. would deprive the U.S. of a powerful propaganda ploy; the inclusion of the Middle East in the forthcoming Geneva talks would "muddy the waters," as one Washington specialist put it, and went against American plans for working out a standoff with Moscow on the nuclear scene.

Thus, Shimon Peres found himself with only half a success: the military operations against the PLO, but not the emigration of the Soviet Jews.

## The assassination attempt

That part of the Peres plan agreed upon in Washington was launched on Oct. 1, when sixteen Israeli warplanes flew 2,400 kilometers from Israel to Tunis and back. On their way they were under scrutiny by American satellites; by the radars and surveillance devices of the British RAF base in Cyprus; by American army radar in Sicily; and of course by the U.S. Sixth Fleet, whose avowed task is to monitor any suspicious military and civilian overflight and shipping movement in the Mediterranean. Moreover, the Israeli airforce combat unit was refueled somewhere in the Mediterranean: according to

Israel—in the air, a most unlikely event for such a large contingent; according to PLO sources—in Sicily, by American crews.

Arriving over the city of Tunis in the relatively early morning, the planes made three runs on the Palestinian base sited on Hamam-Lif (Hamam beach) where Arafat has his headquarters. The planes ignored Palestinian administrative offices, on one side of the PLO compound, and concentrated on bombing Arafat's personal quarters, his conference rooms, and the barracks of his personal guard—all of these in the same two buildings. At least 68 men and women were killed, more were injured. Between 12 and 20 of the victims were Tunisian policemen and guards appointed by the government of Habib Bourguiba.

The aim was, obviously, the immediate assassination of Yasser Arafat and his entourage. It failed because Arafat, who had been away on a trip, had returned late and not gone to sleep in his usual chambers, in Hamam-Lif. According to one version, the PLO chairman was jogging nearby, along the coast, when the attack started.

Shortly after, Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Itzhak Rabin made a variety of statements, the gist of which was that they hoped the attack would not impede the ongoing peace process. This was not just cynical propaganda; it was also an expression of the Labor leaders' belief that they could get away with trying to assassinate the Arafat leadership, while dealing with Jordan, Syria, the United States, and the Soviet Union.

One puzzling feature of the Israeli attack on Hamam-Lif was that the IDF planes had to fly, at least for a short while, inside the surveillance area of Libya's radar installations, which are said to be manned by Soviet specialists. It was thus possible that, as in assassination attempts carried out by the Mossad in the past, Israeli-Libyan collusion occurred, between two enemies concerned with the elimination of a common foe—Yasser Arafat.

It is also possible that the radar technicians had been instructed to alert their bosses only concerning flights directly aimed at the Libyan territory. However, if these installations were really manned by Soviet personnel, one cannot accept this view: The Red Army would not throw away such an excellent listening post. The only remaining possibility would be that the Soviet radar men were incompetent, had been replaced by Libyans—or had been instructed to do nothing.

### **The other assassination plots**

Originally, the imaginative Peres plot included attempts to assassinate not only Arafat in Tunis but also Abu Jihad and Muhammed Milhem in Amman. Only the strongest American and Jordanian warnings, that any military operation against PLO personnel or leaders on Jordanian territory would bring about the break-off of negotiations with Israel, caused the planners to drop this option.

Abu Jihad, also known as Khalil el Wazir, is of course the Fatah leader responsible for armed struggle, and for the

Occupied Territories—the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and the State of Israel (1967 borders), in PLO parlance. He is also one of the most decisive hardliners inside Fatah. On the contrary Muhammed Milhem, PLO Executive member in charge of the Occupied Territories, after his colleague Fahd Kawasmeh was assassinated by pro-Syrian agents in December 1984—is a moderate and known for his non-military activities. Nonetheless, later on, the Mossad released disinformation material attributing to Milhem a leading role in "Force 17," Arafat's bodyguard-turned-operations force.

According to certain Israeli sources, other PLO leaders whom the Peres plot would like to liquidate include leading moderates Khaled el Hassan and Abu Mazen (Mahmud Abbas), and specific moderate PLO cadres elsewhere. As so often in the past, the idea would be to decapitate the moderate camp inside the PLO leadership, and to provoke such Palestinian anger that an extremist or radical would succeed Arafat as the head of the PLO, thus polarizing the political situation and destroying the PLO's image as a responsible movement of national liberation which seeks an honorable peace.

Intriguingly, should Abu Jihad, Abu Mazen, and Khaled el Hassan disappear, together with Arafat, the heir apparent would be the remaining senior Fatah founder, Abu Iyyad—considered by some to be the instigator of "Black September" in the 1970s (although nowadays he is on record as supporting Arafat's "diplomatic" line); Abu Iyyad who is, even today, the head of the "parallel services" of Fatah and the PLO.

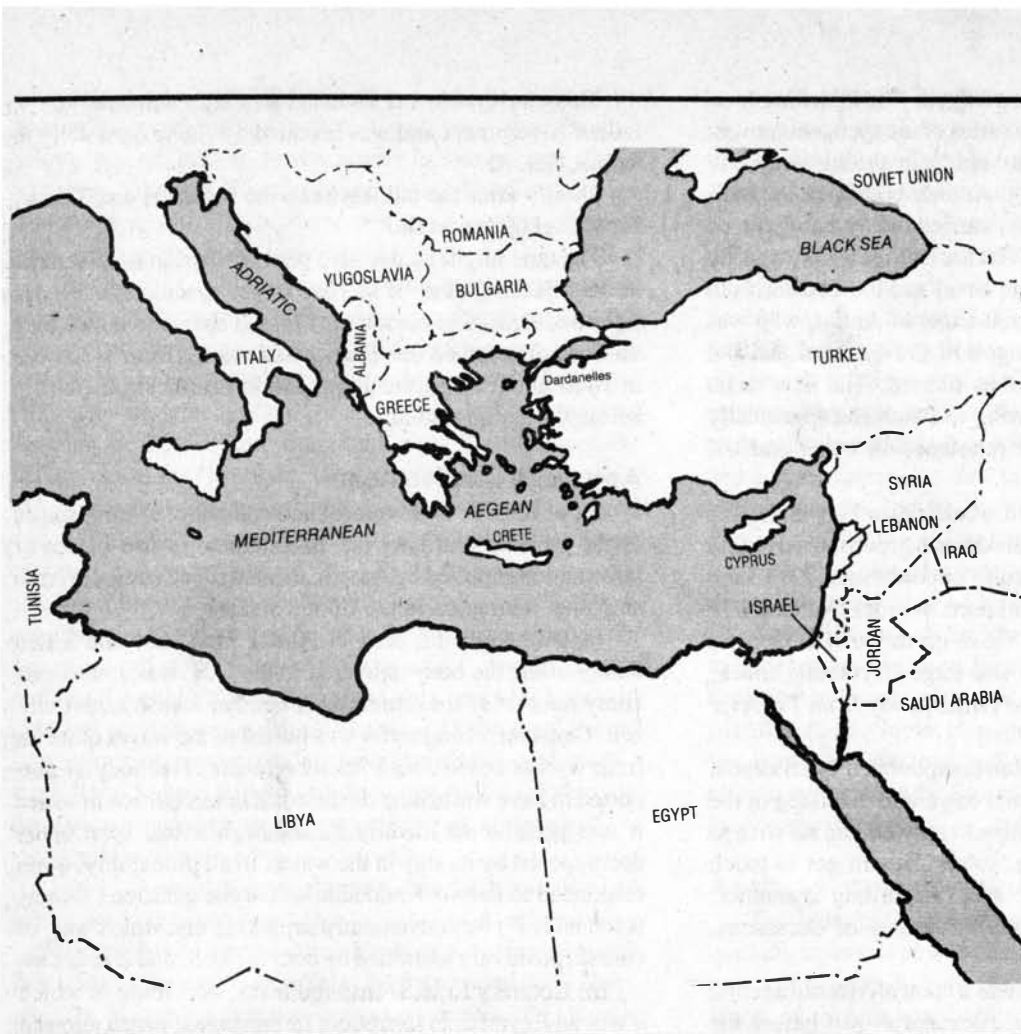
### **The *Achille Lauro* intrigue**

Although Israel failed in the Tunis assassination attempt, it succeeded only too well—probably with Syrian help—in its effort to discredit the PLO as a political force both willing and able to talk peace. This happened during the incident of the Italian pleasure-cruise vessel *Achille Lauro*, and during subsequent events.

While Israel succeeded in this aim, it failed miserably in undercutting worldwide support for the PLO; and unwittingly contributed to the destabilization of American-Arab relations (and most particularly relations between Washington on one side and Egypt, Sudan, and Tunisia on the other). Israel also failed to convince the U.S. that future talks with the PLO will remain out of the question after the Bush crew replaces, probably in 1986, the Reagan-Regan-McFarland administration.

Too much has been written about the hijacking incident to go into details here; let it suffice to remind the reader that a group of four Arabs hijacked the Italian vessel off Egyptian coasts, threatened the captive passengers, and that finally one of them killed a 69-year-old Jewish American invalid, Joe Klinghoffer from New York, who was then shoved into high sea, along with his wheelchair.

The ship was immediately monitored and surrounded. Broadcasting traffic between the Egyptian authorities and the ship was followed by contact between the group with first, Syrian wireless posts and then Tunisian PLO bases, from



which Abu el Abbas broadcast to them a non-committal message.

Following this, the four men surrendered to the Egyptian authorities, who vowed they would be put on trial. Arafat and his aides denied prior knowledge of the raid, said to be carried out by the Palestine Liberation Front, an organization split three ways: with its center close to Arafat, in Tunis; an independent but in fact pro-Iraqi group in Lebanon; and a pro-Syrian split in Damascus.

The hijackers were then put on an unarmed Egyptian plane, which was to take them to Tunis for delivery into Arafat's hands, the PLO leader having pledged to President Mubarak that he would bring them to trial. On the way, on Oct. 11, the plane was forced to deviate from its course by two U.S. jet fighters, which then forced it down onto a U.S. airbase in Sicily, Italy. At first, U.S. soldiers in Italy threatened to shoot it out with their Italian counterparts, when the Italian army and police started arresting the men—who, it turned out, included Abu el Abbas, who had flown to Egypt to accompany and debrief the hijackers.

Followed, in rapid succession: the arrest of the hijackers; Abu el Abbas's release and escape through Yugoslavia to Southern Yemen; the downfall of the Craxi coalition in Rome and its subsequent re-forming, with the precise self-same

composition, accompanied by a surprisingly bitter Craxi statement justifying PLO armed resistance; a statement by PLO Political Department head and extremist Farouk Kadoumi, denying that the hijackers had assassinated Klinghoffer and challenging Israel to show the body; and the providential finding of the victim's corpse, its rapid identification in Syria and its flight back home to New York for what amounted to a state funeral, in the course of a well-orchestrated propaganda campaign.

Shortly afterwards, on Oct. 14, the British government of Margaret Thatcher reneged on its agreement to meet with a two-man delegation composed of Muhammed Milhem and Bishop Eliya Khoury—and here, too, the Palestinians contributed to their own discomfiture: Bishop Khoury had failed to read the final version of the planned British-PLO statement which not only denounced terror but also agreed to recognize, unilaterally, the State of Israel. As the original draft of this statement had spoken of "mutual recognition of the PLO and Israel," Khoury refused to sign and, upon contacting the PLO in Tunis and Jordan, was indeed instructed not to do so—and the PLO appeared as the main guilty party, although the British had, in fact, carefully prepared the terrain for the Palestinians' pratfall.

All this is more or less known. The following facts,

however, are not widely acknowledged: The hijacking incident was, in fact, the result of a series of independent moves, in the Palestinian camp, which kept "slip-sliding away," in the terms of a well-known song. At their base were the individual assassinations of Israelis, carried out by unorganized Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, then followed by directives to PLO fighters inside Israel and the Territories to adopt the same tactic; to the great anger of Arafat, who was then (and is still) trying to arrange a PLO-Jordanian deal and whose "diplomatic line" was thus marred. The new tactic was sponsored by the radical wing of Fatah and specifically those dealing with the armed resistance in Israel and the Territories.

Following this, smaller and weaker elements under the PLO umbrella, including Abu el Abbas's groups, tried to find similar and even more spectacular opportunities. One such idea was to get Israel's Ashdod port, in order to attack IDF units there and, if possible to move on to the IDF General Staff headquarters in Tel Aviv and stage a symbolic attack, the message being: "Tunis is no farther away from Tel Aviv than Tel Aviv is from Tunis."

In fact, this was a suicide plan compounded by an almost certain bloodbath of civilians; and one not to the liking of the most sophisticated among the hijackers, who had no wish to die. According to one version, some of them got in touch with the Syrian-sponsored PLF split. According to another, they already were double agents in the pay of Damascus, from the very beginning.

On board the *Achille Lauro* was a team of Mossad agents. Strangely, they left the boat in Alexandria, just before the hijacking. Even more strangely, the arms and "suspicious behavior" of the Palestinians were then discovered. Abu Abbas's men then supposedly decided to hijack the boat. After hijacking the ship, they went on to waters off the Syrian coast and requested asylum.

To their utter surprise, they were not granted such asylum. Syria was delighted at the opportunity to hurt the PLO's reputation and efforts. That much is clear. The question is: Why did the hijackers expect Syria to accept them, if they really were pro-Arafat-PLO men?

The answer to the mystery may lie in an exchange between the Syrian Tartus Harbor Control Authorities and the hijackers, on Oct. 8:

**TARTUS:** *What are you doing now?*

**THE SHIP:** *Proceeding with our mission. But we do not know what to do since we did not receive any reply.*

**TARTUS:** *You have to continue with implementing the plan.*

**THE SHIP:** *Until now we have not received any reply.*

**TARTUS:** *Continue your mission and proceed to the place agreed upon.*

This conversation is included in a tape delivered to the Italian government and was revealed by *Paese Sera* daily in Rome, Oct. 31.

Shortly after the talk between the hijackers and Tartus, Joe Klinghoffer was shot.

The tape might be decisive proof of Syrian involvement in the hijacking case. If so, one might speculate that Syria informed Israel and caused the Mossad agents (who were on the boat, after Israeli intelligence had learned from its sources in Tunis about the forthcoming Ashdod attack) to leave ship before the action started.

### **American involvement**

Proof of U.S. involvement and collusion, at early stages of the incident and later on, is contained in two pieces of information supplied by American intelligence circles to Arab and other journalists in the United States.

(a) Although the Abu el Abbas men shot and killed Klinghoffer, the body delivered to the U.S. was almost certainly not that of the murdered American Jewish senior citizen. Consider: Klinghoffer was hurled to the waves quite far from Syrian coasts, *with his wheelchair*. His body is purported to have washed up on the coast in a condition in which it was possible to identify it, although it had been badly decomposed by its stay in the water. In all probability, Syria responded to Farouk Kaddoumi's obscene question ("Where is the body?") by conveniently supplying one which was, of course, positively identified by both the U.S. and Damascus.

(b) Contrary to U.S.-inspired leaks, according to which it was an Egyptian indiscretion, or messages, which allowed the U.S. to know to where and when the Egyptian plane was flying from Cairo with the hijackers, the message was in fact passed on to Washington—unwittingly and in good faith—by President Bourguiba's entourage. Washington (which had, one must remember) repeatedly promised Bourguiba that the PLO would get sanctuary in Tunis and that Tunis would never suffer from attacks on its territory, then moved to seize the plane.

Contrary to disinformation conveniently supplied to the international media, complete with cutely drawn maps, the Egyptian plane was not hijacked off Egyptian coasts but rather—80 miles off the Tunisian coast.

This explains why President Reagan agreed to extend an apology to Bourguiba but not to Mubarak: The Tunisian opposition knows how the U.S. learned the flying plan of the Egyptian jet and had to be pacified with an official step—lest it destabilize (with a little help from Muammar Qaddafi in neighboring Libya) the pro-American and pro-French Bourguiba regime.

### **The Russian hostages**

A turning point in the PLO-U.S.S.R.-Israel triangle of relations was the episode of the four kidnaped Soviet diplomat-advisers, taken in Beirut by a Shia dissident faction on Sept. 30. The group demanded that all Soviets leave Lebanon

immediately and stated that the four would be killed if its demands were not met. On Oct. 3, two days after the ultimatum was phoned in to the Soviet Embassy, one of the hostages, Arkady Katkov, was shot dead. The Soviets then started evacuating civilian personnel and a number of diplomats from the U.S.S.R. Embassy in Beirut.

The incident, which occurred while secret negotiations were ongoing between Israeli and Soviet diplomats, had the effect of accelerating these talks, all the while strengthening that faction in Moscow which supports renewed diplomatic relations with Israel, as part of a package deal to be signed between the Soviet Union and the United States, hopefully in the wake of the November Geneva talks. A Soviet demand to Syrian authorities to exert influence on the Shia in Lebanon and to bring about the release of the remaining three Soviet citizens, came to nothing.

A number of governments and powers then launched their own investigations, to find out exactly who had kidnaped the Soviets—and why. The only successful investigation (or perhaps it would be better to say the only one which yielded practical results) was conducted by the PLO on the personal instructions of Yasser Arafat, who promised—and paid—ten million Lebanese pounds (about one million dollars) to the person or persons who discovered the whereabouts of the kidnaped Russians—alive.

The PLO enquiry soon revealed that the kidnaping had been carried out by a breakaway splinter of Amal, working independently and against the authority of Amal leader Nabih Berri, under the orders of a Shia chieftain called Akel Hamieh. The kidnaping unit was composed mostly of Lebanese Shia, but included at least one officer of the Syrian special services, whose name is known.

After the kidnaping, the four Russians were held in a house belonging to one Hassan Hashem, located between Shawfat and the Beirut airport.

Syrian involvement in the kidnaping was also apparent because the Soviet Embassy in Beirut is an area half-controlled by Amal (and any dissident grouplets inside the Shia militia) and half by the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), which sides with Damascus. Both groups have a number of roadblocks and checkpoints and it is quite impossible for a kidnapers' vehicle to leave the area surrounding the Soviet Embassy without being spotted by either the Shia militia or by the PSP.

Knowledge of the Soviets' whereabouts brought on immediate Soviet government pressure—and, in its wake, Syrian pressure on the kidnapers. The Russians were set free.

The incident provoked drastic if subtle changes in Soviet attitude, strengthened, it is true, by the fact that the Israeli-Soviet ploy had not met with real success in Washington. Not only did Moscow now take its distances with Damascus, but Mikhail Gorbachov wrote a personal handwritten letter of thanks to Yasser Arafat. The Central Committee of Fatah was also invited for talks with the Soviet foreign affairs heads.

Arafat himself, however, was not invited to go to Moscow since he went on with the PLO-Hussein initiative and the Soviets had excluded his meeting with Gorbachov as long as he did not drop the Jordanian King.

As for the Soviet-Israeli talks, they went on in a rather desultory way with minor points being granted to the Israelis by Moscow—the exit visa granted to the wife of Jewish-Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, who was allowed out of the U.S.S.R. for “medical treatment”; renewed, if officious, diplomatic relations between Poland and the State of Israel, statement by Hungarian officials that they would welcome trade relations with Israel; and above all, a number of Peres and Labor statements that the exit of “Soviet Jewry” was close. Since the Soviets object to such Soviet Jewish citizens going on to the West, President Mitterrand of France, well-known for his Zionist sympathies, even offered to make these emigrants into a kind of “captive audience,” through their by-passing Vienna—from where they often abandon the route to Israel and emigrate to America—to be airlifted instead by French Air France airplanes. Since, once they are inside Israeli borders, Soviet immigrants must pay back to authorities some \$6,000 “trip and settling expenses,” this would effectively prevent the Soviet Jews from going anywhere, in the foreseeable future.

### Arab rearrangements

The kidnaping incident contributed, however, to some unlikely reversals in what seemed to be established alliances inside the Arab world. On Nov. 12, conciliatory efforts launched months earlier by Zeid Rifai, Jordan's new, pro-Syrian prime minister, bore fruit and a trip to Damascus by a Jordanian delegation was crowned by a series of joint Syrio-Jordanian declarations stating, firstly, that “there were no bilateral problems between Syria and Jordan”; secondly, that both countries were for an international peace conference on the Middle East with the participation of the Soviet Union (the PLO not being mentioned). A third statement was released by the Hashemite Court, in which it was declared that “enemies of Syria who had misused our religion” had, indeed, operated out of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in the past, “misguiding” the authorities. Thus, a major *casus belli*, and a bone of Syrian contention, was eliminated after Hussein's government had publicly apologized for supporting Sunnite “Muslim Brotherhood” activists operating against the Hafez el Assad Alawite regime in Syria from inside Jordan's borders.

Meanwhile, on Aug. 14, a first meeting between King Hussein and Yasser Arafat ended with far less negative results than had been eagerly expected in Washington and in Jerusalem; in fact, a rather conciliatory statement was released, after Arafat promised to restrain elements fighting under the PLO umbrella who wish to use armed force against Israeli, Jewish, or American targets *outside Israel and the Occupied Territories*. The Jordano-PLO statement of Aug. 14 reaffirmed the necessity of an international conference



with all parties concerned, and the need for the PLO to participate in peace negotiations. As such, it was a blow in the face to Washington—or rather a counter-blow, after the U.S. administration's decision to postpone the sale of arms and missiles to Jordan until March 1986, and to reject any talks involving PLO-backed notables.

### **Jordano-Palestinian ambiguity**

The Arafat-Hussein meeting, held on Oct. 28, was conducted in a rather ambiguous atmosphere—with the Israelis, Syrians, and Americans standing in the wings and biting their nails, debating whether King Hussein would or would not drop Arafat.

On the one hand, Hussein and his Court advisers blamed Arafat for not having taken decisive steps, but above all for not being able to restrain his followers, be it Abu el Abbas with his murderous sea-commandos, or PLO Executive member His Grace Bishop Eliya Khoury, who had failed to read the joint British-PLO draft statement before coming to London.

On the other hand, King Hussein was well aware of his lack of political options, without Palestinian participation. In the words of one rather undiplomatic Jordanian diplomat, stationed in a superpower capital: "The King is aware that, should he back non-PLO notables as discussion partners with the Americans, he may have signed his own death warrant."

On one hand, Yasser Arafat was rather worried about the possibility of a renewed Damascus-Amman axis being in the works, an *entente cordiale* which would add the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to those—including Lebanon and even Israel—who were content to work the Arab scene in the ever-lengthening shadow of Hafez el Assad.

On the other hand, the PLO Chairman was well aware that King Hussein and Zeid Rifai might become the architects who could mend his broken bridges to Damascus.

El Assad had agreed to the Jordano-Syrian reconciliation talks under the auspices of Prince Feisal of Saudi Arabia, in accordance with a resolution of the Arab Casablanca Summit of Aug. 7-9, 1985. During the first phase of these talks, the Saudi mediator asked El Assad to come to the next Arab Summit even if Arafat was present, El Assad having boycotted the Casablanca meeting. The Syrian leader agreed grudgingly, but remarked that he might come with a Palestinian delegation of his own, led by Khaled el Fahoum, the ex-Chairman of the Palestinian National Council (or Parliament), who was removed from his post by the Amman PNC for being pro-Syrian. Now, in the second phase of the negotiations, El Assad seems to be adopting more flexible attitudes towards the PLO leader—but he still encourages the dissidence.

Thus, the pro-Syrian "Front of Salvation," and perhaps other groups including George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), may hold a "convention" of their own in Damascus. The PFLP and Nayef Hawatmeh's Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) are

worried that such a meeting would be interpreted as "an alternative to the PLO and the PNC"; nevertheless, under certain circumstances, they would participate.

The Middle East imbroglio brought about one further irony: The most militantly extremist Palestinian groups were now in the wake of Syria, an Arab state which, just like Jordan and Egypt, has permanent and regular coordinating meetings with Israel, yet refuses to accept the PLO's own contacts with . . . Egypt and Jordan.

### **Re-enter Egypt**

Under the threat of a Syrian-controlled axis, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Palestinian dissidents or captive politicians, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak had to re-think his policies. Already bothered by the fact that Camp David had allowed Israel to invade Lebanon and kill over 20,000 Arabs, not to mention having allowed Israel and the U.S. to destroy the Arabs' former apparent unity, Mubarak got further annoyed by the sharp needle pricks of the Taba dispute (involving a microscopic bit of Egyptian territory, on the Red Sea coast, which Israel refused to evacuate), and by the behavior of the Israeli diplomats and spooks in Cairo. His resentment was shared by a great many Egyptians—including one soldier who killed in anger Israeli tourists, and a splinter saboteur group which shot an Israeli diplomat in Cairo.\*

The consensus in Egypt, which since 1977 had been almost unanimous for an honorable peace with Israel, became far less so, since 1982 and Tzahal's invasion of Lebanon when it became apparent that though peace there be, it is neither honorable nor convenient for Egypt's interests in the Arab world—where it really matters.

True enough, Egypt got—and still gets from the U.S.—military and economic aid which, although much inferior to Israel's, † is still the second-largest bounty granted by Washington to any country anywhere; true, too: Peace with Israel had allowed Mubarak to consolidate a rather wise home-rule, after a period in which Egypt's regime had become acutely destabilized under President Anwar Sadat, culminating in Sadat's assassination by fundamentalist Muslim officers of the army, in October 1981.

Yet, Egyptians everywhere smart under the loss of honor they feel their nation has suffered since Sadat went to Jerusalem in 1977 to sign a peace agreement with Israel. The rise of Egyptian fundamentalism on the one hand, and the arrogant behavior of Israel on the other, had been added to Egypt's gigantic and pandemic woes: mounting inflation, lack of foreign currency reserves, an inability to finance decentralized village-industrialization under the strictures of American aid, and a population that will soon reach 50 million souls—in a land which is huge but has nevertheless only a fertile and useful surface no bigger than Belgium's. All these prepared the ground for a change of heart. "The Egyptian fellah (or peasant) is polite, even servile, and slow to anger. But when he does finally break out he is like a volcano," an

Egyptian personality told *I&P* while passing through Paris. Not just the fellah. The political and military class, too.

But honor alone is not a detonator. It may be an explosive charge. Still, the need exists for a specific situation to develop to the point where the package detonates. Such a situation arose when Syria and Jordan got together to try and reconcile their positions, with Saudi blessings, Israel watching benevolently in the sidelines and Washington teleguiding Prince Abdullah's and Prince Feisal's moves. It then became clear to Mubarak that the American-Israeli grand design included a contemptuous appraisal that Egypt would and should remain a stringer country, fated to stay forever in the backwaters of the real decision-makers of the Middle East: Israel and Syria.

If doubt there was, it was removed by Washington's behavior during the incident involving the hijacking of an unarmed Egyptian airplane by supersonic fighter-bombers of the U.S. Air Force. The taking of the plane carrying the Abu el Abbas saboteurs was hailed enthusiastically in the United States as an American victory—just like the invasion of Grenada, years ago. Neither the *New York Times* nor the *Washington Post*, neither NBC nor ABC, bothered to point out that U.S. military power has been consistently stymied by far inferior forces—as witnessed by the Marines' withdrawal in Lebanon, U.S. soldiers killed in El Salvador, or even the still remaining U.S. hostages held by the Shia Hezbollah. In fact, whenever the U.S. confronts resolute and armed opponents, it is forced to give way.

Yet, inside the U.S., it was enough to have the greatest superpower force down an unarmed airplane, for a deliriously happy press and public to applaud Ronald Reagan.

A born actor cannot refuse applause. No matter that anti-American riots broke out in Khartoum, Sudan, and sharply repressed demonstrations were held in Cairo itself; no matter that Rome's and Tunis's power centers wobbled and King Hassan II of Morocco cancelled a state visit to Washington; Reagan refused to apologize to his good friend and ally Hosni Mubarak for downing the Egyptian plane—but, following frantic cables from the U.S. ambassador in Tunisia, apologized to the Tunisian President, Habib Bourguiba.

Historians may one day decide that this was the turning point in Mubarak's policy—towards the U.S., Israel, and the Palestinians. Not out of pure anger, no: simply because it had become crystal-clear that the U.S. was willing to sacrifice Mubarak himself, having in the wings a far more pro-American candidate, Chief of Staff Abu Ghazaleh who, the CIA believes, might accommodate Washington's pro-Israeli policy. And then again, might not: The Egyptian army's higher echelons, too, are becoming restive in the face of the latest developments.

Be this as it may, Mubarak has decided to create a counter-axis to prevent the consolidation of—for him—a dangerous Israeli-Syrian-Jordanian pro-American bloc. The invitation of Yasser Arafat to Cairo, where the PLO Chairman went on Nov. 4, in the company of his most radical second-

in-command, Abu Iyyad, was nothing but the opening shot of this new Egyptian campaign. Mubarak is now intent upon the creation of a new Arab power bloc involving Egypt, the PLO under Arafat, Iraq, Northern Yemen, Sudan, and—should he be able to pry Hussein off his present course—the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The Egyptian leader is said to be confident that such a grouping will force the Saudis away from their present pro-Syrian positions (caused by Riyadh fearing Damascus, as well as by simple gratification that at least *one* Arab country has some clout) and may even foil America's burning desire to keep Israel happy at all costs—even at the cost of supporting the Peres plot.

### Arafat's anti-terror pledge

Thus, Mubarak's main concern was for Arafat to denounce terror or armed action outside Israel's borders and those of the Occupied Territories; and Arafat indeed chose to accept Cairo as the privileged site at which he made precisely this pledge.

On Nov. 9, *Le Monde* exceptionally front-paged Arafat's statement, made on Nov. 7—which so many of the Western media tried to tuck away into a modest column, at the back of the news. *Le Monde*'s acumen was better, since Arafat's declaration was rather exceptional.

Although the U.S. and Israeli media did their best to minimize the importance of Arafat's undertaking, Shimon Peres furiously protested in Cairo. To no avail: The Israeli press reported that Mubarak was intent on launching an international propaganda campaign underscoring the PLO's new line.

According to information which reached *I&P* in early November, the Egyptian leader intends to go further than that. Should Arafat demonstrate in deeds his willingness to curb the violent tendencies of some of the elements under the PLO umbrella, the Egyptian government may soon allow the PLO to transfer its political (but not its military and intelligence) bases from Tunis and Amman—to Cairo.

But even should this not occur, Egypt will surely fight any attempt to liquidate the PLO. Arafat's renewed ascendancy in the Palestinian camp, and his new willingness to come to terms with some kind of agreement between Palestinians and Israelis, may even become, soon, the door through which Egypt returns to the Arab world to claim its former and future central role in Middle Eastern affairs.

\*The group, Egypt's Revolution, also carried out later the hijacking of an Egyptian airliner, in which more than 60 passengers found their death, on Nov. 24-25.

†In August 1985, Ronald Reagan signed a foreign aid authorization giving Israel \$1.8 billion in Foreign Military Sales (FMS) and \$1.2 billion in Economic Support Funds (ESF) for each of the next two years, and nearly one more billion in accessory grants—Egypt got \$1.3 billion in FMS and \$8.5 million in ESF. (Source: *Middle East Observer*, Vol. 8, No. 15, September 1985; published in Arlington, Virginia.)