

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Foggy Bottom woos Qaddafi, again

A rotten deal is afoot to force Egypt—which just swallowed IMF austerity prescriptions—to also make friends with the Libyan dictator.

Disregarding Egyptian feelings on the matter, the State Department has ganged up with the Soviets to impose a reconciliation between Cairo and Tripoli, as soon as possible.

For the Foggy Bottom diplomats, such a reconciliation is considered an essential step for paving the way to broader regional agreements between Moscow and Washington, encompassing a general trade-off of spheres of influence between North Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. Many of these are expected to be ratified in the days following the Venice summit, in the first official meeting in a year between Undersecretary Richard Murphy and Vladimir Polyakov of the Mideast department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry.

Though there have been many informal consultations between the two since then, their last official meeting was held in Stockholm in June 1986, and decided on the re-entry of Syrian troops into Beirut.

For the State Department a reconciliation between Egypt and Libya now is aimed at fostering a new spirit of "détente" in the Mediterranean region, complementary to an expected breakthrough on INF negotiations on the European theater. Believing that it has the wholehearted support of the Soviet Union, in its new, and rather late, crusade against Iran's ayatollahs, Washington is ready to make many compromises, and take Moscow's bait that "reconciliation" is the order of the day.

It began with Moscow's order to

Syria's President Hafez al Assad to reconcile with Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and was followed by a similar reconciliation between Libya's Qaddafi and Iraq.

In these moves, Moscow makes few concessions, for much larger gains. It helps its satraps to come out of their years-long isolation, harvesting much-needed financial benefits, while it receives meanwhile the eternal gratitude of many Arab conservative countries which, like Saudi Arabia, had unsuccessfully tried for years to mediate such reconciliations. Moscow is becoming the new Mecca of Pan-Arabism.

And while Washington is attempting to overcome its years of secret negotiations with the mullahs by finally taking a high profile against Iran, Moscow can keep in the background its hundreds of Iranian assets, comprising the Soviet and East German educated mullahs.

Egypt has fallen prey to these cynical calculations. It has indeed been given little choice. Having been forced to sign a new agreement with the International Monetary Fund, under the blackmail that American wheat deliveries to the country might be suspended, it is known in Cairo that social unrest lies ahead in the near future.

The IMF demands are quite explicit as to their consequences for the Egyptian masses—more suffering. With it, the secular and religious oppositions to the regime are just biding their time to lead demonstrations which could be a replay of the January 1977

riots, but worse. Libya, Syria, and Iran are known to be the main financial backers of the extremists. Between American pressures and Libyan subversion, what else can Cairo do but accept a deal?

In early May, the Libyans made it clear they would increase their financial support to the Egyptian extremists. By mid-May, Qaddafi's security adviser, Ahmad Qaddafadam, arrived in Cairo to meet with Egyptian intelligence officials to initiate preliminary reconciliation talks. Libya is ready to stop financing the opposition "if. . . ."

Though an Egypt-Libya reconciliation is a prize in itself for both Moscow and Tripoli, an immediate aim is to use Egypt to neutralize the threat against Libya which is coming from the south—Chad. Initial attempts at establishing a new modus vivendi between Libya and Chad, through indirect negotiations with Chad's President Hissène Habré, have yielded little so far. Chad maintains its argument that the Libyan-occupied Aouzou strip belongs to Chad. In turn, Tripoli is ready to turn a new leaf in relations between the two countries, if Aouzou is left out of any negotiations, an unacceptable position for the Chadian leader.

However, bypassing Paris, the State Department has begun threatening the Chadians that they should accept the Libyan offers. The point was driven home when, under similar pressures, the Egyptians began to pull out from supporting Chad in recent weeks. Behind Moscow's blackmail is the consideration that a new crisis between Chad and Libya would not only endanger the new cooperation established in the Mediterranean, but could even endanger the broader U.S.-Soviet negotiations over Europe and the Middle East. Egypt and Chad's national interests matter little for these appeasers.