

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Superpowers plot over Lebanon, Israel

The agreements between Moscow and Washington mean continued Syrian rule of Lebanon, and more trouble for Israel.

Was there any connection between the massacre which on May 16 killed some 30 persons in a car-bomb explosion in Beirut, including the Sunni Mufti Sheikh Hassan Khaled, a leading moderate, and the last round of American-Soviet talks on the Middle East held in Moscow, on May 11? Circumstantial evidence—notably respecting Syria's role in Lebanon—does indeed point to the conclusion that responsibility for this latest atrocity can be laid at the doorsteps of both superpowers.

Though Lebanon did not rank very high on the agenda of the discussions between Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Secretary of State James Baker, it was included in the Middle East package they reviewed.

One indication of the agreements reached, was the vote at the World Health Organization on May 13: Both Soviet and American ambassadors voted to postpone for another year any debate on admitting the Palestine Liberation Organization to full membership in the WHO. Washington had previously warned that, should the PLO be given full membership as a member-state, the State of Palestine, it would cut funds to the WHO.

Behind the rhetoric used by both foreign ministers while talking about the Middle East, some clear outlines of their short- and medium-term goals have emerged. Both agreed that in the immediate period ahead, the Lebanese problem has to be "settled," one way or another. The American rationale, to which Moscow agrees, is simple enough, according to intelli-

gence sources. James Baker is set on visiting the Mideast in July. By that time, he wants to have a free hand to concentrate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and does not want to be hampered by instability in Lebanon.

How this is to be accomplished is another matter. Washington is proposing a *quid pro quo*: In exchange for the removal from the political scene of Gen. Michel Aoun, Moscow will exert pressure on Damascus to exercise "restraint" and agree to a settlement among the rival Lebanese militias. Aoun is Lebanon's Christian prime minister, who brought down the wrath of the Syrians earlier this spring when he closed illegal Lebanese ports that were being used for Syrian-sponsored drug-running, thereby leading to the bloody Syrian siege of Beirut. The U.S. State Department has refused to condemn the Syrian atrocities, and, indeed, has expressed the view that Lebanon is "better off" under Syrian occupation.

Washington is pulling as many strings as it can to influence the Arab League mediation committee to come up "on its own" with the idea that Aoun should step down. It cannot be ruled out that more violent measures against Aoun are also being prepared. Left unstated, but fundamental to a "settlement" of the Lebanese crisis, as envisaged by the superpower condominium, is Syria's domination of the country.

Such a posture has been enough for Syria to feel encouraged in perpetrating even worse atrocities; hence the May 16 massacre. Yet such an atrocity

could very well unleash a spiral of violence, leading to a new regional war involving notably Iraq and Syria.

As for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the goals and options of both superpowers were deliberately kept vague in the Moscow discussions. In parallel to the American-PLO dialogue, Moscow is set to increase the tempo of its diplomatic initiatives toward Israel, while Washington puts more pressure on Israel.

In the first week of May, James Baker sent a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, in which he said that Washington was committed to a "land for peace" policy, did not recognize East Jerusalem as part of Israel, and will consider the result of any elections in the West Bank valid only if conducted under U.N. supervision.

Shamir has called for elections among the Palestinian population of the West Bank—elections that would bypass the PLO. Most Palestinians have rejected the proposal, on the grounds that no democratic elections can possibly be held as long as the territories are under Israeli military occupation.

While this point is well taken, the U.S. position, on the other hand, evades the issue of sovereignty for the Palestinians while antagonizing Israel by threatening it with the "Panama treatment," by means of internationally supervised elections. Such elections, depriving *both* Israelis and Palestinians of the rights of national sovereignty, are no solution for either of them.

But Israel is certainly at least as stubborn as Panama's Gen. Manuel Noriega. Hence, it would not be surprising to see the Israelis dedicating their efforts in the coming weeks to sabotaging Baker's upcoming visit to the Mideast.