

Israel's Tunisia raid: major U.S. strategic blunder

by Thierry Lalevée

In the few minutes that the Oct. 1 Israeli raid against the PLO headquarters in Borj-Cedria, Tunisia lasted, the United States of America potentially lost more in strategic terms than in any other single incident of the last 30 years. First, the U.S. President and State Department outright endorsed Israel's violation of Tunisian sovereignty, only later announcing that the United States had "modified its reaction"—as the full implications of endorsing a raid on a key U.S. ally began to become clear.

At the request of Tunisia, which warned the United States that it would be forced to break off diplomatic relations if it did not heed this advice, the United States abstained from, rather than vetoed, a U.N. Security Council censure of Israel, thus allowing the censure to stand. But by that time, the nation of Tunisia was seeing its first anti-American riots in 200 years, and President Bourguiba was fighting for his very political survival and that of 30 years of pro-Western policies.

Anti-American demonstrations in the capital city of Tunis on Oct. 2 were followed by anti-American demonstrations in Gafsa in the south of the country. Meanwhile, Libyan Radio called on the Tunisian army to revolt against the Bourguiba regime for its longstanding friendship with the United States. Libyan propaganda is primarily aimed at the south of the country, where Radio Tripoli is more easily picked up than Tunisian national television.

The anti-American feeling might have run even higher, had it not been for the fact that the Tunisian media blacked out the initial U.S. statements of support for Israel's actions, for fear of an uncontrollable backlash.

The U.S. failure to condemn Israel—its failure to prevent

the raid in the first place—and widespread suspicion of U.S. involvement at some level, have made a mockery of U.S. declarations in favor of a Middle East peace process. It has made a mockery of U.S. commitments given to Tunisia only weeks earlier, to defend its national sovereignty against foreign aggression—this, in connection with an invasion threat from Libya's Qaddafi.

The United States betrayed the confidence of one of its closest friends in North Africa. It was because such trust existed between the United States and Tunisia that Israel decided it could get away with the outrage. It was because of its friendship with America that Tunisia's leadership was blinded to the Israeli threat. Less friendly countries would have taken more precautions, and the cost of such a raid would have risen.

Declarations by American officials, including President Reagan, justifying the raid as a "legitimate act of reprisal against International terrorism," were almost laughable in their stupidity. Has the United States ever authorized retaliatory raids against Iran, or Lebanon's Shi'ite fanatics, who have fostered death and destabilization worldwide? Has the United States ever authorized reprisals against Syria or Libya, which have been responsible for the murders of countless American officials and countless innocent victims in the Middle East and Europe? No, for fear of Soviet reprisal. The United States has found it easier to stab a trustworthy ally in the back, and endorse outrageous actions by a less-than-trustworthy ally.

The U.S. abstention at the United Nations may open the way to an attempt at recouping the strategic losses that could

ensue. Otherwise, Oct. 1, 1985, is a date which will be remembered as one of the darkest when President Reagan decided to become just another Jimmy Carter, selling out America cheap. It is the day which was won by the hardliners and radicals on all sides.

The ever present influence of former Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, was behind Israel's decision. Under political pressures from the Sharons and the Kahanes of Israel to display an iron fist, Shimon Peres capitulated to them and ordered the raid—once again, as he had in the mid-1970s when he became the first prime minister to order an invasion of Lebanon.

Can there be any illusion of the effect of such a raid on the Palestinian movement? Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy, the State Department's special Middle East envoy and a friend of the Syrians, had stated unhappily that there "is a good prospect the PLO may be seriously re-considering its policy of armed struggle." If so, certainly no longer. As political observers noted: "Very quickly, there will be no room for people like Arafat. There will be retaliation against Israel. This will lead to Israeli retaliation and a new vicious circle will begin. Palestinian terrorism, as in the early 1970s, will be resumed. It won't be just Tel Aviv or Jerusalem which will be hit, but all world capitals."

As the City of London's daily, the *Financial Times* commented on Oct. 2: "Israel's raid . . . will have received its warmest welcome in Libya, Syria, and Iran. The one regret of Libya and Syria, will be that Yasser Arafat, chairman of the PLO, was not a victim of the attack."

'New Yalta'

No one can believe that officials of the State Department did not know that a raid of this type would strengthen Soviet puppets in the region. Diplomatic sources commented that those who "approved of the raid, are those who want to have Hafez al-Assad's Syria as the key to the Middle East." Who are they? Henry Kissinger and his associates; Shultz and Murphy in the United States; the Kremlin leadership; and those Israeli factions who want to divide the Middle East into a Greater Israel entity encompassing parts of Lebanon and Jordan, and a similar, Greater Syria horror.

Hence, it was the spirit of the "New Yalta" between the State Department and Moscow which inspired the Israeli action, a Yalta based on the redefinition of sphere of influences in the region whereby the United States withdraws its assets in favor of surrogate powers. Why else did Washington tell the Saudis to buy British weapons? Why else is Washington giving implicit approval to those Gulf countries who want to establish diplomatic ties with Moscow?

Not just in the Middle East. With Israel's Tunisian raid, the State Department has signaled Moscow that it is now ready to retreat from the entire Mediterranean and North Africa.

On Oct. 3, simultaneous statements by State Department

officials in Washington and Soviet spokesman Zamyatin in Paris, during Gorbachov's visit, called for greater cooperation in the fight against international terrorism. Officials at State expressed their sympathy for Moscow's kidnaped diplomats in Beirut. Zamyatin did likewise for the American hostages still held there.

The statements seemed to revive the agreement discreetly signed last June between Vice-President George Bush and Soviet officials for a "better coordination" against terrorism. That agreement was signed only four days before the hijacking of the TWA Flight 847, and the cold-blooded murder of an American Navy Seal. Moscow, it was said at the time, was key to the release of the hostages (not to say, key to the hostage-taking in the first place). "Soon we will see joint CIA and KGB teams fighting terrorists," wrote the French weekly *Vendredi-Samedi-Dimanche* in mid-July. Maybe this has already happened.

Tunisian sovereignty and Palestinian peace factions are now falling prey to the State Department's obsession with the upcoming Geneva negotiations between Reagan and Gorbachov.

In this framework, the extent of American technical complicity in the Israeli raid, has little relevance. PLO spokesmen say they have proof that the United States aided Israel in the Tunisia raid. Salah Khalaf, a top assistant to Arafat, told reporters that Israeli jets refueled at a NATO base in the Mediterranean.

But Israel's air force didn't need the United States to refuel its armada of jetbombers. Nor did it need the United States to pinpoint targets. What it did need was State Department political approval, and that, it unquestionably received.

By Sept. 26, rumors were widely circulating that such a raid was in the making. President Reagan had been informed that Israel intended to strike at the PLO's Force 17, held responsible by the Israelis for the September 24, Lanarca, Cyprus murders of Israeli citizens. But as British officials stated during the U.N. debate of the censure motion afterward, everyone knew the PLO was not responsible for that atrocity. It was a pretext of the sort Sharon is known for leaping upon to conduct pre-planned operations.

It is doubtful that President Reagan would have been made aware of the precise timing of the raid; this was not necessary. That American officials imposed the proviso that PLO chairman Arafat should not be hit by the raid and should be informed at the last minute, is likely. It is also likely that Arafat and other Palestinian leaders were told to keep away from Borj-Cedria, as American officials in Tunisia were told beforehand to stay home.

This doesn't decrease the enormity of the U.S. betrayal. After Iran and Lebanon, what is now established throughout the region is that it is not safe to remain a friend of America. The "biggest strategic blunder ever in the postwar period," in the words of former U.S. presidential candidate Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr.