

Thatcher takes lead against Syrian terrorism

by Thierry Lalevée

More than six months after the American raid against the terror bases inside Libya, the decision of the Thatcher government of Britain to break diplomatic relations with Soviet-allied Syria, on Oct. 24, is one of the most decisive moves yet against state-sponsored terrorism. That such a move came only a few weeks after the Reykjavik summit where President Reagan displayed a firm determination not to compromise with the Soviets on issues of principle, is obviously no coincidence.

Atlantic solidarity was furthered by Reagan's immediate decision to recall for consultations his own ambassador in Damascus, William Eagleton. The move sent shivers through the State Department bureaucracy, for whom Syria's Hafez al Assad still remains the "Bismarck of the Middle East," as Henry Kissinger admiringly dubbed him.

No setback in Europe

The refusal of the other European foreign ministers on Oct. 27, at their Luxembourg gathering, to follow suit in imposing sanctions against Syria, may look like a setback. However, there is no reason for Damascus to rejoice; it has just won a little respite. Clearly, events went too quickly for many governments—in the three days between the British decision and the Luxembourg meeting, they had neither time nor the ability to make such wide-ranging political decisions. Though this was rightly characterized as "regrettable" by British Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe, it was agreed that the next Nov. 10 foreign ministers meeting in London will be able to take a firm position. Indeed, no fewer than six foreign ministers, including those of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Greece, were not even in attendance at the Luxembourg gathering, which coincided with a new Franco-German summit in Frankfurt and the world religious gathering in Assisi, Italy.

However, besides a general declaration of "solidarity"

with Britain, agreed upon by all but Greece, a few firm commitments were made public. For example, it has been agreed that Britain will be able to veto a \$100 million economic aid package of the European Community to Syria, a very effective measure, given Syria's catastrophic economic plight.

Similarly, answering rumors about an upcoming arms deal between France and Syria, both President François Mitterrand and the French government of Premier Jacques Chirac made it clear that there would be no arms deals. As explained by French government officials, there have been long-standing military accords, from the 1982-84 period. The French made it clear that even such deals were now frozen. Commenting on the rumors of a recent deal, French officials reported that the Syrian government had indeed contacted French military industries, a process which set into motion the Specialized Committee Dealing with Arms Exports of the Defense Ministry. The Committee had met to review the demands, which followed last July's visit to Paris of Syrian Vice-President Abdel Halim Khaddam. The ministries and the government had vetoed further discussions.

Agreeing to the British proposal for imposing tighter security against the Syrian airlines and the embassy in Bonn, the West German government announced on Oct. 29 that when its present ambassador ends his tour of duty in Damascus, in November, he will not be replaced.

Closer cooperation

But for the timing, the major divergence between Britain and its European colleagues, seems to concern the level of involvement of the Syrian government, as government. For example, the French representative later commented that the British "presented to us, what can be described as irrefutable proof of the involvement of Syrian intelligence services in attempting to blow up the April 17, London-Tel Aviv, El Al

flight. . . . However is it the same as the Syrian government? We were not convinced.”

Mere shortsightedness, outright blindness, or a special game? No sane diplomat could begin arguing that Syrian Air Force intelligence, led by Gen. Mohammed al Khouli, could potentially organize such terror actions, without President Assad's full knowledge. Granted the 20-year personal relationship between the two men, both trained in the Soviet Air Force, and given that Khouli offices are no further than 10 meters from Hafez al Assad's office in the presidential palace, such arguments don't go very far.

However, the French reasoning, shared by several European governments, is based on a specific assessment of the regional situation. Countries like France and the United States have hostages in Lebanon in the hands of the Islamic extremists primarily controlled by Iran, it is argued; and granted that no European country can take upon itself the task of overthrowing the Syrian regime, it has to deal with it. Hence, in Paris, as well as other capitals, it is reasoned that it should be possible to drive a wedge between Assad and Khouli, under the threat of all-out sanctions against the regime. For that reason, the ambassadors of the European Community are expected to form a joint delegation to Damascus to request from the Syrian government an official explanation on the Hindawi case.

Despite an apparent public division, the first two weeks of November will actually witness a division of labor between Britain and its NATO colleagues. Indeed, none should forget the very successful cooperation established between the United States and France during the visit of Security Minister Robert Pandraud, on Oct. 15. Similarly, in full cooperation with other European units, especially from France and West Germany, and the American "Delta Force," London sent several teams of the Special Air Services to Cyprus on Oct. 26. The presence of such units, in both Cyprus and the Lebanon, has the Syrians very nervous, and trying to guess what will be the next moves.

Syrians and Soviets in a quandary

The government in Damascus knows it has little time to clean up its act. Up to the last minute of the trial of Nezir Hindawi in London, Syria was kept guessing as to its consequences. Deliberately, London had not revealed last April the full extent of its knowledge of the operation. It was, for example, revealed only after Hindawi's condemnation to 45 years in jail, that both Britain's MI-5 and the Americans had intercepted enough radio transmissions between the Syrian embassy in London and Damascus to know of the Hindawi plot in advance. However, such intercepts didn't give the time or the place; Hindawi had to be carefully tailed. The British silence on such irrefutable proof aimed at keeping Damascus in the dark, confirming the Syrians' belief that they had no particular reason to worry; Hindawi's links to Syria would not be exposed.

The British rationale was simple enough: Had Damascus



Prime Ministers Chirac of France, Thatcher of U.K.: their cooperation against terrorism is crucial.

known in April how exposed it was, either it would have launched a massive terror wave to obtain Hindawi's release, or it would have killed him in jail. As the *Guardian* reported on Oct. 28, "Hindawi is no popular man in Damascus" these days. He has become a nightmare to Syrian officials for weeks now.

More bad news is that his brother, Hasi, caught at the same time in West Berlin, is to be tried on Nov. 17 in West Germany. He is accused of having bombed the West Berlin headquarters of the German Arab Society, and suspected to have been responsible for the bombing of the "La Belle" night club on April 4, which killed two people. Hasi has already revealed that, together with his brother, he received the explosives from the Syrian embassy in East Berlin. Hindawi's Syrian controller, Lt.-Col. Haitham Saeed, a close associate of Khouli, was present in person.

Hence, despite the failure of the Europeans to follow Britain, the communiqués from Damascus have been very bitter. In fact, only Libya's Qaddafi has pledged a full solidarity with Assad. Most Arab countries remained silent. Support for Syria was only underlined *ad nauseam* in Moscow, where the Soviet government accused London of "increasing tension in the Middle East," and of covering up for an "Israeli attack against Syria."

The Israeli threat, despite bravado in Damascus and Moscow, hangs like a sword of Damocles over Assad's head. Syria's Chief of Staff Hisham Shahabi can boast as much as he wants that Syria "has reached strategic parity" with Israel in military terms, but he knows that Syria not only has no hope to win such a war, but that the present regime would not survive it either.