

Shifting alignments in the Mideast: Moscow moves in to pick up the chips

by Thierry Lalevée

As a result of U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz's visit to Moscow on April 13, Mikhail Gorbachov is close to clinching Moscow's position as the hegemonic power in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The State Department's eagerness for a new superpower summit is leaving the West with no policy to counter the diplomatic initiatives launched by Moscow since the beginning of the year. Indeed, as a so-called momentum for peace is gathering in the region, it is on the basis of Gorbachov's proposal for an international peace conference.

Crucial to Moscow's aims are the negotiations taking place now within the Palestinian movement and among various Israeli leaders. These negotiations have placed Moscow in a position where it will be able to play most of the cards of the conflict, leaving the United States and Western Europe with little, if any, influence, despite the warnings of moderate Arab countries.

Moscow's Palestinian card

The most spectacular demonstration of Soviet power was the meeting in Algiers among various Palestinian factions which were preparing the April 20 congress of the Palestinian National Council. Moscow's blackmail is about to achieve what nothing else has been able to: a unified Palestinian movement. The first meetings in years have taken place among Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Yasser Arafat, George Habash of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and Nayef Hawatmeh of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). After years of in-fighting, all are expected to join the Palestinian National Council again.

This reconciliation has even touched international terrorist Abu Nidal, who met on April 12 in Algiers with Arafat's associate Abu Jihad. He then signed a document committing his Fatah-Revolutionary Council to operate "only within the occupied territories." Another to join the festivities was Abu Musa of the dissident Fatah. Mediated through the growing Palestinian Communist Party and Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, this reconciliation has taken place at a high cost to Arafat, who saw no other alternative: He had to renounce the 1985 agreement with Jordan's King Hussein, which stipulat-

ed that Jordan and the PLO could form a joint delegation in any international negotiations.

Although such a posture might appear contradictory to Moscow's push for such an international peace conference, it fits all too well. By breaking his ties with Jordan, Arafat is for the time being surrendering control of his national movement to Moscow and its closest allies. This has provoked anger in Damascus, which has been committed since 1982 to getting rid of Arafat. But as Syrian President Hafez al Assad will find out when he flies to Moscow at the end of April, everything can always be negotiated, and there is little he can do. For Moscow, to be in control of a unified Palestinian card which can be manipulated at will, is more important than not hurting Assad's Alawite pride. Entirely under Soviet control, Syria will doubtless discover soon enough the benefits of the new arrangement, which eventually will ring the death knell for the political future of Yasser Arafat.

The Soviet-sponsored Palestinian reunification has wider consequences. An Arafat-Habash alliance potentially spells trouble for many of the Arab states which have not hesitated to play one faction against the other, for years. On the front line for trouble is Jordan's King Hussein, who repudiated his agreement with Arafat last year, but has since violently denounced the United States and come to serve as a kind of spokesman for Assad. While meeting with Prime Minister Thatcher on April 9, Hussein pleaded unsuccessfully for London to reestablish full diplomatic relations with Damascus. Hussein, who was also forced to turn to Moscow for military requests which were denied him by Washington, now looks cornered.

Soviet-Israeli negotiations

The ongoing Palestinian unrest on the West Bank is another signal of how Moscow can pressure the Israeli leadership. Started by hunger strikes by Palestinian prisoners, the unrest was timed to coincide with the preparations of the Palestinian National Council, and is expected to intensify until mid-May. The meaning is all too clear: There is little the Israelis can do about it, unless they make further concessions to Moscow.

Already, as the April 10 issue of the *Jerusalem Post*

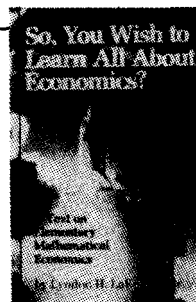
reported, Moscow is now the power which will decide the future of the National Unity coalition. This was the substance of the April 7 talks in Rome between Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and the two Soviet observers at a conference of the Socialist International, Karen Brutents and Aleksandr Zaton of the International Department of the Central Committee. Analyzing Peres's willingness to meet Soviet demands for an international peace conference, the *Jerusalem Post's* David Rosenberg argued that Peres can begin to deliver, only if he gets rid of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. However, continued Rosenberg, for Peres to break the coalition government, he has to be able to show "signs of good will from Moscow." Such signs, concluded Rosenberg, will be the potential monthly increase of Soviet Jewish emigration to Vienna. "Whenever Peres is satisfied with the increase, the real crisis will erupt."

Whether Moscow is committed to a "Peres card" for Israel is highly doubtful. As Rosenberg reported, Moscow's immediate interest in making some concessions—yet to be concretized—on the issue of Jewish emigration, is aimed at the United States. The ploy is to make a deal between Moscow and the American Jewish lobby to repeal the Jackson and Stevenson amendments which restrict trade with the Soviet Union, to give the Soviet Union "Most Favored Nation" status, and to allow American firms to invest directly in the Soviet economy. Such a deal would obviously have broader political implications for the upcoming American presidential elections. As *Le Figaro's* Annie Kriegel noted on April 16, World Jewish Congress chairman Edgar Bronfman went to Moscow in early April in a dual capacity: as a leader of the Jewish community, and as chairman of "the Seagram commercial enterprise." Kriegel pointed out that Peres's behavior toward Moscow will mean "the opening of a Pandora's Box, and of a process of which he will lose control."

Indeed, despite his own political deals, Peres is set up to end up on the losing side. The current West Bank unrest is being directly manipulated by the right-wing of the Labor Party, represented by Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and the Likud forces around Prime Minister Shamir and the former defense minister, Ariel Sharon. Israeli settlers on the West Bank have charged that "Peres has blood on his face," and said that his calls for peace negotiations have "strengthened the terrorists." It is no secret that Sharon is cooperating with the ultra-nationalists of the settlers' movement, the Gush Emunim, and the right-wing Takhya party of Geula Cohen and nuclear scientist Yuval Ne'eman, who are raiding Arab villages. Directly paving the way for the current explosion was the alliance at the Herut party convention early in April between Shamir and Sharon against David Levy. Sharon may well be calculating that Shamir is only a lame duck to be politically destroyed by forthcoming revelations around the Jonathan Pollard espionage affair. Meanwhile, Sharon was elected chairman of the Herut's Central Committee, a post which gives him direct control over the party membership.

The real political axis which is emerging, is between Rabin and Sharon. While Sharon deploys his fanatic friends on the West Bank, Rabin's army does complementary work; both men are building their reputation as tough nationalist no-compromise politicians. This posture makes them Moscow's best choice for negotiations over the future of the region. While Moscow can play its unified Palestinian card against the Israelis, it can also use its longstanding channels to Rabin and Sharon, either directly or through Syria, as a weapon against the Palestinians, Jordan, and most of the Arab states. Rabin was instrumental in negotiating the entry of the Syrian troops into Beirut and Sidon in mid-April. Sharon has had direct access to Assad's court for years, through the President's brother Rifaat, or through the Syrian Jewish mafia of Jack Nasser of Israel's International Bank, and National Republican Bank chairman Edmond Safra, whose families still reside in Damascus.

Through Moscow's good offices, Jerusalem and Damascus can reorganize the region; this may require a limited confrontation, as a face-saving device, and it may require bloodier times on the West Bank. It may also require more fundamental political changes inside Israel, with more radical figures coming to the fore. It is doubtful indeed whether an international peace conference will ever assemble, but the diplomatic organizing process is scoring more gains for Moscow than the actual negotiations would anyway.



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