
Khomeini Sees Convergence with Gorbachov

Moscow, capital of the Islamic world?

by Thierry Lalevé

Though planned for months, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze's successful visit to Teheran took everyone by surprise.

Of course, there were a few unpredicted events, or so it seems superficially. First, the fact that Shevardnadze became the first official of any foreign power to be received by Ruhollah Khomeini in a televised meeting since the visit of Yasser Arafat and Abdelsalam Jalloud of the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1979. Second, pushing aside the problems most Western countries are facing, the Soviets decided to appoint themselves mediators between the West and the Islamic world over the Rushdie affair. The Soviet news agency TASS wrote on March 1 that as a "religious leader," Khomeini could not react otherwise but to issue his *fatwa*, the death sentence, against Salman Rushdie for having published a book offensive to Muslims, *The Satanic Verses*.

In a nutshell, Shevardnadze's visit represented two critical achievements: a new strategic relationship between the dictatorships of Moscow and Teheran—reminiscent of the 1939 Hitler-Stalin Pact—and the projection of Moscow as the defender and de facto spokesman of Islam.

Radio Moscow on Feb. 27 cited Foreign Minister Shevardnadze hailing "the exchange of letters between Khomeini and Gorbachov as a turning point in Soviet-Iranian relations." Radio Moscow's effusive praise of the Moscow-Teheran pact continued, "Foreign Minister Shevardnadze expressed his firm belief that Soviet-Iran relations will develop despite ideological differences, stressing this while meeting with Iranian President Khamenei today." Referring to Shevardnadze's meeting on Feb. 26 with Khomeini, "Khomeini supported the idea expressed in the message from Mikhail Gorbachov that favorable conditions are developing for Soviet-Iranian relations to enter a new stage."

The meeting was hailed throughout the Iranian press as heralding a "new era between the two countries." Khomeini is quoted saying that such a relationship has to be based on Iran's "confronting the Western powers . . . and imposing the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the Gulf." Khomeini and Shevardnadze were also quoted saying that both countries will cooperate—in Afghanistan.

Iranian media reported several deals in the offing, such as resumption of Iranian gas exports to Europe via the Soviet Union, and a large arms contract. As a gesture, former Tudeh (Communist) Party Secretary General Kianouri, in jail for

six years, was released the morning of Feb. 27. Following Khomeini's orders, Interior Minister Mohtashemi called for an "all-out boycott" against the West.

Moscow, spokesman for Islam

For years, Moscow has striven to establish a privileged relationship with the Islamic world, be it of the more radical variety or mainstream Islam. This policy arose out of concern to keep its own Central Asian Muslim republics under control, as well as the desire to capitalize on the "anti-imperialist" contents of radical Islam to judo the plans of those gullible souls in the West who dreamt of using an "Islamic card" against the Soviet Union. The success of Moscow's policy could already be ascertained in the last year's events in the U.S.S.R.'s Transcaucasus republics, when not a single Muslim country tried to use the crisis between Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan to interfere in Soviet affairs.

To understand these developments it is crucial to review the events which followed the Oct. 3, 1986 International Islamic Conference in Baku, presided over the chairman of the Shi'ite Transcaucasus Muslim Board, Sheikh Pasha-Zadeh. Explicitly modeled on the 1920 conference of the Comintern on the "People of the Orient," the new Baku conference aimed at fostering Soviet intelligence penetration of the mainstream of the Islamic world. Given that many participants came from countries which established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union only during the course of 1987 or 1988, it worked. Given that representatives of such organizations as the World Muslim Congress, headquartered in Pakistan and financed by Saudi Arabia, then toured the Soviet Union and accepted Pasha-Zadeh as one of its Executive Committee members, it again worked.

Hence, it is not a surprise to find that the key organizers of the first bloody riots against Rushdie book, on Feb. 12 in Pakistan, such as Kausa Niazi, belong to groups of Muslims who have been touring the Soviet Union, and praising its policies toward Central Asian Muslims. Moscow didn't write Rushdie's book, but certainly organized the key demonstrations. The consequences have been, first, to foster instability in Pakistan and the subcontinent, as originally planned in the process leading to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan; second, to create a deep-rooted crisis between the West and Islam. It should not be overlooked that, despite months of low-key protest, the crisis over the Rushdie book started with

the Feb. 12 riots in Pakistan (story, page 46), which—and only then—triggered Khomeini into issuing his *fatwa*.

Soviet-Iran deals

From that standpoint, Shevardnadze's visit to Teheran was carefully prepared. Only a few days after Khomeini's *fatwa*, it came at a time when the so-called pro-Western faction around Parliamentary Speaker Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was weakened. A few weeks earlier, Deputy Foreign Minister Larijani was speaking in New York about upcoming "changes" in Iran-American relations, and it was rumored that the United States would soon agree to a decision of the International Court at The Hague in favor of unfreezing Iranian assets in the United States. Relations with Britain were just being reestablished, and the French foreign minister had just been in Teheran.

All of those developments disappeared in a puff of smoke when Khomeini ordered Rushdie's death. And yet, the main question remains why was it that Khomeini didn't take such a decision earlier? The book has been on the shelves for months. Intelligence sources report that local Muslims in France or Britain had been going to their Iranian embassies urging Iran to take action. There was no answer; the Rafsanjani group just didn't want to pick up the issue. However, the success of the Pakistani demonstrations made enough impression on Interior Minister Mohtashemi, to convince Khomeini to make his move.

Breaking with the West and turning toward Moscow was then a natural step. For months, Khomeini had been urged by radical followers to take new international initiatives to keep Islamic fundamentalism from falling into limbo. Likewise, a personal letter from Khomeini to Mikhail Gorbachov in early January contained the seeds of a radical shift.

For the Iranians, this was a radical shift, albeit perhaps more tactical than strategic. Moscow thinks otherwise. A breakthrough with Iran has been carefully prepared for years. As with other Islamic countries, Moscow understood that this could not be concretized until its final withdrawal from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, it prepared the ground. For example, one of Shevardnadze's deals signed in Teheran includes the extension of an oil pipeline into the Soviet Union and the building of a railway between the Soviet Union and the Gulf on Iran's Eastern borders with Afghanistan. Underlining Moscow's persistence and determination is the fact that procedures for the deal were first set into motion in August 1987!

However spectacular, the result of Shevardnadze's visit can only be judged by the economic negotiations between the two countries which start on March 5, and whether Moscow does deliver weapons to Iran. It has so far refused to take such a direct step, careful not to jettison its links to Iraq or endanger the ties it is slowly building with countries like Saudi Arabia. Such ties are important for Moscow's other initiatives, its peace gambit in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Meanwhile, the West is facing quite an uncomfortable situation.

Civil war threat looms in Yugoslavia

by Konstantin George

Potential war between Yugoslavia and Albania was added to the threat of civil war in Yugoslavia March 2, as Belgrade March 2 blamed Albania for ethnic protests in Yugoslavia's Kosovo province. Yugoslav State Presidency member Lazar Mojsov told Parliament, "The Kosovo counter-revolution is under the decisive influence of Albanian intelligence." He said that the Yugoslav leadership had acquired a document of an illegal group, which proved that ethnic Albanians were planning an armed revolt, and blamed federal authorities for failing to take strong measures to counter Albanian nationalism and separatism. "All our actions can be compared with the actions of firemen rushing to put out fires," he complained.

In Kosovo, which is under military occupation, police began to arrest "organizers of demonstrations," reported the Tanjug news agency. Reuters news service reported rumors that one former leader of the Kosovo Communist Party was under arrest and another had fled to Albania; both were deposed last year in a maneuver by Serbian strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

As Yugoslavia approaches the threshold of fragmentation along ethnic lines, the aggravation of the Balkan crisis portends sweeping changes on the European map, with Moscow standing ready to grab what it can from the chaos. As in the period 1910-14, the present-day Balkan crisis could ignite a global conflict.

The root cause of the radicalization of Serbs, Albanians, and all ethnic groups, is the economic disaster—the direct consequence of Yugoslavia's years' long submission to the cruel dictates of International Monetary Fund austerity "conditionalities." This submission, prioritizing debt repayment and collapsing living standards to the levels of the 1950s, features inflation rates over 300%, not seen in Europe since Weimar Germany, and Great Depression levels of over 20% unemployment.

Conflict between Serbia and Kosovo

The latest explosion began with the Feb. 23 miners' strike in the Albanian-inhabited autonomous region of Kosovo,