

International Intelligence

Laith Shubeilat under arrest in Jordan

Leading Jordanian opposition figure and Schiller Institute collaborator Laith Shubeilat was arrested in Ma'an on Feb. 19, after speaking during Friday prayers at the local mosque. Later that day, demonstrators gathered in front of the mosque, protesting possible U.S. military action against Iraq, despite the government's recent ban on all demonstrations. One protester was killed when authorities tried to break up the rally.

Shubeilat, who heads the country's 30,000-member engineers association and is a former member of Parliament, had earlier in the week protested the government ban on all demonstrations. He is being blamed for instigating the disturbances. Although no charges have been filed against him, it is widely believed that he will be accused of inciting to riot or sedition, and *lèse-majesté*. He is currently in an Amman prison, and can receive visits only from his lawyer.

These developments reflect the fact that the political and social system in Jordan is reaching a boiling point, as a result of tensions generated by the Iraq crisis. Sources in Jordan expect the government to declare a state of emergency, or martial law, until the crisis is over. One indication of the tensions in the country, is the fact that a chief justice has been sacked for trying to defend the laws guaranteeing freedom of the press. The judge had ruled that the government's amendments to the press law, limiting freedom, were unconstitutional. He was sacked after only two and a half months in office.

London press chorus hums dirge for Russia

On the occasion of Russian President Boris Yeltsin's State of the Federation speech, but also coinciding with the International Monetary Fund delegation's invasion of Moscow and Russia's heightened role in attempts to defuse the London-orchestrated Iraq crisis, leading British press outlets proclaimed Yeltsin as good as dead already. *The Economist* of Feb. 14 set the ghoulish tone, writing,

Yeltsin exhibits "worrying eccentricity," and his "political powers seem to be failing him too." A Russian political scientist from the talking heads circuit, was quoted: "Yeltsin will die a President. The only question is when."

The Feb. 18 *Financial Times* reported on the State of the Federation speech, that the "frail figure of Mr. Yeltsin" was able to "fleetingly shed the bumbling incoherence which has characterized some of his recent public appearances." In an editorial, the *Times* said that if Yeltsin wanted to dismiss ministers who fail to secure growth, "he should, in justice, consider firing himself, since his endless intrigues are what makes it so difficult for any group of ministers to succeed. His subordinates cannot tell him this. Maybe, [IMF Managing Director] Michel Camdessus . . . will dare to do so."

UN observers kidnapped in tumultuous Georgia

Four United Nations observers were kidnapped on Feb. 19 in Zugdidi, western Georgia, near where Russian forces police a disengagement line around the Republic of Abkhazia (part of Georgia). The Georgian Foreign Ministry said that local women and children were also taken hostage, by a band of 10-20 attackers. The kidnapers are reportedly "Zviadists," from the legions of the late ex-President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The Foreign Ministry called the attack "a continuation of the Feb. 8 terrorist act against the country's President [Eduard Shevardnadze] and is another expression of international terrorism."

By Feb. 16, Georgian police had detained six of the 26 members of the Shevardnadze hit squad, most of whom appeared to be Zviadists, and uncovered a "gigantic" weapons cache, according to Russian TV. On Feb. 11, a person calling himself "Salman Raduyev," head of the paramilitary "Army Named after Dudayev," claimed responsibility for the attempt on Shevardnadze, which is likely a diversion, but *Komsomolskaya Pravda* noted that, "two days before the assault (Feb. 8) 'Raduyev' [the original Chechen guerrilla named Raduyev is believed dead] predicted, 'This upstart

Shevardnadze will not rule for long. He will soon be replaced by the supporters of late Gamsakhurdia.'" Gamsakhurdia and the late Chechen Gen. Jokar Dudayev were close acquaintances.

Pope moves ahead with Christian-Islamic dialogue

Pope John Paul II moved ahead on several fronts in February to consolidate a dialogue between Islam and Christianity. He met with Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, the first Iranian official to be received at the Vatican since the election of President Seyyed Mohammad Khatami. According to Iranian sources for the Italian news agency ANSA, Kharrazi delivered to John Paul II a message from Khatami concerning the dialogue among religions. Last October, Khatami sent a message to the Pope, stressing that, "The followers of divine religions should work to spread peace and stability in the world."

On Feb. 16, John Paul II received the credentials of Ambassador Husein-Fuad Mustafa Kabaziya of Libya. The Holy See and Libya established diplomatic relations on March 10, 1997. During the meeting, John Paul II echoed the ambassador's words regarding "the will of the Libyan people to contribute to peace in the world." Christians and Muslims, he said, "have many things in common, as men and as believers. . . . [This dialogue] presupposes the capacity to recognize God with humble submission and to bear witness to Him through word and deed. . . . In a world that desires unity and peace, faith must favor understanding among peoples and promote dialogue, so that differences and conflicts may be resolved not by means of destruction but through mutual cooperation."

Also in February, the Vatican announced the reform of the Constitution of the Vicariat, the Catholic leadership of the city of Rome, whose bishop is, of course, the Pope. The new Constitution states: "Towards the followers of Islam and other religions present in Rome, an attitude of welcome and social solidarity is to be developed, together with dialogue and collaboration."