

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

A Soviet shift in the Gulf?

Moscow's moves toward Iraq could soon leave Washington holding the diplomatic bag.

Ronald Reagan may only now be about to pay the costs of President Jimmy Carter's illicit flirtation with Islamic fundamentalism in Iran. Hints of a Soviet shift toward a rapprochement with Iraq, along with renewed appeals by the Teheran mullahs for help from the Pentagon, might turn the U.S.S.R. into the defender of the Middle East from Khomeini's plague.

If the Soviet Union's shift indeed occurs, after prolonged Soviet ambivalence toward Iran and a chorus of Soviet voices praising Khomeini's "anti-imperialism," the United States may be facing a diplomatic trap in the Persian Gulf.

The first reports of a Soviet approach to Iraq followed the downing of an Israeli-sponsored weapons carrier over Soviet air-space, ferrying Israeli arms to Iran from Cyprus. Baghdad lost no time in making that story into a major propaganda coup, ridiculing stupid Arabs who allied with Iran after the 1979 revolution. Moscow reportedly took note, and reopened dormant contacts with Baghdad.

Now, in an article in *Jeune Afrique* magazine, respected French journalist Paul-Marie de la Gorce reports that the U.S.S.R. has resumed arms deliveries to Baghdad, suspended after the September 1980 outbreak of war.

Entitled "The Kremlin Chooses Baghdad," de la Gorce's article notes that Iraq has mended fences with Arab allies of Moscow

(though serious differences remain), and claims that Iraqi leader Taha Yassin Ramadan's trip to Moscow late last year resulted in Soviet arms flowing to Baghdad.

Iraq, meanwhile, has exercised its full diplomatic powers to rally Arab support in its war against the regime of the insane mullahs. At the beginning of January, Iraq called on all Arab countries to completely sever relations with Teheran, citing, among other atrocities committed by Iran, the documented case of Khomeini's subversion of the Arab Gulf states. The Saudis and their Arab Gulf allies may follow Iraq's suggestion soon.

On Jan. 7, the U.S.S.R. welcomed a scheduled visit by Syrian President Hafez Assad to Iran—a mission reportedly designed to seek an end to the Iran-Iraq war. The Soviet commentary, on Radio Peace and Progress, significantly noted that Israel is "trying to win Iran's friendship" and that Israeli officials have called on Khomeini to escalate the war. But Moscow concluded: "Iran and the Arab countries have one common enemy."

Such a remark indicates that the Soviet leadership may now believe that the time is ripe to strengthen its influence throughout the Persian Gulf. Even Saudi Arabia is reportedly considering whether to reopen diplomatic links with Moscow, severed in 1933.

For the United States, time is

running out.

Despite his private belief, voiced only once, on the eve of his presidency, that the Khomeini gang are "barbarians," President Reagan has yet to take action against the Teheran regime. In fact, according to several reports, an Iranian military group recently visited Washington to beg for arms. Although that delegation was rebuffed, Washington is still tolerating third-party transfer of American weapons to Iran. It appears that the U.S. government continues to believe that the Iranian clergy is the only barrier to Soviet influence in Iran!

The problem is compounded by the reported ouster in Iran of 1,000 Tudeh Communist Party workers from government posts, providing an illusory appearance that the mullacracy is "pro-Western." In fact, de la Gorce reports that the Tudeh leadership, including Chairman Kianouri, have abandoned the capital for a refuge in Kurdistan in Iran's northwest, out of the reach of Khomeini's Islamic Guard. As Mr. Reagan may soon learn the hard way, both the Iranian clergy and the Tudeh leadership are mere assets of the British intelligence service, playing a game whose rules the U.S.S.R. may no longer accept.

Ultimately, Iran must collapse. Its economy is non-existent, its finances are exhausted, and Iranians themselves are sick of theocratic fascism. Last week, Iran's labor minister announced severe restrictions on imports due to "cash-flow problems," and Iran's reserves may have fallen below \$1 billion. Dwindling even faster, however, may be American credibility, unless Washington finally decides to clean up the mess Jimmy left in Iran.