

Middle East Report by Nancy Coker

Iraq-Syria rapprochement?

Saddam Hussein may be the fall guy in Moscow's so-called turn toward Iraq.

In recent months the Soviet Union has been quietly engaged in a diplomatic effort to align the rival Ba'ath Party regimes of Iraq and Syria. That is a formidable task, given the animosity between Syrian President Hafez al Assad and his Iraqi counterpart, Saddam Hussein.

Thus the Soviet effort may require some changes in the governments of either Iraq or Syria in order to succeed. French sources say that in all likelihood Iraqi President Saddam Hussein will be sacrificed and replaced by a pro-Soviet, pro-Syrian military leadership.

It is in this context that France, which has close relations with Saddam Hussein's government, is concerned about reports that the Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal now has a contract for the assassination of Saddam Hussein.

Abu Nidal is an asset of the same old-Nazi nexus associated with Swiss-banker François Genoud, a top controller of extremist Muslim fundamentalists like former Algerian President Ahmed Ben Bella. The founder of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, Michel Aflaq, who has been identified in the plot to eliminate Hussein, is reported to have gained new power in Iraq, and is responsible for pressuring Saddam Hussein to allow Abu Nidal's return to Iraq last year. Shortly after taking power in 1978 Hussein attempted to clamp down on the Abu Nidal-Aflaq group, which was maneuvering against his bid to strengthen ties with the

government of the United States.

Whether Moscow is working with Aflaq and Abu Nidal is not known, but there are signs that Moscow is preparing its own assets within the Iraqi military to replace Hussein. The recent Soviet decision to increase military support for Iraq in its war with Iran is seen as an attempt to woo military factions inside Iraq.

Over recent weeks, delegations from the Syrian and Iraqi ruling Ba'ath parties have been rumored to be secretly meeting to prepare for such a reconciliation. Aflaq, who converted to Islam two years ago, has been playing a key role.

An entente between Syria and Iraq under Moscow's tutelage is viewed as a crucial component of the Kremlin's drive to gain full control of the "northern tier," which runs from Syria through Iraq to Afghanistan.

Should this objective succeed, Iran will be surrounded by a Soviet-dominated Iraq and Afghanistan, with the Soviet military mobilized on its northern border.

A senior official at the Soviet foreign ministry delivered a stern warning to the Khomeini regime in early April that Iran's northern neighbor was prepared to isolate Iran should Khomeini continue to pursue an "anti-Soviet" policy. The message reportedly contained an oblique threat to cut off all Comecon channels of civilian and military trade.

The recent Khomeini crackdown on the Iranian communist party, the

Tudeh Party, however, was not what credulous observers in Washington, D.C. were supposed to find it.

There is reason to believe that the Soviets themselves, in the person of a member of the Politburo, Geidar Aliyev, engineered the crackdown. These days the discredited Tudeh is not a useful vehicle of influence for the Soviets, who have direct assets within the mullarchy and other entities. It may well have been the Soviets who leaked, through the British, details of "secret plans" by the Tudeh to take over Iran.

The Jordanian daily *al Akhbar al Usbu* reported at about the same time that once Moscow succeeded in realigning Iraq and Syria, it would break the Syrian alliance with Iran. This alliance has permitted the cash-strapped Khomeini regime to sell oil in exchange for military and other essential imports. And Syria has provided essential backing for Iran's drive to weaken Saddam Hussein as Iran persisted in its military drive against Iraq.

In the long run, the Andropov regime fully intends to capture total control over the oilfields of the Persian Gulf, thereby gaining access to the primary source of oil for most of Western Europe and Japan. This would drastically advance Andropov's effort to Finlandize Europe and push the United States out of the Middle East.

OPEC recently opened a dialogue with Moscow in order to urge the Soviets to limit exports of crude oil to Europe, exports which have seriously undercut the OPEC price.

But Moscow has set its price for limiting its oil output: the U.S.-allied Gulf states, starting with Saudi Arabia, must open formal diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R., a move which would further erode U.S. standing in the region under current circumstances.