

## Middle East Report by Judith Wyer

### Moscow tightens its grip on Syria

*Politburo member Aliyev's trip to Syria set up a "strategic consensus" between Moscow and Damascus.*

Within five days of the March 8 collapse of the government of Syrian President Hafez al Assad, Soviet Deputy Prime Minister Geidar Ali Reza Aliyev arrived in Damascus. The next day, a new cabinet was formed which will further Moscow's bid to markedly upgrade its military alliance with Syria.

The daily *Al Qabas* of Kuwait reported March 19 that through Aliyev the U.S.S.R. has pledged to provide Syria with advanced military technology, including the MiG 29 and MiG 31 fighter planes. According to Western diplomats quoted by the Kuwaiti daily, Moscow intends to forge a military axis with Syria like the "strategic consensus" between the United States and Israel.

Aliyev is reported not only to have influenced the composition of Assad's new cabinet, which is said to benefit the military hardliners around Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas and Chief of Staff Hikmat Shihabi, but also to have begun the process of changing Syria's command-and-control. Moscow has pledged to upgrade satellite intelligence sharing, and to increase training for the Syrian military.

Aliyev finalized an agreement with Syria to upgrade the Syrian Air Force and "shift its role from defense to attack, toward achieving strategic balance with Israel," according to *Al Qabas*. This agreement and new arms deals "heralded a new and practical phase of Soviet-Syria relationship . . .

whereby Syria's escalation of confrontation with Israel appeared an urgent Soviet objective after President Ronald Reagan decided to curtail the U.S. confrontation with Syria."

Abdul Halim Khaddam, who was upgraded from foreign minister to first vice-president in the cabinet shuffle, is to make a tour of the Persian Gulf oil-exporting states in order to expedite the process of establishing relations between them and the U.S.S.R. The foremost target is Saudi Arabia.

In the weeks before the collapse of Assad's government, a faction fight erupted to the point of military clashes in the Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley of Lebanon and outside Damascus between military factions and the special forces of Hafez al Assad's younger brother Rifaat.

This power struggle emerged in November when the Syrian president was stricken with a heart attack, triggering a succession struggle. Despite his recovery, the infighting did not subside.

Assad himself is reported to have become suspicious of his ambitious and corrupt brother in the wake of his illness. "Poster wars" have erupted between the two brothers in Damascus, where brigades of Rifaat-supporters have plastered the city with his portrait, only to have the posters replaced the next day with pictures of a smiling Hafez al Assad. Late last year, what are politely known as "charity organizations," actually secret socie-

ties, were shut down, including one run by Rifaat al Assad.

Among the changes which Assad made in his cabinet was the appointment of three vice-presidents. After Khaddam, himself considered to be an ally of Tlas, is Rifaat al Assad, followed by Muhammed Zuhahr Mas-harqah, a long-time confidant of the Syrian president and activist in the ruling Ba'ath party. Assad who is known for his strong-man rule, has not shared power since he appointed a shortlived vice-presidential post in 1974.

The military faction, which includes the Syrian intelligence chief, Ali Duba and the influential head of the Syrian Third Army, Shefiq Fayeze, made critical gains at the expense of Rifaat al Assad, *Le Monde* reported on March 13, and that this signals the eventual dismantling of Rifaat's crack special forces, which act as a kind of palace guard for the ruling Assad clan. Moreover, it was reported that one of the Syrian president's longstanding allies, Sharif Barakat, was dismissed as the chief of the cabinet. Khaddam himself is vying for power at the expense of the Assads.

Arab sources caution that despite the apparent calm in Damascus following the appointment of the new cabinet, things are far from settled. There are reports of a new generation of leaders coming up through the ranks of the Syrian Ba'ath Party, who are firmly allied to the military.

Rifaat al Assad, well known for his ruthlessness, has jeopardized the rule of the Assad clan and more broadly the Alawite Muslim minority from which it comes. Tlas himself is from the majority Sunni Muslim community which only three years ago fought a military battle against Assad. Rumors are again rife that President Assad's health is failing, which if true would invite even more violent power struggles.