

## Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

### Moscow's sword-and-fire policy

*In the wake of Egypt and Jordan's reconciliation, the Russians are preparing a new Middle East crisis.*

The reconciliation between Jordan and Egypt announced on Sept. 25 has provoked much ranting and raving in the two meccas of Arab radicalism, Tripoli and Damascus. Almost immediately, Syrian Vice-President Khaddam declared that King Hussein would meet "the same fate as Sadat." Syria's ruling Al Baath party declared: "Damascus cannot tolerate a new Sadat on its own borders."

Qaddafi was not long in following suit. Squashing the laughable hopes of those who actually believed he was becoming a moderate, the Libyan dictator told an Oct. 7 mass rally that "Hussein should be punished for his betrayal." Then, on Oct. 9, Libya's JANA news agency wired another announcement by the mad colonel that it was a "national duty to eliminate and decapitate Hussein and Mubarak"!

While both Libya and Syria have their own reasons to feel betrayed, they are primarily carrying out orders from Moscow. On Oct. 5, the Middle East correspondent of *Izvestia* devoted a half-page article to denouncing King Hussein, who allegedly "has broken Arab unity" as well as the "commitments made in Baghdad in 1979" not to reconcile with the Egyptians so long as they adhere to Camp David.

The Kremlin thought that through its control over Syria and Libya on one side, and its developing relations with both Cairo and Jordan on the other, it could become the game-master in the region at America's expense. Short of ordering the immediate assassination of Hussein and Mubarak, Moscow can now do little but reorganize its region-

al strategy and plan a new offensive.

What Moscow fears is that the Egypt-Jordan reconciliation is part of an American grand design for a new peace initiative after the presidential elections, which would bring together Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Arafat's PLO. While there is little serious indication of such a plan, the Oct. 3 London *Daily Express* reported that this is being talked of in Washington's corridors. That's enough for Moscow to mobilize its agents and allies for a new offensive; hence the activation of Al Jihad in Beirut, the religious warfare opposing Sunnis and Shi'ites in Lebanon, as well as the summoning of Syria's Hafez al Assad to Moscow on Oct. 15, where the next crisis in the Middle East will be decided.

Those who will pay the price most immediately are the Palestinians. As reported by *Le Matin de Paris* Oct. 9, the strategy of Soviet-controlled Syria is simple: "In the framework of a new Yalta in the Middle East, it wants to hold both the Lebanese and Palestinian cards!" The Egypt-Jordan rapprochement is upsetting the negotiations held last summer between Israel's Sharon and the Syrians for a private deal over Lebanon and the Golan Heights, and may give PLO-chairman Yasser Arafat enough maneuvering room to escape their grip; many in Damascus were enraged at Arafat's recent visit to Jordan.

Correspondingly, increased attacks against Mubarak and Hussein have been accompanied by even more brutal attacks against Arafat and Palestinians loyal to him. For example,

by Oct. 10, dozens of members of Arafat's El Fatah had been rounded up by Syrian forces in Lebanon and northern Syria. The day before, Qaddafi had called for a reorganization of the Palestinian movement around "one single Palestinian chief who should unite the organizations through sword and fire if necessary." Continued Qaddafi: "Any Palestinian who will not pay his dues in blood and money should be killed." No clarification was needed to understand that Arafat was not the "Palestinian chief" he was talking about.

The same day, George Habash of the PFLP announced in Damascus that he was ready to join with the Syrian-puppet "Nationalist Alliance" of Palestinians to remove Arafat from leadership of the PLO.

Essential to this game has been the refusal of the Syrians and their Palestinians to allow a new meeting of the Palestinian National Council. Such a meeting, they fear, would consolidate Arafat's positions because of the support he has in the occupied territories and elsewhere. The Syrians have announced that they will only agree to a meeting and a preparatory reconciliation of the various Palestinian organizations if the central committee of El Fatah "disavows and discharges Arafat" first!

However, the game is played at several levels, entirely under Soviet control so far: Syria and Libya are outspoken enemies of Arafat, while Soviet ally South Yemen, whose President Ali Nasser recently visited Moscow, is reportedly urging the Soviets to soften Syria's stand, a demand that Arafat himself delivered to Andrei Gromyko in East Berlin on Oct. 6.

As result of all this, the PLO is all but neutralized. Arafat is reported to be looking at Greece, Malta, or Cyprus as a site for a PNC meeting no Arab country dares host.