

## Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

### Chaos and confusion

*Who's behind the obscure new terror groups that are suddenly cropping up? Ask in Jerusalem and Damascus.*

With the Sept. 24 murder of three Israelis in Lanarca, Cyprus, by a group of "Palestinian" terrorists which has refused even to identify itself, the war of terror and counterterror in the Mideast has taken a bizarre new turn. Who is striking at whom? The participants themselves do not know, as new groups proliferate and vanish, and the intelligence services which deploy them do not hesitate to strike at their own expendable assets.

It was good propaganda, perhaps, for the Israelis to blame the Lanarca murders on the obscure "Force-17" group, and to assert that it belonged to Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization; but no proof of this has ever been presented. How little the Israelis themselves believed that charge can be seen from the fact that, just days before their Oct. 1 "retaliatory" raid on PLO headquarters in Tunis, they had raided the headquarters of Col. Abu Musa, an anti-Arafat Syrian agent in the Baalbek region of Lebanon. Between the Sept. 26 raid on Abu Musa's headquarters and the strike against Tunisia, did Israel gather proof of Arafat's guilt? Doubtful.

The nature of the Lanarca murders was also singular. The three Israelis were *not* shot because the terrorists' demands were not met—they were killed even before any demands were put forward! These were cold-blooded executions, aiming at provoking Israeli retaliations, like the Abu Nidal-sponsored attempted murder of the Israeli ambassador in London in June 1982, which gave then-defense minister Ariel Sharon the pretext he need-

ed to invade Lebanon. The Lanarca murders had no other aim than to provide a similar pretext.

But for the cover-story to be accepted politically in Jerusalem, "F-17" had to have a history which could plausibly allow the blame to be placed on Arafat. Part of that history has been a systematic effort by Syrian and East bloc intelligence agencies to establish in Damascus exact duplicates of all of Arafat's organizations.

From the vantage point of Syrian President Hafez Assad, to deploy obviously Syrian-controlled Palestinians against Israel would be problematic; it would endanger Assad's courtship of Washington and provoke Israeli retaliation against Syria itself. But to deploy against Israel Syrian-controlled Palestinians *claiming to work for Arafat*, is another story. This creates chaos and confusion, gives the Israelis the pretext they need, boosts Assad's credibility, and confuses even Arafat's own ranks.

Syria and the Soviet Union know it; Israel knows it; but for others, the doubt remains. Hence the refusal of the Lanarca terrorists to identify themselves. Anything else said about them is either speculation or disinformation.

The same pattern can be traced in the Oct. 7 hijacking of the Italian cruise ship "Achille Lauro." The "Palestinian Liberation Front" claimed responsibility. But which PLF? The one based in Tunis and led by Abul Abbas, a member of the PLO and an associate of Arafat? Or the one based in Damascus and run by Talaat Ya'acoub, ex-

pelled from the PLO in 1981 and a founding member, with Georges Habbash, of the anti-Arafat "Palestinian National Salvation Front"? As Abbas has a more public profile than Ya'acoub, Abbas was blamed.

Confusion intensified, as the obscure "Revolutionary Organization of Socialist Muslims" was also implicated in the hijacking. The ROSM had bombed the British Airways office in Rome the week before, and came to notoriety in November 1984, when it assassinated the British vice-consul in Bombay.

The ROSM struck at British Airways just as the Abu Nidal terror group announced that it had condemned to death two Palestinians who had accepted an invitation from British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to come to London to discuss the peace initiative of Arafat and Jordan's King Hussein. Members of the Abu Nidal group were arrested in London on Oct. 4, at safe-houses filled with Libyan weapons. Abu Nidal himself met with Libya's Colonel Qaddafi on Sept. 28, according to the Libyan news service.

It seems that the ROSM and Abu Nidal's "Black September" group are operating with a common command structure, but a unique division of labor. The ROSM has targeted exclusively British-related interests, while "Black September," reactivated in the summer of 1984, has targeted Jordan.

And what is behind the sudden creation of the "Islamic Liberation Organization," which kidnaped four Soviet diplomats on Sept. 30?

The mushrooming of such organizations threatens to unleash a war of terror like that of the early 1970s, with a new Middle East war and a new division of the region. But the stakes may turn out to be much higher than the "clever" strategists in Moscow, Damascus, and Jerusalem anticipate.