

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Hussein goes to Damascus

The U.S. retreat from the region has forced Jordan's king into a very precarious round of diplomacy with his enemies.

The recent visit of Jordan's King Hussein to Damascus, Syria may have paved the way for a dramatic shift in the balance of forces in the Middle East, bringing Damascus closer to its dream of becoming the second regional superpower, after Israel.

Apart from the potential for a staged, limited war between Israel and Syria over control of the Golan Heights, the next few months will see a fight to the death between Cairo and Damascus. According to Israeli political observers, this fight will determine the future of the entire region.

Israel is the swing factor, and both Syria and Damascus have political and military alliances which represent two different political alternatives to Jerusalem. But the overriding context for Israel's choice, and reflected in Hussein's visit to Syria, is the strategic fact of U.S. withdrawal and Soviet advance in the region.

Cairo is genuinely committed to a peace settlement with the PLO and the Israeli factions around Shimon Peres, a policy dependent on the United States. Soviet-satrap Syria plays an entirely different game, presenting itself as a regional empire which wants to divide and conquer the region's nations, a Greater Syria from Iran's borders to Cyprus, Jordan, and the Hejaz, in agreement with a Greater Israel, both under Soviet sponsorship.

Behind Cairo stand several countries: North Yemen, Iraq, Jordan, and the PLO forces of Yasser Arafat, as well as some Northern African countries

which have never been directly involved in the Arab/Israeli conflict. Around Damascus stand the Palestinian radicals and international terrorist structures, as well as Iran, and Syria's control over Lebanon.

Hussein's visit was the first in more than seven years, and came despite repeated attempts by Syria's Assad to have him assassinated or overthrown. Only a few hours after his arrival, Hussein announced that the two countries had decided to resume full diplomatic relations and exchange ambassadors. However, little else has been said or revealed since. Although on Dec. 31, Assad and Hussein held a day of talks, nothing of their content has been leaked.

Behind the meeting was months of secret diplomacy, strengthened by the refusal of the United States to recognize the Feb. 11, 1985 Jordan-Palestinian agreement as a serious basis for negotiation with Israel. Initiating the reconciliation with Syria were the Saudis, especially Crown Prince Abdullah, himself married into the Assad clan. Relying on Syria to guarantee the security of the Kingdom, the Saudis put heavy cash on the table to smooth the diplomatic process. Several hundred thousand dollars are reported to have been paid in personal bribes to Jordanians and Syrians, along with offers of free oil supplies as well as increased economic aid.

So, in early December, Jordanian Prime Minister Rifaai, himself of Syrian origins, visited Damascus for

meetings with Assad to plan King Hussein's visit.

After suffering his disappointments in negotiating with the Americans, and the U.S. Congress's hold on military aid, Hussein decided last fall to initiate closer military and political contacts with the Soviet Union, as part of wider diplomatic activity which received the approval of Jordan's former colonial master, Britain.

Whether Hussein has decided to ally with Syria is another matter altogether. Though also disappointed by Arafat's refusal to move any further with their joint peace initiative, Jordan has commitments both to Cairo and to Syria's arch-enemy, Iraq. Assad is also reported to have sent a Syrian emissary to Teheran on Dec. 28, to assure the Iranians that Hussein's presence in Damascus would not affect the Damascus-Teheran axis.

Of special importance is that Syria let it be known in preceding weeks that a full reconciliation with Jordan has a particular price: While Damascus commits itself to halting attacks on Jordan and putting a halt—for now—to assassination attempts, Jordan must provide shelter to Syria's radical Palestinian terrorists and agree in principle to their use of Jordanian territory against Israel.

That prospect can raise no joy in Amman. Though Syria may promise military help, there is little doubt that Damascus would be only too happy to stand by in the face of a retaliatory Israeli attack on Jordan, to then pick up some pieces of territory under the cover of "brotherly help"—as in Lebanon beginning in 1976.

According to Kuwait's *Al Qabas* newspaper of Jan. 1, Assad told Hussein, more as a threat than an offer, that Soviet intelligence reports indicated just such Israeli attacks on Jordan!