

Palestinian National Council: Soviets win

by Thierry Lalevée

Heralded as a personal victory for PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian National Council which gathered in Algiers beginning April 20, was a milestone in the Soviet drive to become the power-broker in the Middle Eastern conflicts. It was a victory for Arafat, in that despite many assassination attempts sponsored by Syria's Hafez al Assad, he is alive; and despite Assad's attempts to create an ersatz PLO called the "Palestinian National Salvation Front" (PNSF), he remains PLO chairman. But for the future of the Palestinian movement and peace in the region, the victory was worse than pyrrhic, and Arafat's own political future is in doubt.

To celebrate this show of Palestinian unity, wide-ranging concessions were made, in which Moscow alone called the shots. The brutality of Soviet blackmail was exerted behind the scenes while the public side took a more diplomatic mien, sponsored by Algeria and Libya's Muammar Qaddafi. Days before the congress, the PLO leadership was forced to hold direct talks with international terrorist Abu Nidal. Though only a public meeting between PLO number-two man Abu Jihad and Abu Nidal was acknowledged, Yasser Arafat himself met the man he had personally condemned to death 15 years ago, and who was responsible for executing all of Arafat's associates in Europe. Bitter pro-Palestinian activists questioned the reconciliation between Arafat and the killer of his associate Sartawi, who had worked for an Arab-Israeli peace settlement: "Will it mean that Abu Nidal will only kill Palestinian moderates in the West Bank?"

Of course, Abu Nidal didn't attend the PNC; his presence would have totally discredited the PLO, and that's not Moscow's immediate aim. Moscow desires a Palestinian movement under its control, mobilizable at will, but credible enough for its propaganda in favor of an International Peace Conference. For the same reason, international terrorist Abul Abbas was also dismissed from the leadership. Through the election to the PLO Executive Committee of the Palestinian Communist Party, despite its total lack of credentials because of its inactivity in the occupied territories, Moscow will have its agents in place. This will complement the pressures exerted on Arafat by the presence of George Habash's PFLP and Nayef Hawatmeh's PDFLP, the two founding organizations of the Damascus-based PNSF. In an inexpensive good-

will gesture, Habash had announced the dissolution of the PNSF, hours before the holding of PNC.

The Arab strategy

If there had been any doubts as to Moscow's clout in the region, the Syrian lack of reaction days before the PNC made the point. Assad's Syria, on the front line of the anti-Arafat campaigns, saw its Damascus-based Palestinian puppets leaving its capital, one after the other, without complaints. No doubt Assad's pride was hurt that the Soviet leadership had so abruptly shifted gears. However, he still has power over Lebanon, hence over its Palestinian camp. He could also appreciate, that under Soviet advice, Libya's Qaddafi decided not to attend the PNC—as a gesture to Damascus. Assad was then summoned to Moscow on April 23. The Soviet media heralded the convergences of views between the two countries, including on the need for an International Peace Conference.

Also intriguing has been the silence of Jordan's King Hussein who was one of the sticking-points between Arafat and his former enemies. Though Hussein had himself denounced the February 1986 agreement with the PLO last year, Arafat had held back from doing likewise. Days before the PNC, he bowed to the radicals' demands, but this provoked no particular reaction in Amman. King Hussein and Assad had consulted extensively over recent weeks, and it was announced that less than 10 days after Assad, Hussein will fly with half of his cabinet to Moscow.

A deliberate provocation from Arafat over the Polisario "liberation" movement caused a Moroccan walkout from the PNC, and Morocco to announce the next day it was closing down the PLO office in Morocco. Only two weeks earlier, King Hassan had reiterated his willingness to help mediate the conflict with Israel. Clearly, the alliance heralded by the July 1986 summit in Morocco, around then Israeli Premier Shimon Peres's idea of a Marshall Plan for the region, is one of Moscow's main targets. As the PNC met, violence rocked the West Bank, paralleled by two attempts of Fatah guerrillas to cross the Lebanese borders into Israel, and renewed rocket attacks against Israeli settlements.

An immediate victim has been Shimon Peres, whose last two years of peace efforts were denounced by Israeli hardliners for having "weakened Israel." In a special cabinet meeting on April 19, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin forced the issue and got full powers to launch retaliation at will in Lebanon, against the Palestinians.

Rabin has at the same time welcomed the Syrian move to the Awali river around Sidon, as "expected and necessary" to control the Palestinian movement. Just as the U.S. State Department is said to have thrown its weight behind a Rabin-led coalition, Moscow is doing the same through Assad. Yet, Moscow's control over the Palestinian movement keeps them both in check. Ultimately, each of the players will be played as a puppet one against the other to Moscow's benefit; that's the price that Arafat has paid to retain his nominal position.