

Crises in the Middle East a test for superpower deal

by Jeffrey Steinberg and Thierry Lalevée

A series of rapid-fire terrorist and military confrontations has thrown the Middle East into chaos on the eve of the final preparations for the May Reagan-Gorbachov summit in Moscow. While those developments have certainly unleashed an escalating pattern of violence, and raise the prospect of a new Arab-Israeli war triggered by the threat of mass expulsion of Palestinians from the Israeli-occupied territories, they also provide the crisis conditions for an even more dangerous superpower "condominium."

A "New Yalta" deal, involving Washington-Moscow solutions dictated to all "regional conflicts," has been the underlying goal of U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz's recent diplomatic junkets through the Middle East, leading to his April 20-21 Moscow sessions with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze.

Under such an arrangement, Moscow would be the principal beneficiary, replacing the United States as the dominant military and political power in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and sections of Asia and the Pacific rim, while leaving the United States to play-act "Teddy Roosevelt" gunboat diplomacy in the Western Hemisphere.

The Middle East blowup began on April 4 with the hijacking of a Kuwaiti Airlines flight carrying several members of the Kuwaiti royal family, by a highly professional team of Iranian-deployed terrorists. When the hijacked airliner landed in Mashad in the northeast corner of Iran bordering on the Soviet Union, a second team of terrorists was inserted onto the plane, thus suggesting advanced planning to bring the flight temporarily to rest on Iranian soil. According to one Arab source, that backup team traveled from Beirut through Damascus to Teheran en route to Mashad, implying an even broader coordination of the incident. There was a simultaneous heavy outbreak of terrorism in Western Europe.

The European terrorism and the hijacking incident had the common feature of involvement of North Korean special warfare teams in the training of the terrorist cadre. Soviet-linked North Korea maintains terrorist training camps within Iran, and the Japanese Red Army, whom Italian security officials named as the authors of a Naples bomb attack that killed one American GI, are believed to receive their logistical backup from the North Koreans. Up until recently, the

JRA has been primarily based out of Beirut, enjoying the joint protection of Iran and Syria.

The Kuwaiti Airlines hijacking ended on April 20 when an unidentified mediator, believed to have been a senior official of the Lebanese Shi'ite Hezbollah ("Party of God"), negotiated the release of the hostages in return for the terrorists gaining safe passage to either Teheran or Beirut. The Algerian government, too, played a pivotal role in the resolution of the situation. However, by the time that compromise settlement was reached, the entire regional situation had been drastically altered by the April 16 assassination of Palestine Liberation Organization leader Khalil Wazir, a.k.a. Abu Jihad.

The American naval presence in the Persian Gulf was the target of the next attack. On April 14, the USS Sam B. Roberts was hit by a recently planted Iranian mine, resulting in the injury of 10 sailors. After several days of policy debate, in which the majority of the Reagan cabinet opposed taking any retaliatory action against Iran on the eve of Shultz's arrival in Moscow for the pre-summit discussions, military and intelligence community "institutional forces" prevailed on the President. In the early morning hours (EDT) of Monday, April 18, Defense Secretary Carlucci and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Admiral Crowe personally oversaw an American naval bombardment of two Iranian oil platforms at Sassan and Sirri.

Breaking its earlier profile of non-response, Iran attempted to attack several U.S. ships and ship-borne combat aircraft, resulting in the sinking of two of Iran's four naval frigates and the destruction of several other Iranian military targets. Indicating the "limited" character of the American action, the Pentagon was quick to reject initial reports that the USS Williams had been attacked by five Silkworm missiles. Had such an attack been confirmed, the American standing policy of taking out the Iranian ground-based Silkworm sites would have been almost mandatory.

According to administration sources, Pentagon and intelligence community officials had pressed President Reagan to take even the limited action that he approved as a means of countering the overall drift of the White House toward placing the superpower condominium above the United State's

unilateral policy commitments towards the Middle East. The purpose, according to the sources, was to signal America's Gulf Arab allies that the United States intended to maintain its commitments to the security of Gulf shipping lanes.

Within this byzantine maneuvering, no one proposed that the United States move decisively to obliterate the Khomeini terrorist regime by assaulting the ground-based staging areas and logistical centers of Iran's terrorist command.

The Abu Jihad assassination

By the time that the United States finally got around to retaliating, events in the Persian Gulf and eastern Mediterranean had already been turned topsy-turvy by the April 16 assassination in Tunis of the PLO's military commander, Khalid Wazir, known as Abu Jihad. The assassination, by a special Israeli commando unit known as Sayeret Matkal, had been in the works for four months, and involved communications jamming, a 40-man on-the-ground logistics and reconnaissance team, and a naval escape.

Middle East sources also insist that a security screen around Abu Jihad was mysteriously lifted—thus allowing the assassins to carry out their mission unchallenged. These reports provoked widespread speculation that the assassination of the moderate PLO leader had been personally approved by Secretary of State Shultz during his recent trip to Tel Aviv en route to Moscow. Abu Jihad had directed the Palestinian civil disobedience in the occupied territories and had apparently opposed the escalation of those protests to armed struggle. Reportedly, Shultz had ordered U.S. Ambassador Pickering to drop all efforts to convince Israeli Prime Minister Shamir to go along with the Shultz "land for peace" proposal and his call for an international peace conference co-sponsored by the Americans and the Soviets. Shultz's purpose in visiting Israel had been to sabotage his own peace initiative, thereby creating greater impetus for a Washington-Moscow deal on the Middle East.

Whether or not the accusations against Shultz are accurate, the Abu Jihad assassination certainly added a new degree of urgency to the entire Middle East situation at the very moment that Shultz was on his pilgrimage to Holy Mother Russia.

Ever since Prime Minister Shamir's March visit to Washington, the Israeli cabinet, intelligence services, and military have been embroiled in a fierce debate over what action to take in response to the continuing Palestinian civil disobedience in the occupied territories. According to U.S. and Israeli sources, the dominant view currently is that Israel should seize upon the first opportunity to carry out a mass expulsion of Palestinians to Jordanian territory on the east bank of the Jordan River. Such a move would begin with a temporary Israeli military occupation of Jordanian territory, i.e., a short war with Jordan.

Key to the military planning is an assurance that the Syrians would not invade Israel in the area around Nazareth.

Back-channel talks between Tel Aviv and Damascus have long focused on a "Greater Israel" and "Greater Syria" deal, in which Israel would permit a Syrian annexation of the bulk of Lebanon in return for Syrian non-response to an Israeli move into eastern Jordan. This would be in keeping with the broader U.S.-Soviet condominium. In fact, Washington and Moscow would necessarily serve as arbiters and guarantors of such a maneuver.

Thus, it is no coincidence that even as Shultz was running around the Middle East pouring cold water on his own "peace plan," Moscow was doing its bit to lay the foundations for a Middle East condominium.

- On April 17, *Pravda* ran an editorial heralding the U.S.-Soviet-Afghan-Pakistani accord in Geneva as the "first time the United States and the Soviet Union have cooperated to act as intermediaries to help solve a regional conflict," thus demonstrating that both superpowers "could work together to solve such possible conflicts as, say, the Middle East."

- On April 13, a top adviser to Shamir, Ben Aharon, had flown to London to confer with Yevgeni Primakov, the director of the CPSU's IMEMO think tank and the former head of the Soviet Oriental Institute. Primakov is one of Gorbachov's key Middle East policy shapers.

- The same day, Shamir had personally announced that he was prepared to go to Moscow to confer with Reagan and Gorbachov during their summit—provided that Jordan's King Hussein would join him. Thus, Shamir in effect proposed to apply the Afghanistan formula to the Palestinian crisis.

- On April 14, Nimrod Novick, chief foreign policy aide to Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, was in Paris meeting with Vladimir Terrasov, the head of the Middle East desk at the Soviet ministry of foreign affairs.

- On April 16, in response to an announcement by Alexander Zinchuk, Soviet ambassador in Amman, that Foreign Minister Shevardnadze would soon tour Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, Shamir invited the Soviet foreign minister to add Israel to his itinerary.

In the face of George Shultz's flight forward to a "regional matters" sellout in Moscow, and the mounting consensus within the Shamir cabinet to respond to any escalation of Palestinian unrest with a mass expulsion of Palestinians from the occupied territories, PLO leader Yassir Arafat is reportedly still managing to hold the line against radical elements who are anxious to launch terrorism in retaliation for the Abu Jihad murder. This would throw the entire Eastern Mediterranean into a bloody replay of the Thirty Years War. As one observer put it, so long as the Palestinians stick to rock throwing, they stand a real chance of achieving their goal of a Palestinian entity. Even under the best of circumstances, that is a risky proposition. With forces in both Moscow and Washington intent on driving the PLO into the clutches of its most radical elements, the chances of a successful resolution of the crisis—save a serious injection of economic development credits—is near zero.