

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Shifting alliances

A spectacular reconciliation between Iraq and Syria may lie ahead, with Lebanon's anti-Syrians the first victims.

In their own way, events in the Middle East in coming months will probably reflect the sweeping changes that have taken place in Eastern Europe and the changing nature of the NATO and Warsaw Pact military alliances. Except for the Palestinian uprising, the Intifada, in Israel's occupied territories, this is not, however, expected to involve mass revolts or the overthrow of any government. Rather, it will mean a radical shifting of alliances.

One of the most startling shifts, which could occur before the end of February, is a spectacular reconciliation between Syria and Iraq. While this is being negotiated at the present time, no one is asking how long it might last.

In the aftermath of the Arab mobilization against the Camp David treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1979, there was a temporary reconciliation between Syria and a Iraq. One of the consequences was the elimination of Iraqi President Hassan Bakr, who had increasingly become a mere figurehead, and the consolidation of the power of Saddam Hussein, his successor.

Yet, by the time the Iran-Iraq war erupted in September 1980, the Syrian-Iraqi reconciliation had been long buried. There was no hesitation in Syria's decision to support Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. In recent years, attempts at even organizing a private meeting between Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein during Arab summit conferences failed.

The first public indications that reconciliation was again on the table,

were reports of the return to Damascus of Assad's brother and nominal vice-president, Rifaat al-Assad. One of the reasons for his long exile in France, Spain, and the United States, was the divergence of views between the two brothers concerning Iraq. It was no secret that during his exile, Rifaat al-Assad regularly met with high-ranking Iraqi officials, acting as a back-channel intermediary for his brother.

In recent weeks, Rifaat al-Assad reportedly returned to Damascus along with his family.

Ever since the reconciliation between Egypt and Syria at the beginning of this year, the tempo toward an Iraqi-Syrian reconciliation has been increased. Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak is even reported to have paid a secret visit to Damascus in mid-January to review the case with President Assad.

Saddam Hussein has been meeting intensively in the last two months with both Mubarak and Jordan's King Hussein, his fellow members on the Arab Cooperation Council. Indeed, Syria's membership in the ACC will be the logical outcome of the ongoing reconciliation, and this is expected to have far-reaching consequences.

Why these shifting alliances right at the present time? Syria has evidently drawn the consequences from the changes taking place in the Warsaw Pact. Not only has it lost reliable allies in East Germany and Romania, but it stands to receive less and less support from the Soviet Union itself.

It thus became urgent for Damascus to find other allies. A reconciliation with members of the ACC—Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq—is bound to

be welcome internationally, and will give Syria additional leverage.

Pragmatically speaking, there are two crucial issues for Syria.

First, Turkey: When, in January, the Turkish authorities interrupted the flow of water of the Euphrates River, both Syria and Iraq were affected. This prompted high-level consultations between the two countries, which tended to accelerate the process of normalization. The government in Ankara will obviously monitor carefully these changes on its southern borders.

Secondly, Lebanon has been and remains Syria's main headache. Anti-Syrian nationalist Lebanese forces will obviously be among the first victims of this reconciliation. Iraq would be expected to halt all support to the national army of Gen. Michel Aoun, whose forces are battling the Syrians in an effort to regain sovereignty for Lebanon, against Assad's designs for a "Greater Syria."

In exchange for a reconciliation with Syria, implying an end to the "strategic alliance" between Syria and Iran, Baghdad is not expected to have much hesitation. This could have far-reaching consequences at a time when war rumblings can again be heard between Iran and Iraq. In recent weeks, there was alarm when Iran massed fresh troops on its borders.

And finally, there is the effect of the developments in Syria on the "peace process" between Israel and the Arabs. Syrian membership in the Arab Cooperation Council could well mean that Damascus is ready to join the American-sponsored peace process with Israel and Egypt. This would extend the present negotiations from Israel's occupied territories to the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights. Some are already arguing that by joining the peace process, Syria may derail it.