

'Black September' kills PLO moderate

by Thierry Lalevée

On Dec. 29, in Amman, Jordan, Fahd Qawasmeh, the former mayor of the West Bank town of Hebron and a high-ranking official of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), was assassinated by professional gunmen. The crime fits the pattern of Soviet-Syrian response to the prospect of an American-sponsored peace initiative in the Middle East.

Callers to Agence France Presse in Paris and Beirut, describing themselves as members of the "Black September" group, claimed responsibility a few hours after the Qawasmeh assassination. "Black September" is the name of the Palestinian terrorist organization responsible for the fall 1972 Munich massacre of 11 members of the Israeli Olympic team. It had not been heard from in several years, but on Dec. 4, 1984, it claimed responsibility for the murder of Azmi al Mufti, a Jordanian diplomat in Bucharest. Over recent years, many Jordanian diplomats have fallen victim to the underground group of Sabri al Banna, a.k.a. Abu Nidal, who is reported to have died in early November in Baghdad. The reactivation of a "Black September" group now tends to confirm an earlier intelligence report that up to 200 members of Abu Nidal's group had been recruited by Iranian and Syrian intelligence services in recent months.

Syria's anger

A few hours after the assassination of Qawasmeh, PLO chairman Yasser Arafat left little doubt that Syrian intelligence stands behind this "Black September." A leading moderate Palestinian figure close to Arafat, Qawasmeh had been appointed to the executive committee of the PLO following its recent congress in Amman; he is the first member of the executive committee to be assassinated since 1973, a warning to Arafat, whom the Dec. 30 *Jerusalem Post* reported to be "at the top of Syrian president Hafez al Assad's hit-list." Another of Arafat's associates, Hani al Hassan, also narrowly escaped assassination in Amman recently.

Only a few months ago, Syria felt assured of being the crucial player in any Middle East negotiations, thanks to Henry Kissinger, the Soviet Union, and Secretary of State George Shultz. But a reconciliation between Egypt and Jordan began to threaten the Syrians (and Moscow) with isolation. When U.S.-Iraqi diplomatic relations were re-established, Syria began to fear formation of a moderate alliance linking Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq with Arafat's PLO, which

defied Damascus by holding its meeting in Amman. As a result, Damascus, which only recently felt confident enough to consider a limited agreement with Israel over Lebanon, instead wrecked the talks.

Assassination plot against Peres

According to the French weekly *Vendredi-Samedi-Dimanche*, the Syrians had also planned the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres during his visit to Paris in early December. There is no doubt of Moscow's direct complicity in such a conspiracy. According to *VSD*, the plot was to be concretized only a few weeks after the meeting between Israeli Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir and American businessman Armand Hammer, one of the KGB's wealthier diplomats, who left his talks with Peres for Moscow.

According to *VSD* and other sources, the murder was to be carried out by members of the French terrorist group Action Directe and the Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Fraction (FARL), part of the PFLP of George Habash.

Since 1981, the FARL has functioned as the international branch of the PFLP, establishing links with European terrorist groups such as Action Directe and the Red Army Fraction in West Germany. French intelligence sources say they have evidence proving that German, French, Belgium, Italian, and Spanish terrorist groups are operating as a single European terrorist unit, using French territory as a political and logistical sanctuary.

The assassin was to have been one Abdallah George Ibrahim, a Lebanese Maronite trained in East Germany and associated with the "Carlos" terrorist network since at least 1975, the same network which produced the new "Black September" organization. An activist of the PFLP, Ibrahim is reported to have played a key role in the assassination of U.S. ambassador Francis Meloy in Beirut in 1976, and then to have been active in Italy with the Red Brigades in 1978. Ibrahim was arrested in the French city of Lyon on Oct. 26 as part of a crackdown in Italy, Yugoslavia, and France on the terrorist network responsible for an April 1982 bombing in Paris. Only after his arrest did it emerge that Ibrahim had been sent to France to coordinate the assassination of Shimon Peres with Action Directe.

On Dec. 20, one of his key associates, Josephine Abdo Sarkis, was arrested at the Rome airport. A leader of a female-only terrorist cell, Sarkis had also worked with the Carlos network since at least 1975, and has now been proven responsible for the spring 1982 murder of Israeli attaché in Paris I. Barsimantov. She is suspected of involvement in the February 1984 murder of U.S. diplomat Leamon Hunt in Rome.

According to Mossad officials quoted in *VSD*, "the leaders of the FARL have received strategic orders at the highest levels to kill moderate Palestinians leaders or statesmen who are trying to stabilize the Middle East." The same officials added that Peres is a "prime target" because of the potential for U.S.-sponsored Israeli-Jordanian peace negotiations.