

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Iranian S.S.R.?

London's Muslim Brotherhood mullahs may have already been checkmated by the Russians.

Almost unnoticed amid the hub-bub created by Menachem Begin's Arab bombings, the Soviet Union is tightening its grip on war-racked Iran. Ronald Reagan, preoccupied with other matters, is oblivious to Iran's drift; and the British, masterminds of the 1979 revolution, seem almost resigned to their inability to salvage the "Khomeini experiment."

A superficial sign of the changing Soviet attitude occurred in connection with the ill-fated Israeli arms-smuggling effort. A jet transport carrying Israeli arms of U.S. manufacture from Cyprus to Iran, on contract from the Ayatollah's defense department, was shot down over Soviet territory last week. Aboard the plane was a well-known British arms merchant who had chartered the Argentine jet. Available evidence now suggests that the plane was lured into Soviet airspace and then shot down by Soviet air-to-air missiles—an unmistakable warning that Moscow may be cracking down on the Iranian military relationship with Israel and the West.

According to Arab sources, the event signals a shift on Moscow's part toward a tougher line on Iran, including a closer, more cozy relationship with Iraq. Signs of increasing Soviet activity in Iran also include the following:

- Tudeh communist organizers have reportedly established well-ordered Peoples' Commissars in the

ranks of the armed forces at the level of individual units.

- Col. Seyyed Mousa Namjou, Khomeini's new armed forces representative in charge of purging the military, is a reported KGB agent.

- The leadership of Iran's radio and TV system is now in the hands of Tudeh-allied radicals.

- Iran's oil workers, almost totally passive amid all the recent Iranian turmoil, have assented to the mullahs' regime only because of tactical advice from the Tudeh. "And oil is where the power is in Iran," said a former official.

It is therefore not surprising that Parliament Speaker Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani announced that he will visit Cuba and East Germany in the coming weeks. Newly elected President Mohammed Rajai—an unshaven, illiterate thug—is said to be a puppet of Rafsanjani, and intent on maintaining Tudeh support for the ever-weaker Islamic Republican Party (IRP).

Since the blowing up of the power behind the IRP, Ayatollah Beheshti, the IRP's influence has been declining steadily, and the absurdly rigged July 24 presidential elections hardly bolstered the mullahs' power.

In fact, at the climactic Teheran electoral campaign rally, scheduled to take place in a huge sports stadium capable of seating tens of thousands, only 1,000 people showed up to hear Rajai, and the

event was canceled, attesting to the IRP's lackluster position.

The pathetic flight into exile by ex-President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, sans Groucho Marx moustache, was a sign of the declining influence of the British in Iran. Fearing the Soviet coup, the British, as evidenced by recent editorials in the *London Times*, now feel compelled to "do something" about Iran.

But it may be too late.

One *London Times* editorial in mid-July called for a military coup. On July 27, a contradictory editorial hoped that Bani-Sadr, the leftist Mujaheddin, and some Kurdish factions could assemble a challenge to the mullahs. And a plethora of letters to the editor and opinion columns bemoaned the fate of the Iranian Bahai, darling cult of the British Secret Intelligence Service since the 1840s.

To carry out such editorial policy on the ground in Iran will prove most difficult. Partisans of the Iranian monarchy, based in Cairo, are reportedly hopeful that President Anwar Sadat's Aug. 4 visit to Washington will help persuade President Reagan to back a restorationist coup d'état. But Sadat is not expected to get too far with that idea, if he indeed raises it at all.

On the other hand, ex-Chief of Staff General Bahram Aryana, a nationalist officer, has moved his Paris headquarters to Ankara, Turkey, telling friends that he wants to launch a counterrevolution. But, short of money and without a military camp to base an army, he is unlikely to have much effect immediately.

Now, if a Soviet-Iraq accord does materialize, London may find itself checkmated.