

# Washington's Arab allies start to play Soviet card

by Judith Wyer

Since Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) chief Yasser Arafat concluded his talks with Soviet leader Yuri Andropov on Jan. 14, Moscow has redoubled its efforts to increase its influence in the Arab world. During Arafat's Moscow visit, the Kremlin was quick to affirm that its Middle East peace plan was far closer to the one agreed upon at the Arab League Fez summit last year than to the "divisive" Camp David framework of Washington.

Andropov's tacit support for confederation between Jordan and a Palestinian state was a striking change from the standard Soviet backing for an independent Palestinian state. Moscow's shift was in part calculated to appeal to the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf, notably Saudi Arabia. It was Saudi King Fahd who formulated the Fez summit's call for confederation within a framework of peace talks with Israel.

It seems that Andropov's ploy is paying off. The day after Arafat left Moscow, the Saudi daily *Ukaz* ran a stunning commentary entitled "Dimensions of Arab Move Toward Moscow" (see box) which welcomed the U.S.S.R. as a mediator in the Arab-Israeli conflict. This departure from Saudi Arabia's traditional anti-Soviet posture could not have appeared without approval from the highest levels of the Saudi leadership.

The same day as the *Ukaz* commentary, Radio Moscow broadcast a strong attack in Arabic on Washington's Middle East policy, especially toward Lebanon. The broadcast concluded by citing a recent declaration from the Kuwaiti Foreign Minister, Sabah al Jabir as-Sabah, that the "comprehensive and just settlement of the Palestinian question is impossible without the participation of the Soviet Union."

## Capitalizing on U.S. failure

Since the Arafat visit the Soviets have sent delegations to Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Jordan, the crucial country in resolving the core of the Middle East crisis, the Palestinian problem, has become a focus of Soviet diplomacy. Two Soviet delegations arrived in Amman, and the speaker of the Jordanian National Consultative Council exchanged mes-

sages with the U.S.S.R.'s Supreme Soviet on global peace both through the arms limitation talks and within the Middle East sphere.

Two members of the Supreme Soviet traveled to Beirut, the first ranking Soviet emissaries to visit there since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Predictably they issued press statements attacking the U.S. for dividing Lebanon by not forcing an end to Israel's occupation, and pledged Moscow's support for Lebanon's "integrity and sovereignty."

In fact, the Soviets are attempting exactly what *EIR* warned they would attempt shortly after Israel's June 6 invasion of Lebanon. If Washington tolerated the Begin regime's expansionist policies, we said, the United States would lose credibility in the Arab world and Moscow would move in to fill the vacuum.

Moreover, there are indications that the Soviet Union may be prepared to do what Washington has never undertaken: end the Iran-Iraq war. The Warsaw Pact issued its first declaration calling for an immediate end to the two-year old Gulf war in mid-January. According to a Gulf diplomat, the Pact statement was widely read by Arab officials as the strongest signal to date from their northern neighbor of a desire to end the war.

Washington appears to be dismissing the new flirtation between Moscow and the moderate Arab states which rank as the closest U.S. allies. It is simply being read as "realpolitik" in an effort to get the U.S. to force concessions from Israel both in Lebanon and on the Palestinian issue.

But a number of strongly worded interviews from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his Foreign Minister Hassan Ali on anticipation of their Jan. 26 arrival in Washington leave little doubt that the Arab world is getting tired of waiting for Washington to make a move to restrain Begin. Mubarak told the *Christian Science Monitor* Jan. 24 that should the United States fail to pressure an immediate Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon it will have "grave" consequences.

Hassan Ali in an interview with the Jan. 25 *Washington Post* became the first member of Mubarak's government to admit that Egypt is moving toward opening relations with the

Soviet Union. Ali's statement came less than two weeks after Anatoli Gromyko and Soviet Mideast journalist Igor Belayev met in Cairo with Osama al Baz, Mubarak's closest adviser.

Cairo fears that if the White House does not soon make visible progress in its Middle East peace bid, the Reagan peace plan will become altogether paralyzed by the campaign for the 1984 presidential elections. For this reason Cairo is giving the United States until mid-1983 before it openly begins to reassess its foreign policy, especially its pledge to uphold the Camp David Treaty with Israel.

In truth, as long as the Begin-Sharon combination remains in power, all hopes of a solution to the Palestinian problem are academic. The Begin regime is firmly opposed to any territorial concessions on the Israeli occupied West Bank and Gaza, which the Palestinians claim as their homeland. The intransigence of the Begin regime, in fact, has done more to advance Soviet influence within the Arab world than anything else.

There is no little hypocrisy in Moscow's pledge to bring peace to the region, of course. Moscow is simply basing its current diplomatic drive on the ruins of U.S. policy, and is talking peace to win new Arab allies.

The actions of Moscow's own allies in the Arab world, Syria, Libya, and the radical wing of the PLO, indicate the opportunistic attitude of the Soviets. Just as the Kremlin began to propagandize its own Middle East policy, Syria began to adopt a new hard line against any linkage between Jordan and the Palestinians in future peace talks. At the same time that Arafat was conferring with Andropov in Moscow, the so-called Steadfastness Front of radical countries convened in Libya to reaffirm opposition to both the Fez plan and the Reagan plan. But by encouraging Syria and Libya to take a hard line on Arab-Israeli talks, Moscow is doing exactly what it has been accusing Washington of doing—dividing the Arab ranks.

Arab sources say that these moves by Moscow's allies were more than anything else aimed at ensuring that the Reagan plan would again be stalled just long enough that the upcoming presidential race will undermine U.S. peace efforts through 1984.

The same sources have confirmed that the Soviet effort to sabotage the Reagan administration in the Middle East is linked to the ongoing bargaining between Washington and Moscow to start up the arms limitation talks (see *EIR*, Feb. 1). The Kremlin naturally opposes the continuation of Arab-Israeli peace talks within the framework of Camp David bilateral treaties, which has served as the vehicle for the buildup of U.S. and NATO military presence throughout the region.

### **Drawing the line in Iran**

As a well-informed Arab journalist put it: "It's a complicated game being played between the superpowers now. But one thing is for sure, and that is that the U.S.S.R. will not

tolerate any longer the Pax Americana which Kissinger started with the bilateral Israel-Egypt treaty."

In early January, Moscow issued an unusually strong statement that it would not tolerate the re-imposition of the Iranian monarchy and with it the Western military presence that existed before the Khomeini takeover. A lengthy article entitled "Iran: Revolution at the Crossroads" which appeared in *Noya Vremya* on Jan. 2, accuses the United States of backing the ultra-conservative wing of the Islamic Republican Party, known as the Hojitia group, to succeed Khomeini. The rabidly anti-Soviet Hojitia is characterized as a front for the monarchy. European sources believe that more than any other country in the Middle East, Iran is the arena for a potential superpower crisis.

If Washington does not now heed the warnings from its Arab allies, the United States will gradually surrender more than the Arab world. It will find itself indefinitely locked out of such strategic countries as Iran, which, like Saudi Arabia and Egypt was up through 1978 one of Washington's best friends in the developing sector.

## **What the Saudi Arabians say about the superpowers**

*Excerpts from the Jan. 15 article in the Saudi Arabian newspaper Ukaz:*

The strategy of an Arab move on the international level has achieved great success, proving that the Arabs are capable of reaching centers of international decision-making and influencing them in their favor.

The Arab countries, through the Arab-seven-member committee [of the Arab League], have been able to achieve positive results, thanks to the committee's visits to Washington, Moscow, Paris, and Peking. . . .

The Soviets have never ceased supporting Palestinian rights and the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, but the Soviets support so far has remained verbal and rhetorical without reaching the stage of playing an effective role in the comprehensive settlement, for which preparations are underway.

The United States may not want a Soviet presence in any future settlement, but the Soviet Union cannot be excluded because it is the second superpower responsible for world security and stability. . . .

Moreover, a Soviet role, despite its limitations in wielding influence, would lend an equilibrium to the balance of power in the area that would in future prevent the area's polarization or inclusion in the sphere of influence of this or that superpower.