

## Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

### Whither the Assads?

*Some fools in Washington have bought the Soviet disinformation line that a new "moderate" Syrian regime is in the offing.*

Arriving in Beirut on Sept. 21 to assess the damage from the terrorist attack on the American embassy the preceding day, U.S. Undersecretary of State for Middle Eastern Affairs Richard Murphy went on to meet with President Hafez al Assad for three hours on Sept. 22, declaring afterward that he had come to "consult America's friends in the region."

As he made the statement upon arrival in Tel Aviv, it would not have been obvious whether Murphy was referring to the Assads of Syria as well as to Israel, but for the fact that he had been one of the first American public figures to praise the Syrian regime, telling a Senate subcommittee in July how important he considered Syria's role "for stabilizing Lebanon." Although that statement was viewed critically by many in the United States and in Israel, it nonetheless received the backing of Secretary of State George Shultz a few weeks later.

Murphy's remark is a precise indicator of the relations between Washington and Damascus these days. Many American politicians, as the *Washington Post* reported on Sept. 26, are wishfully looking at the Assad clique as a potentially independent and even pro-Western faction. The President's brother Rifaat Assad, according to the *Post*, "in private conversation with Western and Arab diplomats, has hinted that he was unhappy with Syria's ties to the Soviet Union and would be interested in reorienting Syrian policy toward the West if he were to succeed his brother as president. 'Rifaat sees Reagan as the first

president since Eisenhower to serve a second term and he would be free to pursue a policy in the Middle East free from too much [Israeli] influence,' said one U.S. source in Washington."

The *Post* underlined the economic involvement in the West of Rifaat, which includes ownership of a mansion in New Jersey. What the *Post* discreetly failed to mention was Rifaat's large dollar bank account in Switzerland.

The issue here is not whether the reports of the new moderation or pro-Western stand of the Assads are KGB disinformation—although the Soviets are certainly making a bid to market a new "moderate" version of Muammar Qaddafi, while Moscow extends its grip over the Middle East and Africa.

More important is whether the Assads and Syria have any future in the "New Yalta" deal that the Kissinger crowd would like Moscow to accept. An operation to portray the Assads as pro-Western has definite advantages for Moscow; it has succeeded in blinding the United States to what is really going on in the Middle East. Eager to play the Assad card, Washington has been led to invest too much in Syria, at the expense of more reliable allies like Egypt. As a result, Cairo has turned more toward Moscow.

Of course, the Assads are sometimes tempted to play the United States and the Soviet Union off against each other, and this had led to internal struggles within the country; hence the foreign exile of Rifaat al Assad, first to Geneva, now to Paris. There is no fundamental split, however; recent

decisions have made clear that the Syrian leadership is ultimately a reliable Soviet ally, and that not-so-discreet meetings in Geneva between Rifaat al Assad and CIA Director William Casey will do nothing to change that. As recently as July, Damascus agreed to welcome a contingent of 1,000 East German advisers to reorganize their intelligence and police services.

The U.S. response to the bombing of its embassy in Beirut was one indication of the success of KGB disinformation in disseminating the new line on Syria. No one in Washington seemed to notice that the most blood-curdling threats against the United States came, not just from the Islamic Jihad terrorists, but from Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas, a graduate of Moscow's Voroshilov military academy and avowed admirer of Hitler and of the Nazi regime. In a 12-page interview to the German weekly *Der Spiegel* published on Sept. 10, Tlas made no secret of the fact that his military conceptions were based on what he described as "a popular war of liberation . . . a man with a bomb tied on his body embraces his enemy and they blow up together."

Tlas praised to the heavens the case of the two "martyrs" who "alone blew up more than 400 of our enemies," and he announced that such a "popular war will continue as long as the Americans are in the Middle East." Tlas is generally seen as a factional opponent of Rifaat al Assad; he told *Der Spiegel* that Rifaat "will forever be *persona non grata* with us" and "will never come back to Damascus," despite his continuing power in the Syrian capital.

Tlas's statements suggest quite a bit about the foolishness of those people in Washington who go on dreaming about a "moderate" regime in Syria.