

British, Soviets in Mideast power grab

by Thierry Lalevée

The signing of an enormous arms deal between Great Britain and Saudi Arabia on Sept. 26 signals a power play by Britain of far-reaching import. Thanks to the gradual U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East initiated by Henry Kissinger in 1969, the traditional empires which have dominated the region in the past are moving in swiftly to fill the vacuum: the British and the Russians.

The military contract—worth over £3 billion (about \$2.3 billion)—is significant enough in itself. The *London Times* on Sept. 26 described it as “the biggest arms contract Britain has won this decade.” The deal includes delivery from Britain to Saudi Arabia of up to 132 military aircraft in total, including some 48 Tornado attack fighters, jointly produced by British, West German, and Italian aerospace companies; PC-9 planes for training use, jointly produced with the Swiss Pilatus company. Once spare parts are added in, the total value of the equipment may reach £4 billion.

But potentially more important is the political price-tag: Saudi reliance on British pilots for maintenance and training.

This British coup, “won in the teeth of fierce competition from France,” as the *Times* put it, is not the only one in recent weeks. During her tour of the Middle East in September, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher signed a £270 million arms deal with Jordan. A few weeks before, Britain had signed a contract with the Sultanate of Oman for delivery of Tornado fighters.

Thatcher's success has had an apparent political price. She announced in Amman, Jordan that she was inviting two PLO-connected Palestinians to London to further the peace initiative of Jordan's King Hussein and the PLO's Yasser Arafat. “Riyadh is likely to be positively influenced by such a pro-Arab move,” commented the *Financial Times* on Sept. 23. The British action provoked an angry reaction from Syrian Vice-President Khaddam, who declared on Sept. 22 that “the initiative is doomed to fail.” The Abu Nidal terrorist group announced on Sept. 24 that, should the designated Palestinians accept the invitation, they would be assassinated!

Underlying this courting of the Arabs is London's geopolitical gameplan for the region. As the *Financial Times* pointed out on Sept. 24, “by becoming the first British Prime Minister to visit Jordan, Mrs. Thatcher, who is also a friend of Israel, signalled perhaps the emergence of a new role for London.” Thatcher's idea of convening, in London, a new

peace conference on Palestine, smacked of the British imperial initiatives taken after World War I, whose “peaceful” results can be measured in nearly a century of bloody Arab-Jewish conflict.

Britain would not have achieved the results we are now seeing, without the American decision to withdraw from its regional responsibilities. The Saudi purchase of Tornado planes came when the Saudi leaders were quietly informed that Washington had no desire whatsoever to confront congressional opposition to deliveries of F-15 jetfighters to Saudi Arabia. Faced with British and French counterproposals, the Saudis were advised to choose Britain.

The latest reports indicate that the U.S. administration may take a similar stand toward the even more sensitive issue of arms sales to Jordan. If Washington doesn't cancel its sales altogether, it is expected to postpone them until the next fiscal year, meaning that Jordan would not receive any American weapons before 1988.

Further, the Middle East has reportedly been withdrawn from the agenda of the summit meeting between President Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachov in November—a signal to Moscow that while large parts of the Middle East will now be up for grabs, the rest will have to be negotiated . . . with London!

Moscow's moves

London's thrusts in the region have coincided with similar successes from Moscow. Diplomatic consultations between Moscow and Riyadh have increased since the meeting of the Saudi and Russian ambassadors in London, a few days before the Aug. 7 Casablanca summit, which the Saudis sabotaged by sending pro-Syrian crown prince Abdullah. This was followed in late August by the visit to Moscow of the chairman of the Saudi Sport Association, one of King Fahd's sons, who had high-level meetings at the Soviet foreign ministry. This led to an Abdullah-sponsored attempt at reconciliation between Jordan and Syria—on Syrian's terms—while Saudi Arabia hosted a mediation mission between French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas and Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Sheikholislamzadeh on Aug. 17: Sheikholislamzadeh had just returned from Sudan, where he had re-established diplomatic relations with the Khartoum government.

Moscow has been courting other Gulf countries, such as Bahrein, whose Sheikh Khalifa ben Salman announced that “the Arab monarchies have to change the nature of their relations to the Soviet Union.” By letting it be known recently that it was resuming arms deliveries to Iran, Moscow signaled to the countries of the region that it was the power able to play both sides at once. The message was not missed, as hopes of Washington taking leadership against Ayatollah Khomeini have long since faded.