

Soviets move into Gulf, Mediterranean

by Thierry Lalevée

While international attention was focused on the clash between Libya and the United States, the Soviet Union's deputy defense minister, Gen. Vladimir Govorov, quietly arrived in Kuwait on Jan. 11. Preliminary reports indicate that military deals worth \$300 million were signed between the two countries, but few specialists have any illusions that the purpose of the visit was limited to the issue of arms sales. Kuwait and the Soviet Union have had diplomatic relations for years, but Govorov's visit, the highest-ranking Soviet military delegation to visit the Gulf, represents the high-point of Moscow's ongoing diplomatic offensive in the region.

Postponed from the original date of Dec. 21, Govorov's mission was made fully public as it ended on Jan. 16. The trip was prepared by Soviet troubleshooter Karim Brutents of the international secretariat of the Soviet Communist Party, who arrived in Kuwait on Jan. 4. Brutents has become a familiar figure in Kuwait and in the Gulf where he has, in recent years, played the figure of a discreet diplomat. Brutents's presence in the region has always coincided with major terrorist and military events, and there is little doubt that the Soviet embassy in Kuwait plays an essential role in coordinating Moscow's activities throughout the region.

Kichmal Madatov, the suspected KGB *resident* in Kuwait, was a KGB official under Geydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan. Aliyev, now a Politburo member, has broad responsibility for operations in Asia and the Mideast. Pogos Akopov, the Soviet ambassador, is an old Middle East hand with close ties to Aliyev, and is suspected to have played an important role with the Armenian terrorist organization ASALA (he is Armenian himself).

From Kuwait, Brutents went to the United Arab Emirates, the Gulf sheikhdom which is expected to be the next to establish diplomatic relations with Moscow. At the very same time, Yevgenii Primakov, the new head of the IMEMO think tank in Moscow and rumored to be scheduled for appointment as a deputy member of the Supreme Soviet, told Japanese reporters that he expected diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia to be established "very soon."

The timing of this diplomatic offensive is certainly no coincidence, and has run parallel to the crisis between the United States and Libya. While fanning the military crisis

and mobilizing its European assets to drive a wedge between Europe and the United States, Moscow is imposing itself as *the* ruling power.

It was no coincidence, either, that on Jan. 11, the Iranian Navy seized an American vessel in the Strait of Hormuz. The American government almost apologized to the Iranians, as the State Department commented that Teheran was within "its rights" to have boarded the U.S. ship. There was no outcry in the region against Iran—on the contrary. The media in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia are not merely criticizing American policy, but are blasting away at it day after day. Pro-American editors are reported to have been purged from the newsrooms. Saudi Arabia has certainly not converted to the Iranian brand of fundamentalist Islam, but reliable sources indicate that Riyadh is heavily financing Iran. Saudi financial contributions based in European banks—Swiss in particular—are channeled to Iran through Qaddafi's Libya—a *realpolitik* aimed as much at securing the Saudi kingdom as at desperately manipulating the Gulf war to prevent a collapse of oil prices.

The Saudi shift

It has thus not been a total surprise to see Saudi Arabia becoming, in the last few weeks, one of the strongest supporters of Qaddafi! King Fahd of Saudi Arabia did have several direct discussions with Qaddafi to assure him of his support in the conflict with the United States. Reports from Tripoli indicating that Riyadh had pledged military and financial support to Libya were at first widely discounted in the West, but proved later to be entirely correct.

This spectacular shift of policies in Saudi Arabia is only the tip of the iceberg, indicating how successful the Soviets have been in manipulating the current crisis to their advantage, demonstrating to one and all that the United States is an impotent power. Not surprisingly, Israel has played an important role in this shift. The public display of negotiations between Israel and the Soviet Union sent a clear message to the countries of the region. Moscow made the Gulf countries quite uncomfortable at the thought of having to face a Moscow-Jerusalem axis on the one side, and on the other, Islamic mobs raving at their governments' American connections. Displaying at will its "Arabists" or its "pro-Israelis," the Soviet Union has announced loud and clear that it can be the mediator between Arabs and Israelis. Whether the U.S.S.R. can actually guarantee the Gulf's security against any Israeli attacks, is another matter.

Moscow is especially optimistic that its plans can come to fruition. It has the Americans bogged down off Libya's coast—both in political and military terms. Matching the U.S. military deployment in the region, Moscow has sent in its own flotilla of warships, making the point that the crisis will continue as long as America doesn't acknowledge the Soviet Union's status as an "equal power" in Mediterranean security. Meanwhile, thanks to its Israeli and Arabs assets, Moscow now has a free hand in the rest of the Middle East.