
France

Hostage crisis erupts on eve of elections

by Thierry Lalevée

A major issue of French foreign policy, avoided during most of the current legislative election campaign, was finally raised in the last week of the race: the question of terrorism, and the fate of the French hostages in Lebanon.

By March 8, with the kidnapping of four journalists in Beirut, the number of hostages rose to eight; two days later, it became clear that only seven actually remained, as researcher Michel Seurat had been executed by the terrorist group Islamic Jihad, as it had claimed on March 6.

The Socialist government of President François Mitterrand is on the chopping block because of this tragedy, as scandals began to unfold which revealed the unbridled cynicism of the regime. The government had expected that the hostages could be released by early February; but when this failed, negotiations were terminated and the issue shelved, until after the elections—or so the government hoped.

But the press revealed that the CIA had warned last October of the presence of terrorist Imad Muganyiah in Paris, but the Mitterrand government chose to ignore the report. The CIA identified Muganyiah as involved in the June 1985 TWA hijacking; but thanks to the personal intervention of Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, who described the terrorist as a "key negotiator," the police were prevented from arresting him. Mitterrand refused even to meet with the U.S. ambassador on the issue.

Press exposés of secret deals between the government and the terrorists mounted, as the government found itself forced to enter into last-minute negotiations to prevent the execution of another hostage, which the Islamic Jihad threatened to carry out by March 15. It warned the French government to stop making "noisy declarations," and continued, "We know that you are unable to retaliate. We have killed your soldiers in the past and you have done nothing!" The group demanded the release of an Iranian commando who had attempted to kill Shahpour Bakhtiar, the former Iranian prime minister and anti-Khomeini exile, in 1980, as well as the return to Paris of two Iraqi fundamentalists who had been extradited in February to Baghdad.

As negotiations proceeded with Damascus, Beirut, and Baghdad, the French government found itself the accused. Seurat's wife Mary told the press on March 12 that she considered the interior minister and prime minister "guilty" for

the murder of her husband. Interior Minister Pierre Joxe had signed "a blackmail deal with Abu Nidal" in February, she charged, which prompted the release of two agents from a French jail. "Why a deal with Abu Nidal, and not with the Jihad?" she asked. Could the elections have had something to do with it?

Upon confirmation of Seurat's death, negotiator Razah Raad accused Paris of having prevented him from traveling to Lebanon three weeks earlier, in an effort to negotiate his fate. Of Lebanese origins, and with an extended family in the Shi'ite region of the Bekaa valley, Raad had gone twice in August and December to meet with the kidnapers. Twice he had come back empty-handed, as Paris refused to recognize him as an official negotiator—perhaps because he is a candidate for the March 16 elections on an Opposition ticket. Only on March 8, when the Jihad requested his presence, did Paris provide him with a negotiating mandate.

The government answered the execution of Seurat with a warning that the hostage issue "should not become an electoral issue"—while allowing some carefully timed leaks to the effect that Paris may consider special military or intelligence operations to release the hostages, or to retaliate for Seurat's death.

Disarray in the intelligence services

The fate of hostages has raised fundamental issues about the future of French policy. As *Le Figaro* pointed out in its editorial on March 12, the country has now lived through "five years of a foreign policy based on complacency and compromises with international terrorism."

What about the effect on France's foreign intelligence service, which the Socialists changed from SDECE into DGSE in 1981? The transformation included purges of most of the SDECE's agents worldwide; scores of full-time agents and informants were forced to retire, under suspicion of being anti-Socialist. The Socialists transformed French intelligence into a political operation, open for manipulation. The result was soon felt. Besides its lack of political will, Paris has displayed a total inability to deal with the Lebanese terrorists. Whenever a retaliatory military operation was considered, it had to be abandoned immediately, as no one could confirm the accuracy of the target.

In the last weeks before the election, both Mitterrand and Joxe have been busy appointing their own men to "non-political" positions which cannot be affected by a change of government. Mitterrand, for example, has been seen establishing direct contacts with key personnel within the police, the interior ministry, defense, and the army, to ensure that they will keep him personally informed, bypassing the hierarchical structures of the government. Just before the election, Joxe reassigned no fewer than 67 directors and deputy directors of the police and DST intelligence service to appoint his own men, creating a legacy which may endanger the viability of France's next government.