

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée and Robert Greenberg

Soviets court rapprochement in Israel

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In the weeks immediately following the July 22 historic summit meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Morocco's King Hassan, the Soviet Union made a flurry of diplomatic gestures toward Israel, focusing on the long-festered issue of reestablishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. While appeasement factions in the West such as the U.S. State Department have been actively encouraging these moves as a step toward an international conference on the Mideast, in reality, the Soviet actions are motivated by a kind of desperation.

The new peace initiatives begun by Peres and Hassan, with the overt backing of Egypt, and quiet support of the United States and several moderate Arab nations, have frozen the Soviets out of the process. Moreover, the reaction to the summit by Syria, the Soviet's main client-state, as indicated by their hysterical break of relations with Morocco, has wrecked the Syrian card backed by Secretary of State George Shultz and has laid the groundwork for backing Syria into an isolated corner in the Arab world.

The timing of the Soviet offensive, right on the heels of the trip of Vice-President George Bush to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan, is also a signal of their concern. Bush's trip, which was not intended to develop any major new policies, nonetheless helped maintain the momentum begun by Peres and Hassan. For example, he met with 18 West Bank Palestinians, including two who represent the PLO, and he carried messages from Peres to Jordan's King

Hussein and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Since Bush's trip, secret meetings have been going on between the Israel and Egypt, and Israel and Jordan. With the preliminary resolution of the Taba dispute, a meeting between Peres and Mubarak is expected shortly. Finally, Peres recently stated in the *Wall Street Journal* that he will continue his peace efforts, even after the agreed-upon rotation of positions with Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir in October, even if it means a breaking up of the government.

Thus the carefully constructed scenario discussed by State Department representative Richard Murphy and Soviet Foreign Ministry representative Vladimir Polyakov has fallen apart, and the Soviets have responded in typical fashion, carrot and stick. While on the one hand, they have launched a full diplomatic offensive, they have meanwhile directed their Syrian ally, as well as their allies around Israel's Ariel Sharon, to blow up the region as a way to force themselves back into the picture.

The "rapprochement offensive," as some Israeli sources have called it, began on Aug. 4 when Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Gerassimov announced that Moscow was opening talks with Israel on unresolved disputes over the properties belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church in Jerusalem. What followed were reports that Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary would set up interest sections in Israel, with Israel doing the same in those countries. Soon after, Bulgaria

invited the wife of Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir for an official visit.

Still to come is the planned meeting between Israeli and Soviet representatives in Helsinki on Aug. 18. On Aug. 8, the authoritative Soviet journalist Victor Louis told a London-based Jewish newspaper that the Soviet move was "a major step toward a full normalization of relations between Moscow and Israel."

In tandem with these diplomatic moves, the Soviets, through Syria, blew up Lebanon. Not a day goes by without a new bombing in Beirut or an exchange of artillery fire between the Islamic and Christian factions there. The purpose is to substantially build up Syrian presence in Lebanon, politically and militarily, ultimately forcing Lebanese President Amin Gemayel to surrender Lebanese sovereignty to Syria in exchange for keeping the peace. With Syria in control over Lebanon as a "peace-maker," it is once again propelled into the region as a recognized major player in any discussions for peace.

The Soviets are also hedging their bets in Israel. While on the one hand they are in discussions with the current government run by Peres, U.S. intelligence sources have reported that they are pursuing a completely separate track with the Likud, whose leader Shamir will come to power in October.

This was the meaning of secret meetings that took place between Ariel Sharon and Soviet diplomats in Turkey at the end of July, according to these sources. In striking a separate deal with the Likud, in which the Soviets will release Russian Jews for settlement in the West Bank, in exchange for a Greater Israel/Greater Syria partition of the region, the Soviets are hoping to once again rule affairs in the Middle East.