

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Will Moscow really gain in Irangate?

The Soviets have their own dirty secrets in the Gulf war, and a crisis looming with their closest ally in the region, Syria.

At first, Moscow and especially its Middle East troubleshooters were overwhelmed by the revelations coming out of Irangate. After a few days, the Russian propaganda machine was set into motion to demagogically blast Washington's "double-talk." On second thought, Moscow became more cautious, not only because President Reagan had shown some ability to deal with the scandal, but because a scandal in the West can affect the East, too.

A mid-November article in the *Sunday Times* detailing how Moscow had been doing exactly the same as Washington, received much publicity in the Middle East. The article only scratched the surface of Soviet dubious dealing in the Gulf war. No one has yet really looked into the Soviet-Vietnamese connection to the American-Iranian deal. It is a mere matter of time.

Pending the December arrival in New York of a Soviet delegation from the IMEMO think-tank, which will meet with the Council of Foreign Relations to analyze the consequences of Irangate, Moscow has decided to crank up its propaganda and diplomatic activities in the region.

The first signs were given on Nov. 26 by a long political analysis of the Gulf war in the weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta* by Mideast expert Igor P. Belyayev, a long-time crony of IMEMO director Yevgeny Primakov. Titled the "Iranian gambit," the analysis attacked American-Iranian dealings, and warned that Washington wanted to reintegrate Teheran into an Ankara-

Islamabad axis.

There was vague mention that Washington's game-plan is the "dis-mantling of Iraq," but the focus of the article was its conclusion: "America is asking for trouble." This probably means the Soviets have decided to reactivate their "right to intervene" into Iran, in accord with the 1923 treaty.

The article fit several purposes. It portrayed Moscow as the old friend of the "anti-imperialist" Arabs—Iraq and its allies; and it helped fuel Iran's internal faction fight in favor of the arch-fundamentalists around Montazeri, who could now argue that the deals with Washington were exposing Iran to a most serious threat at its borders.

Meanwhile, Moscow gave a green light for upgrading Soviet-Iranian economic ties. On Dec. 9, Konstantin Katushev, chairman of the Soviet State Commission for Foreign Economic Relations, arrived in Teheran to chair the Soviet-Iran grand economic commission, the first such meeting in six years. Deputy Foreign Minister Yuli Vorontsov started a round of meetings with the Iranian ambassador in Moscow, Naser Nobari, on Nov. 19, and exchanged letters with Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Valayati, who will go to Moscow in early January.

The Soviets have been making similar gestures to Iraq. In mid-November, they delivered new Badger long-range bombers which were crucial to the Iraqi bombardment of Larak Island. On Dec. 9, Foreign Minister Shevardnadze talked of upgrading military and diplomatic ties with the Iraqi ambassador, Saad al-Faisal.

Also meant for Baghdad to appreciate was the arrival in Jordan on Dec. 2 of General Chesnokov, the Commander in Chief of the Soviet Air Defense Forces, whose visit will lead to comprehensive military deals for the kind of weapons that Washington has been refusing to the kingdom. A stronger Jordan is a major help to Iraq. The same goes for Egypt, which just received Victor Dementsev of the Soviet State Bank to renegotiate some \$3 billion in debt from Nasser's era. Rumors abound that Moscow may grant Cairo a debt moratorium.

However, Moscow's real dilemma in the region concerns its closest ally, Syria. On Dec. 7, a *Pravda* editorial accused the United States of planning a "Grenada-type" military action against Damascus. It ended by warning that Moscow would stand by Syria. The real meaning of the editorial is elsewhere. Moscow knows that Syria is expected to face a serious crisis by the end of the year, and preemptively wants to blame it on Washington.

Damascus faces three problems. Though limited, the sanctions imposed by Britain and the European Community against Syria for running terrorism have a grave economic and psychological impact. Syria is facing its worst economic crisis ever. This was admitted on Dec. 2 during a special meeting of the People's Assembly, which reviewed the food shortages and the paralysis of industrial production. Syria's isolation has sparked a new round of faction fights in the top ranks of the leadership. Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas has seized the opportunity to urge the removal of Hafez al-Assad's confidant, Gen. Mohammed al-Khouli. Moscow has to ponder what it can do to save Assad's neck without creating a crisis which will simply help President Reagan to divert attention from Irangate.