

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Israel and Syria: a war ahead?

A limited confrontation looks like part of the "regional affairs" condominium being worked out by Shultz and Shevardnadze.

A limited confrontation between Israel and Syria, over Lebanese territory, may be the outcome of the "Shultz Peace Plan." There are signals from Moscow, Washington, and Damascus that both superpowers' leaders are toying with the idea as part of their ongoing negotiations over "regional affairs." In less than a month, there have been more than four consultations between Moscow and Washington on the Middle East. In early March, Undersecretary of State Richard Murphy went to Moscow to meet with Eduard Shevardnadze to review the Shultz plan. This was followed by Shevardnadze's visit to Washington, accompanied by Vladimir Polyakov, director of the Middle East department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, who again met with Murphy.

At the end of March, Assistant Secretary for Political Affairs Michael Armacost conferred with Deputy Foreign Minister Yuli Vorontsov in Geneva about a trade-off between Afghanistan and the Middle East. In exchange for renewed American pressures on Pakistan, the Soviet Union would back the Shultz initiative. Murphy and Polyakov are again expected to meet soon.

At lower levels, this diplomacy has set into motion a bargain centering on Syria and Jordan. Jordan's King Hussein provoked the anger of the Afghan resistance movement during the March 20 Islamic Conference in Amman, when he called for an "Afghan National Reconciliation." Resistance spokesmen protested that the call lent credibility to Moscow's policy of a "reconciliation" between Kabul and the resistance. Days earlier, just as his

prime minister, Zaid al Rifai, was returning from Moscow, Hussein had visited Islamabad, urging Zia ul Haq to drop his opposition to the U.S.-Soviet offer.

In return, Hussein is getting promises from Moscow, that it is advising its assets in the region to give the "Shultz Plan" a try. In particular, Moscow is telling the PLO to forget about imposing an independent PLO delegation in an international negotiating forum, and to accept Jordan's leadership.

However, the real political and diplomatic game centers on Syria. Local intelligence sources report that American officials have gone a long way in accepting Syria's bargaining demand—Lebanon. Washington is considering positively a request by Syria that the famous "Red Line" in southern Lebanon be pushed southward. Pointing to the recent wave of kidnappings of American officers, Syria argues that its army needs to control Sidon, the south of the city as well as the entire zone up to the Litani river. This would call into question the 1982 agreement which led to Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon, and the U.S. has agreed to arm-twist Israel on this.

The aim of these Byzantine dealings remains the imposition of a superpower condominium over the region. While in Moscow, Murphy proposed that the Golan Heights issue be settled by declaring the entire zone "demilitarized," with a permanent presence of either American and Soviet or U.N. troops. Moscow answered by supporting the idea of U.N. troops. On March 28, spokesman Gerasimov called for the U.N. ob-

server mission in Jerusalem to be beefed up with Soviet U.N. observers. Both Moscow and Washington also favor the idea of sending U.N. "observer" troops into the Occupied Territories; but Israel says "no."

Smelling a trap, the Egyptian government is also rejecting proposals on a joint U.S.-Soviet initiative. On March 25, President Mubarak's adviser, Osama al Baz, said that talks sponsored only by Washington and Moscow were unacceptable, and demanded "negotiations sponsored by all of the members of the Security Council," i.e., also France, Britain, and China.

Hence, the talk of a limited confrontation, which neither side would be expected to win, but which would give Moscow and Washington the pretext to intervene to stop the war and impose their control, with or without the United Nations cover. Syrian politicians are delighted at the idea. Such a war would reestablish their leadership in the Arab world, at the expense of Egypt, and would downgrade the importance of the Palestinian revolt. The Palestinian organizations would have no choice but to line up behind Damascus. Not least, it would locate the issue of Lebanon within the sole context of an Israel-Syrian war, torpedoing attempts by Lebanese politicians to have Lebanon as a separate item of negotiations. Syria would simply be recognized as the final master of the country.

And who benefits in Israel? On March 24, William Quandt of the Brookings Institution declared, "Perception in Washington has changed. The administration is disillusioned with Labour because they have not used their opportunities. The key thing is that there be a stronger Israeli government. Maybe it will be the Sharon wing. Ariel Sharon is not an ideologue."