

Washington, Moscow play Syrian card

by Thierry Lalevée

Except for *EIR* and the April 3 *London Sunday Express*, no one seems to have noticed the March 19 visit of Col. Gen. Vladimir Pikalov to Damascus. The little-known General Pikalov, who rarely travels abroad, is the chief of the Chemical Warfare department of the Soviet Army, nominally attached to the ground forces. In January 1987, he was awarded the Order of Lenin for his leadership of the rescue teams at the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and for "other services," implying the role his units have played in Afghanistan.

Given that he traveled to Damascus to meet with Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas and the leadership of the Syrian army, with a large team of scientists, the visit was obviously of vital importance in the strategic balance in the region. Syria has been working on developing its chemical warfare capabilities for years, to equip its Scud-B missiles as well as the Soviet-manned SS-21.

Another "oversight" cropped up in the latest report of the U.S. State Department on international drug production and smuggling, published in early April: The chapter on Lebanon is replete with details, but never mentions Syria's well-known role, according to *Le Figaro* of April 5. Likewise, the State Department's early March report on international terrorism spotlighted Iran, but noted that Syria has been "less and less" involved. The report whitewashing Syria came out just a few days before George Shultz's visit to Damascus.

These benevolent oversights come in sharp contrast to the U.S. media coverage and declarations of the administration on issues concerning Israel, the Palestinians, and the Palestine Liberation Organization, and more recently, the flap over the Chinese sale of intermediate-range missiles to Saudi Arabia.

Such "oversights" betray policy decisions made in Washington, in agreement with Moscow, on how to share influence in the Middle East. It has to be made clear, first, that there is no "Shultz Peace Plan," and there is no peace plan whatsoever. What is encompassed in that over-used label is a combination of political aims, where electoral jockeying serves broader strategic deals with the Soviet Union. Ultimately,

the Kissinger-like shuttle diplomacy perpetrated by George Shultz is not based on the longstanding relationships between the United States and Israel, nor even Camp David partner Egypt, and much less Jordan, but on the covert convergences of interests between Washington and Damascus—blessed by Moscow.

In short, every long-term ally the United States has had in the Middle East will be stabbed in the back, in favor of an alliance with Syria, which, as *EIR* has documented, is *the* mother of world terrorism of all varieties, and the center through which Moscow creates and deploys Islamic terrorism against the West.

Peace negotiations: a fake

Most of goals of the Shultz initiative were defined during last December's summit between Mikhail Gorbachov and Ronald Reagan. As the summit began, Washington and Moscow joined in warning Israel against retaliating against Syria for the Nov. 25 PFLP glider attacks, for which Damascus had claimed credit. The attack, which killed six Israeli soldiers, became one of the catalysts for the revolt in the Occupied Territories. The revolt handily created an internal crisis which could be managed from the outside. Hence, in December, while neither Washington nor Moscow had enough leverage on Israel and its Arab neighbors, especially Egypt and Jordan, to deliver anything, it was agreed in principle for the "Middle East issue" to be dealt with at the next summit.

Washington has been working on two complementary timetables. First, during this year of U.S. presidential elections and upcoming parliamentary elections in Israel, the pundits agree there can be no political breakthrough. American diplomatic deployments in the region are merely aimed at preventing a blow-up until next year. It is also believed that the new U.S. administration, even were it led by George Bush, would need a six months' trial period before launching any foreign policy initiatives.

Second is the more pressing timetable of Reagan's next summit or summits with Gorbachov. It was to satisfy the Soviets that Shultz launched his "Peace Plan" and began talking about an "international conference," avoiding any specifics about whether such a gathering would be binding, or a mere protocol exercise. For both Washington and Moscow, the issue is not content but framework. Moscow has no interest in finding a peace settlement to the Middle East conflict, but wants to be acknowledged as an equal partner with Washington, and the Reagan administration has long since agreed. However, Shultz and the administration cannot be seen capitulating immediately.

The policy toward Israel shows how little Washington wants a settlement; the United States refuses to support those Israeli and Arab leaders who advocate a "Marshall Plan" for the region. The Shultz plan makes no mention of economic needs. Moreover, while U.S. arms deals and defense packages are signed, economic pressures are undermining the

very security of countries such as Egypt. De facto, Washington finds itself allied in Israel, not with the Labor Party of Shimon Peres, but with the hardliners.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and his associates reject the Shultz plan because they see no reason to be subjected to a U.S.-Soviet condominium. Ultimately, their view that the Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian problem is a bilateral one, is correct, and should be welcomed by all those Arab nationalists who publicly demonstrate against "American imperialism," but discreetly negotiate for both Moscow and Washington to decide their fate.

Moscow's policy toward the Middle East conflict remains similar to its policy toward the Gulf: Keep all channels open, and as Washington discredits itself, turn more governments toward Moscow. Soviet regional power was expressed at the March 15-18 seminar of the "Arab Thought Forum" in Amman, Jordan, where Alexander Vasiliev of Moscow's Oriental Institute blasted the Arab countries for not having followed Soviet policy in 1948 when Moscow advocated the creation of two states in Palestine, one Israeli, one Palestinian. "It was the Arab regimes of the times" which rejected the creation of a Palestinian state, said Vasiliev. Could any Western politician dare to say that in Amman nowadays?

While the Shultz peace plan appears to be focused on Israel, the Occupied Territories, and the Palestinians, the real deals are being made in Damascus. Note that whenever Shultz goes to Damascus, there is no actual report on what was discussed, but all is described as "encouraging." What's encouraging? Has Damascus accepted direct talks with Israel? General Pikalov's visit underlines the fact that Syria's priority is to establish a new military balance with Israel, not peace negotiations. The Damascus regime also makes no secret of its annoyance at the events in the Territories, not because they create trouble for Israel, but because they are building up the credibility of a Palestinian movement, independent from Syria.

The Lebanon partition scenario

The Washington-Damascus deal has only one subject—Lebanon, and the building of Greater Syria. It was Kissinger's policy to give Lebanon to Syria, and there has been continuity in American foreign policy. In the last two rounds of negotiations between Shultz and Assad, various concrete proposals have been promoted, to coincide with Lebanon's presidential elections this summer. Though no agreement has yet been made on Lebanon's next President, Washington is committed to use all of its powers to ensure a stable Lebanon as a Syrian dominion.

On April 5, President Assad is reported to have even mooted to Shultz an "Afghan solution" for Lebanon. Provided that the next Maronite President gives firm guarantees of recognizing Syrian political and military control over the country, Syria would be ready to withdraw from all or part of the country. It is, after all, economically cheaper and

politically more profitable to politically control a satrap than to maintain tens of thousands of troops abroad. Lebanon's northern part around Tripoli could become directly a Syrian province, the Christians would be alone to rule their business around part of Beirut; the central part of the country from the Bekaa on south would be controlled by the various Muslim militias.

In exchange, Syria's military power of intervention would be extended further south in case of need, up to the Litani River. Israel would withdraw its troops and leave the Southern Lebanon Army alone. What do the Americans get in exchange? Syria's help in releasing some hostages.

Above all, Washington receives a promise from Damascus and Moscow that the Palestinian movement will be brought under control. There won't be an "independent" Palestinian factor. At the Shultz-Shevardnadze meeting in Washington on March 22, Shevardnadze told Moscow's Arab friends that they should not reject the Shultz initiative but "give it a try," and told the PLO that they should accept a Jordano-Palestinian delegation. The proposal is ironic, since it comes at a time when Jordan's King Hussein, fearing that the events in the territories may spill over to Jordan, is just about to withdraw from the whole charade.

On the other side, the PLO has made it clear that it wants nothing to do with a Jordanian delegation, but wants an independent one. But it will have to abide by the bidding of Moscow, which made its proposal as a reward to Jordan's King Hussein for his pressures on Pakistan's Zia ul Haq, to accept the Soviet Afghanistan deal. Whether a joint Jordano-Palestinian delegation is ever formed is irrelevant. The message is that Moscow agrees with Washington and others (not the least, Damascus), that the PLO cannot be accepted independently. It can be played with, used as a bargaining card, but not negotiated with. The issue was acknowledged by Arafat's spokesman Bassam Abu Sharif in early February when he wrote that the events in the Territories were simply an "additional bargaining card for Moscow in its negotiations with Washington."

It is thus an elaborate exercise of crisis management that both Moscow and Washington are practicing to keep the situation under their own control, pushing their pawns one after the other. There is obviously the risk that at one point, one of the players may decide to stop playing the game, or that the events in the Territories will burst out of control.

That was what General Pikalov's visit was all about. When it comes to that point, both Washington and Moscow will agree on a limited confrontation between Israel and Syria. Chemical weapons may not be used at this time yet, but the threat is there, and may be used just to trigger the conflict. Such a war will lead to a U.S.-Soviet-imposed ceasefire, will push into the background the events of the Territories—hence the Palestinian question—and will strengthen Syria, in its drive for the leadership of the Arab world against Egypt.