

Habash affair targets French institutions

by Christine Bierre

On Jan. 29, George Habash, the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and frequently depicted in the international media as a top terrorist leader quietly entered France. By Jan. 30, Habash's visit was headline news all over the country.

According to most accounts, Habash had suffered a stroke and was seeking emergency treatment. According to his wife, the visit (apparently not his first) was for a routine checkup. What was clear, however, was that France had issued Habash a visa; he did not arrive under a pseudonym, but with the full knowledge of the government.

French President François Mitterrand, who was in Oman promoting arms sales when the news broke, exclaimed that he could not believe such a decision had been made. That same day Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy denounced the visit as a "slap in the face" to Israel, while his aides said they might demand that the PFLP leader be extradited to Israel. (Perhaps the best-known incident attributed to Habash is the 1976 hijacking of an Air France plane to Entebbe, Uganda, which ended in a dramatic shootout after Israeli commandos seized the plane.)

Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir overruled his foreign minister, saying mildly that "Habash is a sick man, physically speaking. It is not a major problem."

By Jan. 31, Habash was being "detained for questioning," according to French government spokesmen—leading to PFLP denunciations of a "trap." But later that day, Mitterrand himself reported that there was no outstanding arrest warrant against Habash. The next day, Habash was whisked out of the country.

Purge ensues

As Habash was leaving France, however, Mitterrand was carrying out a purge of his government, allegedly because of the incident, and some observers were suggesting that the whole situation had been created to destabilize or purge the government.

Two officials of the Foreign Affairs Ministry, which is often portrayed as a hotbed of pro-Arab sentiment, were forced to resign: Bernard Kessedjian, the director of Foreign

Minister Roland Dumas's cabinet, and François Scheer, a well known Arabist generally considered to be France's foremost diplomat. Scheer negotiated the "rapprochement" with Iran and the reestablishment of relations with the Arab world after France's participation in the Gulf war. At the Interior Ministry, two high-level officials were forced out: the minister's own cabinet chief, Philippe Marchand, Christian Vigouroux, and Patrice Bergougnoux, another high-level official who is the man in charge of negotiations with the Paris Mosque (the Interior Ministry has jurisdiction over religious affairs).

The operation also targeted the "Palestinian cell" of close advisers to President Mitterrand: Edgar Pisani, Georgina Dufoix, and Pierre Mutin. Pisani, a former minister of the late President Charles de Gaulle, is officially employed as adviser to Mitterrand as well as being president of the Arab World Institute. Pisani conducted secret talks with the Iraqi delegation in the name of the French government during the last-ditch negotiations in Geneva between Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz and U.S. Secretary of State James Baker a year ago. Georgina Dufoix heads the interministerial agency coordinating anti-drug policy. As president of the Red Cross of France, she had established ties with the Palestinian Red Crescent organization, run by a relative of Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat.

Pierre Mutin is a go-between in back-channel negotiations with Arab countries. In 1986, he went to Damascus in the company of prominent Syrian businessman Omrame Adham, to deliver a letter by François Mitterrand regarding a deal to free hostages in Lebanon. In 1988, at Pisani's suggestion, Mutin helped to launch APEA, the Euro-Arab, Euro-African press agency, which is seen as a front for Franco-Arab intelligence operations. Moroccan money helps fund APEA, which employs the journalist Fouas Hobeika, who is tied to Diana Tawil, the wife of the PLO representative to France, Ibrahim Souss (see box).

Cherchez le Joxe

The Habash affair is undoubtedly one of the sharpest assaults on French institutions since the Greenpeace scandal of 1985 and the more recent Carpentras affair in 1990. These three affairs have several things in common: the name of Pierre Joxe; the fact that all three resulted in the replacement of major sections of the French secret services; and the attack on the remnants of de Gaulle's foreign policy apparatus, including the "pro-Arab lobby."

The *Journal du Dimanche* of Feb. 2 printed statements from secret service agents indicating that the leaks about Habash being in France came from within the cabinet of the defense minister, Pierre Joxe. The paper speculated that the operation could have been organized by the American secret services, irked by François Scheer.

The Israelis also have an obvious interest in these events. The official statements of the Palestinian organizations, the

PLO and the PFLP mainly, accused “pro-Zionist” elements, in particular in France’s right-wing opposition parties, of having served as conduits for this dirty trick. Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy tried to breathe more life into the scandal on Feb. 4, accusing Mitterrand of being in “bad faith” because, he claimed, Israel had informed France the day before Habash was allowed to leave the country, that it was preparing a demand for extradition.

In the mid-1980s it was Pierre Joxe, then interior minister, who leaked information concerning the sinking of the Greenpeace boat by the French secret services, an operation which had been approved by then-Defense Minister Charles Hernu. Joxe’s treacherous actions to the resignation of Charles Hernu, a Socialist who had been totally converted to Charles de Gaulle’s defense policies.

The name of Joxe also appeared in the blowup around the strange “Carpentras” affair—the desecration of graves at the Jewish cemetery of Carpentras two years ago. While the Jewish community of the French town was still investigating the incident, it was Joxe who at a press conference turned this affair into a huge scandal, a hideous “anti-Semitic” attack. Joxe was then unable to find the perpetrators of this misdeed and prove that it was an act of “anti-Semitism” as distinct from a crime which could have targeted any community. The Carpentras affair, however, was key to manipulating a national identity crisis—“have we French not always been anti-Semitic as a people?”—which was, in turn, an important psychological element to prepare the French for participation in the Gulf war, against their traditional Arab allies, and in favor of Israel.

During the Gulf war, Pierre Joxe replaced “pro-Arab” Defense Minister Jean Pierre Chevènement, a man who, like Charles Hernu, was committed to maintaining de Gaulle’s defense policies and strategic priorities.

Anglo-American interests advance

The elimination of the “Arab lobby” in government and the bureaucracy is apt to bring France much more into line with the Anglo-Americans, in particular when it comes to the question of policies toward the Arabs—like denying Libya, Algeria, or Iran the right to develop high technologies for economic development and especially, nuclear power.

France has apparently irked the Anglo-Americans by stalling on several policies, all of which pivot on the issue of turning the world into a free trade zone under Anglo-American domination. For example, the French government has been insisting on the need for a NATO-allied but independent European Defense Force; it seeks a special alliance with Germany as the hinge of its European policy; and it has put up quite a fight against swallowing the GATT free trade agreement. While these positions fall far short of a positive program, they are enough to be a thorn in the side of those in London and Washington who don’t wish to share the spoils of the new world order.

The British press and politicians had been most vocal in complaining about France. Now the London *Times* gloats that the Habash affair is the most “damaging scandal since the Greenpeace affair.” The *Daily Telegraph* reports on a speech by Conservative parliamentarian George Walden who was candid about British irritation against France. For Walden, the French are “eccentrics” who insist upon a “European Europe” in which the United States would play a smaller role, a policy which in his view contributes to the “dominance of Germany” in Europe. Walden denounced “Gaullist” anti-American “rigidities” especially in the French Foreign Ministry, while finding “more amenable to the facts of life,” the Defense Ministry run “by the abrasive but hard-nosed Pierre Joxe.”

The Habash affair has overshadowed the considerable publicity given by the French press to Patrick Seale’s recently published book *Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire* (New York: Random House). The book reveals that in 1984, while Pierre Joxe was interior minister, France negotiated a broad-ranging peace agreement with Abu Nidal, in exchange for the terrorist’s promise not to engage in terrorist attacks in France and against French targets. The main thesis of the book is that Abu Nidal is run by the Israeli Mossad.

The affair surrounding PFLP leader George Habash took a surprising turn on Feb. 13, when Ibrahim Souss, the PLO’s ambassador to France, charged in an interview published in the daily *Libération* that western intelligence agencies are implicated in a threat to the life of PLO chief Yasser Arafat. Souss was responding to a broadcast on the U.S. Cable News Network (CNN), which purported to be the recording of a telephone discussion between Souss and Arafat, in which Arafat denounces Jews as “dogs” and “filth,” and warns of a “settling of accounts” with the Jews because of their role in the campaign against Habash.

Souss charges that the whole thing is a fabrication, and French newspapers point out that it is “technically possible” to make such a phony recording. He said that “Arafat never uses such filthy words,” and “to accuse Arafat of being an anti-Semite is a slander.” The “racist connotation” about Jews conveyed by the tape is a projection of western anti-Semitism onto the Palestinians, he said. “I wish that the West, guilty of having massacred millions of Jews, would leave us alone, we and our Semitic cousins. The Jews are your victims, so you are guilty.”

Souss blamed “European authorities close to the Mossad” for the dirty trick—not the French, but others, in “European chancelleries.”