

State Department:

"U.S. Press Overplays Egypt-PLO Split"

The following is an interview with the Palestinian desk officer from the U.S. State Department:

Q: What is the state of PLO-Egyptian relations?

A: While the Egyptian-PLO relationship is in bad straits the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have overplayed this quite a bit. It is wrong to interpret the situation as being one step away from an Egypt-PLO break. Sadat is acting more out of personal pique. Both parties, the PLO and Egypt, need each other; so, Sadat won't go the separate peace route. The Saudis tend to

stay aloof from these affairs but if they picked up signals that Sadat was getting ready to renounce the Rabat decision, they would move into the situation to stop it. There's no sign at this point that he is ready to renounce Rabat, Sadat can't afford this since he needs the legitimacy of the PLO for what he is doing in negotiations. He needs them available for some point in the future. All the Arab states see the PLO as the legitimate Palestinian representative—theoretically, for example, a Rabat renunciation would bring King Hussein into the talks, but it won't work since the King won't bite. It's too transparent. Sadat, in short, has got to have the PLO card to play.

British Set Up Syria, Lebanon For Destabilization

The paralysis in the Egypt-Israel peace talks and all the current organizing for a suicidal separate deal between the two countries have added new importance to the volatile Lebanese situation. As occurred in 1975-1976 in the wake of Henry Kissinger's Sinai Pact, Lebanon is threatening to become the flashpoint for conflict touched off by rightist anti-Palestinian militias tied to Israel, British intelligence, and the British-connected wing of Iranian intelligence. This conflict, centered both in the southern Lebanese "no-man's land" — where renewed fighting broke out this week — and in Beirut, where ultrarightist militias and their supporters have initiated shoot-outs with Syrian army peacekeeping forces, threatens to directly involve Israel and Syria in a showdown which could trigger a dangerous destabilization in Syria.

British responsibility for unrest along Israel's northern front is emerging clearly. Early last month, intensive Syrian and Lebanese government efforts were successful in cooling down the Beirut tensions; this week leading Lebanese politicians and the Lebanese media attributed continuing dangers of unrest to British and Israeli intervention.

Reporting that the leaders of the right-wing National Liberal Party (NLP) had denied and "expressed astonishment over" media reports that the NLP had harshly criticized the Syrian role in Lebanon, the *Beirut Domestic Service* noted Feb. 17:

The report, which has been denied, had been carried by *Reuters* and *Agence France Presse*. It was soon picked up this morning by the British radio, the Israeli radio, and the Monte Carlo radio, thus intensifying the war of biased rumors which some foreign information quarters have apparently decided to launch against Lebanon. Yesterday we warned the citizens against such rumors.

On the next day, *Syrian Arab News Agency* reported that Lebanon's ex-President Franjieh, during a trip to Damascus to meet the Syrian leadership, "denounced the rumors and propaganda campaigns whose sources

and suspect objectives are known." Calling upon the Lebanese population to support the peacekeeping efforts of the Syrian and Lebanese governments, Franjieh then advised the Lebanese government to "be vigilant and to act firmly in controlling false news and sources which propagate false rumors, and to block the subversion carried out by certain foreign correspondents, particularly Monte Carlo radio, London radio, and the radio of Israel."

The Syrians have every reason themselves to be wary of the British. In a Feb. 18 London *Guardian* piece entitled "New Beirut Clashes Keep Foreign Money Away," correspondent John Palmer had the following analysis of the Syrian internal situation:

The countryside outside Beirut on the dramatic mountain route to Damascus looks both prosperous and peaceful, but a potentially lethal mosaic of Christian, Moslem, Druze, and Armenian villagers all like cheek by jowl in this region. It would not take much for the fighting to spread here in a particularly savage form, if there were partitioning of the Lebanese communities . . . Syria, like Lebanon, consists of a bewildering array of nationalities and religions. As well as Sunni and Shiite Muslims there is an important third sect, the Alawites, who are heavily represented in the military element of the Assad government. There are at least six Christian groups as well as Druze and Kurds. In Damascus there is a small, but by all signs thriving community of Jews in whose quarter the Hebrew language can be heard in shops and cafes. Syria has a tradition of concessional tolerance, though this would be put under immense strain if the Assad regime fails to prevent the breakup of the Lebanon.

The British, of course, realize that a strong central government in Syria, a country that has been one of the most coup-prone in the post-World War II era, would go a long way toward neutralizing any such scenario. Hence

reports from London sources of unrest and factionalization at the top rungs of the leadership command. The London-based private newsletter of British-Zionist intelligence operative Jon Kimche recently reported that Syrian Foreign Minister Abdel Halib Khaddam is being put forward by the Soviets to lead a government that will replace an overthrown President Hafez Assad and that will institute a regime under the sway of the radical ideologue wing of the Syrian Baath Party. This report has received no independent substantiation.

A more ominous British media exclusive was the following item in the Feb. 19 *London Sunday Times*, entitled "Arab Hit-Squad Kills Russian":

Syria has imposed a news blackout on the mysterious death there last Saturday of a senior Soviet adviser to its air force. Colonel Vladimir Yakovlevich Dankyevich, posted to Damascus last September, and thought also to be a senior KGB officer, died from injuries received in a car "accident" earlier this month. In fact, he is the latest of nearly a dozen senior Russian advisers in Syria to

be assassinated by a fanatical Moslem group — in similar traffic "accidents."

The Moslem Brotherhood, a pan-Arab movement dedicated to strict observance of religious laws and the eradication of Western "liberalism" regards the presence of Soviet advisers as imperialist aggression and Communist ideas as contrary to the Moslem creed. Western intelligence sources believe the brotherhood has a list of Soviet "intruders" marked for assassination. Its activities are acutely embarrassing to the Syrian government, which is receiving large amounts of aid from the Soviet Union in the form of military supplies and advisers.

The most embarrassing of these was the murder on Sept. 2 of last year of General Yakov Dimitrevich Dibly, a senior assistant to the Soviet military chief in Syria. He died instantly when his car crashed into a lorry driven deliberately across his path in northern Syria. Another victim was the chief Soviet adviser to the Syrian Navy, Rear-Admiral Alexander Alexandrovich Trofimov, killed by a hit-and-run driver in 1975.

Soviets Move Diplomatically Into Middle East

The Soviet Union is moving diplomatically into the Middle East, with a view to getting peace negotiations going again by establishing a Soviet-Arab-European economic development axis.

Central to the Soviets' recent activities in the region is, surprisingly, their rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, long a bastion of anti-Soviet sentiment. Over the past several weeks, both countries have endeavored to restore the basis for effective outside intervention into the deadlocked Arab-Israeli negotiating process. According to the French daily *Le Figaro*, the increased coordination between the two countries is not limited to the Middle East but will extend to stabilizing the volatile Horn of Africa.

A Feb. 19, Radio Moscow commentary (excerpted below) called for the revival of Soviet-Saudi friendship, pointing out that ties between the two countries date from 1926 when "Soviet goods appeared on the Saudi markets — a matter that made it possible to weaken the grip of the British monopoly on domestic and foreign trade in the Saudi kingdom." The commentary also attacks those circles in the U.S. who are doing Great Britain's dirty work by trying to prevent Soviet-Saudi ties.

However, the Soviets are making it clear that they do *not* intend to push the U.S. out of the Middle East. Last week, Soviet President Brezhnev pinpointed the Mideast as the area where U.S.-Soviet relations could be stabilized, and attacked those "forces (in the U.S.) that are interested neither in good-neighborly USSR-U.S. relations nor in the relaxation of international tension in general." Brezhnev's emphasis on cooperation reflects Soviet concern to revive the historic Oct. 1, 1977 joint U.S.-USSR communiqué calling for a Geneva peace conference.

Soviets, Saudis Against Separate Peace

As the Soviets know well, Saudi Arabia exerts sub-

stantial economic and political leverage in any peace talks because of its financial sway over the Egyptian government. The Saudis adamantly oppose a "separate peace" deal between Israel and Egypt that would leave the crucial Palestinian homeland problem unresolved and hence open the way for civil war in Lebanon and war in the entire region. Any "separate peace" initiative by Egypt's President Sadat, leaving out the Palestinians, would lead the Saudis to cut off their economic aid to Sadat — as experts on the region emphasize.

Soviet awareness of this political reality was underscored in a Radio Moscow broadcast on Feb. 17 by Georgii Ilich Mirskii, a leading Soviet Mideast analyst for over two decades. (see below).

With an eye to political survival, Sadat is meanwhile keeping lines to the Soviets open, not only because of Saudi opposition to a "separate peace," but also on account of mounting opposition from the Egyptian "Nasserite" military and bureaucracy, which has historical ties to the USSR.

According to *Le Figaro*, Sadat is secretly seeking to reopen relations with the USSR, shut down in 1977, by using Morocco's King Hassan II as mediator. Hassan, who maintains close ties with the Saudis, recently strongly praised the Soviets. A State Department official confirmed the possibility that the "Moroccan connection" is being activated by the Soviets and Saudis to prevent Sadat from making a desperate flight forward to salvage the remnants of his peace initiative towards Israel of last fall.

A potential shift in orientation by Sadat was also evidenced by Sadat's recent interview in *October* magazine, an Egyptian weekly. While criticizing the Soviet leadership, Sadat pointed to Brezhnev as "the best figure in the Kremlin." Sadat added: "If one day Egyptian-Soviet relations return to normal, it will be thanks to the political experience and wisdom of Mr. Brezhnev."