

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1-AWASHINGTON TIMES
2 October 1985

Kidnapping turns tables on Moscow

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The kidnapping of four Soviets in Lebanon Monday has dramatically altered perceptions of the terror network in the Middle East and could signal new approaches to the war against terrorism.

"We are now in the same boat as the Americans and other Westerners in Lebanon," said a Soviet journalist yesterday in Lebanon. And, in fact, the kidnappings may have an impact on the Geneva summit. President Reagan is thought to be certain to bring up the topic of state-sponsored terrorism, and the kidnappings will enable Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to plead the

innocence of a wounded man.

For the first time in the Middle East, Soviet diplomats have fallen victims to terrorism. For the first time, Syria, which exercises a measure of the control over terrorists, has become the target of terrorist demands.

This, in turn, has raised questions over how much control Syria really exercises.

The Islamic Jihad terrorist group's kidnapping of three Soviet diplomats and a Soviet doctor could have far-ranging implications for Soviet interests in the Middle East and the politics of that region in general. Islamic Jihad in the past has worked with the support, or at least the acquiescence, of Syria, the Soviet Union's closest Middle East ally.

The kidnapping highlights the overlapping and sometimes conflicting influence of Syria and the Soviet Union in Lebanon.

Except for the Christian Lebanese Forces, most of the factions vying for influence and power in Lebanon support and receive various forms of assistance from Syria.

Islamic Jihad has been carrying out attacks against American, Israeli and Western European influence in Lebanon. It operates from the Bekaa Valley, which is under Syrian control, and is considered to be under the strong influence of Iran.

American sources believe that Islamic Jihad was responsible for the bombing of the American Marine barracks resulting in the deaths of 273 Marines. The terrorists reportedly received assistance from Syria.

Israeli and American intelligence sources believe that until the split between Syria and the PLO, most if not all of the worldwide terrorism emanating from Lebanon received support from Syria and the PLO.

But in the wake of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, terrorist groups proliferated and the PLO and Syria began a vicious struggle for power in Lebanon.

In Tripoli, Islamic forces backed by the PLO are waging a struggle for power with Syrian and leftist forces.

Shi'ite forces recently joined that struggle and threaten to split the Iranian-Syrian front.

Thus the ironic situation that has developed in recent days, resulting in Soviet diplomats being abducted by a group that operates in one part of Lebanon under Syrian control and is now allied with Syria's PLO opponents.

"I think it's the case of the sorcerer's apprentice," said Ray Cline, an expert on terrorism at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies. "The Russians let loose enough of these terrorists and now they've become the victims themselves."

The prospect of the Soviets becoming victims of terrorism has titillated experts who accuse the Soviets of direct and indirect support of terrorism.

"The Russians aren't any better off than we are," Mr. Cline said. But "they will be much more ruthless" than the Americans, he added.

The Soviets will no doubt exert tremendous pressure on the Syrians to crack down on Islamic Jihad.

The Syrians may not be able to control Islamic Jihad, according to Judith Kipper of the American Enterprise Institute. Miss Kipper said that the kidnapping of the Soviet diplomats in Beirut marks an "escalation" of terrorism in Lebanon.

"The Syrians won't be able to help them any more than they help us," she said. "It is clear that there is a mutuality of interests between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. I would hope that there would be a decision between the two superpowers to do everything to avoid a confrontation."

The battle for Tripoli has been brewing for two years with Syria hoping to end any remaining influence on the part of PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

The split between Mr. Arafat and

Syrian President Hafez Assad has strained relations between Syria and the Soviet Union, a staunch supporter of Mr. Arafat. Relations between Syria and the Soviets may be strained further by the latest series of events.

On the other hand, the kidnapping of the Soviets will provide another opportunity for Mr. Assad to assert his independence of the Soviets. The Syrians exploited the June hijacking of TWA Flight 847 to the same end.

The Soviets are not likely to have much patience with Syrian muscle-flexing. Yesterday, they branded the kidnappings "acts of ultra-rightist bandits."

Soviet leverage over the Syrians is limited, however. They cannot afford an open split with their main proxy in the Middle East. "The main Soviet interest is not to lose Syria because then they're out of the Middle East," Miss Kipper said.

The current situation is filled with ironies. "It will be very interesting to see this gang of mafiosi working on each other instead of on us," Mr. Cline said.

Mr. Cline doubts that the Soviets would be willing to work with the United States against terrorism after the latest kidnappings. "The Russians will try to handle this on their own," he concluded.

Many terrorism experts believe the Soviets will be constrained from using force for the same reason the United States has been unable to retaliate in the past. "The trouble is that you don't know who's on the end of the telephone" in kidnapping cases, a State Department official said.

The Soviets now are experiencing the same frustration Americans have felt so many times before. Like the Americans, they will find it difficult to act on their own, and their proxies may not find it in their best interests to help.