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Kuwait: Standing Up to Terrorism and the Radicals

A major irony of the current hostage situation in Beirut is that Kuwait may now be perceived in the region as less susceptible to pressure by terrorism than either the US or Israel, and a decision by the Kuwaiti government to execute its convicted Shia terrorists may seal the fate of some of the US hostages held in Lebanon--particularly William Buckley. Earlier this week Nabih Barri and Algerian officials involved in the negotiations rejected a suggestion that release of the Shia terrorist prisoners in Kuwait be added to the list of conditions for releasing the TWA hostages, in part because it would have further complicated an already messy situation, but probably also because the Kuwaiti regime has earned a reputation in the past two years for taking--and maintaining--a tough stand against giving into Shia terrorist pressure.

The new respect for Kuwait probably results in large part from changed perceptions. The Kuwaiti regime was once widely perceived as spineless--US officials used to disparagingly describe Kuwait as following a policy of "preemptive capitulation" to pressure--so almost any sign of backbone came as a surprise to regional observers. Further, the Kuwaiti policy has evolved quietly, without fanfare. In contrast, the United States since the Iranian hostage situation has been perceived in the Middle East as unable to implement its widely proclaimed intention to counter terrorism. In addition, perceptions of Israel's previously rigid stand against compromise with terrorists may have been fatally weakened by the recent exchange of over 1100 convicted Palestinians for 3 Israeli POWs.

The turning point for the Kuwaiti government was the series of bombings by Iranian-backed Shias on 12 December 1983 of the US and French embassies there as well as vital Kuwaiti government installations. Seventeen members of the pro-Iranian Dawa Party were sentenced to long prison terms--including three to death--for participation in the bombings.

- Contrary to expectations, the Kuwaitis did not quietly expel the prisoners after their convictions; nor, however, did they execute the three sentenced to death. Radical Shia efforts in Lebanon and in the Gulf have increasingly focused on trying to win the freedom of these prisoners.

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The Kuwaiti position further hardened in December 1984 when a Kuwaiti airliner was hijacked to Tehran by Shia terrorists who demanded the release of the Dawa prisoners. Two US officials were murdered and Kuwaiti passengers were brutalized by the terrorists, but the Kuwaitis refused to buckle to the pressure. The Kuwaitis strongly suspect Iranian complicity in the incident--and the suspicion is reinforced by Tehran's continuing refusal to return the hijacked jet.

- Kuwaiti-Iranian relations have further deteriorated recently as Kuwait has stepped up deportations of Iranians caught illegally in the country. [REDACTED]

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In a parallel fashion, Kuwait has shown increasing backbone in standing up to Syria--which the Kuwaitis suspect of complicity in both the December 1983 bombings and the December 1984 airline hijacking to Tehran. Relations between the two countries are deteriorating.

- Reflecting the large Palestinian presence in the country, the semi-independent Kuwaiti National Assembly has voted to cut off economic aid to Damascus to protest Syrian encouragement of the recent Shia attacks on Palestinian camps in Beirut. The Assembly also cut off aid in 1983 to protest President Assad's efforts to destroy the PLO (then in Tripoli, Lebanon) and his decision to massacre the inhabitants of Hama to stamp out Muslim Brotherhood agitation.
- Kuwait has also been expelling Syrian troublemakers in an effort to improve internal security.
- Syria has withdrawn its Ambassador from Kuwait, and last week it sanctioned an anti-Kuwaiti demonstration to take place in front of Kuwait's Embassy in Damascus.

Last month's suicide attempt to kill the Amir by blowing up his motorcade may finally end the regime's hesitation to execute the three condemned prisoners. Kuwaiti officials are all too aware that Hizballah extremists have linked the fate of the seven US hostages captured in Beirut before the TWA hijacking to the fate of the Dawa prisoners.

- Kuwait may postpone executing the prisoners if the TWA incident appears likely to be resolved soon. The attempt to kill the Amir has built powerful public pressures to proceed with the executions, however, and I believe the regime will do so in the near term--regardless of the consequences in Beirut. Some reporting from Kuwait suggests the Amir may order the execution of the prisoners at any time.

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Hizballah elements in Beirut are already reputed to hold at least five of the TWA hostages. The longer the TWA incident drags on, the more likely it is that radical Shias will gain control of the fate of more of the TWA hostages. If this occurs, the fate of these TWA hostages--along with the seven US citizens seized before the hijacking--will be linked in part to developments in Kuwait.

- Execution of the Dawa prisoners, particularly in the next week or two, would greatly inflame the Hizballahis in Beirut, and probably would result in retaliatory killing of some of the US hostages they are holding.

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Moscow's View of the Hostage Crisis

Moscow surely appreciates the global perception of "America held hostage" and impression that the United States is no more able to deter these actions or bring power to bear to favorably resolve them than in 1979. Such images lower estimation for the United States and tend to redound to Soviet advantage in the superpower competition insofar as it is believed that the US is unwilling to forcefully use military power to protect its interests and the assertion is made that the Soviet Union doesn't suffer such outrages because it would forcefully retaliate.

While the Soviets currently use their propaganda techniques to accuse the US of practicing terrorism--including US military movements related to the crisis--they want to be able later to more quietly inform the international community that the US is unable to protect its own interests and those of its allies even less.

* { [REDACTED] Gorbachev reportedly has told Syrian President Assad and informed Nabbi Barri that the USSR would not get involved in the hostage crisis and encouraged them to adopt a less provocative stance. He is said to have warned them of possible US military action to free the hostages. Whether this report is true or not, the Soviets probably do fear a dramatic US use of force aimed at ending the standoff, or more likely, following its resolution.

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The best outcome for the Kremlin would be a diplomatic ending to a protracted crisis that is both humiliating to the United States and not followed by a consequent US use of force which both deters future such incidents and heightens respect for the US as a great power. While the Soviets would appreciate least a dramatic rescue followed by some major destruction of the terrorist network and capabilities, they probably accord this a low probability.

The Kremlin's analysis of the impact and opportunities afforded by a US use of force probably includes as potential scenarios US attacks against terrorist positions in Lebanon, less likely attacks against Lebanon and Libya or Iran, and least likely actions that included a strike against Syria or a multi-theater operation aimed at both Iran and Libya. The Soviets know well their resulting propaganda opportunities with the immediate targets of such an action and will mount a worldwide propaganda barrage against US "militarism and terrorism" in the event of any US use of force. They probably are doubtful about their ability to gain directly or indirectly valuable political advantage in Lebanon, fearful that Qadafi's hold on power is fragile and that he could be overthrown by a US political-military operation, and highly uncertain about the aftermath of a military attack against Iranian targets.

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Moscow probably has the least concern about Syria, both because of doubt that it would be the target of a US attack and expectation that such an attack would be circumscribed so as to not provoke a major US-Soviet crisis. (Moscow is nevertheless angry at Syrian actions in Lebanon, particularly its support of the Amal militia's behavior in the internecine warfare there).

By contrast, the Soviets have no record of military commitment to Qadafi and would be taking an enormous risk of massive escalation on his behalf by militarily opposing a US military operation against him. Such Soviet action would be highly unlikely. Nevertheless, as in the past, Soviet naval dispositions and operations in the Mediterranean probably would be made to appear threatening so as to dissuade and limit the effectiveness of such a US course.

The Soviets certainly would seek to exploit US military retaliation against Iran but probably doubt that they can gain a political position with the Khomeini regime secure and significant enough to sway post-Khomeini Iran. Insofar as such an attack further reinforced anti-Americanism in Iran, the Soviets would feel further comforted about US inability to regain political influence there in the future.

Moscow probably is more uncertain than hopeful that US military action against Iran would result in a net advantage because it basically views the Khomeini regime as a fanatical political throwback, as the US does. Tehran has sought a more balanced Soviet position in the Iran-Iraq war, but so far has been unwilling to give Moscow anything tangible to obtain it (see attached for more on this).

In the event of major instability in Iran, that possibly might be promoted by US use of force, the Soviets do not have a political position in Iran today that they could count on to dominate events. They do have assets--in their diplomatic presence, the Tudeh (weakened as it is), and in Azerbaijan--that the US does not have; how valuable they would be in a crisis probably is debated by Soviet analysts. As always, Soviet military intervention to gain control of Iran would forebode enormous risks.

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Soviet Perspective on Iran

In the main, the Soviets so far are rejecting Iranian entreaties for improved relations and Moscow's adoption of a more balanced position in the Iran-Iraq war. Moscow is able to play tough because of Iran's hostility toward the US and the Soviet position with Iraq. The Soviets seek to drive a hard bargain that includes tangible gains and not just an increased presence or symbols.

A scowling Gromyko reportedly entered a Moscow meeting between an Iranian delegation and Soviet officials to attack Tehran for its oppression of the Tudeh, assisting the Afghan insurgents, and sending secret emissaries to Azerbaijan to incite the populace against the USSR. He further alleged that the Iranians had extended the range of the Scuds they had received from Libya. He then terminated the meeting, giving the Iranians no chance to present their position.

The May issue of the Party journal Kommunist includes an article that attacks the clerics for subverting the Iranian revolution in 1979 with their "muslim fanaticism" and "political despotism." The article concludes that "the conservative clergy has succeeded in stopping the social revolution and tearing it away from . . . the elimination of American domination." It perceives the clergy's plans as supportive of "bourgeois business and large landowners."

Pravda on 20 June replayed the main part of a Tudeh protest calling for an end to repression by the Khomeini regime.

These types of events broadly overshadow the fact that the government newspaper Izvestiya did not replay the Tudeh attack--thus possibly indicating some discord between the Party Secretariat and the Foreign Ministry--and a Ministry readout to a US embassy officer in April suggesting optimism over future economic relations.

A good indicator of Moscow's perspective and tactics toward Tehran will be whether Deputy Foreign Minister Korniyenko visits Tehran in the next several months, as has been long rumored, and the fallout from that visit.

The Soviets may believe that the Islamic regime will survive Khomeini and is a fundamental threat to Moscow's control of the muslim portions of its empire, and that open support for the regime could ultimately threaten a danger more important than the possibility of influencing the post-Khomeini era. Their goal, nevertheless, may be to do what is possible to weaken the regime by assisting Iraq in its war effort--which they are doing--so as to maximize its amenability and possibly bring about its collapse. The Soviets probably calculate that they can do no worse than Khomeini. From a current tactical standpoint, however, Moscow may believe that without the Tudeh it stands little chance of swaying events in Iran.

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The Kremlin might be right in such thinking; while we worry about the Soviets cutting a deal that would better position them to influence the post-Khomeini era, they have some immediate objectives and concerns in the meanwhile, and they have much experience in the pursuit of influence and dominion over Iran.

The likelihood that the Soviets are thinking in these terms is greater insofar as Soviet policy toward Iran probably remains in the hands of hard-nosed tacticians like Gromyko and ideologues like Ponomarev of the International Department. The new chief of the Middle East countries department for Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan is a cautious, old school diplomat.

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