

# Here's the real linkage

**B**izarre as it sounds, there's an intriguing link between the world's two current hot spots — the rebellious Baltic republics and the war-torn Mideast.

In Lithuania and Latvia Soviet special forces and "popular front" communist groups — mobs of ethnic Russians organized by the KGB — have been trying to crush the Baltic independence movement. In a curious replay of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, Moscow once again is sending in its tanks while the world is distracted by war in the Mideast.

Not, however, totally distracted. An angry European Community, which has lately been lavishing all sorts of favors on Mikhail Gorbachev's government, has just halted a \$1.3 billion aid package to protest the crackdown in the Baltic.

Now there is mounting pressure on the U.S. Congress to also cut aid to Moscow and to rescind recently granted trade concessions. If this happens, Israel and its Arab neighbors could be directly affected.

For more than a decade, the powerful pro-Israel lobby in the U.S. used its clout to get Congress to bar any aid or trade deals with Moscow in order to pressure the Kremlin to allow emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel. In the last two years, the Soviets, increasingly desperate for U.S. aid and access to the huge American market, finally allowed large numbers of Jews to leave for Israel and Europe.

As a result, it is estimated that between one and two million Soviet Jews will probably arrive in Israel in the next few years. Some Israeli experts believe their nation's population of 3.7 million Jews will grow by at least 25% in the next two years, thanks to soaring immigration. The armed forces will have another 100,000 soldiers available from the manpower pool of Soviet newcomers.

This massive influx, which Arabs claim will inevitably force displacement of 1.7 million Palestinians living in the occupied territories, is a major reason why so many Arabs back Saddam Hussein. Unpromising as his chances may seem, Saddam's challenge to the West and Israel

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appears to a lot of Arabs as the absolute last chance to save what's left of Palestine and to prevent the Jewish state from expanding to six or seven million people.

This the hidden demographic front of the Gulf war.

Backers of Israel insist U.S. aid to the USSR must continue. Supporters of Baltic independence demand that aid be stopped. Clearly, if U.S. economic aid to Moscow is cut, Jewish emigration will very likely be reduced or even halted. But a U.S. aid cutoff might also force Moscow to back off in the Baltic. In other words, a nasty dilemma.

Chances are that Congress will give Moscow a few sharp raps on the knuckles and continue aid, no matter how severe the Baltic crackdown. The Bush administration, which is due to sign a series of highly important arms reductions agreements next month with Moscow, is similarly opposed to upsetting U.S.-Soviet relations or Moscow's tepid, but still vital, support for the U.S.-led assault against Iraq.

Meanwhile, there is growing dismay in Moscow — and many other parts of the world — that what was originally billed as a UN operation to liberate Kuwait has turned into a campaign by the U.S. to eradicate Iraq from the Mideast map. Neighboring Iran is also deeply alarmed by what is happening to Iraq and may even be considering intervening to support Saddam.

Under the fig leaf of the UN mandate, President George Bush is operating, say critics, under a hidden agenda. This, quite simply, is to destroy Iraq as a challenge to U.S. strategic interests in the Mideast. Freeing Kuwait is merely a side-issue.

Considering the mammoth bombing that Iraq is sustaining, its regime, ever inept in public relations, has failed to show the world the damage caused by the air blitz. Doing so would gain Baghdad a great deal of international sympathy and produce demands that the destruction of Iraq be halted. Instead, the obtuse Iraqis have booted out almost all newsmen and are parading captured coalition airmen in a crude attempt to rekindle memories of Vietnam. They are also doing so to show the Arab public that the Americans and British are not invincible, hi-tech knights but ordinary mortals who can be beaten.

This may play well in the souks of the Mideast, but not in North America where people are enraged by yet another example of Iraqi cruelty.

North Americans, however, have no sense at all of what it's like to be carpet bombed and left without food, water, electricity or toilets. A few days of this and people quickly forget the niceties of the Geneva Convention.

So far, the U.S. is winning both the air war and the equally important propaganda war. Saddam's PR men are even more off target than his anti-aircraft gunners.