

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Israel hostage to extremists?

While the major parties struggle to form a unity government, fascist Rabbi Meir Kahane is polarizing the country.

Close to two weeks after the July 23 elections, on Aug. 5, President Chaim Herzog finally gave Shimon Perez, chairman of the Labor Party, the responsibility to form Israel's next government. According to Israeli rules, he has some 40 days to try to patch together a national coalition. While Labor with its 45 seats (or Likud with its 41) could try to form a coalition that falls short of a 61-seat majority as a caretaker government until new elections, it is expected that Perez will seek to form a national-unity government of Labor and Likud.

Intervention by former Prime Minister Menachem Begin proved key to the present situation. Begin had waited until July 22, one day before the vote, to endorse Shamir's Likud—a far cry from the outspoken campaign Likud had been counting on. The reason, according to the July 20 *Jerusalem Post*, was probably the presence of Ariel Sharon as number-four on the Likud list. "Don't ever mention that name to me again," Begin was quoted telling a friend. On July 25, he called for a national-unity government, reportedly in the belief that such a government would not include the dangerous general.

Begin's formulations otherwise indicated a concern to prevent a Likud government which would be a hotbed of extremism. He called on Likud never to negotiate with the Kach leader, Meir Kahane, who, having won a seat in the Knesset, would have had to have been included in a Likud government.

Both Labor and Likud got Begin's point, and by July 27, the first contacts

were made between them. But they have not yet been able to agree on anything. Meanwhile, as Begin rightly feared, the political scene has been dominated by the fascist Kahane, founder of the U.S.-based Jewish Defense League.

On July 24, he organized a mass rally at Jerusalem's Wall to celebrate his election, announcing that he would soon launch a "Jewish Holy War against the Arabs." On July 27, he warned President Herzog, that if he was not involved in the government talks, he would storm the presidential palace. On Aug. 1, he attempted it, and had to be driven back by police. "I am not stupid," he told followers. "I will wait to receive full parliamentary immunity. So far, we have only scared the Arabs a little. Next, I will destroy the walls which surround the Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem, and I will build a synagogue!"

Kahane, who received a sizeable 25,000 votes from predominantly poor oriental Jews—compared to 5,000 in the last elections—nightly spews racialist abuse on Israeli Arabs, whom he denounces as "reproducing themselves like rabbits." On Aug. 2 in Um el Faham, inhabited by 25,000 Arabs, he established an "Office for Arab Emigration," where, he said, Arabs who want to leave Israel should register immediately.

Two weeks of this have produced reactions. Outgoing Prime Minister Shamir, generally described in the press as a never-depressed fighter, told the press that "walking through the streets of Jerusalem, I feel the anguished and heavy atmosphere of Je-

rusalem besieged by the Roman armies, just prior to the destruction of the second temple." The press was quick to observe that the month of August, *Ab* in Hebrew tradition, is the month of catastrophes, and that, during the month, the roughly 1900th anniversary of the destruction of the temple occurs.

On Aug. 5, some 20,000 Israelis demonstrated in support of the Um el Faham Arabs against Kahane, and Attorney General Zamir announced an investigation to determine whether Kahane was still on probation from a past criminal conviction—which would invalidate his election.

That "Israel's Farakhan," as Theodore Mann of the American Jewish Congress termed him, could win an election is a clear sign of the crisis in Israeli society. But for his immediate electorate, Kahane has little support. The Knesset is expected to repudiate him by outlawing racial discrimination against Israel's Arabs.

But Kahane, and those behind him, are not entirely crazy. His extremism is creating a polarized environment for the next government, which may be driven into an accommodation with the more "moderate" brand of extremism, Yuval Ne'eman's Tehya party (five Knesset seats). Ne'eman, technology minister in Shamir's government, has asserted that he will not be left out of current talks. He announced that his aim was to create a "situation of no-return in the occupied territories with new settlements within a year," warning that if the government refuses, "I will go with the settlers and we will do it anyway"—waving the specter of Jewish revolt on the West Bank against the central government.

Kahane could not have said it better. In such an atmosphere, look for the political comeback of another extremist, despite Begin's warnings: Ariel Sharon.