

Will Israel become a new Weimar republic?

by Thierry Lalevée

Only the deployment of some 1,000 policemen around the Galilean village of Oum el Faham on Aug. 29 prevented the first battle in what may become Israel's civil war.

A key figure in provoking the crisis is the new Member of the Knesset and former FBI-informant, Rabbi Meir Kahane (a.k.a. Michael King), who was elected on a racist, anti-Arab electoral platform. And the Arab village of Oum el Faham is becoming a kind of national symbol of Israel's crisis. It is there that Kahane decided to open, several weeks ago, an "Office for the Emigration of the Arabs," announcing that the 750,000 Israeli Arabs—"those snakes," as he called them—had to leave Israel. By Aug. 29, he declared, he would enter the village to begin collecting names, voluntarily or *manu militari*. On Aug. 28, members of Kahane's fascist party, the Kach, distributed leaflets in the town of 25,000 inhabitants, reading: "Accept a good solution: Leave! You will be indemnified. Call Kach's central office in Jerusalem, give your name, identity card number, and telephone number."

The leaflet provoked outrage among the citizens and the few hundred Jewish and Arab supporters who poured into the village to keep out Kahane and his goons.

Although the confrontation finally fizzled, the events threw a spotlight on the behavior of Interior Minister Josef Burg, who first refused to send police to protect the village, then changed his mind and specified that the police deployment was aimed "at preventing disorder." As for Kahane, Burg told the village mayor, "he is a Member of the Knesset and has the right to go wherever he wants." As a result, Kahane was later politely told by the police not to enter the village, and the day ended in battles between the police and the local population, mostly the children.

That such an incident can take place at all underlines the dramatic change in Israel's atmosphere since the Lebanese war and the July parliamentary elections, which have left the country politically paralyzed. Officially, no one supports Kahane. His extremism is denounced day after day in all the main newspapers. However, there is little doubt that Kahane is seen as a key asset to manipulate the policies of whatever government comes in. Members of the Likud who think they should form the next government have not hidden the fact that they are ready to do their utmost to sabotage the efforts of Shimon Peres to put a new coalition together, even a National Unity government.

Everyone accepts the principle of such a government, but the Likud wants quondam Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, not Peres, to lead, and the Likud negotiating team has taken up the most hardline policy toward Labor, for example, on Jewish settlement and negotiations with Jordan. The aim is to force Labor to compromise on such issues, thereby leading toward a split between Labor and its main left-wing component, the Mapam, which would leave Labor in a definitive minority position.

The Sharon gamble for power

On other occasions, the Likud has directly sided with Kahane. For example, on Aug. 26, four Members of the Knesset (MK) from the left-wing Shinui party wanted to visit the jail where Israeli terrorists are held, to investigate reports that the terrorists are receiving preferential treatment, including extensive telephone privileges. As they reached the gate of the jail, not only were the guards instructed not to allow the MKs to enter, but they were greeted by a mob of fanatics from Kahane's Kach. The MKs were severely beaten while the guards watched. The police arrived much later, though Burg had been made aware of the events from the outset.

Burg is not alone to blame for this situation. In its evident desire to lead the next government at any price, the Labor Party of Shimon Peres has shown more than political weakness. In this game, not only the Likud and Labor, but Israel's population will be the ultimate loser.

Ariel Sharon, who was dumped as Israel's defense minister after an inquiry blamed him for massacres in Lebanon, has reimposed himself on the political scene. No one talks any more about his handling of the Lebanese war or of his potential connections to the Israeli underground terrorists. He is even a key Likud negotiator with the Labor Party for a national unity government.

Emboldened, Sharon told Labor on Aug. 24 that he considered that "ultimately Jordan will be ours in the same way that east Jerusalem belonged to us even before 1967." This declaration, broadly disseminated in the Israeli press, coincided—not so strangely—with a death threat sent to King Hussein in early August by the Israeli "TNT" (Terror-against-Terror) group advising the Jordanian King to "leave the territories occupied by your ridiculously small kingdom." Sharon's statement is particularly ominous in the light of his repeated trips to Switzerland during the summer to negotiate a Lebanon settlement with Syria's Rifaat al Assad.

Did they decide to share Jordan as they have planned sharing Lebanon? As in the past, such deals need more wars to be implemented. A new war coupled with an internal political collapse is just what Sharon and his backers want to impose his dictatorship, whatever form it may take. Kahane's job is to create such conditions, even at the price of civil war. It will be important to watch his visit to the United States which began on Aug. 30.