

Israel engages in apocalyptic politics

by Thierry Lalevée

More than two months after the outbreak of protests in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, it is time for the Israeli leadership, as well as that of the Palestinians, to step back and reflect on what real options exist for getting out of the present crisis. Failure to do so now, will have rapid, disastrous consequences. It will bring to political hegemony the real enemy of Israel, as well as of the Palestinian Arabs who have been struggling for decades for an independent state: the fundamentalists of all kinds, be they Islamic, Jewish, or Christian. From such a cauldron of cultish irrationalism, the nation of Israel would never recover.

There is not much time left. The threshold beyond which a longstanding political conflict could be transformed into an apocalyptic and psychotic religious war, setting Muslims against Jews, Muslims against Christians, and Christians against Jews and religious sects of all kinds, is close to being crossed. Many desire just such a religious war. *EIR* documented in a 1983 Special Report, "The Jerusalem Temple Mount: a trigger for fundamentalist holy wars," how this scenario was intended to unfold. For Jewish and Christian fundamentalists alike, the destruction of Al Aqsa, the mosque atop Jerusalem's Temple Mount, will open the way for rebuilding the third and final Temple of Solomon, announcing the coming of the Messiah and the Apocalypse. For Islamic fundamentalists, the recapture of Jerusalem could also mean the coming of the Messiah.

That threshold was nearly crossed on Jan. 15, when, during riots at the Al Aqsa mosque, Israeli soldiers penetrated the mosque itself, one of the most holy shrines of the Muslim religion, in search of Palestinians who had kidnaped one of their troops. Only because the Israeli soldiers were Muslim Druzes, has the incident not unleashed a general Islamic revolt. However, there is little doubt that such incidents will occur again and again, whether at Al Aqsa or at other holy

sites, unless a solution is found rapidly.

Few international leaders have yet realized that we are now faced with a religious time-bomb that could engulf the entire region in flames—except perhaps the Pope, who addressed the matter in his sermon of Jan. 17, and Jerusalem Mayor Teddy Kolleck, who committed himself to the protection of the Muslim holy sites on Jan. 19.

Many options, but no solution

Israel has several options immediately at hand. Two are most obvious, and are no solution to the crisis at all. They are represented by the flight forward of the Shamir government, and by the policies implemented by Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin's behavior in the last weeks has mystified not only supporters of Israel abroad, but Rabin's own colleagues inside the government and the Labour Party. Rabin, the man who displayed many weaknesses as chief of staff, and allowed himself to be politically manipulated by Henry Kissinger, now wants to become a new "strongman," like Industry and Trade Minister (and former defense minister) Ariel Sharon. For purely internal and personal political reasons, Rabin is breaking with the policy of his party, and closing ranks with the hawks around Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Sharon. Throughout the occupied territories, it is Rabin's drive to become prime minister again, which is being cynically fought for.

One of Rabin and Shamir's options is to impose an "iron fist" over the occupied territories, a total, genocidal food blockade, including the refugee camps which are under curfew, at the price of destroying Israel's own economy. No doubt they have considered the other option, a limited war, in Lebanon or in Syria.

If such a war is waged, many Israeli officers, who are already demoralized and frustrated by recent events, will

know that they are being manipulated, and are fighting a war that is not in Israel's interest. And the war will certainly be lost. Already, last November, many Israeli officers were grumbling about how a small group of Palestinians could have succeeded in penetrating Israeli defenses, using glider planes. Some saw that Nov. 25 incident, which helped spark the events of the West Bank and Gaza, as a setup, aimed at "manipulating Israel into a war against Syria, once again as a proxy," as one such individual expressed it.

The Palestinian leadership, represented by the Palestine Liberation Organization, has similar options at hand. Outflanked at the very beginning by the militance of the Iranian-backed Islamic fundamentalists of the Gaza strip, PLO chairman Yasser Arafat resorted to his usual tactic, ignoring the slogans of most Islamic fundamentalists against the PLO and against a Palestinian state per se. Instead of confronting them, and potentially creating a split inside the movement, he decided to join them, and suddenly remembered that four Islamicists were members of the Palestinian National Council. In so doing, Arafat is creating a situation where, as in Lebanon, the Palestinians become hostage to the most rabid fundamentalists.

The Iranian-backed Hezbollah only support the PLO for the tactical reason that they want to develop their own infrastructure in Lebanon, independent from Syria—as part of a move which, however, does not question the "strategic alliance" between Damascus and Teheran. Ultimately, their aims diverge.

Indeed, it is scarcely in the interest of the PLO to be part of a movement which is openly dedicated to the overthrow of Jordan's King Hussein, of the Egyptian government of President Hosni Mubarak, and of most regimes in the Gulf—including that of Iraq, where the present headquarters of the PLO are located. The fundamentalist demonstrators in Cairo do not hide the fact that "Palestine" only provides a handy pretext to hold demonstrations against Mubarak. For the PLO to play this card will surely backfire. How long will it be until some of the Arab regimes strike back?

The pawns

Arabs and Israelis might well be amazed at the pace of events and international reactions to them. Recent developments show that the crisis in Israel is in fact part of broader superpower negotiations for a "New Yalta." Consider the following unusual developments:

At a time when the Reagan administration was moving ahead to close down the PLO office in Washington, the State Department granted a tourist visa to Omar Qatayesh, a member of the hard-line faction of the political bureau of George Habash's radical PFLP, enabling Qatayesh to hold unreported political discussions in the United States, just a few weeks before the Nov. 25 glider incident. Once that incident occurred, both Washington and Moscow intervened to freeze the situation. Prior to that, Jewish fundamentalists of the "Temple Mount Faithful," whose American backers, like

former State Department consultant Michael Ledeen, were involved to the "Irangate" affair, had tried to storm the Al Aqsa mosque. Both events, together with a well-calculated series of stabbing incidents perpetrated by Iranian-backed fundamentalists in Gaza, set the stage for the revolts in Gaza and the West Bank.

Meanwhile, while Washington was voting against Israel in the U.N. Security Council, Moscow was making overtures toward Israel, like sending its consul back to Jerusalem, releasing Jewish "refusenik" Josef Begun on Jan. 16, and inviting an Israeli delegation to Moscow on Jan. 17. The Soviets told the Israelis in early December not to approach the PLO directly, because "we can do it better for you." And until a letter from Soviet party chief Mikhail Gorbachov to Yasser Arafat on Jan. 16, there had been no major Soviet political statement on the events, no denunciations of Israel, except for the usual variety of daily propaganda on Radio Moscow. Even British Foreign Ministry official David Mellor was strangely more outspoken against Israeli actions than Soviet diplomats in their official declarations.

Toward a new coalition?

More than a military challenge, the recent events have created a political challenge for those involved. The usual recipes and proposals will not work. The issue is not whether is an international peace conference on the Middle East can be held, but what could be its real contents in the present situation. To have a superpower condominium over the region under the cover of a U.N. Security Council which has no record of effectiveness?

As the events in Israel underline, a profound reform of the political system is needed—and may be under way. Those who now advocate a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians are to be found in both the Likud and Labour parties. This was publicly stressed on Jan. 17 by the Likud mayor of Tel Aviv, General Lahat, who advocated immediate negotiations on the West Bank and Gaza, to be followed by negotiations on the Golan Heights. Inside Likud, that position is also defended by the "dove" faction led by Moshe Amirnav, which is urging immediate negotiations with the PLO. These proposals are met on the Labour Party side by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres as well as Ezer Weitzman, who is lobbying for a new peace proposal which would involve the start of immediate negotiations in Cairo.

Ultimately, the "doves" of Likud and those of Labour will have to join hands, if not in a new party, at least in a coalition. Only then can there be a serious call for early elections, with prospects for an outcome favorable to the future of Israel.

Given Yasser Arafat's recent commitment to immediately and officially recognize U.N. Resolutions 242 and 338, recognizing the right of the State of Israel to exist—provided that an Israeli commitment to negotiate with the PLO be demonstrated—these moves can be reciprocated on the Palestinian side, too. Better now, before it is too late.