

The Israeli elections: When will war break out?

by Thierry Lalevée

Less than 48 hours prior to the Nov. 1 Israeli parliamentary elections, unofficial opinion polls among the country's mainstream voters and leading political circles revealed that 80% were convinced that a new Middle East war was already in the making. After the election returns came in, boosting the power of Israel's radical fundamentalist parties, it became for most not a question of "whether," but of "when" and "how." Some say that war already began on Dec. 8, 1987, the start of the Palestinian uprising, the *Intifada*.

The climate for the current crisis was well prepared on the eve of the elections, as moderate opinion was swept aside by new explosions of fundamentalism and brutality on both sides. In the latest escalation, Palestinians attacked an Israeli civilian bus in Jericho on Oct. 30. In the incident, which shook Israel to the bones, a young mother and her three toddlers were burnt alive. Israeli retaliation against Palestinian strongholds in Lebanon was swift and fierce. The stage was set for a victory of Israel's right-wing majority.

This Israeli electoral campaign was blatantly manipulated from the outside. By the middle of the campaign, it became obvious to anyone who cared to investigate the matter, that both superpowers wanted the right-wing Likud bloc to win, for their own cynical purposes of "New Yalta" diplomacy. The Soviet Union decided all of a sudden to avoid any major public declarations in favor of an international peace conference, which could have been understood as an endorsement of the Labor Party of Shimon Peres. Instead, the Kremlin's friends afforded red carpet treatment during the campaign to one of the government's most extreme representatives, Trade and Industry Minister Ariel Sharon. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir went to Hungary on a "private" visit at the beginning

of October, followed by the first official visit by an Israeli, Ariel Sharon. During that period, the daily *Jerusalem Post* remarked that Moscow, through its satellites, was expressing its favor for the Likud.

Moscow's terrorist assets, too, went into action in a way that played into the hand of the Likud bloc. This was the rationale behind the Oct. 11 suicide commando operations by the Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah, which killed seven Israeli soldiers. The operation was fully facilitated by Syrian intelligence. Similarly, despite claims by Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin that the culprits of the Jericho attack on Oct. 30, were a group of young Palestinians who were quickly arrested, investigations show otherwise. Though those arrested may have participated in the attack, it was a carefully prepared and professionally implemented terrorist action, perpetrated by Syrian-controlled Palestinian commandos, probably of the PFLP-General Command of Ahmed Jibril. Needless to say, the attack was carried out in full knowledge of its consequences for the elections 48 hours later.

Israel's descent into the maelstrom of fundamentalist irrationalism is at least as much to be attributed to the vacuum in American foreign policy, as to Moscow's manipulations. Perhaps somewhat more discreet than Moscow, Washington gave little support to the more moderate proposals of Peres, even though they are officially closer to the position of U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz.

Further, Labor and Peres were stabbed in the back by the American Establishment when, in the midst of the campaign, Bankers Trust and other New York "blueblood" banks, as the London *Financial Times* described them, went to court to demand the immediate liquidation of the Koor industrial

conglomerate. The political implications of the move were not lost on anyone. Israel's biggest industrial concern, producing 10% of the country's industrial output and employing some 30,000 workers, Koor belongs to the Histadrut trade union, affiliated with the Labor Party. Bankers Trust's move, which threatens the jobs of thousands, end up underlining the bankruptcy of Labor-run-companies.

War by December?

One Israeli political analyst, Yehuda Litani of the daily *Hadashot*, published a lengthy political commentary on Oct. 31, the eve of the elections, in which he warned that the first anniversary of the Palestinian uprising on Dec. 8 may well unleash the next war, starting with unprecedented mass riots, leading to terrorism hitting Israeli cities, and the expulsion of thousands of Palestinians by Israeli authorities. Next, according to him, an emergency Arab summit to be held in Baghdad would decide on a united Arab front, leading to Syria launching direct military attacks against Israel, on Dec. 15.

According to the Nov. 1 issue of the French daily *Libération*, few inside Israel disagree with Litani's predictions. Even more indicative are the official comments from Egypt. An adviser to President Hosni Mubarak, Tahsin Bashir, told *Libération* that in case of a war between Israel and Syria, Egypt would remain neutral. However, should Israel engage in a mass expulsion of the Palestinian population, Egypt would join in!

The victory of Israel's right-wing parties has come to confirm Litani's fears. Though it may take days, and perhaps even longer, for Israel to achieve a stable ruling coalition, it is clear that whatever government emerges, its outlook will be radically different from any government of the last four years. Political analysts consider that for the first time, the Likud will form a right-wing-only coalition, in which the Likud may happen to be the most moderate of all parties. Indeed, the Likud so far has refused to include in its official program the electoral platform of General Ze'evi (ret.), a.k.a. "Gandhi," which, on the basis of advocating the "transfer" of the entire Palestinian population out of the occupied territories, received two seats in the Knesset. The same with the more extreme views of Yuval Ne'eman's Tehiya party.

But whatever government comes to rule Israel, it will be held hostage by an unholy coalition of some 18 Knesset members belonging to the most ultra-orthodox fundamentalist Jewish groups. In a decades-long process of "orientalization" of Israeli society, the Jewish state is becoming the hostage of its fundamentalist rabbis, like other nations of the region are at the mercy of their imams or mullahs. This was an unfortunately predictable result, according to some supporters of the Labor Party, because of Shimon Peres's deliberate refusal to present a clear-cut alternative to the policies of Shamir, outside of merely saying that he was ready to negotiate with Palestinian representatives.

The next stage of this pre-planned tragedy is now expected to occur around Nov. 15, when the Palestinian National Council of the PLO gathers in Algeria. Since it was unable to agree on a straightforward peace plan in the weeks and days preceding the Israeli elections, the PLO is even less likely to be able to now. Instead, it will have to come to terms with the Syrian-controlled Palestinian movement.

On Nov. 4, the Arabic newspaper *Al Fajr*, published in East Jerusalem, published what it said was the draft of a Palestinian declaration of independence, to be proclaimed Nov. 14. "We the Palestinian people," it said, "represented in the Palestine National Council, declare the establishment of a Palestinian state on the soil of Palestine, with Jerusalem as its capital, according to the natural right of the Palestinian people to live in its homeland and according to U.N. Resolution 181 of 1947." The document will be printed together with a map outlining the borders of the proposed state.

The expected declaration, lacking in content, may well be coupled with more radical slogans.

The superpower game

Back to square one? Not quite. It has become evident in recent weeks that for Washington and Moscow, with the witting or unwitting complicity of other members of the U.N. Security Council, a limited war between Syria and Israel is considered a likely option, based on the understanding that it would not lead to an American-Soviet confrontation. On the contrary, such a war is seen as a perfect opportunity for both Washington and Moscow to jointly intervene and, shrouded with the mantle and illusory power of the Security Council, impose a ceasefire and a diplomatic process which, in the months ahead, could lead to a "peace conference." And Moscow and Washington could claim to have settled the "Middle East regional affairs" crisis—for the moment.

It is no secret that Syria, as well as other Arab states and the Israeli leaders, have made the same calculation. Syria has a precise rationale. By December, the 1978 Baghdad agreement which allocated \$2 billion in economic aid to Syria as a frontline state in the conflict with Israel, expires. Syria has to prove that it is still a frontline state, worthy of such lucrative assistance. Furthermore, a war will give Damascus the kind of military and political leadership—notably, over the Palestinian movement—that it has lost over the past year. And if, under the pretext of such a war, Israel does expel the Palestinians, this will not displease Syrian President Hafez al-Assad—especially if Jordan becomes the territory targeted to receive them.

Needless to say, the risk of a war going out of anyone's control is enormous. Israel's elections, reported the Paris daily *Le Monde*, represented the victory of the "Massada Complex." A right wing which is deeply suspicious of superpower intervention is now in power in Israel, and will definitely not abide by a Security Council resolution, until what it considers as its own security aims, are met.