

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Israel's summer crisis

Games of revelations and counter-revelations from Washington have fueled the political war in Israel.

On July 23, the Israeli cabinet seemed to have momentarily put an end to a severe government crisis. This had started on July 5 when the Central Committee of the Likud, chaired by Industry Minister Ariel Sharon, had voted to add four major amendments to Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's May proposal for elections in the West Bank.

The amendments imposed such stringent conditions on the holding of the elections, that it had the effect of killing the entire proposal. Besides excluding all Palestinians residing in East Jerusalem from having the right to vote, the amendments called for a firm commitment now that "peace for territories" proposals would never be accepted, and that any contact whatsoever with the Palestine Liberation Organization and PLO-linked Palestinian officials be banned.

The day after this vote, the Labor Party leadership convened in emergency session and advocated the breakup of the national unity coalition. Only a major terror operation—when a member of the Islamic Jihad clandestine organization forced a bus off the road, killing 16, on July 6—postponed an otherwise inevitable breakup of the government.

In the aftermath of the national outrage, Labor decided to put off any decision until its own Central Committee meeting, sometime in late August, while continuing negotiations with Shamir. A settlement was finally reached when Shamir put his previous May proposal up for vote at the cabinet, without amendment.

Yet, while a breakup of the nation-

al unity government, meaning political paralysis and early elections, is not on the agenda any more, a broader political crisis does exist. It is foremost within the Likud itself, and has been setting Shamir and Sharon against each other in violent verbal clashes. Repeatedly, Shamir has warned over recent weeks that should Sharon go on "sabotaging the governmental activities, he will be fired." On July 18, there was a showdown at the weekly meeting of Likud ministers when Shamir decided to acknowledge reports that he had met with Palestinian representatives on the West Bank.

When Sharon threw a fit over not having been informed, Shamir retorted that it was deliberate, "because you cannot keep a secret." This exchange has put the spotlight on the real events inside Israel. Though considered as a hardliner and a hawk, Shamir has been displaying an unexpected political realism. As has been made public since, Shamir has in recent months been meeting with leading Palestinian representatives of the occupied territories to prepare for the elections.

Though most of his interlocutors are not formal members of the PLO, the Israeli leader could not have any illusion about the fact that these talks would find their way to the PLO headquarters in Tunis, and had received the approval of Yasser Arafat.

The way these events have been made public is casting some doubts on the policy pursued by Washington in particular. For example, just days before the Likud Central Committee meeting, the State Department agreed to make public the fact that its nego-

tiations with the PLO had been upgraded through meetings between Richard Pelletreau and PLO number-two man Salah Khalaf. The revelations had the predictable effect of strengthening Sharon's challenge against Shamir.

Likewise, only days before a crucial cabinet meeting, State Department official John Kelly told a Senate committee in "confidence" that he knew of secret PLO-Israeli talks but could not make it public. Less than five minutes after being uttered, these words were on all the news wires, creating major embarrassment for the government, both Likud and Labor.

If such contacts did not exist, to say they did, had no other aim than to provide ammunition to the extreme right wing. If such contacts did exist, they were obviously of a very sensitive nature, meaning that public exposure would endanger them.

These games of revelations and counter-revelations coming from Washington have fueled the political war inside Israel. Additionally, Israelis have been wondering why Radio Moscow immediately described the July 6 operation as a terror action, while it took ten days for the State Department to shift from the word "incident" to "act of terrorism." While Sharon is playing the governmental game for the time being, and has clearly no intent of being fired, he and his friends are biding their time. If they cannot win a government crisis, they will organize in the streets and among the settlers.

No one can underestimate the consequence of the July 6 terror action, done within Israel proper and not in the occupied territories. That such a thing could occur within the green line boundary has provoked a trauma within the population, which right-wing fanatics are trying to manipulate.