

Mideast: No war, no peace, more crisis

by Thierry Lalevée

At their recent summit meeting, neither President Bush nor President Gorbachov attempted to give the impression that the Middle East was in any way an important point on their agenda. In a break with the routine of other summits, which had always seen a pro forma declaration reiterating their commitments to sponsor a new peace initiative, there was no such statement this time. Even though at previous summits few believed the words, the statements of principles always led to a few weeks, even a few months of diplomatic momentum. The rule of the game was not to focus on the contents, but on the outward shape of the momentum.

This time however, there was not even such a pretense. Instead there were separate declarations, whose common denominator was to underline Moscow and Washington's opposition to Israeli policy, in particular regarding the issue of the immigration of Soviet Jews. This was pleasing to most Arab ears. Gorbachov warned that he could interrupt the flow if immigrants were settled in the Israeli-occupied territories—in full knowledge that he would not do it, because it would be a violation of the just-ratified American-Soviet trade agreement. Bush concurred, and added that American pressures would be exerted. Both knew that a simple solution existed: Give the Soviet Jews a bona fide passport and the right to emigrate anywhere they want. Gorbachov promised that such a law would be passed upon his return. It was discussed at the Supreme Soviet, and a decision was postponed until September. Meanwhile, the United States, and for that matter all of the other Western countries, are refusing to welcome any of the emigrés.

No substance

Yet, these were not merely demagogical words aimed at appeasing the Arab world. They definitely served that purpose, and whoever wants to be misled, could now conclude that the superpowers are on the side of the Arabs against Israel. However, the mere fact that of all issues tearing apart the region, that one was singled out, did represent a policy statement.

The issue has little substance. Only 1% of Soviet immigrants might settle in the occupied territories. A comprehensive study of their social origins makes clear that, because of age and professional training, the bulk will never be interested in living in agricultural settlements in such areas. The Arab world itself saw nothing wrong in the matter until some-

time in January, more than a year after the first major flows of immigration, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir was misquoted. The international media said he was speaking about a "Great Israel," while he had in fact spoken about a "strong Israel." Whether such a misquotation was innocent, is doubtful. It just came in time to give a sense of mobilization, at a time of diplomatic low ebb.

Political manipulation

Prior to the Washington summit, the Middle East situation was bad; by the end of it, and with such statements, it was even worse. A direct result came on June 8, when after more than three months of governmental crisis, a right-wing government was finally formed in Israel, with a slim majority. Just what political and ideological compromises were made by Shamir to the small right-wing and religious formations, will not be known for some time. However, it is obvious that seemingly confronted by a superpower *diktat*, the Israeli right reacted predictably.

Such a right-wing government, with only a 61-vote majority, will have the ability neither to survive very long, nor to take fundamental decisions concerning the fate of the country. It will be instead a short-lived transition government, either leading again to a national unity coalition—depending on whether there are changes of leadership inside the Labor Party—or to general elections—depending on the proposed constitutional changes for a direct popular election of the prime minister.

Direct consequences of these manipulations are all too obvious. There is no peace process ongoing, and there will not be one for quite some time now. Does this mean a war? Not necessarily. The majority of the Israeli Armed Forces are opposed to a war. The political elite also knows that such a war would not solve the pressing task of integrating the Soviet Jews—a matter not of territory, but of economy and political system.

In the broader context, a war is also dangerous for the superpowers, and the Soviet Union in particular, even though there could be a sinister agreement between Moscow and Washington. Political manipulation would not change the basic parameters of a war, according to which, despite all of the weapons at their disposal, several Arab countries, including Soviet ally Syria, would be once again defeated by Israel. In the present situation, a Syrian defeat would be tantamount to a Soviet defeat. Would the Red Army swallow its pride and accept such a defeat for the sake of trade agreements with Washington? How would the populations of Soviet Central Asia and others who are living under Russia colonization, react to a Soviet defeat? According to some, there could be an economic bonus: A war could lead to a new oil crisis, with prices skyrocketing, which would be beneficial to the Soviet economy. But what then of the U.S. economy, which now requires lower oil prices to be able to lower interest rates and avoid a repeat of the 1987 stock market crash?