

# Middle East time bomb is ticking

by Thierry Lalevée

As a direct result of the outbreak since May 20 of what is being called the second Intifada in the Israeli-occupied territories, George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachov are putting together a joint peace initiative for their summit in Washington. Despite a number of unpredictable factors, the chain of events on the eve of the summit arouses suspicions.

The new flareup of violence in the occupied territories, sparked by the killing of seven Palestinians by a crazed Israeli, comes just on the eve of important diplomatic meetings. For example, in a climate of tension over Soviet Jewish emigration to Israel, and a U.S.-Iraqi crisis over the regional arms race, the Arab League finally convened a general summit of the Arab nations on May 28 in Baghdad, in order to produce militant and militarist statements just before the Washington summit.

Until May 20, the gathering had been weakened by Syria's refusal to get involved. But the Tel Aviv massacre created a climate in which Syria could not fail to show up. Similarly, the exceptional meeting of the United Nations Security Council in Geneva on the subject of the May 20 events, will further dramatize the situation.

## Following a superpower script?

Since the Malta summit, which was essentially dedicated to Central and Eastern European affairs, the two superpower leaders agreed to put off regional crises, particularly the Middle East, to the next summit. That is exactly what happened—as if the events were following a script. For example, in early February, just when Israel was supposed to give its response to the U.S. "Baker Plan," terrorists attacked a busload of Israeli citizens in Egypt. Two weeks later, the crisis provoked by this event having passed, negotiations were being pursued among Jerusalem, Cairo, and Washington. As soon as Prime Minister Yitshak Shamir had privately accepted the Baker Plan, but had not yet made public his decision because of the internal debates in his Likud party, Bush decided to remind everyone that East Jerusalem was an occupied territory.

True—but why say this now? It was manna for the most extremist factions of the Likud party, who reject any negotiations with Palestinians. The ensuing political crisis toppled the national unity government and brought the Israeli-Palestinian and Israeli-Arab talks into a long-term impasse.

Was it just a gaffe by the American President? Or was the real purpose to ensure that Secretary of State James Baker would have free energy to focus on Europe and U.S.-Soviet

dealings rather than shuttle between Washington, Jerusalem, and Cairo?

## License to meddle

Faced with a crisis which had ripened to the point of degenerating into a regional military explosion, Bush and Gorbachov now have the pretext to meddle, with the blessings of the international community and the Arab world. The content of their initiative will likely touch on several areas. One will certainly be an "INF"-style treaty, like the one Gorbachov and Reagan signed for intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe, to curb the proliferation of missiles, chemical weapons, and nuclear research in the region. We can expect a growing showdown between Washington and Israel, with the United States toying with the idea of sending U.N. observers into the occupied territories and proposing an international peace conference under U.N. auspices, as Moscow and most of the Arab states are demanding.

Months of political manipulations on all sides have resulted in an all too predictable outcome: the growth of religious and political extremism on all sides, at the expense of the moderate elements willing to talk. The only positive note on the May 20 crisis is that it will allow renewed diplomacy by the Palestine Liberation Organization in the international arena, thanks to PLO chairman Yassir Arafat's May 24 speech to the Security Council.

These past months, it has been the Muslim fundamentalist groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad and the Palestinian extremists George Habash or Abu Musa who have been on the upswing. These forces took the lead in the latest Palestinian demonstrations in the Israeli-occupied territories. They are also the forces that clashed with Jordanian police during the uprising, ignoring PLO appeals for calm.

Jordan and Egypt are the two countries seen as most vulnerable during the present crisis, which combines religious and political radicalization with an ever-worsening economic crisis. Egypt has entered the end-phase of negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, which will be ratified on July 1. Aside from long-term changes in the Egyptian economy, they will bring price rises of up to 130% within months. Petroleum products rose by 40-60% in April and May. The specter of the hunger riots of January 1977, which forced Sadat to sign his first pact with the IMF, is about to reappear.

Other countries are also prey to this radicalization process. Early June will see key elections in Kuwait, Tunisia, and Algeria. In Kuwait, opposition forces tied to Palestinian radicals are calling for a boycott of the elections, the first since parliament was dissolved in 1986. In the other two countries, Muslim fundamentalists are expected to make big advances. Events in Gabon, Ivory Coast, and other African countries point to the general trend: revolts against IMF-imposed austerity. No "peace process" will resolve these crisis without a major economic plank.