

## Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

### Peres maneuvers for peace

*The Israeli prime minister has joined the peace process, and now prepares to deal with the threat posed by Ariel Sharon.*

Concluding his two-day visit to Italy on Feb. 20, Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres told a Rome press conference, "I am ready to go to Amman myself to meet with King Hussein . . . and I am sure that Israel will be ready to welcome King Hussein in Jerusalem."

Such a declaration, bound to create a wave of reactions in Israel and internationally, is Israel's first serious answer to the Feb. 11 agreement between Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat and Jordan's King Hussein on a new framework of peace negotiations.

Enabling Peres to make such a proposal were two important developments. First, upon his arrival in Italy, Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi handed him a personal letter from Arafat, reportedly a detailed briefing on the contents of the PLO-Jordan accord, and on the decision of the PLO leadership council to "exchange peace for territories." Second, on the same day that Peres spoke in Rome, the executive committee of the PLO announced its decision to endorse the Amman agreement, praising "the creation of a confederation between Jordan and Palestine" and underlining the close ties between the two people.

As Peres made his statement, he reminded his audience of the 1977 speech of Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat in the Knesset, Israel's parliament, saying that Sadat had been able to say "whatever he wanted"! Whether Hussein will answer his offer

to visit Amman positively, and when such an answer will come, remains to be seen. But clearly, Israel has chosen to join the peace process represented by the Amman agreement, and the preliminary negotiations which will reach their climax with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's March 12 visit to the United States.

Peres would not have given his answer to the PLO leader's letter on the Amman agreement so quickly were he not prepared to confront, and quickly, those hardliners inside Israel who, within days, had described the agreement as a ploy worth no consideration. Leading the show were Foreign Minister Yitzak Shamir and Trade Minister Ariel Sharon.

Sharon told an American delegation Feb. 12 that "there will be peace once it is realized that Jordan is Palestine"—a statement smacking of direct annexation of the occupied territories. Sharon qualified his statement by saying that the solution "is the autonomy proposal of Camp David," something he had hitherto opposed.

The statement was certainly intended as a warning to Peres and the Labor Party against any new concessions to the Arabs. Peres's proposal to Amman is also his answer to Sharon.

According to Israeli observers, Peres's commitment to the peace process will be elaborated between now and the upcoming election of the Histadrut labor confederation in early May, elections which are considered as important as those to the Knesset, since most of Israel's workforce will

vote. Directly at stake will be the future of the unstable national-unity coalition between Peres's Labor and Shamir's Likud parties. That agreement requires that in some 20 months, Peres surrender his post to Shamir. Though no one is yet publicly advocating an end to the uneasy coalition agreement, both Labor and Likud are busy attempting to rebuild their political base to outflank the other.

According to most recent opinion polls, there is no doubt that despite the economic crisis and the messy ongoing withdrawal from Lebanon, Peres has become a very popular prime minister. In a lengthy feature on Feb. 13, West Germany's *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* predicted that Shamir will never replace Peres. But the article then cautioned that the growing danger to Peres, and hence to peace in the region, is the possibility that Ariel Sharon will pull a military coup d'état!

The newspaper did not give any hint of how such an unprecedented development might occur. However, Sharon has been making no secret of his wish to become prime minister. His law suit against *Time* magazine, heavily financed by arms smuggler Ja'acov Nimrodi and pornography boss Meshulam Riklis, became a preliminary publicity drive for such a bid. These same circles, revealed the Jan. 18 issue of the *Jerusalem Post*, also organized an alliance between Sharon and the fundamentalist Jewish parties which hoped to collapse the government around a Knesset debate over the racialist-tinged issue of "who is a Jew." Meanwhile, Sharon, who had a surprise meeting with former Prime Minister Menachem Begin on Feb. 20, is busy campaigning for the Histadrut elections, too.

But were the Arabs to answer Peres's proposals positively, chances are the Sharon threat would be quickly neutralized.