

Israel may start new Mideast war to hold shaky coalition together

by Joseph Brewda

The formation of a new Israeli government headed by Likud bloc leader Yitzhak Shamir on June 11 may mean an Arab-Israeli war is back on the agenda in the Middle East. One of the major characteristics of the new regime will be its impulse to go to war to solve the "Palestinian problem" once and for all. This danger is aggravated by the fact that Israel maintains excellent relations, despite appearances to the contrary, with both Washington and Moscow. Both superpowers seek to expand the influence of Syria and Israel in the region at the expense of their neighbors. A little war, it is thought, may be one way to do that.

That the new government is planning a possible military action in the near term, was indicated by circumstances surrounding a Bush administration leak to the *Washington Times* on June 19. According to a purported Central Intelligence Agency report cited by the paper, Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi is covertly building an underground chemical warfare facility in the remote desert town of Sabha. While the allegation was discounted by a U.S. government spokesman the next day, Arab diplomatic circles have been quick to observe that the story was designed to provide a pretext for an Israeli "surgical strike" against the supposed facility. Israel's 1981 strike against a nuclear facility in Iraq was preceded by similar stories. A strike against Libya would be supported by many within the Bush administration.

No dearth of potential provocations

Other possible, but less likely, near-term Israeli targets, according to both Arab and Israeli sources, include the Palestine Liberation Organization's headquarters in Tunisia, which Israel had previously attacked in 1985, and the Palestine Liberation Front's headquarters in Iraq. The PLF, formally a part of the PLO, attempted a raid on an Israeli beach north of Haifa a few weeks ago. The raid was used as a pretext by the Bush administration to break off official U.S. negotiations with the PLO on June 20.

There are two major reasons why Israel might launch a military strike in the short term, analysts say. One reason is to place the Arab states into a "put up or shut up" situation, regarding Israel's regional superpower status. This possibility was enhanced by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's reaction to the *Washington Times* leak: Within hours of the arti-

cle's publication, Hussein threatened that he would consider any attack on any Arab state as equivalent to an attack on Iraq.

It is no secret that the Shamir government is dedicated to the annexation of the occupied territories, which it intends to populate with some 750,000 Soviet Jews who will go there according to the deal worked out by Edgar Bronfman and his Russian friends. A military strike would establish the new rules of the game.

The second reason for potential Israeli military actions bears on Israeli domestic politics. The government is new, and has a fragile parliamentary majority. It needs to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the population. The best way to do that in Israel is through actions that are considered strong and decisive, especially if they are seen as also in defiance of world opinion.

Shamir's expansionist regime

Several features of the new Israeli regime make for an explosive combination. Although led by the Likud bloc, which holds 40 seats in the Israeli Knesset (parliament), the government is based on a coalition of several other parties including the National Religious Party (5 seats), the Shas movement (6 seats), the Tehiya party (3 seats). The Moledet, Tzomet, and Degel haTorah coalition partners each hold 2 seats. There are, additionally, two independents, one of whom, Rabbi Yitzhak Peretz, is a cabinet member. Altogether, the coalition has only 62 seats; 61 is the minimum required to form a government.

With the exception of Shas, which is largely a Sephardic (Oriental Jewish) constituency organization, every other coalition member is defined by its commitment to "strengthen, expand, and develop" new settlements in the occupied territories, in the words of the coalition's stated policy guidelines. The defection of any single coalition member would bring the government crashing down. The government is, by its nature, expansionist and xenophobic.

Although the cabinet is formally led by Shamir, its actual power is a triumvirate made up of General Ariel Sharon (housing), David Levy (foreign affairs) and Yitzhak Modai (finance).

Henry Kissinger's friend Ariel Sharon, perhaps the most

vocal military expansionist, was the defense minister who oversaw the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. His ministry, despite its title, is crucial, since it oversees settlement policy. Sharon will continue the provocative policies followed by his immediate predecessor, David Levy.

In the previous Likud-Labor government, Levy used the ministry to finance the illegal occupation of a Greek Orthodox church building adjoining the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, by "settlers" from the Aterit Cohanim yeshiva. The settlers provoked a riot the day before Good Friday, by covering up Christian crucifixes on the building's facade with Jewish Stars of David. Israeli police tear-gassed the area; the aged Greek Patriarch was felled by the fumes. The yeshiva, which had been formed by the Israeli intelligence agency Shin Beth, had earlier been caught attempting to blow up the Al Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Levy is one of those who would like the Israeli government to take over all Christian and Muslim holy sites altogether.

'We couldn't help it'

With such figures dominating his cabinet, Shamir is well situated to claim that moderation on his government's part is impossible. "How can I possibly negotiate," he can always complain, "since, if I did, my government would instantly collapse?"

Yet there are indications that the new government will undertake several diplomatic initiatives designed to give it the appearance of reason. One tactic will be to offer negotiations to all neighboring Arab governments, negotiations made farcical by excluding the PLO.

A second tactic is an initiative to establish Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, possibly in Cairo, Egypt, which would lead to supposed "self-government" of the occupied territories. The plan, as reported by Arab diplomatic circles, would be based on the phased removal of Israeli troops from the territories upon the conclusion of the ongoing Palestinian uprising. An election in the territories would follow—excluding PLO candidates, of course.

The 1979 Camp David agreement provided for a five-year transition to the occupied territories' sovereignty. In the new Shamir "plan," the territories, even in their ultimate status, will be Israeli controlled, possessing strictly limited self-governing features. Since the plan is provocative, it will necessarily fail, and its sole intent, the Israelis hope, is that it will give the world the impression that they have become accommodating.

'Jordan is Palestine'

But, diplomatic tactics aside, the new government's real policy is summed up in the phrase, "Jordan is Palestine." Back in early March, even before the formation of the new Israeli government, Jordan's King Hussein reportedly told a meeting of the Arab Coordination Council in Amman, Jor-

dan, that he had concrete evidence showing that the Israeli government was planning an operation east of the Jordan River.

The ambitious plan reportedly entailed expelling the Palestinians from the West Bank into Jordan, overthrowing the Jordanian king, and declaring that Jordan was now Palestine. No longer could the Palestinians claim to be stateless, according to the plan; they would nominally control Jordan. To ensure the success of the mass expulsion, certain strategic points on the east bank of the Jordan would have to be taken, at least temporarily.

Other sources have since reported that when former Israeli cabinet official Yitzhak Rabin traveled to Washington in the spring, he also proposed such a military operation. The assessment in several capitals then was that the success of such an operation would require, as in 1956, simultaneous crises in the Middle East and elsewhere. Developments in Lithuania and Kashmir now—as in Hungary then—could provide the context to strike.

New Israeli-Soviet deals

One reason for the Israelis' bold schemes is the rapid deepening of relations between Israel and Russia. Relations with the United States may be the rockiest they ever have been, but there is no cause to fear that the Bush administration will ever stop supplying them the funds and arms that they need. The Soviets, on the other hand, are providing them a population.

According to the latest predictions of the Israeli government, Moscow will send between 750,000 and 1 million Soviet Jews to Israel over the next three to five years, increasing the Israeli Jewish population by one-third. Because of new agreements struck between Moscow, Jerusalem, and Washington, these emigrating Soviet Jews will be denied international refugee status. They will consequently be denied easy entry into the United States, where virtually all would prefer to go. Direct flights to Israel from such locations as Budapest, and the immediate granting of Israeli citizenship (which will subject them to other nations' immigration quota systems for Israelis), will ensure that most remain in Israel.

Other ominous Soviet-Israeli arrangements are proceeding in tandem with this. Last May, World Jewish Congress chairman Edgar Bronfman traveled to Budapest on issues officially concerned with emigration. A deal was struck to have the Israeli Mossad take over the security of Hungary's national airline, supposedly to guard against Arab terrorist attack. In fact, the Mossad services will extend throughout Eastern Europe under this cover. This extension of Israeli intelligence operations in Eastern Europe is not only sponsored by the Soviet KGB, it is said, but also U.S. intelligence. This intelligence agency relationship provides for joint operations—for example, stemming the growing influence of the Roman Catholic Church in Eastern Europe, which both superpowers fear.