

## Middle East Report by Judith Wyer

### Calm before the storm

*The Lebanon crisis is far from over, despite the international deal to evacuate the PLO from Beirut.*

With the final obstacles to a PLO withdrawal from Beirut apparently removed, euphoria is running high in Washington that the crisis in Lebanon has somehow been solved.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Not only is there the danger that Israel Defense Minister Ariel Sharon could torpedo the evacuation deal at the last minute, but the chances are high of a new and larger crisis erupting in the post-evacuation period.

The trigger is Lebanon's presidential election on Aug. 23.

The leading contender for the presidency is Falangist warlord Bashir Gemayel, hated by Lebanon's Muslim population for his unabashed alliance with the Sharon faction in Israel. Muslim parliamentarians are threatening to boycott the election in protest against the fact that the fix is in for Gemayel and his fascist clan. Should the boycott occur and should elections fail to take place, Lebanon will be left without a President, given that the tenure of the current president, Elias Sarkis, expires next month.

The stage is thus set, whether or not the elections occur, for warfare in Lebanon between Muslims and Christians. Syria, as protector of the Muslims, and Israel, as protector of the Christians, will almost inevitably be drawn in. The likely result: a small war between Israel and Syria, leading to a partition of Lebanon between the two.

Ariel Sharon is known to look benevolently on such an arrangement;

but he would have liked to combine it somehow with an all-out assault on Beirut to finish off the PLO and murder Yasser Arafat.

Intelligence sources report that Sharon is actively seeking a pretext to go all the way, and recently met secretly with Henry Kissinger in New York to discuss how best to up-end the evacuation deal.

Among the options reportedly considered were the assassination of Prime Minister Begin or opposition Labour Party leader Shimon Peres, or a wave of anti-Semitic terrorism targeting prominent American and European Jews.

According to several Israeli intelligence sources, the idea of a Sharon-choreographed assassination plot against Begin is not to be dismissed. Reports of the plot, or an actual unsuccessful assassination attempt on Begin, are intended to drive him into a "flight forward" political accommodation with Sharon, despite the political antagonism between them.

If the attempt were successful, it would probably mean the early crowning of Sharon as "King of Israel."

Sharon's obsessive bid for power has temporarily backfired on him, earning him the reprobation of virtually the entire cabinet. However, even Sharon's worst enemies concur that his eclipse is not permanent and that he is biding his time until he makes his next move.

Lebanon is not the only country on the chopping block as a result of Shar-

on's military adventurism. Egypt's life is also on the line.

The government of Egypt has stepped up pressure on the Reagan administration to come up with a genuine overall Middle East peace settlement as a precondition for Egypt's cooperation with an evacuation plan for Beirut.

Such an overall settlement, Egypt has stressed, must include a solution to the Palestinian problem that goes beyond relocating Palestinians from one country to another.

In mid-August, Egyptian Foreign Minister Hassan Ali and Minister of State Butros Ghali met with U.S. embassy officials in Cairo to reiterate Egypt's position that Egypt will not take in any Palestinian fighters from Beirut unless the Reagan administration commits itself to a comprehensive peace approach for the Middle East.

Butros Ghali stated that as long as Israel remained in Lebanon, Egypt would not resume Palestinian autonomy talks with Israel. Hassan Ali underlined this point, saying that the autonomy talks could not continue "on the same basis as in the past."

U.S. equivocation on reining in Israel and promoting a general peace settlement has created political problems for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who himself is targeted for overthrow.

Egypt's three opposition parties have banded together to demand radical anti-Israel action on the part of the government, including the recall of Egypt's ambassador from Tel Aviv, and a halt in Egypt's sale of oil to Israel.

"Washington is destabilizing Egypt," commented one Egyptian diplomat. "The irony is that the loser is not only us, but the United States, too."