

Middle East on fire once more

Judith Wyer reports on the maneuvers by Begin and Haig that are handing the Arab world over to the Soviet Union.

The ceasefire in Lebanon imposed on Israel by the United States July 24 began crumbling within hours. According to Washington sources, two things are clear: *first*, that the ceasefire was imposed on the Israelis only after enormous pressure compelled Ronald Reagan to send a blistering telegram to Menachem Begin; and *second*, that Reagan and Secretary of State Haig have since given Israel renewed leeway to start the process of undermining the entire package.

British Foreign Secretary Lord Carrington, who visited Washington just before the Ottawa summit, is reported to be particularly concerned that Reagan's toleration of Begin's activities is leading to an inordinate expansion of Soviet influence in the Arab world.

According to a former State Department official, Begin "cannot tolerate" the ceasefire. The source revealed privileged information that "in the next two weeks there is going to be a Palestinian terrorist atrocity against Israel, and that atrocity is going to be a covert operation controlled by Mossad [Israeli intelligence]—since many of the extremist Palestinian groups are, in fact, controlled by Mossad."

The prime minister's widely condemned disregard for international law, is sustained by the Reagan administration's ambivalence toward Begin. Despite the embargo of ten F-16 fighter jets slated for delivery to Israel, insiders report that Begin knows he will get his jets and that Reagan's fundamental commitment to Israel has not changed.

The Ottawa angle

The Reagan White House's sudden move to impose a ceasefire in Lebanon was prompted by the Ottawa summit, where Reagan came under intense pressure, particularly from the European participants, to "rein in Begin." Reagan's strategic policy of "international consensus" against the Soviet Union, which makes Israel the strongest U.S. ally in the Mideast, also drew fire at the summit.

But despite the reported "brutal discussion" at Ottawa, Reagan's Middle East stance appears funda-

mentally unchanged. This is most clearly evinced by the surprise dismissal of U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Robert Neumann, known to be one of the strongest advocates within the foreign service of restraining the Begin regime and adopting a Middle East policy which took into account the Palestinian problem.

According to a colleague of Neumann, he was "concocting his own foreign policy" aimed at a more evenhanded attitude toward Israel and the Arabs. It is reported that Neumann was working closely with Philip Habib, Reagan's special envoy to Lebanon, and that they had opened up certain channels with the Palestinians. Secretary of State Alexander Haig, sponsor of the strategic consensus policy, fired Neumann on the spot. Rumor has it in Washington that Habib, who returned from the Middle East last month, may also be dismissed under the thin cover of resignation for health reasons.

Which way for Sadat?

Should Haig's policy prevail, it brings into question the status of the Camp David treaty between Egypt and Israel, which calls for the establishment of Palestinian autonomy leading to self-rule.

Egyptian President Anwar Sadat arrives in Washington Aug. 4 for talks with the administration. The Palestinian issue is expected to be a central negotiating topic. Sadat is known to have become enraged at Begin's aggression against the Arabs. A July 27 statement harshly condemning Begin by Sudanese President Ghafar Numeiry, a close ally of Sadat, was an expression of Sadat's own sentiments. Numeiry became the first Arab head of state to visit Egypt since the Camp David treaty was signed.

Sadat has begun to mend fences with the Arab world, which publicly opposed Camp David. This is one reason Sadat is eager to reopen the Palestinian autonomy talks.

But Begin refuses to engage in any dialogue on the rights of the Palestinians. According to a former Middle East ambassador, if Sadat presses hard in Washington on the autonomy issue and gains concessions from the

President, Begin may "go for broke" in Lebanon and trigger a war with Syria.

The response Sadat is more likely to get is a commitment to "crank up the autonomy talks" in the autumn following Begin's trip to the United States. But many Washington sources agree that the talks will be "purely cosmetic" and will not challenge Begin's intransigence toward the Palestinians. According to Haig's calculations, this will simply buy time until Israel withdraws from the remaining 25 percent of the Sinai in April 1982. After that point, Sadat is expected to rejoin the Arab world, which is increasingly looking for new alliances, notably with the Soviet Union, as the United States maintains its preferential ties with Israel.

How long will Begin remain in power?

by Nancy Coker

Menachem Begin can survive as prime minister of Israel only to the extent that he receives the backing of the Reagan administration. "The only thing that can save Begin is the United States," said one Israeli intelligence source. "If Reagan and Haig support him, he can last. But if not, it is only a matter of time before he falls." It is not certain how much more weight President Reagan will give the Israeli prime minister, whose terror raids on Lebanon have brought the world nearer to catastrophe in recent weeks. But without Reagan's support, Begin is in real trouble.

Begin's problems began shortly after June 30, when Israeli President Yitzhak Havin asked Begin, whose Likud Party won 48 Knesset seats as opposed to the Labour Party's 47, to form a government. Boasting that a government would be formed within days, Begin instead ran into some unexpected difficulties. The trouble emanated from Begin's would-be coalition partners—the National Religious Party, the Agudath Israel, and the Oriental Jewish Tami Party—whose internecine squabbling and numerous demands have up to now blocked Begin from assembling a workable coalition with them. Contrary to press reports, majority elements in all three parties oppose Begin's obsessive quest to annex the West Bank and increase Jewish settlements there.

In an attempt to blackmail these parties into cooperating with him, Begin announced that if he failed to form a government by August 5, when his mandate expires, he would not seek another 21-day extension or new elections. Labour Party leader Shimon Peres, would then have to try to form a government. According to the Israeli press, Peres has reportedly reached some sort of agreement with National Religious Party head Yosef

Burg, Begin's interior minister, to cooperate in forming a government—which could undermine Begin.

Should Begin manage to form a coalition, stability will not be its hallmark, according to Israeli sources, who predict that Begin will be toppled in the coming weeks or months, provided that he does not start a war first. New elections will follow most likely before the end of 1981, resulting in a Labour Party victory and possible majority, eliminating the necessity of forming a coalition.

If Begin cannot form a government, the sources add, he would resign as head of the Likud and run as only a minor candidate, perhaps fourth on Likud's list for the Knesset. This would mean the end of Likud, one Israeli insider said, via fragmentation.

This appears to be happening already. According to the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the liberal faction of Begin's Likud has begun to call for the creation of a grand coalition with the Labour Party, without the participation of the National Religious Party and Agudath Israel. The Labour Party, meanwhile, is on a full mobilization to prepare itself for power. The Labour Party strategy is: 1) party unity, i.e., cessation of internal bickering, such as the in-fighting between Peres and former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, that contributed to Labour's electoral defeat; 2) mobilization of the party machine as if the new election were tomorrow; 3) preparations for a parliamentary "guerrilla war against Begin," by forcing constant government crises and votes of no confidence in Begin; and 4) mobilization of the anti-Begin Peace Now movement and others to pressure Begin and to act as a counterweight to his own popular base, Israel's Oriental Jews.

The Labour Party's tactics, while a step forward, fall far short of the hubristic measures necessary to undo Begin. Labour does not criticize Begin's insane policies, nor does it educate the Israeli electorate as to the tasks and policies that must be pursued to ensure Israel's survival as a viable nation-state.

Some people, however, do recognize the problem. One Labour Party officer attacked the American Jewish community for its "gutless refusal to attack Begin's actions." "American Jews can provide an important flank for what we are trying to accomplish in Israel. Their fear that Israel's enemies will use their attacks on Begin as ammunition for attacks on Israel and the Jews is totally unfounded. They should be more frightened of Begin and what his continued rule means for Israel."

Begin's popularity in Israel, especially since the July 17 bombing raid on Beirut that caused hundreds of civilian casualties, is on the decline. Combined with external pressure, Begin's growing unpopularity could do him in. "Begin," commented one Israeli, "is psychologically unprepared to be defeated or even challenged, and he will crumble if he realizes that he is not getting the backing he craves."