

# Begin scrambles to hang onto power

by Nancy Coker

Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin bowed to international and domestic pressure at the end of September and agreed to open a full-scale state investigation into the Beirut massacre of Palestinians. Depending on what the investigation turns up, the Begin regime—including Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, the architect of the slaughter—could collapse as a result of revelations of government complicity in the massacre, in which at least a thousand were killed.

Although the formation of an independent commission of inquiry is seen as a victory for Begin's opponents, Begin himself and possibly even the cold-blooded Sharon may not yet be finished. Numerous Israel-watchers predict that Begin may well weather the current crisis as passions gradually subside inside Israel. Begin may attempt to distance himself from Sharon over the next few weeks, and then move toward some sort of national-unity government.

"Begin has great staying power," commented one veteran analyst. "He's a wily old fox who just may survive this crisis after all."

However, Begin's position is, to say the least, tenuous. The worsening economic situation in Israel in the wake of the war, combined with dissent inside the armed forces, could oust him. One thing is certain: namely, the man Henry Kissinger is looking to, to take Begin's place.

According to Washington intelligence sources, Kissinger is pushing former Defense Minister Ezer Weizman to lead the next Israeli government. It is expected that Weizman, a product of the Royal Air Force and a long-time British intelligence asset, will readily cooperate with the Kissinger-authored Reagan peace plan, which, in true Kissingerian fashion, is designed not to resolve the fundamental issues of the Middle East conflict but merely to sustain an endless series of step-by-step negotiations and "crisis management" at the expense of the region's stability and economic development potential.

The fix for Weizman is not necessarily in, given the distrust he engenders among the Israeli populace and his image as a wheeler-dealer. Israeli President Yitzhak Navon, a protégé of Israeli founding statesman David Ben-Gurion,

is viewed by many as the best candidate for the prime ministry, given his popularity among all elements of the Israeli population, including Israeli Arabs. At present, however, Navon is publicly rejecting appeals that he resign the presidency and actively campaign to become Prime Minister.

## Damning evidence

It will not be easy for Begin to stay in power, given the evidence of government responsibility for the Beirut slaughter. Zeev Schiff, a respected military correspondent for the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, confirmed Sept. 28 that contrary to government allegations, the massacre was no "spontaneous act of revenge" for the murder of Lebanese President-elect Bashir Gemayel. The massacre, said Schiff, was "an act that was planned beforehand with the objective of causing a mass flight of Palestinians from Beirut and Lebanon."

More than anything, it is the opposition of the Israeli Defense Forces to Sharon that will probably determine the fate of the Begin government. The Israeli army is livid over Sharon's efforts to blame them for the Beirut massacre and to implicate them as well in the 1976 massacre at Lebanon's Tel Zaatar Palestinian refugee camp. According to intelligence sources, top military brass have put out the word that they will resign en masse if Sharon continues to sully the name of the Israeli Defense Forces through his irresponsible comments and dangerous actions. Gen. Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, Secretary-General of the Tami Party, one of Begin's coalition partners, has termed Sharon guilty of "blood libel" against the Israeli army and state.

Israeli sources agree that the Israeli Defense Forces could easily turn against Sharon. Seventy percent of Israel's reservists, who make up the bulk of Israel's fighting force, are kibbutzniks affiliated with Mapam, the left wing of the opposition Labour Party. The officer corps itself is also split, with an estimated 50 percent affiliated politically with Begin's Likud and the other 50 percent with Labour.

The degree of disaffection in the army was underscored by Sharon himself, who revealed that two weeks ago he was unable to muster a certain crack regiment for duty in Lebanon because its members opposed the war. Such refusal to fight is absolutely unprecedented in Israel. On Sept. 29, a thousand reserve officers and soldiers sent a petition to Sharon asking that they not be sent to Lebanon because of their opposition to the war. The soldiers who signed the petition are affiliated with an anti-war group called Yesh Gvul, or "There Is a Border."

That Begin is feeling the heat was revealed by his sudden cancellation of a pro-government rally he was trying to organize for Saturday, Oct. 2. The rally was to have served as a response to the 400,000-strong anti-government demonstration held a week earlier in Tel Aviv to protest the Beirut massacre and to demand Begin's and Sharon's removal. The cancellation is viewed as a tacit admission by Begin and Sharon of their weakened position.