

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Begin is gunning for war

The Israeli prime minister's drive to expel West Bank Arabs, and blitz Lebanon, are the triggers.

Menachem Begin of Israel is dead set on dragging the Reagan administration into a shooting war with the Soviet Union over the Middle East. And President Reagan's poor grasp of international affairs, which has resulted in full U.S. support for Begin's extremist Israeli government, combined with Secretary of State Haig's leverage over foreign policy, is greasing the skids of Begin's lunatic British-backed strategy.

Speaking to a gathering of the ruling Likud bloc and the fanatic National Religious Party, Begin declared this week that because of his ill health, and the potential weakness of the new governing coalition, only "one year remains" to accomplish the outlines of "Eretz Israel," the Land of Israel, a cultish term signifying Begin's version of the Palestine of the Bible.

To secure that perverted vision, Begin is preparing twin crises in southern Lebanon and on the occupied West Bank of Jordan in the immediate future. The intended result is to force an exodus of at least 300,000 Palestinian refugees into Jordan. That, in turn, will destabilize the entire area, including the oil-rich Persian Gulf states.

As if to underline the point, Israeli jets raided Palestinian targets in southern Lebanon three times between July 10 and 15. On the West Bank, according to intelligence community sources, large-scale arms caches are being built up

by the paramilitary gangs of the Gush Emunim ("Faith Bloc"), the zealot settlers' movement there.

According to U.S. intelligence sources, the raids into Lebanon are part of Begin's plan for a "final solution" to the Palestinian problem. "What Begin is doing to the region north and east of Israel is exactly what Hitler did to Eastern Europe," said one former State Department official. "The Israelis intend to make Palestine *Arabrein*, or Arab-free," he said.

The smallest miscalculation in the Begin strategy could lead to a major war with Syria, inevitably involving the Soviet Union and the United States. On July 14, during the third strike on southern Lebanon, Israeli jets clashed with Syrian MIG fighters, shooting down one of them. It was the first time in many months that the Syrians had tried to thwart the Israelis in Lebanon, signaling Syria's willingness to go to war with Israel.

Last week, Syrian President Hafez Assad visited Algeria and Libya to form a "Russian-backed alignment against Israel" in the region. "The situation [in Lebanon] is such that war may break out between Syria and Israel," Assad declared. He further affirmed that should war break out, the Soviets would come to Syria's defense.

Last week, for the first time ever, Syria and the U.S.S.R. conducted joint naval maneuvers including landing exercises off the

Syrian coast. Soviet Communist Party Central Committee member Vadim Zagladin stated on French television that the unprecedented maneuvers were conducted "to aid Syria to ensure its defense. Syria is now threatened by Israel."

Acknowledging the possibility of a superpower clash, Begin's Deputy Defense Minister Zippori stated: "The Syrian-Soviet treaty of 1980 has a more profound significance than we at first thought."

Encouraging Begin in his strategy are the radical Palestinians, who are coordinating their moves with Syria.

On July 14, the Israeli military commander of the Rafah region of occupied Sinai was killed by a terrorist bombing at the Sinai-Gaza Strip border. A Syrian spokesman in Damascus quickly announced that Palestinian guerrillas had planted the bomb.

Hani Hassan, the Palestine Liberation Organization representative in Iran, last week called for a Soviet-backed PLO military offensive against Israel and the U.S.

Begin's efforts to drag the Reagan administration into a war are being facilitated by Begin's fans in Washington. The Reagan administration has reportedly decided to allow the shipment of ten F-16s to Israel this week. An Arab source concluded that this move by the White House will signal "that Begin can have open season in Lebanon and maybe as far east as the Arab oil fields in the Gulf."

Begin's blitzkrieg will destroy the last shred of credibility Washington has with the Arab states and will directly feed into the ongoing power play that London is now conducting to regain hegemony over the Arab world.