

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Crisis in Israel

The Defense Minister wants to take Lebanon, and much more. Will Begin or Sharon come out on top?

Following months of factional warfare and infighting, a government crisis has erupted in Israel, bringing to a head the tensions between Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Defense Minister Ariel Sharon over whether to invade Lebanon.

Sharon's strategy for coming to power is war.

For months now, Sharon, with the tacit support of Secretary of State Alexander Haig, has been straining at the leash to occupy the southern half of Lebanon and conduct military operations into Jordan and even, possibly, Saudi Arabia. His goal is straightforward: to exterminate the Palestine Liberation Organization, and at the same time use a military spectacular to catapult himself into power in Israel as some latter-day Caesar.

To block Sharon's power play, Begin, and a number of military officers associated with the Labour Party, have managed to temporarily check Sharon's extremism.

Begin favors early elections in order to gain an absolute parliamentary majority, thereby freeing himself from his current dependence on the extremist religious parties.

The opposition Labour Party, which would almost certainly lose to Begin's Likud in new elections, would like somehow to maneuver itself into power *without* elections, through a deal with either Begin or one or more of the extremist par-

ties.

However, with his government now collapsing because of defections, Begin is fast losing his ability to keep his renegade defense minister in tow. Encouraged by the political turmoil, Sharon hopes to forge ahead with his dangerous Lebanon invasion plans.

Sharon's sidekick, Chief of Staff Rafael Eytan, coyly warned May 14 that he "might go into Beirut." As many as 60,000 Israeli troops have been massed on the Lebanese border in preparation for what is already being called in Israel "Sharon's war."

Sharon does not enjoy an open field. Inside the Cabinet, Ministers Ehrlich, Levy, Zippori, Aridor, Berman, and Burg oppose him. He is also being restrained from outside—namely, by Washington.

The first signs came weeks ago, when President Reagan was said to have personally issued several warnings to Israel to refrain from invading Lebanon.

Then, on the eve of Sharon's scheduled May 21 arrival in Washington to sign a reconstituted Memorandum of Understanding on U.S.-Israeli Strategic Cooperation, rumors began to fly that the official part of Sharon's Washington visit would be canceled, the Memorandum would be put back on the shelf, and Sharon's stay would be limited to fund-raising for Israel.

According to one intelligence

source, a controversy has arisen between Sharon and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger over the Memorandum of Understanding. "The United States is now seeking an explicit commitment from Sharon not to attack Lebanon before any revival of the MOU can be expected," the source said. "Weinberger is absolutely insistent on this.

"Sharon, however, doesn't want his hands tied by such a commitment. In fact, what Sharon is looking for is an official letter from Reagan stating that the United States is unalterably opposed to a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Then and only then will Sharon agree to stay out of Lebanon."

The snag around the MOU does not mean that the Memorandum is being scrapped. What it could indicate is that Reagan, and Weinberger, want to consummate the deal not with Sharon but with Begin (the prime minister visits Washington in June) so as to strengthen the somewhat more moderate Begin against Sharon.

Another setback for Sharon was the May 19 vote of no confidence in the Knesset, which Begin managed to squeak through with a narrow one-vote margin. Sharon had intended to use a government collapse to launch his military move.

That possibility still very much exists. Both the Liberal Party and the National Religious Party may bolt the Likud-led coalition, leading to a complete government reorganization.

That would not necessarily bode ill for Israel. The question is what Sharon has up his sleeve—and what the Reagan administration intends to do to restrain him.