

The Navon option surfaces in Israel

by Nancy Coker

The Israeli state commission hearings on the September massacre of Palestinian civilians in Beirut have revived the opposition to Defense Minister Ariel Sharon that swept Israel following the massacre, and have brought to the fore the possibility of a challenge by President Yitzhak Navon to the Begin coalition. Sharon appeared Oct. 25 before Israel's state commission of inquiry to admit that he had personally authorized the Falangist militias to enter the Palestinian camps in Beirut and that he had anticipated that civilian casualties would result.

"Sharon is finished," was the assessment of one high-level Israeli Labour Party source. "I hesitate to predict any imminent collapse of the Begin government, but I do not hesitate to say that Sharon's career is definitely over. He will either be forced to resign as a result of the inquiry into the Beirut massacre, or, if he manages to stay on, he will be morally ostracized and effectively neutralized."

Despite Sharon's insistence that the hearing be held behind closed doors, the commission overruled Sharon and opened the session to the press for half of the interrogation. Sharon's strategy appeared to be to place the responsibility for the massacre on the cabinet and the military.

However, the defense chief's efforts to protect himself through linguistic somersaults and lies are boomeranging. The army in particular is enraged by Sharon's attempt to pin the blame on them, and Sharon finds himself more isolated than ever.

"After the commission of inquiry publishes its findings, all hell will break loose in Israel," said Ido Dissentchik of the Israeli daily *Maariv* in a recent interview. "Sharon will probably be forced out. But he will not go quietly. He will try to avenge his downfall, and will do his utmost to bring the rest of the government down with him."

"What happened in Beirut has become the determinant henceforth for all politics in Israel," commented the Labour Party source. "The fact that new elections are on the horizon is not because Begin wants them, but because they have been forced upon him by events in Beirut. Even if Begin wins those elections—and there is a good chance that he will,

despite everything—the Likud government that he forms will not be the same government that exists now. It will be weaker, shaped by the Beirut massacre."

Many Israelis, as well as Jews outside Israel, are looking to Yitzhak Navon to run for the prime ministership in next year's national elections. Navon, a Labour Party leader who served as personal secretary to Israeli founding father David Ben-Gurion, is respected throughout Israel by all political factions because of his level-headed approach to national and regional problems. As prime minister, Navon, who is of Sephardic Jewish origins, would be particularly effective in rallying behind him Israel's large, economically underprivileged Sephardic majority, the bulk of whom have been manipulated by Begin's and Sharon's demagoguery into serving as the "base of support" for the Begin government's military adventurism and irresponsible political brinksmanship. Navon also enjoys the trust and respect of Israel's Arab population.

Despite his reluctance to plunge into the "cold waters" of Israeli politics (the Israeli presidency is purely a ceremonial position), Navon has hinted that he might be considering "responding to necessity," as one close supporter put it. In a speech Oct. 20 at an Israeli kibbutz, Navon said that he would make his final decision in February or March on whether he would return to politics. The elections are slated for the spring.

In his address, Navon made it clear that a peace treaty is more than a list of synthetic bilateral arrangements. "Peace does not mean tourism or commercial agreements," said Navon. "Peace means that our sons will not lose their lives in wars."

A compartmentalized society

In a speech a few days earlier in Tel Aviv, Navon deplored the closed nature of much of Israeli society as contributing to many of Israel's larger political problems. "Because of the system of education prevalent in Israel," said Navon, "the children of religious and secular parents are growing up in separate compartments, leaving little room for mutual contacts. If people came to know each other better, much of the friction marking human relations would be eliminated."

"If Jews were to know Arabs better, they would be surprised to learn how great the similarities are between the two," he added.

The organized crime-linked mafia behind the Begin government is frantic about the possibility that Navon may challenge Begin's continued rule—and win. Until now, Begin's Likud has been smugly confident that they can defeat the Labour Party and its lackluster leaders, Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Rabin. A Navon-led Labour Party, however, would be another story.

In an effort to stop Navon, the Begin crowd is attempting to push a bill through the Knesset to make it illegal for a former president to run for the prime ministership until five years have elapsed since the end of his presidency.