

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Why Begin stays in power

Opportunism in the Labour Party and a Soviet KGB faction are two of the reasons.

All opinion polls in Israel show Prime Minister Menachem Begin's popularity to have plummeted to around 20 percent. His ruling coalition is subject to no-confidence votes on an almost weekly basis. The coalition's formal majority in the Knesset has dissipated following the announced defection to the opposition of a member of the National Religious Party.

Why, then, is Begin still in power? Why have early elections not been called?

The immediate answer lies in the calculations of leaders of the Israeli Labour Party. Labour, according to sources familiar with the thinking of its leadership, *wants* to keep Begin in power for as many months as possible, and perhaps even until the November 1981 date for scheduled elections.

According to one source, "Labour intentionally prevented Begin from losing the last two no-confidence votes in the Knesset. [Begin squeaked by by three votes and four votes respectively.] Labour made sure that some of its people stayed away from the vote, or left before the vote was cast, to ensure that the vote was close, and that the dimensions of the anti-Begin sentiment were visible, but to guarantee that Begin would survive."

Several top-level Labour strategists, especially those with close relations with former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, also believe that Begin's fanatical policies

toward the occupied West Bank can be turned to their advantage.

These Kissinger-linked strategists think that as long as Begin is in power, Labour's own West Bank policies can seem moderate and accommodating by *comparison*. Were Labour itself in power, however, this appearance would soon dissipate, since Labour's policy of territorial compromise in the West Bank has been consistently rejected by the Arab leaders, particularly Jordan's King Hussein.

Referring to Labour's thinking, a U.S. intelligence source commented, "You can't have a soft cop if you don't have a hard cop."

Since he was let off the hook by Labour, Begin has been performing some interesting tricks of his own. He has won to his side, in the short term, a group of minuscule Israeli political parties who fear that they will become extinct if new elections are held soon. This strategy has worked particularly well with the National Religious Party, which fears that recent corruption scandals will doom it in future elections.

Begin is also trying to turn the Labourites' West Bank game on its head—by intentionally setting up a major crisis on the West Bank! Since mid-November, Begin, who is also Israel's defense minister, has ordered Israel's occupying army to commit a string of severely repressive acts on the West Bank, including shooting at unarmed teenage Arab demonstrators and shutting

down the territory's Bir-Zeit University.

These actions have fed a mood of radical activism and anti-Israel bitterness in the West Bank, and have played into the hands of a core group of professional agitators around Bir-Zeit connected to that faction of the Soviet KGB associated with British triple agent General "Kim" Philby.

The Philbyites have gladly taken the bait, since they too want to see Menachem Begin remain in power. It is their cynical calculation that as long as the fanatical Begin remains in power, there is a greater chance for radicalization in the Arab world, and hence a greater opening for regional influence by the Marxist-Leninists within the U.S.S.R.

The strange Begin-KGB collusion to stage provocations is evident in the events flowing from Begin's Dec. 1 ban of a scheduled Israeli-Arab Congress called for the weekend of Dec. 6-7 by the Philby-linked Israeli Communist Party.

Prior to Begin's ban, the conference was to be boycotted by most of the Israeli Arab leadership. But Begin's action has given the Israeli Communist Party, or Rakah, greater notoriety and greater potential for support among Israel's Arab population.

As the West Bank-Israeli-Arab game unfolds, Begin thinks he will beef up his tough nationalist image of nontolerance for Arab radicalism among Israel's voters. Rakah and its comrades on the West Bank can bask in the publicity accrued from leading an anti-Begin revolt. And Israel's population can thank the sly opportunism of the Israeli Labour Party for the resulting chaos.