

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Whither Israel?

Sharon's West Bank butchery may be the undoing of Menachem Begin's regime.

A popular Israeli radio show with a large listenership in the armed forces recently ran a comedy routine in which the Yiddish word "meshugenah," or "crazy," was graphically defined.

"You mean 'meshugenah,' as in Ariel Sharon," commented one of the characters.

In the eyes of not a few Israelis, Ariel "Arik" Sharon, Israel's extremist defense minister, is more than just meshugenah. He is viewed as a power-hungry megalomaniac whose ruthless plans for annexing the occupied West Bank and shooting or otherwise eliminating anyone who gets in his way have engendered revulsion in Israel. Even Prime Minister Menachem Begin has gone on record describing Sharon as "anti-democratic" and likely to "surround the prime minister's office with tanks."

Begin is not far off the mark. On March 23, the Begin government was nearly toppled when three motions of no confidence were brought before the Israeli Knesset by the opposition parties in protest of the harshness with which Sharon and his clique are handling the West Bank. Despite the fact that for their own purposes the extreme right-wing splinter parties joined with the Labour Party in the vote (i.e., to block withdrawal from Sinai), the tie vote in the Knesset that almost brought Begin down was widely interpreted as testimony that a substantial number of Israeli citi-

zens do not want an occupation army in the West Bank. The tie vote has sharply reduced Begin's parliamentary maneuvering room, and may also have thrown a monkey wrench into Sharon's provocative schemes.

Sharon's West Bank brutality, charged a March 22 *Jerusalem Post* editorial, has "surely widened the gap between Israelis and Palestinians in the [occupied] areas" wrecking any chance of Palestinian autonomy agreement. The Israeli daily *Haaretz* accused the Begin government of treating the West Bank "as though it had already been annexed," and it absolved the Palestine Liberation Organization from responsibility for the West Bank riots, declaring they are provoked by Sharon.

While talk of early elections is rampant, there is one thing that is clear: Sharon and his faction in and around the government are very much out on a limb.

Sharon has been gambling that by stepping up military pressure on the West Bank, south Lebanon, and Jordan before the April 25 deadline for Israel's final withdrawal from Sinai, he can emerge as a strongman among Israeli political leaders and the successor to the ailing Begin.

Backing for Sharon comes primarily from the non-Israeli organized crime networks, including the Meyer Lansky dope empire and the U.S.-based Meshulam Riklis of the

Rapid-American Corporation. Sharon also has important ties with British and Swiss bankers. Inside Israel, one of his closest collaborators is former Col. Menachem Milson, the new West Bank civilian administrator. Milson is an Israeli intelligence veteran who is associated with the Aspen Institute in the United States, the thinktank that helped overthrow the Shah of Iran in 1979 and fostered the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.

According to Israeli intelligence sources, Sharon has lost the confidence of much of the leadership of Begin's ruling Herut Party. Ministers Aridor, Shamir, and Levy have reportedly formed a "Stop Arik Movement" to thwart Sharon's power play. In addition, many Israeli army officers are reportedly angry at Sharon's one-man rule. Most worrying to these officers is Sharon's stated willingness to defy the United States and carry out an adventurist policy toward Israel's Arab neighbors.

In early March when Sharon proposed that Israel stage a land, sea, and air invasion of Lebanon—his demand since January—he was blocked by Begin and others in the cabinet. Thus checkmated, at least temporarily, in Lebanon, Sharon is going haywire on the West Bank.

Working with Sharon is Chief of Staff Rafael Eytan (despite a public display of differences) and Economics Minister Yaacov Meridor. The Mafia-connected Meridor, the key powerbroker in Herut between Sharon and Begin, has suddenly come under investigation for all sorts of illegal activities, however, including kickbacks to his sons and an alleged loan made illegally from the North American Bank Ltd.