

"Despite the persistence to continue the bilateral negotiations in the hope of softening the Israeli attitude and the failure to achieve any tangible positive result — and we can say that the negotiations have completely failed to introduce radical changes to Israel's arrogant stands — the opportunity still exists to strengthen and support the aforementioned positive signs with the aim of holding the New York conference. Yet, it depends on the U.S. Administration's taking a harder line toward Israel, if Washington does not wish to see itself, together with the parties concerned with the dispute, in the Israeli bottleneck."

Sadat Remains Stubborn

King Hussein's refusal to accept anything short of an overall settlement has opened the way for the consolidation of ties among Jordan, Syria, and the Palestine Liberation Organization. PLO executive committee member Abu Maizer met this week with the Jordanian

Ambassador in Damascus, while PLO Foreign Minister Farouk Kaddoumi will arrive soon in Amman for talks with King Hussein. Concurrently, a high-level PLO delegation led by Yasser Arafat flew to Moscow for talks following the conclusion of a mutual defense pact between the Soviets and Syria. The Soviet-backed Syria-Jordan-PLO axis will provide the muscle necessary for getting Geneva back on track.

Isolated as he is, Egypt's President Sadat is stubbornly — and suicidally — holding back from refocusing his peace efforts on Geneva or the United Nations. In an interview last week in the Egyptian magazine *October*, Sadat condemned the Oct. 1 joint Soviet-U.S. communiqué and dismissed the idea of reconvening Geneva altogether. Commented one well-informed Middle East analyst, "For Sadat to opt for Geneva would be the same as admitting the failure of his initiative, and that's something he just will not do."

—Nancy Parsons

Does Israeli Cabinet Crisis Spell Doom For Begin Government?

Over the past week, a bitter conflict has broken out within the Israeli cabinet over the controversial issue of Israel's building new Zionist settlements in Arab lands occupied during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Defense Minister Ezer Weizman has emerged at the head of a cross-party faction opposed to the expansionist policies of Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan and Agriculture Minister Ariel Sharon.

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Prime Minister Menachem Begin appears to be delicately straddling the fence between these two groups, but his statements on March 8 and 9 affirming Israel's "right" to control and settle the West Bank irrespective of external and internal pressures to the contrary indicate a strong tilt toward the Dayan-Sharon camp.

Begin's attitude sets his government up for a fall on two accounts. First, U.S. Administration pressure on Israel to abide by internationally recognized protocols insisting on Israel's withdrawal from the West Bank will help Weizman's faction to prevail. Second, Weizman himself — now touring in the U.S., where he is being delicately cultivated as a pro-U.S. Israeli leader by Administration policy-makers — has taken a very strong position against appeasing Sharon and Dayan. He has threatened to resign if new Israeli settlements are approved, and has told Washington press sources that "I put my foot down very hard!" in a phone conversation with Begin March 7. According to France's *Le Matin* March 8, Weizman declared in the U.S., "The next week will be decisive. I will not allow a group of fanatics to sabotage the peace process."

A former Israeli parliamentarian analyzed the developing Israeli faction situation in the following way:

The Begin government is a fleeting episode. Weizman, the Liberals (a faction of the ruling Likud Party — ed.) and Yadin (deputy Prime Minister and head of the Democratic Movement for Change group) have stood up to Begin in a way that was not expected. Begin himself, according to close personal friends, is melancholy, and is talking of resigning.

If he were to resign, that would trigger an easily identifiable realignment in Israel. Weizman, some of Begins' own Herut faction in the Likud, Yadin's people, and the Labour Party would come together to present an alternative involving a normal, objective policy involving the West Bank. After Begin resigns, a process can begin of moving toward giving up the territories.

You cannot take it for granted that every world leader is normal. Every leader to some extent is mad. Begin has great virtues, he is very learned and so on, but on the basic fundamental point of the West Bank, he's mad. He won't agree to any settlement that involves giving up the West Bank.

A second Israeli analyst corroborated the above thesis. Commenting on a spate of rumors this week that Weizman, Finance Minister Simcha Ehrlich, and Sharon are all threatening to resign, the expert noted:

All the talk of resignation in Israel by these Ministers probably will end up with Begin resigning. This is a growing possibility: after Begin's visit to the U.S., if sufficient pressure is put on him by the U.S., it will lead to a situation where any Israeli Prime Minister would have to make concessions —

concessions which Begin simply can't make, so he would have to resign.

Baltimore Sun commentator Ruth Cale reported from Jerusalem March 8 that Weizman is clearly emerging as the number two man behind Begin, ahead of Dayan and Sharon, in the current internal fight:

The only person to emerge untarnished from the Israeli leadership's lamentably unsophisticated handling of the peace-making process and other major national upheavals is in the view of many sober Israelis the charismatic defense minister, Ezer Weizman. No wonder that he is being widely tipped as the most likely successor to Prime Minister Menachem Begin....

....While Messrs. Dayan and Sharon became increasingly controversial because of their nationalist ideology, arbitrary decisions and ill-considered public statements, Mr. Weizman attended to his defense bailiwick with quiet efficiency, never putting a foot wrong or talking out of turn. No wonder, that his popularity has climbed steadily, and that recently he reached the top of the charts, ahead of both Mr. Begin and Mr. Dayan (Mr. Sharon wasn't even mentioned.)....

Mr. Weizman has emerged as an "establishment dove," who sincerely wants to clinch peace with President Sadat, and doesn't want to cheat with tricky formulas and last-minute creations of "facts" in disputed regions....

The (Israeli) people are plainly tired of periodic upheavals such as they have been exposed to by Dayan and Sharon and also occasionally by Mr. Begin. They want a level-headed and hard-fisted and honest no-nonsense man at the top, who will not get sidetracked in the peace-making business by religious mystics and toughs who claim settlement in certain occupied areas is more important than peace (as one of Mr. Sharon's aides recently declared in public).

It seems Ezer Weizman is likeliest to have these qualities. His supporters hope that on his visit to the United States, his first trip to America since he took over the defense ministry, he will impress Americans as he has impressed the Egyptians.

Dayan Mobilizes, Begin Boxed

Dayan has not been dissuaded by the rise of Weizman's star from trying to build a grass-roots movement in favor of his own policies. The *Jerusalem Post's* political affairs correspondent reported March 2 that Dayan supporters in the Israeli Knesset (parliament) are urging him to form an electoral list under his banner.

The Post then went on to say:

A source close to Dayan said that the Foreign Minister now feels the lack of his own political organization, since he is in the government at Begin's discretion and has no independent backing. One source claimed that Herut and the Liberals don't particularly like Dayan.

Dayan himself has so far denied any ambitions of heading a political group. Observers, however, believe he would like the option of having an organized political backing should there be a need or the right opportunity for it. Dayan is seen likely to launch a new party should Begin step down or if members in the various parties split over a crucial question — such as the future of (the West Bank).

Nevertheless, Dayan is meeting with potential supporters. The moshav (an influential organization of Israeli agriculture cooperatives) members are unhappy with the Labour Party's alignment with the more dovish Mapam, and a source close to Labour's Chairman Shimon Peres yesterday predicted some may break away should Labour and Mapam continue their alliance.

Dayan has also maintained contact with some members of the La'am faction in the Likud, whom he reportedly met two weeks ago. He is also associated with the Forum for Political and Social Questions, which tomorrow will discuss the implications of peace on Israel.

Post reporter Mark Segal reported March 1 that "it is certainly premature to dismiss Dayan as a political lightweight with no political base of his own." Segal noted that "Begin is giving Dayan full backing" during current controversies — including Dayan's provocative revelation that Israel is arming Ethiopia — that had led to calls in the Knesset for Dayan's resignation.

The conservative Italian daily *Il Giornale* went one step further than this March 7, reporting that Begin has "become the prisoner of Dayan."

Begin has certainly lent credence to this assessment throughout the week, with his repeated assertions that Israel is justified in refusing to relinquish control of the West Bank and his arrogant denunciation March 8 of 300 Israeli reservists and officers who had, in an unprecedented act in Israeli history, signed a petition denouncing "a government which prefers the frontiers of a Great Israel to an Israel living in peace with its neighbors." Begin accused the petitioners of committing a "disservice" to Israel for "publicly advising" the government in this way.