

Middle East Report by Robert Dreyfuss

Will Israel choose a fascist?

Begin is using Nazi tactics and gangsterism to secure his re-election as prime minister—or worse.

A national leader with a cult following who cites a messianic vision to justify attack on his neighbors. Uneducated rabble in the streets physically attacking his opponents. Use of the big lie technique to justify his actions.

This is not only a description of Khomeini's Iran, or perhaps Adolf Hitler's Germany. It is a description of Israel under the regime of clinically insane Menachem Begin. And the people making the comparisons are not Arabs or writing in *Pravda*. Rather, these are statements made by Shimon Peres and the opposition Labour Party, finally making a last-ditch effort to defeat Begin in Israel's June 30 national election.

In a sharp departure from his previous low-key approach, in the wake of the Israeli raid on Iraq's nuclear facilities June 7, Shimon Peres this week blasted the Likud bloc of Begin for its "quasi-fascist tactics." After a series of Likud-led hooligan attacks on Labour Party offices and rallies—in one day speeches by Peres and Abba Eban were disrupted by gangs of knife-wielding thugs and a Labour office in Tel Aviv was burned—an angry Peres asked his supporters: "Do you want this Khomeinism to take over Israel with idol worship?"

Peres blamed Begin directly. "I can say with certainty that these disruptions by the Likud are organized. People are bused in, they are paid, and yesterday one of them

even brandished a knife," he charged. Shlomo Hillel, a former interior minister, backed Peres. "There is an atmosphere of social incitement and nationalist incitement. Experience teaches us that when these two elements are combined it always leads to fascism."

According to one observer of Israeli affairs, "What is at stake in the Israeli election is the very morality of the nation. No nation can survive with its integrity unscarred if it tolerates a leader like Begin."

Manipulating the cheapest and meanest section of the population of Israel, including the uneducated and impoverished Oriental Jews, Begin has built himself up into a cult figure. He is frequently followed by chanting crowds of worshippers who shout, "Begin, Begin King of Israel!" At virtually every appearance, he evokes the images and memory of the holocaust of the Hitler era to win sympathy.

And he has not shied from implying that Peres, because of his stated opposition to the outrageous attack on Iraq's reactor, is committing treason. An official Israeli cabinet communiqué June 15 accused Peres of "something of sabotage," and Begin aides told the press that the prime minister had considered charging Peres with being a traitor. Peres is now faced with the formidable task of trying to mobilize undecided voters against the Nazism of the Begin machine in the remaining days of the campaign.

From indications close to the Labour leadership, Peres is aware of the urgency of the situation. "Our backs are to the wall," said a Peres adviser. "We've got to go back to the basic instinct for telling the truth about the missiles and the reactor, even if we go down in flames for it."

Peres is aware, sources also report, that unless he takes on directly the issue of Begin's crimes, he has no chance to rally voters to his side. And, if he does lose the election, at least Peres and Labour will be able to tell the Israeli population that the "rebuilding" process preparatory to toppling Begin must begin on a sound, moral basis.

King Hussein of Jordan—who is known to favor Peres's election—told an NBC interviewer last week that Begin was "imitating Hitler," and that if the Israeli people vote for Begin on June 30 it will mean that, simply, "they do not want peace."

A prominent Israeli newspaper columnist, Uri Benziman of *Ha-aretz*, laid out the real issue for opponents of Begin: "Is it really possible to prevent the Arab states from entering the atomic age? Wouldn't it be better to strive for political accords with them, considering the technological advancements awaiting them?"

Such a policy—almost a vision of real peace for most Israelis—might, in fact, under the right circumstances, become the basis of Shimon Peres's government, if Begin is defeated.

But Begin, buoyed by the polls in recent days, is riding high. The most eloquent statement of his views: "Thank God, U.S. Jews are behind us."

But are they?