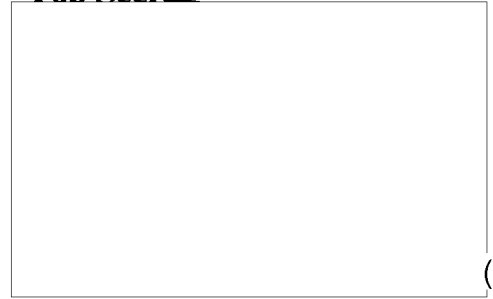


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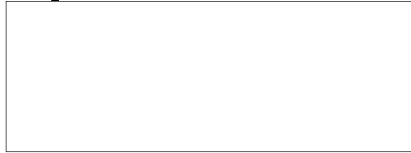
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SPECIAL ANALYSES

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ISRAEL: Prospects for the Begin Government

The controversy surrounding the massacre in Beirut has weakened Prime Minister Begin's hold on power and eroded his political support. More damaging revelations are likely as the inquiry into the incident develops. Nevertheless, Begin retains important political assets, and he stands a reasonable chance of remaining in office so long as no evidence surfaces of any early awareness of the massacre on his part. Eventually, he probably will have to dump some senior military officials--including perhaps Defense Minister Sharon.

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Begin's ability to project an image as a forceful and adroit foreign policy operator has been badly undermined by the massacre. His reluctance to agree to a full-scale inquiry also has hurt his prestige.

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The Prime Minister's political standing is likely to suffer more damage as the inquiry proceeds. Major questions remain unanswered, particularly Israel's role in assisting the Phalange in planning the operation and the possible role of the Israeli-controlled forces of Major Haddad. New revelations will almost certainly appear.

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Moreover, as long as the Army remains in Lebanon in force, there is a good chance of additional embarrassing incidents that would serve to divide further public opinion on Begin's policies and thus weaken his standing.

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[Redacted]

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Begin's Strengths

Begin, however, still has important sources of power. His coalition partners, although upset by his handling of the massacre, do not want early elections and have little political future if they desert the coalition. [Redacted]

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Moreover, Begin's personal popularity remains high. A poll released this week showed him still far ahead of his rivals, although his rating declined since the massacre. [Redacted]

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In addition, the Prime Minister will try to keep his coalition together by charging that opposition attacks on him are linked to alleged US efforts to install a new government that might make concessions on peace negotiating issues. This tactic will keep some potential dissidents in line. [Redacted]

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Labor's Tactics

Begin's prospects also will be helped by the continuing leadership divisions in the Labor Party. Continued feuding between party leader Peres and former Prime Minister Rabin have hindered Labor's efforts to exploit Begin's current difficulties. [Redacted]

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According to press accounts, Rabin is particularly angered by Peres's efforts to court Ezer Weizman, a member of Begin's party who quit the cabinet in 1980, by offering him the defense post. Rabin hopes to hold that post in a Labor-led government. [Redacted]

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Efforts to attract Weizman appear to be a major part of Labor's strategy. Peres apparently hopes that, by offering Weizman a key post, he can induce some members of Begin's Likud bloc--particularly the Liberal faction--to join a Labor government. [Redacted]

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A Labor-led government, even if it included Weizman, would be wracked by factional strife and vulnerable to opposition efforts to oust it. Such a government would find it hard to develop and sustain a coherent foreign policy and would have difficulty initiating negotiations on the Palestinian issue. [redacted]

Outlook

Although Begin's standing is likely to diminish as the inquiry proceeds, the major threat to his rule probably will come in a few months when its findings are published. The inquiry is almost certain to conclude that major mistakes in judgment were made, and evidence damaging to Sharon and other senior military officials is likely to accumulate. [redacted]

Begin will then be faced with a hard decision. Although Sharon has hinted he might resign if the commission's evidence points to his having had a role in the massacre, Sharon probably will not go quietly and Begin will be reluctant to ask him to step down. [redacted]

Begin respects Sharon's military expertise, and they have close family ties. The Prime Minister probably also fears Sharon might turn on him. Pressure from anti-Sharon elements in the coalition and public opinion, however, is likely to require Begin to get rid of Sharon if he hopes to retain power. [redacted]

If Begin survives, his ability to govern almost certainly will be curtailed and his popularity probably will not return to the levels it reached this summer. His weakened position, however, will not lessen his determination to combat US efforts to get Israeli agreement on concessions in the peace process. [redacted]

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