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Tuesday 9 May 1978

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ISRAEL: Coalition Dissension

[ ] Some ranking members of Israel's Democratic Movement for Change, the largest party in the government after Prime Minister Begin's Likud, are pressing their leadership to pull the party out of the coalition because of Begin's hard line on peace negotiations. The dissidents do not claim to have the endorsement of a majority of the party's executive council, but they nevertheless remain optimistic that disillusionment with Begin's peace strategy will increase over the next few months and gradually draw the party's leadership to their side.

[ ] This group planned to hold a meeting last night in an effort to impress the party's senior leadership with the backing they already have.

[ ] Nearly half of the Democratic Movement's 15-member Knesset delegation and a growing number of the party's rank-and-file are increasingly restless with Begin's foreign policy. They believe that staying in the coalition despite Begin's continuing refusal to consider any territorial withdrawal from the occupied West Bank contradicts the Democratic Movement's platform, which calls for some territorial adjustments as part of a final peace settlement.

[ ] In recent weeks, Democratic Movement dissenters have played an important role in organizing "Peace Now" demonstrations calling for greater flexibility in negotiations. Twice in the last 10 days, advertisements signed by hundreds of Democratic Movement voters have appeared in leading Israeli newspapers calling on party head Yigael Yadin either to force the government to change its stance or to lead the party out of the coalition.

[ ] The dissidents, many of whom come from the former dovish Shinui reform movement, nearly bolted the Democratic Movement in January. They continue to express deep dissatisfaction with Yadin's inept leadership, his lack of influence within the coalition, and the party's inability to make significant headway on electoral and other domestic reform legislation--a key plank in the party's election campaign a year ago.

[ ] This present disaffection with government policy does not seem to be shared by Yadin or the Democratic Movement's other three cabinet ministers, all of whom seem intent on holding on to their portfolios and working from the inside to change government policies. Even Amnon Rubinstein, the former Shinui head and ostensible leader of this Democratic Movement group, does not now appear to favor withdrawal from the coalition. As his price for remaining in the party, Rubenstein recently demanded and won a larger role in party councils. Since then, he has somewhat muted his earlier criticisms of Yadin and Begin.

