

«peace» efforts, the US will maintain its usual protective silence about Israel creating «facts» on the ground(via the settling of the new immigrants), which undermine the search for a just peace.

Religious influence?

The influence of the religious parties was already strongly felt in the 1988 elections when they gained more Knesset seats, holding the balance between the two big blocs, and also putting forth a series of controversial demands, especially concerning the question of «who is a Jew.» If anything, the religious forces are even more prominent in the current governmental crisis, but their role has taken on a slightly different tone. The nascent tendency among some of these parties to realize that Jewish security and well-being may not be compatible with territorial expansionism has become more pronounced. This tendency was most clearly represented by Rabbi Yosef of Shas, the largest ultraorthodox party, and composed of Sephardic Jews, which held the immigration and interior ministries in the Shamir government. In technical terms, it was Shas that toppled the government when five of its six MK's abstained after Shamir balked at Rabbi Yosef's compromise. The rabbi went on record as saying that Shamir's policy «invited bloodshed and war upon Israel.» In the ensuing political consultations, Shas Rabbi Ariele Deri said that the party was not asking for special demands, but wanted to «do everything we can to advance the peace process»(*International Herald Tribune*, March 17-18th). A poll published by *Maariv* in late March showed that 53.1% of the Israeli public supported Rabbi Yosef's principle that peace must be the deciding factor in forming a new government.

However, there was also a backlash among the religious forces. Rabbi Yitzhak Peretz resigned as head of the Shas Knesset group, protesting his party fellows' abstention that caused Shamir's downfall. Rabbi Yosef was sharply criticized by both of Israel's chief rabbis(Sephardi and Ashkenazi) for his statement against Shamir's policy. Rabbi Schach, Shas's other spiritual mentor, worked to stop



100,000 Israelis demonstrated for electoral reform on April 7th, the biggest demonstration in Israel since the protest against the Sabra-Shatila massacre.

the party's drift toward Labor. His March 26th speech, a key event in the congress of another ultraorthodox party, Degel Hatorah (Torah Flag), directly attacked Labor and the kibbutzim for having distanced themselves from Judaism. However, he also noted that «territory doesn't guarantee existence.»

In the political consultations aimed at forming a new government, both Likud and Labor are, as usual, trying to woo the religious parties to their side. In the midst of the political crisis, the Knesset approved the budget for the fiscal year 1990-91. Of the total \$31.2 billion budget adopted, \$100 million was approved for settlement-building, while \$110 million was allocated to religious institutions - a point on which both Likud and Labor MK's concurred. This gives the religious institutions over two times the budget allocations they received last year, and again raises the questions of whether the orthodox parties hold disproportional power when compared to the fact that the great majority of Israelis are non-religious.

One should not overlook, however, that the influence of the religious parties is built into the Israeli political structure. Zionism needs Judaism, for without it Israel stands naked as the colonial state it is. Thus, making a pretense of deferring to the religious forces is necessary for garnering support domestically and internationally. It is no accident that the role of the religious forces becomes even more

prominent when the society is in crisis. So far, the intifada has deepened the polarization in Israeli society, but without yet inducing a clear consensus in either direction, though the movement towards right-wing extremism appears stronger than left-leaning tendencies. Generally, the Israeli public is split 50-50 on crucial issues concerning the occupied territories like withdrawal, annexation, mass expulsion of Palestinians, etc. In this paralysis of the settler state, the religious forces may very well hold the balance, with a myriad of secondary questions distracting Israel from the existential questions it is loath to face up to.

The happy caretaker

More basic than the distractions offered by the religious forces is the chance for Israeli leaders of all factions to use the current political crisis to distract the international community's attention from the peace process and Israeli efforts to block this. On the domestic scene, the crisis serves to deflect criticism from the left and the right of the government's failures, including its failure to quell the Palestinian intifada. One might even argue that Shamir and the Likud generally are delighted with their role as a caretaker government. The US is treating Israel with kid gloves, and a series of questions are postponed until the formation of a new government.

Likud is certainly taking advantage of the breathing spell. Within two weeks of his government's fall, caretaker Shamir who is doubling as defense minister after Rabin's resignation, has set in motion plans for quickly starting five more settlements in the 1967 occupied territories. These five settlements were among the eight decided on by the coalition government in 1988, but reportedly postponed by Rabin in his capacity as defense minister due to US protests. The other three of the original eight have already been opened: Ofarim and Tsoref in the West Bank and Kfar Darom in the Gaza Strip(AP, April 1st). Clearly, as long as the government crisis persists, Shamir and his deputies will be working according to the watchwords: Buy time - and colonize!