Americans get an impression that Israeli politics is monolithic. This impression is enhanced by the geographical and cultural distance between Israel and the United States, as well as by American tourists' inability to comprehend the "complexity" of the situation in the Middle East.

The recent so-called National Unity government, which brought together the Labor bloc and Likud bloc, furthered this impression. Each bloc has approximately forty seats in the 120-seat Knesset (Parliament), always subject to some change due to political horse-trading and opportunism.

Of course there are nuances: Likud's Yitzhak Shamir obstinately opposes any contact with the PLO, while Labor's Yitzhak Rabin orders Israelis to break Palestinian arms and legs. Petty squabbles between ego-inflated political personalities, yes; but the overall impression is one of a monolithic regime. There is quite another aspect to Israel's political life, however, which is no less important in this time of virtual gridlock in the Knesset. This is the politics of the smaller parties in Israel, who hold the other two-score seats in Knesset.

Earlier this month, I interviewed Dr. Benny Temkin, Secretary General of the RATZ Party. The Citizens' Rights Movement (RATZ) was founded by Shulamit Aloni in 1973. The initial programme was to promote civil rights in Israel, a vitally important topic in a country which has neither a Constitution nor a Bill of Rights. By 1981 "Peace" was added to RATZ's name, as it became increasingly clear, as Temkin put it, that "the issues of human and civil rights in Israel were inextricably linked to issues of peace and war, and to the issue of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza." The Party currently has five members in the Knesset, so it plays an important role in resolving the balance of power -- some would say impasse -- between the Labor and Likud blocs.

Temkin stated that "our first priority as a party and as individuals is to do everything in our power to prevent a war with one (or a few) of the Arab states." This seems particularly salient in light of quotations of hard-line remarks by Israeli General Bar Kochba now circulating in the Middle East, to the effect that Israel will inevitably go to war with Iraq and Syria, and may reoccupy the Sinai in the process. RATZ links the priority of peace to Israeli policies regarding the Palestinians, since, as Temkin puts it, "our occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, our repression and their resistance -- the Intifada -- can bring about such a conflagration, such a war." Then he pointed out another sequel of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians: "we do not believe that a nation (Israel) which is occupying another people (the Palestinians), preventing them from expressing their own right to self-determination, can in the long-run have a democratic society, human rights, civil rights."

Currently, Israeli society and especially the ruling Shamir coalition are confronting an "internally contradictory" situation, according to Temkin. He asked somewhat rhetorically "how can they at once satisfy the Americans and at the same time satisfy the Israeli settlers in the Territories? And at the same time satisfy the religious parties in Shamir's coalition?"
Temkin continued "all this will make for either a tremendous rate of inflation in Israel (this has already happened to a Likud government before) or else the fall of the ruling coalition -- if nothing else." He does not accept a deterministic view of Israel's future: what is to come depends upon decisions made and actions taken now.

Thus Temkin went on "the things that would postpone the playing out of these internal contradictions include of course another war." While he hopes the contradictions will not end in war, Temkin acknowledged that such an eventuality would "help Shamir stall, and would postpone the playing out of these contradictions that I'm talking about."

Regardless of short-term opportunistic political motives, no sane person can want war in the Middle East. Temkin acknowledged that there is "a large amount of political opportunism on the part of some of the members of the current ruling coalition." Yet it is clear that "the cost of such a war in human, economic, and political terms will be staggering."

What can the U.S. government do to help secure lasting peace and justice in the Middle East? Temkin responded "it has to get us to sit down with the Palestinians."

He was even more specific about this critical point. "It is necessary for the PLO to be involved." He continued "we believe that once both sides are at the table, they will be able to reach agreements between them, between the sides."

The U.S. must change its approach in the Middle East, according to Temkin. "For a number of years, the U.S. government has given uncritical, unrestrained support to the policies of the governments of Israel, and I don't think that this support has contributed to bringing peace to the Middle East."

Temkin went on: "if the U.S. is not able to bring about such negotiations, then perhaps the U.S. should try -- how does President Bush put it -- "try other alternatives." The main thing for us is to bring about a meeting between the Palestinians and the Israelis, and not to let Shamir stall, which is what he's going to try to do." He concluded that this was so important now "because we do not feel that time is working in our favor -- in favor of moderation on both sides, both on the Israeli side and on the Palestinian side." And to repeat, for the Citizens' Rights and Peace (RATZ) Party, "our first priority is to prevent the occurrence of another war."

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