

Jews break ranks over Palestine

Israelis vote Tuesday in what could be their most important election in decades. Shimon Peres' centrist Labor alliance is pledged to begin some sort of negotiations over the occupied West Bank and Gaza where more than 305 rebellious Palestinians have already been killed. The right-wing Likud bloc, led by Yitzhak Shamir, refuses to give up one inch of land and threatens even harsher repression of the Palestinians.

Most pundits expect Israeli voters to give neither side a majority, thus forcing another coalition. This, in turn, will continue the do-nothingism and inertia that has marked the last four years of unity government where nobody and everybody was in charge. It will also neatly put off hard decisions that must be made about the West Bank and Gaza.

There's also another Mideast political drama going on, this one in the United States. Maybe rebellion is a better word. Its outcome could be even more important for Mideast peace than what happens inside Israel.

Last week, a long-simmering dispute in the Jewish community finally erupted into the open. The three leading American Jewish organizations, the B'nai B'rith, the American Jewish Committee and the American Jewish Congress, publicly broke with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and announced that they would begin lobbying on their own.

AIPAC, though little known outside Washington, is the America's most powerful and feared lobby. It rewards and backs senators and congressmen who vote faithfully for what AIPAC says are Israel's interests and punishes those who do not. Some leading senators and congressmen have been driven out of office by AIPAC and its informal network of wealthy fund-raisers.

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AIPAC has become so powerful and successful that a single phone call is enough to produce Pavlovian responses in Congressmen. In effect, AIPAC now virtually runs a good part of U.S. Mideast policy through its control of Congress and great influence in the Pentagon. Critics of AIPAC, joined last Sunday by CBS's *60 Minutes*, charge that it is no mere lobbying organization of "concerned" American Jews, but an unconscionably powerful arm of the Israeli government.

Or, more accurately, its right-wing Likud side. Many prominent American Jews are increasingly anguished by the spectacle of Israeli troops shooting down Palestinian children. Within important segments of the Jewish community, there is a growing sense that some sort of political compromise must be made with the Palestinians. Lurking behind, is the awareness that more and more non-Jewish Americans are growing angry at Israel and troubled by the impression that Israel has, in the words of one congressman, "hijacked U.S. Mideast policy."

The potential for an anti-Semitic backlash is disturbingly clear. But no Mideast peace is going to work without active U.S. support. And this will not happen as long

as Likud's hardliners use AIPAC to hog tie Congress and block attempts at peace.

So, with deep reluctance, the three Jewish organizations have broken with AIPAC in an effort to end its monopoly as sole spokesman for Israel in Washington. They will speak for the Labor party which, it is hoped, will begin inching forward toward political and territorial compromise with the Arabs.

The Jewish organizations may yet heal their rift. But it's now undeniable that there is as much debate within the U.S. Jewish community over a possible peace as there is within Israel—and that the hard right is not Israel's only voice.

Until recently, most American Jews were afraid to break ranks or criticize AIPAC for fear of hurting Israel. Now, however, they are being forced to do so by the prospect of more Palestinians being shot down in the streets and, even worse, of the growing popularity in Israel of proposals to expel Palestinians from their homes.

This is a loathsome and shameful notion for a people who suffered so much under the Nazis. Enough, say moderate American Jews. Some other way must be found. And this might turn out to be the most positive and important step yet in the long, rocky road to a Mideast peace.

Time now for moderate Jews to start talking to moderate Arabs so that the killing won't continue for another 40 years.

As for extremist Arabs who want a Palestine rid of Jews, or for extremist Israelis who want it rid of Arabs, let them go fight each other in the desert and leave sensible people to make peace.