

Not a happy holiday

Hanukkah is usually a time of joy and celebration, but this week, as the city's Jewish community lights the first candles of the season, the prevailing mood is one of deep worry, or even gloom.

Los Angeles' large and politically influential Jewish community is watching events unfold in the Mideast with mounting dismay as the Gulf crisis takes a 180 degree turn. It now appears that war between Iraq and the U.S. may well be averted. Upcoming negotiations could result in a face-saving way for Saddam out of Kuwait, followed by a formal pledge by the U.S. not to attack Iraq. The entire world is breathing deep sighs of relief — except for Israel's right-wing government and its American supporters.

In recent days, the shape of a possible comprehensive Mideast settlement is becoming clearer. The U.S. may finally agree to a major UN conference that will tackle head-on the question of a homeland for Palestinians. A newly invigorated UN could focus massive international pressure on Israel to compel it to comply with a series of resolutions calling for Israeli withdrawal from all Arab territories captured in the 1967 war.

Even more ominous, for backers of the current hard-line Israeli policy, the UN, which strongly supports the Palestinian cause, may then go on to press for creation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza.

The raison d'être of the far-right Israeli government of Yitzhak Shamir is the maintenance of a Greater Israel by permanent annexation of the occupied territories, including, most likely, a chunk of southern Lebanon. The Shamir government also appears to be secretly committed to a program of gradual expulsion of some or all Palestinians in the occupied territories. There is simply not enough water in Israel or the occupied territories for the existing Palestinian residents and the million or so Soviet emigrants expected to arrive in the next few years.

In the past, Israel has used its mighty political clout in the U.S. to get Washington to block UN resolutions calling for an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories. Unlike the Reagan administration, which was packed at all levels by ardent supporters of Israel, the Bush administration has extremely poor relations with Shamir's government, which is seen by many U.S. policy-makers as fanatical and impossible to deal with. The Bush team has cold-shouldered Israel for the past two years. Shamir was not even granted a meeting with Bush during the current Gulf crisis until this week.

Since Saddam invaded Kuwait, the U.S. has been pressuring Israel to keep a low profile. And so Israel has, until now. But as a peaceful settlement of the Gulf crisis appears increasingly possible, Israel's right-wingers and their U.S. backers have taken deep alarm.

There are persistent rumors that Israel may trigger war by attacking Iraq. In recent weeks, senior officials

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of the Shamir government broke their silence and openly called for a U.S. attack on Iraq. So have many of Israel's backers in the U.S. Even normally ultra-liberal Jewish groups here in Beverly Hills have suddenly veered far to the right in demanding all-out war.

Many American Jews fear Israel will have to face Iraq alone one day soon. Better, they reason, to let the U.S. do the fighting. But, at the same time, some black groups in the U.S. are complaining that American Jews are pushing the U.S. into a war for the sake of Israel. Since there are few Jews in the U.S. armed forces, the butcher's bill for a war will be paid by blacks, Hispanics and the poor whites who make up the bulk of the military. Obviously, there's a nasty land mine of anti-Semitism waiting here to explode.

The Israelis share similar worries. If war erupts and turns into a bloody quagmire, many Americans, including Congress, will blame Israel for getting the U.S. involved. Israel is going to need between US\$23 billion and US\$40 billion of additional aid to settle the expected million Soviet Jews — this on top of the current US\$3 billion in aid Israel already gets.

Should the U.S. go the war with Iraq, there will be no money left for Soviet Jews. So Israel is caught in a nasty dilemma. Each way it turns presents major dangers. Any move it makes could backfire and endanger its vital economic and political support from the U.S.

Unfortunately, the Shamir government appears incapable of dealing with these life and death issues. And the opposition Labor party, which could fashion an acceptable settlement with the Arabs, has little chance of regaining political power soon.

On top of these worries, the U.S. and the Soviet Union appear close to agreeing, with Europe's backing, to a nuclear-free zone in the Mideast. Saddam will have to give up his nuclear program and chemical weapons — which were developed in part to counter Israel's nuclear arsenal — and so will Israel, if the plan goes ahead.

Nuclear arms are Israel's insurance policy against a second Holocaust and they give the Jewish state absolute supremacy in the Mideast. Getting Israel to give up its nuclear power and the West Bank will be nearly impossible. Yet if it does not, Israel may find itself almost as isolated by the world powers as Saddam Hussein's regime is today.

A cheery Hanukkah this certainly is not.