

The political dead end of Labour Zionism

Part 3—The June 1967 & "Six Day War"—A turning point in the evolution of Israel

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This concludes a three-part article examining the historical process that has led Israel's Labour Party to form a coalition government with Likud under Ariel Sharon, and its participation in the brutal suppression of the Palestinian intifada. Parts one and two were published on April 5 and 6.

The June 1967 "Six-Day War" marked a turning point in Israel's history. It created a new generation of Arab refugees and extended Israeli control over all British Mandate Palestine through the barrel of a gun. Israel became the major military power in the Middle East. It initiated a "Greater Israel" policy, and spawned a new social layer—particularly amongst the Jewish settlers within the Occupied Territories—committed to this expansionist policy. Whatever differences the Labour Zionists and the Revisionists had had in the past, these were now settled in practice.

The war that broke out between Israel and her Arab neighbours in June 1967 followed a period of escalating conflict between Israel and Syria. But it was precipitated by Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser's expulsion of UN forces from the Gaza Strip, which Egypt then controlled, and Sharm el Sheikh, where they were guarding the Straits of Tiran, and the closing of the Straits to Israeli shipping.

As tension mounted during the weeks preceding the war, the Israelis presented the situation as one of an Israeli David surrounded by an Arab Goliath. Israel seized the opportunity to initiate a first strike, wipe out the Egyptian air force on the ground, defeat the Arab armies and seize territories in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, including Jerusalem.

Shimon Golan, a senior researcher in the Israel Defence Forces' (IDF) history department, believes that Israeli security policy in 1949-53 meant the government did not want to make the concessions to the Arabs that the major powers were demanding. Instead, Ben Gurion instituted the policy of gradual peace efforts, copied by subsequent governments. He withstood the pressure from the US and Britain to make territorial concessions and allow the refugees to return. He is reported to have said in a meeting with the Foreign Minister and senior IDF officials, "The main interest is not peace with the Arabs... Viewing peace as the principal interest is similar to the improper way in which the army views itself as the center of affairs, convinced that the economy, manpower and foreign relations must adapt themselves to its needs." He set down his priorities in the following way: Israel's principal interest was its own existence. Its second interest was its relations with the US. Peace with the Arabs came in third place.

In 1952, a memo to Ben Gurion explained that the IDF would not be able to defend Israel if the Arabs attacked first, given the current balance of forces. His conclusion was that Israel must always be the one to take the initiative in any war, which Golan believes presaged the adoption of the philosophy of a pre-emptive war. The operational programme that laid the basis for the 1967 War and Israel's expansion was developed in the subsequent period.

The problem of borders preoccupied the government, particularly the "infiltration" of Palestinian refugees and the struggle with Syria over

control of the demilitarised zones in the north. Then as now heavy reprisals were carried out. As a young officer, Ariel Sharon established the 101 Unit and led the 1953 raid on Qibbya, in what was then Jordan, that left 69 men, women and children dead. That raid marked the resumption of active hostilities between Israel and the Arabs.

The Israeli establishment had refused to accept the 1948 armistice line, known today as the "Pre-1967 War borders". Central Israel, as originally constituted, was a narrow coastal strip no more than 10-15 miles wide, vulnerable to any attack from Jordan in the East, which could rapidly overrun the coastal plain and cut Israel in two. Syria, in the north east, controlled the Banyas, the source of the River Jordan and Israel's water supply. It also controlled the strategic Golan Heights, an ideal position from which to attack Israeli towns and villages. While the bitterest fighting before Israel's independence had been over Jerusalem, the Zionists had been unable to capture the entire city, with the east remaining under the control of Jordan.

As a result of the formation of the Zionist state, British Mandate Palestine was divided between Israel, Transjordan (which had seized the West Bank) and Gaza (administered by Egypt). This division of such a geographically crucial part of the Eastern Mediterranean, plus the sealing of Israel's borders by hostile Arab neighbours, severely disrupted communications both within Israel and the region as a whole.

In the early years, Moshe Dayan (1915-1981), a young army officer who became Minister of Defence in 1967 and spearheaded the Six-Day War, favoured the Jordan River as Israel's eastern border. For pragmatic reasons, he adopted the same position as the Revisionist Zionists and the religious parties, who laid claim to the whole of biblical Palestine.

It was only the fear of international opposition that deterred the Israeli government from putting such a plan into action. Even Foreign Minister Moshe Sharrett, the most moderate member of the cabinet, was convinced that the Arabs "in their stupidity or evil" would create an opportunity for Israel to expand its territory without having to annex too many Arabs into its borders. "We should consider taking advantage of it", he said.

The IDF considered various plans to "improve" and enlarge Israel's 1948 borders in the case of a military attack by the Arabs on all fronts, and whether to include Beirut, Damascus and Amman within such borders. They got ready for a "second round". Shimon Golan says he has found no evidence that these early plans were ever agreed by or even submitted to the government.

Six days after the start of the June 1967 War, the map of Israel had fundamentally changed. Israel's borders now included the Golan Heights, seized from Syria, and only 30 miles away from Damascus; the West Bank and East Jerusalem, formerly Jordanian territory; the Gaza Strip and the whole of the Sinai Desert, which it had seized from Egypt. To this day, all the territories captured in the Six-Day War remain under Israeli control, with the exception of Sinai and some of the Golan Heights.

The Likud government's 1982 invasion of the Lebanon, with Ariel Sharon as Defence Minister, belatedly carried out the northern part of the IDF's plan.

The June 1967 Six-Day War proved to be a watershed for both Israel and the Labour Zionists. Within weeks of the war, the national unity government, headed by Mapai Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, established settlements in its newly conquered territories in defiance of international conventions. As Israeli historian Ze'ev Sternhell explains in his book *The Founding Myths of Israel*, "Despite the impression that some of the founders of the labour movement, motivated by internal political struggles, have attempted to create, everyone in the coalition—both the founders and their successors—were united in pursuing a policy of *fait accompli* in the occupied territories. Despite the divisions in the Mapai since the mid-1940s, the family of Mapai remained true to the doctrine of never giving up a position or a territory unless one is compelled by a superior force."

As Sternhell explains, while Eshkol feared the consequences of such a move, he had no ideological alternative. His failure to prevent the colonising of the occupied territories stemmed not from personal weaknesses, but from the fact that he had no response to the argument that if Jews could live in the Arab towns and neighbourhoods of Jaffa and Haifa and consider them their legitimate homes, there was no reason to prevent them living in Nablus or Hebron.

Eshkol's successor, Golda Meir, was chosen to be prime minister precisely because she wholeheartedly embraced the nationalist perspective of the Labour Zionists and appealed to history for proof of the legitimacy, morality and exclusivity of the Jewish people's right to the newly enlarged country. Under her leadership, a new wave of religious immigrants from the West came and settled in the Occupied Territories. These settlements created a social layer that had a vested interest in an expansionary policy. It provided a pole of attraction for some of the most reactionary forces, such as Moshe Levinger, the father of the settler movement, and Meir Kahane and his fascistic Kach Party.

Despite their initial reluctance, all the Labour Zionists united behind this expansionist policy. In 1968, Mapai merged with Rafi, a breakaway Mapai faction formed in 1965 by Ben Gurion and Moshe Dayan, and the left Mapam party to form the Labour Party. It was Yigal Allon, a Labour Party minister and former general, who proposed the annexation of the Jordan valley and the Golan Heights, which became official Labour Party policy, and proposed a Jewish settlement in the West Bank town of Hebron: Kiryat Arba. Today, this small settlement of several hundred Jews has become the bastion of Jewish extremism. It was home to Baruch Goldstein, who gunned down 35 Arabs in 1994. This tiny enclave is guarded by an equal number of IDF soldiers.

Despite its democratic pretensions the Labour government had to administer a military occupation of the territories that were seized during the 1967 war—both to defend its colonisation policy on the ground and to subjugate the Palestinians. The occupation became increasingly brutal as the Palestinians resisted.

Golda Meir was one of the old guard, a contemporary of Ben Gurion during the British Mandate years. But another group was emerging to challenge their leadership: Moshe Dayan, Shimon Peres, Yigal Allon, and Yitzhak Rabin. They were a product of the post-independence period and had close connections with the military. The Six-Day War had greatly enhanced their reputations, and particularly Dayan's. As a result, Meir did not enjoy the authority of Ben Gurion and his control over the cabinet. When, in 1974, the premiership passed to Rabin, who had been chief of staff in 1967, it signified the end of the old guard and the beginning of a new political leadership.

But despite the fact that these new leaders were former military officers, they were not to enjoy the same harmonious relationship with the IDF. The military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza led to increasing

conflicts and divisions within the IDF that became more pronounced after Likud came to power in 1977, and the invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

More fundamentally, the end of the long economic boom that followed World War Two, the mounting costs of the occupation and the resultant budget and trade deficits precluded social policies to alleviate the worsening plight of Israel's poor. Their conditions were exacerbated by the pool of cheap labour in the Occupied Territories that had now become available to Israeli employers. The flow of Jewish immigration dried up in the early 1970s, as the boom ended. Indeed migration flows reversed as Israeli professionals left for higher-paid jobs in the West. By 1989, more than half a million Israelis were living in the US and Europe. As a result, Israel turned increasingly to poorly paid Arab labour from the Occupied Territories. By 1975, one quarter of workers from the West Bank and Gaza were employed in Israel, most notably in the construction and agricultural sectors.

Growing social hardship also affected the Israeli Arabs. Many abandoned their support for the Labour party in droves and joined the Stalinist *Hadash* party. Herut, primarily an extreme right wing party that appealed to and was led by Jews from Eastern Europe, also grew. In the years that followed the 1967 war, Herut transformed itself into the Likud party, intransigently opposing any territorial compromise with the Arabs. Likud, in an attempt to form a mass rightwing party, made a conscious effort to whip up and manipulate the divisions between the poor and more prosperous Israelis that corresponded, to some extent, with their origins in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe, respectively.

By 1977, the Labour Party had lost its political *raison d'être*. The social forces set in motion by the June 1967 war combined to bring down the Labour Zionists, end the monopoly of power they had enjoyed for decades, and pave the way for a rightward lurch in Israeli politics, increasing social instability.

The Oslo Accord becomes Labour's swansong

After being unceremoniously kicked out of office in 1977, Labour mounted no opposition to Likud's murderous expansionist policy in Lebanon and served in national unity governments under Likud between 1984-90. It did not take over the reins of power again and form its own coalition government until 1992, when Yitzhak Rabin came to power with a pledge to reach an accommodation with the Palestinians within a year.

With the help of "Peace Now", an organisation of liberal Zionists who opposed Israel's expansionist policies for both humanitarian and pragmatic reasons, Labour rebranded itself as the party of peace. However, this did not represent any fundamental break with Zionism. Rather, it offered the most rational solution to the conflict from the perspective of Israel's national interests. In the end, however, the "peace process" set in motion by the 1993 Oslo Accords was to be Labour's swansong.

Peace Now was launched in the late 1970s. It gave voice to genuine concerns felt by many ordinary Israelis about the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Israel's settler policy, the war in the Lebanon, and Sharon's role in the massacre of 1,000 Palestinians at the Sabra and Chatilla refugee camps.

It protested at the bombing of Lebanon, the establishment of Zionist settlements in the Occupied Territories and the growing violation of human rights in these territories, such as administrative detention without trial, the imposition of collective punishments and the demolition of homes of suspects even before a trial. It supported the right of the Palestinian people to a "national existence". In 1988, during the first *intifada*, the spontaneous uprising of the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, Arafat and the PLO recognised Israel and renounced terrorism as a means of achieving a Palestinian state. Peace Now immediately called upon Israel to "talk peace with the PLO" and agree to the repartition of Palestine into sovereign Jewish and Palestinian states.

Like all single-issue movements, Peace Now brought together people with quite different political backgrounds and perspectives. Although it

reflected the growing sentiment for peace among ordinary Israelis, it rejected a historical or class-based analysis of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. It was therefore unable to articulate a political programme that expressed the legitimate aspirations of both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

The peace movements' starting point was not the social, economic and political aspirations of the Palestinians, but the needs of the Zionist state. It regarded the surrender of the Occupied Territories and establishment of a Palestinian state as the best means of ensuring the stability and development of the state of Israel. In this way, the Zionist state would be able to maintain its Jewish majority, while a Palestinian state under Arafat and the PLO was preferable to the rule of the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas.

A Palestinian state would be separate from but contained by Israel. In effect, Arafat and the Palestinian Authority would take over Israel's role as the occupying power in controlling the Palestinian masses. This necessarily precluded any possibility of democracy for the Palestinians. Such proposals were a pragmatic appeal to the Israeli ruling class to make concessions that were in the longer term interests of the Zionist state, i.e., to return most of the land taken in 1967, with the exception of East Jerusalem.

In the aftermath of the *intifada*, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990-91 that brought almost a million Russian immigrants to Israel, and the Gulf War, this appeal began to get a hearing in a layer of the Israeli ruling elite. Leading Israelis became convinced of the need to reach some sort of accommodation with Yasser Arafat, the PLO, and Israel's Arab neighbours. In 1991, the Israeli government agreed to go to the UN-sponsored peace talks in Madrid. A Labour Party coalition headed by Yitzhak Rabin and including Peace Now activists in the Meretz party won the 1992 election. It seemed as though the long Arab-Israeli conflict was finally coming to an end.

The underlying cause for the Labour Party's adoption of the Peace Now programme was a sea change affecting the Israeli economy. The policies of privatisation, economic liberalisation and drastic devaluation espoused by the Likud government after 1985 had devastated much of Israel's traditional enterprises. Israel was increasingly integrated into the international economy. Foreign institutional investors bought up an increasing proportion of companies quoted on the Tel Aviv stock market, while many of Israel's leading high-tech firms began to have their shares listed on the New York Stock Exchange and to operate outside Israel.

These measures also changed the social composition of Israel's business circles. The shift towards globalisation upset the old equilibrium that had existed between big business and the military establishment, in favour of a new elite based on Israel's high-tech sector and pharmaceuticals. Peace with Israel's Arab neighbours promised more new markets than Israel's garrison state could ever deliver. Achieving a wider Middle East settlement and access to the markets that would make Israel a regional economic power meant reaching some sort of arrangement with Arafat and the Palestinians, if not a full withdrawal from the Occupied Territories and Jerusalem as demanded by international conventions and UN resolutions.

As Shimon Peres explained in a newspaper interview in 1992 reported by the *Alternative Information Center* (May 2000), "All the world is organised like a house with two floors: in the basement the regional agreements. And on the top floor: multinational groups of companies". In other words, "We do not want a peace between nations. We want a peace between markets", he continued.

But such a "peace", famously initiated on the White House lawn in September 1993, could never be more than a chimera. It was destined to fail because it ignored the very social forces and processes that the strivings for a "Greater Israel" had given rise to.

Within Israel's fractured political system, small political parties were

able to take advantage of their position as king-makers, to extract enormous financial concessions that buttressed their own social base. They had no interest in seeing a peace agreement signed, especially as many of their own supporters were being adversely affected by the relocation of industries to the West Bank, Jordan and Egypt.

Moreover, the negotiations were continually frustrated by the need to placate the right wing Zionists for whom any surrender of the settlements was an anathema. Jewish settlements continued to be established on the West Bank and in Gaza, with a system of roads built to link them, but which also divided the Palestinian towns and villages from each other.

But these measures were not enough to placate the Israeli right, who wanted an end to the peace talks.

Right wing religious nationalists denounced Prime Minister Rabin as a traitor at an angry demonstration in Jerusalem in October 1995. One month later, a religious zealot assassinated Rabin, in an attempt to bring the talks to an end.

Rabin's assassination achieved its political objective: It produced further concessions from the Labour government, now headed by Shimon Peres, and provoked a major political crisis that brought Benjamin Netanyahu to power at the head of a Likud government in 1996. As political heirs to Jabotinsky and the Revisionists, Likud was opposed to the surrender of Greater Israel, and under Netanyahu the peace talks came to a virtual standstill.

However, the majority of Israelis were still anxious for a peaceful resolution to the conflict with the Palestinians and an end to the occupation of Lebanon. In 1999, after three years of political scandals and economic problems, they voted in a new prime minister: Ehud Barak, Israel's most decorated general and the leader of a new Labour coalition party, One Israel, was given a mandate to reach an agreement with the Palestinians.

Under the country's fractured political system, Israelis vote directly for a prime minister and via a system of proportional representation for a government. Thus Barak, a former chief of staff who famously scorned politicians and had no political experience, found himself at the head of a minority government. Spurning an alliance with the Arab Israeli and trade union deputies, he formed a coalition with Labour's Zionist and religious opponents to whom he soon became beholden.

He tried to breathe new life into the faltering peace talks, but failed, and was unable to appease the extreme nationalists. It proved, in the final analysis, impossible to make any concessions to the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians within the context of the defence of an Israeli state based upon religious exclusivity. Barak's fractious coalition dissolved, as he struggled to reach an agreement with the Palestinians.

The limited autonomy granted to the Palestinians under the 1993 Oslo Accords had brought them only economic deprivation, social misery and political oppression, while a small clique around Arafat prospered. Nothing that the Israelis could or would offer brought any prospect of alleviating their plight. It was these social tensions that sparked the uprising that began last September when Barak allowed Sharon to go to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem escorted by the armed forces, in order to demonstrate his refusal to surrender control of the holy places—one of the key issues in the peace talks.

Barak had evidently calculated that he could not stop Sharon's visit without precipitating an internal crisis and possibly even civil war. He gambled on Arafat's ability to suppress the inevitable resistance on the part of the Palestinians and lost. To forestall a fratricidal war between the Jews meant to go to war against the Palestinians.

A new perspective and leadership needed

After a brief and unconvincing makeover as the party of peace, the Labour Zionists' perspective is in tatters. The fact they have now thrown in their lot with Likud expresses the inexorable logic of the nationalist programme that they embraced, albeit employing certain socialist

phraseology, in the early days of the twentieth century.

This historical review of the origins of the Zionist movement and the development of the Israeli state shows that the Labour Zionists and the right wing Revisionists/Likud shared the objective of establishing a Jewish state on Palestinian land. At key points in the history of Zionism, both their methods and aims became identical, and they joined forces.

Zionism has always relied upon Great Power support, be it British, French or more recently American. Consequently, it has played a perfidious role in world politics. Neither the Revisionists nor the Labour Zionists were able to establish a Jewish state upon a democratic and egalitarian basis. The Revisionists never had any intention of creating such a state. And the Labour Zionists could not do so, because it is impossible for a state to ensure social justice and equality for all its own citizens if it is premised upon ethnic cleansing, wars and military occupation.

The Zionist utopia of a national state in which the Jews of the world could find liberty, equality and social justice has been realised in the form of a capitalist entity created through the dispossession of another people. It has been maintained through brutal wars and repression beyond Israel's borders, and mounting social inequality at home. As the murderous actions of the extreme right-wing zealots cultivated by the Zionist state have shown, there is a real danger that Israel will itself reproduce the very conditions of dictatorship and civil war from which earlier generations of European Jews had fled.

The political dead-end of Labour Zionism is an expression of the failure of all movements based on the perspective of nationalism to resolve any of the fundamental social questions confronting the mass of working people. This is no less true for the Arab countries, where for their own self-preservation the ruling elites have manipulated nationalist sentiments and the bitter resentment of Israel in order to divert the social struggles of the working class. The history of the twentieth century is littered with heroic struggles to achieve social emancipation through nationhood that have failed. Zionism represents one such terrible experiment.

While Sharon received a large majority of the votes cast in the ballot for Prime Minister, this does not represent an endorsement of his perspective by ordinary Israelis. Sharon's vote was no higher than that received in the May 1999 election by the then Likud leader Netanyahu, whom Barak defeated so decisively. Sharon only won because of massive abstentions by both Israeli Jews and Arabs. They could see no way forward out of the impasse.

No faction of the Labour Party, trade unions or Peace Now has made a political appraisal of Zionism, considered whose interests it has served and rejected it. Indeed, few have even asked the basic question: how has it come to this? It is vital that such an evaluation is made.

The only way out of the current impasse is the development of a political movement to unite Arab and Jewish workers and intellectuals in a struggle against the ruling elite throughout the Middle East, and for the building of a socialist society. In this way, the historic injustices suffered by the Palestinian workers and peasants can be redressed, and the twin evils of oppression and war can be ended, which have exacted such a terrible price throughout this region. The creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East would remove the artificial borders imposed through various imperialist intrigues—and which presently divide the peoples and economies of the region—enabling its valuable resources to be used to fulfil the social, economic and political aspirations of all the region's peoples.

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See Also:

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Part 1—The origins and class character of political Zionism

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