

Terrorism and the origins of Israel—Part 2

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This is the conclusion of a two-part series. Part one was posted on June 21.

The Irgun

In contrast to the Stern/Lehi group, the Irgun only took up the armed struggle against the British when the defeat of Germany became imminent. At the end of 1942, Menachem Begin returned to Palestine after his release from a Soviet labour camp in Poland. He took over as the military commander of the Irgun and led the armed struggle—the Revolt—to get rid of the British.

But the Irgun's activities had nothing in common with a revolutionary struggle to overthrow imperialism in the region. They were also targeted against the Arabs. One of its pamphlets read, "We must fight the Arabs in order to subjugate them and weaken their demands. We must take them off the arena as a political factor. This struggle against the Arabs will encourage the diaspora and consolidate it. It will draw the attention of the nations of the world, which will be compelled to honour the people which struggles with its arms. And an ally will be found which will support the peoples' army in its struggle."

Begin, unlike the Stern group and Lehi, always rejected the label "terrorism", claiming that the Irgun was an army fighting a war against another army. Using the same methods as these two terrorist groups, the Irgun's most well known act against the British was the blowing up of the King David Hotel, the British military headquarters in Jerusalem in July 1946.

Lehi's assassination of Lord Moyne in 1944—a close friend of Churchill with whom Weizman and Ben Gurion, the Labour Zionist leaders, had good relations—led them to crack down on both Lehi and the Irgun. "Every organised group must spew them out... refuge and shelter must be stringently denied these wild men... It is our hearts—not the heart of Britain—that the terrorist iron has entered. Our hands then, no others, must pluck it out." [Cited by Colin Shindler in *The Land Beyond Promise: Israel, Likud and the Zionist Dream.*]

The Zionist parties unite

It was the election of a Labour government in July 1945 under Clement Attlee, anxious to maintain control over the Middle East's oil resources that was to lead instead to a troubled reconciliation between the Labour Zionists and the terrorist groups.

These groups had been for years the bitterest of political rivals. They had not even fought together in the 1943 Warsaw ghetto uprising. What united them at this time was firstly the reversal by Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin of the Labour party's previous support for the establishment of a Jewish state. He now rejected the notion of two states—one for the Jews and one for the

Arabs—and favoured an Arab stooge regime along the lines of those in Transjordan, Egypt and Iraq, where Jews would be guaranteed minority rights.

Secondly, and for similar reasons, the Labour government also opposed Jewish immigration to Palestine. Under conditions where neither Britain nor the US were prepared to open their doors to the hundreds of thousands of survivors of the Holocaust, the Jews would have had to remain in the displaced persons camp and in the countries of their persecution.

In November 1945, the Haganah (the Labour Zionists' military wing and by far the largest of the three military groups), the Irgun and Lehi signed an agreement to establish the United Resistance Movement to drive the British out of Palestine. This was to last for less than a year—until the King David Hotel bombing—when Ben Gurion terminated the agreement calling the Irgun "the enemy of the Jewish people". Despite this, the scale of the terrorist attacks increased tenfold.

Faced with increasing hostility and disruption in Palestine and rejection by both Arabs and Jews of a bi-national state, Britain referred the conflict to the United Nations, fully expecting the UN to hand Palestine back to Britain to deal with. But Britain's hopes of resolving the conflict in Palestine on its own terms were to be thwarted. The major powers, including the US and the Soviet Union, actively supported the establishment of a Jewish state for their own purposes: they saw it as a way of blocking Britain's position in the Middle East. This, plus the worldwide sympathy that the catastrophe that had befallen European Jewry evoked, led the UN in November 1947 to vote for the partition of Palestine. In May 1948, the British withdrew from Palestine and the Zionists immediately declared independence and the establishment of Israel. War broke out between Israel and the Palestinians, led by the Arab feudalists, for control of the land.

The Revisionist groups used all the training and methods they had developed and used against the British to terrorise and intimidate the Palestinians. The planned terrorist activities, carried out by the Irgun and Lehi, and sanctioned by the Labour Zionists, were to play a major role in driving the Palestinians from their homes. The massacre at Deir Yassin, where more than 200 men, women and children were slaughtered, is only the best-known example. Ben Gurion himself encouraged the Haganah, largely under the control of the Histadrut/Mapai Party and forerunner of the Israeli Defence Forces, to expel the Palestinians from their homes. The expulsion of the Palestinians, who were destined to become refugees in neighbouring countries and dispersed throughout the world, and the takeover of their land were the

essential prerequisites for the founding of the state of Israel.

From underground terrorist groups to the political mainstream

Immediately after the end of the war, Menachem Begin, leader of the Irgun, transformed the Irgun into a political party, Herut, in opposition to the official Revisionists. Vehemently opposed to any concessions to the Arabs and an agreement with Abdullah that had absorbed the West Bank into his kingdom of Transjordan, now renamed Jordan, Begin glorified the Irgun's underground terrorism and its role in driving out the British. His inflammatory language and style were more than a little reminiscent of the nationalist ethos of Eastern Europe and Pilsudski's military nationalism in Poland during the 1930s.

Committed to the recovery of Palestine, he and the Herut party denounced those who opposed such a perspective as the enemies of the Jewish people. Coming after the sinking of the *Altalena*, the Irgun arms ship, at the hands of the Labour Zionists and in which several members of the Irgun were killed, it was a virtual declaration of civil war against Ben Gurion. Not a few thought that the Herut might mount a putsch.

In the first elections, where nearly all the political parties claimed some affiliation to socialism, Begin's Herut party was the largest non-socialist party, winning 11 percent of the vote and 14 out of the 120-member Knesset. The official Revisionists won no seats at all. Begin assumed the mantle of Revisionism and became the leader of the right-wing opposition to the Labour Zionists.

In the early years of the Zionist state, the Herut vote declined and Begin was to spend the next 30 years in the political wilderness, transforming and expanding the Herut party into the *Gahal* in 1965. He briefly joined the war coalition set up prior to the June 1967 war against the Arabs that took advantage of the situation provoked by the reckless opportunism of Nasser, the Egyptian leader, to significantly expand Israel's borders.

The conquest of the West Bank and Gaza breathed new life into the far-right forces, leading to the formation of the Likud party in 1973, which went on to win the largest number of seats in the 1977 elections. The ultra-nationalist right wing political force, which had always been on the fringe, had now become the mainstream, displacing the old political establishment.

While the *Lehi* went on to form the *Moledet* party, an even more nationalist outfit than Likud, whose noxious policies include ethnic cleansing: the removal of the Palestinians from the territories occupied by Israel.

Shamir himself retired from active politics in the 1940s. When Ben Gurion lifted the ban on *Lehi* members taking up official positions, Isser Harel, the Mossad chief, immediately recruited Shamir and others. It was Shamir who planned the letter-bomb campaign against German scientists working for Nasser's Egypt in the 1960s that brought him into conflict with Shimon Peres, then deputy Minister of Defence. He joined the Herut party as the only party that had not renounced the idea of an Israel that extended "from the Nile to the Euphrates" in 1970. Shamir cultivated the links with the anti-socialist minded Russian Jews that were seeking to leave the Soviet Union and brought them into the Likud party. He became prime minister in 1983 when Begin suddenly resigned—signifying an even further shift to the right in Israeli

politics.

It is the political heirs of terrorists like Stern, Begin and Shamir that now form Israel's political establishment and the Bush administration's chief ally in the region. They are now able to put into practice the policies that their antecedents could only dream of. Their history also shows why Israeli politics have always been so fractious. The civil war that is never far beneath the surface has long standing basis.

While the establishment of the state of Israel was hailed at the time as a new and progressive entity dedicated to building a democratic and egalitarian society for the most cruelly oppressed people of Europe, the history of the origins and development of the Zionist state has shown that that was always a chimera. It is impossible to build a socially progressive society on the basis of a nationalist perspective. The Zionist perspective, be it the Labour Zionists or its ultra-reactionary variant, has played a poisonous role in strengthening imperialism and chauvinism, bolstering the power of the national bourgeoisie on the one hand and dividing the working class and rural poor on the other.

It is noteworthy that the publication of the British intelligence files attracted little attention from the press. Apart from reporting the contents, no political commentators sought to draw attention to either the methods used to spawn the Zionist state or the Israeli government's political roots.

Within Israel itself, the liberal paper *Ha'aretz* merely carried a Reuters report under the headline "Document: UK feared influx of Zionist terrorists in post-WWII era", as though Zionist terrorism was some aberration rather than an integral part of their perspective and programme. The article itself focused on the anti-Jewish measures put in place by the British authorities to combat Zionist terrorism. While explaining that the files were written in the aftermath of the bombing of the King David Hotel bombing, the article remained silent on the Irgun and Menachem Begin's role in the bombing—even though it went on to note that Begin received a Nobel Peace Prize for his peace agreement with Egypt. Neither did it mention the plans to assassinate the foreign secretary and leading British political figures.

Such professional and political honesty would only have drawn attention to the terrorist origins and role of the Zionist political establishment on whom the political gangsters in the Bush administration use as a pawn to divide and rule the Middle East.

Concluded



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