

The Israeli state and the ultra-right settler movement

Part one

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This is the first in a four-part series.

The campaign by the ultra-nationalist settler movement against the planned withdrawal from Gaza has again demonstrated the extraordinary and disproportionate political influence of these extreme right-wing forces in Israel.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to "disengage" from Gaza and pull out the settlements housing just 8,000 Israelis is a tactical retreat in the face of the escalating cost of maintaining the settlements. More fundamentally, it is aimed at securing Washington's consent for the annexation of vast swathes of the West Bank that Israel has occupied illegally for nearly four decades. In Gaza itself, Israel will remain the occupying power, retaining control of Gaza's borders, its seaport, airport and water supply, and will reserve the right to invade whenever it sees fit.

Despite this, members of Sharon's own cabinet, including the finance minister and former prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who resigned in protest, as well as the ultra-nationalist and religious parties, are opposed to the disengagement. Israel's extreme right wing regards Sharon's decision to pull out from any part of the biblical land of Israel as nothing short of treason.

The settlers have staged sit-down protests, poured oil and nails onto the roads, and set tyres alight to block roads in Israel, causing traffic jams for miles. They have beaten, stoned and shot Palestinians in an effort to humiliate them and provoke them into violent retaliation. Sharon has blamed such incidents on the banned Kach movement and ordered a crackdown on the extremists.

Nine soldiers refused to obey orders and prevent Israelis from entering the Gaza Strip. Two went into hiding in a Gaza settlement, while a 10th soldier was tried and sentenced to 21 days in prison. The army disbanded the platoon in an attempt to head off mutiny by right-wing troops refusing to enforce the pullout.

This month, a 19-year-old conscript soldier, who had refused to implement the pullout and deserted the army two months ago, shot and killed 4 Arab Israelis and wounded at least 12 others. Eden Nathan Zaada boarded a bus, where he opened fire with an M-16 rifle, shooting the bus driver and passengers before turning on people on the street. He carried on shooting until he ran out of bullets. The gunman said, "Tell the prime minister this is to stop the disengagement. I will carry out a massacre here." Enraged bystanders boarded the bus and beat him to death.

Prior to this incident, there were fears that religious fanatics would bomb the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, the third-holiest site in the Muslim world. Three months ago, Zaada was questioned by the police, who suspected him of planning to gain entry into the mosque.

President Moshe Katsav has warned that right-wing nationalists could attempt to assassinate Sharon. He said the atmosphere was very similar to that during the run-up to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination in November 1995 by a religious fanatic opposed to any peace deal with the Palestinians. Cabinet ministers have been fitted for flak jackets.

That the very social forces Sharon cultivated for so long have, like a Frankenstein monster, turned against him is an indication of the depths of the political and social crisis facing the Zionist state. To understand why this situation has emerged, it is necessary to review the basis upon which Israel was founded and the origins and growth of these right-wing layers.

The founding of Israel and the political conceptions of the Zionist movement

The establishment of the state of Israel was bound up with the defeats of the European working class in the 1920s and 1930s and the spread of fascism, which led to the eruption of the second world imperialist war in a quarter century. In the course of World War II, more than half of European Jewry was exterminated.

Prior to the war, political Zionism held little appeal for Jews, many of who were closely identified with the socialist movement. Within Palestine itself, a socialist movement fought to unite Arabs and Jews and create a democratic and secular Palestinian state that would reorganise society on socialist lines.

Several factors led to the creation of the Zionist state in 1948. There was an outpouring of sympathy on the part of ordinary people for the plight of the Jews, hundreds of thousands of whom remained in displaced persons camps in Europe several years after the end of the war. The US, the Soviet Union and France cynically manipulated public opinion to rally the support of their client states in a vote of the United Nations General Assembly to

establish a Jewish state on part of Mandate Palestine. These powers supported the creation of Israel largely as a means of dislodging Britain from the oil-rich Middle East in furtherance of their own geopolitical interests.

The Zionist movement—a minority within Mandate Palestine—had long been bitterly divided about the boundaries of such a state, the means by which statehood was to be achieved, and what to do about the hundred of thousands of Arabs who lived in Palestine.

The Labour Zionists under the leadership of David Ben Gurion took a pragmatic approach in relation to the size of the Zionist state: establish a Jewish state, however small, and adjust the boundaries later. Ben Gurion, who became Israel's first prime minister, also understood that the viability of such a state, surrounded by enemies and carved out of a small portion of what was once the Syrian province of the Ottoman Empire, depended upon the support of a powerful backer.

Vladimir Jabotinsky was the founder of the Jewish Legion and leader of the Revisionists, who called for a more ruthless and expansionist policy. In 1923, he had written an article entitled "The Iron Wall." He declared, "Zionist colonisation must be either terminated or carried out against the wishes of the native population. This colonisation can, therefore, be continued and make progress only under the protection of a power independent of the native population—an iron wall, which will be in a position to resist the pressure of the native population. This in toto is our policy towards the Arabs.... A voluntary reconciliation with the Arabs is out of the question either now or in the near future."

Jabotinsky became increasingly hostile to what he perceived as Zionist acquiescence to Britain's disregard for its obligations to the Jews. He demanded that Transjordan be included in the Jewish National Home in Palestine. He poured scorn on the Labour Zionists who eschewed the restoration of their own armed forces, which had been disbanded at the end of World War I.

"If you wish to colonise a land in which people are already living, you must provide a garrison for the land, or find some 'rich man' or benefactor who will provide a garrison on your behalf. Or else—or else, give up your colonisation, for without an armed force which will render physically impossible any attempt to destroy or prevent this colonisation, colonisation is impossible, not 'difficult,' not 'dangerous,' but IMPOSSIBLE!..."

"Zionism is a colonising adventure and therefore it stands or falls by the question of armed force. It is important...to speak Hebrew, but unfortunately it is even more important to be able to shoot—or else I am through with playing at colonisation."

Two years later, Jabotinsky joined the Revisionist party, which was to become the Zionist brownshirts, more and more closely mimicking the militarism of Mussolini and Hitler, although Jabotinsky naturally never referred to himself as a fascist. He was quite clear about his objectives. "We want a Jewish empire," he told a journalist in 1935.

The Revisionists and its armed wing, the Irgun, led by Menachem Begin, and later the Stern Gang, among whose leaders was another future prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, waged a campaign of terror aimed at driving out the British and establishing a Jewish state on the entire land of Biblical Palestine, including Transjordan. With the Jews a minority in Palestine, such

a state would necessarily mean expelling the Arab population to ensure its Jewish character.

The war between Israel and its Arab neighbours that followed the United Nations' partition of Palestine—Israel's so-called War of Independence—led to the flight or expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Arabs and their transformation into refugees. The Revisionists' terrorist activities in furtherance of their policy of ethnic cleansing, or population "transfer," carried out by the Irgun and the Stern gang and sanctioned by the Labour Zionists, played a major role in driving the Palestinians from their homes.

But so bitter were the divisions between the Revisionists and Labour Zionists that all-out civil war nearly broke out only days after the end of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war over whether to try to capture East Jerusalem. It was only averted when the right-wing forces backed down after the sinking of the *Altalena*, laden with arms to continue the war, by the Labour government's forces.

Surrounded by hostile neighbours, Israel was from its inception a garrison state and placed its Arab citizens under military law. However, for the next 20 years, the Labour Zionists were to dominate political life in Israel and the extreme right-wing forces, like their counterparts elsewhere, were to remain in the political wilderness until the late 1970s.

While initially the Labour Zionists presented Israel as a David fighting an Arab Goliath and clothed themselves in socialist colours, these myths were soon punctured.

When France and Britain invaded Egypt in 1956 in response to Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal, Israeli troops seized the Sinai desert. But their actions conflicted with US interests in the oil-rich region. The Eisenhower administration refused to accept the former colonial powers' attempts to regain control of the Canal and maintain their influence in the Middle East, and ordered Britain, France and Israel to pull out.

By 1967, the situation had changed. While the US had largely seen off Britain's and France's influence in the region, it now faced the growing radicalisation of the Arab masses and Moscow's growing interest and influence in the region, marked especially by Egypt's turn to the Soviet Union for development loans and military aid.

Starting with President Kennedy's sale of Hawk missiles to Israel in 1963, the US began to view Israel, alongside Saudi Arabia and Iran, as a means of promoting its own interests. While the relationship has not always been a smooth one, it was from this point that US aid began to increase its aid to Israel to the \$3 billion a year that it is today.

To be continued



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