

The Israeli state and the ultra-right settler movement

Part two

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This is the second article in a four-part series. Part one was published on August 15.

When Nasser provoked a confrontation with Israel in 1967, the US—fully aware of the latter’s superior forces—sanctioned Israel’s long-planned invasion of Egypt, Syria and Jordan in the Six Day War of June 1967.

The June war, prosecuted by a Labour-led National Unity government that included, for the first time since the establishment of the Zionist state, members of the Revisionist movement, by then renamed the Herut party, marked a turning point in Israel’s history.

It created a new generation of Palestinian refugees—some becoming refugees a second time—and extended Israeli control over all of Mandate Palestine. Israel became the major military power in the Middle East. It initiated the policy of Greater Israel, and spawned a new social layer committed to and even dependent on an expansionary policy.

Within the Labour Party and its political partners, this was expressed in the rise of a new and more overtly imperialist and racist layer of former military commanders such as Yitzhak Rabin, Moshe Dayan, Yigal Allon and Ariel Sharon.

The National Unity government established settlements in the newly occupied territories within weeks of the war, in defiance of international conventions, ostensibly for security reasons. Yigal Allon, a Labour Party minister and former general, proposed the annexation of the Jordan valley and the Golan Heights—a proposal that was to later become official Labour Party policy. He proposed a Jewish settlement near Hebron, Kiryat Arba, although this was not implemented until it was set in motion a decade later by right-wing settler forces. Today, this town has become the bastion of Jewish extremism.

All parties within the coalition supported this policy. After all, 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 from living in Nablus or Hebron.

Golda Meir became prime minister in 1970 because she wholeheartedly embraced the nationalist perspective of the Labour Zionists and appealed to history as proof of the legitimacy, morality and exclusivity of the Jewish people’s right to the newly enlarged country.

But the Jewish settlements, surrounded by a hostile Arab population, were not attractive to the majority of Israelis. Therefore, under Meir’s leadership, a new wave of religious immigrants, mainly from the United States, was encouraged to come and settle in the Occupied

Territories.

Thus, the settlements were to create a small but politically influential social layer that had the most direct vested interest in the expansionary policy of the dominant layers of the Israeli bourgeoisie. They provided a pole of attraction for some of the most reactionary forces, without whom the Labour Zionists could not have established these outposts within the Arab territories.

The origins and character of the new right-wing forces

Some religious right-wing groups had greeted Israel’s surprise (to all but the Israeli military establishment and the CIA) victory in 1967 as nothing short of a miracle. It was the “beginning of Redemption” that offered an opportunity to realise the Biblical vision of the “whole land of Israel” of Judea and Samaria.

They spawned the new theology of the “Land of Israel,” a messianic interpretation of the Zionist state that meant that the settlement of the West Bank was the most important part of a redemption process. It was also fundamentalist: the scriptures provided the basis for understanding reality and determining the mode of behaviour for their members and the Jewish state.

In this, it should be noted, they mirrored their counterparts in the Muslim Brotherhood. Although secular Zionists had always encouraged the return of the Jews to Palestine, they had done so in nationalist terms—arguing that the Jews constituted a nation. For these religious groups, the “return” was bound up with the religious duty to settle the land and with the resurgence of Jewish religious beliefs.

While their forces were small, from the very first the settlers and ultra-religious groups played an important role in shifting Israeli politics to the right. In part, at least, this was because they found a key ally: General Ariel Sharon.

While Sharon had come from a Labour Zionist background, his ruthlessness, opportunism and unpredictability gave him a reputation as a loose cannon. After resigning from the army in 1973, he was elected to the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, for the Liberal party, one of the forerunners of the Likud Party. Within a year, he had resigned his seat in order to resume his military career. He briefly served Labour Prime Minister Rabin as special security advisor before establishing his own party and then, in 1977, dissolving it into Likud.

For Sharon, a secular Jew and military man, the expansion of the

Zionist state and the settlements were bound up with security and defensible borders. Even before he resigned from the army in 1973 to take up a political career, Sharon formed an alliance with the religious movement, which he reasoned would provide the necessary forces for the new Jewish settlements. For the religious settlers, Sharon provided the military justification and later the authority, when he became minister of agriculture, to seize land in the Occupied Territories.

The military needs of the political Zionists coincided with those of the religious Zionists. Indeed, whenever the legality of Israel's settlements and land confiscations faced a challenge in Israel's High Court, the government could always be relied upon to back the settlements by justifying them in terms of security.

But the pace of settlement development did not match the right wing's expectations. When the terms of the armistice with Egypt after the October 1973 war, which damaged Israel's geopolitical stature, forced Israel to make the first territorial concessions in the Sinai Peninsula, the settlers turned to the National Religious Party, one of the components of the 1967 National Unity government, to oppose them. Its failure to do so provided a further impetus for the political development of the settler movement.

In 1974, some of these forces, which constituted a faction within the National Religious Party, formed the Gush Emunim, the Block of the Faithful, under the leadership of a religious zealot, Rabbi Moshe Levinger. Gush Emunim was an extra-parliamentary pressure group unaffiliated with any political party. Levinger became the father of the settler movement.

Even further to the right was Rabbi Meir Kahane, leader of the US Jewish Defence League (JDL), an extremist vigilante movement with the stated aim of defending Jewish neighbourhoods in New York City against anti-Semitism and street crime. Later, the JDL campaigned stridently against the repression of Soviet Jewry and the refusal of the Stalinist bureaucracy to let the Jews emigrate to Israel, harassing Russian artists and demonstrating, often violently, outside Russian agencies. The JDL's thuggery, which did not flinch at using guns and bombs, helped force Soviet Jewry up the US political agenda, dovetailing with the Cold War agenda of staunch anti-communists and leading to the 1975 Jackson-Vanick amendment to US trade laws. This provision withheld "most favoured nation status" from countries that restricted Jewish emigration. The bill's principal architect was Richard Perle, who was to become a leading neo-conservative ideologue and ally of the current Bush administration.

As long as the JDL's activities suited Washington's Cold War politics, funding flowed Kahane's way and his penchant for violence was tolerated. But in 1971, after receiving a suspended sentence for the illegal possession of guns, ammunition and explosives and inciting violence, he fled to Israel. By the mid-1970s, the FBI consistently referred to the JDL as a terrorist group.

In Israel, Kahane set about establishing a fascist party, which he called Kach, to claim the inheritance of the Revisionist movement. Kahane used violent provocations to polarise relations between Palestinians and Jews and to create the conditions for expelling the Palestinians not only from the Occupied Territories, but from within Israel itself—where in the late 1970s they constituted 16 percent of the population.

The mission of Gush Emunim, Kach and similar forces was to oppose further territorial concessions and to struggle for the extension of Israeli sovereignty over the Occupied Territories. The land was, they claimed, holy, God-given, inalienably theirs, and thus non-negotiable. Their task was to force the Labour government to establish

as many settlements as possible in the "Land of Israel" and East Jerusalem, including the heavily populated Palestinian areas, and to engineer the "transfer" of the Arab population.

They also took note of a broad-based extra-parliamentary protest movement that arose in the aftermath of the October 1973 war demanding the resignation of the leading government ministers responsible for Israel's lack of preparedness for the war and, coalescing with a broader social movement, calling for widespread political reform. Following a critical report from the Agranat Commission, Prime Minister Golda Meir, Defence Minister Moshe Dayan and Foreign Secretary Abba Eban were forced to resign, to be succeeded by a new generation of Labour leaders: Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres.

Gush Emunim was also active in opposing any agreements with Egypt and Syria. It mounted demonstrations and set up illegal settlements in the West Bank, frequently becoming involved in confrontations with the Israeli army.

Its adherents would settle a site without government permission or contrary to government policy or under false pretences, to force the government to recognise it later as an accomplished fact. For example, after seven unsuccessful attempts in 1974-1975 to establish settlements in the Nablus area, they reached a compromise with the then-Labour minister of defence, Shimon Peres, who allowed them to stay at an army base called Qadum, west of Nablus. Two years later, the base was officially transformed into the settlement of Qedumim.

It was Ariel Sharon who defended the settlers against the military sent in by the Rabin government in 1974. He told an Israeli newspaper that it was an "immoral military command, and it is necessary [for the soldiers] to refuse such orders. I would not have obeyed such orders." For Sharon, it was immoral because it undermined Israel's "security needs," not because it violated religious duties.

By 1977, almost 30 settlements with some 4,500 Israeli inhabitants had been built in the West Bank, mostly in areas earmarked for development under the Allon Plan. A further 50,000 Israelis lived within the newly extended city limits of Jerusalem.

To be continued



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