

# The Israeli state and the right-wing settler movement

## Part three

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*This is the third article in a four-part series. Parts one and two were published on August 15 and 16 respectively.*

The Labour government, despite its democratic pretensions, had to administer a military occupation of the territories 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. Kach's thugs played a crucial role in this.

Within Israel itself, the end of the long postwar boom, soaring inflation, the massive military expenditure—nearly half of the gross domestic product—and the impoverished conditions of the immigrants to Israel from the Middle East and North Africa gave rise to increasing social tensions.

Tensions also heightened between Jewish and Arab Israelis over land and jobs. Firstly, the government's announcement in February 1976 that it would confiscate thousands of acres of land in the West Bank to "develop the Galilee for both its Jewish and Arab inhabitants" provoked a general strike among Arab Israelis and violent confrontations with the army that left six Arab Israelis dead and scores injured, and several dozen policemen wounded. Right-wing student activists and future Likud members of parliament used these events to engineer provocative confrontations and launch their own political careers.

Secondly, there was growing competition for lower-paid jobs as Jewish bosses realised that Arab Israelis as well as Palestinians from the Occupied Territories provided a cheaper alternative to heavily unionised Jewish labour.

In the years that followed the 1967 war, Herut, the political heir to the extreme right-wing Revisionist movement that appealed to and was led by Jews from Eastern Europe, transformed itself through a series of mergers and name changes into Likud, which opposed any territorial compromise with the Arabs. It made a conscious effort to whip up and manipulate the divisions between the poor and more prosperous Israelis that corresponded in some degree to their origins in the Middle East and North Africa, and Europe, respectively.

By 1977, the social forces set in motion by the 1967 war combined to bring down the Labour Zionists, who had ruled Israel for nearly 30 years, and pave the way for Israel's lurch further rightwards and increasing political instability. The expansion of Israel's rule via military conquest required a different type of government.

For the small settler movement, the Likud government's electoral victory was a dream come true. The political heirs of the Revisionist movement had come to power. Led by Menachem Begin, the Irgun terrorist leader infamous for the massacre at Deir Yassin of 250 Palestinians in 1948, Likud had crafted a political line that had fused social resentment towards the privileged Labour elite with economic liberalisation and "free market" reforms, ultra-nationalism and anti-Arab chauvinism.

At the core of this ideology was the pledge to hold on to the Occupied Territories as part of Greater Israel. The Likud government would be instrumental in furthering the growth of the settler movement.

Whereas Labour's policy had largely involved building settlements that encircled the Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, the incoming Likud government sought not only to expand the number of settlements, but also to build them throughout the Occupied Territories, with the intention of making life as miserable as possible for the Arab population so that they would eventually leave.

In September 1977, Ariel Sharon, who had been rewarded for dissolving his own small party and joining Likud with the post of minister for agriculture, unveiled a master plan called "A Vision of Israel at Century's End." He called for the settlement of 2 million Jews in the Occupied Territories by the end of the twentieth century and a new wave of immigration to Israel, particularly from the Soviet Union and the US. He claimed that it was no less valid to create a Jewish majority on the West Bank than it had been for the Zionist pioneers to do so along the Mediterranean coast during the 1920s and 1930s.

Such settlements, he reasoned, would impose a Jewish majority on the West Bank and make it impossible for Israel to relinquish it without expelling hundreds of thousands of Jews and precipitating civil war. In this way, he sought to pre-empt any agreement based upon trading land for peace.

In less than four years, Sharon built 62 new settlements at a cost of more than \$1 billion, completely changing the landscape of the Occupied Territories. Not without reason has he become known as the political godfather of the settlement project.

He also claimed in a newspaper interview in 1973 that he had been "the initiator of the idea of establishing Jewish settlements in the [Gaza] Strip." He explained, "I established Kfar Darom [the first settlement in the Gaza Strip] and I established Netzarim, and encircled their territory with fences."

In its alliance with the settlers, Likud helped build a monster that has not always proved easy to control. The attempt by the Begin government to strike a deal with Egypt at Camp David in 1978 that entailed giving back Sinai and Yamit, a Sinai settlement, and giving autonomy to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza outraged the settler movement. Some right-wing politicians left Likud in disgust and formed the Techiya party. A faction within the Gush Emunim set up the Jewish Underground that espoused vigilante terrorism. It blew up the cars of the mayors of Ramallah and Nablus and threw a hand grenade into a mosque, injuring a dozen Arabs. It even planned to blow up the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

These atrocities and countless other acts of violence went unpunished. Kiryat Arba, near Hebron, was Rabbi Meir Kahane's stronghold and served as a focal point for violence against the Palestinian population.

Having lavishly funded Gush Emunim, which had carried out his expansionist policy, Begin refused to take action against the Zionist terrorists or rein in their activities even though the secret services knew of their plans. Gush leaders, including men later jailed for terrorism, were welcome in Begin's rooms in the Israeli parliament.

Another and much larger Gush Emunim faction played an important role in the radicalisation of the extreme right: the Movement to Halt the Retreat in Sinai. Formed to oppose the Israeli evacuation of northern Sinai required under the Camp David agreement with Egypt, it mobilised about 1,000 activists to prevent the pullout from Yamit and a few cooperative settlements. Although Sinai had no biblical significance whatsoever, they feared that it heralded the beginning of a wider territorial compromise. Several violent confrontations ensued, to no avail. They were forced to withdraw. But they had served a warning that any pullout from the West Bank would mean a much more determined struggle.

The rise of the right-wing forces did not go unopposed. Peace Now was launched shortly after Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977. It was triggered by an open letter to Likud Prime Minister Menachem Begin, signed by 350 reserve officers in the Israeli army, many of whom were highly decorated, opposing the establishment of Zionist settlements in the territories occupied since the 1967 war. They too shared a Zionist standpoint, stating that they preferred a smaller Israel at peace with its neighbours to a Greater Israel at permanent war. Any other policy would create "doubts as to the justice of our cause.... Real security can be achieved only in peace. The real strength of the Israeli army grows out of the citizenry-soldiers' identification with state policy."

Nevertheless, the right wing denounced the signatories as traitors. In response, 40,000 people spontaneously took to the streets to defend them. Peace Now focused on the settlements in the Occupied Territories as the main obstacle to peace. In June 1979, it organised rallies of more than 3,000 people at Elon Moreh, a Gush Emunim settlement near Nablus. Its demonstrations encouraged Palestinian landowners to file a suit in an Israeli court claiming that their land had been seized illegally.

The high court ruled that Elon Moreh must be dismantled. But Army Chief of Staff Rafael Eitan and Agriculture Minister Ariel Sharon fought tooth and nail to get around the ruling. Within six months, the Israeli cabinet announced, in defiance of international conventions, that henceforth any land that had previously belonged to Jordan, or that was unregistered or uncultivated, could be expropriated for settlers. The great West Bank land grab had begun.

In the 1981 election campaign, which Labour was expected to win, Begin and the Likud party accused Labour of corruption and discrimination against the poor Sephardi Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin, stoking long-held grievances. The campaign became violent and led to a narrow Likud victory over Labour, which served to legitimise the violence pioneered by Kach and later Gush Emunim.

### **Right wing sets Likud's political agenda**

Having concluded a peace agreement with Egypt, the way was now clear for the Likud government to further expand the settlements in the Occupied Territories. Likud expropriated thousands of acres of Palestinian land in the West Bank, pushing land in Jewish ownership up from 0.5 percent in 1967 to 40 percent in 1984. Much of this was acquired by corrupt, fraudulent or illegal means, enriching Israeli land dealers and builders around Sharon in the process. The government even sent its salesmen to promote West Bank land sales to rich American Jews. By the beginning of 1984, it had established 112 settlements.

The government also had a free hand to deal with the Palestine

Liberation Organisation, based since 1970 in Lebanon, secure in the knowledge that Egypt would not intervene. Begin advanced the former Stern Gang terrorist Yitzhak Shamir and made Ariel Sharon defence secretary. A murderous all-out war against the PLO and Lebanon was now only a matter of timing. In June 1982, Sharon invaded Lebanon, drove the PLO out of south Lebanon and prepared to besiege Beirut.

The first anti-war protests broke out soon after the war began, when Peace Now reservists received a few days' break. Only Begin's denials that Israel was about to invade Lebanon had prevented anti-war demonstrations prior to the war. Now, 120,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Tel Aviv to protest the war. This was the first time that any Israeli movement had dared to protest a war waged by the Israeli army. Right-wing forces jumped in to defend Begin and Sharon.

Although there were other anti-war movements, the religious right and ultra-nationalists singled out Peace Now for vilification and intimidation because of its position on settlements in the Occupied Territories. When Peace Now sponsored an enormous rally of 400,000 Israelis to oppose the massacre of Palestinians by Christian militia in the Beirut refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla in September 1982, and to demand an inquiry into the role played by Israeli forces under Sharon's command, tensions reached fever pitch. For months after the invasion of Lebanon, Peace Now activists kept up a vigil outside Begin's official residence, demanding withdrawal from Lebanon and holding up placards with the number of Israeli casualties. Many thought that their action had played a part when in 1983 Begin suddenly resigned, a broken man, without any explanation, shortly after the number of Israeli casualties reached 500. Begin was succeeded by Yitzhak Shamir, an even more right-wing former terrorist, as prime minister.

The right-wing activists were infuriated by Peace Now. In 1983, a fanatic assassinated one of Peace Now's leading activists, Emil Greentzweig, during a demonstration, and wounded a score of other demonstrators. Prominent liberal academics, artists and journalists became targets for right-wing violence. When one political pollster reported that the majority of Israelis wanted to trade land for peace, his apartment was torched.

The climate of intimidation and fear was stoked by politicians like Sharon, who branded members of Peace Now "traitors" and "defeatists." Left-wing meetings were attacked and broken up in a style reminiscent of the fascists of the 1920s and 1930s. It was in this fetid atmosphere that Rabbi Kahane was able to mobilise support to lift a 10-year ban and win a seat in Israel's parliament in the 1984 elections.

The event that really exposed the degree to which these extremist forces had penetrated the Israeli political elite was the trial of the Jewish Underground movement that had tried to blow up the Al Aqsa mosque, the third most holy site in the Moslem world. Al Aqsa is built on the site of the second Hebrew temple, and these religious fanatics believed that the catastrophic upheavals that would follow its removal would pave the way for the redemption of Israel and the building of the third temple.

The trial became a cause célèbre of the right wing. Twenty members of parliament from all the right-wing and nationalist parties, including Likud, openly campaigned on behalf of the defendants, who claimed that they had the support of another 25 MPs. Some MPs even appeared as character witnesses for the defence. Rabbis also supported them.

Three of the accused were sentenced to life imprisonment, while the other 12 received sentences of between four months and seven years. So lenient were most of the sentences that supporters of the Underground shouted out, "We've won, we've won."

But the settlement project failed to generate sufficient support within Israel. When the supply of religious settlers dwindled, Gush Emunim planners working with the Likud government decided in 1983 that the only way to judaicise the West Bank was to offer huge public subsidies and attractive housing to Jews then living within the 1967 borders. By the

following year, subsidies to the settlements were four times higher per capita than aid to the Jewish residents of the Upper Galilee. Under the prevailing conditions of hyperinflation and severe economic dislocation, this constituted a major attraction for hard-pressed Israeli families, and created a broader political constituency on the West Bank for the right-wing political parties.

*To be continued*



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