

The Israeli state and the right-wing settler movement

Part four

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18 August 2005

This is the conclusion of a four-part series. Parts one, two and three were published on August 15, 16 and 17 respectively.

The rightward shift in Israeli politics was indicated by the results of the 1984 election. While the right wing as a whole maintained its share of the vote in relation to Labour, Likud lost seats to other right-wing parties, Techiya and Morasha.

The religious zealot Rabbi Meir Kahane and his Kach party were elected to parliament, attracting votes from the poorest sections of Israeli society, including many in the army. The second on his list had been imprisoned for political thuggery, while the third, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, would 10 years later gun down 29 men and children at prayer in a mosque in Hebron.

It was not simply that the Labour Party had failed to offer a progressive alternative to Likud that facilitated the shift to the right in Israel. When Likud proved unable to continue to govern as a result of the fragmentation of the right wing, Labour came to its rescue. Likud-Labour governments of national unity were formed between 1984 and 1992.

While some of the more left-wing Labour bloc of parties refused to join forces with the right wing, the participation of most of the Labour Alignment and its willingness to sanction the creeping annexation and settlement of the Occupied Territories served to legitimise the large number of settlements built between 1977 and 1984, and, through this, the activities of the ultra-nationalist and religious parties.

The right wing both in and out of Likud continued to grow, pushing the government itself ever further to the right. The fracturing of the Zionist political establishment spawned new right-wing formations of which Shas, a religious party orientated towards the Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin, was but one manifestation. In part, the appeal of such parties was in their network of social welfare facilities for the poor and in part because they were not associated with the elitist and corrupt Labour establishment.

The price of establishing a large coalition dependent upon small right-wing parties was the offer of seats round the cabinet table, where each party sought to obtain posts that would provide opportunities for political patronage. Parties and leaders used the coveted interior and housing ministries to build up their own social constituencies.

By 1992, it had become clear to the Israeli financial elite that on every count the government's right-wing policies in pursuit of a Greater Israel had produced a disaster. The army was bogged down in Lebanon. The economy was stagnant. Palestinian workers and youth had been in revolt against their dreadful economic and social conditions since December 1987.

Despite the most brutal reprisals, the army had been unable to put down the uprising. The costs of the war in the Lebanon, the occupation, and the subsidies for the settlements were eroding the very economic and political

foundations of the state. Israel's position as a garrison state, isolated from the regional economy, had led to a sharp economic and social crisis. The Israeli capitalist class had to break out from its economic isolation.

The 1993 Oslo Accords

In 1992, Yitzhak Rabin came to power at the head of a Labour government with a pledge to reach an accommodation with the Palestinians within a year. With the help of Peace Now, the Labour party cast itself as the party of peace, advancing a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians as the most rational solution to the conflict from the perspective of Israel's own national interests.

The 1993 Oslo Agreement between Israel and the PLO epitomised the failure of the PLO's bourgeois nationalist perspective to secure the democratic and social aspirations of the Palestinian masses. It was an agreement imposed by US imperialism on an isolated Palestinian leadership, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Gulf War, and the wholesale accommodation to Washington of the Arab regimes.

In return for a promise of a heavily truncated degree of self-rule and the eventual creation of a Palestinian mini-state on the West Bank and Gaza, the PLO agreed to recognise the state of Israel.

But Israel too had been forced to make compromises. Oslo signalled the recognition by Israel's more perceptive politicians that the end of the Cold War had also weakened Israel's position. In addition to Israel, the US could now rely on a number of Arab regimes, such as Egypt and the Gulf States, to police the region, as the 1991 Gulf War had demonstrated. Moreover, in a globalised economy, Israel needed access to Middle Eastern markets if it was to prosper, and the price for this was to agree to the creation of the Palestinian Authority.

But even such partial concessions contained in the agreement famously initiated on the lawn of the White House in September 1993 were unacceptable to the rightist settlers' movement to which the policy of "Greater Israel" had given rise.

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 therefore had no interest in seeing a peace agreement signed, especially as many of their own supporters were adversely affected by the relocation of industries to the West Bank, Jordan and Egypt in search of a ready supply of cheap labour.

The negotiations were continually frustrated by the need to placate the

right-wing Zionists for whom any surrender of the settlements was an anathema. And Jewish settlements continued to be built at an even faster rate than before in the West Bank and Gaza for mainly US and Russian immigrants. A system of roads was built that divided Palestinian towns and villages from each other while linking the settlements, thereby denying the Palestinian entity any territorial contiguity. But even this was not considered sufficient by the settlers.

The shift in Israeli policy, so necessary for the Israel capitalist class, set off an explosive reaction among the extreme right-wing forces. The March 1994 massacre of 29 Palestinians in Hebron by the US-born fanatic and Kach member Baruch Goldstein was only the first significant expression of their opposition.

In October 1995, the opposition Likud party was silent as right-wing religious nationalists denounced Prime Minister Rabin as a traitor in front of an angry demonstration in Jerusalem. A month later, Rabin was assassinated by a young religious zealot, Yigal Amir. The first killing of an Israeli leader since the founding of the state of Israel was carried out not by an Arab, but by a Jew.

The assassination achieved its political objective. It brought Binyamin Netanyahu's Likud government to power in 1996, and the peace talks came to a virtual standstill.

The majority of Israelis were still anxious for some resolution of the conflict and voted Labour's Ehud Barak in as prime minister in 1999 to reach an agreement with the Palestinians. Barak's Labour coalition tried to breathe new life into the faltering peace talks, but failed. This was in part because he was not offering anything to the Palestinians that met even their elementary requirements. But it was also because even the concessions he was prepared to offer were vetoed by the right-wing and religious parties that were for the first time brought into a Labour-led coalition, including Shas and Yisrael B'Aliya, the Russian immigrant party.

Sharon's visit surrounded by more than 100 heavily armed security forces to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in September 2000 was expressly designed to put an end to any prospect of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza by provoking a violent response by the Palestinians.

Too many people had prospered on the back of the illegal settlement policy lavishly bankrolled and supported by Washington. Fortunes had been made by siphoning government funds earmarked for development projects. And for many poorer people, the facilities provided by the religious parties extracted from the government as the price of their support provided a lifeline. It was, in the final analysis, impossible to make any concessions to the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinians within the context of a religious state that had come into existence through the expulsion of the Palestinians from their homes.

Since coming to power in 2001, Sharon has done everything in his power to forestall any possibility of a Palestinian state. He has used the continuing violence—which he has done so much to provoke with four years of roadblocks, curfews, house demolitions, political assassinations and military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza—to further his plans to expand the Zionist state. In the name of waging a “war on terror,” he has implemented a veritable war of terror that has seen the framework for his Greater Israel come together.

Settlement expansion has greatly accelerated over the last five years, particularly in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where 450,000 Jewish Israelis now live. Sharon's settlement project has been so successful that few believe that the “two states” solution called for under Oslo is a viable option. He has embraced the Labour Party's idea of a separation wall that cuts through the West Bank and will permanently annex the best Palestinian land to Israel. All these measures have been carried out with the full support of the Bush administration.

In return, Sharon has offered the minor concession of pulling out the

settlements from Gaza and four small ones in the West Bank. His is a tactical retreat to facilitate a strategic advance in the spirit of realpolitik. His approach allows him to deal with the question of borders and settlements without negotiations and on terms favourable to Israel. His close confidant, Dov Weisglass, blurted out the truth when he said that the disengagement plan was “actually formaldehyde. It supplies the amount of formaldehyde that is necessary so that there will not be a political process with the Palestinians.”

Sharon himself made it clear at the Sharm el Sheikh summit in February 2005 that “there will not be a direct transition from the disengagement plan to the Road Map” and has said that his plan “constitutes a mortal blow to the Palestinians.”

He is no longer willing to spend an exorbitant amount of money to defend a few isolated settlers in the West Bank and 8,000 settlers surrounded by 1.3 million hostile Palestinians in the Gaza Strip when he can annex, with the consent of the White House, much of the West Bank and thereby reduce the possibility that it will have to be surrendered under any future agreement. Even as he pulls settlers out of 1,700 homes in the Gaza Strip, his government has authorised a far more significant settlement programme by tens of thousands of people in the West Bank, in defiance of the “Road Map” requirement to halt on all housing construction there.

In the process, Sharon has been called a “peacemaker” and received the support of his former opponents on the left and in Peace Now. Last year, the Labour Party stepped in to prevent the Likud-led coalition government's collapse after the resignations and sackings of cabinet ministers and parties opposed to the pullout. All the polls have consistently shown that 70 percent of the Israeli population supports the pullout because they want an end to the long-running conflict with the Palestinians on the basis of some land-for-peace agreement.

None of these considerations count as far as the extreme right is concerned. They too view their old ally as a “peacenik” and therefore a traitor to the Zionist cause. The growth of such a fascistic layer opposed to any concessions to the Palestinians, even when made in return for the much greater prize of US backing for the consolidation of Israel's hold on the West Bank, raises the spectre of civil war in Israel—between religious and secular Jews. As such, it again exposes the myth that the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine at the expense of those already living there would provide a solution to the persecution of the Jews.

It is not only peace with the Palestinians and Israel's Arab neighbours that is incompatible with support for the Zionist state apparatus and the nationalist ideology of Zionism—but peace between the Jews themselves. Social, economic and genuinely democratic progress can be secured only by uniting Jewish and Arab workers on a secular and socialist basis, for the creation of a United Socialist States of the Middle East.

Concluded



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