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ע"ש לאונרד דיוויס
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*The Leonard Davis Institute
for International Relations*



Konrad
-Adenauer-
Stiftung



The Israeli Right and the Peace Process 1992-1996



Ehud Sprinzak



The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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***The Israeli Right and the
Peace Process, 1992-1996***

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INTRODUCTION

Most observers were stunned on 30 May 1996 by Benjamin Netanyahu's victory in Israel's elections. The surprise did not simply involve the preelection public opinion polls, most of which had consistently favored Prime Minister Shimon Peres. It also had to do with the defeat of one of Israel's most effective cabinets ever, a government responsible for the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians, for the peace treaty with Jordan, and for an unprecedented improvement in Israel's international status and legitimacy. The economic fruits of the peace accords and the positive business atmosphere created in Israel between 1993-1996, expressed both in consistent economic growth and in a dramatic decline in unemployment, constituted another reason for the expected Labor victory. But most of all there was the Rabin assassination. The murder of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on 4 November 1995 shocked the nation and the world. Since the Israeli right was held responsible for the intense anti-Rabin campaign conducted for months before the murder, most observers believed that Netanyahu would have to pay the political price. Even the majority of Israel's ultranationalist activists did not believe that the young and inexperienced Likud leader could win.

The purpose of this chapter is to review the politics of Israel's right between 1992-1996 in order to shed light on two events, the Rabin assassination and Netanyahu's electoral victory. The chapter focuses on the internal dynamics of the parliamentary and extraparliamentary right, and on the interaction between the political elites of the right and the Israeli people. I will maintain that the key factor in the radicalization of Israel's right, a process that led to Rabin's assassination, and also in creating the conditions for the Netanyahu victory, was Muslim Palestinian terrorism. Although many factors influenced the evolution of right-wing politics in Israel, Muslim Palestinian terrorism was crucial for four reasons: (1) it dramatically reduced the government's popularity

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after the signing of the Oslo Accords; (2) it created enormous right-wing frustration with the two individuals held “responsible” for the terrorism, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres; (3) it closed the ranks among the different schools of the Israeli right, with the extremists setting the tone; and (4) its resumption in February-March 1996 resuscitated the right and strengthened Netanyahu’s position in the election campaign.

THE ISRAELI RIGHT IN 1992: AN INTERACTIVE MAP

The characteristic feature of the contemporary right, an old school in Israeli politics that was consolidated after the 1967 Six Day War, is not a conservative socioeconomic platform (which it does not possess) but instead an aggressive approach to the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and a maximalist view of the future borders of the state of Israel. Most Israeli right-wingers refer to their camp as the “national camp.” They see themselves as the “loyalists” of the Greater Land of Israel and believe that the state of Israel has both the right and the capability to retain the entire West Bank, occupied in 1967. They are also great supporters of the settlement movement in the occupied territories and regard the settlements as the most meaningful manifestation of present-day Zionism. These Eretz Israel (Land of Israel) loyalists are skeptical about the willingness of the Palestinians to live in peace with Israel and believe, in general, that “territory equals security.” They also maintain that Israel’s military and economic might provides a sound basis for an aggressive foreign policy.

As a political camp, the Israeli right is made up of several political parties—the Likud, Tzomet, Moledet, and the National Religious Party (NRP)—and two sociopolitical-religious settlement movements, Gush Emunim and Kach. Whereas the Likud and Tzomet, with few exceptions, represent the pragmatic and parliamentary politics of the Israeli right, Moledet, the NRP, and particularly the settlement movements speak on behalf of the nation’s radical right. They are more militant in their pursuit of the Greater Land of

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Israel, more aggressive toward the Palestinians, and do not care much about the distinction between parliamentary and extraparliamentary politics. The Israeli radical right is, furthermore, less concerned about the principles of pluralist democracy, ready to turn a blind eye to extralegal acts against Arabs, and in general puts its version of Zionism above all other norms of the Jewish state. Whereas the Likud and other parties have best represented the interests of the Greater Israel principle in the Knesset and the government, the settlement movements have spearheaded the extraparliamentary activities of the right and set its ideological agenda.¹ Right-wing politics in Israel, therefore, is best regarded as an interaction of several schools and orientations that often cross party and movement lines. During the 1992-1996 period, the Israeli right contained five distinct schools: the *parliamentarians*, the *pragmatists*, the *extremists*, the *terrorists*, and the *moderates*.

1. The *parliamentarians* focus on the Knesset and regard the parties of the right as the major carriers of the nationalist agenda. This school is characterized by a pragmatic parliamentary orientation and a belief that Israeli politics is decided by the ordinary electoral process and by what the government and the Knesset do or do not do. The elections of 1992 dealt the parliamentarians a huge blow; the Likud was relegated to opposition and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir had to step down. For a while it appeared that the party's days were numbered and that Likud's political hegemony of 1977-1992 was gone. But the electoral debacle was deftly exploited by Benjamin Netanyahu. A former ambassador to the United Nations and deputy foreign minister, Netanyahu convinced his Likud colleagues to follow Labor's example and select their leadership in a primary system. Buttressed by several rich American supporters and a spirit of party revitalization, Netanyahu surprised the Likud's old guard by winning the primaries with an overwhelming majority. In 1993 the young leader took over the party, started to pay its huge electoral debts, and restructured it entirely. He changed the party's constitution and made sure his loyalists were in total control of the party's Central Committee and bureaucratic machinery. Because of their minority status in the Knesset, however, during 1992-1996 the parliamentarians played only a small role in Israel's right-wing politics.

2. The *pragmatists* consist of the leading groups among the religious settlers in the occupied territories, followers of the Gush Emunim philosophy and the legacy of Rabbi Kook.² Despite the small number of these highly motivated settlers (about thirty thousand), the pragmatists constitute a dynamic and influential elite group. Most of the Israeli right considers them the “pioneering vanguard” of the entire camp and abides by their ideological leadership. Since the mid-1980s, the pragmatists have been represented in Israeli politics by the Council of the Settlers of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza (Yesha Council) and have enjoyed the unequivocal support of the NRP and Moledet.³

Like settler activists in general, the pragmatists have always been strong opponents of the peace process, have never had compunctions about prolonging the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and have repeatedly expressed “understanding” about anti-Arab vigilante acts. But unlike other settler activists, the pragmatists have strong political instincts and understand that their antipeace struggle can only succeed if supported by a large number of ordinary Israelis who live within the Green Line. Having learned from past experiences, such as the abortive 1982 effort by settlers to stop the evacuation of northern Sinai, the pragmatists know that extremist settlers have sometimes severely damaged the cause of the Land of Israel.⁴ They understand that their extremism must be cloaked in politics, businesslike rhetoric, and parliamentary decorum. Indeed, the leaders of the pragmatists are constantly seen in the Knesset, publish articles and columns in Israel’s secular press, and often appear on television and radio talk shows. Although extremist in their ultimate convictions, the pragmatists have increasingly been identified as flexible and moderate, which makes them dangerous adversaries of all Labor administrations.

It should be stressed, however, that the pragmatists have never been complete cynics or hypocrites. Their idealistic vision of the Jewish state includes a great concern for the state of Israel, admiration for the army, and a desire to see the nation united. Pragmatist rabbis seriously believe in the sanctity of secular Israel, and their sons are eager to serve in the nation’s best military units. All these elements make the pragmatists acceptable to a large

number of Israelis who otherwise differ with their religious convictions and concrete political goals.

Since the Oslo Accords were signed, the pragmatists have aimed at forging an antipeace consensus that can neutralize Labor's peace politics. This strategy is based on the conviction that the Oslo Accords are disastrous and that the Israeli public should be apprised of the danger they pose. To their dismay, the pragmatists have learned that a majority of Israelis do not care about the settlements or about the Greater Israel idea. Hence they have focused their propaganda on Palestinian terrorism and contended that contrary to Labor's promises, the Oslo process has reduced the personal safety of Israelis rather than increasing it.

3. The *extremists* also come from Gush Emunim and are inspired by the ideo-theology of Rabbi Kook. But unlike the pragmatists, they adhere to the radical legacy of the Gush, its past defiance of different Israeli governments, and its uncompromising attitude toward the Palestinians. The extremists are also preoccupied with messianic convictions.

Led by Gush Emunim legends such as Rabbi Moshe Levinger⁵ and Rabbi Dov Lior, both of whom live in the high-friction area of Hebron and Kiryat Arba, the extremists do not believe in political expediency and are rarely concerned about making a negative impression on the Israeli public. In addition to rejecting the peace process, they have little trouble in challenging the government's legitimacy, in justifying the killing of innocent Arabs, and in advocating military confrontation with the Palestinians. Although bitter setbacks of the past, such as the Camp David Accords, the evacuation of northern Sinai, and Oslo, have not changed their minds about the upcoming heavenly redemption, they have made them frustrated and bellicose. Moreover, since the mid-1980s the extremists have increasingly been marginalized by the pragmatists. The 1992 elections, in which Rabbi Moshe Levinger tried and failed to enter the Knesset as head of a new radical party, led to further marginalization. Levinger and his followers, indeed, were blamed for splitting the right-wing vote and helping the left return to power.

The post-Oslo strategy of the extremists focused on radicalizing the extraparlimentary struggle of the right and making it a massive campaign of

civil disobedience. Also influenced by secular activists such as Attorney Elyakim Haetzni, former Knesset member Geula Cohen, and the illustrious military commander (res.) Shlomo Baum, some of the extremists convinced themselves that the government could be brought down in the streets.

4. The *terrorists* consist of the followers of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane (assassinated in New York in 1990), and have organized themselves into two religious protest movements, Kach and Kahane Chai. They do not constantly practice terrorism but enthusiastically support the idea of Jewish terrorism and are mentally prepared to kill innocent Arabs. The terrorists are detached from Israel's political reality; blending messianic convictions with a catastrophic reading of history, they believe that intimidation, violence, and terrorism can help them shape a new reality in the occupied territories.⁶ Before the signing of the Oslo Accords, the prestige of the terrorists within the Israeli right had hit rock bottom and they had become a marginal group with only a few dozen provocateurs in Judea and Samaria.

5. The *moderates* are leading activists of Gush Emunim who since the mid-1980s have moved to the center of Israeli politics and become increasingly critical of their radical colleagues' bellicosity toward the Arabs. The moderates have not compromised their Eretz Israel ideology but have subjected it to moral and ethical restrictions. The moderates were deeply affected by the horrors of the Lebanon War and by the traumatic discovery in 1984 of a Gush Emunim underground that planned to blow up the Dome of the Rock (a Muslim holy site on the Temple Mount) and was responsible for anti-Arab terrorism. They responded by forming a new settler orientation: conscientious, critical of anti-Arab atrocities, and ready to work with Labor hard-liners. The leading members of the moderates are Rabbi Yehuda Amital, who even tried to place a moderate religious party in the Knesset called Meimad, and Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun, a Gush Emunim founder and longtime critic of the extreme right.⁷ Following the Oslo Accords, a number of moderates established Tchelet (Light Blue), a small group that offered support to the Labor government provided it would agree to maintain large settlement blocs within the future Palestinian state. The moderates failed to constitute a significant political

force, but succeeded in breaking the image of a unified right-wing anti-Oslo bloc and were ready to open a constructive dialogue with the Rabin government.

AFTER OSLO: PATTERNS OF STRUGGLE OF THE ISRAELI RIGHT

The Oslo agreements, made public in September 1993 and welcomed by the majority of the nation, stunned the Israeli right. Benjamin Netanyahu, the newly elected and inexperienced Likud leader, was disoriented. As experienced as Gush Emunim and the heads of the Yesha Council were in setbacks and political disappointments, none of them expected Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's Mr. Security, to recognize the PLO and allow the formation of a far-reaching Palestinian autonomy. The positive response of most Israelis to the agreement and their fascination with the Rabin-Arafat handshake on the White House lawn intensified the right's shock.

The right's immediate response was a virulent demonstration against the agreement, held on September 7 in Jerusalem with the participation of nearly 200,000. This impressive showing had, however, no significant, large-scale follow-up.

Unable to mount an effective struggle in the streets, the pragmatists, under the leadership of the Yesha Council, resorted to a costly public relations campaign based on the slogan "Yesha ze kan" (Yesha [Judea and Samaria] is here). In addition to the message that Yesha's security was Israel's security, the campaign appealed to the nation's brotherly sentiments: the real message, driven home to hundreds of thousands of Israelis, was "Do not forsake us!"

The settlers' campaign, initially sluggish, was ignited by an unwelcome but highly expected development: Islamic terrorism. Oslo's grace period, which lasted nearly two months, came to an abrupt end in late October 1993. A few squads of Palestinian Muslim terrorists—mostly associated with the Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements—killed a number of soldiers, settlers, and other Israeli civilians, triggering an immediate radicalization of the settler

community. A "Jewish intifada" ensued, a settler mini-insurrection consisting of tire burnings, roadblocks, stonings, destruction of hundreds of Arab cars and other property, and even killing. After a particularly atrocious murder by Palestinian terrorists, in which a settler named Chaim Mizrahi was burnt alive, hundreds of Jews ravaged Arab villages, destroying property and attacking civilians. A few days later, hundreds of settlers took to the roads during morning rush hour and brought all Arab traffic to a standstill. After a promise from the military commander in the area that the army would act aggressively against the terrorists, the settlers agreed to evacuate—but not before declaring their determination to repeat the action if necessary.

Members of Yesha's moderate Rabbinical Council subsequently ruled that shooting Palestinian attackers was legitimate. Religious followers of these rabbis were told that no legal barriers should stop them from doing what they felt necessary.⁸

The settler radicalization was further intensified by a new series of murders. In an Arab ambush near Hebron, Ephraim Ayubi, driver for the revered rabbinical authority Rabbi Chaim Druckman, was killed; Druckman survived the attack. The terror wave peaked in January 1994 with the murder in Kiryat Arba of Pinchas Lapid and his son Shalom. Lapid, a longtime "refusenik" from the Soviet Union who finally came to Israel in the early 1970s, was an exemplary figure in the settlement movement. The government was virtually powerless to control the emotional eruption of the settler community, especially in Kiryat Arba and Hebron.

The most significant effect of the terror campaign on the Israeli right was the regaining of political legitimacy by the extremists and the terrorists. Long marginalized by the parliamentarians and the pragmatists because of their excessive extremism, the radicals were now allowed to join the action. The pragmatists' intensifying anger made them return to Gush Emunim's early days, in which the entire movement challenged the government in the streets. In addition to the small Kach and Kahane Chai movements, two groups gained momentum: Mateh Ma'amatz (which can be loosely rendered as Action Center) and Elyakim Haetzni's Committee to Abolish the Autonomy Plan.

The new wave of terror was especially helpful to Haetzni, a Kiryat Arba attorney long known for his vitriolic rhetoric. Haetzni's warnings about a coming disaster for the settlers, which for many years had fallen on deaf ears, became much more influential in January 1994. Frustrated settlers began to heed Haetzni's calls for massive civil disobedience to bring down the government.

A people whose government committed an act of national treason, collaborated with a terrorist enemy to steal the heart of its homeland, gave this enemy tens of thousands of guns—aimed directly at the hearts of its sons and daughters—must be ready to fight. And in this war as in every war there are risks and casualties. If we do not fight in 1994, no miracle will occur and the year will be as cursed as the previous one.

Rise up and do it! We have done nothing. Protests, demonstrations, "tent cities," even setting roadblocks are insufficient acts against a government conducting national treason. In France, defeated in 1940, when Marshal Petain gave in to Hitler and made an alliance with him—just as Lieutenant General Rabin did by shaking Yassir Arafat's dirty hand—de Gaulle did not demonstrate in protest. Although the regime was born in a democratic way ... he deserted, rebelled against a Nazi collaborating army ...⁹

Although the more pragmatic Yesha Council did not lose its organizational hold over the settler struggle against the Oslo agreements, it was Match Ma'amatz and the Committee to Abolish the Autonomy Plan that began to set the rhetorical tone of the campaign. Haetzni's anti-Rabin posters, increasingly seen in right-wing demonstrations, were even more malicious than his articles in the settler journal *Nekuda*. The most nefarious of these posters depicted Rabin as an unsavory Arab, smiling at Yassir Arafat and washing his hands in blood. The poster's text associated the prime minister with Palestinian terrorism and assigned him direct responsibility for Jews killed by Hamas

violence. Yet Haetzni was not alone; a number of distinguished right-wing individuals declared their support for his organization, not least among them Colonel (res.) Baum. The Yesha Council made little effort to limit the virulence of Haetzni's propaganda material; thousands of copies of the posters were distributed to all participants in Yesha antigovernment demonstrations.

Meanwhile, the role of the parliamentarians declined. Netanyahu, troubled by intraparty conflicts especially with former Foreign Minister David Levy, as well as by the cold shoulder many Likud veterans offered him as a newcomer who had made off with the party, failed to put his mark on the anti-Oslo campaign. His dull Knesset speeches as well as his inability to stimulate massive resistance to the Accords left the radical right in full control of the struggle. As the radical right's anti-Oslo struggle gained momentum, Netanyahu found himself increasingly tailing the extremists. Indeed, he sometimes pleaded with the activists of the radical right to be allowed to appear in their demonstrations for photo opportunities, fearing that otherwise he would be forgotten by the Israeli public. In essence, between November 1993 and November 1995 (Rabin's assassination) the struggle against the Oslo Accords was taken over and even monopolized by the extreme right, with Netanyahu and the Likud simply making no difference.

THE HEBRON MASSACRE IN PERSPECTIVE

At 5:10 on Friday morning, 25 February 1994, about five hundred Muslims were kneeling in a Ramadan prayer at the Isaac Hall of the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. A man dressed as a captain of the Israel Defense Forces, armed with an automatic Glilon rifle, broke into the hall and began spraying the worshippers with bullets. Twenty-nine Muslims were killed instantly, over one hundred wounded, before unharmed worshippers overpowered Goldstein and beat him to death. Amid the hysteria and outrage that spread through the occupied territories, further violence took place; Palestinians and Israeli soldiers clashed all over the West Bank and Gaza, leaving nine Palestinians dead and nearly two hundred wounded.

The shock of the Hebron massacre intensified when the killer's identity was discovered. He turned out to be Dr. Baruch Goldstein, the emergency physician for Jewish settlers in Hebron and Kiryat Arba, a devoutly Orthodox Jew and father of four. He had treated many Jewish victims of Palestinian terrorism, and had also cared for wounded Arabs.

Goldstein's massacre was immediately described as the unpredictable act of a lone madman. The theory of an insane individual was, not surprisingly, supported by the Yesha Council, whose leaders were quick to aver that Goldstein represented no one but himself, and that the settlers were as shocked by the massacre as anybody else. However, many of Goldstein's close friends in Kiryat Arba saw it otherwise, justifying his act as a response to Palestinian terrorism. According to these friends—members or supporters of the Kach movement—the massacre was not just a deed of political-military revenge; it was a religious act and a sacred mission.¹⁰

Although there is no question that Goldstein perpetrated the crime alone, it was conducted within an elaborate ideological and political framework that fully justified anti-Arab terrorism. It is clear that Goldstein planned the attack well in advance, wanted to kill as many Muslims as possible, was certain that God approved of it, and hoped and believed that it would stop the peace process.¹¹ If we add to these facts Goldstein's long and close association with Kach, the Hebron disaster loses its random, isolated appearance. It becomes, instead, a collective act by proxy, an outburst of political violence expressing the crisis of an entire fundamentalist milieu. The current Israeli-Palestinian peace process is enormously threatening to Zionist religious fundamentalists, and the Hebron massacre was their most extreme reaction to this threat.¹²

The Hebron massacre had a dramatic radicalizing effect on both Arab and Jewish extremists. As for the Arabs, it appears certain that the massacre triggered a massive Hamas retaliation. There are many indications that squads of Izadin al-Qassam, Hamas's military arm, as well as the Islamic Jihad were determined to engage strategically in anti-Israeli terrorism before the Hebron massacre. Izadin al-Qassam's mastermind, Yihye Ayyash, "the engineer," was apparently eager to strike. But Goldstein's atrocity made counterviolence

much more urgent for Hamas.¹³ Two Hamas car bombs in the towns of Afula and Hadera killed and wounded a large number of Israeli civilians; there was more to come.

As for Israel's pragmatic extreme right, though shocked, they blamed the authorities for Goldstein's act. Rabin's government, not the deranged doctor, was responsible because it had recognized the PLO "terror organization" and reduced its own antiterrorist efforts. Blood and catastrophe were imminent and the time for moderation was gone.

THE CRISIS OF TEL RUMEIDA AND THE RABBINICAL RULING ON SOLDIER DISOBEDIENCE

The Israeli government's immediate reaction to the 28 February atrocity in Hebron was to outlaw Kach and Kahane Chai, which continued to preach anti-Arab violence and praised Goldstein as a martyr. Their offices were sealed and their propaganda literature confiscated; about ten leaders of these organizations were placed under administrative detention. Government officials were privately told by Yesha activists that the banning of the Kahanist organizations was long overdue.¹⁴ Of much greater concern to the settler establishment was the increasing likelihood that, as a by-product of the massacre, Hebron's Jewish community would be evacuated.

Before the February massacre, there were no evacuation plans for the small Jewish community of Hebron. Although he knew that this radical enclave, consisting of five hundred Jews living in the midst of 130,000 Palestinians, was the most volatile settlement in the West Bank, Prime Minister Rabin did not have contingency plans for its removal. The Oslo agreements with the PLO stipulated that settlement evacuation would be discussed only during the final stage of the negotiations and after the implementation of a Palestinian autonomy in Gaza and the West Bank. But the massacre at the Cave of the Patriarchs, which led to the indefinite suspension of the peace process, created a new reality. Israeli doves, including members of Rabin's cabinet, warned that the

continued presence of Jewish provocateurs among Hebron's Palestinians was a recipe for future disasters.¹⁵

In mid-March, the government began to seriously consider evacuating the seven Jewish families living in Tel Rumeida. Since the mid-1980s, a small number of very radical Jewish families had lived on this small hill in central Hebron. If Jewish Hebron spelled trouble for Arab-Israeli relations, Tel Rumeida was the eye of the storm. Constantly guarded by an entire army company lest they be butchered by their neighbors, Tel Rumeida's Jewish residents kept provoking the neighboring Palestinians.

The news of a possible evacuation stunned the settler leaders. Hebron, the City of the Patriarchs, second in holiness only to Jerusalem, was the first settlement site chosen by Jews after the Six Day War. If the Rabin-Peres government, already responsible for the Oslo "treason," could evacuate Tel Rumeida, it might evacuate all of the settlements in Judea and Samaria.

The looming crisis at Tel Rumeida produced one of the most effective mobilization efforts in settler history. Israel's parliamentary opposition was put on alert. Contingency plans were formulated for bringing tens of thousands of ultranationalist activists to Hebron, who would block the removal by planting their own bodies on the holy ground. Heads of right-wing organizations, including many support groups formed within the Green Line, were instructed to prepare for an unprecedented ordeal. Many lobbyists pleaded with Rabin to spare Tel Rumeida and argued that the danger of another massacre was minimal.

The most dramatic response to the Tel Rumeida evacuation plan was made by four prominent rabbis, namely, Shlomo Goren, Abraham Shapiro, Shaul Yisraeli, and Moshe Tzvi Neria: they issued several Halakhic (Jewish religious law) rulings categorically prohibiting evacuation of Jewish settlements in Eretz Israel. Goren, Israel's former chief rabbi and a highly regarded Halakhic authority, was the first to rule against settlement removal; he did so in a detailed answer to a question submitted to him in November 1993 by the Council of Judea and Samaria Rabbis.¹⁶ In an expanded version of that judgment, written in the aftermath of the Hebron massacre, he declared:

The criminal initiative to evacuate Hebron ought to be met with *messirut hanefesh* [utmost devotion]. The ruling on such a heinous crime, as the ruling on saving life, is “*yehareg velo ya’avor*” [be killed but do not sin]. If the government succeeds in its plan, God forbid, the evacuation of Hebron must be responded to by *kria* [rending one’s garment—a sign of death in the family]. ... According to the Halakhah, the significance of the destruction of Hebron, God forbid ... is as the killing of people, which requires *kria*. ... This is why we have to give our life in the struggle against this vicious plan of the government of Israel, which relies on the Arabs for its majority, and be ready to die rather than allow the destruction of Hebron.¹⁷

Although Rabbi Goren’s ruling, which preceded the Tel Rumeida crisis, produced only a minor controversy, the ruling of Shapiro, Yisraeli, and Neria reverberated all over the country. These three rabbis were by far the most influential in the religious-Zionist milieu. The first two were the heads of Yeshivat Mercaz Harav, Gush Emunim’s founding yeshiva; Neria, the oldest of the three, was the founding father of all yeshivas of Bnei Akiva, the religious-Zionist youth movement. What was shockingly novel about the three rabbis’ ruling was that it was addressed to all of the nation’s soldiers: they were all being publicly told that evacuation orders were illegal, and that any order to evacuate Jewish settlers from Jewish land must be disobeyed.¹⁸

The most damaging aspect of the rabbis’ ruling was not, however, the potential refusal of a few religious soldiers to participate in Tel Rumeida’s evacuation, but its symbolic import: highly regarded spiritual authorities no longer respected the sanctity of the Israeli army. Long recognized as the nation’s only guarantee of survival, the IDF has never been regarded as just an instrumental institution for compulsory service, but as a moral calling and a virtue. The very rabbis who now called for disobedience had themselves been part of the post-1967 religious exaltation of this norm. Almost all Israelis grasped the profound significance of the rabbinical ruling and the issue refused to leave the headlines.

Although the rabbinical ruling failed to gain endorsements from non-religious Jews, it was approved by the majority of Israel's Orthodox rabbis. Rabbi Eliezer Waldman, head of Kiryat Arba's *hesder* (combining religious studies with military service) yeshiva, saluted the ruling and promised "to obey it. This government was born in sin. It depends on the votes of the PLO and has no right to go against any Jewish settlement." Rabbi Dov Lior, Waldman's colleague and Kiryat Arba's chief rabbi, was even more adamant: he privately issued a special ruling that Jews should be ready to give their lives over Hebron.¹⁹ One interpretation of Lior's judgment was that suicide was permissible in case of forced evacuation.

In the end, neither Hebron nor Tel Rumeida was evacuated. Based on evaluations that suggested a high likelihood of violent confrontation with the settlers and possible Jewish fatalities, Rabin decided to let the settlers remain.²⁰ A message to that effect was delivered to Israel's Council of the Chief Rabbinate on 4 April 1994 by Deputy Defense Minister Mordechai (Motta) Gur, who had close ties to the settlers. Toeing the line between their official duty as state rabbis and their respect for Shapiro, Israeli, and Neria, Israel's chief rabbis produced this announcement:

The Council of the Chief Rabbinate has registered with great satisfaction the announcement of Deputy Defense Minister Motta Gur that the government of Israel has no intention of evacuating either Jewish settlers or Jewish settlements. ... It is therefore clear that the question of military orders to evacuate settlers or settlements—which are against the Halakhah—is not on the agenda and the army must be taken out of the political debate.²¹

However, the relief felt by the Council as well as by several other rabbinical bodies was greatly diluted by a new blow to the settlers. That April the Gaza-Jericho plan, suspended since the Hebron massacre, was finally implemented. Arafat was allowed to land in Gaza and the Palestinian autonomy became a fact. The extremist rabbinical ruling, which under other circumstances might

have been reversed, remained in full force. Orthodox rabbis who until then had been hesitant were now ready to support it openly. On 3 May 1994 a large rabbinical gathering, calling itself the Eretz Israel Rabbinical Union, fully endorsed the ruling on soldier disobedience. Rabbi Nahum Rabinovitz, head of the hesder yeshiva of Ma'ale Adumim, called on his colleagues to take Torah scrolls into the streets of Jerusalem and stay there "until our outcry is heard in Heaven and our message penetrates secular hearts too." Representing over a thousand rabbis from all over the country, the new body issued an unequivocal warning to the government:

The so-called peace agreement, made by a government supported by a tiny majority with a critical Arab Knesset vote, is a complete contradiction to peace. The implementation of the agreement may lead, God forbid, to great danger to human life. This is why anyone who can stop this "agreement" and does not do so, breaks the rule "you shall not stand idle when there is danger to your brother."²²

The struggle against his government's legitimacy did not leave Rabin unaffected. A secular sabra to the bone, he had never liked the settlers and their messianic rhetoric. During his first term as prime minister, he had been the target of many Gush Emunim protests. Convinced that they would do anything to fulfill their dream of Greater Israel, he was wary and mistrustful toward them. In 1994, with the intensification of their struggle against his peace policies, Rabin lost his patience; he completely lacked sympathy or empathy with the settlers' sense of impending disaster about the possible collapse of their territorial dream. Unlike President Ezer Weizman, who had psychologically disarmed many of these angry people by paying visits to their settlements following terror attacks, Rabin remained cold and aloof. Repeatedly humiliating them with name-calling, including "*kugelagers*" (a mechanical part of a car's wheel that squeaks noisily) and "propellers" (i.e., people who make noise and vent hot air), Rabin conveyed to the settlers that regardless of their pain he was determined to move ahead with the peace process. There was no real victor

in this tragic psychological warfare—neither Rabin, the bitter and personally insecure prime minister, in front of whose house protesters screamed “traitor” and “assassin,” nor the many settlers who felt marginalized and humiliated by their government. But increasingly, the settlers’ political struggle against Rabin assumed a personal character: they hated him, he despised them.

DIN RODEF AND DIN MOSER

The rabbis’ confrontation with Yitzhak Rabin reached a new height in February 1995. Following an unprecedented series of Hamas and Islamic Jihad suicide bombings inside Israel, which took the lives of 87 Israeli civilians, wounded 202, and traumatized the entire nation, the heads of Yesha’s Rabbinical Council decided to consider putting the government on trial according to the laws of *din rodef* and *din moser*. Moser and rodef, according to the Halakhah, are among the worst kinds of Jew: they betray the community through acts that may cause the loss of innocent Jewish life. A moser provides Gentiles with information about Jews or illegally gives them Jewish property. Since the Halakhah views Eretz Israel as a sacred property of the Jewish people, Jews are obliged to execute a moser found guilty of giving away part of it. A rodef is a person about to commit or facilitate an act of murder; he must be killed immediately so as to save Jewish life. This rule does not apply to a murderer caught after the deed, who has to go on trial. *Din rodef* is, according to a certain interpretation, the only case where the Halakhah permits the killing of a Jew without a trial.

The fact that the escalation of Muslim terrorism was largely a response to Goldstein’s massacre was hardly noticed by the ultranationalist rabbis or anybody else in Israel’s extreme right. Instead, the radical right blamed two individuals, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, for the terror attacks. By evacuating Israeli soldiers from Gaza and Jericho, allowing the formation of a large Palestinian police force, and relaxing the security forces’ struggle against Palestinian extremism, Oslo’s two architects had made it possible for Hamas and Islamic Jihad to kill Jews.

Thus, the rabbis addressed a long question about *din moser* and *din rodef* to forty Halakhic authorities.

What is the rule about this bad government? Can they be regarded as accomplices in acts of murder committed by terrorists, since in their plans they are responsible for the strengthening and arming of these terrorists? ... Should they be tried according to the Halakhah? And if proved guilty as accomplices in murder, what should their sentence be? If they are, indeed, ... punishable in court, is it the obligation of every individual to bring them to trial in a court of justice, or, for lack of an alternative, in an ordinary secular court? Is it not the obligation of the community's leaders to warn the head of the government and his ministers that if they keep pursuing the agreement, after the terrible experience of [Oslo 1] in all of Judea and Samaria, they will be subject ... to the Halakhic ruling of *din moser*, as ones who surrender the life and property of Jews to the Gentiles?

... We know that the very interest in the issue may stimulate, God forbid, an intense controversy in the nation. Aware of the actual conditions on the ground, we are worried that the situation will get worse, that these questions will be asked by the majority of the people and that many of the victims [of terrorism] may be filled with sentiments of revenge.²³

Although the rabbis' letter was formulated as a question addressed to other, more prominent rabbis, it was itself a very incriminating document. It treated the causal relation between the government's peace process and Muslim terrorism as a given, and referred to Palestinians collectively as terrorists. No distinction was made, for example, between the peaceful PLO and the terrorists of Hamas. There was, moreover, no reference to a possible link between the Hebron massacre and the eruption of Muslim terrorism. The three rabbis who drafted the letter, Dov Lior, Eliezer Melamed, and Daniel Shilo, already seemed close to concluding that Peres and Rabin qualified for *din moser* and *din rodef*.

Especially notable, in this context, was the harsh language increasingly used against Israeli leaders by North American Orthodox rabbis. In a stormy meeting with Shmuel Hollander, Israel's Orthodox cabinet secretary, who visited New York over the High Holy Days, some of these rabbis compared Arafat to Hitler and told the stunned official that his boss was both *moser* and *rodef*.²⁴ Rabbi Abraham Hecht, the prominent head of New York's large Sharei Zion synagogue, said in public what many of his colleagues had been saying privately: "according to Jewish Halakhah, Rabin deserves to die. He who intentionally transfers living people, money, or property to strangers commits, according to the Halakhah, a crime punishable by death. Maimonides maintained that he who kills such a person is doing the right thing."²⁵ In a television interview, Hecht said that to kill Rabin was a *mitzvah* (Jewish obligation) and he was sorry he was personally unable to fulfill it.

Following Rabin's assassination, there were further indications that many discussions of *din moser* and *din rodef* had preceded the murder. The above-mentioned Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun openly charged several rabbis with authorizing the killing. In a meeting with Israel's chief rabbis, he mentioned Dov Lior and Nahum Rabinovitz. Bin Nun further maintained that a young rabbi from Gush Etzion, Shmuel Dvir, who in the past several months had made death threats against Rabin, had told other people he knew of a *rodef* ruling by seven prominent rabbis.²⁶ Although none of Bin Nun's charges could be fully substantiated, and he later apologized in public, his allegations exposed the culture of Halakhic defiance that preceded the assassination, including the wide discussion of *moser* and *rodef*. It is unlikely that any of the aforementioned rabbis issued a death sentence on Rabin and Peres, but a number of them allowed their students to believe that Rabin and Peres more than qualified for the infamous titles. With, perhaps, the exception of Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, who forbade his students to use slanderous language against the heads of state,²⁷ rabbis such as Lior, Rabinovitz, and so on had increasingly joined the campaign of invective. The culture of Halakhic character assassination was well expressed in the *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) journal *Hashavua*, which incited against Rabin with such terms as "traitor," "madman," and "non-Jew":

There are, today, [settler] groups that favor violence of the first order. They even demand permission to assassinate the heads of the government, especially Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, against whom there is *din rodef*. ... The heads of the national haredim maintain that an extreme line against the government—which stands under *din rodef*—must be adopted. All speakers with whom we talked tried to maintain that the discussion is totally theoretical and there is no intention to kill Rabin and Peres. ...

The new situation puts before the haredi public alternatives never faced before. One possibility is to forcefully challenge the group that took over the government of the state. ... There is no reason that we must allow the vicious maniacs who run this government to take Jews as sheep to the slaughter. "Rabin is a traitor," says Rabbi Gadi Ben-Zimra, "and I have no problem in saying this. It is clear that the government betrays all values ... and puts the state in danger."²⁸

The outlawing of Kach and Kahane Chai and the inability of their members to display their original emblems led to the rise to fame of Eyal (an acronym for Israeli Fighting Organization), a new Kahanist organization. Eyal was formed in 1993 by a Tel Aviv University student, Avishai Raviv. Raviv, who first gained notoriety by demanding the resignation of the Arab head of Tel Aviv University's Student Association on the ground that an Arab could not be trusted, was eventually expelled from the university. He moved to Kiryat Arba, where he and a small number of activists started to attract media attention through provocative anti-Arab rhetoric and aggressive ceremonies condemning Jewish "traitors." Raviv proposed contingency plans for expelling Hebron's Arabs in the event of an Israeli pullout from the city, and even staged special horror shows for Israel's television networks. Masking their faces, armed Eyal activists moved into the Arab *casbah* (central marketplace) of Hebron and performed, in front of the camera, contingent terrorist acts against the local population.²⁹ Raviv and his comrades became major promoters of the character assassination of the nation's top leaders. Responsible for the mass

production of vicious anti-Rabin posters, they were also involved in disseminating a picture of Rabin in Nazi uniform.³⁰

BEFORE THE ASSASSINATION: THE RABBINICAL STRUGGLE AGAINST OSLO 2, THE RISE OF ZO ARTZENU, AND THE PULSA DI NURA

In the summer of 1995, the radical right felt itself more delegitimized than ever by the Rabin government. At issue was the implementation of Oslo 2, the second stage of the agreement between Israel and the PLO. Stipulating that the Palestinian autonomy should now be expanded to seven major West Bank cities and several hundred villages, Oslo 2 significantly reduced Jewish control over Judea and Samaria, and provided for the introduction of thousands of armed Palestinian policemen to the area. The Israeli right was increasingly frustrated; the Gaza-Jericho autonomy, contrary to the right's expectations, seemed to be working well and Arafat's police had not become a terrorist gang. Against this background, settler demonstrations were less and less effective; efforts by right-wing leaders such as Knesset member Hanan Porat to call for early elections fell on deaf ears.

Again, the spiritual authorities of the settlers launched a dramatic response. After a lengthy consultation, which included hearings of senior military officers, a distinguished rabbinical body ruled that it was illegal to evacuate military bases in Judea and Samaria and that soldiers should disobey any such orders. The ruling was an aggressive extension of the similar decree of over a year earlier. What was new was the rabbis' expansion of their judgments to purely military matters. Everyone recognized that there is a huge difference between civilian settlements and military compounds. No civilian rabbi in Israel had ever ruled, or claimed to be competent to rule, on technical matters involving the location of military bases. The rabbinical statement, which was endorsed by fifteen prominent rabbis including Rabbis Shapiro, Neria, Ya'acov Ariel, and others, read:

We hereby determine that there is a Torah prohibition on evacuating IDF bases and transferring the sites to Gentiles. ... A permanent military camp is a Jewish settlement in the full sense of the term. Its uprooting and relinquishment into the hands of Gentiles falls under the same rule as the removal of an Eretz Israel settlement, which is prohibited by law. It is therefore clear that no Jew is allowed to take part in any act aiding in the evacuation of a settlement, camp, or military compound. ... Never before has the army put its soldiers in a situation in which they had to act against their conscience. We call upon the government and the army to avoid putting soldiers through a decision involving a choice between the army's orders and loyalty to their ethical convictions.³¹

The new rabbinical ruling created a national commotion even stronger than the one fifteen months ago. President Ezer Weizman, who had been particularly attentive to the settlers' distress, was furious. Weizman, a respected former general, refused to admit to his residence a representative group of rabbis who came to explain; he demanded categorically that the new ruling be canceled. The attorney general declared his intention to try the rabbis for incitement. Hebrew University professor Aviezer Ravitzky, a leading Orthodox academic, asserted that the ruling implied the symbolic collapse of "the Israeli social contract." In *Yediot Aharonot*, Israel's largest daily, Ravitzky charged the rabbis with expressing "an extremist political position characteristic of a minority group, not the opinion of Israel's religion." Ravitzky doubted whether most hesder-yeshiva soldiers would obey the ruling, but warned against the danger of insubordination.³²

A number of army generals expressed outrage; meanwhile, some yeshiva students said they would not obey the rabbis. Rabin made it clear that soldiers who did obey the ruling would be instantly court-martialed. Infuriated, Rabin told journalists:

It is unheard of that a democratically elected government will be forced by rabbis, using the Halakhah, to allow soldiers to disobey orders.

There has never been anything like this in Israel's past history. It is one of the worst things possible that a small number of rabbis, who do not represent the majority of Israeli rabbis, can make such a decision. It is unthinkable that we turn Israel into a banana republic. The entire Knesset, not just the government, ought to reject this matter.³³

The public uproar did not, however, move any of the main signatories to retract. Nor did it weaken the ultranationalists' determination to bring down the "illegal" government in the streets; indeed, it led to further radicalization. The divisions among Israeli Jews in the summer of 1995 were as wide as ever.

The intensifying frustration over the inability of the rabbis or the Yesha Council to derail the peace process led to the meteoric rise of a new radical-right movement, Zo Artzenu (This Is Our Land). It was formed by two relatively unknown settlers, Moshe Feiglin and Shmuel Sackett, residents of Ginot Shomron, an affluent bedroom community close to the Green Line. They were soon joined by Rabbi Benny Elon, the young head of the Orot Yeshivah in Jerusalem. Zo Artzenu's contribution to the antipeace struggle involved new measures of aggressive civil disobedience and new campaign rhetoric. From July to October 1995, its activists engaged in illicit settlement, blocking of the nation's major highways, and aggressive protests in front of government offices. In the summer of 1995, Zo Artzenu activists set the agenda of the radical right and dictated its style of struggle.

Thus, the time was ripe for Feiglin and Sackett to test Zo Artzenu's ideas with Operation "Doubling" II. Begun in August 8, the operation involved the establishment of thirty new strongholds as "twin settlements" in the West Bank. Thousands of activists were eager to launch extralegal settlements and refuse the army's evacuation orders. Hundreds were arrested and sent to prison. Settler-soldier confrontations were now heavily reported in the press and a formidable protest movement quickly developed.³⁴

Boosted by their growing publicity, the heads of Zo Artzenu decided to bring their campaign across the Green Line. The intent was to start disrupting life and public order in Israel proper, signaling the government that unless it

suspended the peace process, its own ability to function would be literally stopped in the streets. Operation Roadblock, conducted by several thousand Zo Artzenu volunteers, was orchestrated in almost military fashion. Spread among nearly eighty road junctions across the country and coordinated by Rabbi Benny Elon flying above in a chartered helicopter, these activists succeeded in disrupting transportation for several hours. Nearly three thousand policemen were needed to clear the roads and highways, not before 130 activists, including Feiglin, had been arrested.

Although succeeding in gaining publicity, Zo Artzenu was unable to induce the Israeli populace to join its struggle. Most Israeli drivers did not appreciate being stuck at intersections for hours, and in fact tended to become resentful toward Zo Artzenu and its antipeace struggle. Later efforts to repeat the disruption on 13 and 29 September—the second anniversary of Oslo 1 and the signing day of Oslo 2, respectively—showed decreasing effectiveness. Another provocative venture, a spectacular plan to have hundreds of thousands of Israelis turn on their lights and appliances all over the country and flood the electric grid, failed miserably; no serious disruption was reported by the Electric Company.

The intense attention given to Zo Artzenu, as well as its increasing role in shaping the agenda of the radical right, did not result solely from its disruptive tactics. Of special attraction for the media were its new faces and voices. The most active members of Zo Artzenu were American immigrants; in media interviews, they stressed commitment to the American tradition of civil disobedience. For Israel's mainly liberal and left-wing journalists, the new images were a far cry from the conservative and messianic rhetoric of Gush Emunim.

Heavily reported in the foreign press, Zo Artzenu's rhetoric was particularly effective among American audiences; the young movement succeeded in establishing nearly forty support groups in the United States, and received much of the funding for its large operations from U.S. sources. Feiglin, born to Australian parents but married to an American, remarked:

There is an American approach to freedom that does not exist in this country and I live among Americans who know the real meaning of individual freedom. Freedom does not mean that the government, which won the elections, is free to do whatever it pleases. ... When a person who barely wins the majority, moves to take away the most precious objects of the Jewish majority in the country, and speaks in the name of democracy, he cannot expect his actions to go without resistance. The reason the opposition comes mostly from American immigrants is because they understand the meaning of democracy.³⁵

Although Zo Artzenu failed to bring down the Israeli government in the streets, it greatly intensified the delegitimation of the government. The movement's operations served as rallying events for the entire hard core of the radical right, whose number reached into the hundreds, as well as thousands of other activists. Old and new posters and slogans, calling Rabin and Peres traitors, assassins, or collaborators with terrorism, abounded. Not a few of the activists began to speak and chant about the need to execute the "traitors."

On 6 October 1995, just two days after the holiday of Yom Kippur, an odd group of extremists gathered in front of the prime minister's Jerusalem residence. The purpose of the meeting, convened by former Kach activist Avigdor Eskin, was to conduct the traditional *Pulsa di Nura* ceremony against Rabin. *Pulsa di Nura*, which means "blaze of fire" in Aramaic, is the most severe death curse that can be made against a Jewish sinner. This mystical punishment is imposed very rarely and, if at all, by Kabbalistic rabbis. To execute the curse, ten rabbis and community heads must convene in a synagogue, fast for three days, and then perform the curse at midnight. The text of the curse reads:

Angels of destruction will strike him. He is damned wherever he goes. His soul will instantly leave his body ... and he will not survive the month. Dark will be his path and God's angel will pursue him. A disaster he has never experienced will befall him and all curses known in the Torah will apply to him.³⁶

It is not known whether all the formal requirements of the *Pulsa di Nura* were fulfilled by the group convened before Rabin's residence. The fact that Israeli citizens, although very few and very extreme, considered its invocation during Yom Kippur was, however, telling: in the fall of 1995, the verbal violence against Rabin now included death threats. Another ominous indication occurred a week later when Rabin visited a gathering of Anglo-Saxon Israelis at Netanyahu's Wingate Sport Institute, and met an aggressive group of hecklers one of whom approached him menacingly.³⁷ It seemed that it was all too easy to threaten the prime minister from close range.

FROM RABIN'S ASSASSINATION TO THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Yitzhak Rabin was pronounced dead at 11:10 p.m. on Saturday, 4 November 1995. He had been shot an hour and twenty minutes earlier, just a few minutes after delivering a rousing speech at a huge Tel Aviv peace rally an important theme of which was nonviolence. None of the participants expected that the event would conclude with the first political murder of the Jewish nation's premier in nearly two thousand years.

Rabin's assassination stunned the nation; it also dealt a devastating blow to the Israeli right. On 5 November 1995, no one believed that Benjamin Netanyahu had a chance to beat Rabin's successor, Shimon Peres, in the upcoming elections. Opinions about Netanyahu's responsibility for the murder varied, however. The prime minister's widow, Leah Rabin, and many left-wing activists argued that the Likud leader, who did not aggressively counter the rhetoric of the extreme right, was as responsible for the assassination as the extremists. Others rejected this claim but maintained that Netanyahu bore indirect responsibility. Everyone on the left agreed, however, that Netanyahu's effort to deny any responsibility and refusal to apologize for his low profile before the assassination were reprehensible. There was a general consensus that the young Likud leader was politically dead.

The sharpest attack on the Israeli right was launched by the moderates among the settlers. As noted, Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun blamed several Gush Emunim rabbis for issuing a Halakhic death sentence on Rabin. Another moderate leader, Rabbi Yehuda Amital, maintained that the entire educational system of the religious right, which sanctified Eretz Israel at the expense of all other norms, had created the conditions for Yigal Amir's act.

Between November 1995 and February 1996, the Israeli right hit rock bottom. A national soul-searching revealed the magnitude of the government's delegitimation by leading right-wing spokespersons. The large preassassination alliance among the parliamentarians, the pragmatists, the extremists, and the terrorists collapsed, with each school trying to distance itself from the appalling act. Many activists of the extremists and the terrorists were called for investigation and a few were even arrested. A right-wing victory in the coming elections looked more and more impossible.

The Rabin assassination had another effect on the right: a tacit acquiescence in the Oslo Accords. Although the leaders did not change their opinions about the sanctity of the Land of Israel or the illegitimacy of the PLO, the traumatic murder showed them that they were left with two alternatives: to tacitly accept Oslo, or to prepare for potential civil war. Shocked by the killing, they did not hesitate to choose the former alternative. The choice was made easier by Oslo's main architects, Prime Minister Shimon Peres and Minister of Economics and Planning Yossi Beilin, who made it clear that they did not seek revenge and were interested, instead, in national reconciliation. Peres, Beilin, and other Labor leaders assured the settlers that they intended neither to return to the 1967 borders nor to dismantle most of the settlements; this gesture eased the settlers' de facto acceptance of Oslo. Indeed, the pragmatists were certain that Amir's act had defeated them and there was no more they could do for Eretz Israel.³⁸

Israel's right was salvaged by Hamas. A series of four suicide bombings in February and March 1996 destroyed Peres's solid lead over Netanyahu. The bombings, which took the lives of seventy Israelis and wounded two hundred, created a "countertrauma" to the trauma of Rabin's assassination. Shimon

Peres, originator of the optimistic slogan “the New Middle East,” was left helpless against the reality of the old Middle East. His young rival, long known for his skepticism about the region, had nothing to do but reap the political fruits. But in this case, Netanyahu did better: instead of attacking the government, he graciously offered his support for the fight against terrorism. In any case, polls showed that though Peres still lead, it was no longer by a wide margin.

Netanyahu’s and the parliamentarians’ return to center stage also profoundly affected the radical right. The pragmatists, their dream of Greater Israel resuscitated, set to work mobilizing thousands of young settlers and students to help Netanyahu’s campaign.

From March to May 1996, Netanyahu skillfully positioned himself for the elections. He knew that to win, he had to unite the entire right behind him. Two challengers for the leadership of the right, Ariel Sharon and Rafael Eitan, had dropped out of the race, though Eitan, leader of the Tzomet faction, made Netanyahu guarantee him a prominent position in the future government. But there was still former Foreign Minister David Levy, who had left the Likud over a bitter personal feud with Netanyahu. When the latter, however, gave in to Levy’s excessive demands, including the position of foreign minister in the right-wing government, Netanyahu indeed stood at the helm of a united camp. Labor’s low-key campaign, based on confidence that Netanyahu was no match for Peres, played into the hands of the underdog. Winning the elections by the narrowest margin in Israeli history—29,457 votes—at forty-seven Netanyahu became the nation’s tenth prime minister.

THE SOLIDIFICATION OF ISRAEL’S “SOFT” RIGHT AND NETANYAHU’S VICTORY

Undoubtedly, Netanyahu would never have become prime minister without the role played by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. But there was another factor in this surprising victory: Netanyahu and his Likud colleagues’ success in mobilizing the strong support of Israel’s religious camp. During the last two

weeks of the campaign, one saw not only Likud and settler activists in the streets, but thousands of yeshiva students who had never served in the army or intended to do so. There was also a strong mobilization by supporters of Shas, a Sephardi ultra-Orthodox party. Such activists were neither members of Israel's traditional right (radical or pragmatic) nor simply activists of their own parties; they, together with other elements, constitute what I refer to as the *soft right*.

Ever since the Likud's 1977 victory, it had been apparent that in addition to right-wing hard-liners, Likud governments enjoyed the support of the nation's conservative camp, which included traditionalist Sephardim, lower- and middle-class Ashkenazim, and the ultra-Orthodox. Israel's conservatives have never fully identified with the ideological right or its dream of Greater Israel; their attitude toward the settlements has been lukewarm at best. What they always had in common was religious Orthodoxy or respect for it, lower socioeconomic status, hostility toward the burgeoning upper-middle class, disapproval of secular mores, and intense hostility toward the Arabs. The rise in the 1980s of ultraliberal, civil rights, and anticlerical organizations such as Peace Now and the Meretz Party, largely oriented toward compromise with the Palestinians, further strengthened the conservatives' association with the Likud. Meretz in particular, which made an ideology of Westernization, epitomized everything they hated in Israel's secular culture.

The Labor-led government of 1992-1996 was highly effective. The Rabin-Peres cabinet signed the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians and the peace treaty with Jordan. It raised Israel's diplomatic and economic status to unprecedented heights, while boosting economic growth and eliminating unemployment.³⁹ But there was a high political price for these achievements: all of them, which also included a large investment in secular-humanistic education and generous support for ultraliberal causes, were made "courtesy of" Meretz and Israel's Arab parties. Had the 1992-1996 government brought real peace to Israel's war-weary society, these factors would probably have had only a minor alienating effect; most of Israel's conservatives have long shared the left's yearning for peace and tranquillity. Beginning as early as

December 1993, however, terrorism undermined the peace process and curtailed its political benefits. Thus, the right's aggressive attacks on the government increasingly appealed to the conservatives; they came to regard the Rabin-Peres cabinet as "Arab lovers" who neither cared about Jewish life nor Jewish values.

We shall never know how Yitzhak Rabin would have fared against Netanyahu in the 1996 elections. Some believe he would have won because of his military past and record of integrity; others argue that he would have suffered the same disabilities as Peres, and moreover that the Likud, unharmed by the Rabin-assassination effect, would have been stronger. No one believes, however, it would have been an easy victory; the Labor-Meretz-Arab coalition had done more to push the conservatives toward the Likud than the Likud itself.

A critical factor in transforming the conservative camp into the soft right was the nation's new electoral system. In 1996, Israel's traditional parliamentary system went through a dramatic change. For the first time, Israelis voted separately for the prime minister and the Knesset. Unlike the old system, in which the prime minister was elected by the Knesset, the 1996 elections offered the opportunity to choose directly between Peres and Netanyahu. The new system, thus, had a polarizing effect on the final outcomes.⁴⁰

Thus, apart from terrorism, the most significant factor in the 1996 elections was Netanyahu's success in solidifying the entire right-wing/conservative camp. Many people, particularly haredim, who would never before have voted for a secular candidate gave their support to Netanyahu, encouraged to do so by their rabbis.

The rabbinical decision to back Netanyahu could not have been so instrumental without another important sociocultural process in Israeli society, the rise of the *haredim leumi'im* (nationalist ultra-Orthodox), a contradiction in terms just a few years earlier. The haredim, who never accepted the legitimacy of secular Zionism, were long known for their expedient attitude toward the Zionist state and lack of interest in issues of war, peace, territories, and the Palestinians. Convinced that all these minor problems would vanish

once the Messiah came, the haredim focused exclusively on the survival of their community and the prosperity of their yeshivas. Their inclination to support the Likud had nothing to do with ultranationalist or territorial aspirations, and was mostly because of Likud's greater traditionalism.

In the 1970s and '80s, however, certain haredi attitudes toward the Land of Israel began to change. A nationalist orientation started to creep in, and the cult of Eretz Israel became increasingly influential. One of the hasidic schools, Habad and the followers of the Lubavitcher Rabbi, particularly identified with the new approach. Rabbi Schneerson, who had never set foot in Israel, was apparently thrilled by Israel's return to Judea and Samaria in 1967, and ruled against territorial concessions. Indeed, Habad hasidics took an active role in financing and participating in the huge anti-Oslo demonstration in Jerusalem on 7 September 1993.

Two additional processes fostered the *haredi leumi* phenomenon: the increasing "haredization" within the Gush Emunim milieu and the impact of Kahanism on marginal haredi students. In the 1980s, a number of Gush Emunim yeshivas underwent a process of haredization. They insisted on greater Jewish introspection and devotion to pure Halakhic studies, and even started to encourage deferment of military service for outstanding students. This led, dialectically, to an increased nationalization of certain haredi schools, which could not resist the appeal of the Eretz Israel cult.⁴¹

Meanwhile, haredi anger at Palestinian violence intensified. Although most of the haredim had always been hostile toward the "sons of Ishmael," the increasing violence against yeshiva students in the Old City of Jerusalem, haredi and nonharedi alike, raised bitter memories of Diaspora pogroms. The presence in Jerusalem of Rabbi Meir Kahane and his followers, who had long glorified violent acts of revenge against Arabs, galvanized this anti-Arab sentiment.

The *haredim leumi'im* became the winning card in Netanyahu's victory. They provided the cadres who worked day and night during the last weeks of the campaign. Having received the blessings of all haredi rabbis, who wanted to block the establishment of another Labor-Meretz government, the activists

brought their message to all haredi neighborhoods. Their efforts raised the haredi vote for Netanyahu to an unprecedented 95%. The extra 10% of this haredi vote formed the critical mass that solidified the soft right and made the electoral difference for Netanyahu.

NOTES

1. For an overview of Israel's right up to the 1992 elections, see Ehud Sprinzak, "The Israeli Right," in K. Kyle and J. Peters, eds., *Whither Israel* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993).

2. On Gush Emunim, see Gideon Aran, "Jewish Zionist Fundamentalism: The Bloc of the Faithful in Israel (Gush Emunim)," in Martin E. Marty and Scott Appleby, eds., *Fundamentalism Observed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Ehud Sprinzak, *The Ascendancy of Israel's Radical Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Ch. 5.

3. Sprinzak, *Ascendancy*, pp. 124-137.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 99-105.

5. On the profile and political style of Levinger, a leading extremist, see *ibid.*, pp. 139-141.

6. On the Kahanist violence, see Ehud Sprinzak, "Violence and Catastrophe in the Theology of Rabbi Kahane: The Ideologization of the Mimetic Desire," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 3, 3 (Fall 1991).

7. Sprinzak, *Ascendancy*, pp. 151-160.

8. *Yesha Rabbis' Communiqué*, No. 9, May 1993.

9. E. Haetzni, "Civil Disobedience Now," *Nekuda*, 1994, pp. 25-27.

10. See, e.g., Michael Ben-Horin, ed., *Baruch the Man: Memorial Book for Dr. Baruch Goldstein, the Saint* (Jerusalem, special edition, 1995).

11. *Report of the State Investigation Committee Studying the Massacre in Hebron's Cave of the Patriarchs* (Jerusalem: Government Printer, 1994) (Hebrew).

12. Ehud Sprinzak, "When Prophecy Fails: The Crisis of Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel," *Contention* 4, 2 (1995).

13. This conclusion is based on circumstantial evidence and on the fact that before the Hebron massacre Hamas neither resorted to suicide terrorism within the Green Line nor threatened to use it.

14. Interview with settler leader Aharon Domb, 9 November 1994.

15. This is based on the author's conversations with Eitan Haber, Rabin's bureau chief, in March 1994.

16. Nadav Shragai, *Ha'aretz*, 1 December 1993.

17. *Ibid.*, 7 March 1994.

18. Shlomo Dror, *Ha'aretz*, 1 April 1994.

19. Gideon Alon, *Ha'aretz*, 1 April 1994.

20. The author was personally involved in writing one of these memorandums.

21. Avirama Golan, *Ha'aretz*, 5 April 1994.

22. Nadav Shragai, *Ha'aretz*, 5 May 1994.

23. Rabbi Dov Lior, Rabbi Daniel Shilo, and Rabbi Eliezer Melamed, "What Is the Rule About This Bad Government?" in Dana Arieli-Horowitz, ed., *Religion and State in Israel, 1994-1995* (Jerusalem: Center for Jewish Pluralism, 1996), pp. 120-123.

24. Shimon Shiffer, *Yediot Aharonot*, 11 September 1995.

25. Shlomo Shamir and Reli Sa'ar, *Ha'aretz*, 9 November 1995.

26. Nadav Shragai and Shachar Ilan, *Ha'aretz*, Zvi Zinger, *Yediot Aharonot*, 13 November 1995.

27. See comments in Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, *The Prime Minister: Essays in Honor of the Kingdom of Israel and Eretz Israel* (Bet El: Bet El Publishing Services, 1996).

28. Shachar Ilan, "Hashavua: Rabin and Peres: Israel's Evil People: Yudenrat Men and Capos," *Ha'aretz*, 12 November 1995.

29. *Ha'aretz*, 13 April 1995, 19 November 1995. It should be noted that Raviv was later identified as an informant of the General Security Services.

30. *Ha'aretz*, 20 November 1995.

31. *Yediot Aharonot*, 13 July 1995.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Nadav Shragai, *Ha'aretz*, July 31, 1995.
35. Ravit Noar, "Moshe Feiglin, Zo Artzenu Chairman ...," *Ma'ariv Magazine*, 18 August 1995.
36. Dov Elboim, "The Murder Curse," *Yediot Aharonot*, 13 November 1995.
37. Arieli-Horowitz, *Religion and State*, p. 287.
38. This is based on a number of conversations between the author and several radical-right rabbis after the Rabin assassination.
39. Shevah Weiss, *14,729 Missing Votes: An Analysis of the 1996 Elections in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997), Ch. 4.
40. Ibid., Ch. 5.
41. Eliezer Don-Yehiya, in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Accounting for Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

