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978-0-521-19378-8 - The Rise of the Israeli Right: From Odessa to Hebron

Colin Shindler

Excerpt

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Introduction

Between Fidelity and Heresy

In the twenty-first century, the Likud appeared to be the dominant party of government. Under successive Netanyahu administrations, the party garnered 20–30 seats out of 120 in elections. Although this was a poor showing in comparison with 48 seats in its heyday in 1981, the twenty-first-century Likud relied on the fact that smaller parties preferred it to any alternative from the Centre Left. Indeed, in the 2009 election, the Likud was the second-largest party. Yet the smaller Far Right, religious and ethno-nationalist parties projected a greater affinity for Netanyahu than for Tsipi Livni and her Kadima party. Therefore, what mattered was not which party emerged as the largest in any election, but whether it could forge a coalition with other parties – often on the political margins – to create a blocking majority of at least 61 seats.

It had been the Left and socialist Zionism which had built the state and led it to victory in the war of Israel's independence in 1948. Their political hegemony and machismo seemed all-pervading, and the position of their leading party, Ben-Gurion's Mapai, seemed impregnable. Indeed, after Menahem Begin had turned the Irgun Zvai Leumi into the Herut movement for the first Israel election in January 1949, it won a paltry 14 seats out of 120 and emerged as the fourth-largest party. In the subsequent election in 1951, Herut lost half its seats and was on the precipice of oblivion. Despite widespread dissension within Herut and the dropping away of many of its stalwarts, Menahem Begin persevered to build a cluster party of the Right which finally displaced Labour in 1977. Herut became Gahal in 1965, which in turn became the Likud in 1973. Begin succeeded because as the Left fragmented, the Right coalesced.

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From 1977, the year of ‘the earthquake’, until 1996, both the Likud and Labour led coalition governments. The dual election for premier as well as for party in 1996 caused a dramatic fragmentation such that the Likud shrank in size. The Likud became dependent on smaller parties on the Far Right to form a government.

Ariel Sharon’s decisive leadership in combatting the al-Aqsa Intifada between 2001 and 2004 was instrumental in bucking this trend. Following Operations Defensive Shield and Determined Path and the building of the security barrier, Sharon’s standing in the opinion polls rose dramatically. By 2003 he had restored the Likud to thirty-eight seats plus another two from the collapsing Russian party, Yisrael B’Aliyah.

Sharon’s incapacitation due to a stroke and the debacle of the second Lebanon War in 2006 eventually led to the unexpected return of the Likud to power and a restoration of Netanyahu to the premiership. Netanyahu managed to reverse the move towards the centre in the wake of electoral disillusionment with the peace process and an ongoing conflict with Palestinian Islamism. Yet it was the smaller parties which propelled him back into the prime minister’s chair. Moreover, while the Likud’s standing had remained relatively static under the aegis of an unadmired Netanyahu, the Far Right – both nationalist and religious – stepped into the political vacuum created by the inability of the Centre Left to present either coherent policies or credible leaders. The pattern of a shrunken Likud leading the smaller parties of the Right became the template for Israel’s government. All this represented a move away from the broad philosophy of the credited founder of the Zionist Right, Vladimir Jabotinsky.

Despite the Israeli Right’s embrace of the historical figure of Jabotinsky as a political tool in ongoing campaigns, the real Jabotinsky was far more complex in his political thought – someone whose legacy has been lost in the mist of time. As with Lenin or the Baal Shem Tov, the ideas and persona of the founder of a dynamic movement have been mythologised to meet the political exigencies of the present.

Jabotinsky was immersed in the political whirlpool of fin-de-siècle, pre-World War I Europe when a student in Rome. He explored syndicalism, anarchism and later Futurism, but he was also affected by Italian liberalism – to which he often referred in his writings.¹ In the 1930s he bemoaned the political seduction of the young in an age of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. The promotion of Betar as ‘obedient rebels’

¹ Vladimir Jabotinsky, ‘Zeyde Liberalizm’, *Haynt*, 14 October 1932.

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provided Jabotinsky with a political instrument to utilise against his internal opponents.²

He instead espoused the increasingly unpopular belief in parliamentary democracy and the rule of law.

This reaction to the often accepted ideological wisdom of the day was related to his questioning of the role of Judaism in Jewish political life. While he certainly utilised religious imagery to attract followers,³ Jabotinsky never warmed to the idea of organised religion and deference to rabbis. He believed that it was the people's sense of nationhood, rather than religion per se, that had allowed the Jews to survive two millennia of persecution and exile. This inversion of the reason for Jewish survival down the centuries – the nation now at the centre with religion on the outside – was the dividing line between Jabotinsky and religious Zionism. For Jabotinsky, nationalism rather than religion was the holy Torah.⁴

Judaism was a national commodity, belonging to all Jews. Jabotinsky argued, however, that there was no connection between this national possession and 'the religious obligations ascribed to it'.⁵

Jabotinsky identified not only with Garibaldi, but also with the biblical Gideon ben Yoash, the military saviour of the Jews.⁶ He rejected the monarchism of the religious for the republicanism of Gideon – who like Cromwell refused to wear the crown. Belief in God was transformed into belief in the nation.

Yet he also opposed the maximalism of intellectuals such as Abba Ahimeir and youthful political activists such as Menahem Begin. Although he was head of the Irgun, Jabotinsky was ambivalent and often conflicted about the need for retaliatory violence. This often placed him at odds with military figures such as David Raziel and Avraham Stern. While he attempted to navigate the choppy waters of Revisionist Maximalism – sometimes compromising, sometime opposing⁷ – the worsening situation in Europe in the 1930s and static situation in Palestine mitigated against any success.

² Daniel Kupfert Heller, 'Obedient Children and Reckless Rebels: Jabotinsky's Youth Politics and the Case for Authoritarian Leadership 1931–1933', *Journal of Israeli History* vol. 34, no. 1 (March 2015), pp. 1–24.

³ Arye Naor, 'Jabotinsky's New Jew: Concept and Models', *Journal of Israeli History*, vol. 30, no. 2 (September 2011), pp. 141–59.

⁴ Vladimir Jabotinsky, 'Shir Ha-Degel', *Rassviet*, 15, 16 and 17 April 1927.

⁵ Arye Naor, 'The Leader as a Poet: The Political and Ideological Poetry of Ze'ev Jabotinsky', *Israel Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 2 2014 pp. 161–81.

⁶ Vladimir Jabotinsky, 'Ha-Neder', 17 August 1934, Jabotinsky Institute Archives, Tel Aviv.

⁷ Vladimir Jabotinsky, 'Maximalism', *Moment*, 1 February 1935.

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Yet Jabotinsky did provide the Zionist Right with an anti-socialist veneer. In part this was due to the Bolshevisation of Russia following the October Revolution. While always an opponent of Tsarist autocracy, he gradually came to hate Lenin's suppression of Russian culture and freedom of thought and speech – particularly the closing of the non-Bolshevik press, such as his own newspaper, *Russkie Vedomosti*.⁸ Russia was no workers' state. Like his hero, the poet, Dante Alighieri, condemned in absentia, Jabotinsky could not return to his native city. By 1930 he was in exile twice over – from Odessa and from Palestine.

Jabotinsky moved from a non-socialist position to an anti-socialist one. In the wake of the emigration of the Polish Jewish middle class to Palestine in the mid-1920s, he began to passionately espouse private enterprise and the cause of the individual against the collective.⁹

Jabotinsky was in fact not entrapped by ideology, but exhibited a flexibility in dealing with opponents such as Ben-Gurion. Indeed, it can be argued that the ideologists – Tabenkin on the left and Begin on the right – prevented an agreement between Jabotinsky and Ben-Gurion in 1934 which would have changed the course of Zionist history.¹⁰ In 1915 Jabotinsky proclaimed that a settlement was not the be-all and end-all of the Zionist enterprise.¹¹ In his speech to the New Zionist Organisation conference in Prague at the beginning of 1938, he attacked Ben-Gurion's arguments for partition in the belief that the state would expand in the future. Jabotinsky condemned 'small-scale Zionism' and argued that if a smaller partitioned state proved to be acceptable, then there would never be an opportunity to later expand. If Arab land was conquered in the future, it would lead to unforeseen problems. As he put it, 'Only an idiot would believe that a military occupation would be a possibility.'¹²

Jabotinsky died in New York in 1940. Therefore, unlike his successors, he was not hampered by the burden of state and the difficult choices that had to be made. The three Likud prime ministers, Begin, Shamir and Netanyahu – as well as the two Kadima premiers, Sharon and Olmert – all had to recognise the limits of ideology and power. Being in government was fundamentally different from the freedom of opposition. All

⁸ Vladimir Jabotinsky, Letter to Anya, 11 June 1919, *Igrot, 1918–1922* (Jerusalem, 1997).

⁹ Vladimir Jabotinsky, 'The Shopkeeper', *Rassviet*, 29 May 1927.

¹⁰ Menahem Begin, 'Address to the Second World Conference of Betar', 6 January 1935, Jabotinsky Institute Archives, Tel Aviv.

¹¹ Vladimir Jabotinsky, 'Activism', *Di Tribune*, 15 October 1915.

¹² Vladimir Jabotinsky, Opening Address at the New Zionist Organisation conference, Prague, September 1938, in *Neumim, 1927–1940*, Ketavim 5, ed. Eri Jabotinsky (Jerusalem, 1958), p. 298.

these prime ministers, regardless of their loyalty to ideology, had to recognise the world of realpolitik and the political pressure of the United States.

Throughout his life, Menahem Begin proclaimed a fidelity to Jabotinsky's teachings. Yet there were fundamental philosophical differences between the two men. A central one was that Begin believed in military Zionism and a revolt against Britain. Jabotinsky was less enamoured of the prospect of violence and preferred diplomacy.

Jabotinsky was acutely aware, very early on, of the British attempt to row back from the Balfour Declaration.¹³ Even so Jabotinsky regarded the pro-British orientation as both central and important. At one time, he worked with the Labour MP Josiah Wedgwood on the idea of Palestine as a seventh dominion of the British Empire, and there was even talk about Palestine becoming a crown colony. The watershed of the pro-British orientation was the killing of Jews by Palestinian Arabs during the disturbances of 1929. Many Zionists, including Jabotinsky, were highly critical of British conduct during this period.¹⁴

During the Revisionist conference in Prague in August 1930, there were vociferous attacks on British policy – particularly in the wake of the Shaw Commission and the general British approach of blaming the Jews for the situation. The Revisionists were annoyed at the British perception that while pogroms in European Russia were reprehensible and should be condemned, in the Middle East murder, mayhem and massacre were quietly acknowledged as a traditional way of solving problems.¹⁵

Yet the tide of history flowed in Begin's direction. For many small nations Albion was seen as indeed perfidious and two-faced. Jan Masaryk, the Czechoslovak foreign minister, felt betrayed by Britain. Promises made became promises broken in the late 1930s. Masaryk sarcastically proposed to Chaim Weizmann that they purchase a fine three-storey house in London. The bottom floor would be reserved for Haile Selassie, the exiled emperor of Ethiopia. The middle floor would house Masaryk and his countrymen. The top floor would be inhabited by Weizmann and his Zionist colleagues. All harboured a sense of betrayal by the British despite the genteel explanations as to why a course of action was necessary.¹⁶

¹³ Vladimir Jabotinsky, Letter to Richard Lichtheim, 1 March 1922, *Igrot*, 1918–1922 (Jerusalem, 1997).

¹⁴ Vladimir Jabotinsky, 'Address to a meeting of Revisionists in Paris,' 29 August 1929, *Rassviet*, 9 September 1929.

¹⁵ *Rassviet*, 27 April 1930.

¹⁶ Anita Shapira, *Ben-Gurion: Father of Modern Israel* (London, 2014), p. 112.

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Following Jabotinsky's death, his movement fragmented into three main factions: the Revisionists themselves, the Irgun Zvai Leumi and Lehi. The latter two took up arms. While Begin's Irgun considered itself an underground army which was fighting the British occupier, Shamir's Lehi conducted individual acts of terror, including the assassination of British officials and Jews who worked for the British.

Menahem Begin, however, led a charmed political life. In 1948 he emerged as the undisputed leader of the Zionist Right – not only because he had courageously led the Irgun but also because many of his potential rivals were dead and buried. The deceased Jabotinsky was proclaimed 'the Father of the Revolt' against the British, while the very much alive Abba Ahimeir – who had an equal claim to that title – was marginalised. In the years between the first election in 1949 until 1977, when Begin became prime minister, he astutely widened his political support in building a cluster party, the Likud. As a traditional Jew, he promoted 'Jewishness' rather than 'Israeliness' and appealed to religious Zionists.¹⁷ To the General Zionists, he upheld the rule of law and democratic norms. To the labour Zionists, he reflected Ben-Gurion's sense of reality and willingness to take hard decisions.

While Begin adhered selectively to some of Jabotinsky's ideas, he concurred with Jabotinsky's assessment of the passing of liberalism – albeit in the aftermath of the Shoah. In February 1950 he commented:

When liberal thought flourished it was said of the state's authority that it ought to be limited to the role of 'night watchman'. That period is past and every free man prays that we will not be forced to admit that it has gone forever.¹⁸

Ben-Gurion, however, depicted Begin and his party, Herut, as poisonous weeds accidentally planted in the golden garden of Zionism. They were seen as fascists who happened to escape such labelling purely because they were Jewish. Herut was viewed as a party of gunmen and gangsters, far removed from the struggle for an independent Israel.

The promotion of a more conciliatory, less outspoken, older Begin after 1967 led to a wider public acceptance. By the end of the 1960s, even Ben-Gurion – and certainly after the death of his wife – seemed to drop his long-time antagonism towards Begin.¹⁹ His State List, which he

¹⁷ Naor, 'Jabotinsky's New Jew'.

¹⁸ Menahem Begin, Speech in the Knesset, 1 February 1950, in Itamar Rabinovitch and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society, Politics and Foreign Relations, 1948–Present* (Oxford, 1984), p. 45.

¹⁹ David Ben-Gurion, Letter to Menahem Begin, 6 February 1969, Jabotinsky Institute Archives, Tel Aviv.

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FIGURE 1. Mapai election poster (late 1948) indicating a Herut gunman shooting a worker-pioneer in the back. The words 'rak kak' (Only Thus!), the Revisionist and Irgun slogan plus the map of an Israel incorporating both banks of the Jordan are inscribed on the gunman's cuff. The caption reads 'the key of Herut' which is probably an answer to a contemporary Herut poster showing Ben-Gurion with the key to the future – as long as you were a member of and voted for Mapai.

Courtesy of the Central Zionist Archives.

headed in the 1969 election, became one of the founding components of the Likud four years later.

In his drive for power, Begin dispensed, one after another, with the services of veteran Revisionists, former comrades from the Irgun, youthful

upstarts and charismatic military men who wished to displace him. His toughness, exemplified by his long sojourn in the political wilderness, was also defined by his understanding of the non-negotiable ideological boundaries of the state.

Yet Begin in government realised that power offers possibilities for change – and change might mean adjusting the principles of a lifetime for what might be viewed as the greater good. After all, his party had joined the Histadrut in the 1960s after decades of refusal while the claim to the East Bank was gradually downgraded. It was therefore Menahem Begin who made peace with the largest Arab state, Egypt, and returned territory which many on the right ideologically regarded as part of the Land of Israel.

The Camp David Accord, signed by Begin and Sadat in 1979, led to a fragmentation of the Israeli Right. Those who could not stomach the agreement accused Begin of betrayal and left the Likud to form Far Right parties. The umbrella which Begin had erected to shelter the Right was now in tatters.

Begin's successor, Yitzhak Shamir, who opposed the Camp David Accord, similarly believed that no part of the historic homeland should be given up and no settlements evacuated. Yet he accepted the first partition of Palestine in 1920 while rejecting the second one in 1947. He did not oppose the accord with Jordan in 1994. On the other hand, his views on the Palestinians had not changed. He argued that the Oslo Accord in 1993 would lead to the destruction of Israel. While he later berated Netanyahu for relegating ideology to a lower rung, he could not avoid the reality of the Madrid conference in 1991, which he reluctantly attended. Unlike Jabotinsky, both Begin and Shamir bore witness to the Shoah and this affected them to the core. Unlike the cosmopolitan Jabotinsky, both men exhibited a deep suspicion of outsiders.

The Right was aided by the emergence of redemptionist Zionism from traditional religious Zionism after 1967. The desire to colonise the West Bank – and beyond – to recapture and re-establish locations of biblical remembrance particularly moved the religious Zionists from left to right. Their political religiosity transformed religious Zionism into Zionist religion. The original mission of religious Zionism was simply to safeguard the place of religion in the new state and to ensure that any government understood the needs of the religious public. The national religious camp therefore supported the British proposal for Jewish settlement in Uganda in 1902 and endorsed the UN partition of Mandatory Palestine in 1947. The dormant messianism within religious Zionism was awoken chiefly

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through the teachings of Zvi Yehudah Kook, who unlike his father, the revered Avraham Yitzhak Kook, had also lived through the Shoah and witnessed the establishment of Israel.

The 1970s also gave rise to an awareness in religious circles that conventional Zionism had brought neither normalisation of the Jewish condition nor an end to anti-Semitism. The conclusion was that the task of Zionism was not to achieve normalisation and assimilate into the nations of the world, but to transform the Jews into a holy people as part of the messianic process.

In the early 1980s the desire to colonise the West Bank and to integrate it into a Greater Israel found its political inspiration in the IRA hunger strikers and the struggle of the Viet Cong in Vietnam. They too had resisted partition long after the formal division of their countries.²⁰

With the passing of the generation of Begin and Shamir – and the reality of the Oslo Accord with Arafat – the relegation of ideology seemingly took place within the Likud. The inflexibility of ideology was often substituted by banging the drum of security. Yet even Begin had argued that the retention of territory prevented not only another war but also the occurrence of another holocaust. Begin highlighted the security question for the Right when he resigned from Golda Meir's government in August 1970 during the War of Attrition.²¹ The retention of the territories, he believed, would ensure peace, whereas the 'land for peace' formula would have the very opposite effect. The status quo of remaining in the West Bank was therefore preferable to leaving it. During the Camp David negotiations in 1978, Sharon advised Begin that the evacuation of Yamit in Sinai did not impair Israel's security. Sharon further suggested that the security argument did not displace the case of historic right, but instead overlaid it with today's reality.

Following the Oslo Accord, Netanyahu completed the transformation of the Likud from a party based on an outworn ideological faith to one based on an ever-present need for security. Netanyahu maintained a precarious balance between the pragmatists and the ideologists of the Far Right. While the ongoing planning and implementation of the expansion of West Bank settlements proceeded apace, he was willing to return 13 percent of the West Bank territory at the Wye Plantation negotiations in 1998. Unlike Begin and Shamir, Netanyahu did not

²⁰ Ehud Sprinzak, *The Ascendance of Israel's Radical Right* (Oxford, 1991), p. 183.

²¹ Arye Naor, 'The Security Argument in the Territorial Debate in Israel: Rhetoric and 150–77.

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promise to retain ‘the Land of Israel’ in its entirety. His prevarication in resigning from the Sharon government over the proposed withdrawal from Gaza suggested a lingering indecision over the merits of ideological commitment.

Yet this displacement of the primacy of ideology was not shared by either the Far Right or the religious Right. In addition to fidelity to restoring the entire Land of Israel, Menahem Begin’s advocacy of regime change – from ousting Abdullah from Jordan in 1950 to forging an alliance with the Christian Maronites in Lebanon in 1982 – seemed to be placed on the shelf following the Lebanon debacle. Instead the Far Right stepped into the breach in advocating this approach. Avigdor Lieberman during Operation Cast Lead in 2009 and Naftali Bennett during Operation Protective Edge in 2014 both urged Netanyahu to allow the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) ‘to finish the job’ in eradicating Hamas from Gaza. Netanyahu, wary of the potential number of casualties and the political cost of re-occupation, refrained from taking any action. The task of Likud prime ministers therefore appeared to be primarily to defend Israel strongly when it was assaulted, but to defer and to stonewall politically while expanding the West Bank settlements.

Up until the election of 2015, Lieberman tried to project his party as ‘the real Likud’, in opposition first to Sharon and then to Netanyahu. Yisrael Beiteinu significantly described itself as ‘a national movement with the clear vision to follow in the brave path of Ze’ev Jabotinsky’.

Lieberman differed from the Likud and its traditional adherence to the Land of Israel in suggesting that the solution to the demographic problem lay in a two-state solution with more ethnically homogeneous populations. He argued, therefore, that Israel should annex major settlement blocs near the Green Line while transferring the area around Umm al-Fahm and Tayibe in Israel where Israeli Arabs were concentrated to Palestinian sovereignty.

While the religious Right continued to occasionally challenge the authority of the state, the aura of figures such as Naftali Bennett – young, bright and professionally successful – persuaded many non-religious Jews to vote for HaBayit Hayehudi in 2013. Even so, many in the religious camp saw an Israel characterised by licentiousness and permissiveness – a corroding influence which could bring about the spiritual withering of the state.

In one sense little had altered since the formation in the early 1950s of the small group of religious Zionists, Gahelit, which first followed Zvi Yehudah Kook, then grew into Gush Emunim and finally cascaded as a