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The Demise of the Peace Process

Aryeh Deri's trial and consequent conviction generated a wave of protest that persisted long after the 1999 elections were over. The summer of 2000 was especially tense. Deri was scheduled to start serving his prison sentence in September of that year. His many followers were determined to prevent that from happening, but to no avail. On an early September morning, Deri arrived at the gates of the Ayalon Prison, where new inmates are processed and later assigned to the prison in which they would serve their sentence. Deri was accompanied by hundreds of followers, to whom he spoke just minutes before entering the gates of the complex. He made a moving speech, thanking his supporters and telling them that he knew they would never desert him. Soon afterwards, Deri was processed and assigned to the minimum security Maasyahu Prison, close to the city of Ramla. When he arrived at the jail, Shas activists had already set up a stronghold outside the prison. They promised to turn the place into a yeshiva named Sha'agat Aryeh—"Aryeh's (Lion's) roar" and not to leave the premises until the beloved leader was released. On Friday morning, September 29—the eve of Rosh HaShana, (the Jewish New Year)—I was scheduled to give a talk at a campus located not far from the prison. Just out of curiosity, I drove by the new yeshiva to take a peek. The compound was a collection of tents, trailers, and other temporary structures. It looked wretched, but it was swarming with action. Deri's devotees were planning to spend the holiday next to their leader, and the preparations were in full swing.

Two hours later, as I was driving back to Haifa, I turned the radio on. The Shas protest that had captured the headlines over the preceding months had suddenly been pushed down the ladder and mentioned only incidentally. A new, major story was unfolding. The previous day, Ariel Sharon paid a visit to the Temple Mount, by far the most sensitive site of friction between Jews and Muslims. Fifteen months earlier, shortly after Netanyahu's loss in the elections and subsequent

resignation, Sharon was elected as the head of Likud. Initially it seemed that this was a temporary appointment of one of the tribes' elders who was called to rebuild the bruised party and then pass the torch to a younger leader. As always, though, Sharon had other plans. His decision to visit the holy site shortly after the collapse of the Camp David talks worried the Palestinian leaders. In the eyes of the Palestinians Sharon was the ultimate Israeli provocateur. They never forgot his involvement in the events that led to the massacre in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982 while he served as the minister of defense. Palestinian officials who sensed a significant degree of unrest during the days that led to the visit conveyed their concerns to their Israeli counterparts. The latter approached Sharon several times and asked him to reconsider, but he was adamant. As expected, the event turned into a media circus and Sharon seemed to enjoy the commotion. The same cannot be said about the Shabak security agency and the police who were responsible for Sharon's safety. In light of the information they received regarding the Palestinians' growing anger, the commanders on the ground decided to cut the visit short. Despite some violent clashes between Palestinians and the police immediately after the swift visit, the security forces on both sides released a sigh of relief. It would have been difficult to imagine what lay awaiting them only a few hours later.[1]

Sharon's visit released the last safety valve over a volcano. The failure of the Camp David summit just two months earlier had put Israel and the Palestinians on a collision course. Despite desperate attempts to keep the momentum of the negotiations going, both the Palestinian and the Israeli leaders were disillusioned and conveyed their frustrations to their people. On the day after the visit, as soon as the Friday prayers in the Al-Aqsa Mosque ended, a protest broke out in Jerusalem's Old City. Hundreds of Palestinian worshipers clashed with Israeli security forces and threw stones at Jews who were praying next to the Wailing Wall, located less than one hundred yards from the mosque. Despite the heightened level of alert, the extraordinary intensity of the protest caught the police forces by surprise, and their response was harsh. When the first wave of the riots subsided, it was clear that the relations between the Israelis and the Palestinians had reached a turning point. When news about the deadly clashes in Jerusalem reached other Palestinian cities, all hell broke loose. The events of the next day, Saturday, September 30, became engraved in the Palestinian collective memory as the symbol of the unfolding uprising.

On that morning, Jamal al-Durrah and his twelve-year-old son Muhammad left their home in the Bureij refugee camp and traveled to Gaza to look at cars. On their way home, they were caught in heavy crossfire between Israeli and Palestinian forces near the settlement of Netzarim. A French news crew that arrived on the scene found Jamal shielding his son's body with his own while begging the shooters to cease their fire, but the shooting only intensified. The

cameraman, who was looking for cover himself, diverted his lens from the dreadful scene for a brief moment. When he refocused, Muhammad was lying dead on the ground while his badly wounded father was leaning helplessly against a wall. The horrific footage made evening news headlines all over the world. Muhammad al-Durrah became the symbol of the second Palestinian uprising, now more commonly known as the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

Frustration and Aggression

The tragedy in Gaza fueled the violence. This time, however, the riots were not confined to the Palestinian territories. The Palestinian citizens of Israel, who usually refrained from joining the waves of protest that erupted on the other side of the Green Line, were infuriated.[2] After watching the grim pictures of Muhammad al-Durrah's death, thousands of protesters stormed the streets of their villages and towns, mostly in Galilee. These events did not come out of the blue. The Palestinian citizens of Israel had felt an acute sense of deprivation and injustice for decades. Their initial desire to show support for their Palestinian brothers on the other side of the border turned into a channel for conveying their own frustrations.[3] The local police forces were flabbergasted, having never experienced riots of such magnitude; they were underprepared and outnumbered. They used tear gas and rubber bullets in an attempt to contain the riots, but the protesters only grew angrier. Several police officers, who felt that there their lives were threatened, used live ammunition, leaving two demonstrators dead and dozens injured. At that point, the violence spiraled out of control and clashes erupted throughout the country. Seven more demonstrators were killed on the following day. The Palestinian authority expressed its support for the demonstrators, while Prime Minister Barak and his cabinet members desperately looked for ways to put the genie back in the bottle.[4]

On October 1, the situation in the West Bank took yet another turn for the worse. A large group of Palestinian rioters and militiamen besieged a compound known as Joseph's Tomb in the outskirts of Nablus. The attack surprised the small group of Israeli border police officers, who were on a routine assignment of protecting the compound. One of the servicemen, Corporal Madhat Yusuf, was shot in the neck by a Palestinian sniper and began bleeding profusely; he needed to be evacuated to a hospital to stop the bleeding. Representatives of the IDF preferred to avoid further bloodshed and tried to coordinate a rescue operation with the Palestinian police, but to no avail. It took the rescuers four hours to enter the compound. By the time they attended to Yusuf's wounds, he had already died.[5] The fragile collaboration between the Israeli and the Palestinian

security forces that had developed slowly following the formation of the Palestinian National Authority was now shattered.

A week later, on Saturday, October 7, Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia Islamic Group, made its own contribution to the escalating conflict by attacking an IDF convoy on the Israeli side of the Israel-Lebanon border. The Lebanese militia kidnapped three soldiers who were patrolling the road. While most Israelis' attention was diverted to the northern border, the violence inside Israel reached a dangerous peak. At 10:30 p.m., Jan Bechor and his brother headed south on the Haifa-Tel Aviv highway. As they traveled under an overpass near the Arab village of Jisr az-Zarqa, rocks were thrown at the car as it rushed by. One of the stones shattered the car's front windshield, and Bechor suffered a direct blow to the chest killing him instantly. He was the only Jew who died in a clash between Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel during the initial phase of the conflict. The death toll on the other side, however, was significantly higher: twelve Palestinian citizens of Israel were killed.[6]

While Palestinians rallied behind Muhammad al-Durrah's death, an event of similar importance for the Israelis occurred on October 12. For most Israelis, that day's events came to symbolize their complete disillusionment with the idea of a peaceful solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. Two Israeli reserve soldiers, Vadim Nurzhitz and Yossi Avrahami, drove a civilian car to their unit's gathering point near the settlement of Beit-El. Both men served as drivers and thus had limited military training. They also lacked knowledge of the roads in the West Bank and paid little attention to the Israeli checkpoint in Beitunia, which was located two miles west of the city of Ramallah. They passed through the checkpoint straight into Ramallah. The two were immediately identified by the locals as Israeli servicemen, were detained by Palestinian police officers, and led to a nearby police station. Rumors of the arrest of Israeli "commandos" spread rapidly throughout the city, and within a few minutes the stunned soldiers were surrounded by an angry mob. The arresting officers handed the two over to the cheering crowd. They were subsequently lynched inside the police compound. Once again, a European news crew, which had been sent to cover the uprising in the West Bank, happened to be on the scene and caught the events on tape. The Israeli public was shocked by the gruesome footage. Two images in particular were engraved in the minds of most Israelis. The first depicted the dead body of one of the soldiers as it was thrown out of the second floor of the police compound into the riled-up crowd. The second picture was of a young Palestinian whose hands were covered in blood. He stood by the same window from which the body was thrown and, to the delight of the crowd below, raised his bloody hands in the air.[7]

Jewish-Arab relations had been strained from the time the first large wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine in the last decades of the nineteenth

century. These communities were divided along national, ethnic, religious, and cultural lines. Further, they fought over very scarce resources, land, and sovereignty. The divisions and animosity between the groups undermined any prospect for integration of the communities. This was clearly portrayed in an almost complete voluntary residential segregation.[8] While the separation prevented interactions that could have built trust between the communities, it also reduced the potential for friction and therefore the outbreak of violence.

However, Israel's massive expropriations of Arab lands in the late 1940s and 1950s posed serious obstacles for the Palestinian citizens of the state and generated a deep sense of injustice. The Jewish Agency and the KKL enacted uneven land allocation policies that complicated the situation even more. While Jews were encouraged to establish new settlements near Arab population centers in the Galilee and the Negev, requests from Arabs who wanted to build houses within their own villages or to purchase lands for both residential and agricultural purposes were often turned down. Frustrated Arabs who found it harder and harder to build a home near their own villages and towns looked for alternatives.[9] Adal Qadan, a resident of Baqa al-Gharbiyye, was one of them. He worked as a nurse in the Hillel Yaffe medical center of Hadera and interacted with Jews on a daily basis. In 1995 he decided to move his young family to a different town where they could enjoy a higher standard of living. He chose the newly established, tranquil community of Katzir, located just six miles from Baqa al-Gharbiyye. At the time Katzir was looking for young, middle-class families, and Qadan believed that his family fit the profile perfectly. There was one hurdle to cross, though: like many other small communities in Israel, Katzir installed an admissions committee that was responsible for conducting background checks and interviewing candidates interested in purchasing property and joining the community. To Qadan's surprise, the committee denied his application on the grounds of "social incompatibility," which of course was a facade. Katzir's admissions committee wanted to preserve the community's Jewish homogeneity. Thus, regardless of the Qadans' educational background and socio-economic status, they were deemed unfit to live in Katzir. Due to Adal Qadan's deep sense of injustice and determination, this incident became a constitutional milestone in Israel. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) took Qadan's case to Israel's High Court of Justice, where the justices found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. The case was a direct challenge of Israel's attempt to reconcile its Jewish ethnic characteristics with its aspiration to adhere to liberal principles. The question at hand was whether Israel's Land Administration could legally charter national resources to a governmental body (in this case the Jewish Agency), which would then ban non-Jewish citizens of the state from enjoying that resource.[10] In March 2000, after several failed attempts to reach a compromise, the court ruled that such discrimination was illegal. The riots that broke out seven months after the court's ruling distracted the attention of the public and authorities from the case of the Qadans and raised serious questions regarding the possibility that Jews and Arabs could ever live together peacefully.

During the first week of the riots, Arab demonstrators blocked roads that led to Jewish communities in the northern part of the country. In several instances, angry protesters approached Jewish houses in the area in a manner that made their residents feel trapped and threatened. The sudden rise of their neighbors, with whom they had commercial and mostly cordial relations, generated a sense panic. Frequent comparisons were made to the massacre of the Hebron Jews by their neighbors in 1929 as well as to the long history of pogroms in Europe and the Middle East. The fact that the riots took place in the heart of sovereign Israel only exacerbated the fear shared by many Israeli Jews that the Arab citizens of the state were in fact a "fifth column" and that, despite their Israeli citizenship, they were committed to the Palestinian cause and were just waiting for the opportunity to reclaim their state back from the Jews.

As a result, the time following the October riots was marked by expressions of fear, betrayal, and alienation on both sides of the conflict. In media interviews, politicians from the Right suggested that if the Arabs were unsatisfied with the Israeli democracy, they should consider relocating to the Palestinian territories or to one of the authoritarian Arab countries in the Middle East. In the meantime, the latent fear and anger of the Jews swiftly translated into action, and many decided to cut whatever ties they had with their Arab neighbors. The outcomes were mostly felt in the economic arena; Arab-owned businesses such as restaurants, bakeries, and mechanic shops, which relied mostly on Jewish clientele, suffered from economic setbacks that brought many of them to the brink of bankruptcy. There was no guiding hand behind the Jews' decision to minimize their contact with the Arabs. It was a grassroots, emotional response that reflected both the mounting collective fears and the desire to punish their "ungrateful" neighbors. The Jewish society, which only weeks earlier had been torn by its internal political and religious cleavages, rallied to protect itself against the perceived mounting Palestinian threat.[11]

The first few weeks of the Intifada were marked by continuous exchanges of fire between Palestinian and Israeli forces. The escalating violence and the failed attempts to revive the peace process left Barak, who by that time was leading a minority government, with no option but to call for new elections. The date of the elections was set for February 6, 2001. Barak was concerned about his predecessor, Netanyahu, who seemed determined to reclaim the leadership of the Likud and thus become a serious contender for the role of prime minister. In an attempt to prevent Netanyahu from making a comeback, Barak took advantage of a loophole in the new electoral law, which stipulated that only an acting member of the Knesset is eligible for competing in premiership elections. Barak

offered his personal resignation, a step that led to an unprecedented situation in which the Israeli public was called to vote for a new prime minister while the Knesset remained intact. The maneuver was successful. Netanyahu, who was not a member of the Knesset at the time, was automatically disqualified from presenting his candidacy.[12] However, Barak, who has gained a reputation for possessing outstanding analytical skills, suffered from a lack of understanding of human emotions. He was oblivious to the changes that the Israeli society had undergone since his election a year and a half earlier, and many voters considered him a disappointment. Jewish constituents were especially disillusioned by his clumsy attempts to bring the conflict with the Palestinians to an end and were traumatized by the consequent eruption of violence. Furthermore, the Palestinian citizens of Israel held Barak accountable for the violent actions taken by the police in response to the October riots.

With Netanyahu eliminated from the race, Barak was relieved. He assumed that the seventy-two-year-old Ariel Sharon, the incumbent leader of Likud and a longtime pariah for many Israelis, would not be a serious contender. Sharon, on the other hand, knew that this was most likely his last chance to lead Likud to victory and to become Israel's prime minister. The timing could not have been better for him. Following two consecutive tenures of young prime ministers, Netanyahu and Barak, who began their tenures with high hopes and left office with less than impressive records, most Israelis were yearning for an elder leader who would restore a sense of sanity in a situation that had rapidly spiraled out of control.

After years of condemnation and portrayal as a rogue politician, Sharon was vindicated. His advisors ran a campaign designed to soothe the public's fears. Sharon was portrayed as a level-headed, grandfatherly figure who was the only one capable of stopping the escalating conflict.[13] Sharon's victory was decisive. He carried 62.4 percent of the vote, while Barak secured only 37.6 percent. Furthermore, since these were special elections in which the public was asked to cast a ballot for only the prime minister, the division of power in the Knesset did not change. Unlike Barak, who was faced with major challenges when he was trying to form his coalition in 1999, Sharon had no such problem. The powerful right-wing bloc in the legislature offered him various alternatives for coalition formation. Loyal to his moderate campaign, Sharon formed an oversized National Unity cabinet comprised of both the Labor and the right-wing factions, which allowed him substantial political maneuverability.[14] Yet, Sharon's promise to calm down the situation was hardly an attainable goal. By early 2001, shortly after he assumed power, the conflict escalated even more. Suicide bombers attacked every major Israeli city, initiating a reign of terror unprecedented in the country's history. The first three months following the elections saw nine suicide attacks. However, the tenth

attack at the gate of the Dolphi Disco in Tel Aviv, began a new and somber chapter for many Israelis.

"Kahane Was Right"

Meanwhile, Kach, which over the years had faded away from the public eye, received a sad, yet important boost of energy. On December 31, 2000, a few weeks after the tenth anniversary of his father's assassination, Binyamin Zeev Kahane, the younger son of Rabbi Meir Kahane, was driving from Jerusalem back to his home in the settlement of Tapuach accompanied by his wife and their six children. Near the settlement of Ofra, they were ambushed by Palestinian gunmen. Both parents died shortly after the attack, leaving behind six young orphans. The death of young Kahane expedited the merger of his splinter faction Kahane Chai (Kahane Lives) with Kach, which his father's disciples still held together. The tragedy brought some of the color back into the cheeks of these two marginalized movements as they looked for the right opportunity to pave their way to the center of the political arena.[15]

The attack at Dolphi Disco was carried out on Friday, June 1, 2001, at 11:30 p.m. where dozens of young people lined up near the front of the nightclub on the southern end of Tel Aviv's beach boardwalk. The crowd was unique in one sense: the nightclub was a popular gathering place for young immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The suicide bomber who found his way into the crowd carried a heavy explosive belt loaded with shrapnel. His dispatchers from Hamas (the Sunni Muslim group), had instructed him to cause the most devastating impact possible. They succeeded in more ways than one. Twenty-one young men and women were killed and more than 150 were injured. In the course of the evening, any trace of animosity toward the Russian newcomers was erased. The Dolphi Disco attack served as their informal initiation into Israel's culture of bereavement, and they were embraced by the overwhelming majority of the longtime Jewish citizens. The hours following the attack brought more violence. Less than 150 yards separated the Dolphi Disco from the Hassan Bek Mosque, which serves the Muslim worshipers from the adjacent city of Jaffa. In the early hours the following Saturday morning, an inflamed Jewish mob surrounded the mosque.[16] They shouted, "Kahane was right" and "Arabs out." For the first time in years, demonstrators appeared in the heart of Tel Aviv wearing the yellow T-shirts of Kach. This demonstration of power was far from trivial. According to Israel's Prevention of Terror Ordinance, any individual that showed support to a group such as Kach, which was designated as terrorist entity, could face up to three years in jail. Even so, the police forces at the scene were not particularly interested in the Kach's provocateurs. The events of October of the

previous year were still fresh in their minds, and their efforts focused on containing a demonstration that threatened to escalate into a bloodbath. The incensed demonstrators slowly closed in on the mosque, throwing large stones at the compound and trying to set it on fire. The besieged worshipers responded by throwing heavy objects at the mob, but this time the police were better prepared. By carefully executing riot control tactics, they succeeded in diffusing the situation.

From the perspective of Kach's followers, this event was a significant milestone. The group that was for many years condemned, marginalized, and on the brinks of disintegration had begun a speedy process toward redemption.[17] Within the next several months, signs and stickers with the slogan "Kahane was right" appeared all over Israel. This time, neither the Knesset nor the law enforcement agencies seemed to have any interest in cracking down on the proliferating phenomenon. Two years later, in the 2003 national elections, the Kahanist ideology received the ultimate seal of approval. The former Likud Knesset member Michael Kleiner took the lead of the new Herut faction. By then Benny Begin, the symbol of the small party, had already abandoned it. Shortly after he became the chairman of the party, Kleiner invited Baruch Marzel, Kahane's former right hand, to join him as his number two. Together they positioned Herut on the far right-wing edge of the political spectrum. They managed to secure 36,202 votes but fell short from meeting the 1.5 percent representation threshold and securing two parliamentary seats.[18] For the time being, Kach was denied parliamentary representation. However, and more importantly, "Kahanism" was re-legitimized and deepened its roots in the public sphere.

The New Conservatives

The escalating violence generated a paradoxical situation. While the Jews in Israel were terrorized and felt victimized, citizens of many countries around the world perceived Israel as the aggressor. This simplistic perspective of the conflict was loudly articulated in September 2001. Ten days prior to the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., much of the international media attention focused on the World Conference against Racism (also known as the Durban 1 Summit), which was orchestrated by the UN. A large and well-organized group of Islamic countries were determined to use the event as a platform to condemn Israel for violating the human rights of the Palestinians. The delegates of these countries were supported by activists of international civil rights organizations, which were also in attendance at the summit. South Africa, which was still healing from the scars inflicted by five decades of apartheid, served as the perfect location for the summit. The premise that Zionist ideology

as a whole was based on racist principles, that Israel followed in the footsteps of apartheid, and that the State of Israel was in fact executing a carefully devised ethnic cleansing policy against the Palestinians were received at the summit with open arms.

The attention that the conference generated was cut short by the events of September 11. In the long run, however, it had a significant impact for Israel, a lesson I learned less than a year later. In the summer of 2002, I was engaged in a preliminary research on suicide bombers and happily accepted an invitation to participate in an academic panel organized by the UN office in Geneva on the recruitment of youth by terrorist groups. A week after the organizers first contacted me I received a second phone call. The woman on the other end of the line was apologetic but firm: she told me that, due to political sensitivities, the conference organizers had decided to remove my institutional affiliation, which at the time was the University of Haifa, from the program. I was surprised and asked her for the reason for the decision. She explained that despite their best efforts, the organizers had failed to find a Palestinian speaker for the panel and thus they could not allow the participation of an Israeli representative with no Palestinian counterpart. My attempts to explain that my presentation was purely academic and in fact had no direct reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, fell on deaf ears. Eventually, I decided to withdraw from the conference. This occurrence gave me a glimpse into Israel's deteriorating international reputation.

The denunciation of Israel came from a wide variety of individuals and institutions, including post-Zionist Israeli academics, left-wing European activists, and various Islamic movements around the world. Some focused on Israel's policies and were motivated by concerns for human rights. Others saw it as an opportunity to portray Israel as the source for all the troubles in the Middle East, and there were those who simply jumped on the bandwagon that legitimized the expression of old anti-Semitic sentiments by covering them in anti-Israeli rhetoric.[19] The mounting hostility toward Israel reignited the primordial collective fears of the Jews in Israel. In retrospect, it is safe to say that the events of that period restructured the Israeli ideological landscape, a fact that had considerable consequences for both the moderate and the radical Right.[20]

The beginnings of this process were humble. Several Zionist academics and public intellectuals articulated the widespread sense of frustration that consumed large parts of the Jewish society in Israel. It is important to note that these intellectuals never formed a movement and would probably object to the idea that they belonged to a single ideological thread. Many of them were never associated with a political party, and those who had partisan affiliations were generally linked to parties that were positioned left of center, at least in terms of their outlook on the conflict with the Palestinians. Despite their nuanced backgrounds, they gradually converged around a New Conservative worldview, which seemed to

be rooted to a large degree in Yigal Allon's perspective. First, they were dubious about the idea that a comprehensive peace agreement with the Palestinians, at least in the foreseeable future, was feasible. They argued that the Palestinians were not ready to cross the Rubicon, as it were, and to accept Israel's right to self-determination as the homeland of and the safe haven for the Jewish people. Second, though they usually refrained from using the word "occupation," they feared that the continuous expansion of the settlements would eventually obliterate the already blurred border between Israel and Palestine. This, they said, would put the Israelis and the Palestinians on a deterministic path that would eventually lead to the formation of a single, binational state to the west of the Jordan River, one in which Jews were destined to become a minority. Third, based on these premises, they asserted that it was imperative that Israel become proactive and take decisive steps toward maintaining the demographic ratio of 80 percent Jews to 20 percent Arabs in sovereign Israel.[21] When articulated in terms of policy, the new ideological circle advocated two main agendas—separation and unilateralism.[22] Eventually, these two pillars were embraced by Sharon and shaped the most significant political maneuvers during his tenure as prime minister: the erection of the West Bank barrier and the disengagement from Gaza.[23]

The Network Infiltrates the Likud

This turbulent period should be remembered for another significant development: the formation of the Jewish Leadership movement (Manhigut Yehudit) by Moshe Feiglin and his former associates from Zu Artzenu and, more importantly, their decision to pave a new path to power. Feiglin, who gained a reputation for his political savvy and creative ideas, learned from the experiences of many ephemeral political groups, which had operated in Israel's right-wing scene throughout the years. It was clear to him that if he and his comrades were to continue as an extra-parliamentary movement or even form another right-wing party, they would probably fall victim to the curse that led their predecessors to oblivion. Thus, Feiglin decided to try a novel approach. His group joined Likud as a well-organized faction. This was a highly sophisticated move. For many years, the most powerful organ of Likud was the party's convention. Every four years registered Likud members are invited to elect 3,000 delegates who are then entrusted with the task of shaping the party's policies. Among other things the convention is responsible for selection of Likud's list of candidates to the Knesset.[24] Feiglin, who had already proven himself to be an organizational wizard during the protest against the Oslo Accords, adopted the concept of "hostile takeover" from the corporate world and adapted it so it could

be utilized in the less formal environment of the Likud party. He concluded that, by instructing his loyal supporters to join Likud and take part in the elections to the party's convention, he could become a pivotal actor in its apparatus and consequently have a significant impact on its official positions and a great degree of political clout during the formation process of the party's list of Knesset candidates. Soon after "Jewish Leadership" officially joined the Likud, Feiglin took another surprising step. He openly challenged both Sharon and Netanyahu by presenting his own candidacy for leader of Likud. Even though Feiglin did not expect to win the race, he managed to draw the attention of party leaders and activists to his large and cohesive group, which only recently had joined the party. While Feiglin's attempts to place his own people in Likud's list were not fruitful, Jewish Leadership's indirect impact was noteworthy. Likud activists who aspired to get elected to the Knesset were willing to adopt more radical views in order to receive his seal of approval and the votes of his loyalists.

Though most commonly associated with the settlers' network, "Jewish Leadership" actually encompassed all of the ideological elements of the new radical Right. As mentioned earlier, Feiglin's worldview overlapped with Kahanism much more than it did with Gush Emunim's. In their own writings as well as in media interviews, the leaders of this faction referred to the territorial issue as secondary to the battle between Israelis and Jews over the desired trajectory of the state.[25] For instance, while campaigning for the immediate annexation of all the occupied territories, the movement also called for the official realization of Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount. Further, "Jewish Leadership" advocated for reforming the Israeli constitutional framework by expanding the role of Jewish Orthodox laws in the state's legal apparatus. The group also aimed at restructuring the Knesset into a bicameral legislature. According to their vision, the Knesset would serve as the lower house and continue to represent the citizens of Israel. Meanwhile, the new upper house would represent the whole Jewish people, regardless of whether they were citizens of the state. In accordance with the view that only Jews should make critical decisions with regard to the future of the Jewish state, only the upper house would have the right to vote on issues that fell into this category.[26]

The Union of the Old and New Radical Right

Farther to the right of Likud, things were not much calmer. In early 2000, elements from the old and new radical Right converged. HaIhud HaLeumi and Yisrael Beiteinu decided to form a parliamentary alignment, which turned them into a faction of eight Knesset members. They joined Sharon's coalition immediately following the 2001 elections. Rehavam Zeevi, the leader of Moledet

(which became the leading faction of the HaIhud HaLeumi), was appointed as minister of tourism. Avigdor Lieberman was named minister of national infrastructure, a position tailored specifically for Sharon only five years earlier. However, the partnership between the faction and Sharon was short lived. The prime minister's decision to change the IDF's deployment in Hebron and to invite the Palestinian security forces to enter the areas that the IDF vacated was the end of the line for Zeevi, Lieberman, and their associates. On October 16, 2001, HaIhud HaLeumi–Yisrael Beiteinu officially withdrew from the cabinet.

The following day marked another significant milestone in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Like many Israeli politicians who were not residents of Israel's capital city, Rehavam Zeevi spent several nights a week in a Jerusalem hotel. His preferred hotel was the Hyatt Regency, which was located on Mount Scopus, close to the Hebrew University campus. Despite the Shabak's pleas, Zeevi, a former counterterrorism advisor to the prime minister, refused to be protected by a security detail. He was complacent and confident in his abilities to defend himself. Despite his vast experience and self-assurance, Zeevi made a critical error. He seldom changed his routine. He repeatedly stayed in a suite on the eighth floor of the hotel, ate breakfast at the hotel's restaurant every morning between 6:00 and 7:00 a.m., and returned to his room once more before leaving for his office or the Knesset.

On the morning of October 17, when he was approaching his room after breakfast, Zeevi was ambushed and shot three times. Two bullets hit him in the skull and one in the torso. Zeevi was rushed to the nearby Hadassah Hospital but the doctors were helpless; his wounds were deadly. Three hours later, the hospital's spokesperson told journalists that the seventy-five-year-old Zeevi had died. It was later revealed that the assassins were a random group of untrained Palestinian men who were recruited by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The operation constituted the organization's response to the assassination of its leader, Abu Ali Mustafa, who had died less than two months earlier when IDF Apache helicopters launched rockets at his office in Ramallah.[27] The Israeli political system was shocked, as were Zeevi's colleagues. As a result of the assassination, Lieberman and Binyamin "Benny" Elon, Zeevi's successor as the head of Moledet, decided to postpone their departure from the cabinet; but in March 2002 they submitted their final resignation. They resented what they described as Sharon's policy of restraint in the face of the escalating violence.

During those volatile months, by pure coincidence, I observed another development, which was still in its embryonic stage but later contributed significantly to the consolidation of the new radical Right. Brigadier General Efraim "Effi" (Fine) Eitam , who was a few months away from retiring after a thirty-year service in the IDF, decided to enroll at the University of Haifa and complete his master's degree in political science. This provided me with the opportunity to

become acquainted with one of Israel's most controversial officers. Eitam was born in 1952 in Ein Gev, a secular kibbutz on the eastern bank of the Sea of Galilee. During the Yom Kippur War, Eitam, a young infantry officer at the time, fought in the Golan Heights not far from his kibbutz and was decorated with the Medal of Distinguished Service. Shortly after the war he immersed himself in Orthodox Judaism and during the process attended Rabbi Kook's Merkaz Harav Yeshiva. At the same time, Eitam developed an impressive career in the military and in many ways was a pioneer. Eitam was Israel's first highly ranked officer from the Zionist religious camp and spent most of his career commanding special forces and infantry units. As such he became a role model for many young soldiers from this segment of society, who exhibited increasing interest in volunteering for the IDF's spearhead units. In the late 1980s, following the outbreak of the First Intifada, Eitam's race to the top was cut short. At the time, he was the commander of Givati, Israel's southern infantry brigade. He was faced with allegations that on various occasions, he had encouraged his soldiers to use a heavy hand toward Palestinian demonstrators and allegedly was himself involved in violent repression.[28]

When I met Eitam, he was still considering his future in the political arena. His ideas were relatively undeveloped but were intriguing nonetheless. Eitam envisioned a synthesis of the old and new elements of Israel's right-wing ideology. His worldview, which was laid out a year later, was rooted in a combination of religious and militaristic perspectives. He seemed to share many ideas with Feiglin's Manhigut Yehudit, had clear affinity to Zeevi's ideology, and even presented elements of Kahanism.[29] In a nutshell, Eitam perceived the conflict with the Arab world as a zero-sum game, a titanic clash of civilizations and religions. He denounced the Oslo Accords and desired to dismantle the Palestinian authority. Furthermore, he advocated the annexation of the West Bank to Israel and suggested that the solution to the Palestinian problem could be found only in neighboring Arab countries—a tortuous way to advocate Zeevi's idea of "transfer." Eitam did not hesitate to say that he perceived the Palestinian citizens of Israel as a fifth column in the heart of the Jewish state, but he refrained from explicitly committing to any concrete solution for the challenge that they posed.[30] I was very impressed by Eitam's understanding of the practical side of politics and especially by his understanding of the potential power of "political networks." He did not use this term, but much like Feiglin, he aimed at tearing down the political walls between the religious and secular Right and to break down old parties that divided the power of the right-wing camp. Eitam aspired to join Likud and to fight over the leadership of the Israeli Right. But his initial ambitions were restrained by Israel's political reality, and prior to the 2003 elections he was called to lead the Mafdal, which was suffering from a leadership crisis.

"A People That Shall Dwell Alone, and Shall Not Be Reckoned Among the Nations" (Num. 23:9)

The reshuffling of the ideological landscape in Israel prior to the 2003 elections was nothing short of an earthquake. Most Israeli Jews realized that the old divide between the Left, which adhered to the idea of achieving peace through territorial concessions, and the Right, which vowed to maintain the integrity of Greater Israel, was out of date.[31] On the one hand, it became clear that perpetuating Israeli control over the occupied territories was unsustainable. On the other hand, the "New Middle East" vision, in which Israelis and Arabs lived in peace and led the region to an era of prosperity, seemed equally unrealistic. The majority of the Jews adhered to the pessimistic outlook of the new conservative stream, which was best summarized by Ehud Barak when he claimed that Israel was fated to be a villa in the jungle that was the Middle East. This somber conclusion left Israel with few viable policy alternatives. One idea was repeated over and over again by speakers from most Zionist parties: for the sake of preserving Israel's very existence as a Jewish state, they had to find a path to separate from the Palestinians—and the sooner, the better.

This perspective stood in sharp contrast to the settlers' vision. Suicide attacks in heavily populated areas, the most terrifying tactic that the Palestinians applied during the years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, failed to generate the devastating psychological impact on the settlers that it exercised over those living in sovereign Israel. Paradoxically, while the settlers were at a higher risk of being ambushed by Palestinian gunmen on the roads of the West Bank, their exposure to suicide attacks was relatively limited.[32] Thus, they were shocked to learn that although they saw themselves as risking their lives in the frontier shielding the Israeli heartland with their bodies, a growing number of Israelis were wondering what kind of protection, if any, the settlers actually provided. Further, the IDF's resources seemed to be progressively diverted toward protecting remote outposts and isolated roads in the West Bank, while the security in the nation's interior was routinely breached. Consequently, many Israelis became disillusioned. The number of those who perceived the settlers as the genuine successors of the first Zionist pioneers dwindled while the perception of the settlers as a detached group, which was completely devoted to an unrealistic dogma, gained traction. According to this notion, not only did the settlers ignore the fact that their ideological zeal put the lives of many Israelis at risk, but their long-term goal of formally annexing the West Bank to Israel posed a threat to the very existence of the Jewish State, since it would leave the Jews in Israel as an ethnic minority in their own homeland.[33] This increasing discontent over their worldview could not have come at a worse time for the settlers. Not only had they lost their persuasion

skills that had successfully charmed large parts of the Israeli society for so many years, but there were signs of increased ideological divergences even within their own ranks.[34] Some critiques argued that the network had become an effective settling machine that had gotten caught up in a state of perpetual motion. This tunnel-vision viewpoint detached the settlers from the larger Israeli society. Thus, they were caught by surprise when, as a result of the horrific violence of the Intifada, the Israeli public turned its back on them and became increasingly susceptible to the ideas of withdrawal from the territories and complete disengagement from the Palestinians. The network's leaders were unable to offer a convincing alternative vision.[35] Ariel Sharon, on the other hand, was fully aware that the average Israeli was no longer willing to pay the increasing price tag attached to control over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Shortly after he was elected as prime minister, Sharon began a slow and cautious process of individual political transformation, which eventually led him to abandon the so-called Greater Israel Ideology and commit to a smaller but sustainable Jewish State. In practice, the process meant another break from his alliance with the settlers' network. During the first few months of his tenure, Sharon stuck by the settlers and responded favorably to their every demand.[36] Hence, when he first signaled that he was considering erecting a security barrier between Israel and the West Bank, the Yesha Council was caught off guard.[37] The idea of a barrier was not new.[38] As early as 1994, shortly after the signing of the Oslo Accords, Prime Minister Rabin instructed the IDF to build a fence that would separate Israel from the Gaza Strip. In the years following the fence's construction, both security personnel and politicians noted that suicide attackers almost never came from Gaza. As a result, they concluded that a physical barrier between Israel and the West Bank was vital for the security of the Israeli heartland. Even prior to the outbreak of the Intifada, Ehud Barak and members of his administration expressed their support for the barrier idea. However, they preferred to parcel it with other mechanisms that would hopefully end in a comprehensive peace agreement with the Palestinians.[39] Sharon's path to embracing the idea of the barrier was very different. It was grounded in and became one of the first concrete manifestations of the new conservative agenda. Sharon's plan was based solely on what he perceived as the Israeli interest and showed little regard for the Palestinian needs and grievances. His approach was assertive and unilateral. The plan's objective was to de facto annex as much land with as few Palestinians as possible. Since many of the settlements were constructed in close proximity to Palestinian residential areas, the maps that Sharon's team drew were very complex. In essence, they aimed at attaching to Israel as many settlements and settlers as feasible. The maps featuring suggested paths for the barrier illustrated this intention. Up to 17 percent of the territories of the West Bank were supposed to be attached to Israel.[40]

The settlers perceived Sharon's initiative as nothing short of a betrayal even though he had their best interests in mind. Based on their own extensive experience with setting facts on the ground, the settlers understood that the erection of what was then portrayed as a temporary obstacle for security purposes would most likely have long-term consequences. They also knew Sharon very well and collective memory sent them clear warning signs. The removal of the Sinai settlements that had taken place less than two decades earlier had taught them a valuable lesson: Sharon never developed a deep ideological commitment to the settlements; at the end of the day, he was not really one of them. Rather, he had a razor-sharp understanding of politics, was highly attentive to the changing disposition of the Israeli public, and was determined to satisfy the increasing calls for more security.

In an attempt to regain the support of the Israeli public, the settlers' network launched a struggle against the very idea of the barrier. The campaign failed. The Yesha Council realized that this time, their lifework was faced with an unprecedented challenge. Sharon was locked on his new course and the fact that he was backed by the majority of the Israeli public made things easier for him. The settlers had no alternative other than to rapidly alter their strategy. Rather than fighting Sharon, they decided to join him. The network mobilized rapidly. They took advantage of their unlimited access to the prime minister's closest circle of aides as well as to the security establishment's highest echelons. In essence, they injected themselves into the planning process of the barrier.[41] And this tactic proved to be highly effective.

It is true that from the settlers' standpoint, any barrier that tore the territory of Greater Israel apart was undesired. However, by becoming part of the process, the settlers' network could make sure that its most vital interests were not compromised. Members of the network also received clear messages from Sharon that he genuinely perceived the barrier as a temporary security measure. He backed his promises to the settlers by taking two significant steps. First, he readopted the tactic that he had applied when he was in charge of removing the Israeli settlements in the Sinai Peninsula. While most of the public attention was focused on the drama surrounding the construction of the barrier, Sharon provided the Yesha Council with his blessing to intensify their expansion efforts in the West Bank's areas that were designated to be attached to Israel.[42] Sharon's second step was a military one. The Oslo Accords had divided the West Bank into three areas: (A) one in which Palestinian civilian and security forces exercised full autonomy, (B) one where the Palestinians enjoyed only civilian control, and (C), one that was under full Israeli control. Sharon instructed the IDF to carry out invasive raids on towns in Area A. In March 2002, following a chain of devastating suicide attacks, large IDF forces carried out Operation Defensive Shield, in which Israel re-occupied the main Palestinian population centers and

therefore undermined the budding Palestinian sovereignty. During the operation, Sharon closed in on the leader of the Palestinian National Authority, Yasser Arafat, whom he had loathed for decades. Despite conflicting reports regarding Arafat's true impact on the escalation of the Intifada, Sharon portrayed him as the main figure behind the violent uprising. The IDF's engineering corps surrounded and destroyed Arafat's office complex in Ramallah, known as the Mukataa. For the next two years, almost until the day of his death, Arafat was confined to a small office that remained intact within the Mukataa's besieged walls.[43]

Although the idea of the barrier angered the settlers, they made sure that their interests were not seriously harmed through their intense involvement in the planning of its route. The same cannot be said about the Palestinians. Sharon's determination to annex as much territory and as few Palestinians as possible, was one of the main guiding principles behind the route of the barrier.[44] Consequently, in many cases Israel placed the barrier between uninhabited lands, mostly agricultural fields, and the Palestinian villagers who worked them. The farmers encountered increasing difficulties in accessing their lots and thus were deprived of their main source of income.[45] In Jerusalem, the barrier took the shape of a tall brick wall, which divided Palestinian neighborhoods into two. It led to surreal situations: workers and pupils, who used to cross the street and reach their workplaces or schools in a matter of minutes, were now forced to walk for miles and cross several checkpoints, only to reach a destination located on the other side of the wall, a mere few yards away from their homes.[46] Eventually, when the barrier was a faits accompli, most of the settlers' initial concerns were alleviated. Beyond their significant impact on the planning of its route, the network's leadership understood that any barrier that effectively annexed so much land to Israel could never be accepted by the Palestinians as the baseline for a viable peace agreement.

Unintended Consequences

Not surprisingly, the barrier quickly became a symbol of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, and subjected Sharon and the IDF to increasing criticism, both domestically and on the international scene.[47] Even so, from a security standpoint, it was a success story. By 2004 Israel's unilateral policy paid off, and the number of suicide attacks decreased dramatically. A renewed sense of security spread among the residents of Israel's metropolitan areas. The effectiveness of the barrier led many Israelis to the conclusion that turning the barrier into a permanent border would not only guarantee their security but would also ensure Israel's long-term survival as a Jewish state. The success of the barrier led

to unintended consequences that gave a significant boost to radical right-wing notions, which were not necessarily in line with the settlers' interests. Many Israelis that had never seen themselves as supporters of the radical Right became increasingly convinced of the idea to unilaterally separate from the Palestinians. One derivation of the separation agenda was the notion of territorial exchanges or land swaps. The plan was initially presented by Efraim Sneh and Ehud Barak from the Labor Party, and later adopted and amended by Avigdor Lieberman, who turned it into a major item on Yisrael Beiteinu's platform.

The basic premise behind the initial plan of territorial exchanges was this: given the levels of hostility between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the division of the land between the two people was inevitable. However, the presence of Jewish settlers in the future Palestinian state was likely to exacerbate the existing tensions. The alternative—the removal of hundreds of thousands of settlers—did not seem like a feasible option either; such an attempt by the Israeli government could have led Israel to a civil war as well as to an economic meltdown. Hence, both Israeli and Palestinian officials agreed to the principle of proportional land swaps. Essentially, in return for the legal annexation of large Jewish settlements, Israel was willing to offer the Palestinians lands west of the Green Line.[48]

One question remained unanswered: what would be the fate of the Palestinian citizens of Israel following the formation of an independent Palestinian state? This was a serious matter. After the deadly outcomes of the October 2000 riots, many Arab citizens felt even more alienated from the state. They suffered a shock that opened up old scars. Arab intellectuals and politicians called for a detachment from their fragile alliance with the State of Israel and openly identified with the aspirations for independence expressed by their brothers on the other side of the Green Line.[49] Key Arab public figures employed an escalating rhetoric, which enflamed their constituents and had a ripple effect on Jews. The defiant approach of the Arab leadership amplified the existential fears shared by large groups of the Jewish population. They feared that the formation of an independent Palestinian state would not put an end to the Palestinian grievances. Rather, they came to see this as another step of the PLO's Phased Plan in which the ultimate goal was the complete liberation of Palestine. Nonetheless, it paved the way to attain the goal in several steps rather than in one big move. The Israelis' main concern was that after the formation of their independent state, the Palestinian leaders would encourage the Arab citizens of Israel to challenge the Israeli government by increasing their demands for autonomous rule in the parts of sovereign Israel in which they constituted a majority. Eventually, many Israelis feared that these autonomous enclaves would merge with Palestine and swallow the Jewish State.

A related and by no means secondary fear was that, once an independent Palestinian state had been established, the PLO would pursue the Palestinian

Right of Return, demanding that Palestinian refugees and their descendants be allowed to return to their places of origin in sovereign Israel as well as the West Bank and reclaim their properties. This concern was not far-fetched. Descendants of Palestinian refugees, many of whom fled or were deported during the 1948 War, never gave up on the dream of returning to their homes. Evidence of this yearning could be found in the refugees' house keys, which they saved and cherished even decades after their houses had been destroyed.[50] Palestinian negotiators never gave up on the demand that Israel would accept the Right of Return principle even symbolically. The Palestinians' determination not to let go of this issue eventually backfired. Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent, who were similarly forced out of their homelands and had left their property behind during the 1940s and 1950s, considered the Palestinian agenda to be an offensive provocation and started calling for their own Right of Return. For other Jews, it served as proof that the Palestinian people never relinquished their commitment to the eventual annihilation of the State of Israel and to the establishment of their own independent state on its ruins.[51] A new notion of transfer emerged as a practical solution to these concerns. Rather than transferring populations, which was Kahane's longtime plan, Sneh and later Lieberman advanced the idea of the transfer of sovereignty.

The gist of the plan was that the new border between Palestine and Israel would be drawn to the west of several population centers of Israeli Arabs, thus making them part of the new Palestinian state. This would have allowed Israel to rid itself of 10 percent of its Arab citizens.[52] From a human rights perspective, this plan was much more challenging than the versions of "transfer" that Kahane and Zeevi had advocated. In the virtual transfer, notions that involved the uprooting and relocation of individuals were absent. The plan also posed a serious intellectual challenge to the Israeli Arab politicians who confessed an outspoken identification with Palestinian nationalism and expressed a desire to unite with their compatriots. Many of their constituents were not eager to replace the close to $30,000 GDP in Israel with the $3,000 in Palestine. While liberal pundits argued that targeting an ethnic group and stripping it of its citizenship subverted the very moral foundations of democratic philosophy, many Israeli Jews supported the plan, in which they saw two main virtues.[53] First, by revoking the citizenship of 10 percent of its Arab inhabitants, Israel could temporarily alleviate the looming demographic threat. The concern that due to the high birthrates among Palestinians the demographic advantage of the Jews in Israel would be eroded, troubled the Israeli leadership and public for decades. This was one of the main arguments against the annexation of the West Bank to Israel. Second, and even more importantly, the plan offered many Jews a sense of retribution and catharsis. It was not uncommon to hear the sarcastic suggestion according to which "if the Arabs were so dissatisfied with the Israeli democracy and felt such a strong connection to the future Palestinian state, we should allow them to enjoy the Arab version of democracy."

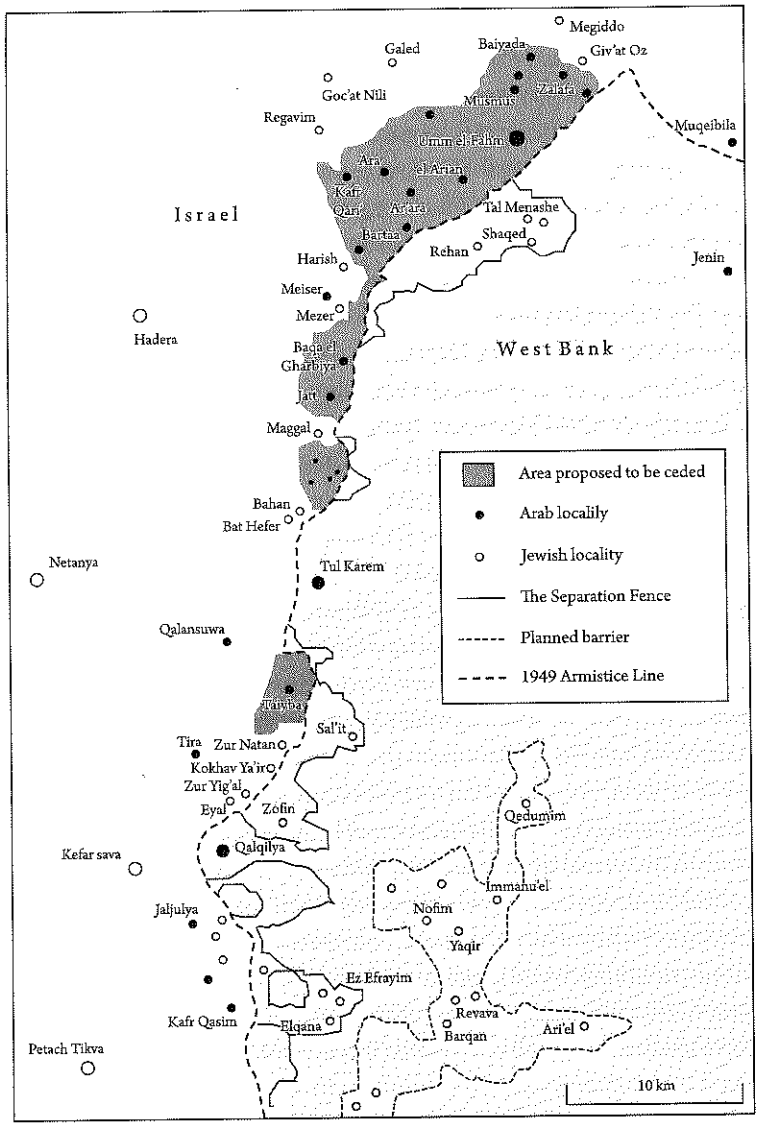

Figure 7.1 PROPOSED IDEA FOR TERRITORIAL EXCHANGES—THE LIEBERMAN PLAN
Source: Adapted from the Floersheimer Institute for Policy Studies by M. Anwar Sounny-Slitine

The Non-Virtual Transfer

While Israelis were consumed by the fears generated by the Intifada and focused on the budding debate over virtual transfer, a different, much more concrete transfer was set in motion. On August 18, 2002, Sharon's cabinet signed off on decision no. 2469, "The Expulsion of Illegal Foreign Workers in an Attempt to Increase Employment Rates among Israelis." It is important to note that many of

the workers who were designated as illegal had actually entered the country with valid work visas. However, Israel applied a "binding policy," according to which each foreign worker was attached to a single employer. Termination of employment, for any reason, resulted in an immediate change of the worker's status to illegal. This arrangement provided the employers with complete control over their workers' fate, a fact that quite often led to abuse.[54]

The new policy was enacted as a direct result of the continuous pressure imposed on the cabinet by Shlomo Benizri, the minister of labor and social welfare from Shas. Throughout his long political career, Benizri never shied away from controversy. He emerged as one of Shas's most outspoken advocates for the adoption of harsh policies against minority communities, including the Palestinian citizens of Israel, foreign workers, and especially homosexuals. Since his ministerial appointment, Benizri argued that removing foreign workers would solve the increasing rates of unemployment among Israelis. At the time, 250,000 men and women in Israel were classified as foreign workers, while 237,000 Israeli citizens were unemployed. He did not hesitate to use strong language to make his point. In one instance he said, "I can't understand why the waiter who serves the food in my restaurant has to have slanted eyes."[55]

The police, according to the cabinet's decision, were assigned with the task of deporting 50,000 foreign workers in a period of sixteen months.[56] Despite the fact that experts could have easily refuted Benizri's simplistic arithmetic linking the presence of foreign workers to the increasing levels of unemployment among veteran Israelis, their opinion was not solicited. The state referred to the operation as a top national priority and conveyed a clear message to the public, according to which a strict deportation policy was vital to Israel's attempt to emerge from the recession.[57] The cabinet provided the police, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Labor and Social Welfare Ministry with the resources and the authority to carry out the new policy. In order to facilitate the process, these bodies were coordinated by the newly established immigration administration.

In the midst of the Intifada, when police forces were desperately needed for the task of securing the streets of Israel,[58] more than four hundred officers were mobilized for the deportation effort, which the police chief referred to as a "military operation." The Israeli Prison Service was provided with funding to expand its jailing capacity and accommodate up to 1,300 detainees at once.[59] Indeed, the operation was carried out with military precision. Yaakov Ganot, a major general who formerly commanded Israel's border police, was chosen to lead the endeavor. Ganot applied his vast background as a border police officer and trained his troops to carry out intelligence operations and raids. Under the threat of arrest and forced deportation, terrified foreign workers chose to leave the country or turn themselves in. Others were hunted down, imprisoned, and consequently deported.[60]

The heavy-handed policy toward the foreign workers, by far the weakest group in Israeli society, went almost unnoticed. The Jewish public, which was consumed with fear, rallied around its exclusivist collective ethnic identity and developed an increasing hatred toward any out group. Unlike the Russian immigrants, who were perceived by most Israelis as members of the Jewish ethnicity and were thus embraced during the crisis, the men and women from China, Romania, India, and Ghana remained outsiders.[61] Even three consecutive suicide attacks in Tel Aviv's old bus station area, the city's hub for the foreign worker community, did not lessen the animosity toward them. Shas had effortlessly turned Kahane's legacy into an official state policy.

8

The Radical Right at a Crossroads

As the 2003 elections drew near, Ehud Olmert decided to test the waters in the national political arena. Olmert was a close ally of Likud's leader, Ariel Sharon, and hoped to find a way into the leadership of the party based on his own hawkish credentials. To his dismay, the members of Likud's convention had other ideas. They had not forgotten Olmert's disloyalty during the 1999 election campaign when, as mayor of Jerusalem, he defied Netanyahu, the bruised leader of his own party, and openly supported Ehud Barak's candidacy in the premiership race. The party's delegates sent a clear message to the rogue mayor. Olmert, who for many years was considered a major figure in the young leadership of Likud, was pushed to thirty-second place in the party's list of candidates to the Knesset. This blow increased Olmert's dependence on Sharon's support. More puzzling was the fact that Sharon, one of the shrewdest and least sentimental politicians in Israel's history, was willing to go out of his way to soothe Olmert. He promised him the role of deputy prime minister as well as a major ministerial position in his cabinet. Less than a year after the elections, Olmert repaid his benefactor.

Sharon Drops a Bomb

On Monday, December 1, 2003, Ariel Sharon was scheduled to represent the cabinet in the annual memorial service for David Ben-Gurion; but instead he sent a note apologizing that he would be absent. According to his aides, he caught a cold, which prompted his doctors to confine him to his residence. Olmert was chosen to deliver a speech on behalf of the prime minister. None of the attendants expected it to be more than a formal and uninspiring tribute. Sharon and Olmert, however, had other plans. Olmert stunned his listeners with a monologue that stood in sharp contrast to everything he and his party stood for: