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David A. Charters

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Article abstract

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Jewish Terrorism and the Modern Middle East

by
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ABSTRACT

This article begins with a question: can the contemporary Middle East conflict itself, in which terrorism plays a prominent role, be traced to a successful terrorist campaign? I argue that Jewish terrorism in 1940s Palestine was both tactically and strategically significant. At the tactical level, Jewish terrorists were able to erode the ability of British security forces to control Palestine. Strategically, that persuaded Britain to withdraw from Palestine, which, in turn, created the conditions that facilitated both the founding of Israel and the creation of an Arab-Palestinian diaspora. The consequent Arab-Israeli conflict has shaped and dominated Middle East politics and diplomacy for much of the last 60 years. Thus, Jewish terrorism left the region with a dual legacy of tactical effectiveness and strategic influence. This article explores and assesses this dual legacy.

INTRODUCTION

In Western popular discourse the term terrorism has long been associated with the Middle East, but particularly with the activities of Palestinian Arab groups, which have dominated the news for the past forty years. But sixty years ago, it was the actions of Jewish terrorists in Palestine that grabbed headlines around the world. Although this campaign is not as well known today, it raises an important question: is the modern Middle East conflict, in which terrorism plays a prominent role, itself a product of a terrorist campaign?

In this chapter I argue that Jewish terrorism in the 1940s was both tactically and strategically significant. At the tactical level, Jewish terrorists were able to frustrate British security forces and erode their ability to control Palestine. That played a significant role at the strategic level in persuading Britain to withdraw from Palestine, which, in turn, created the conditions that facilitated the founding of Israel and the consequent creation of an Arab-Palestinian diaspora. The Arab-Israeli conflict, which arose from this situation, has shaped and dominated Middle East politics and diplomacy for much of the last six decades. Thus, Jewish terrorism left the region with a dual legacy of tactical effectiveness and strategic influence. This article will explore and assess both of these legacies.

Origins of the Jewish Terrorism Campaign

The armed struggle that preceded the formal founding of Israel had its origins in the complex interaction of European social conflicts, great power diplomacy during the First World War, the clash of competing Jewish and Arab nationalisms in the inter-war era, and divisions within the Zionist movement. The rise of modern European nationalism combined with the marginalization and persecution of Jewish minorities encouraged a wave of Jewish immigration to Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century. These same trends revived and politicized the Zionist movement, which dedicated itself to re-creating a Jewish state, preferably in the ancient lands of Israel and now within Palestine.[1] Britain's wartime diplomacy, undertaken to defeat the Ottoman Empire, left it committed to an untenable contradiction. It was obligated both to create independent Arab states on former Ottoman lands and to support the creation of a Jewish 'homeland' on a portion of those lands. Britain's inability to reconcile these obligations frustrated Palestinian Arabs, who clashed violently with Jewish nationalists determined to create a new Jewish state in Palestine.[2]

The Zionist movement itself was divided into two broad camps: the Labour Zionists, an agrarian socialist movement, and the Revisionists, a more nationalistic faction. Their ideological differences were exacerbated by the clashes with the Arabs, which led the two factions to adopt somewhat different approaches to the use of force. The Labour Zionists, by far the majority among Palestinian Jews and drawing upon a pacifist tradition, favoured a strategy of 'active defence.' They created the *Haganah* (Defence Force) to defend their settlements; trained by Orde Wingate, a pro-Zionist British officer, the *Haganah* also carried out limited offensive operations against Arab guerrilla forces. The Revisionists, however, were dissatisfied with the defensive mindset of the Labour Zionists and favoured taking the fight directly to the enemy. Thus, the *Irgun Zvai Leumi* (National Military Organization) emerged out of a pro-Revisionist rump of the *Haganah*. In the late 1930s, the *Irgun* carried out a number of terrorist-style attacks on Palestinian Arabs. But the outbreak of the Second World War divided the Zionists further over the issue of cooperation with Britain in the war effort. While the *Haganah* and *Irgun* were willing to do so to a limited degree, a few dissidents within the Revisionist movement regarded this as betrayal since British policy toward Palestine, articulated on the eve of the war, proposed the creation only of an Arab state. These more extreme militants created a new group: the *Lochmei Herut Israel* (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel — LHI). Led initially by intellectual mystic Abraham Stern, they attacked the British security forces in Palestine. After Stern was killed by the police in 1942, the group became known more commonly as the Stern Gang.[3] These three groups ultimately confronted the British with a terrorist insurgency after the war.

In the meantime, however, the Holocaust changed the Zionist calculus. The almost total destruction of European Jewry created a crisis within Palestinian

Zionism. While the Holocaust reinforced the moral case for a Jewish state, the prospect of actually doing so seemed to be slipping away. The Jews the Zionists had counted on to populate and build the new state had been systematically exterminated.[4] Rescuing the survivors helped to shape a new 'culture of survival' against existential threats to Jewry. So, it was a 'militarized' Zionism, embodied in the phrase 'Never Again,' that confronted the British in Palestine in 1945.[5]

Terrorism: A Tactical Weapon for Strategic Purposes

The Jewish underground groups launched their insurgency against the British on 31 October 1945 with a series of coordinated attacks against the railways, oil refineries, and police boats. The anti-British insurgency continued for nearly two years, in two phases. The first, often referred to as the 'United Resistance' phase, lasted from October 1945 to August 1946. During this period, the three groups attempted to coordinate their actions against the British, but political and strategic disagreements precluded a wholly united front. The *Haganah* used violence as a pressure tactic to persuade the British to change their policy on Jewish immigration into Palestine. So, it limited its attacks mostly to targets related to anti-immigration efforts, such as coastal radar stations and police boats. But it also sabotaged the railway as a way of imposing economic pressure on the British. The *Irgun* and Stern groups, however, were committed to all-out 'national liberation' wars. They did not believe that the British would give Palestine to the Jews and thus were determined to force them out. They tried to increase the human and political costs to Britain of remaining in Palestine by attacking British troops and police, military bases and police stations, oil refineries, trains, bridges, and banks. Between them, the three groups carried out 78 attacks in the nine months after October 1945. However, the united resistance dissolved after the *Irgun* blew up the British administration headquarters in the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in July 1946, killing 92 people. Following that disaster, which was a grave embarrassment to the moderate Zionists, the *Haganah* effectively withdrew from armed operations. Unrestrained by the need for a united front, the *Irgun* and the Stern Gang rapidly escalated the levels of violence nearly four-fold in this second phase, carrying out 286 attacks over the next twelve months. Casualties exceeded 1,000 over the whole two-year period.[6]

But numbers don't tell the whole story. The insurgents confounded the British by conducting a 'two-front war': a tactical paramilitary battle for control — the *ability* to rule; and a strategic, political, and psychological battle for legitimacy — the *right* to rule.[7] On the tactical front, they used innovative terrorism techniques to reduce the country to chaos, thereby making Palestine ungovernable. At the strategic level they expanded the armed struggle to Europe and Britain, and conducted an imaginative propaganda war against Britain in the United States that frustrated British policy efforts. Together, these two fronts undermined the British will to remain in Palestine.

Irgun leader Menachem Begin believed that once the revolt began Palestine would resemble a 'glass house.' The world's attention would be focused on events there and that would protect the insurgents because the British would not be "free to suppress the rebellion in a sea of blood."[8] So the *Irgun* pursued a strategy that would simultaneously undermine British rule in Palestine while promoting the *Irgun*'s image and message. Every *Irgun* attack the British failed to prevent would be a blow to its prestige, while the act itself would enhance the reputation of the *Irgun*. It was a classic application of the anarchist strategy 'propaganda of the deed.'[9] The *Irgun*'s strategy was designed to defeat Britain on both the tactical/control and strategic/political fronts. Since the British position in Palestine was already controversial at home and abroad, the legitimacy battle was all but won. So, the *Irgun* concentrated on undermining the means of British control.

The LHI's grand strategic vision had died with founder Abraham Stern, leaving a legacy of commitment to individual terrorism, which the group turned into an obsession with revenge for his death. His successors fused this with their Marxist doctrine, arguing that Britain's position in Palestine was determined solely by economic interests. Therefore, the Stern Gang's strategy consisted of a combination of economic warfare and anarchist-style 'direct action' against senior government officials and especially the police. Like the *Irgun*, the LHI's leaders believed that their attacks would show that the Mandatory regime was "weak and ineffectual" and unable to maintain order except at an unacceptable cost.[10]

The attack on the King David Hotel in July 1946 was a devastating blow to the British administration in Palestine. The bomb had blown up the Secretariat, which was responsible for much of the day-to-day work that kept the government — and the country — functioning. It took the lives of twenty-one senior civil servants and of many junior staff, such as clerks, typists, and messengers. Administrative files and records were destroyed. Neither the people nor the records could be replaced easily, and the administration of the mandate suffered as a consequence.[11]

While the insurgents relied on 'tried and true' terrorist tactics, such as bombings, assassinations, and sabotage, they offset British military advantages with tactical innovations of their own. The road network and the British Army's vast pool of motor transport gave them freedom of movement throughout the country. The insurgents reduced British mobility with Improvised Explosive Devices (IED's) disguised as mile-stone markers that blew vehicles off the road and killed or injured their occupants. The insurgents regarded these as their most cost-effective weapon. They also placed bombs in abandoned vehicles. British police stations were heavily fortified, protected by high thick walls, so in at least one attack the insurgents blew up a station with a massive truck bomb (vehicle-borne IED).[12]

When the British passed death sentences on convicted terrorists, British military personnel and civilians were abducted and held for ransom. Two Intelligence Corps sergeants were executed by the *Irgun* after a mock trial. Their booby-trapped bodies were hung in an orange grove. Facing the death penalty, two imprisoned *Irgun* members sacrificed themselves in a 'martyrdom operation': they blew themselves up in prison with a smuggled grenade. Others were freed in an attack on Acre prison.[13] In short, they skilfully neutralized Britain's ability to exert control of the security situation.

The insurgents carried out more than 90 attacks against economic targets. Mines damaged or derailed more than 20 trains, and five railway stations were attacked. These incidents disrupted and delayed railway traffic over a period of nine months from October 1946 to August 1947, with a resulting loss of commercial revenue. In addition, the insurgents attacked the petroleum industry a dozen times; most of these involved sabotage of the pipeline, but in March 1947, the Stern Gang destroyed 16,000 tons of petroleum products at the Shell Oil refinery in Haifa.[14] The damage inflicted in these attacks cost Britain nearly two million pounds, but the real damage was to its ability to govern the mandate. During the winter of 1947, Britain was forced to evacuate non-essential personnel and concentrate the remainder in heavily guarded security sectors (known as 'Bevingrads'). By August 1947, the rising insurgency had spilled over into large-scale Arab-Jewish communal violence.[15] At that point the High Commissioner, Sir Alan Cunningham, told the Colonial Secretary, Arthur Creech-Jones,

> I cannot guarantee that the situation will not deteriorate to such a degree that the Civil Government will not break down . . . it is by no means clear how much longer I can keep the Civil Service working under conditions such as exist at present.[16]

The combined application of the *Irgun*'s and Stern Gang's strategies of chaos worked; they had eroded British control of Palestine to the point where it was ungovernable. This was one of the major factors that influenced the British decision in September 1947 to abandon the Palestine Mandate.

The International Propaganda Campaign

In keeping with Begin's 'glass house' theory, the insurgents also conducted a strategic political and psychological battle for legitimacy. They complicated Britain's situation on the political front through a well-organized local and international propaganda campaign. The insurgents were aided by 'front' groups that served as the voices of the insurgency outside Palestine, promoting the Zionist cause and castigating the British government for its policies and actions.

This bolstered morale within the movements and among their local sympathisers. But they also reached out to potential supporters world-wide, especially in the United States. The US had a large and politically active Jewish com-

munity, and because it was Britain's major creditor, it was the one major power able to exert influence on Britain. Insurgent propaganda repeatedly emphasized several major themes: first, that the insurgents were winning; therefore, a British withdrawal was inevitable. Second, it characterized Britain's Palestine policy as illegal; it singled out in particular the limits on Jewish immigration that violated the terms of the mandate. This shifted the blame for violence onto Britain and legitimized all Jewish resistance as 'self-defence.' Third, insurgent propaganda de-legitimized British rule by portraying Palestine as akin to a 'police state.' Closely linked to this was a theme that equated British policies and behaviour with Nazism and anti-Semitism. These themes rested upon at least a kernel of truth. British policy had not changed since the outset of the war, at which time it favoured the Arabs and limited Jewish immigration, in violation of Britain's obligations under the mandate. Palestine was not a democracy; it was governed under emergency laws, enforced by a large military and police presence. And the words and deeds of some British officials and members of the security forces were infused with a patina of anti-Semitism. This embarrassed the British government and gave insurgent propaganda considerable credibility within its audiences at home and abroad. It allowed them to maintain pressure on the US government, making it almost impossible for the Truman administration to cooperate with Britain in finding a negotiated solution to the Palestine crisis.[17]

To enhance their armed and propaganda struggles the *Irgun* and the Stern Gang also extended their terrorist campaign abroad. On 31 October 1946, the *Irgun* set off a large 'suitcase bomb' at the British embassy in Rome, causing extensive damage. It claimed that the attack marked the opening of a new front against the British and the accompanying propaganda offensive was intended to 'bring home' the terrorist threat to the British people. Hysterical newspaper stories of faceless, ruthless terrorists haunting the streets of London may have produced the desired psychological effect. But the reality was less dramatic. The *Irgun* and Stern Gang networks in Britain, including some 'home-grown' terrorists, were small, under-funded, and not particularly competent. Furthermore, MI5 kept a careful watch on them and, although both groups carried out some smaller attacks, they never mounted another successful major international operation.[18]

A British Counterinsurgency Defeat

Just as the Jewish insurgents were quite skilful in their armed and propaganda attacks, the British were unable to contain the insurgency. Although they had large military and police forces at their disposal, the British in Palestine were plagued by a range of problems that precluded an effective counterinsurgency campaign. These included: the absence of viable policy guidance, an indifferent or hostile Jewish population, poor intelligence, an outdated doctrine, a negative public image, and ineffective counter-propaganda. The majority of operations

consisted of ponderous and apparently futile searches for arms and wanted persons. Following the King David Hotel bombing, the army searched the whole city of Tel Aviv. Later, both that city and Jerusalem were placed under martial law.[19]

In spite of these problems, the British Army demonstrated a capacity to adapt. They supplemented large operations, which never had the advantage of surprise, with smaller actions that kept the insurgents off balance. These included: snap searches of houses and apartments, random identity and baggage checks on public transport, quick-reaction mobile roadblocks, night patrols, and raids mounted quickly to exploit intelligence. These actions invariably were more cost-effective than the larger 'cordon and search' operations.[20] The most noteworthy innovation was the attempt to employ special forces in the conflict. This has since become one of the hallmarks of British counterinsurgency strategy, but the Palestine campaign was its nursery. While the effort became mired in controversy, it demonstrated imaginative thinking about counterinsurgency.[21]

None of this, however, could offset Britain's inability to construct a political solution and thus it could not overcome the insurgency itself. In the final analysis, all it could do was to allow the British to determine the timing and manner of their exit from Palestine.

The Strategic Impact of the Insurgency

The strategic impact of the Jewish terrorist campaign against Britain has been the subject of a long and lively debate within Israeli political and intellectual circles. Indeed, the issue cannot be disentangled from politics for two reasons. First, the two sides of the debate represent competing political factions within Israel that are the descendents of the three insurgent groups and their own political movements, Labour Zionism and Revisionism. Thus, for much of the post-independence period, while Labour Zionists were politically dominant, 'mainstream' Israeli historians and politicians — from the Zionist left — tended to downplay the role and impact of the *Irgun* and Stern Gang and to seize the moral high ground by playing up the *Haganah*'s role in illegal immigration, an essential non-violent activity. It was not until the 1970s, when the *Herut* party (derived from the rump of Revisionism) began to gain ascendancy in Israeli politics, that the 'extremists' received what many regarded as their due credit.[22]

Second, it has been difficult for Israeli governments, themselves grappling with terrorist challenges from the Palestinians, and for Israeli society as a whole, to acknowledge that some of their founders used terrorism and regarded it as legitimate to do so. To concede that point would confound Israeli efforts to de-legitimize Palestinian terrorism.

Without denying the importance of the *Haganah*'s illegal immigration operations, which served to embarrass the British internationally, this article

finds in favour of the terrorists. Confronted with a deteriorating security situation, the British government assessed its options. It could 'muddle through' with no prospect of things getting better, or cut its losses and get out. It chose the latter course. On 26 September 1947, the British government announced its intention to withdraw from the Mandate no later than May 1948.[23]

The Jewish terrorist insurgency and the resultant security situation was a major, but not the only, factor in that decision. First, Britain was in economic crisis after the war. Much of its wealth had been spent on the war and now it was dependent upon the United States. As the new Labour government sought to introduce major economic and social reforms, it was also coping with 'Imperial Overstretch': too many commitments and too many forces abroad. Second, American policy toward Palestine was influenced and complicated by domestic politics. Frequent shifts frustrated British efforts to find a negotiated settlement. Third, after its visits and hearings, the UN Special Commission on Palestine had recommended partition of the country. But Britain would have to carry the burden of implementing that decision alone and it was not prepared to do so. Fourth, Britain had alternative locations for basing its troops, including Egypt, Cyrenaica, and Kenya. Finally, by granting independence to India and Pakistan at the end of August 1947, Britain had lost the centrepiece of the rationale for its Middle East policy — protecting the flanks of the sea lines of communication to the Empire. Imperial policy was in transition in a time of austerity.[24] Palestine was no longer needed; it could be abandoned with alacrity, and it was.

Thus it is essential to place the insurgency in context. It was but one factor in the British decision to withdraw from Palestine, significant in itself, but not the sole explanation. The insurgents had no influence on the situation in Egypt or the sub-continent. Had those circumstances been less amenable to British strategic and economic concerns at that time, it is by no means certain that the British government could have abandoned Palestine so readily, even in the face of the violence there.

In November 1947, the strength of the Jewish nationalist struggle, demonstrated in part by its armed struggle in Palestine, persuaded the United Nations to vote to partition Palestine into separate, independent Jewish and Arab states. But the result was a war, from which Israel emerged as a viable state, while independent Palestine vanished under the competing onslaughts of Israeli, Egyptian, and Jordanian military forces, each seizing land that the others could not hold. The Palestinian population, largely leaderless and ill-prepared for war, was driven out of what became Israeli territory by a combination of deliberate attacks, such as the joint *Irgun* and Stern assault that resulted in a massacre at Deir Yassin, and an understandable and natural desire to flee the violence. When the war ended, they had become a new *diaspora*, huddled in refugee camps across the region.[25] Not surprisingly, this gave birth to a new generation of insurgents, who later turned to the same methods that Jews had used to drive out the British.

The long-term impact of the successful Jewish terrorist campaign against the British has been a complex, protracted, and seemingly intractable series of political and military struggles throughout the Middle East. The major, central dispute over the fates of Israel and Palestine has been exacerbated by intersecting local conflicts, the involvement of the major Cold War rivals on opposite sides of the dispute, and by competition for the region's abundant supply of oil. Long before the emergence of *al-Qaeda* and concern about the regime of Saddam Hussein, the inherently contradictory twin pillars of American policy in the region — defence of Israel and access to Arab-owned oil — had ensnared the pre-eminent superpower in the Middle Eastern 'tar baby.' The consequences for the United States and the world have been serious and long-lasting. Thus, the fallout from that terrorist insurgency sixty years ago is still playing out on the local, regional, and world stages, making it a campaign of strategic significance.

Endnotes

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9. Begin, *Revolt*, pp. 52, and 93; and *Irgun Zvai Leumi, The aims of the Irgun*, Jerusalem 1946, Palestine Statehood Committee Papers, f. 42, box 12, MG 690, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University.

10. Charters, *British Army*, pp. 50-51; and Heller, *Stern Gang*, part three.

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13. Charters, *British Army*, pp. 61-63.

14. Ibid., pp. 63-64.

15. Ibid, pp. 108-10, 121, 124, and appendix V, p. 206. See also Saul Zadka, *Blood in Zion: How the Jewish Guerrillas Drove the British out of Palestine* (London: Brassey's, 1995), p. 159.

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17. Susan L. Carruthers, *Winning hearts and minds: British governments, the media and colonial counter-insurgency 1944-1960* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), pp. 30-32, and 49-54; and Charters, *British Army*, pp. 27-29, 32-33, 36, 38, 65-70, and 80-82.

18. Charters, *British Army*, pp. 64-65, 75-76, and 82; Bell, *Terror*, pp. 307-8; 'Avner', pp. 19-23, and 109-50; Heller, *Stern Gang*, pp. 239-55; and Yaacov Eliav, *Wanted* (New York: Shengold, 1984), pp. 240-46. See also letters to author from former *Irgun* member Monte Harris, 15 February, 1 March 1978; and notes of interview with former *Irgun* member Dan Nimrod, Montreal, 14 June 1978. MI5's awareness of suspected terrorists in Britain is revealed in documents from the PRO sent to the author by Philip Sellars, Executive Producer, BBC Documentaries Unit in April 2006. These include letter, J. C. Robertson, B3A Section, MI5, to Trafford-Smith, War Office, 27 August 1946; letter, Defence Security Office, Palestine and Trans-Jordan, to Director General of the Security Service, 6 December 1946; and memo, Metropolitan Police, Special Branch, to B3A Section, MI5, 8 December 1946. Which files and record groups these came from is not indicated.

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