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Jewish Fundamentalism and Extremism - The Case of Gush Emunim

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Abstract: This paper explores the complex landscape of religious fundamentalism and extremism within Israeli society, with a particular focus on the Religious Zionist faction known as Gush Emunim. It delves into the group's formation, ideology, and actions, specifically examining their underground branch, the *Makhteret*, responsible for executing acts of symbolic terrorism in Israel. The study aims to shed light on the motivations, religious assurances, and perceived threats that compel these religious groups to resort to violence. By analyzing the broader societal and religious divides within Israel, including the significant cleavages between secular and non-secular Jews, the research offers a nuanced view of how religious identity, political ambition, and the pursuit of biblical lands contribute to fundamentalist and extremist behavior. The ultimate goal of such movements, as highlighted, is the expansion of Israeli territory to its biblical borders and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, seen as essential for the Messiah's arrival. This paper contributes to the understanding of religious extremism's impacts on Israeli politics, society, and interfaith relations, emphasizing the role of religious conviction in driving some of the most profound conflicts in the region.

Keywords: Makhteret, Jewish Underground, Religious Zionists, Israel, fundamentalism, extremism

Introduction

Religious assuredness can wake people to unimaginable things. One who is drunk by religious pise may be up to the greatest things possible, but also the worst of them. Religion truly has the capacity to be a weapon of mobilization and unification of people. Still, throughout history, it has been used in specific circumstances to be a source of legitimacy for militant religious groups for their actions, which they understand as a reaction to threats from the outside (modern and globalized) world to their community. Whether the threat is political, economic, or cultural, a violent response is what religion demands of them, or rather, that is their perception. Religious groups that adopt this worldview through acts of terrorism in an attempt to change the political environment combine *terror* - to intimidate and send a message to opponents and *religion* - to attract followers (PBS, 2002). Since the middle of the 20th century, the Middle East has been a place of permanent conflict, primarily between Jews and Palestinians (but also Arabs in general). These conflicts take various forms, and one of the forms is acts of fundamental extremism. Israel is a deeply divided society and, as such, represents fertile ground for conflict. In addition to the division between Jews and Muslims, it is important to mention that Jewish society itself is divided into several entities. Roughly, the division is between the secular and the non-secular, who clash over the role of religion in their state, but this can be extended to four large groups: *Haredi* - ultra-orthodox Jews who do not recognize the existence of the state of Israel, because it was created by man, not by God's hand, and the term itself signifies *one who trembles under the word of God*; *Dati* – religious orthodox Jews; *Masorti* – traditional (not necessarily theistic); and *Hiloni* - the largest group that includes secular citizens (PEW, 2016).

Consequently, numerous acts of terrorism have been committed during the last decades, and the actors and targets are diverse. This paper looks at the religiously inspired acts of terrorism committed by religious Jews. Those acts could be aimed both toward the Jews themselves, but also toward the Palestinians, and it is the acts of terrorism toward another ethnoreligious community that are the basis of this work. Specifically, the focus is on the *Gush Emunim* (Block of the Faithful) movement, more precisely, the *Makhteret* (Underground) that emerged from that group and has committed multiple attacks against Muslims in Israel. Their goal, as well as the goal of other Jewish fundamentalists, is the expansion of the state of Israel to the biblical borders and the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem, which they consider a prerequisite for the coming of the Messiah and salvation. Therefore, they take matters into their own hands and are directed towards creating the

conditions necessary for the day of the savior's arrival. From their point of view, power (force) secures the right, and divine legitimacy stands behind them. The restoration of the temple implies the demolition of the third holy place of Islam, while the unification of the biblical territories would imply the expulsion of the Palestinians. The following text will discuss the ways in which the Underworld of Gush Emunim strives to achieve these goals.

Theoretical Framework

In order to understand individual acts of religious fundamentalism which include terrorism, it is necessary to briefly mark what terrorism means and how it fits into the theological tradition of the world's oldest living[1] monotheistic religion. A comprehensive, but narrow definition of terrorism for the needs of this paper can be borrowed from Richard English (2016), who defines terrorism as "the use of force against civilians for a political purpose with the aim of creating terror or fear among the directly threatened group and the general public" (p.5). Such a definition focuses on the act itself and emergent characteristics of terrorism and does not go into the perception of the justice of a political or rational goal. What distinguishes fundamentalist terrorism from other forms of terrorism is that they do not want dialogue with the West, they want to reject Western and modern influences, and they do not consider themselves to be in conflict because they have a religious justification for their actions (Post, 1988). A great framework for the study of fundamentalism and extremism can be found in the work of Almond, Appleby, and Sivan, and the psychological side of this medal is presented by Mark Juergensmeyer in his numerous works.

The aforementioned trio investigates, first of all, the context and conditions of the emergence of fundamentalist movements and their influence on religion, culture, and politics. In order to describe these movements, they assign them the term "strong religion" because they are militant movements that are clearly antagonistic to secularization (Almond et al., 2003, pp. 17-18). Therefore, these movements can be said to be fundamentally against the secularization and marginalization of religion. They do not arise in a vacuum but are shaped by a certain long-term context (structure), certain coincidences or chances that are more or less (un)predictable,

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1   Research shows that Zoroastrianism is the oldest religion, but it has no followers today (at least not a significant number).

and choices made by the leaders themselves, further influencing the direction and intensity of development (Almond et al., 2003). The very context of creation shapes the conditions of creation. It includes the centrality of religious leadership, then the state of secularization and religion that is suppressed and which fights against such a state, then civil society, the level of education, globalized communication, social structure, ethnic-religious factors, economic development, international and the internal environment, as well as other factors that shaped the conditions within which a fundamentalist movement was born (Almond et. al., 2003). All of this together affects the adoption of a worldview as a world of war, which is not a simple process, but a series of steps that lead to the symbolic empowerment of individuals who adopt that worldview. First of all, the attitude is adopted that *the world has gone awry*. This is often caused by real problems that people struggle against politically and culturally. However, fewer take a step forward towards a culture of violence and come to the position of *the foreclosure of ordinary options*, that is, that goals cannot be achieved by ordinary means. For that minority, religion offers precisely the possibility of *satanizing* the opponent and *cosmic war* as an absolute conflict between good and evil. Thus (religiously) empowered individuals to *perform symbolic* acts of power that include terrorism as a means of fighting against absolute evil (Juergensmeyer, 2017).

Fundamentalism is a "type of conservative religious movement characterized by the advocacy of strict conformity to sacred texts (Henry Munson, 2024)." All fundamentalist movements, which we can place under the broad term of the old monotheistic "Abrahamic" faith (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), have certain ideological and organizational characteristics. *Ideological* ones include:

1) Ideological component of Reactivity to the Marginalization of Religion;

2) Selectivity, which is reflected in the selective interpretation of sources, taking elements from modernity that correspond to them and paying attention to special goals;

3) Moral dualism (Manichaenism), which represents a worldview about the division into light and darkness, which is polluted and should be protected from;

4) Absolutism and Inerrancy of divine sources (the Torah, the Talmud, the Halakah origin are divine and true and accurate in all particulars); and

 5) Millennialism and Messianism, the idea that ultimate good will defeat evil with the help of a messiah (Almond et al., 2003).

Organizational characteristics define a movement that has:

1) Elect, Chosen Membership, described as "the remnant" or "last outpost" who are on the right (divine) track;

2) Sharp Boundaries between the saved and the sinful – separation can be established on various levels – from dress code, lifestyle, etc. A great example here can be Haredi (ultraorthodox Jews who live near synagogues, wear a white shirt with a black jacket and pants, *Kippah* is a must, etc.;

3) Authoritarian Organization that has no bureaucracy but a superior charismatic leader who outshines regular members and blinds their perspective; and

4) Behavioral Requirements in every sphere of life (dress code, eating, ideas…) (Almond et. al., 2003).

Another thing one must consider when researching fundamentalist movements is their perception of the force they are fighting, essentially their enemies. Perception of the enemy is an important characteristic of these movements, and it can threaten the movement directly or indirectly, in a less noticeable way. Depending on that, the enemy can be primary or secondary. No matter of enemy type, it is being demonized in order to deal with him more easily. When the victim is deprived of the status of a human being, it is easier to kill him. Satanization is easier when people feel oppressed or suffer violence (Juergensmeyer, 2017). The main enemies are, first of all, the religious establishment, which they perceive as corrupt, then the secular state and civil society, which introduce modernity which is a danger to their community and values, and other factors against which they can be directed are religious or ethnonational competition and imperialism and neo-colonialism (Almond et. al., 2003). The alternative framework of fundamentalist movements denies them an organizational and hierarchical structure. Actors of religious terrorism act through *social networks* rather than through organizations, in a special counterculture that strengthens the righteousness of their path, social cohesion, and faith (Pedahzur & Perliger, 2009). However, despite the fact that some authors identify the form of the organization differently, they agree that the groups see the conflict between the forces of good and evil as inevitable and that this is especially pronounced in the minority that has a high identification with the values of the community (Pedahzur & Perliger, 2009). They also emphasize the central role of the leader, being based on close member ties and the sense of crisis as a very important factor that pushes people to violence (Pedahzur & Perliger, 2009).

Throughout their history, the Jews have lived in turbulent periods full of conflict and often marginalization by another, dominant, or threatening group. The consequence of living under conflict was the development of "competitive victimhood," i.e., the tendency to interpret the suffering of one's own group as far greater than that of the rival (Halabi el. al, 2020). Thus, the feeling of victimhood can be used as a psychological mechanism to justify violence, which is even more intensified if the danger to their community is real (as in the case of Israeli Jews). The scriptures themselves are permeated with violence, and one often hears that the Old Testament God is a God of war and violence. Proponents of that thesis can refer to "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" as proof of that claim, although many argue that it cannot be interpreted literally and that, for example, it refers rather to a financial sanction than injuries (Kalimi & Haas, 2006, p. 2). Burns claims that Jewish tradition calls for the minimization of violence that it is permitted only to prevent the occurrence of evil and that minimal violence must be used to achieve goals (Burns, 1996). In addition, Judaism, like any other religion, deals with violence and war and theologically (dis)justifies certain cases. Those principles are known as *jus ad bellum* or rules before the war, and they are accompanied by another set of conditions that concern the moral limitations of warfare itself - rules in war or *jus in bello* (Juergensmeyer, 2020). Judaism allows for several types of justifiable war: *binding – milhemet hova* (defensive, although self-defense does not count as war and those where God ordered the fight) and *permissible – milhemet reshut* (when it seems wise for the state to do so) although some add *preventive* as a separate category (BBC, 2009; Juergensmeyer, 2017; Solomon, 2005). The decision on whether there are conditions for a just war is made by the *Sanhedrin* (council of elders) or the prophet in the case of a permissible war and in the case of a binding one by the government guided by Halakha. As it does not exist today, those with the authority to interpret halakha – the rabbis – decide, which is especially important for the Gush Emunim (Juergensmeyer, 2017). Both war and peace come from God. In this way, individual responsibility is erased. It is important to note that when violence is carried out, one must act according to certain norms: it is conducted only by true believers who do not have a recently conceived family or other obligation that binds them, and the force used must be directed towards the maximum speedy resolution of the conflict, peace must be offered to the opposite side, and even if he is refused, the children and women will be spared or captured (Solomon, 2005). Although they are religious fundamentalists, this does not seem to apply to extreme religious groups that commit terrorism. This is another indication of the selective interpretation of sacred sources.

Gush Emunim and *Makhteret*

Jewish terrorism in Israel is directed both within the group and against external enemies. It appeared for the first time after the establishment of the state and was aimed at Jewish targets, and since 1980 and the appearance of the Underground, it has been directed more vigorously at the Palestinians (Gal-or, 2004). Gush Emunim represents one of a series of examples of Jewish fundamentalism that claimed many lives and fits into the theoretical matrix that is being presented. The importance of this example can be seen from the fact that between 1978 and 2008, 90% of terrorist acts were committed by national-religious Jews, among whom a large proportion of followers of Block of faithful in their settlements (Aran & Hassner, 2013). In addition, the relevance of this movement is illustrated by the fact that they managed to develop strong political mechanisms to influence the Israeli government, which includes a significant number of seats in the Knesset.[2] The main influence on Israel's politics can be seen in the creation and expansion of Jewish settlements along the West Bank, i.e. Judea and Samaria (Perliger, 2016). The movement first emerged as a non-violent, messianic, ultra-national orthodox movement, and then the *Makhteret* (underground) that undertook terrorist acts was separated from it. This shows that religious traditions are not immutable, but although they are partially restrictive, they are nevertheless adaptable, and they leave room for (religious) leaders to interpret the sources selectively. The main acts by which *Makhteret* is recognizable are: 1) Planting bombs on the cars of Palestinian mayors; 2) Attack on students of the Islamic Faculty in Hebron; and two planned but unexecuted acts: 3) Intention to blow up the Dome of the Rock; and 4) Intention to plant bombs on buses in Jerusalem.

Gush Emunim has its roots in the ideas of two rabbis, father and son, Isaac Kook and Zvi Yehudah Kook. Isaac was the chief Ashkenazi rabbi in this area under the British protectorate and saw the secular Zionists as God's instrument of redemption, as a sign of the restoration of the homeland of Israel and the beginning of the messianic era (Rabbi Snitkoff, 2022). This attitude towards secular authorities distinguishes religious Zionists and ultra-orthodox Jews – a view of the circumstances that led to the formation of the Jewish kingdom in Israel – some take an active role in salvation. In contrast, others consider it better to wait for the messiah passively.

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2   In 2024 one group with same political worldview of Religious Zionism makes second most important party in Israeli government. They hold important ministries and have a major influence on prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Thus, for example, religious Zionists perceive the formation of the State of Israel and the victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, perhaps most important due to the occupation of the territories of Judea and Samaria, as stages of the redemption process (Perliger, 2016). Kook Sr. was the head of the *Merkaz ha-Rav* school (yeshiva), which his son succeeded. Kook Jr. incorporated into his father's teaching the idea of the necessity of fulfilling the biblical borders and the unification of Eretz Yisrael into the State of Israel and thus formed his ideo-theology about the borders and annexation of the mentioned territories (Sprinzak, 1987).

The Gush Emunim emerged only after the Yom Kippur War when they felt the need for political organization. The movement was officially born in 1974 in the territory of the annexed West Bank in a settlement that was taken from the Arabs under the slogan "Land of Israel, for the people of Israel, according to the Torah of Israel" (Sprinzak, 1987; Rabbi Snitkoff, 2022). Initially, the movement was close to the authorities because the expansion of settlements West of the Jordan River suited both, but democracy was seen only as a step towards a Halakhan theocracy. The Gush has been seen as a "settlement movement" that aims to settle territories to which the Palestinians have no rights (Sprinzak, 1987, p. 203). Kook the elder's idea that the settlement should be peaceful, is not current with the new settlements that aspire to Jewish sovereignty over Eretz Israel (Solomon, 2005). Supporting the new ideology that sees all Palestinians as *Amalekites* comes with the emergence of new leaders.

First of all, the ideologue of the appearance of the Underground in 1979 within Gush Emunim is Yehuda Etzion, who, along with Ben Shoshan, is the main and responsible for planning the first terrorist actions (Friedman, 1986). Alongside them, a leader with military experience was needed, which was found in Commander Menachem Livni, a veteran of the Israeli army (Aran & Hassner, 2013). The Underground is emerging as a fundamentalist movement that believes that the messiah will come in our time and that something needs to be done here and now (Post, 1988). The key event for its origin was the negotiations at Camp David when they saw the concessions made by the Israeli government as a betrayal of Jewish ideals. Etzion formed his "theology of active redemption," through which he continued the views of Ben Dov, who believed that one should not wait for a miracle but act now and come up with the idea of blowing up the Dome of the Rock in order to initiate the metamorphosis of Israel (Sprinzak, 1987, pp. 203-207). However, despite their planning, the action was never carried out because they could not get the rabbi's approval to carry out such an act (Sprinzak, 1987). This disappointed Etzion

and Shoshan, who did not play a more important role in further actions. Other authors point out that, paradoxically, another terrorist (Palestinian) act saved the Dome. The unfortunate event concerns the murder of six yeshiva students in 1980 as they were leaving the synagogue in Hebron. The movement reacted to this with the first terrorist act, whose mastermind was Livni. After the commemoration of the dead students, they planned to retaliate by placing bombs under the cars of the Palestinian mayors, in order to cripple them and thereby humiliate the Muslims in this area. Their action was partially successful. Not all bombs were activated, and they even blinded a Jewish soldier who was injured while deactivating one of the bombs (Friedman, 1986).

The next misdeed was committed in 1983, again as a vengeance for the murder of a yeshiva student: actors entered the Islamic Faculty in Hebron and killed three and wounded 33 people. Authorities arrested 25 persons responsible for the attack (Norman, 2021). Intoxicated by this act, young Shaul Nir wanted more. He believed that the Palestinians must be driven from the holy land that God intended for the Jews. He convinced the rabbis to bless the new operation. It was planned to blow up five buses with Arab passengers. However, this did not happen because the Shin Bet discovered this plot and, in 1984, arrested Gush Emunim members, several military personnel, and rabbis (who were acquitted), and the organization was officially declared a terrorist (Sprinzak, 1987; Norman, 2021). Individuals, mostly well-educated from the middle class, which is the profile of members of the underworld, affiliates of Gush Emunim continued to carry out *Price Tag* attacks in the West Bank area in an attempt to provoke the Arabs into a response and thereby hope that the Israeli army would step in and forcefully unify the biblical territories (Aran & Hassner, 2013).[3] People from the settlements have supported both terrorist and *Price Tag* attacks because they perceive them as defending their community against the demonized Palestinians.

Concluding Remarks

In Makhteret, all the elements identified by theorists of fundamental movements are depicted. First of all, they represent a response to the secularism and modernism embodied in the State of Israel, which has failed the goal of unifying the territories of Eretz Israel. All five ideological and four organizational characteristics are

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3   Price Tag marks attacks of vandalism and hatred crimes against the Palestinians (Gurski, 2020).

also present: they are a militant response to the defense of religion, they selectively interpret the sources and pay attention only to a certain problem, their world is divided into good and evil, and their ideo-theology is infallible, and the messiah will come and defeat good and evil. They will initiate it. They are the righteous remnant and are differentiated from the sinners in an organization that puts leaders first and demands certain behavior from its members. Their main enemy is the Arabs, but also the religious establishment that is corruptly close to the State of Israel. The conditions of emergence are also present. Long-term factors shaped their perception – a life filled with conflicts under ethno-religious competition in a secular state. Short-term factors or chances occurred – Camp David, but also reactions to the murder of yeshiva students. Leaders made key choices – planned attacks/actions. It is important to make a connection with the stages of empowerment: primarily, because of Camp David, they realized that everything had gone awry and that they could not use regular options (such as democratic solutions) against a satanized enemy who had nothing to seek in the Holy Land. Consequently, they had to take some acts that would show that they were ready to all, acts that would demonstrate power.

It was critical for them to have the rabbi's approval of their actions, as they saw their authority as religious interpreters as crucial. The question arises: if they pay so much attention to religion, why do they not find in it mechanisms to establish peace through non-violent means? The answer to that is precisely the characteristic of fundamental movements to interpret sources selectively. Such acts will not end anytime soon, nor will the conflict in this area – precisely and paradoxically because of religion. What they should do is move the cosmic war out of reality and into the realm of ideas and find in the biblical writings instructions for the cessation of bloodshed such as (Juergensmeyer, 2020):

> And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, ad their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the Lord of hosts hath spoken it. All the nations may walk in the name of their gods, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever (Micah, 4:2-5).

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