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War and peace within the Israeli Right (1970 - 1978): the path of a Hawkish party towards pragmatism

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ABSTRACT

Right-wing ethno-nationalist parties are conceived of as upholders of rigid foreign policy positions. But in what instances might a hawkish party pursue a peace-promoting policy? The present article seeks to examine this question through the case study of the hawkish-nationalist Right in Israel during the 1970s, which eventually led its leader Menachem Begin to sign a peace agreement with Egypt, entailing a commitment to a full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula and the evacuation of the Jewish settlements established in the area. The article examines the process which paradoxically led such right-wing hawkish leadership to signing—with determination and contrary to public expectations—an unprecedented political agreement in the history of the Israeli-Arab conflict. Contrary to the Israeli Right historiography which has, hitherto, focused on Menachem Begin's persona and on his role in the political process—the article emphasizes those broad historical processes eclipsed by the limelight cast on its leader, underscoring the peace discourse evolving within the Israeli right political network, from party activists and supporters to parliamentary leadership. Rather than a personal initiative opposing his network's policy—as considered in academic discourse—Begin's peace project followed the exhortations of his political matrix.

Right-wing ethno-nationalist parties are conceived of as upholders of rigid positions on issues related to foreign policy.[1] The rhetoric of their populist leaders and spokesmen is fraught with flourishes of national dignity, of uncompromising loyalty to the territorial and security interests of the nation-state, alongside an assertive and resolute attitude towards those countries perceived as hostile. Their quest to shield national sovereignty from hostile forces within and outside the country exacerbates international relation crises, and they frequently oppose a moderate political leadership on the grounds that the latter adopts a conciliatory or compromising foreign policy as a result of its commitment to extraneous interests.[2]

But in what instances might a hawkish party pursue a peace-promoting policy? Under which circumstances might its leaders lean towards compromise and pragmatism? What are the factors that could bring such a party to reshape its approach and lead to the signing of a political agreement based upon a compromise with its neighbours on the basis of a dialogue that favours partnership over rivalry? The present article seeks to examine this question through the case study of the hawkish-nationalist Right in Israel during the 1970s.[3]

Throughout the 1970s, the Israeli Right underwent a significant permutation in every aspect related to its peace and war policy in the Middle East. In August 1970, Gahal (the Liberal Herut Bloc; see below), the then Israeli right-wing party, resigned from the Israeli government on account of its opposition to the political outline promoted by the American administration.

Menachem Begin led his party, in those days, to leave the Golda Meir government, since he categorically rejected the compliance of Meir's administration with the initiative advanced by Richard Nixon, the state secretary and William Rogers, the president to launch negotiations between Israel and its neighbours, especially Egypt, on the basis of the UN Security Council Resolution 242 (which demanded the withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict). This resignation from the government manifested the hawkish and uncompromising political position of the Israeli Right.

Surprisingly, eight years later, in September 1978, Menachem Begin—already Prime Minister of Israel—Anwar Sadat, President of Egypt, and Jimmy Carter, the President of the United States, would sign framework agreements for peace based on UN Resolutions 242 and 338. As is well known, the Camp David Accords and the peace agreement signed about six months later between Israel and Egypt also included a commitment to a full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula and its handover to Egypt, following the evacuation of the Jewish settlements established in the area.

The government in charge of signing the peace agreement was led by the Likud (Heb., 'Consolidation', or National Liberal Movement)—a hawkish right-wing and, to some extent, also a nationalist-populist party—rather than by camps which represented a more conciliatory line in the Israeli political system. Moreover, Begin's resolution in favour of a far-reaching withdrawal vis-à-vis the public statements aired by most circles in Israel in the years prior to its implementation was taken relatively quickly. He entered negotiations immediately after the elections whereby his party succeeded, for the first time, to form a government in Israel, upon issuing preliminary messages to Sadat concerning the Israeli prime minister's readiness for a massive withdrawal in Sinai.

This gambit stood in blatant contradiction to most of the previous predictions and assessments regarding Begin and his party both within Israel and abroad. Despite this incongruence, the agreements with Egypt received broad public support in Israel, including the endorsement of the political network that stood behind the government, which also comprised right-wing and religious parties.

In this article, I aim to examine the process which paradoxically led the hawkish right-wing party leadership in Israel to signing—with determination and contrary to public expectations—an unprecedented political agreement in the history of the Israeli-Arab

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[3]On the populist characteristics of the Israeli Right, see Dani Filc, *The political right in Israel: Different faces of Jewish populism*. Routledge, 2009.

conflict. I shall define the October 1973 War (known in Israel as the 'Yom Kippur War') as the watershed moment of the turnabout in the stance of the Israeli Right in relation to peace. I will show how, in the aftermath of this bloodshed, a heated internal debate sparked within the Likud, which set peace as an essential national goal to be promoted by the party through a shift from a relatively dogmatic position onto a pragmatic approach.

The main contribution of this article stems mainly from its offering a novel perspective which focuses on and closely scrutinizes the broader historical process leading to the historic accord. In contradistinction to the respective historiographies of the Israeli Right and that of the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt which have, so far, focused on the image and role of the leaders. In the Israeli case, academic research has focused on Menachem Begin and the role he played (alongside that of Anwar Sadat and Jimmy Carter, of course) in the historic decision that led to the peace agreement with Egypt.[4] Thus, the current article seeks to shed light on those broad historical processes which were eclipsed by the limelight cast on Menachem Begin.

Thus, for instance, did Arye Naor, an important researcher of the Zionist Right who also served as Cabinet Secretary in the Begin government, analyse the political-security positions of the sixth prime minister of the State of Israel. At the core of his interpretation stood the distinction between the fundamental dimension of Zionist-Revisionist ideology —which conceived of the West Bank as part of Greater Israel, and the pragmatic dimension of this ideology—reflected in Begin's approach to the territories that Israel had conquered from Egypt and Syria in 1967.[5]

A similar perspective was adopted by Gerald Steinberg and Ziv Rubinovitz in a book devoted to the analysis of Begin's role in the negotiations conducted with Egypt and in face of the American mediation. They highlighted the way he manoeuvred between his ideological beliefs as a Zionist revisionist and the *realpolitik* he espoused as prime minister. The two researchers underscored Begin's resolution to compromise, as opposed to some circles from his historical support base.[6]

Seth Anziska disagreed with their conclusion, but also put forth the leader's decisions at the core of the debate. In his research, he emphasized how the determination to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state was Begin's top priority throughout the negotiations with Egyptian representatives over the implementation of the peace agreement.[7] The prominence of the leader as a historical figure and the human drama that often accompanied his activities while holding senior positions has gripped the attention of scholars, increasing their tendency to focus on his quandaries and resolutions.[8]

However, the inclination to focus on the leader—ingrained, perhaps, in biographical writing—may prove an obstacle for an accurate and in-depth fathoming of the historical process, since leaders do not act in a vacuum.

[4]*Colin Shindler, The Rise of Israeli Right. From Odessa to Hebron, Cambridge University Press, New York 2015, 318 – 320*; Yechiam Weitz, 'From Peace in the South to War in the North: Menachem Begin as Prime Minister, 1977–1983.' *Israel studies* 19.1 (2014): 145–165.; Lawrence Wright, Thirteen Days in September: *Carter, Begin, and Sadat at Camp David*. Simon and Schuster, 2014.

[5]Arye Naor, *Erets yisarel hashlema—emuna ve-mediniut?* (Haifa, 2001); Arye Naor, 'Hawks' Beaks, Doves' Feathers: Likud Prime Ministers between Ideology and Reality.' *Israel Studies* 10.3 (2005): 154–91.

[6]Gerald M. Steinberg and Ziv Rubinovitz. *Menachem Begin and the Israel-Egypt Peace Process: Between Ideology and Political Realism*. Indiana University Press, 2019.

[7]Seth Anziska, *Preventing Palestine*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

[8]Avi Shilon, *Menachem Begin*. Yale University Press, 2012.

Obviously, wide circles of actors partake in the historical process, and a historical reckoning is required in order to examine the interrelationships between the components of the political network spearheaded by the leader, with which he maintains a constant feedback that constitutes an indispensable condition for their success in advancing their policies.

In the present article I seek, thus, to broaden the scope from Begin himself onto further circles within the political expanse of the Israeli Right, from the level of party activists and supporters up to the echelon of parliamentary leadership. Based on diverse documentary material gleaned from public and party archives in Israel that has not hitherto been addressed in academic writing, the contribution of this article lies in its presenting a historical affair which could serve as a case study for a theoretical discussion elsewhere.

The press of the period, as well as the archival sources on which I shall base my argument, afford the linchpin that supports my choice to present the ongoing debate on the issues of war and peace as it took place in institutions representing the various spheres of the Zionist Right, from the level of activists through the different echelons of political leadership.

I will briefly unfold the sociopolitical network that was woven as part of the process of bolstering the Right in the State of Israel, whose political embodiment was the 'Likud'. I shall argue that the jolt experienced by Israeli society in the aftermath of the bloody October 1973 War[9] did not miss the Likud, which was established but a month before the outbreak of hostilities.

I will point to the development of a peace-promoting discourse within the ranks of the party and analyse a number of landmarks whereby it is possible to identify the inner maturation processes of the Israeli Right, towards the endeavour aimed to achieve a peace based upon considerable compromise and pragmatic policy. Begin was bound to grapple with this internal permutation in the context of the dialogue between him as a leader and his network of supporters.

Initially, as a first response to the war, Begin adhered to the conceptions he had presented in previous years and considered the military offensive of Egypt and Syria as proof that the Middle East was far from being ripe for a peace settlement. The more time went by and the more he was exposed to the various trends within his movement and throughout the political network that consolidated around him, the more the Likud leader's stance changed, and he lent more weight in his speeches and manoeuvres to the importance of peace and to proposing courses of action to promote it.

It is hoped that the article will add a valuable tier to the annals of Israeli political history at large and, more specifically, to the chronicles of the Zionist Right, as well as foster an understanding of Israeli society's response to wars. In a broader sense, it is possible to regard the analysis of this period as a case study for the modes whereby nationalist-hawkish parties might adopt a pragmatic policy that manifests a shift in their worldview.

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[9]Anita Shapira, *Israel: A History*. UPNE, 2012, 326–33.

The Israeli Right towards October 1973—the emergence of a diversified network

Throughout the first three decades that followed the establishment of the State, the Israeli Labour Party, in its different versions, preserved its hegemony. The Israeli Right purported to have become the dominant force in its government, whereas, in effect, it remained, for long years, a rather marginal factor in Israeli politics. It was not until September 1973 that the long process of weaving a broad political network came to fruition. This matrix stood behind Menachem Begin, who succeeded in maintaining, almost uninterruptedly, his status as leader of the Right.

At the core of the Israeli Right stood the Herut (Heb. 'freedom') party, a movement founded in June 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel, based on the anti-British underground or 'Irgun', in Hebrew ('The National Military Organization in the Land of Israel' or Etzel, its acronym) and on veterans of the Revisionist Zionism movement. Herut carried the banner for 'Greater Israel' as part of a worldview tinged with nationalist-populist-hawkish traits.[10]

Economic, social and cultural processes increased the support for Herut among the immigrants from Jewish communities in Islamic countries and their families. Begin and Herut's shift towards more moderate liberal-national stances,[11] along with their ability to garner broad electoral support, led the Liberal Party (the General Zionists)—a centre-right party which held capitalist and relatively moderate foreign policy views—to consider Begin and Herut as a partner who could aid sectors from the Israeli bourgeoisie to gain further political influence.[12]

This is how Gahal (an acronym for 'Gush Herut Liberals'; lit. Freedom-Liberal Bloc) was founded already in 1965. Gahal joined the Israeli government during the security crisis of May-June 1967, at whose end Israel conquered large areas of Arab countries and, at its core, the West Bank. Begin defined the retaining of the 'Greater Land of Israel' as the foremost mission of his party within the Alignment led-government (Heb., 'Ma'arach') and struggled against any expression of a willingness to territorial compromise. As mentioned, in the summer of 1970, when the Golda Meir government accepted the American political initiative based on Resolution 242; that is, complied to withdraw from the West Bank as well, Begin led his party back to the opposition benches.

The upshot of the June 1967 War and the years of his participation in the government afforded Begin and his party political impetus and legitimacy, and those, in turn, fostered the unremitting expansion of the right-wing political matrix. For the first time, prominent and even senior members of the security, legal and economic establishment in Israel joined in. In the fall of 1973, some of these figures led to the unification between Gahal and a number of small centre-right parties which, in unison, founded the Likud. The new, united political party, sought to turn the Zionist Right into an actual political alternative to the Labour Movement.

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[10]Ami Pedahzur, *The triumph of Israel's radical right*. Oxford University Press, 2012, 35–80.
[11]Nadav G. Shelef, 'From' Both Banks of the Jordan" to the 'Whole Land of Israel:' Ideological Change in Revisionist Zionism." *Israel studies* 9.1 (2004): 125–148.
[12]Amir Goldstein, 'Crisis and Development: Menachem Begin's Leadership Throughout the 1960s.' *Israel Studies* 20.1 (2015): 110–133.

Even if the consolidating network of the Right held diversified stances vis-à-vis the various arenas, in the early 1970s, Begin and his partners stood out on account of their hawkish statements. Moreover, they opposed any political initiative or proposal to resolve the Israeli-Arab conflict based on an Israeli withdrawal—first and foremost, in relation to the West Bank, perceived by Begin as a historical-integral part of the Land of Israel and, therefore, as a region that Israel must rule forever.

However, regarding the other fronts as well, their main message entailed a deep distrust in the will of Arab leaders to promote peace initiatives and come to terms with the existence of the State of Israel. The rhetoric of the Right underscored the security dangers that Israel would be thrust into in the event of a withdrawal, and blamed the Alignment government for its lack of commitment to the preservation of national security and for maintaining ties with hostile elements in the international-socialist world.[13]

During the October 1973 War, the hawkish line of the Likud leaders, conveyed by Begin and his partners at the daily meetings of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee of the Israeli Parliament was conspicuous. Throughout the containment battles waged by Israel against the armies of Egypt and Syria, they were careful to demonstrate a patriotic and stately enlistment and support for the initiatives of the Golda Meir government.

However, but a week after the break out of the battles, with the bouncing back of the Israeli army and its shift to the offensive, the Likud leaders also began to criticize the way the war was conducted—which, in their view, was not sufficiently aggressive. These disagreements escalated and turned, during the negotiation stage to end the war, into a scathing contention between the leaders of the hawkish opposition and the government. The Likud leaders demanded that Israel oppose any ceasefire and operate on the diplomatic arena to thwart any such initiative, as long as the Egyptian army maintained its grip on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal.[14]

They pushed for a decisive crushing of the enemy despite American pressure, arguing that ending in a 'sort of draw' would lead to renewed Arab offensives within a short time.[15] Begin read aloud a resolution on behalf of his party ruling out the government's response to the ceasefire and slammed the committee members: 'Is there any doubt around this table that even now the Arabs want to destroy us? [...] This should be the premise'.[16]

The hardline position of the Likud leaders was justified on the grounds of 'concern for the security of the nation and the prevention of further bloody attacks', but at its core stood, again, the opposition to the very mention of Resolution 242, which entailed the expectation that Israel withdraw from the territories occupied in 1967, along the lines of the ceasefire agreements. On the basis of similar arguments, Begin led the Likud to oppose the convening of the Geneva Conference in December 1973, with the participation of the superpowers, Israel, Egypt and Jordan (but not Syria), although this multinational gathering was conceived of as a first step on the way out of the vicious circle of war, whose bitter round had just ceased.

This hawkish and uncompromising stance, in the midst of the renewed Israeli election campaign in late 1973, fostered the Likud's image as a 'war party' whose rise to power

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[13]Filc, *The political right in Israel*, 25–6.
[14]Minutes of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, Israel State Archives (henceforth: ISA) 19.10.1973.
[15]Ibid, 28 October 1973.
[16]Ibid.

would exacerbate the violence in the Middle East due to the rigidity of its leaders.[17] The heads of the Alignment depicted in gloomy colours the future script of Israel's friendly relationships around the world, especially with the United States, in the event that the Likud came into power.

At this point, it seemed that a preliminary rift was beginning to wedge between the Likud leadership and its underlying political matrix. The fact that the heavy price of war was not even mentioned in Begin's directives preoccupied the party activists during the weeks spanning between the ceasefire and the Eighth Knesset (Israeli Parliament) Election Day.

The jolt of war and the longing for peace at the Herut central committee debates

In the wake of the ceasefire, the Herut Movement—the Likud's central faction—convened its central committee for a number of meetings in view of the forthcoming elections, postponed to the last day of 1973. The memorandums of these sessions, attended by hundreds of prominent party activists, afford a valuable glimpse into the commotion which gripped right-wing and Likud supporters. This was a soul-searching moment, triggered by the shock of war and the encounter with the Israeli reality that unfolded in its aftermath.

The over 2,600 Israeli army soldiers killed in action during the Yom Kippur War (in Arab countries the number of deaths ranged from 10,000 to 20,000, according to different evaluations) confronted Israeli society with an inconceivable degree of bereavement, and an unprecedented amount of wounded and POWs. The price exacted by the war set off a mental shock and did not slip through the cracks for members of Begin's movement. More and more comrades sought to process their experiences in the aftermath of the painful and tense weeks that elapsed and the poignant sensations to which they were exposed in Israeli society. One of the central committee members shared with his audience his impression from a home circle in which he had participated: 'The longing for peace is deep. The concern is deep'. He urged the Herut leaders to 'come and explain to other people that we are longing for peace just like any other citizen in the country [. . .] more emphasis should be put on the word *peace*'.[18]

Another central committee member told of a poll she had conducted among her acquaintances: 'The public rejects our way, which claims that ours is 'the only way!') Heb'. 'rak kach'!). The Likud can no longer, she stressed, settle for censuring the government. After the war and during the run-up to the general elections, the party must propose a course of action that will extricate Israel from the cycle of bloodshed: 'We have a hard and arduous task before us. Do not deceive yourselves; there is a tectonic shift —the fear, the fatigue, a large number of fallen and injured created a different mood'.[19] Quite a few speakers referred to the public mood and there seemed to be a consensus that the public was craving for initiatives that would push war away, and dreaded that the Likud would bring Israel closer to another round of fighting: 'Many ask, and what about tomorrow morning?'[20]

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[17]Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov, 'Israel and the Peace Process, 1977–1982: In Search of Legitimacy for Peace' (1994), 20.
[18]Minutes of the Herut Movement committee Center, 29 November 1973, Jabotinsky Institute Archive (henceforth, JIA), E 1–2/21/2.
[19]Ibid.
[20]Minutes of the Herut Movement committee Center, 29.11.1973, JIA, E 1–2/21/2.

The deliberations at the central committee of Herut—the movement which hitherto had upheld the most traditional, unswervingly hawkish views in Israel—now expressed the significant effect of the Yom Kippur War upon the party discourse. However, the conclusions drawn by the members were not uniform. Some demanded that the party leadership adopt a pragmatic approach, and convey the explicit public statement that Herut was not pledged to the slogan 'not one inch' (Heb., 'Af Sha'al')—that is, to the categorical commitment to oppose any withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967 as part of a peace agreement. A veteran central committee member explicitly voiced the demand that Menachem Begin clarify to the public that 'not yielding an inch, as an ideology, relates to the West Bank alone' and that party leaders would be willing, for the sake of genuine peace, to return territories of the north and south to Arab countries.[21]

Concurrently, Begin received letters conveying similar directives on the part of various public figures who supported him, but were also troubled by the entrenchment of the image of a party which turned its back on any attempt to promote peace. For instance, Prof. Yohanan Aharoni, one of the most prominent archaeologists in Israel, urged Begin not to miss their 'finest hour' and to formulate a 'clear foreign and security policy that is opposed to the illusion of peace, but does not commit itself a priori to "not an inch"'.[22]

Others actually emphasized the responsibility of the movement to disclose before the public its resolution to stand firmly behind its traditional ideology, even if it entailed 'bitter and painful things', rather than gear its propaganda to 'captivating the electorate'. This is how a member of the centre argued that the movement must adhere to its hawkish principles: 'Whoever wants to tell half-truths weakens our position [. . .] we are the only ones who can put a stop today to our country from going downhill'.[23] During another meeting, MK Yoram Aridor demanded, 'in the name of realpolitik', to make it clear to the public that, contrary to the illusions scattered by the Alignment government, 'under the current conditions, there is no chance in the near future of making peace between us and the Arabs'.[24]

Menachem Begin heeded to the speakers and mostly responded with unflinching dictums concerning the righteousness of the hawkish party stance. Although the Alignment tactic of presenting the Likud as a movement whose coming into power could lead to the outbreak of another war was overt and discussed in the press, Begin made no real effort to flex his viewpoints or messages before the Israeli public. It is estimated that, as a result, the Likud lost a crucial number of seats in the elections for the ruling party.[25]

Incipient voices within the Likud leadership in favour of greater pragmatism

If in the period following the cessation of hostilities it was mainly Likud field activists who demanded a thorough reckoning of the party policy and conduct in the aftermath the war, during 1974, similar exhortations issued from more senior figures. Shmuel Tamir, head of the Likud Free Center division, who, in the post-1967 years had expressed even

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[21]Ibid, 16 December 1973.
[22]Prof. Yochanan Aharoni to Menachem Begin, 2 December 1973, Begin Heritage Center Archive, (henceforth: BHCA) OP —556.
[23]Minutes of the Herut Movement committee Center, 29.11.1973, JIA, E 1–2/21/2.
[24]Ibid, 16 December 1973.
[25]Meron Medzini, *Golda Meir: a political biography*. De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2017, 626.

more maximalist positions than those of Menachem Begin, now enjoined his party to formulate more flexible stances in the field of foreign policy.

Throughout various speeches and discussions, he iterated time and again the admonition that 'on Yom Kippur the data changed, and whoever seeks to come out of his shell, and understands that he must open up to reality—must acknowledge this fact'.[26] Tamir, who was assigned the eighth slot on the Likud election list, argued that the war had 'ended without a decisive victory' and stated that 'even if there is but a five percent chance for true peace', the opposition party must express its willingness to relinquish [conquered] territory for that purpose. He stressed that the Likud's inflexible positions nullify its public sway: 'A political body which does not merely wish to assemble in order to disseminate ideas, but also seeks to assume responsibility for the existence of the state is not entitled to offer the same answers it gave before reality utterly and fundamentally changed'.[27] However, Tamir was, to a certain extent, an outsider in the Likud and his admonitions could be assessed as an exception that proved the party rule.

Lo and behold; in the summer of 1974 a dramatic event befell: two Likud Knesset members joined two of the more dovish MKs from the Alignment Party and published a manifesto addressed to their parties and to the Israeli public calling for a more pragmatic approach to the resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

In their view, nationalist and religious fanaticism divides Israeli society and, therefore, there is an urgent need to 'give back to the people, before we miss the deadline, the dimension of political, social and ethical sanity, to return to the golden mean of moderation [. . .] to the royal road of Zionism'. They called on the Israeli government to formulate a 'peace policy with our neighbors through compromise'. To the voices uttered by members of the Herut movement immediately after the war and to Shmuel Tamir's message now joined two other, quite senior partners: Benjamin Halevy was assigned the fifth slot on the Likud list for the Knesset and Shneor Zalman Abramov was placed thirteenth. The two were among the party delegates to the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee and were privy to its deliberations prior to, during and after the October 1973 War. This fact also attests—even circumstantially—to the connection between the October War and the turmoil that had gripped the Israeli Right.

Halevy warned that the perpetuation of the Israeli-Arab conflict held in store the menace of escalation to yet a further war, whereby the deployment of 'increasingly deadly weapons' would be expected. He argued that the responsible Israeli leadership of the two major parties was bound—in face of the impending danger of ongoing bloody cycles—to reconsider its positions, steer clear from coming to terms with a reality of ever-persisting war, and steer towards an unswerving effort to bring peace closer: 'We owe it to our children, if possible, to prevent the ever recurrent bloodletting of our best youngsters. [. . .] We must strive for peace under conditions that will ensure our outmost security and our existence for time without end'.[28]

From the perspective of the discussion on the changes that had swept the Israeli Right during the years in question, it is possible to consider the publication of the manifesto as an unprecedented event, as may also be deduced from the vivid responses it arouse. The

[26]*Ma'ariv*, 13 August 1974.
[27]*Davar*, 8 August 1974.
[28]*Haaretz*, 9 July 1974.

proclamation shook the very foundations of Herut. Dr. Halevy, a former Supreme Court justice, was the rising star in the movement. His affiliation to the party following the Israeli conquests in June 1967 symbolized the growing legitimacy of the Right and the buttressing of the hawkish forces in Israeli society.

Between him and Begin, only MK Yohanan Badr, a veteran who was at the end of his political career, stood at the top of the party. And in July 1974, it was precisely Halevy who now expressed a conciliatory outlook which called into question the sacred principle of the wholeness of the homeland.

Various forums of the movement grappled with the 'Halevy affair' for several long weeks. The discussion focused on what was considered by many as a deviation from the strict ideological line vis-à-vis the integrity of the homeland, on the argumentation of Halevy that formed the basis of the manifesto he had signed and on the very possibility of holding a free discussion in Herut over the basic positions of the political party.[29]

A significant number of the speakers emphasized the extent of their respect for him and, precisely for that reason, they hoped that he himself had been misled, or that his words had been misinterpreted. Other members of the centre hurled at him, throughout this and subsequent meetings, an impassioned and blatant criticism as one who expressed heresy and folded the flag of Greater Israel and endangers the security of the nation, and even exhorted him to leave the party and resign from the Knesset.

The Herut youth in Jerusalem attempted to intervene in order to heal the rift that was wedging between him and the members of the movement: 'The Herut movement cannot afford to give up on a personality of Dr Halevy's stature'.[30] As time went by, however, it became clear that Halevy adhered to a more pragmatic and conciliatory outlook.

He insisted that most Likud voters supported his views, and were open to the possibility of reaching a territorial compromise with Egypt, whose scope would depend upon the degree of actual evidence that Egypt was keen on making peace. This evaluation turned out to be true several years later, around the Camp David Accords (1978), but at this point Halevy was forced to quit his movement. In January 1975, on the eve of the convention of the 12th National Conference of the Herut movement, he announced his decision in a letter addressed to Menachem Begin, whereby he accused the Herut leadership of refusing to part with its characteristic dogmatism, despite the cautionary lesson of the Yom Kippur War: 'The policy of the Herut movement eschews reality and refuses to adapt to its permutations'.[31]

Begin did not reply to the letter but, as it seems, he could not shun the growing pressure exerted on him by the political network he had led to adopt a more pragmatic line on issues of foreign policy and national security. Halevy mainly highlighted the danger of an impending war with Arab states and only hinted at the need to address the Palestinian issue as well. Those who explicitly posed the Palestinian question as part of the inner discourse within the Likud were senior members of the Liberal Party.

[29]Protocol of Herut Administration, 17 July 1974 and 31 July 1974, JIA, E 1–2/23.
[30]Herut Youth Board Meeting—23 July 1974, JIA, E 1–4 / 47.
[31]Benjamin Halevy to Menachem Begin, 1 January 1975, BHCA, 20–210.

Voices issuing from the Liberal Party in favour of recognizing the Palestinians as a people and reaching a compromise

The Palestinian issue received increasing attention in the international arena throughout the 1970s. A series of anti-Israel activities carried out by Palestinian organizations attested to their keen determination not to give up their national aspirations despite the time that had elapsed since 1948. The PLO had, in those years, succeeded in gaining widespread recognition as the chief, and perhaps the only factor to represent the Palestinian people before the superpowers.[32]

The Meir and the Rabin respective administrations vehemently opposed the recognition of a Palestinian entity, and certainly did not consider the PLO as its legitimate representative. In tandem, nevertheless, after the 1967 War, increasing voices in the Israeli discourse exhorted to face up the fact that the Palestinians are the heart of the conflict and to search for a way to engage in negotiations. To Begin's chagrin, an expression of such mindset issued among the Likud ranks as well following the Yom Kippur War, especially among prominent figures in the Liberal Party.

Among this faction, which so far had taken pride in its moderate political tradition, the influence of the Herut partner's maximalist-hawkish line was marked after 1967. For instance, the party convention adopted an official stance against a territorial compromise in the West Bank.[33]

Nevertheless, after October 1973, spirited statements on pragmatic positions, voiced in the party institutions, expressed the readiness to return occupied territories to Arab states in the framework of a peace agreement, and even called for the recognition of the Palestinian people as a legitimate factor in the political process. The leaders of the Liberals, the second largest and most important partner in the coalescing network of the Right—Elimelech Rimalt, Simcha Erlich and Aryeh Dolchin—held conciliatory positions, but tried their best to carefully select their messages in their public speeches, in order to avoid jeopardizing the Likud intra-relationships.

But less senior, or more independent personalities within the party ranks, felt free to express a more outspoken position. Yehezkel Flomin, who headed the Liberal 'Next Generation' (the young faction leadership) and was elected to the Knesset for the first time towards 1974, called for a compromise in the contacts with Arab countries and even with the Palestinians.[34] A prominent voice that expressed a dovish position following the 1973 War was that of Dror Zeigerman, who led the ideological circle of the Liberal Party youth.

The group launched a special convention of the party centre, whereby Zeigerman stressed the need to counterbalance the dogmatism of Begin and Herut. He underscored that the key point to secure stability in the Middle East stability was the Palestinian question, and enjoined the party convention to recognize the existence of a Palestinian entity and to express the readiness for a territorial compromise in the West Bank as well. Zeigerman warned that 'those who deny a Palestinian entity bury their heads in the sand and behave like an ostrich'.[35]

[32]Farsoun, Samih K., and Naseer H. Aruri. *Palestine and the Palestinians: A social and political history*. Routledge, 2018, 180–89.
[33]Resolutions of the National Convention, 26 November 1975, p. 217 JIA, E 1, 13/12/18.
[34]*Ma'ariv*, 23 July 1974.
[35]Minutes from the National Convention of the Liberal Party, 26 November 1975, JIA, E 3–1/4/1, 63.

Insofar as these views were voiced by a group among the younger generation—not precisely the one that represented their prevailing position—the party institutions, to some extent, turned a deaf ear. However, other household names of public status conveyed similar opinions. The two prominent public figures of the Liberal Party— Mayor of Tel Aviv Shlomo Lahat (nicknamed 'Chich'), and Mayor of Ramat Gan Israel Peled—exhorted the Israeli government in July 1974 to promote a dialogue with the Palestinian people in order to achieve a peaceful coexistence.

Peled called for the recognition of the Palestinian as a political entity and parley with them, based upon the acknowledgement that this is a national framework that represents one and a half million Palestinians living under Israeli rule.[36] Lahat, on his part, justified his demand for the recognition of the Palestinians' right to self-determination 'similarly to the Zionist demand for the recognition of Jewish national self-determination'.[37]

The two attached their signatures to those of other public figures and intellectuals identified with the dovish circles in Israel, and thus expressed the wide range of voices comprising the political matrix which stood behind the Likud. This trend of increasingly moderate voices within the ranks of the Liberal Party was reflected in the political-security debate that took place at the party convention in November 1975.

Menachem Savidor, vice-chairman of the Liberal Party headquarter and chairman of its political think tank, demanded to modify the hardline manifested in the decisions accepted at the previous conference: 'It is a fundamental and basic mistake to come and say that we shall "live by the sword, die by the sword" and there is no chance, no window of opportunity to make peace'.[38]

Savidor advocated the relinquishment of most of the territory in the Golan Heights and the recognition of a Palestinian self-determination in the West Bank as well.[39] These proposals elicited a mixed reaction in the Liberal Party institutions. Alongside those who supported his views were quite a few who came out against what they considered as naive positions that pulled the rug from under the righteousness of the Zionist path.

However, it seems that the voices throughout the right-wing political network which called for a proactive peace process and a coming to terms with the need to negotiate with the Palestinians as well accumulated into a critical mass that Begin could no longer overlook. Savidor had enjoined, on an earlier occasion, to convene a festive ceremony in Jerusalem and make the public announcement that 'we are ready for peace, to enter peace negotiations without preconditions [...] and thus put the ball from our onto Arab courts'.[40] Indeed, in early 1975, Begin chose to take an initiative closely resembling this proposal.

The 'peace attack' of the opposition leader in Israel

The cumulative pressure mounting among the Likud ranks during the summer-autumn of 1974 affected Menachem Begin. Begin realized that as the leader of a broad and

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[36]Ibid, 102.
[37]Ibid, 107.
[38]Ibid., 11.
[39]Minutes of the Liberal Party Management 29.05.75, JIA, E 3–4/5, p. 41; Minutes of the Political Thinking Team of the Liberal Party, ibid, E 5. 3–12/3.
[40]Minutes of the Liberal Party Center, Archive—JIA, E 5. 3/3/1, 2 December 1974.

diversified party and of a political force purporting to stand at the forefront of a future government, he could not make do with levelling a negative rhetoric aimed at criticizing governmental policy and central committee out the dangers posed by political initiatives or conciliatory statements. The 12th National Conference of the Herut Movement, scheduled to convene in early 1975, was chosen by Begin as a suitable platform to propose his own political agenda.

Begin brought the main points of his plan to the attention of the central committee members of his party a few days before the convening of the conference, which included the key circle of activists.[41] He sought to demonstrate to his supporters his amenability to the mindset pervading the various party hubs since the October 1973 War, which considered the prevention of another war and the attempt to achieve peace major issues that should concern the largest opposition party in Israel and not the government alone. In his remarks he distinguished between the two controversial arenas:

The one related to the neighbouring Arab countries, especially Egypt, and the one related to the West Bank; moreover, to the Palestinian question. The decision to hold the Herut Conference in Kiryat Arba, a settlement- neighborhood near Hebron, was intended to symbolize the commitment of the party to the notion of the wholeness of the homeland and to highlight its unwillingness to discuss a territorial compromise in Judea, Samaria and Gaza.

A central and innovative part of Menachem Begin's speech at the conference addressed the issue of peace.[42] He shared with the audience—composed of Herut activists from all over the country—the novel proposal he had formulated, which he dubbed the 'Peace and Security Plan', whose main thrust entailed an appeal on the part of the Israeli government to the Arab states to jointly declare a total three-year ceasefire. This period of time was designated to create a suitable climate for a turnabout in the dynamics of the historical conflict. During this timespan, talks between the governments on the various issues under dispute would be held in Jerusalem and in the capitals of neighbouring Arab countries, or in a neutral place in Europe. The issue of borders could be resolved within the framework of peace treaties between the countries. Israel would grant Palestinian refugees an economic compensation, but would deny the return to their lands.[43]

Begin expressed the Iron Wall logic, formulated by Ze'ev Jabotinsky,[44] whom he considered his teacher and ideological guide: Begin advised the Arab states to learn from their experience after fifty-five years (since 1920) of unsuccessful attempts at waging war against the Jews; because war itself was pointless: 'You have not succeeded in destroying us', and 'so it shall be in the future'. The Likud leader made an appeal: 'Our hand is extended to you in peace. What is the point of persisting in the wars between us, of mutual killing, of designing destruction?' He enumerated a series of long and bloody wars that had been waged in Europe and exhorted to learn from history. In a poignant formulation that elliptically embodied loss itself, Begin pondered: 'How lives were destroyed, how cultures disappeared, how children were killed and murdered! All nations

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[41] Minutes of the Herut committee Center, 05.01.75, ibid, E 1–2/26.
[42] *Davar*, 13 January 1975.
[43] Menachem Begin, 'Bitachon ve-Shalom be-Eretz Israel, Ne'um Hebron' [Security and Peace in the Land of Israel, Hebron Speech], *Ma'ariv*, 7 January 1975.
[44] See Brian J. Horowitz, *Vladimir Jabotinsky's Russian Years, 1900–1925* (Indiana University Press, 2020), 174–81.

have reached the conclusion that there is no point in these wars and have made peace. Let us also make the serious, real, honest, straightforward attempt to make peace between our peoples'.[45]

This was probably the first time that the Israeli right-wing leader had come out with any official plan to promote peace and not merely expressed his position as part of an internal controversy or propaganda speech.

However, the plan of cessation of hostilities on the road to peace, which Begin presented and was adopted by the Herut Conference,[46] was not perceived by the Israeli public as an actual or significant move and was mainly criticized for being unrealistic. Begin followed the reactions he had stirred: 'In the last two weeks, all the geniuses of mockery and peace-seekers have risen up against me . . . the likes of you are warmonger of peace!'[47]

He came out against his critics' premise that peace was the domain of the dovish camp within the Labour Movement and that the Right harboured no sincere desire to promote it. Controversial as were the articles formulated by Begin against the Alignment government in the following months, he presented peace—in his writings and at meetings with various audiences—as an immanent part of the Israeli Right's set of values.[48] In this sense, one can identify here an initiative not only projected outwards, aimed at dispelling his image as a 'war party' leader, but also as an inward-looking move, to prepare the hearts and minds of his followers in order to initiate a process of change in their interpretative patterns of the Middle-East reality.

Still, the declaratory step undertaken by Begin in early 1975 was circumscribed. It was difficult to assess whether or not it signified a new tendency. Begin stated the importance of peace, but did not mention in his public remarks any reference to a readiness for an Israeli withdrawal from territories it had conquered in 1967. He adhered to a general formulation stipulating that the discussion on borders would take place in the framework of direct negotiations and without preconditions.

Since, in tandem, Begin and the Likud were dead set against the Rabin government, which had signed an interim agreement with Egypt, and Begin, moreover, had joined in, albeit belatedly, the illegal settlement activities of Gush Emunim in Judea and Samaria,[49] the main impression that arose vis-à-vis the Israeli Right was of rigidity and refusal, rather than of a willingness to achieve a breakthrough towards peace. Once again, there was a growing sense that the gap between the outlooks expressed by Begin as a leader and his image as a refuser who outright rejected any compromise that might promote a peace agreement was irreconcilable. Thus, a breach widened between the leader and the variegated matrix of the Right, sectors of which, as mentioned, sought after more pragmatic positions.

A token of the possible disintegration of this network or its downsizing was manifested in the decision taken by some of the public figures which had come out against its dogmatism to leave the party. Thus, for instance, both the abovementioned MKs

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[45]Menachem Begin, 'Bitachon ve-Shalom be-Eretz Israel, Ne'um Hebron' [Security and Peace in the Land of Israel, Hebron Speech], *Ma'ariv*, 7 January 1975.

[46]*Davar*, 16 January 1975.

[47]Menachem Begin, 'Le'an Molich HaViturism' [Where Does Waiverism Lead to?], Ma'ariv, 31 January 1975.

[48]See, for instance, Begin's conversation with Tel Aviv University students, *Davar*, 6 June 1975.

[49]Amir Goldstein and Elchanan Shilo, 'Menachem Begin and the Question of the Settlements: 1967–1977.' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2020): 1–20.

Benjamin Halevy and Shmuel Tamir resigned and joined the Democratic Movement for Change (known by its Hebrew acronym as Dash)—the newly established centrist political party (1976). Zalman Shoval, a Likud member of The People faction (Heb., La'Am), who was allotted the fifteenth slot in the previous elections—also in the top half of the list—did not quit the Likud, but exhorted the party to demonstrate its willingness for a territorial compromise in the West Bank in order to promote the possibility of peace.[50]

Concomitantly, Reserve Major-General Ezer Weizmann plunged back into vigorous activity in the run-up to the 1977 elections, and was perceived by the various Likud factions as the figure who could bond the right-wing factors of the matrix. Weizmann stressed that a future Likud government should set its sights on foreign policy and security considerations; that is, he underestimated the worth of Herut's ideology, which denied a priori a waiver of a territory perceived by the Right as part of the 'historical Land of Israel'.[51] The gap between Begin and the political network on which he had based his sway widened even more and was in sore need of narrowing.

On the eve of the upheaval—an explicit statement of readiness to withdraw within a peace agreement

The more the ninth Knesset elections approached, the more the likelihood of missing the opportunity to trigger a political upheaval—in view of the rigidity demonstrated by the Likud leaders in the political arena—became tangible. The memory of the many voters who had recoiled from Begin's opposition to the Geneva Peace Conference (December 1973) and from the lack of a vision of peace after the bloody October 1973 War was still fresh. This was the background to Begin's decision, at the dawn of 1977, to add a further layer to his political declarations—an unequivocal readiness for territorial withdrawal.

Also this time he chose the (13th) National Conference of the Herut Movement, which convened in January 1977, as a suitable forum to deliver his words. As part of the bonding process of the right-wing political network, he held—prior to the launching of the conference—preliminary talks with the heads of the factions affiliated to the Likud and with key figures from the younger generation of the movement and crystallized the formulation of his remarks.[52] Once again, Begin opted to devote a central section of the convention opening speech to the issue of peace.

He pledged that 'if the Likud is called to form the government, its first consideration will be to prevent war'. Setting the concern for a maximum risk reduction of further bloodshed as the first priority of the government he hoped to form was aimed at underscoring his commitment as a leader and that of his political party to the value of human life and mitigate, as far as possible, the fear of conflict escalation if the Right came to power. He mentioned that 'all the wars had burst out under the rule of the Alignment government' and stressed: 'The Likud will attempt a new way and a novel policy to show to the people how it is possible to prevent war and advance the nation towards peace'.

[50]*Ma'ariv*, 2 January 1977.
[51]*Ma'ariv*, 4 January 1977.
[52]Eliyahu Ben-Elishar, 'Lo od Milchama' [*No More War*], Or-Yehuda (1995), p. 26.

Begin weaved the new messages alongside the typical rhetoric he resorted to. Although he emphasized that the deterrence of aggression and the concern for national security were based upon the reinforcement of Israel's military power, he immediately added that he did not merely intend to settle for the prevention of an escalation: 'The Likud government will launch a peace initiative'. Here he spelled out, perhaps in the most public and explicit way, his position as a candidate for the post of Israel's prime minister in the coming months, in favour of a territorial compromise in Sinai ('the border between Egypt and Israel will be determined within Sinai') and in the Golan Heights ('the border between Syria and Israel will be determined on the Golan Heights').[53]

Indeed, there was a fundamental difference in the historical worldview of the revisionist Right, as expressed by Begin, vis-à-vis the various areas that Israel had conquered in 1967. Begin himself conveyed during the Israeli cabinet meetings, already in the summer of 1967, his agreement in principle to an Israeli withdrawal from Sinai and the Golan Heights. However, this was an assent given in meetings behind closed doors and, in fact, in the following years, Begin did not reiterate it—certainly not in public. Whoever listened to the dozens of speeches delivered by Begin or read the several dozens of his articles from the late 1960s onwards was exposed almost exclusively to messages that implied distrust in the possibility of a peace process: Loyalty to Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip; the presentation of Arab leaders as refusing a coexistence alongside Israel; pointing at the security threat inherent in any territorial concession; a categorical opposition to a withdrawal within the framework of interim arrangements. All these were more boisterous and more explicit than any hypothetical willingness to return territories in the Sinai and Golan Heights, in the event of peace.

And at this juncture, in January 1977 unprecedentedly, the Israeli right-wing leader made a public appearance and, in front of his supporters and activists, explicitly expressed his willingness for an Israeli withdrawal in the framework of a peace agreement.

According to the logic formulated by the Israeli right-wing leader himself over the years, it could be inferred that a declaration of the readiness for an Israeli withdrawal would set a starting point for future negotiations, during which—pending on the Arab states' willingness to sign a substantial and deep-rooted peace agreement—he would display further gestures of generosity. Begin did not declare an a priori full or large-scale withdrawal; neither did he circumscribe his intent to a 'tiny withdrawal'. He made do with pointing out the fact that the Communist Party was the only political party in Israel which was 'ready to abandon all of Sinai'—a decision which, as is well known, he would himself take less than two years later.

For long years, it had seemed that the Israeli Right had refused to respond in an orderly fashion to the query over what alternative it offered in the political sphere, beyond rejecting the government's position. And all of a sudden, at this point, its leader publicly presented the outline of an organized plan. The proposal included a willingness to compromise in the south and north alone, and was based upon a persistent categorical refusal to any Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. This was the main difference between the plan of the largest opposition party and the position of the Alignment government, whose leaders were ready for a partial withdrawal from all areas, the West

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[53]The speech was published in the press: Menachem Begin, 'Ma Ta'aseh Memshelet ha-Likud' [What will the Likud Government Do], *Ma'ariv*, 2 January 1977; Steinberg and Ziv Rubinovitz, Menachem Begin, 52.

Bank included. Beyond this matter, the proposal presented by Begin—to be approved in the following days by the convention delegates—was no different from the position of the Alignment government. Begin, indeed, sought to emphasize, with the launching of the election campaign, that any attempt to pinpoint a dichotomy between the war-monger Likud and the peace-seeking Alignment was ill-founded.[54]

The Palestinian question and its impact on the process

Begin's choice to emphasize the issue of peace in his speeches and to express an increasing pragmatism during 1975–1977 stemmed from three main factors: 1. The jolt that shook all sectors of Israeli society in the aftermath of the October 1973 War. 2. The proliferation of voices within the political network he had been weaving over these years, calling for the advancement of peace on the basis of willingness for a broad territorial compromise. 3. The electoral consideration to gain further support from the centre of the political map by allaying the voters' fear from the possibility that the Likud's rise to power would lead to a conflict escalation.

Nevertheless, within the Likud factions, and especially among the Liberal Party, as mentioned, appeals were made throughout these years not only concerning the vital importance of launching initiatives to promote peace, but also to face squarely the Palestinian question, acknowledge its centrality within the Jewish-Arab conflict and even its being a precondition for it resolution. Against the backdrop of the growing willingness to comply, even if partially, with the Palestinian need for self-determination, the limitations of Begin's pragmatism were more noticeable.

Begin's speeches and articles manifested his adherence to the Revisionist ideology, which considered the West Bank (and even the East Bank) of the Jordan River as part of the Greater Jewish Homeland. On the grounds of historical right claims on the one hand and security considerations on the other, he refused to contemplate any deliberation of an Israeli withdrawal from Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip. A Palestinian state (which he called 'Arafat State') was doomed, he was convinced, to become a Soviet stronghold on the Israeli border that would jeopardize the security of most of its inhabitants and the stability of the Middle East as a whole.[55]

Since he was unwilling to comply with the pragmatic trend in the Palestinian context, but was also loath to be branded as a chauvinist and warmonger on account of his hardline position, he made considerable efforts to present his view as based upon national-liberal foundations. From the conference podium, in early 1977, with a rhetorical flourish that swept the Palestinian question under the carpet. Begin exclaimed before members of his movement and other guests: 'We are not chauvinists. We are nationals [. . .] we love our people. We do not despise other nations'.

Labelling Herut as a nationalist party was, in his opinion, a 'complete distortion of concepts and facts'. Israel must grant the Palestinians equal rights and even cultural autonomy. West Bank residents will be able to freely choose their state citizenship, either in Israel or Jordan:

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[54]Minutes of the 13th Herut Movement Convention, JIA, E 5.1–13/13/6; *Davar*, 6 January 1977.
[55]Jørgen Jensehaugen, "Terra Morata: the West Bank in Menachem Begin's Worldview. "
Contemporary Levant 5.1 (2020): 54–63.

> Our citizenship will not be enforced on them. If they are citizens, they will have all the rights, including suffrage for the Knesset. If they prefer to be residents rather than citizens, they will be granted full rights as individuals and as a nation, excepting the right of vote to the Knesset.

He stressed that the Zionist Right offered not only 'civil liberty' and 'human dignity, social progress', but also a 'coexistence with members of another people in peace, fairness, equal rights, mutual respect' and defined this concept: 'This is the humane nationalism [. . .] a glorious factor in human progress'.[56]

It is hard to assume that Begin and his partners in the Likud leadership actually believed that their proposal for the West Bank and its residents would suffice to advance a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, a careful reading of the sources reveals that Begin was troubled by the fact that the Palestinian problem had become a central issue in the international, Middle Eastern and Israeli agenda. The concern vis-à-vis the growing recognition of the Palestinian question worldwide and the toll it took on Israel is woven into the debates of the Herut movement during the years under discussion.

Haim Landau, chairman of the Herut administration, devoted a central session of his detailed political survey—at the committee meeting held in September 1974—to the pervasive highlighting of the Palestinian question in the international agenda. He explained that 'the matter has begun to receive very broad political backing' and defined the bolstering status of the PLO at the UN an 'unsympathetic move'.[57] At the dawn of 1976, Begin shared with members of the Herut administration the persisting pro-Palestinian tendency towards the scheduled debate at the United Nations Security Council, to be held with the participation of a PLO representative—an event he labelled as 'the greatest international disgrace since the days of the League of Nations'.[58]

Not long after, a paraphrase of the biblical warning resonated in Begin's lips: 'The Palestinians are upon you, Israel!' This is the impression received from all over the world."[59] Yitzhak Shamir (Begin's future successor to the prime minister office), who, at this stage, had replaced Landau as chair of the Herut board, surveyed the organizations and supporters affiliated with the Palestinian campaign and emphasized, 'in all European countries, their activities are felt at every turn. Their propaganda is inexhaustible. [. . .] The enormous impact of their activities should not be underestimated'.[60]

I concur with Jensehaugen's opinion, who posited that the growing awareness and concern over the political strengthening of the Palestinians, and even President Jimmy Carter's positive stance in favour of their plea, played a role in promoting the peace initiatives vis-à-vis Egypt led by Begin and the Israeli Right.[61]

The persuasive methods deployed to win hearts and minds towards a far-reaching compromise with Egypt were intended to extricate the largest and most powerful Arab state out of the vicious circle of hostility, to significantly reduce the risk of facing a war on

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[56]*Ma'ariv*, 3 January 1977.

[57]Minutes of the Herut Movement committee Center, 11 September 1974, JIA, E 1–2 / 24.

[58]Minutes of the Herut Movement Management, 1 January 1976, ibid, E 1–2/27/1.

[59]An allusion to the biblical verse 'Samson, the Philistines are upon you!' (Judges 16:12).
　　Menachem Begin, 'Me Akev Achilles le-Agudal Natui' [From Achilles' Heel to an Askew Thumb], *Ma'ariv*, 23 January 1976.

[60]Minutes of the Herut Movement Management, 1 January 1976, JIA, E 1-2-2 / 27/1.

[61]Jørgen Jensehaugen, 'Smokescreen Diplomacy: Excluding the Palestinians by Self-rule.' *The Middle East Journal* 73.2 (2019): 224–241.

a number of fronts, which would certainly cause a large number of casualties. In tandem, Begin hoped that this initiative, if it materialized, would take the sting out of the pressure to meet the demands arising from the Palestinian issue.[62]

This pressure was not only related to the external circumstances of the State of Israel, but also to the inner pressures within the Likud ranks during the years preceding the peace agreement. Begin was unwilling to accede to calls issued by the interim leadership demanding a recognition of the Palestinian historical rights and of the need to resolve the bleeding historical wound by establishing a Palestinian entity in, at least, part of the West Bank territories. But he could appreciate that an honest, even bold scrutiny of the possibility of promoting a historic peace with Egypt would aid him to preserve the variegated network forged around him—the indispensable condition to become a viable governmental alternative. At this point, therefore, Begin developed the logic that would lead, eventually (from the Israeli angle discussed here), to the peace agreement with Egypt.

Concluding remarks

The temporal closeness between the establishment of the Likud—the political party that would lead the Israeli Right to power—and the October 1973 War—the military campaign that shook the Middle East—was a factor that affected the historical development of the Zionist Right. At the initial stages of the consolidation of the Likud out of a cluster of political parties and groups into a single political movement, issues of war and peace stood at the crux of the Israeli agenda.

The price of war had never been so tangible, and so was the indispensable need to substantially examine the possibility of reaching a durable peace with the Arab countries. The path of the Israeli Right to peace was far from being a straightforward and simple process. Like many historical developments, different and even contradictory trends were racing through. However, the palpable trend in the course of events—as it emerges from the analysis of the inner debates in party forums—was towards a growing willingness to achieve a historic breakthrough in the relations between Israel and the Arab states, especially Egypt.

The process unfolding in this article demonstrates that Begin was not a single actor, as historians sometimes tend to present him. In the years whereby he was on the verge of power, he was bound to pay heed to increasing exhortations within his political network in favour of a deep compromise, in view of the possible signing of a peace agreement with Arab states.

Begin himself attached importance to peace as a value and was sensitive to human life, but it seems that beyond these, the rhetorical peace bombardment he chose to launch in 1975 and 1977 was necessary in order to preserve the newly-formed and diversified political party that rendered the Right, under his leadership, a viable alternative to the hegemony of the Israeli Labour Movement. About a year after the October 1973 War, he publicly unfolded a peace plan, and two years later he added to this initiative—before his supporters and followers—a declaration of his readiness to withdraw from Sinai and the

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[62]Anziska, *Preventing Palestine*, 117–125.

Syrian plateau. The assertions that a Likud government would prevent a new war at all costs and undertake a peace initiative went on until the very election day.[63]

The swiftness whereby Prime Minister Begin led political moves vis-à-vis Egypt from his first day in office is in line with the trend that evolved within the Likud during the years leading up to the upheaval. Immediately after the 'upheaval', in the summer of 1977, a secret document was speedily prepared for the US administration, whereby the Begin administration pledged a 'significant withdrawal of our forces in Sinai' in exchange for a peace agreement.[64] Begin geared up to address a 'personal' speech to the Egyptian people in a call for historic peace, but in tandem, the back channel of communication with Sadat yielded fruitful results. The Egyptian president had led, with impressive determination, to the breakthrough for a peace process.[65] The Israeli prime minister's ability to make great strides relatively swiftly towards the peace agreement with Egypt stemmed from his awareness of the massive inner backing warranted him from his party, in light of the process that had come to fruition in various foci since the October 1973 War.

Academic research has, to this day, underscored the opposition to the peace initiative launched by Begin and Sadat as it arose within the Herut movement and among the hawkish Right at large, as well as the right-wing leader's determined grappling with such resistance on the path to a far-reaching compromise that would enable a peace agreement with Egypt. Indeed, Begin confronted, perhaps for the first time, an emotive and poignant criticism issuing from the right wing that repeatedly deployed a rhetoric similar to the one he himself had targeted at Israeli governments in the past.[66] Conversely, the internal debates held within Likud forums since October 1973 attested, to the fact that the road to a peace agreement actually issued out of Begin's complying with processes unfolding among his political support matrix.

Opponents to the agreement within and outside Herut, strong minded and vociferous as they were, turned out to be a marginal group, whereas key elements within the Likud, including the Mizrahi (Oriental Jews) representatives, former senior army (field-grade) officers and, certainly, the Liberal Party, stood behind Begin and granted the peace agreement their sweeping endorsement. Only sixty percent of the Knesset members from the Herut movement voted in favour of the Camp David Accords; most of the others abstained, while few opposed. And yet, at the central committee meeting of the Herut Movement—a political party which had been branded over the years as a 'war party' and was conceived of as featuring populist characteristics—the resolution supporting the peace agreement with Egypt won a sweeping majority: three hundred and six supporters against only fifty-one opponents.[67]

In a follow-up article, it would be pertinent to examine the debates held within the various Likud factions on the way to and throughout the 1982 Lebanon War, led by the Begin government. The story of the Israeli Right in the years discussed above enables to suggest a number of factors under whose sway a nationalist-hawkish party may break

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[63]*Ma'ariv*, 11 May 1977.
[64]Minutes of the Israeli Cabinet Meeting, ISA, 13 July 1977, p. 21. Regarding the future withdrawal from the Golan Heights, the addition 'significant' did not feature.
  'The Framework -for -the Peace Making Process -between Israel -and its Neighbors (7 July 1977)', ISA, A 4313/1.
[65]Shahin Berenji, 'Sadat and the Road to Jerusalem: Bold Gestures and Risk Acceptance in the Search for Peace.' *International Security* 45.1 (2020): 127–163.
[66]Steinberg and Ziv Rubinovitz, Menachem Begin, 170–182.
[67]Minutes of the Herut Movement committee Center, 19 November 1978, JIA, 1–2/32/1.

new paths towards compromise, pragmatism and a peace-promoting policy: A bloody war whose toll exacted in terms of human lives shakes society and, along its members, the supporters of the hawkish party, manifesting the danger of a rigid policy; the necessity to forge a diversified political network that includes hubs holding more moderate positions; moving to the political centre—under certain circumstances—regarded as essential to enable the coming into power of a radical party.

These are some of the factors that warrant examination through other case studies worldwide and along different historical periods. The instance of the Israeli Right and the path it traversed in the 1970s from its hawkish and rigid messages to the signing of a pragmatic peace agreement also sheds light on how the media, political rivals and even intelligence services struggle to identify, in real time, complex political trends among the hardline Right.[68] The media tends to turn the spotlights on the nationalist statements of populist leadership, sometimes out of the reservations or the anxiety aroused by them, thus contributing to a dichotomous demarcation of worldviews in the political system at large and to construing a one-dimensional image of the populist movement in particular.

Probably, the explanation for the failure to identify in real time the process that the Israeli Right underwent also lies in the fact that the shift in its foreign policy was offset by its obstinacy not to give up in the context of the Palestinian issue. Against this backdrop, the more conciliatory messages were swallowed up by other statements which reflected the pervasiveness of a hawkish-nationalist discourse and that focused on the future of the West Bank. Be that as it may, the peace discourse of Begin and of the institutions of his party has been labelled as empty and unauthentic.

A close examination of the notions of war and peace in the discourse and praxis of the Israeli Right during the 1970s may reveal the complexity of political movements and the potential dynamism of their stances. And perhaps also that—alongside the hawkish declarations—there may also hide a longing, among the uncompromising, nationalist Right, to gain recognition on account of its successful endeavours to prevent war and promote peace.

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[68]The Israeli Secret Intelligence Service assessed that Begin's rise to the Israeli prime minister's office would hasten the possibility of a military escalation and hamper the chances that the political contacts come to fruition; Sagit Stivi-Kerbis, 'The Surprise of Peace: The Challenge of Intelligence in Identifying Positive Strategic–Political Shifts.' *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 32.3 (2019): 448–466.