Shin Bet and the Challenge of Right-Wing Political Extremism in Israel

Eyal Pascovich

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“The government of Israel announces in consternation, in great sadness, and in deep sorrow, the death of prime minister and minister of defense Yitzhak Rabin, who was murdered by an assassin, tonight in Tel Aviv. . . . Blessed be his memory.”

—Eitan Haber, head of Prime Minister Rabin’s bureau, 4 November 1995, 11:14 p.m.

Early in 1990, Carmi Gillon, a high-ranking official in the Israel Security Agency (commonly known as Shabak or Shin Bet), submitted his master’s thesis to the Political Science Department of the University of Haifa under the title “Ideologically Motivated Law-breaking of the Extreme Right within the Context of the Israeli-Arab conflict.” Gillon’s main argument was that the “ideologically-motivated infringement of the law (‘ideological crime’) by the extreme right is a threat to the democratic values of Israeli society.”

Five years later, in March 1995, Gillon was appointed Director of Shin Bet by then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Gillon was the first Shin Bet director whose main specialty was foiling Jewish rather than Arab terrorism. Eight months later, in November 1995, Shin Bet—among whose missions is the
guarding of Israel’s national leaders—experienced its worst fiasco ever when a radical right-wing Jewish assassin succeeded in shooting and killing Rabin, dealing a devastating blow to Israeli democracy.

Although Shin Bet’s failure to prevent Rabin’s assassination was attributed mainly to the agency’s Dignitaries Protective Unit, its Intelligence Department also received criticism. Over the years, Shin Bet has had difficulty penetrating the strongholds of the country’s radical right.

**EARLY DAYS: ALL ISRAELIS ARE BROTHERS**

"An underground organization, however ridiculous it may be, does not need the masses in order to commit a spectacular act. All that is needed is to put a pistol in the hands of one guy and show him the target, and the act will be executed"

—Nathan Yellin-Mor, former leader of the Lehi Jewish underground movement, October 1978.

Shin Bet was established on 30 June 1948, just a few weeks after Israel declared its independence. Under the provisional name “Internal Shai” (or “Mahatz”) the agency was based on the foundations of the Shai Intelligence Unit of the Haganah organization—the main Jewish paramilitary organization fighting against the British Mandate in Palestine. One of the Shai’s internal missions was to monitor the rival right-wing Jewish underground organizations—Etzel and Lehi—that fought against the British by even more violent means.

Following the establishment of the State of Israel and the founding of its army, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which was formed mainly on the basis of the Haganah, the Etzel and Lehi were supposed to cease their independent activity and merge with the IDF as the sole army of the newborn democratic state. But some Etzel, and especially Lehi, veterans refused to accept the IDF’s authority and continued to operate independently, most notably the Etzel’s failed attempt to smuggle weapons into Israel onboard the *Altalena* cargo ship. Another serious incident was the murder of Count Folke Bernadotte, the United Nations mediator in Palestine, on 17 September 1948 by several Lehi activists. Following his assassination, the Israeli government declared Lehi a terrorist organization.

As a successor to Shai, and as the new nation’s internal security service, charged with defending the democratic regime, Shin Bet was assigned the mission of finding Bernadotte’s assassins, as well as preventing any form of subversive activity. Such activities became widespread in the early 1950s, as described by Shin Bet’s first director, Isser Harel, who had previously served as one of the leaders of Shai:
The early 1950s was the era in which the State of Israel was shaped as a democratic society. In those years, awareness of the supremacy of the rule of law and democracy had not yet been established. Therefore, it is not surprising that those years of shaping Israeli democracy witnessed attempts on the part of extremist groups to influence the State’s character by means of violence and political terrorism.10

Among the violent underground organizations operating in the 1950s, most of which were identified with the extreme Right, was the Tzrifin Underground (known also as the Kingdom of Israel Underground) which consisted of a number of Lehi veterans. In late 1952 and early 1953, the group threw bombs at the Russian and Czechoslovakian consulates in Tel Aviv in protest of the widespread anti-Semitism in the Soviet bloc states. Other underground groups adhered to not only a right-wing ideology, but also to a religious worldview. Examples were Brit ha-Kana’im (“Covenant of the Zealots”), which aspired to turn Israel into a state governed by religious law, and Hamachaneh (“The Camp”) which violently opposed the induction of women to the IDF.11

Harel described the difficulties Shin Bet experienced in confronting these underground groups in the 1950s—difficulties that continue to the present day:

These acts of terror were committed by small groups of fanatics. . . . These were “hit-and-run” acts for which those who were responsible did not openly claim responsibility. Therefore, it was difficult to monitor these groups, to penetrate their ranks, to watch them, and to stop them before they committed a crime. . . . [Moreover], in order to foil political terrorism in a democratic regime, preliminary information on the upcoming act is needed, and the perpetrators must be caught shortly after the act or during the act itself. . . . But at the same time we had to present sufficient evidence to the court against the perpetrators of the acts of terror . . . while the latter claimed they had been arrested for no fault of their own and had not actually intended to commit an act of terror. . . . They used the presence of a secret agent of Shin Bet operating among them—a fact that was often revealed following the arrest of the group’s members—as a pretext to claim that the acts had always been executed with the ‘knowledge’ of the services or even with their encouragement and direction.”12

Even in those early days, Harel complained about the public’s forgiving attitude, particularly among some right-wing politicians, toward the activities of these militant groups:

On the one hand, there was a tendency to belittle the strength of small terror groups. . . . On the other, there were those who provided them with ideological and public patronage due to their sympathetic stance, as well as on the basis of a cold and calculated consideration that political terrorism might help their fight against the government. . . . [Thus] the
right-wing camp, which initially joined those who condemned and censured the Bernadotte assassination and even justified the government’s acts against terrorism, gradually changed its approach. The underground’s prisoners soon became victims of the “tyrannical regime,” and from now on were referred to as fighters who liberated the homeland.13

This attitude of forgivingness was manifested again in the case of Lehi leader Nathan Yellin-Mor, who was sentenced to eight years in prison for his involvement in the murder of Bernadotte, but was soon freed after he and his friends received an official pardon. (Indeed he was subsequently elected to the Knesset, the Israeli parliament.) Similarly, the leaders and members of the Tzrifin Underground were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment following the government’s designation of the group as a terrorist organization. But they were soon freed on the initiative of the government. In fact, Harel himself argued that the State should indeed “uproot political terrorism, but simultaneously must do its best to extinguish the ember of fanaticism and blind hatred and to integrate those who tend to terrorism and conspiracy into the life of society.”14

The phenomenon of political terrorism was not uprooted, however. On the contrary, the assassination of Israel Kastner in 1957 marked a new level of political violence. This incident also led to the exposure of Shin Bet, whose very existence had hitherto been concealed from the public.

The Killing of Kastner

Israel Rudolf Kastner, a leader of the Budapest Aid and Rescue Committee during the Holocaust, immigrated to Israel in 1947. A decade later, on 4 March 1957, he was shot in front of his Tel Aviv home, dying a few days later from his wounds. Two years earlier, the Tel Aviv District Court had determined that Kastner had “sold his soul to the devil,” collaborated with the Nazis, and indirectly contributed to the eradication of the Hungarian Jewry in return for the rescue of 1700 “well-connected” Jews.15

Shin Bet quickly identified Kastner’s assassin, Ze’ev Eckstein, and his collaborators, all of whom were identified with the extreme Right, including Lehi activist Yosef Menkes, who had also been involved in the Bernadotte murder. Indeed, Shin Bet was quite well acquainted with Eckstein, since he had previously collaborated with the agency, which encouraged him to find a niche in a radical right underground group. Eckstein’s function as a human intelligence source (HUMINT) ended prior to the Kastner assassination after he became captivated by radical Right ideas. Shin Bet then suspected him of being a double agent—a fact Eckstein himself revealed in a recently-published retrospective book:

Little by little, without feeling how the change was taking place in my thoughts, in my opinions—and eventually also in my desires—the
understanding grew stronger in me that when I spy and inform for “us” against “them,” I am lying in my soul... They [the underground’s members] knew they were surrounded by agents and provocateurs, and I understood that if I wanted to be part of them, I had to bring them a suitable “dowry”... and thus—woe is me—I became the servant of two masters.16

Just a few days after Kastner’s assassination Isser Harel confirmed these details at a meeting of the Israeli government. The protocol of this meeting, only recently declassified,17 revived the conspiracy theories that had spread shortly after the assassination when Eckstein’s past contacts with Shin Bet were initially revealed. These theories, which were reinforced after Eckstein and his collaborators received a pardon, with Harel’s support, just a few years after the assassination, alleged that no other than Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and the Shin Bet were actually behind the assassination.18 Harel’s book, The Truth about the Kastner Murder, published in 1985, sought to refute these conspiracy theories:

In this book I intend to analyze the Kastner murder and the circumstances that led to it and to refute unambiguously the terrible libel that has been woven against the government of Israel, its leaders, and the state’s security services since 1957 and up to the present day. This libel claims that the Israeli government activated Shin Bet to kill a famous and controversial public personality in order to silence him for once and for all. It did so in order to prevent a forthright and authoritative public, legal, and historical debate surrounding the acts and omissions of the Jewish pre-state’s political leadership during World War Two and the Holocaust of European Jewry—the same leadership that later came to lead the sovereign State of Israel... The perpetrators of Kastner’s murder planned it in such a way that they could use it as a tool for creating this malicious libel against the Israeli political establishment.19

Conspiracy theories seem to be a routine by-product of any traumatic political murder. Indeed, identifying some similarities between the emergence and details of the conspiracy theories surrounding the Kastner assassination and those that followed the murder of Prime Minister Rabin several decades later is not difficult.

But before the Rabin assassination, Israel experienced several more radical Right underground groups, though the years that followed the 1957 Kastner affair were a period of relative calm in this respect, allowing Shin Bet to concentrate mainly on combating Soviet and Eastern European espionage.20 However, the 1967 Six-Day War sowed the seeds that would eventually lead to a renewed resurgence of Israel’s radical Right.

“There will be many more settlements like Alon Moreh”
—Prime Minister Menachem Begin, following his victory in the 1977 elections

Israel secured a spectacular victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, conquering the Golan Heights from Syria, East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan, and the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip from Egypt. These areas jointly constituted a territory three times larger than that of the State of Israel prior to the war. This formative event sharpened the divisions between Israel’s left- and right-wing political camps.

Political attention at the time focused mainly on the Gaza Strip and, even more so, the West Bank. While some left-wing elements already argued at this early stage that Israel should relinquish what were now termed the Territories, and even recognize the Palestinians’ right to self-determination, the right-wing camp, and its religious wing in particular, described the war’s results in terms of a divine miracle. Many of them regarded the Israeli victory as a sign of Atchalta De’Geulah (“the beginning of the redemption”), a traditional religious concept referring to historical events that pave the way for the imminent arrival of the Messiah. For them, the possibility—and indeed the duty—to renew Jewish settlement throughout Greater Israel formed part of this perspective.

The results of the war also had a dramatic effect on Shin Bet, whose top priority shifted from countering Communist espionage to combating Palestinian terrorism, which began to intensify following the war. Simultaneously, both left-wing and right-wing extremism began to worry Shin Bet, but at this stage both remained very much on the back burner.

In 1972, Shin Bet discovered a Jewish–Arab espionage and sabotage underground group that adhered to a radical left-wing ideology and spied for the Syrians. Its members were put on trial and sentenced to long prison terms. Another left-wing underground, Derech HaNitzotz (“The Path of the Spark”), was exposed in the late 1980s following its contacts with a Palestinian terrorist organization.

But the Israeli radical Left was always close to negligible in comparison to the extreme Right. Carmi Gillon, who headed Shin Bet’s Jewish Department in the 1980s, a unit which addressed both right-wing and left-wing subversion, noted:

During the years when I closely monitored extreme left-wing activists, I gained the impression that they represented a very marginal phenomenon, lacked any influence on society, and never had threatened the State’s fragile consensus. In contrast to groups on the...
By the extreme right that “took the law into their own hands” and committed violent acts, including murder, the Israeli extreme left has never been characterized by violent activity. In the late 1960s and for most of the 1970s, however, violent radical Right groups were also still very small. Most of them operated within university students’ cells as a reaction to the extreme Left. A much more significant phenomenon was the religious right-wing settlement of the West Bank, some of it illegal. Especially important was the emergence of the Gush Emunim (“Bloc of the Faithful”) movement following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, due in part to the erosion of public confidence in the government and a decreased acceptance of its authority following that traumatic war. Exploiting the government’s weakness, Gush Emunim sought to establish Jewish settlements throughout the occupied territories, with or without governmental approval. For example, the movement’s eight attempts to establish a Jewish settlement in Sebastia in the West Bank, while directly confronting the IDF, ended in the government’s retreat and eventually paved the way for the founding of the Elon Moreh settlement northeast of the Arab city of Nablus.

The historic victory of the right-wing Likud party in the 1977 Knesset elections, ending almost 30 years of leftist rule, aroused hope within Gush Emunim and the entire religious camp. The new government’s policy toward the settlements was reflected in the now-famous promise by Prime Minister Menachem Begin that “there will be many more ‘Elon Morehs.’”

Although settlement activity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip increased under Begin’s government, his consent to a full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in return for a peace agreement with Egypt gravely disappointed his supporters among Gush Emunim and the religious camp. Accordingly, that the 1978 Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt led to the renewal of right-wing extremism and terrorism was perhaps unsurprising. The late 1970s thus witnessed the blooming of several radical right political groups. One was Kach, a movement established in the early 1970s by Rabbi Meir Kahane, whose activities were tracked by the Shin Bet. The agency was later obliged to cease monitoring Kahane following his election to the Knesset in 1984, highlighting the limitations imposed by democracy; as Carmi Gillon explains:

Until his election to the Knesset, Rabbi Kahane was considered an object for Shin Bet’s attention. We knew that he himself was not actively engaged in anti-Arab terror, but he was involved in directing those who did so. Therefore, Kahane was under surveillance. But immediately after his election as a Knesset member we ceased to
monitor him, though we continued to follow other activists from his movement who were not elected officials.\textsuperscript{25}

Kahane’s activists were indeed involved in violent acts against Arabs throughout the 1980s, including during the four years when their leader served as a Knesset member. In the next elections for the Knesset, in 1988, the Kach and Kahane were barred from participating due to their racist ideology and incitement to violence,\textsuperscript{26} enabling Shin Bet to renew its surveillance on him. But the democratic dilemma remained: Where to draw the line between legitimate, even if extreme, political movements and illegitimate and illegal groups that constitute a national security danger. Yaakov Perry, Shin Bet director from 1988 to 1995, offered the following attempt to draw such a line:

\begin{quote}
When Shin Bet talks about extreme right, it is not referring to right-wing elements that engage in protest, even if they express sharp statements.\ldots Shin Bet includes in the category of the extreme right individuals or groups that are usually motivated by messianic approaches, such as “expediting the redemption” through violent means, or those who reject the authority of the elected institutions of government due to their racist or religious-fundamentalist beliefs.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

In addition to Kahane’s Kach movement, several other right-wing movements that operated during the late 1970s and the 1980s certainly fell under Perry’s definition. One was the Gal (a Hebrew acronym for “Redemption of Israel”) underground group, whose leader Yoel Lerner dreamed of turning Israel into a state governed by religious law. Its members planned to murder Arabs and advocated the bombing of the Muslim holy places on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount.\textsuperscript{28}

The Temple Mount, Judaism’s holiest site, contains the remnants of the Biblical temples, but it is simultaneously considered the third-holiest site in Islam, housing the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock.\textsuperscript{29} While religious Jews pray every day for the reestablishment of the Temple with the Messiah’s arrival, the Gal underground and similar fanatical groups have not confined themselves to prayers but have actively sought to “encourage the messianic era”\textsuperscript{30} by destroying the Mount’s Muslim holy places, an act perceived as capable of precipitating Armageddon. Among the reactionary groups, the Jewish Underground came closest to achieving that deranged goal.\textsuperscript{31}

\section*{THE JEWISH UNDERGROUND}

\textit{“Well done! You are the best security service in the world”}

—Shaul Nir, a Jewish Underground member, while being arrested by Shin Bet agents shortly before committing a mega terror attack, 27 April 1984\textsuperscript{32}
A direct line can be drawn from the 1978 Camp David Accords and the Israeli–Egyptian peace agreement a year later to the emergence and activities of the Jewish Underground, and particularly to the Underground’s plan to destroy the Muslim holy places on the Temple Mount. Following their arrest in 1984, several of the Underground’s members, headed by Menachem Livni and Yehuda Etzion, admitted that they had hoped that the removal of the “abomination” from the Temple Mount would prevent the withdrawal of Israel from Sinai, as agreed on in the peace treaty.33

While continuing to hatch their grand plot, Livni, Etzion, and their associates—all of whom were affiliated with Gush Emunim—launched a series of terror attacks against Palestinian citizens, fueled in part by a desire for revenge following terror attacks against Israelis. In June 1980, they seriously wounded three Palestinian mayors in the West Bank, who were identified with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), by hiding explosive charges under their cars. In July 1983, they murdered three Palestinian students and wounded several dozen others in an armed attack on the Islamic College of Hebron. They also hid explosive charges in a school and in a number of mosques in Hebron.

This series of terror acts found Shin Bet surprised and unprepared, as acknowledged by Yaakov Perry, then-head of the Shin Bet’s Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria Command.34

The assassination of the mayors caught Shin Bet by surprise. . . . We fumbled around in the dark for almost four years. We worked day and night, used our entire intelligence, operational, investigative, and technological apparatuses on an unprecedented scale. . . . Yet despite all our efforts, we failed to grasp even the tip of a clue. . . . It felt like we were looking for a needle in a haystack. We were well aware that the extremist groups we were dealing with maintain very strict compartmentalization. We also knew that the ideological strength that forms the basis of these people’s motives would prevent almost any chance of cooperation with any of them.35

Shin Bet’s difficulties in exposing the Jewish Underground apparently also stemmed from a controversial decision taken by Avraham Ahituv, then Shin Bet director (1974–1980), following the election of Menachem Begin as Israeli Prime Minister in 1977. Believing that the new government’s rightist ideology would minimize the risk of radical right terrorism, Ahituv cut back the agency’s efforts in this field.36 Instead, Begin chose to embark on a peace process with Egypt, a move which led to the emergence of the Jewish Underground.

Ahituv blamed Begin’s supportive policy toward the settlements, including his approval of the illegal ones, for creating a public atmosphere which encouraged settlers to break the law and undermined the justification of
Shin Bet’s surveillance against them. Despite this, Begin was evidently a very honest Prime Minister. Deeply committed to the rule of law, he ordered Avraham Shalom, Ahituv’s successor as Shin Bet director (1980–1986), to increase its efforts at exposing the Underground.

A breakthrough was achieved only in the summer of 1983 following a HUMINT clue. Shin Bet began to track a number of suspects using both physical surveillance and Signals Intelligence (SIGINT—mainly wiretapping). Some of these suspects had contacts with politicians and visited them in the Knesset, creating a democratic dilemma for the Shin Bet agents who followed them. A few months later, on 27 April 1984, at the end of a nerve-racking nighttime chase, Shin Bet agents caught several Underground activists as they were hiding explosive charges in five buses that were parked in East Jerusalem. The plan was to activate the bombs during rush hour the next day, thereby potentially killing hundreds of Arab passengers.

While investigating the detainees and the other Underground members—29 in total—Shin Bet realized that this mega-attack was not the most dramatic terror act the group had been planning. Over the past five years, the Underground’s members had been working, and even taking some preliminary steps, toward their grand plan: destroying the Muslim holy places on the Temple Mount by means of highly powerful explosive devices. The Underground’s failure to secure a rabbinical permission for the plan appears to have been the main reason preventing them from igniting the entire Middle East through that action. Previously, though, when planning the various other terror attacks against Palestinians, they had apparently been inspired by rabbis.

Investigating the Underground’s detainees was not an easy task for the Shin Bet. Shortly after the immediate widespread denunciation of the Underground’s actions by the public, the media, and the political system, dissenting voices began to be heard, arguing that the underground’s detainees should be treated mercifully, since they were “our own flesh and blood.” The prisoners were described as “the salt of the earth”—religious Zionist settlers who served in the IDF reserves (two of them were officers in the standing Army) and who acted out of pure devotion to the Land of Israel and the Jewish people.

Thus, the Shin Bet suddenly found itself exposed to external political and public pressure intended to relax the conditions of interrogation and imprisonment of the Underground’s members. A special lobby of Knesset members was founded for that purpose. This attitude of forgiveness also characterized the Jerusalem District Court, which convicted the detainees—in part on the basis of their confessions to Shin Bet interrogators—but sentenced some of them to relatively short periods of
imprisonment, while others were sent off to longer prison terms, including life sentences.

Despite the sentences, none of those convicted remained in jail for more than a few years. Twelve were pardoned (or had their sentences commuted) by then-President Chaim Herzog, with the backing of the Ministry of Justice. Some of the pardons were justified on the basis of “personal reasons,” such as public remorse expressed by some of the prisoners, while in other instances President Herzog declined to offer reasons. At the same time, the Ministry of Justice refused to recommend to the President the pardoning of certain other prisoners from the Underground. Bluntly bypassing the President’s authority, the Knesset sought to enact a special amnesty law for the remainder of the Underground prisoners, on the pretext that Jewish terrorists should not be discriminated against when Arabs were released from Israeli jails following prisoner exchange deals signed between Israel and Palestinian terrorist organizations.

Though this anti-democratic initiative by the Knesset was ultimately unsuccessful, it was notably supported by dozens of Knesset members, including several ministers, headed by then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who—not coincidently—had previously been one of the Lehi’s leaders. Yet, Shamir was careful not to interfere with Shin Bet’s investigation in this case. All Israeli Prime Ministers have adopted the same approach, recognizing the political and public sensitivity regarding Shin Bet’s activities against the extreme Right.

And indeed, some ideological and other similarities, and even an element of continuity, can be found between Lehi and the other right-wing underground groups of the 1940s and 1950s, before and after the Jewish State’s establishment, and the Jewish Underground of the 1980s. In both cases, the ideological criminals were inspired by a religious authority, although no religious leaders were put on trial. In addition, both groups enjoyed a forgiving attitude among the public and the politicians as “terrorists of our own,” and paid a reduced legal price for their deeds. Thus, by no later than 1990, President Herzog had pardoned all the remaining prisoners from the Underground, an act that deeply disappointed and frustrated the Shin Bet. These similarities continue to characterize subsequent instances of radical right-wing terrorism.

CAVE OF THE PATRIARCHS MASSACRE AND THE COUNTDOWN TO THE RABIN ASSASSINATION

“Dr. Baruch Goldstein was an educated person, devoted to his medical profession but full of unbridled and infinite fanaticism and
While the Shin Bet has encountered significant difficulties in monitoring such small and secretive fanatical groups as the Jewish Underground, its task is even more complicated when trying to prevent attacks perpetrated by lone terrorists.

On 10 February 1983, at the end of a left-wing rally in front of the Prime Minister’s Office in Jerusalem protesting Israel’s actions during the 1982 Lebanon War, a thrown fragmentation grenade killed one of the demonstrators, Emil Grunzweig. On the same day, Prime Minister Begin, fearing the possibility of civil war, called Shin Bet Director Shalom and ordered him to do whatever was necessary to capture the assassin. Shin Bet—in cooperation with the Israel Police—required almost a year to find the assassin, Yona Avrushmi, who had acted alone, though he claimed to have been influenced by radical Right incitement. The agency’s basic working premise was that a Jew, and particularly a religious one, would not likely kill another Jew for political or ideological reasons.

Indeed, Avrushmi did not meet the typical profile of a political assassin. A petty drug dealer not affiliated with any political movement, he acted out of hatred rather than profound ideology. Avrushmi was found guilty in court, in part on the basis of his own confession, and was sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1995, President Ezer Weizman commuted Avrushmi’s sentence to 27 years, and he was freed in 2011, while continuing to claim that he has enjoyed public support, or at least understanding, of the circumstances that led him to commit his offense.

A Plague of Lone Wolves

Hundreds of terror acts committed by lone Jewish perpetrators have occurred since the 1980s. Foiling such acts on the basis of preliminary intelligence is obviously extremely difficult, indeed almost impossible. Many of these terrorists acted completely alone, sharing their plans with virtually no one else. Generally acting out of hatred and a desire to avenge Palestinian terror acts against Israeli Jews, they may also have drawn encouragement from the public’s greater tolerance regarding Jewish terrorism against Arabs. And indeed, most of the perpetrators were eventually granted a presidential pardon or commutation of their sentence.

Such was the case with IDF soldier David Ben-Shimol who, on 29 January 1984, fired an anti-tank missile at an Arab bus in Jerusalem, killing one
person and wounding ten others. Ben-Shimol was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment. His sentence was later commuted to 17 years in prison, but he was actually released in 1995 after the Israel Prison Service deducted one-third of his remaining term for good behavior in prison, a legal procedure rarely applied to imprisoned Palestinian terrorists.

Another example is Ami Popper who, on 20 May 1990, opened fire on Palestinian workers near Tel Aviv, killing seven and injuring eleven. Popper was sentenced to seven consecutive terms of life imprisonment. In 1999, President Ezer Weizman commuted his sentence to 40 years imprisonment.51

The most serious act of Jewish terror against Arabs was the massacre by Baruch Goldstein in the Cave of the Patriarchs in 1994. While most of the other Jewish terrorists who acted alone were motivated by revenge, Goldstein—like the Jewish Underground—was also motivated by a desire to stop the peace process.

Israeli negotiations for peace have always sharpened the political sensitivities between Left and Right, particularly when an Israeli withdrawal from any of the occupied territories has been raised for discussion. For religious and political reasons, any “threat” to the future of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank has always been a particularly sensitive issue. Accordingly, that the first Oslo Accord between Israel and the Palestinians, signed in 1993, aroused intense fear and opposition among the settlers and throughout the right-wing and religious camp is no surprise. Most of the anger was directed at left-wing Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who as IDF chief of staff had conquered the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, but who was now considering relinquishing most of these areas in return for a final peace agreement with the PLO.

A Doctor Who Did Harm

Baruch Goldstein, an Israeli physician and religious extremist living in Kiryat Arba near Hebron, sought to put a spoke in the wheels of the peace process. To this end, he planned a major terror attack, carefully choosing both its location—the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, a holy place for both Jews and Muslims—and its timing: the Jewish festival of Purim, which symbolizes the Jewish people’s victory over its enemies and is characterized by national-religious joy, including an element of joyful revenge. Moreover, that year Purim fell during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Early on the morning of Friday, 25 February 1994, Goldstein approached the Cave of the Patriarchs, dressed in military uniform and carrying the rifle he lawfully owned as an officer in the IDF reserves. He first entered the Cave’s Abraham hall, where a few Jews were praying. Exploiting the IDF’s inadequate security arrangements, he easily moved to the adjacent Isaac
Hall, which was heavily crowded with some 500 male Muslim worshippers. As they began their prayers and were about to bend their bodies, turning their backs to Goldstein, he opened fire, killing 29 of them and wounding another 125. He managed to reload no fewer than four magazines of ammunition and to fire about 100 bullets in automatic mode before he was captured by furious worshippers and beaten to death.

The appalling massacre provoked intense anger among Palestinians, sparking lethal clashes between Palestinian demonstrators and IDF soldiers. In an attempt to calm the tension, the Rabin government quickly announced the establishment of a national commission of inquiry into the Cave of the Patriarchs massacre, headed by the then-President of the Israeli Supreme Court, Meir Shamgar. The commission found that, although Goldstein was a follower of Rabbi Kahane and a member of his radical Kach movement, he had acted alone, sharing his satanic plan with nobody. For this reason, the commission cleared the Shin Bet of any liability in failing to provide an alert about the pending massacre. The commission stated that “in a case of a lone terrorist who does not tell anyone of his plans and preparations, exposing any preliminary clue to his identity or to the place and time at which he will commit his act is almost impossible.”

The commission added that intelligence preparations for such a scenario should be on two levels: (1) creating a reliable and accessible database, updated and as complete as possible, regarding potential terrorists, their profiles, and their actions; and (2) building a network of collaborators in places offering a probability of exposing any preliminary activity. Taking these measures into account, the commission concluded that the Shin Bet was aware of the danger of Jewish terrorism against Arabs, including by “lone wolves,” and was taking the necessary precautions to meet this threat.

Responding Assertively

Shin Bet interpreted the commission’s conclusions as a recommendation for the agency to adopt a more active, if not aggressive, approach to gathering preliminary information among the radical Right strongholds. Attention then naturally focused on the ideological Jewish settlements in the West Bank. But the Shin Bet’s efforts in this direction aroused feelings of resentment among the settlers, who argued that the agency was engaging in the anti-democratic monitoring of legitimate protests against the Oslo peace process.

The commission also leveled criticism at law enforcement deficiencies (on the part of the IDF and especially the Israeli Police) against both Arab and particularly Jewish lawbreakers in the West Bank. This criticism confirmed
the similar findings of previous investigative teams during the 1980s. In an attempt to facilitate the efforts of the law enforcement agencies, the Israeli government, in response to the Hebron massacre, outlawed the extreme-right Kach and Kahane Chai movements, declaring them to be terrorist organizations based on the professional opinions of Shin Bet and the Israeli Police.

The Cave of the Patriarchs Massacre provoked widespread condemnation from Israeli politicians across the political spectrum, as well as from the public and the media. In contrast, Kach and Kahane Chai described Baruch Goldstein as a righteous person who had sanctified God’s name through his martyrdom. He was buried at a special gravesite in a Kiryat Arba tourist park named after Rabbi Kahane. The movement’s followers have since turned the tomb into a site for pilgrimage and worship.

The radical Right’s admiration of Goldstein’s act was also reflected in a pamphlet titled “Baruch HaGever” (Hebrew for both “Baruch the man” and “blessed be the man”) published in 1994, followed by a book of the same name, edited by four religious figures. Both publications lauded Goldstein’s action and argued that it was consistent with the principles of the Halakhah, Jewish religious law.

Goldstein’s massacre was followed by a disastrous deterioration in the Israel–Palestinian conflict. In retaliation for the killings, the Palestinian Islamic terror movement Hamas changed its policy, committing its first mass suicide attack inside Israel, one that would be followed by many similar attacks over the years.

Despite the rise in Palestinian terrorism, the Israeli–Palestinian peace process continued, albeit with profound mutual suspicions. The level of support for the peace process among the Israeli public declined sharply, while the right-wing opposition led a vigorous campaign against the government’s rapprochement policy. The entire right-wing camp—not only its extremists—took part in mass and angry demonstrations against the peace process, some of which were violent. The anger was mainly targeted in one direction: Prime Minister Rabin. Photomontages depicting Rabin in a Nazi SS uniform were burned by furious demonstrators shouting “We’ll drive Rabin out through blood and fire.” Moreover, leading religious figures among the Jewish settlers decreed that Rabin should be libeled as both Rodef and Moser—two of the worst offenses, according to Jewish religious law, that theoretically incurred the death penalty. Extreme Right activists also conducted a symbolic religious ceremony called Pulsa di Nura—a death curse—against Rabin in front of the Prime Minister’s Jerusalem residence.

The tension reached its peak following the signing of the second Oslo Accord on 28 September 1995, according to which Israel pledged to withdraw its military forces from areas of the West Bank that were about
to be transferred to the Palestinian Authority. The right-wing camp’s furious reaction to this expected event heightened the concern of Shin Bet director Carmi Gillon regarding a potential attempt to harm Prime Minister Rabin. A few weeks earlier, Gillon had initiated an unusual meeting with Israeli journalists, asking them to help calm the atmosphere. To Gillon’s chagrin, their reaction was characterized by apathy and even scorn, referring to his concern as exaggerated. Gillon also met with leading rabbis, the settler leadership, and the heads of the political opposition, but in vain. As a last resort, Gillon asked Shin Bet’s Dignitaries Protective Unit to increase its vigilance in recognition of the possibility that a radical Jew might attempt to assassinate the Prime Minister. Unfortunately, his warnings fell on deaf ears.

THE ASSASSINATION OF PRIME MINISTER RABIN

“Look up carefully all around / Do not let your senses fail for even a moment / For invaluable is the item deposited in your hand”
—Shin Bet Dignitaries Protective Unit’s anthem

The main priority of Shin Bet’s Dignitaries Protective Unit is to ensure the Prime Minister’s safety. The unit was established in 1958 following an incident in the Knesset in October 1957, when a mentally unstable young person threw a grenade that seriously injured a minister and lightly wounded several others, including Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. Until then, Shin Bet had shared the mission of protecting the Prime Minister with the Israeli Police, with no clear division of responsibility between the two organizations. Following that incident, Shin Bet was granted primary responsibility, with police assistance. This arrangement, formalized in 1975, was clarified in 1992 through a detailed mandate that the police should assist Shin Bet in securing mass events attended by the Prime Minister and other top officials.

Shin Bet’s basic principles regarding VIP security were formulated in the 1970s by Dave Beckerman, its chief marksmanship instructor, who placed particular emphasis on the bodyguards’ skills in instinctively drawing and effectively using their weapons. These principles were meant to guide not only the Dignitaries Protective Unit but the entire Shin Bet Security Department. The department assumed responsibility for securing Israeli embassies, airliners, and official delegations abroad following the rise of international terrorism in the late 1960s and the 1970s.

But Shin Bet’s method for protecting the Prime Minister did not face a real test until Rabin’s murder on 4 November 1995. Yet, during the months that preceded that fateful night, Rabin’s bodyguards were witnesses to the intensity of hatred for Rabin among right-wing demonstrators who cursed
him and wished him death. In an ominous incident on 10 October 1995, during a visit by the Prime Minister to the Wingate academic campus, north of Tel Aviv, a furious unarmed right-wing demonstrator approached Rabin’s entourage and attempted to hit him. At the last moment, an alert Shin Bet bodyguard managed to stop the aggressor and pin him to the ground.

Following the Wingate incident, Shin Bet’s director Gillon asked Rabin—not for the first time—to wear a bulletproof vest when participating in public events. Rabin rejected the request, however, and Gillon did not have the authority to oblige him to do so. Gillon also had no authority to prevent Rabin from getting close to the public, since direct encounters between politicians and the electorate were considered an extremely important element of Israeli democracy. Having no specific but only general intelligence alerts of intents to harm Rabin, Gillon was mainly concerned about the danger of a single assassin. Though he ordered the Dignitaries Protective Unit to increase the security surrounding Rabin, he unfortunately failed to inculcate among the bodyguards the recognition that perhaps a Jewish rather than an Arab assassin could try to kill the Prime Minister.

Tragically, Rabin was murdered at the end of a massive pro-peace rally in the center of Tel Aviv under the slogan “Yes to Peace, No to Violence.” The rally ended after a speech by Rabin in which he condemned the right-wing incitement against him and after he sang “The Song for Peace” along with a crowd numbering hundreds of thousands of supporters. He then began to return to his car, escorted by only four Shin Bet bodyguards, in addition to the Dignitaries Protective Unit’s commander, who lagged behind. The bodyguards, who mistakenly assumed that the entourage’s route was “sterile,” turned to Rabin’s right, focusing on the crowd that was gathering behind barriers, and thereby leaving Rabin’s back unprotected. At the bottom of the steps that led from the rally’s stage to his car, Rabin was shot twice in the back by Yigal Amir, a radical right-wing Israeli religious Jew opposed to the peace process. Despite their heavy training, based on the “second bullet theory,” the bodyguards failed to fire even a single shot. Some of them moved Rabin down to the ground in an attempt to protect him. One bodyguard took a bullet and was lightly wounded. Rabin, seriously injured, was put in his car and rushed to the nearest hospital, where all attempts to save his life failed.

REPERCUSSIONS FROM AN ASSASSINATION

In many aspects, Rabin’s murder is reminiscent of the attempted assassination of U.S. President Ronald Reagan in Washington D.C. on 30 March 1981. In both cases, the leader was giving a speech in a place and time that were determined in advance, and his car was waiting for him right by the exit.
The area surrounding the exit, which was supposed to be “sterile,” was in fact not closely secured, and a single assassin managed to approach the leader and shoot him. Through the quick response of the Secret Service’s bodyguards and the expert care of the surgeons at George Washington University Hospital—with the help of “Lady Luck”—Reagan’s life was saved. Unfortunately, the parallel Israeli case had a very different ending.

Rabin’s murder and the easy and unsophisticated way in which it was carried out shocked the Israeli public, the political system, and especially Shin Bet. The agency had suddenly sustained an abysmal and unprecedented failure. The following morning, Shin Bet’s director appointed an internal investigation commission to examine the reasons for this embarrassing fiasco. The commission took just two days to submit its initial findings, which pinpointed a fundamental failure by the Dignitaries Protective Unit in both planning and executing a secure area around Rabin during the critical phase of his exiting the event.

At the same time, the Israeli government, now headed by Rabin’s deputy, Shimon Peres, appointed a national commission of inquiry into the assassination, led by former Israeli Supreme Court President Meir Shamgar, who had previously headed the national commission of inquiry into the Cave of the Patriarchs Massacre. The Shamgar Commission, which published its final report in March 1996, adopted a harsher line than Shin Bet’s internal investigation commission. The Shamgar Commission concluded that Shin Bet’s failure was due not only to incidental flaws on the night of 4 November, but also to a systematic failure in the agency’s doctrine for protecting Israeli Prime Ministers:

Shin Bet’s method for securing the prime minister at the rally of November 4, 1995, was not adapted to the local conditions and time and was unreasonable. It was these flaws that enabled the assassin to approach the prime minister and shoot him at close range in his back, and these flaws originate, first and foremost, in the method. The method’s failure was compounded by both fundamental and coincidental flaws, which contributed to the creation of the circumstances that gave the assassin a free hand.

The Commission found that, although the Dignitaries Protective Unit employed the term “sterile area,” this did not constitute an obligatory principle in planning or executing security operations at mass events attended by the Prime Minister and other officials. Instead, Shin Bet bodyguards customarily looked carefully for any suspicious figures or hand movements. Moreover, the coordination between Shin Bet and the Israeli Police, which was responsible for securing the “second circle” around the dignitary, was still deficient. This explains why Yigal Amir was able to wait for his victim in the parking lot—where the cars for
Rabin and his deputy, Foreign Minister Peres, were stationed—for no less than forty minutes, with almost no interference. Two policemen who did approach him gained the impression that he might be either an undercover detective or a driver for one of the ministers. Moreover, none of Shin Bet’s secret agents who scanned the area paid any particular attention to Amir, whose prolonged presence helped him to assimilate into the background. As was revealed during Amir’s police interrogation, he could easily have shot Shimon Peres, Rabin’s partner in promoting the peace process, who was escorted by three bodyguards, but chose to wait for the “big prize”—a decision that paid off, from his perspective.

The Shamgar Commission also found flaws in Shin Bet’s and the Israeli Police’s planning and maintenance of an evacuation path to the nearest hospital. As a result, Rabin’s driver encountered difficulties in finding a traffic-free road to rapidly reach the nearest hospital, since many of the streets surrounding the venue of the rally had been barricaded.

In addition to Shin Bet’s failure to protect Rabin physically, the Shamgar Commission identified flaws in the agency’s intelligence arrangements. Some of these were elaborated upon only in the report’s confidential appendixes (most of which were declassified a few years later). Since providing a preliminary and specific alert regarding the intention of a lone assassin to kill the Prime Minister is virtually impossible, the Commission chose not to take a hard line with Shin Bet in this matter. This decision was referred to by Ami Ayalon, who was appointed as Shin Bet director following the Rabin assassination, as “strange,” since the service could actually have exposed Yigal Amir before the event.

Rumors of a Plot
The first hint possibly pointing to Amir’s intention to kill Rabin was received by Shin Bet and the Israeli Police in June 1995, when Shlomi Halevy, an intelligence officer in the IDF reserves, was questioned by the police after delivering, on his own initiative, information claiming that “a young, religious, short Yemenite man” was planning to shoot Rabin. Halevy knew the identity of the “Yemenite”—Yigal Amir—but chose not to share this information with his interrogators. Neither the Police nor Shin Bet could do anything with such a general description. Since they did not suspect Halevy of hiding further information, his police interrogation was ended and he was not questioned by Shin Bet. The Shamgar Commission noted that, in its opinion, any accusation that Shin Bet and the Police should have acted differently with Halevy is a case of “20/20 hindsight.”

But Shin Bet could have known of Amir’s plans from another source. Two weeks after Rabin’s assassination, a television commentator revealed that Avishai Raviv, a prominent extreme Right activist, was working for Shin
Bet and had served as an agent provocateur. Raviv, whose Shin Bet code name was Champagne, had founded and headed a small radical organization, Eyal (a Hebrew acronym for “Jewish Fighting Organization”), which preached violent resistance to the government’s peace policy. Raviv proved to be a problematic agent, often acting contrary to his operators’ instructions, including engaging in acts of violence, but the Shin Bet chose to continue his employment, since he was considered a highly important agent.

Raviv, who knew Amir, reported to Shin Bet on Amir’s involvement in protests against the peace process. But the agency remained unaware of Amir’s plan to kill Rabin. Raviv, who had actually heard Amir say that Rabin should be murdered, did not share this information with his handlers, retrospectively claiming that he thought Amir’s words were no more than bravado.

The Shamgar Commission referred to the Raviv affair only in the confidential appendixes to its report, which were later declassified:

Any reasonable person understands that intelligence collection is essential, and that those involved in this [i.e., in cooperating with Shin Bet] are not necessarily saints or pure-hearted. However, it is vital to beware of provocateurs who exploit the backing they receive, due to malicious intentions or character disorders, and become the instigators of illegal and damaging or provocative activity, under official protection. Such people are unrestrained, due in part to the fact they know they will not be indicted. The State as a whole is affected by the harmful results, such as damage to trust in Shin Bet, which is stigmatized as a clandestine organization engaging in political provocation.... The conclusion is that there must be effective supervision of agents, and they cannot be allowed independent adventures.

The exposure of the Raviv affair was used by right-wing elements to concoct conspiracy theories regarding the Rabin assassination. Some of these theories maliciously claim that Shin Bet, or even Shimon Peres, was actually behind the murder and used Amir as a scapegoat. Supporters of these theories raise various doubts regarding the findings of both the police investigation and Shamgar Commission, focusing, among others, on the shouts “Blanks! Blanks!” that, according to several witnesses, were heard exactly as Amir shot Rabin. Although the Shamgar Commission failed to find out who, if anyone, shouted these words, it deemed the conspiracy claims to be groundless.

Yet these theories refused to fade, damaging the reputations of Shin Bet’s employees, whose morale had already reached a nadir following the 4 November fiasco. In order to pull the rug out from under the conspiracy...
theories and clear the agency of the accusations, Carmi Gillon’s successor as Shin Bet Director, Ami Ayalon, decided, after much prevarication, to support the State Attorney’s unprecedented intention to put Avishai Raviv on trial on charges of not preventing the Prime Minister’s assassination. But the conspiracy theories continued to flourish, even after the Jerusalem Magistrate Court decided, in March 2003, to acquit Raviv, ruling that he had not been aware of Amir’s intent to assassinate Rabin.

Israeli national commissions of inquiry are empowered to issue not only organizational findings and recommendations, but also personal ones. In this regard, the Shamgar Commission ruled that Carmi Gillon bore not only general responsibility for Shin Bet’s fiasco in the Rabin assassination as the head of the agency, but also personal responsibility for failing to take the proper measures to ensure that Rabin was properly protected, even though he had warned of the possibility of a political assassination. Since he had already resigned a few months after Rabin’s assassination, the Commission ruled this action to be sufficient and refrained from issuing further recommendations concerning Gillon. While the Commission was also satisfied with the resignation of the head of the Security Department, it recommended that the commander of the Dignitaries Protective Unit be dismissed from his position. Personal recommendations for less severe punishments were issued concerning several other senior figures in Shin Bet, as well as one high-ranking Police officer. No personal recommendations were made regarding any Shin Bet intelligence officers.

Former Shin Bet senior official Avraham Rotem, who served in the Dignitaries Protective Unit during Rabin’s first term as Prime Minister (1974–1977) and later headed both the Unit (1978–1982) and the Security Department (1986–1990), harshly criticized the Shamgar Commission for what he considered its lax attitude toward those Shin Bet officers who were responsible for the fiasco. Rotem, who described the assassination as “the biggest fiasco since the establishment of the State of Israel,” was especially furious about the Commission’s lack of reference to Rabin’s personal bodyguards, who, in spite of their miserable failure, remained with the agency, some even continued to guard the successor Prime Minister.

Not surprisingly, Rotem, as well as Gillon and his predecessor Yaakov Peri, rejected the Shamgar Commission’s assertion that the agency’s longstanding method for protecting the Prime Minister was defective. In addition, Gillon and his successor, Ayalon, strongly criticized the Commission for failing to investigate the political and social atmosphere that preceded the assassination, as well as the law-enforcement authorities for failing to prosecute those rabbis who had granted a religious seal of approval to kill Rabin. Yigal Amir confessed in his interrogation that he would not have committed his act without rabbinical authorization.
Following the assassination, only four people were put on trial. The assassin Amir, who acted alone, was sentenced to life imprisonment for killing Rabin plus six years’ imprisonment for injuring Rabin’s bodyguard. In an additional trial, Amir was sentenced to eight more years in prison for conspiring to murder Rabin before 4 November, this time in cooperation with two others: his brother Hagai Amir and his friend Dror Adani, who were sentenced to sixteen and seven years in prison, respectively. Another Amir acquaintance, Margalit Har-Shefi, who knew of his satanic plan in general terms, was convicted of not preventing Rabin’s murder and sentenced to several months in prison.

THE RIGHT REBOUNDS

“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes”
—Judges 21:25

Following the Rabin assassination Shin Bet totally changed its method of protecting dignitaries in general, and the Prime Minister in particular. Immediately after the assassination, the number of bodyguards surrounding the Prime Minister was significantly increased, and extra means were taken to ensure the leader’s safety. Maintaining a sterile area around the Prime Minister has become the guiding principle, and his participation in public events is always preceded by comprehensive security preparations.

These increased precautions were criticized by former Shin Bet officials, arguing that they were excessive and even hysterical. The burden facing the agency’s Dignitaries Protective Unit has indeed become almost impossible, leading to an urgent need for change. A public committee was appointed in 1998 to examine the matter. Following its recommendations, the number of dignitaries guarded directly by the Unit was reduced to just seven senior officials regarded as “symbols of authority”: the Prime Minister, the President (which in Israel is mainly a symbolic position), the Knesset Speaker, the Opposition Leader, the President of the Supreme Court, and the ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs. The task of guarding the other Israeli government ministers (twenty or more in number) was transferred to private security companies, with Shin Bet functioning as a professional instructor and supervisor. Then, following the assassination of Minister of Tourism Rehavam Ze’evi by an Arab terrorist cell in 2001, after he had refused to be escorted by bodyguards, new regulations were issued to better define the Shin Bet’s legal authority with regard to its guarded dignitaries.
Shin Bet has also learned lessons regarding its intelligence arrangements. While the agency has dramatically intensified its efforts to penetrate the strongholds of the Israeli radical Right, though not without difficulties, it no longer operates “number ones”—i.e., organization leaders—as human sources, a lesson learned from the Raviv affair. In addition, the Shin Bet has established improved mechanisms for controlling its human sources.  

In contrast to the comprehensive reforms in Shin Bet, the Israeli public does not seem to have absorbed the serious implications of the event and has instead relatively quickly returned to routine. This phenomenon was aided by, among others, the surprising victory of Benjamin Netanyahu over Rabin’s successor Shimon Peres in the elections for Prime Minister that took place in May 1996, just seven months after the assassination. The difficulties that erupted in the Israeli–Palestinian peace process over the following years have contributed to further repression and even a delegitimization of Rabin’s legacy.

The rapid political recovery of the right-wing camp did not escape notice from its radical elements and the Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The settlers used the Raviv affair to evade their own responsibility for the atmosphere of incitement that preceded the assassination. In addition, the failure to prosecute extreme Right rabbis who had advocated Rabin’s murder emphasized the weakness of the law enforcement authorities, even after the traumatic assassination.

Accordingly, that radical Right elements soon resumed their use of violence is hardly surprising. At the beginning of the 2000s, a rise in Palestinian terrorism was mirrored by an intensification in right-wing Jewish terrorism against Arabs. As in the past, Jewish militant acts were perpetrated by individuals or small, closed groups, thereby complicating the Shin Bet’s attempts at surveillance and prevention.

**Tensions Continue**

Moreover, despite Shin Bet’s efforts following the Raviv affair to rebuild its relations with them, the settlers remained suspicious of the agency. The task of recruiting human sources among the extreme Right thus remained extremely difficult.

Despite these difficulties, the Shin Bet has managed to expose several of the small Jewish underground groups that operated over the past decade. In 2002, the agency exposed the Bat Ayin Underground, which had planned to commit a terror attack against East Jerusalem schoolgirls. In 2009, Shin Bet arrested Yaakov (“Jack”) Teitel, an American-born Israeli extreme Right activist who had committed several terror acts over the preceding twelve years, including the murder of two Palestinians and the injuring of a left-wing Israeli professor.
The reaction of the settler leadership to these revelations has ranged from suspicion to an appreciation of the Shin Bet’s efforts to expose extremists who harm the majority of settlers who do not support such militant acts. At the same time, and as observed by former Shin Bet director Yaakov Peri, the extremist settlers themselves differentiate between “two types of Shin Bets: The good Shin Bet, which operates against Arabs, prevents terror attacks, arrests terrorists, and searches for wanted activists; and the bad Shin Bet, which arrested the members of the Jewish Underground, operated the agent Avishai Raviv, and prevents them from doing whatever they want.”

The tension between the Jewish settlers and Shin Bet reached its peak during the months before Prime Minister Ariel Sharon implemented his Disengagement Plan from Gaza Strip in 2005. As part of the disengagement, Jewish settlers in the Gaza Strip were forced to leave their homes and their settlements were then destroyed. The settler leaders accused Shin Bet of monitoring what they claimed was legitimate political resistance to the Disengagement Plan, and thereby functioning as a political tool for executing the government’s controversial policy.

The settlers’ suspicious attitude toward Shin Bet is only one of the reasons for the agency’s difficulties in combating the phenomenon of the Israeli radical Right. Shin Bet is also hampered by the failure of the other relevant Israeli security and law-enforcement agencies—particularly the Police and the State Attorney—to act effectively against this target. All of them, including Shin Bet, have essentially failed to provide an effective response to the dangerous Price Tag phenomenon, which has become prevalent in the West Bank in recent years.

The “Price Tag” Threat

Since 2008, countless acts of violence and vandalism have been committed against Palestinians and their property throughout the West Bank. The phenomenon, which was given the name “Price Tag,” is suspected of being carried out by extreme right-wing settler youths who wish to exact a price from local Palestinian inhabitants for violent acts taken against the settlers. In recent years, the Price Tag phenomenon has expanded to include violent and vandalistic acts against IDF soldiers and commanders in revenge for government actions against illegal settlement outposts, as well as attacks on mosques and churches, not only in the West Bank but within Israel.

Since Price Tag acts are perpetrated by individuals or small, diffuse groups with a low organizational level, most of the acts have not been deciphered by Shin Bet or the Israel Police. And even among attacks that have been deciphered, only a few have resulted in the indictment of those responsible, due to the difficulties encountered in translating intelligence data into...
Another obstacle is the young age of the Price Tag offenders. Shin Bet estimates that many of those involved are minors. The agency also believes that the hardcore of Price Tag activists totals some one hundred individuals, originating mainly from the Yitzhar settlement and hilltop outposts north of Ramallah and in the south Hebron Hills. They are apparently inspired by the ideas of Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburg, well-known for his extremist opinions against Arabs, as reflected in the Baruch HaGever pamphlet, which praised Baruch Goldstein’s Cave of the Patriarchs Massacre. In 2009, Ginsburg, together with several other extreme rabbis, gave his approbation to the book *Torat HaMelech* (“The King’s Torah”), a work written by his students who argued that, according to Jewish law, it is permissible in certain situations to kill non-Jews. As in the past, this affair ended with no rabbi being indicted.

Shin Bet’s attempts to monitor and foil the Price Tag phenomenon and other extreme Right activities have the character of a cat-and-mouse game. Extreme right activists, especially among the Jewish settlers, have carefully learned Shin Bet’s methods of action and are skilled at evading the agency’s radar. One of their leaders even produced a pamphlet titled “The Detainee Guide,” advising activists who have been detained to exercise their right to remain silent during Shin Bet or police interrogations. In addition, a special association has been established to provide activists with free legal services. And some Shin Bet officers who serve in the agency’s Jewish Department and live in the West Bank have become the victims of continuous persecution and harassment by extreme Right activists. Shin Bet officers involved in the efforts to combat the Price Tag phenomenon have expressed frustration at their inability to halt these dangerous acts. Some of them have even dubbed the West Bank “no-man’s land.”

According to Carmi Gillon, none of the obstacles and difficulties Shin Bet encounters in its efforts to combat the Price Tag phenomenon can be considered a legitimate excuse for the agency’s lack of success in this field. Although he blames the entire Israeli law enforcement system, including the Police and the State Attorney, for the lack of deterrence against Price Tag activists, Gillon’s criticism of Shin Bet has naturally gained much interest, particularly his accusation that the agency does not genuinely want to halt this dangerous phenomenon.

If Shin Bet, like the entire Israeli law enforcement system, is indeed not decisive enough in acting against the Price Tag phenomenon, its indecision may be the result of a reluctance on the part of the rightist government to seriously address this challenge, possibly due to a concern that doing so would impair its popularity among the settlers. Although Gillon has admitted that the country’s Prime Ministers have always avoided interfering in Shin Bet’s activities against the extreme Right, due to the
sensitive nature of this work, the political identity of the government may indirectly affect the agency’s motivation in combating the Price Tag phenomenon.

This assertion may be supported by the government’s decision to declare Price Tag an unlawful entity rather than a terrorist organization. Although the two terms have a somewhat similar legal effect, designation as a terrorist organization permits more serious measures against the lawbreakers with a much more significant public impact. But, such a designation of the Price Tag phenomenon as terrorism could also have resulted in electoral damage to the government.

Thus, the small group of young Price Tag activists continues to intimidate not only the Palestinian population directly, but also the Israeli government indirectly. As Shin Bet itself warned after its relatively rare success in exposing and indicting the activists responsible for one of the Price Tag attacks:

The agency takes a serious view of such activity, which is liable to cause grave damage to property and life. This incident illustrates the potential threat in Judea and Samaria due to the operations of a small group of right-wing extremists who use violent and forbidden methods in order to realize their ideological desires, even at the cost of intimidating government decisions and the Palestinian population.\textsuperscript{116}

Shin Bet should not be the only ones concerned by the success of the Price Tag activists. As former Shin Bet director Ayalon noted, “Not only Shin Bet loses to them, but the entire Israeli society.”\textsuperscript{117}

The Price Tag phenomenon reached its peak, to date, with a horrifying incident on 31 July 2015 in which a home in the Palestinian village of Duma, to the south of Nablus, was torched, killing an 18-month-old boy and his parents. Shin Bet suspected that Price Tag activists were responsible for the attack, but the agency fumbled around in the dark for a couple of months. Meanwhile, the protracted delay in the investigation may well have contributed to the sharp increase in the Palestinian violence and terrorism against Israeli citizens, and in particular against Jewish settlers, during the fall of 2015.

In order to unravel the Duma attack and prevent further Price Tag crimes, Shin Bet arrested several radical right activists shortly after the attack and held them in administrative detention, a time-limited alternative to a criminal trial that is used for deterrence and to prevent future crimes. Shin Bet suspected that the detainees, headed by Meir Ettinger, the grandson of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, formed part of a radical right group responsible for several Price Tag attacks against Palestinians and holy places. The group, given the name “The Revolt,” has allegedly set itself...
the ambitious goal of toppling Israel’s secular democratic regime and replacing it with a theocratic state governed by Jewish law.  

Not surprisingly, Shin Bet interrogations of this radical group have encountered the same difficulties that have always characterized interrogations of extreme Right activists, and particularly their exercise of the right to remain silent. A breakthrough was finally achieved at the beginning of December 2015 with the arrest of several individuals who were allegedly responsible for the Duma attack. In a very rare act when dealing with Israeli rather than Palestinian detainees, Shin Bet not only prevented the suspects from meeting with their attorneys for a while but even used aggressive interrogation methods against them. Although the interrogations were carefully monitored by the Attorney General’s office, the detainees’ attorneys accused Shin Bet of using illegal and harsh torture methods against their clients, and hundreds of their supporters demonstrated for their immediate release.

These rarely used interrogation methods eventually produced results at the beginning of January 2016 with the confession and prosecution of two of the detainees: Amiram Ben-Uliel, a 21-year-old activist who allegedly committed the Duma attack alone, under the influence of The Revolt group’s ideas, and a minor who was involved in planning the attack, but ultimately did not take part in it. Accordingly, Ben-Uliel was charged with three counts of murder and his minor friend was charged as an accessory to murder. Not surprisingly, their attorneys quickly declared that they would argue in court that the confessions were obtained illegally.

The solving of the Duma attack was indeed a great achievement for Shin Bet. But even if Ben-Uliel and his friend are ultimately convicted, there is no reason to believe that the Price Tag phenomenon will subside. Similarly, Shin Bet will probably continue to face difficulties in preventing further attacks and prosecuting the perpetrators.

WHERE AND HOW WILL IT END?

“Your destroyers and devastators will depart from you”
—Isaiah 49:17

These pages began with a reference to Carmi Gillon’s thesis on the danger posed to Israeli democracy by the country’s extreme Right. Written in the late 1980s, his work now has the quality of [a] prophecy. Gillon’s observations, reflecting his experience in combatting the Jewish Underground, seem to be as valid as ever today, a quarter century after they were written and more than 20 years after Israeli democracy suffered a near-fatal blow with the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin:
Ideological crime, more than any other type of crime, constitutes a direct and tangible threat to the rule of law and the continued existence of the State of Israel as a democratic and free state. Not only that Israeli society and government do not react to the danger posed by the radical right, they also accept and even support it in one way or another, thus fanning the flames of radicalization.121

Indeed, the process of radicalization within Israeli society has gone deeper during the past two decades. The right-wing political camp has grown, and its extreme margins have become bigger as well. As a result, significant elements within Israeli society and politics do not attribute top-priority importance to defending the country’s democratic nature. Moreover, some of them—who no longer constitute only a marginal minority—believe that the Israeli Jewish character precedes its democratic one. In such an atmosphere, little wonder that some former Shin Bet directors believe that Israeli society and politics have learned nothing from the Rabin assassination and warn of the possibility of another political murder.122

In addition, the Temple Mount continues to constitute a sensitive issue, even as certain right-wing politicians fail to avoid provocations that could inflame passions on all sides. An example was the high-profile visit to the Temple Mount, including prayer, by Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel in September 2015, despite the prohibition by Israeli Police.123 On other occasions, Ariel, as well as Member of Knesset Ze’ev Elkin, then-Chairman of the Coalition, gave Israeli settlers information on IDF movements in the West Bank, allegedly in order to assist the settlers in their attempts to prevent the eviction of illegal Jewish outposts.124 No steps were taken against Ariel or Elkin. Other right-wing politicians often make litigious anti-Arab statements, thus intentionally or unintentionally encouraging the manifestations of hatred and racism that have become widespread within Israeli Jewish society.

Accordingly, the Israeli extreme Right, encouraged by growing public sympathy and by the acquiescence, or even support, of some politicians, is gaining power and threatens to influence government policy and the State’s authority in the Palestinian Territories through undemocratic and illegal means. In light of the weak response to this dangerous phenomenon by the Israeli legal and law-enforcement authorities, the Shin Bet is seemingly left almost alone in this battle against extremism. However, the agency continues to face the same difficulties it has encountered during Israel’s nearly seventy years of independence in its endless and frustrating attempt to monitor and foil Jewish right-wing terrorism.

One of Shin Bet’s key priorities is indeed the defense of Israeli democracy against political subversion. But, this vital mission should not be placed solely on the narrow shoulders of this excellent security agency, nor should it be
confined to the technical task of protecting the Prime Minister and apprehending ideological offenders. The entire Israeli legal and law enforcement system, as well as the religious sector, the political establishment, and Israeli society in general, should learn from history, recognize the danger posed by the extreme right, and present a determined response.

Those who cherish Israeli democracy and the rule of law would do well to bear in mind Carmi Gillon’s gloomy prophecy:

The process of radicalization in Israeli society pushes the most extreme margins to even more extreme points, both in terms of their ideology and in terms of their personal willingness to take risks. This process reinforces the motives that, from their perspective, justify their goal. If the two ends of this spectrum meet, heaven forfend, no one will be able to predict the outcome of the resulting clash.\(^{125}\)

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3. Gillon joined Shin Bet in 1972 and devoted his first decade in the service to security issues, particularly concerning Israel’s embassies abroad. From 1982 to 1987 he headed Shin Bet’s Jewish Department, dealing with internal right-wing and left-wing subversion. Gillon later served as head of Shin Bet’s Northern Command, head of the Administrative Division, Shin Bet’s deputy director, and from March 1995, director of the agency. Carmi Gillon, in discussion with the author, 28 December 2014.


5. Hebrew acronym for “Information Service.”


Altalena’s attempt to anchor in Tel Aviv on 22 June 1948 encountered a firm response by IDF troops, resulting in the sinking of the ship and the death of 16 Etzel fighters and three IDF soldiers.

Shai’s internal security missions were indeed transferred to Shin Bet; its external military intelligence activities were assigned to the IDF Intelligence Department, AMAN; and its external political intelligence activities were assigned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and later to the Mossad.


Ibid., pp. 20 and 51–52.

Isser Harel, *Security and Democracy* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Edanim Publishers/Yediot Aharonot, 1989), pp. 196–197. Harel’s attitude may explain his initiative to recruit veterans of Lehi and Etzel to the security services, among them Lehi leader Yitzhak Shamir, who years later was elected prime minister of Israel.

Ten months after his murder, the Israeli Supreme Court overturned the lower court’s ruling and cleared Kastner’s name, but at the same time noted that he had helped Nazis to evade punishment. The historical and public debate regarding Kastner’s image, which oscillates between that of a traitor and a savior, continues to this day, as do the arguments concerning the exact number of Jews who owe him their lives.


Harel stated in the meeting that “two years ago, he [Eckstein] called the police of his own accord and proposed working against the underground…. But later it became clear that this man came to the police with bad intentions, that is, he was guided in this matter by the members of the underground”; see: Ofer Aderet, “Declassified: Shin Bet Knew Israel Kastner was Targeted,” *Haaretz*, 9 January 2015, at http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/premium-1.636130

These theories also derived support from the revelation that Shin Bet stopped guarding Kastner shortly before his assassination, even though threats had previously been made to harm him; *Ibid.*

Isser Harel, *The Truth about the Kastner Murder*, pp. 11–12, 105. The assassin Eckstein refused to let Harel, who died in 2003, have the last word. In his latest book, Eckstein notes that “many questions, and eventually a great many questions, have been gathered in the reservoir of questions-not-asked, and if they were asked, they were not answered.” One of these questions dealt with the possibility, which Eckstein alludes to, of another person’s involvement in the murder: “Another shot thundered at the very instant of my third shot, followed by agonizing cries. Apparently someone was there, in any event, carried out confirmation of the kill and, as a true professional, did not miss even in the dark”; see: Ze’ev Eckstein, *Quilt*, p. 92, 100.
In addition, Shin Bet played an active role in maintaining the military administration that was imposed on Arab citizens of Israel from 1948 until 1966.


Meir Kahane was born in 1932 in Brooklyn, New York. In 1968 he established the Jewish Defense League (JDL), whose purpose was both protecting Jews from local manifestations of anti-Semitism and protesting, sometimes violently, against the USSR prohibition against Jewish immigration to Israel. In 1971 Kahane left the United States and emigrated to Israel, where he established a local branch of the JDL. Kach was founded as the Israeli political front for the JDL ahead of Kahane’s first (failed) attempt to be elected as a Knesset member (1973).


Kahane advocated the revocation of Israeli Arabs’ civil rights and even their transfer to Arab countries, separation between Jews and non-Jews in neighborhoods and public places, the rejection of Israel democratic regime, and the delegitimization of the Israeli secular liberal left. An elaboration on the ideology of Kahane and the Kach movement can be found in Ehud Sprinzak, *The Ascendance of Israel’s Radical Right* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 211–250.

Yaakov Perry, *Strike First* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Keshet, 1999), p. 106.


Jerusalem also holds special sanctity for Christianity. Some tourists, mainly Christians, who visit the city, suffer from a mental disorder called “Jerusalem Syndrome,” which leads them to hallucinate as having divine powers and a messianic goal. This was the case of Michael Rohan, an Australian tourist who, on 21 August 1969, set fire to the pulpit of the Al Aqsa Mosque, damaging some of the inner sections of this holy place. The incident aroused anger and fervent protest in the Muslim and Arab world. Rohan was put on trial, found insane, and hospitalized in a mental institution. The Israeli committee of inquiry that was appointed following the incident ruled that Rohan had acted alone, taking advantage of insufficient guarding arrangements by the Waqf (the guardians of Muslim holy sites). See: “Report of the Committee of Inquiry to the Circumstances of the Fire at the al-Aqsa Mosque” (the Zuzzman Committee), 19 September 1969.
“Encouraging the messianic era” refers to an act that seeks to expedite redemption and the coming of the Messiah. Halakhah (Jewish religious law) encourages praying for the coming of the Messiah but forbids excessive praying and other acts aiming at urging the redemption.

Another group was the Lifta Gang, whose members—four eccentric religious Jews—unsuccessfully attempted on 26 January 1984 to smuggle explosive charges into the Temple Mount in order to explode the Muslim holy places on the Mount.

Yaakov Perry, *Strike First*, p. 103.

Jerusalem District Court, Verdict no. 203/84, State of Israel against Menachem Livni, Yehuda Etzion and others, 22 July 1985.

Judea and Samaria are the Hebrew names for the areas roughly corresponding to the West Bank and are used in modern Israel as an alternative to the latter name.


Carmi Gillon, in discussion with the author, 28 December 2014.


Shin Bet senior official Yaakov Perry estimated the number of work hours devoted to the investigation during the last 10 months before the Underground’s exposure (July 1983–April 1984) alone at no less than 30,000; see: Yaakov Perry, *Strike First*, p. 106.

One of the names mentioned was Rabbi Dov Lior, then-Chief Rabbi of the Jewish community in Hebron. A decade later, following the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Lior was again suspected of providing a religious decree permitting the assassination. In both cases, he was not prosecuted.

And indeed, both Carmi Gillon, who led the investigation, and journalist Haggai Segal, one of the detainees, noted the moderate manner in which Shin Bet treated the interrogees, in contrast to the more aggressive techniques routinely used by the agency against Arab terror suspects. This attitude was due in part to the Zionist identity of the detainees and their respect for the agency’s role in combating Arab terrorism; see: Carmi Gillon, *Shin Bet between the Schisms*, pp. 117–118; Haggai Segal, *Dear Brothers: The West Bank Jewish Underground*, translated from the Hebrew (Woodmere, NY: Beit Shamai Publications, 1988), pp. 212–234. Surprisingly, perhaps, Segal’s book—despite its author’s involvement in the Underground’s activities, motivated by his radical right-wing ideology—appears to be quite objective, focusing on describing the sequence of events and providing an interesting glimpse into the hearts and minds of the Underground’s members and their feelings towards Shin Bet, both before and during their arrest (Segal spent two years in jail, during which time he wrote his book).

The defendants’ claim that their confessions had been obtained by subterfuge was rejected by the court. However, to this end the Shin Bet interrogators were obliged to expose their methods of interrogation in court, thereby harming the agency; see: Haggai Segal, *Dear Brothers*, p. 274.
The Israeli President has the authority to pardon or commute the sentences of civilians. Thus, while the Israel statute book imposes a life sentence for murderers, Presidents have usually commuted their sentences to periods of not less than 24 years.

A deal with particularly strong public impact in Israel was reached in 1985 between Israel and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC), an organization headed by Ahmad Jibril. According to the deal, Israel freed 1,150 prisoners, mainly Palestinians convicted of committing terror acts, in return for three Israeli soldiers who had been captured by the PFLP-GC.

As was noted by Carmi Gillon: “During the advanced stages of the investigation, when we already had suspects, Shamir knew they were associated with some of his acquaintances and friends, but he has never stopped us, not even by hinting. As a department head in Shin Bet and as an Israeli citizen, I was proud of the prime minister’s dignified national approach”; see: Carmi Gillon, Shin Bet between the Schisms, p. 156.

Yehuda Etzion, one of the Jewish Underground’s leaders, was profoundly influenced by the ideas of Shabtai Ben-Dov, a religious philosopher and a veteran of Lehi. In 2006, Etzion even edited Ben-Dov’s writings into four dense volumes: Shabtai Ben-Dov, A Ladder to the Destined Kingdom of Israel: Shabtai Ben-Dov’s Writings in Four Volumes, edited by Yehuda Etzion (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Sulamot, 2007). Moreover, Underground member Haggai Segal has claimed that Etzion visited Ben-Dov just before his death in 1979 and received a green light from him to destroy the Muslim holy places on the Temple Mount; see: Segal, Dear Brothers, pp. 56–57.

Thus, the three Underground members who were sentenced for life actually served just 6½ years.

In addition, at least one of the Jewish Underground’s members was a former member of Lehi.


Carmi Gillon, Shin Bet between the Schisms, p. 56.

A full chronology of Jewish terrorist acts from 1948 through 2007 can be found in Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger, Jewish Terrorism in Israel, pp. 175–192.

Another terror attack that should be mentioned here has occurred on 11 April 1982, when an American-born Israeli soldier, Alan Goodman, entered the Temple Mount and opened fire, killing a Waqf guard and wounding several other people, including Israeli policemen. Before being captured, Goodman managed to enter the Dome of the Rock shrine, shooting wildly though without hitting anyone. Goodman was sentenced to life imprisonment and 40 concurrent years, but he was pardoned, released from jail after only 15½ years, and deported to the USA.

Goldstein was even one of Kach’s leading candidates for the 1984 Knesset elections, though he was not elected. Later he led the party’s list for the
municipal elections in Kiryat Arba and was elected as a member of the settlement’s council.


54 Ibid., p. 148.


56 Accusations in this vein appeared frequently in the pages of the settlers’ monthly journal Nekuda, as for example in the editorial in the October 1994 issue. The editorial even expressed an objection to the expected nomination of Carmi Gillon as Shin Bet director (although his identity was covert at the time), arguing on the basis of his M.A. thesis, which addressed the danger posed by the extreme right, that he had a prejudice against the settlers.

57 Kach’s founder Rabbi Kahane was murdered in November 1990 by a Muslim assassin during a visit to New York. Following Kahane’s murder, Kach split in two, with Kahane’s son leading a breakaway faction, Kahane Chai (Hebrew for “Kahane is alive”). Avenging the Kahane’s murder was among the motives for Goldstein’s massacre.

58 Israeli Government Decision no. 2757 (13 March 1994). In addition to its declarative significance, the act enables the authorities to take certain measures against both the organizations (such as freezing their assets) and their activists (such as putting them on trial for being members of a terror organization).

59 Michael Ben Horin, ed., Baruch HaGever: A Memorial Volume for Dr. Baruch Goldstein, the Saint (Hebrew, partly in English; Jerusalem: Special publications, 1995).

60 In an exceptional step, the book’s editors were put on trial and convicted of incitement to racism. The same was the fate of Rabbi Ido Alba following his article titled “Investigation of Jewish Rulings on the Killing of Gentiles” that was included in the book. The court convicted Alba of incitement to racism and encouraging violence, rejecting his claim that his article, which discussed the circumstances in which Jewish law permits the killing of Gentiles, should be considered a purely theoretical exercise.

61 As indicated by Matti Steinberg, who at the time was the Shin Bet director’s advisor on Palestinian affairs; see: Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, Lords of the Land, pp. 122–123.

62 Rodef refers to a Jew who imperils the life of another Jew; Moser refers to a Jew who intends to turn another Jew in to non-Jewish authorities.

63 For detailed discussion of the political and religious incitement against Rabin during the months prior to his murder, see the book and film by Michael Karpin: Michael Karpin and Ina Friedman, Murder in the Name of God: The Plot to Kill Yitzhak Rabin (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); The Road

Following Rabin’s murder, harsh criticism was leveled at the leader of the opposition, Benjamin Netanyahu, for his contribution to the incitement campaign against Rabin. For example, the critics accused Netanyahu of leading a procession of demonstrators in March 1994 in Ra’anana, north of Tel Aviv. A few demonstrators, who walked just behind Netanyahu, carried a coffin bearing the words “Rabin is killing Zionism,” perhaps symbolizing Rabin’s funeral. None of this prevented Netanyahu from winning the elections for Israeli Prime Minister that took place on May 1996, six months only after Rabin’s murder.


In an interesting interview as part of an Israeli television investigation, one of Rabin’s bodyguards elaborated on the expressions of hatred and violence directed at Rabin during the months before his murder. The bodyguard recalled that he and other Shin Bet bodyguards complained that they lacked the ability to properly protect the Prime Minister, but their complaints did not receive an adequate response. See: “Rabin’s Assassination,” HaMakor (Hebrew speaking), Channel 10, 10 November 2009, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CE7jXC7NI4s

Carmi Gillon, in discussion with the author, 28 December 2014.

According to the “second bullet theory,” if an assassin manages to bypass all the security circles surrounding the Prime Minister, it is unlikely that the bodyguards will be able to fire the first bullet, but they must fire the second one and kill the assassin. Shin Bet bodyguards are trained to respond and shoot the assassin within no more than 1.6–1.8 seconds; see: Carmi Gillon, Shin Bet between the Schisms, pp. 281–282.

Indeed, Reagan’s bodyguards did not fire even one shot, but managed to push the President out of the line of fire, quickly putting him into his limousine. Avraham Rotem, former director of Shin Bet’s Dignitaries Protective Unit, indicated that Reagan’s attempted assassination has been thoroughly studied in all the Unit’s training programs and courses; see: Avraham Rotem, The Truth, My friend, pp. 250–254.

Both Rabin’s assassination and Reagan’s attempted assassination were incidentally captured on video: Reagan’s at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bt87SbaDeA0; Rabin’s at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QUuZNyGWPU. The latter video clearly illustrates the chaos around Rabin in the seconds before the assassination, in an area that should have been sterilized.

Carmi Gillon, Shin Bet between the Schisms, p. 289.
Ibid., pp. 99–103. Although according to both Shin Bet’s and police’s operation commands toward the 4 November rally the police were supposed to create a second security circle surrounding Rabin and his Shin Bet bodyguards, policemen did not surround the entourage during its way to Rabin’s car.

Ibid., pp. 33–34, 111.

Ami Ayalon, in discussion with the author, 24 December 2014.

Halevy, who was superficially acquainted with Amir, heard of his plans to kill Rabin from a mutual friend. Halevy’s conscience agonized him and he decided to confess. At the same time, however, he chose not to share Amir’s identity with his police interrogators, since he was not convinced that Amir’s plans were serious and did not want to entangle him for nothing.

An agent provocateur entices other persons to commit illegal acts, and may also be required to himself participate in such acts in order to establish his cover story.

Shin Bet’s operational control of Avishai Raviv was supervised by the Israeli State Attorney’s Office, which—on the agency’s recommendation—turned a blind eye to Raviv’s offenses, including those committed on his own initiative, and refrained from indicting him; see: Yaakov Perry, Strike First, p. 291.

A recently published book by Dvir Kariv, a former Shin Bet intelligence officer who worked in the agency’s Jewish Department (officially known as “The Department for Foiling of Terrorism and Political Subversion in the non-Arab Sector”), provides a very interesting glimpse into Shin Bet’s intelligence failures surrounding the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin; see: Dvir Kariv, Yitzhak: Rabin’s Assassination—The Untold Story (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Teper Publishers, 2015).

http://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?.did=143448


Thus, one of the conspiracy theories claims that, thanks to Avishai Raviv, Shin Bet knew of Amir’s plan to kill Rabin and replaced the bullets in his pistol with blanks. The rationale was that the Rabin government supposedly hoped that a failed assassination attempt would help them win public support and delegitimize the entire right-wing camp. However, the theory continued, Amir revealed the plot in advance and restored the status quo ante. Supporters of this theory refer to a true incident in 1994, when Shin Bet discovered the intention of two Jewish settlers to kill a Palestinian Arab and replaced their gun’s bullets with blanks in order to catch them red-handed and prosecute them for attempted murder.

A Report: The Commission of Inquiry into Prime Minister Rabin’s Murder, p. 128. Notably, the former Shin Bet directors utterly reject any possibility of a conspiracy regarding the Rabin assassination (Ami Ayalon, in discussion
with the author, 24 December 2014; Carmi Gillon, in discussion with the author, 28 December 2014). The same firm opinion is shared by former Shin Bet intelligence officer Dvir Kariv; see: Dvir Kariv, *Rabin’s Assassination*, pp. 251–270.

Shin Bet’s concern was that putting Raviv on trial would be interpreted as abandoning a human source, a step which could complicate the agency’s efforts to further recruit human sources (Ami Ayalon, in discussion with the author, 24 December 2014).

For a summary of the court ruling in Raviv’s trial (in Hebrew) see: http://www.news1.co.il/archive/0019-D-2440-00.html?.tag=4-43-10

The commission noted that Gillon “failed to maintain sufficient attention and supervision of the organization, preparations, readiness, alert, and proper operation of the Security Department regarding its Dignitaries Protective Unit, and particularly concerning the protection of the late prime minister”; see: A Report: The Commission of Inquiry into Prime Minister Rabin’s Murder, p. 134.

Gillon submitted his resignation to Rabin’s successor Shimon Peres four days after the assassination, but Peres rejected his request. Gillon eventually resigned in February 1996, before the Shamgar Commission released its report. After the report was published, Gillon rejected its rulings in his regard and claimed that he bore only a general responsibility, and not a personal one, for the Shin Bet’s fiasco.


Indeed, the Shamgar Commission’s mandate as defined by the Israeli government did not include the authority to investigate the political and social atmosphere that preceded the assassination. However, Gillon and Ayalon argue that Supreme Court President Meir Shamgar, as an admired jurist, should have insisted on broadening the Commission’s mandate and not limiting himself to dealing with the “technical” questions as to how Rabin was murdered and why Shin Bet failed to protect him.

Several rabbis were interrogated by the police (though not by Shin Bet) following the Rabin assassination, but ultimately none of them were indicted.

Amir also admitted in his interrogation that he was deeply influenced by Baruch Goldstein’s Cave of the Patriarchs Massacre. Following Rabin’s assassination, the book *Baruch HaGever*, which was written by several rabbis and praised Goldstein’s act, was found in Amir’s room; see: Michael Karpin and Ina Friedman, *Murder in the Name of God*, p. 16; Ehud Sprinzak, “Israel’s Radical Right and the Countdown to the Rabin Assassination,” in Yoram Peri, ed., *The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 113. For elaboration on Yigal Amir, see: *Ibid.*, pp. 121–127.

As was revealed in their interrogation, the Amir brothers and Adani had considered several ways to assassinate Rabin, including the use of a sniper’s
rifle or a LAW rocket. Separately, Yigal Amir had attempted to ambush Rabin on several previous occasions. In addition, in a search of the Amir brothers’ house following the assassination, the police and Shin Bet found large quantities of concealed weapons and explosives, apparently as part of a plot to attack Arabs.


97 Ami Ayalon, in discussion with the author, 24 December 2014. In spite of the repentance with regard to some aspects of the operation of Avishai Raviv, Shin Bet’s former directors and seniors are convinced that there is no alternative to the recruitment and operation of problematic human sources such as Raviv, as explained by the Shin Bet senior officer who was responsible for Raviv’s operation, Yitzhak Pantik: “Shin Bet’s network of surveillance that was achieved thanks to Raviv delivered important results...I told Ami Ayalon that I hoped he would have many sources at Raviv’s level. It is certainly difficult to operate problematic sources, but they provide the most valuable intelligence.” See: Roni Shaked, “Penetrating the Radical Right is Difficult but Possible,” Interview with Yitzhak Pantik (in Hebrew), *Yediot Aharonot*, 29 October 2004. On the same topic, see: Carmi Gillon, *Shin Bet between the Schisms*, pp. 246–255. Yitzhak Pantik has also discussed the challenge of penetrating the strongholds of the Israeli radical right: “It is indeed difficult, though not impossible: If not through the door, then by the window; if not through the back entrance, then by the chimney”; see: Roni Shaked, “Penetrating the Radical Right. Difficult But Possible.”

98 Netanyahu’s surprising victory over Peres—by a tiny margin of less than one percent—was achieved mainly as the result of massive suicide attacks that were carried out by Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad against Israeli citizens in February–March 1996, attacks that Shin Bet failed to prevent.

99 An intensive debate regarding the alleged immoral aspects of the Shin Bet’s usage of Avishai Raviv took place in the pages of the settlers’ monthly *Nekuda*, as well as in several Knesset sessions initiated by right-wing members of Knesset. The latter accused the Rabin government and Shin Bet of operating Avishai Raviv as a tool for delegitimizing the entire right-wing camp, among other claims. See, for example: Eliav Shochetman, “Shin Bet was the Only One to Libel Rabin as Rodef,” *Nekuda* 237 (November 2000), pp. 50–52; Meira Dolev, “Who is Responsible for the Provocation,” *Nekuda* 209 (November 1997), pp. 16–20; “Avishai Raviv and His Activity in the Eyal Organization,” *Meeting no. 313 of the 15th Knesset*, 4 June 2002.

100 Ami Ayalon, Shin Bet director following the Rabin assassination, held several meetings with the settler leadership, including rabbinical leaders, in which he acknowledged the agency’s mistakes with regard to the operation of Avishai Raviv. Some Shin Bet senior officers, such as Yitzhak Pantik, rejected this attitude, arguing that “talking with rabbis is like talking to a brick wall.” See: Roni Shaked, “Penetrating the Radical Right. Difficult But Possible.”

In order to calm the atmosphere and prevent violence, Shin Bet Director Yuval Diskin met with leading rabbis during the months preceding the disengagement from Gaza. Simultaneously, Shin Bet was informed of concrete plans by radical Jews to carry out a terror attack on the Temple Mount, as well as general alerts of intentions to attack Prime Minister Sharon in order to hinder the Disengagement Plan; see: Dror Moreh, *The Gatekeepers*, pp. 328–333.

Jewish violent acts against Palestinians and their property occurred as early as the 1970s and 1980s, but on a much more sporadic basis.

Thus, for example, the historic Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes at Tabgha, on the Sea of Galilee, was set on fire on 18 June 2015. This is just one of 42 similar cases of arson and vandalism against mosques, churches, and monasteries around Israel and the West Bank since December 2009. Shin Bet and the police managed to arrest and prosecute two religious right-wing activists who torched the Tabgha church, though in most of the other cases no-one has been apprehended or indicted.

The Police are responsible for investigating less serious Price Tag incidents (such as vandalism of property), while Shin Bet takes the lead in more serious incidents. In all cases, the Police and the State Attorney are responsible for indictments.

Thus, according to data that was recently published by the Yesh Din human rights organization, the Israel Police has an 84.9 percent failure rate in the investigation of ideologically-motivated crime perpetrated by Israeli citizens against Palestinians in the West Bank. Over the past ten years, only 75 indictments have been served against Israelis for harming Palestinians or their property, compared to 940 investigation files that were closed without indictment, mainly on the grounds of “offender unknown” or “insufficient evidence.” The Israel Police’s weak performance in this field has not improved even after the establishment of a new National Crime Unit in the West Bank in 2013. This poor record fuels mistrust toward the Israeli law-enforcement agencies among Palestinians; indeed, it is estimated that almost one-third of Price Tag incidents against Palestinians and their property in the West Bank are not even reported to the police. See: *Law Enforcement on Israeli Civilians in the West Bank*, Yesh Din Monitoring Update 2005–2015, Data Sheet, October 2015, at http://www.yesh-din.org/userfiles/Datasheet_English_Oct%202015.pdf


See also in this context the *Jewish Voice* Website (http://www.hakolhayehudi.co.il/magazine), which has in the past exposed Shin Bet’s methods of action. This Website, which is operated by followers of Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburg, was also accused of encouraging youths to execute
Price Tag attacks. Two of the Website’s operators have been charged with incitement to violence and racism, but the Website is still functional. The Honenu association describes itself as an “Israeli Zionist legal aid organization which offers legal assistance to our people to protect and preserve their rights to receive a fair judicial process”; see Honenu’s Website: http://honenu.org/


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Gillon was quoted as saying that “in the Shin Bet there is no such thing as can’t—there is don’t want to”; see: Ben Hartman, “Ex-Shin Bet Chief: Israel Does not Intend to Stop ‘Price Tag’ Attacks,” Jerusalem Post, 3 May 2014, at http://www.jpost.com/National-News/Former-Israel-Security-Agency-chief-Israel-does-not-intend-to-stop-price-tags-351225

All the Israeli governments since 2009 have been headed by Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing Likud party, which, together with the other right-wing coalition parties, enjoy the overwhelming support of most of the settlers and the religious sector at election time. Netanyahu’s political dependence on the settlers may also have affected his decision to nominate Yoram Cohen as Shin Bet director in 2011. Thus, Rabbi Haim Drukman, an important leader and religious authority among the settlers, has admitted that he and his friends had put pressure on Netanyahu not to choose the other leading candidate, Yitzhak Ilan, since he had formerly headed the agency’s non-Arab affairs section, which is responsible for the Jewish Department. At the same time, Drukman rejected the claim that he had insisted on the appointment of Cohen, the first religious director of Shin Bet, and added that he had not been familiar with Cohen at all; see: Amichai Ataeli, “This is How the Religious Zionist Leaders Intervened in the Election of the Next Shin Bet Director” (in Hebrew), NRG-Maariv, 30 March 2011, at http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/227/291.html


“Mission Impossible,” Uvda.

Chaim Levinson, “Meet the Jewish Extremist Group that Seeks to Violently Topple the State,” Haaretz, 7 August 2015, at http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.670011

An allusion to the difficulties encountered in the investigation of the Duma attack can be found in a controversial statement by the Israeli Minister of Defense on 9 September 2015, in which he admitted that the security establishment was aware of the identity of those responsible but was refraining from bringing them to justice in order not to expose intelligence


