




The Irgun Zvai Leumi: From Terrorists to Politicians



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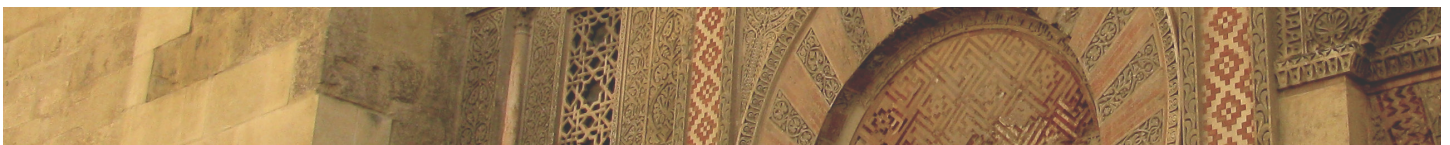
The Irgun Zvai Leumi (National Military Organization) was a Jewish terrorist organization that transitioned from a terrorist group to a political party. As a movement the group was founded in 1931 under Ze'ev Jabotinsky's leadership, but even then their operations did not include violence against their enemies, the British or Arabs. Not until 1939, when group leaders recognized the need to start initiating violence, can the Irgun really be called a terrorist organization.

The source of the Irgun's grievances can be found in the settlement of Israel. They were founded upon Jabotinsky's doctrine of Revisionist Zionism, which included "relentless pressure on Great Britain, including petitions and mass demonstrations, for Jewish statehood on both banks of the Jordan River; a Jewish majority in Pales-



tine; a reestablishment of the Jewish regiments; and military training for youth" (Jewish Virtual Library). Essentially, they wanted to create a Jewish state. This broad goal was largely fulfilled nine years later when "the national council proclaimed the state of Israel on May 14th, 1948" (Henry 27). The end of World War II led the United Nations to create the state of Israel and lay out a partition plan separating Muslims and Jews.

As Alice Henry points out, war immediately broke out the next day: "the Palestine war began. Egypt invaded, Syrians and a few Lebanese attacked from the north, Jordan from the east" (Henry 27). This last detail, including Muslims in a partitioned region, did not satisfy the Irgun as described in a New York Times article printed just



two months after the conflict began. C.L. Sulzberger interviews Menachem Begin, one of the most prominent leaders of the Irgun, and writes that “the extremist organization Irgun Zvai Leumi does not recognize the partition of Palestine as binding upon its supporters and is insistent that the State of Israel shall include all of the former Palestinian mandate as well as all of the Kingdom of Trans-Jordan” (Sulzberger 9).

When a terrorist group such as the Irgun Zvai Leumi sees their key objective completed, what do they do? In the case of their use of terrorism, the Irgun came to an end not because the funds died out or support waned, but because the leadership recognized the need to move to a more democratic and non-violent strategy. In order to continue pushing for additional change, no longer would the Irgun act under overt auspices of violence. Their primary purpose fulfilled, they had no agenda supportable with violence anymore due to the creation of the state of Israel's presence. Instead of disbanding after their success, the Irgun continued to remain active, shifting into a productive political role. Most notably, this shift can be seen in the leadership of both the Irgun and Israel's political institutions.

After the state was declared in 1948, Brit-

ain moved out and there was no need for violence against them. However, the Irgun, instead of stepping down and removing themselves from the political scene shifted in a new direction, specifically turned themselves into a political movement named Herut. Led by Menachem Begin and several other Irgun leaders, Herut establishes itself as a powerhouse within the Knesset, Israel's parliament. The Irgun's strategy and tactics through the year 1948 consisted of terrorist attacks on British and Arab hotspots as they violently opposed British influences and the Arab presence in Palestine. The Irgun then transitioned into the political movement Herut after the creation of the Jewish state, spurred on by the Altalena incident in which the Israeli government made its presence known to the Irgun, making it clear that their terrorist actions would not be tolerated. Begin spearheaded this transition and remained the face of Herut and its respective political coalitions until his retirement in 1983; in fact, many faces and families can be seen in the inner circle of both the Irgun terrorist organization and the Herut political party due to the shared political ideology of Revisionist Zionism present in both groups. For decades after and into the present day, Irgun's legacy lives on through the politi-

cal careers of such men as Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, and Yaakov Meridor. Through these men and many other individuals, the Irgun's stamp on Israeli society resonates even today as conflict in Palestine rages on.

In this paper, I explore the roles of these three men within the Irgun terrorist group and how the group's core leadership shifted to a political role, even while they maintain the same key goal. First, the Irgun's primary goal must be defined, and their terrorist activities made clear. Then I will describe the period of tumult when the Irgun's then leader, Menachem Begin, realized the need to transition from a terrorist organization to a political party. While the creation of the Jewish state was a positive for the Irgun, they had to now work within the Israeli government to push forward their agenda. Finally, I will make clear the connections between the Irgun and the political parties formed, first Herut and then the coalitions Gahal and Likud, through the core leadership and its consistency for so many years, spearheaded by the men mentioned above among many others.

Irgun's Goals and Strategy

The Irgun's goals have already been briefly covered: they align with Jabotinsky's Revision-

ist Zionism, an ideology that essentially calls for a Jewish state reaching the Jordan river at both ends. In order to do this, the Irgun had to, as David Fromkin succinctly puts it, "combat Great Britain, then a global power whose armed forces in the Second World War numbered in the millions, and to expel Great Britain from Palestine" (Fromkin 687). Removing the British from the region would also remove the 1939 immigration policy known as the White Paper, "which limited Jewish immigration to Palestine from European Displaced Person (DP) camps" (Wagner 631). According to these sources, the key group of people that the Irgun planned to antagonize were the British.

However, some claim that in fact the Arab population was the Irgun's primary enemy. Removing both the British and the Arabs would allow their ultimate goal of creating a Jewish state to become a reality, but it is unclear which group the Irgun detested more. Y.S. Brenner, in his article on the splinter group the Stern Gang (also known as Lehi), claims that while "the majority of the Irgun considered the Arabs to be their ultimate adversary, Stern's splinter group looked upon the Arabs as mere rivals and on the British as the real enemy" (Brenner 4). He cites the Irgun's

decision, under David Raziel's command, to ally themselves with the British for certain activities (Brenner 3). Brenner, however, does not give enough weight as to why this is done. The British are in the midst of World War II fighting Germany and their infamous Anti-Semitic Nazi regime. In *Terror Out of Zion*, J. Bell Bowyer notes that "even the Irgun felt it mad to oppose Hitler's most effective enemy [Britain]...a few followers of Avraham Stern would undertake armed action against the alien occupier" (Bowyer 51). Brenner, in his attempt to contrast the Stern Gang and Irgun, cites a temporary Irgun policy held due to the extenuating circumstances of World War II. The Irgun's key goal, excepting this short period of alliance, was to eliminate the British presence in Palestine.

But how did they plan to achieve these goals? Their general plan, according to Fromkin's Irgun source, was to "attack property interests. After giving advance warning to evacuate them, his small band of followers would blow up buildings...economic pressure would drive the Attlee-Bevin government either to withdraw from Palestine or else to try some reckless and possibly losing gamble in an effort to retrieve the situation" (Fromkin 688). This strategy of attracting

the attention of the British Empire did quickly win the Irgun and the Jewish people their state and expel the British, but not without a significant loss of credibility and a shift from their intended tactics.

Their shift in strategy was made complete when one act, an actual accident, forced them to embrace a more violent means to their goal. The infamous King David Hotel bombing that occurred on the 22nd of July, 1946, resulted in the deaths of nearly a hundred people including Britains, Jews, and Arabs (Fromkin 688). While Irgun members claim that the deaths were an accident, their popularity dwindled after the attack. In his memoir *The Revolt*, Menachem Begin recalls the lead-up to the explosion, careful to note that an Irgun member "telephoned the King David Hotel and warned them that explosives had been placed under the hotel and would go off in a short time" (219). Begin himself insists that "there were many civilians in the hotel whom we wanted, at all costs to avoid injuring;" he even claims that the Irgun created a "new device," a timer, for their mines so that the bombs could be set off to "allow for evacuation by hotel guests, workers and officials" (Begin 212-213). Whichever party is to blame for the miscommunication,

the end result was that the Irgun received a large amount of negative publicity. This publicity not only drove the Irgun to take on a more violent strategy against the Arab population and British officials, but it also allowed the Israeli government breathing room to take action against the Irgun later during the Altalena incident.

The Altalena incident demonstrated the lack of trust that the Israel government had in the organization as an ally and ultimately forced the Irgun to take on the form of a political party to get their voice heard. Begin and other Irgun leaders heard the message given by the Israeli military Zahal: if you are not with us, then you are against us. The boat, sailing much-needed men and weapons to Israel to reinforce the army during the Israeli-Arab War, never landed with the supplies and men. Through a series of miscommunications, technical difficulties, and general distrust between the Irgun and the government, the Altalena was disallowed from landing, floating just off the coast of Kfar Vitkin and then Tel Aviv. The official Israeli military, the Zahal, were ordered to fire on the Irgun men unloading the boat and the boat itself in both cities. In *Terror Out of Zion*, J. Bowyer Bell describes the situation for Israeli leader David Ben-Gurion and the cabinet,

writing that “at an early morning cabinet meeting, Ben-Gurion received a vote of seven to two authorizing all measures necessary to assure that the ship was turned over to the government” (Bell 324). The reasons for this rejection are fairly straight-forward: a truce disallowing further arms to be gathered was declared while the Altalena was on the water and unreachable by radio, and the Irgun were not to be trusted with weapons.

One important note to make here is that this distrust was warranted. Prominent members of both the Irgun and the splinter terrorist group Lehi refused to be integrated into the official Israeli army Zahal. Bowyer notes that the city of Jerusalem, “decreed a completely international city...gave the Irgun a welcome opportunity to postpone the inevitable self-liquidation...what Ben-Gurion would have preferred, as far as the Irgun-LEHI was concerned, was instant and total dissolution and enlistment in the Zahal” (Bowyer 316-317). In addition, the weapons from the Altalena were never clearly earmarked for either the Irgun or the Zahal. Both sides, although supposedly allies, wanted as many arms as possible available in case of later conflict (Bowyer 321).

To make matters worse, after trying to gain the shore in Tel Aviv, the Altalena put the white

flag up as the universal signal of surrender after the ship was nearly blown to pieces, yet “the artillery was still shelling the ship after the white flag had gone up” (Bell 326). As Begin (who was at this point still on the boat) claims, their reasoning for still firing on the boat was that “there is a general ‘cease fire’ but the order has not yet reached all the units of the Army” (Begin 175). In the end, the losses were not great; considering the Irgun leadership was on the boat or the shore, the group could have been completely wiped out. Instead Begin, Yaakov Meridor, and others lived to see another day and made their voice heard through democracy.

Begin recognized what the Altalena incident meant to the Irgun and expressed his organization’s plans to Sulzberger in the New York Times article mentioned previously. The Irgun leader reveals his and the Irgun’s plans as Sulzberger writes that the “Irgun does not intend to seek to gain power by a coup and will merely work to achieve authority by electoral means” (Sulzberger 9). The threat of the Irgun staging a coup had to be present in Ben-Gurion’s mind, especially after both the Irgun and Lehi refused to be totally integrated into Zahal. Begin, as commander of the Irgun, had to make a decision

weighing the costs and benefits of trying to maintain the terrorist group in its current form, turning it into a political entity like a movement or political party, or even breaking apart the group altogether. The Israeli government posed an additional threat upon the group’s survival, raising the cost of maintaining the group and causing Begin to turn Irgun into a non-violent political actor. After the Altalena incident revealed the distrust between the Irgun and the Israeli government, the Irgun had to transition into a non-violent political entity, and transition they did.

Another act that does not speak well for the Irgun is the Deir Yassin Massacre, a terrorist attack carried out in conjunction with Lehi, a splinter terrorist group. The terrorists effectively wiped out a predominantly Arab-populated town, killing over 100 people, including women and children. This attack was perpetrated on April 9th, 1948, just a month before the state of Israel was declared by the United Nations. Bookended by the King David Hotel bombing and the Altalena incident, this massacre demonstrates how ruthless the Irgun could be in this short period of time between the bombing and the declaration of the Israeli state (Jewish Virtual Library).

The Herut Movement's Goals and Strategy

Herut, of course, did not rely on the same strategy of violence that the Irgun did. As a political movement and then a political party, Herut had to establish its ideas through a platform. The most obvious political agenda remained consistent with the Irgun's true goal: expand the territory of the Jewish state. In his book *The Politics of Compromise*, Ervin Birnbaum notes, tongue firmly in cheek, that "it has abandoned the slogan of 'a Jewish State on two banks of the Jordan,' but only by substituting for it the claim to the historic boundaries of the Jewish People" (Birnbaum 62). Despite more politically correct phrasing, the main goal of both the Irgun and Herut was the same. This can be attributed to both who the leaders of the movement are and who the members are. Alan S. Zuckerman, in his study of the Herut party, describes the composition of the Herut ranks, writing that "in the early years, Herut activists were volunteers, committed to an expansive vision of the Land of Israel and opposed to Labor. Intimate friends and former comrades in arms, Herutniks were veterans of Etzel [Irgun] or its counterpart, Lehi [Stern Gang] (sic)" (Zuckerman et al. 236). The majority of Herut members were former terrorists who found a non-violent

manner through which to support their Revisionist Zionism ideals. However, some interested groups saw through this charade and sought to bring ruin upon the political movement by bringing its origins to the forefront.

The potential dangers of the Herut party were recognized by some outside of Israel. In fact, in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, several prominent Jewish-Americans expressed their fears about the formation of Herut and what it meant for the future of Israel. The letter, published on the 4th of December, 1948, claims that "within the Jewish community they have preached an admixture of ultra-nationalism, religious mysticism, and racial superiority... They have reclaimed no land, built no settlements, and only detracted from the Jewish defense activity" (Abramowitz 12). Among the signers are prominent Jewish-Americans like Albert Einstein, Herman Eisen, and Harry Orlinsky. Despite this warning, the Herut movement rolled on and established itself as the main opposition party to Mapai.

In preparation of the 1965 elections to the 6th Knesset, the Liberal party and the Herut party merged to form Gahal in order to gain strength through greater numbers. In the previous elec-

tion in 1961, both parties received 17 seats in the Knesset, with the majority leader Mapai winning 42 (knesset.gov.il). In order to reconcile the Liberal party and Herut party's differences, Birnbaum writes that "the program carried the stamp of Herut in the clauses dealing with security and foreign affairs, and the imprint of the Liberals with regard to economic and financial matters" (Birnbaum 64). This temporary coalition helped the Herut in the short term, but with their markedly different political platforms the coalition could not last for long. Indeed, Birnbaum notes "it cannot be foreseen when and how, if at all, Gahal will be able to act in the capacity of a substitute government for Mapai" (Birnbaum 65). The real win for the Herut party, however, was Menachem Begin's promotion within the government: "Prime Minister Eshkol invited the leader of Herut...to join the Cabinet" (Birnbaum 65). The peaceful participation of the Herut party in the democratic system effectively earned their leader a recognition of legitimacy by the opposition. This recognition eventually led to greater things for the Herut party and Begin himself.

With Birnbaum's book being published in 1970, he had no idea what was to come for the Herut party but states that "a circumstance that

could help Gahal to power would be a peaceful and slow revolution of the type that helped the Democratic Party in Turkey to power in 1950, after 28 years of uninterrupted rule by the Republican Party" (Birnbaum 65). Naturally, this is exactly what happened; the Herut party leadership, through the Gahal and then the Likud, gradually climbed to the top of the Israeli government and eventually won their leader, Begin, the executive position of Prime Minister.

The Herut party formed Likud with different pretenses than they did the Gahal. Brimming with confidence, the party created Likud in 1973 with a number of other Zionist political parties. In his article "The Legacy of Begin and Beginism for the Israeli Political System," Ilan Peleg notes that "from the very beginning it became clear that the Likud would be dominated by Herut" (Peleg 26). This coalition's political agenda was a cohesive force in stark comparison with the disjointedness of Gahal. Peleg writes that "the territorial message of the Likud was simple: 'not an inch!'" (Peleg 27). Now, unified, Herut and the rest of Likud could finally move past their more liberal opponents. The Herut party reached this precipice of success, through a cooperative strategy, working from within the Israeli government sys-

tem to win support. In addition, the party managed to keep its primary goal from its Irgun years intact: to expand the borders of the state of Israel.

Same Leaders, Same Politics

Herut participated in Israel's first elections and immediately experienced some success. In the first election held for Israel's Constituent Assembly Herut won 14 of the 120 seats, making them one of the more popular political parties in the new state (knesset.gov.il). Upon examining the list of elected representatives from the Herut Movement in the first Constituent Assembly, the overlap between the Herut and Irgun leadership is extraordinary. Figure 1 is a list of the 14 Herut members who were elected to the first Constituent Assembly, and by extension the 1st Knesset. Cross-examining this list with both the Jewish Virtual Library and official Irgun websites, 11 out of the 14 members were recognized and prominent members of the Irgun. Begin, Lankin, and Meridor were all on the Altalena while it was being blasted by the Zahal; Hillel Kook, Ari Jabotinsky, Shmuel Merlin, and Aryeh Ben-Eliezer "founded the Committee for the Rescue of European Jewry and later on the Committee for National Liberation" (Jewish Virtual Library). While this is only

the list of representatives from the Herut Movement for the 1st Knesset, many of these individuals stayed involved in the Israeli government and represent the group for years. Through a few of these leaders – including Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, and Yaakov Meridor – an ancestral line of sorts can be followed from the last days of the terrorist organization into the 21st century.

The most important figure of the Irgun who made his voice heard in the political sphere is Menachem Begin himself. Under Begin's leadership, Herut was founded upon the same principles as the Irgun; key to both groups is the expansion of Israel's borders. His efforts to move the Herut party into power in Israel through the Gahal coalition have already been noted above, although ultimately Gahal did not deliver this goal. However, the Likud coalition did. In 1977, Menachem Begin was named Prime Minister of Israel after his coalition party Likud won a majority of the seats in the Knesset. Begin became Prime Minister despite his history of violence as leader of the Irgun. He was effectively the commander of Likud during the King David Hotel bombing, the Deir Yassin Massacre, and the Altalena incident. Nevertheless, the coalition

with his name all over it was elected to power. As small right-wing Zionist parties, Herut and others had little power separately. For this reason the right-wing coalesced and even today, Likud remains one of the two major political parties in Israel.

After Begin's retirement, Likud lost its flag-bearer and briefly broke into factions as several groups fought to gain control of Herut and by extension the coalition party Likud. In Alan S. Zuckerman's article "The Party's Just Begun: Herut Activists in Power and After Begin," he notes that "Begin transformed the Revisionist movement into the Herut party, and then attracted other parties into the Likud, forming one of the two largest political blocs in Israel. When he stepped down...Herut and Begin were no longer synonymous" (Zuckerman et al. 236). In his article, Zuckerman describes how the factions fall along new guard v. old guard lines as "political professionals" from such regions as Asia and Africa begin to permeate the Herut party (Zuckerman 246)

Begin, as commander of the Irgun beginning in 1943 and ending with his retirement from politics, became the emblematic leader and practically the symbol of the Revisionist Zionism

movement. His influence on the creation of the state of Israel is debated, but there are no doubts that he had a large one. Peleg (19) concedes Begin's influence, writing:

At this historical juncture, Israel's fortieth anniversary, it could be argued that with the exception of David Ben-Gurion, Menachem Begin was the single most important personality in the political history of the State of Israel...Begin was instrumental in the development of a bipartisan system in a country that traditionally had one dominant party.

Without Begin's passionate leadership of the Herut party, the coalitions of Gahal and then Likud may never have matriculated and the liberal parties such as Mapai may have stayed in power to this day without a strong opponent. Today, Begin's only son Benjamin Begin serves in the Knesset as a member of the Likud party (knesset.gov.il).

Finally, similar to Begin, Yitzhak Shamir also went from terrorist group leader to Prime Minister. Shamir took a different path to politics, actually spear-heading another similar terrorist group for a few years after his time with the Irgun.

The Irgun were not the only Zionist terrorist group during this time period. The Stern Gang, also known as Lehi, actually broke off from the Irgun because of personality and ideological differences. Avraham Stern, after losing out to David Raziel as Irgun leader, formed his own group. Stern created the Stern Gang and eventually was killed. Stern and the first incarnation of Lehi fell apart quickly, but Shamir restarted Lehi “after his escape from Mizra in January 1943... [he] became the organizer, a man of no doubts and few words” (Bowyer 84). Along with a few other key Stern Gang holdouts like eighteen-year-old Joshua Cohen, Shamir and the Stern Gang ultimately worked alongside the Irgun committing terrorist acts such as the Deir Yassin massacre (Bowyer). Shamir joined Herut in the 1960’s and by 1973 was elected to the Knesset as a member of the Likud coalition. He eventually succeeded Begin as Prime Minister in 1983 (Jewish Virtual Library). These two men successfully overcame the odds and went from violent, radical terrorist leaders to leading politicians in their state. While never wavering in their ideology and beliefs, their strategy underwent a shift from violent to non-violent as the situation called for it.

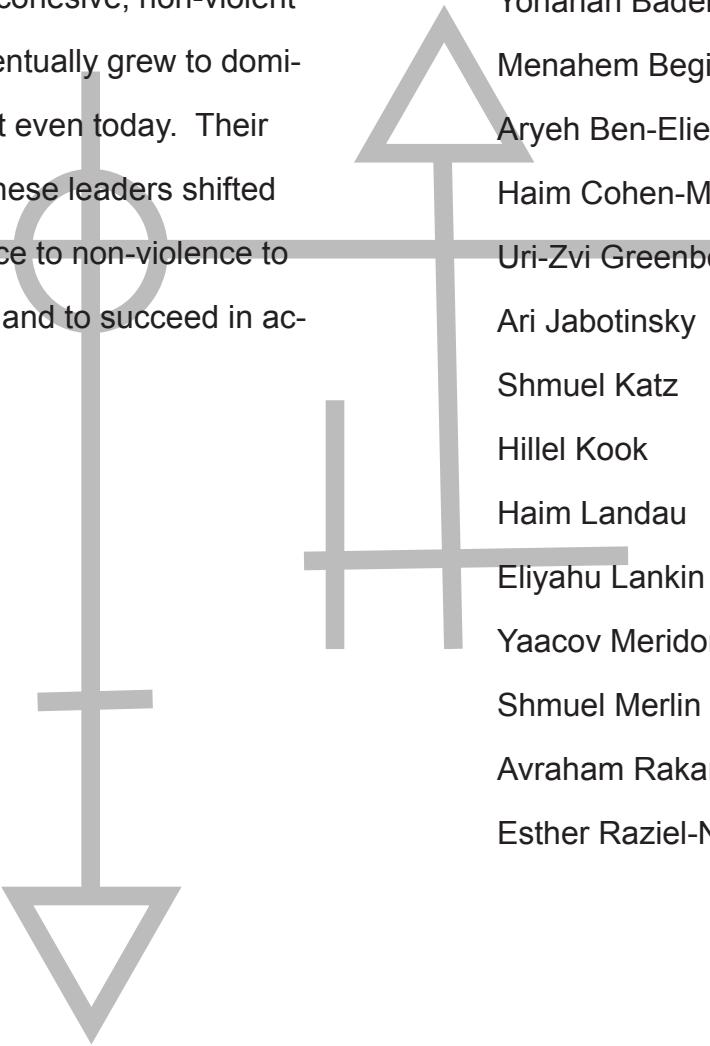
Yaakov Meridor, another terrorist-turned-politician, acted as Irgun’s leader before Begin

did. During World War II, Irgun suffered a severe setback when Ze’ev Jabotinsky died, and just a month later Jabotinsky’s chosen leader for the Irgun, David Raziel, was killed in a bomb attack. Ironically, Raziel was killed carrying out an operation alongside the British against Iraq, a German ally (Bowyer 55). Meridor served the Irgun as a caretaker leader of sorts until he handed the reins over to Begin (Jewish Virtual Library). He stayed active in the Irgun and eventually became a founding member of Herut alongside Begin and Raziel’s sister Esther. He served in the Knesset for several terms, representing Herut, Gahal, and even Likud later in life (knesset.gov.il). Meridor, while never having the status that Begin or Shamir had, represents a more typical Irgun terrorist transformation into a politician. Both Begin and Shamir had more authority within the Irgun and then the political party, but many others such as Meridor made the same transition that Begin and Shamir did. He stands for more of a mid-level leader among the Irgun and then the Herut movement.

Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir effectively created a base of Revisionist Zionism through first terroristic and then strictly democratic means, solidifying themselves as leaders of the community and gaining the respect of many

people. These men are not exceptions: others such as Yaakov Meridor also went from being prominent terrorist leaders to politicians in Israel. Menachem Begin especially transitioned the Irgun terrorist group into a cohesive, non-violent political movement that eventually grew to dominate the Israeli government even today. Their violent acts behind them, these leaders shifted their strategies from violence to non-violence to assert their political beliefs and to succeed in accomplishing their goals.

Figure 1:
Herut Members in 1st Knesset
(knesset.gov.il)

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- Yohanan Bader
 - Menahem Begin
 - Aryeh Ben-Eliezer
 - Haim Cohen-Meguri
 - Uri-Zvi Greenberg
 - Ari Jabotinsky
 - Shmuel Katz
 - Hillel Kook
 - Haim Landau
 - Eliyahu Lankin
 - Yaacov Meridor
 - Shmuel Merlin
 - Avraham Rakanti
 - Esther Raziel-Naor

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