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Yitzhak Rabin and the Price of Peace

Steven Alan Samson

Liberty University, ssamson@liberty.edu

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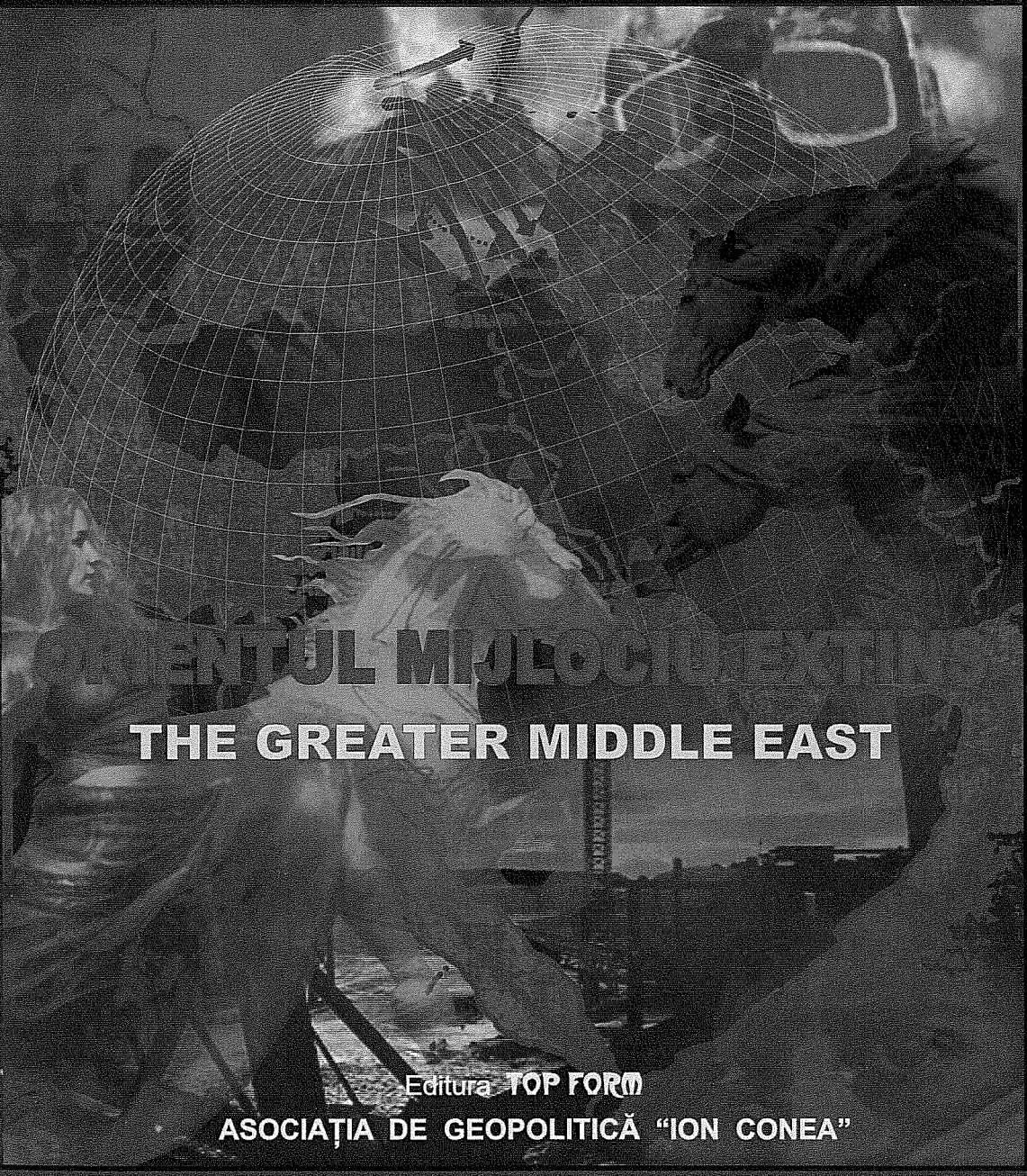
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YITZHAK RABIN AND THE PRICE OF PEACE (in the Middle East)

Ph.D. Steven Alan SAMSON*

The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places; how are
the mighty fallen! (2 Sam. 1:19)

The assassination of Israel's prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, and moments after speaking of his hopes for peace at a large public rally in Tel Aviv late in 1995 gave his death the added poignancy of the image of an old soldier giving up his life in the pursuit of peace. But the assassin's bullets were also aimed at the heart of an entire nation. The same could be said of the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy on November 22, 1963, Rafiq al-Hariri on February 14, 2005, and Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007. The assassination of Ahmed Shah Massoud in Afghanistan preceded the 9/11 in New York and Washington attacks by only two days.

The scope of the horrors that have accompanied twentieth century warfare and ethnic strife is unimaginable. Few occasions are more calculated to cut us to the quick and even fewer expose the vulnerability of the body politic more dramatically than the assassination of a national leader. It reduces the unimaginable to human scale.

Nearly seventy years ago, soon after the fall of Paris to the German army in 1940, the philosopher Simone Weil wrote an essay on the *Iliad*, noting that the greatest calamity the human race can experience is the destruction of a city. Few calamities resonate with greater intensity even centuries later than the fall of Troy, Carthage, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. An assassination is a microcosm of such a calamity. The word "assassin" derives from the name given a secret Muslim fraternity in the Middle Ages called the "hashish-eaters." The young initiates into this cult were transported to "paradise" during a drug-induced stupor, permitted to sample its pleasures, then afterwards "brought down to earth" and instructed to kill the enemies of the sect, whether rival Muslims or Christian crusaders. It is hard to imagine a more fanatical foe than one who knows he will be immediately transported to paradise if he dies in the service of his deity. We need only to be reminded of the Viking berserkers, the Turkish janissaries, or the Japanese *kamikaze* pilots to sense the terror they struck into the hearts of their enemies.

This also describes the uncanny relationship assassination bears to politics. It is not simply the pursuit of political goals by non-political means. Political terror, whether it takes the form of random acts of violence or takes aim at key individuals, is designed to weaken an established political order by intimidating and demoralizing the entire body politic.

The word "terrorism" was introduced into the English language in 1795 around the time of Maximilian Robespierre's Reign of Terror in revolutionary France. But like the old blunderbuss it is an extremely volatile weapon. In the end, Robespierre's head joined those of his victims in the basket at the base of the guillotine.

The rise of systematic, state-sponsored terrorism on an international scale and the cooperation of various terrorist factions in recent decades has made Americans more security-conscious, but its precedents may be found in ancient times, as for instance in the lists of proscriptions that marked the century-long decline and fall of the Roman Republic. These early bills of attainder put a price on the heads of leading citizens who were members of one or another of the political factions that persecuted each other in turn as their political fortunes rose or fell. Beginning with the Gracchus brothers, factional leaders sought to extend their terms of office and some even raised private armies. Populist demagogues would alternate with defenders of the old order.

Among the great names of the day - Marius, Sulla, Catiline, Crassus, Pompey, Caesar, Cicero, and Mark Antony - only Sulla died in bed.

* United States of America.

An abundance of parallels with Rabin's assassination may also be found in contemporary examples. Anwar al-Sadat and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi sought to bring peace to heal the wounds of war in Egypt and India respectively, only to be murdered by fanatical co-religionists. Emperor Haile Selassie, who so dramatically appealed to the League of Nations to take action against Italian aggression in the 1930s, was murdered by Marxist rebels nearly forty years later. Jordan's King Hussein and Fidel Castro both survived numerous attempts on their lives.

Assassination has clearly altered the course of history in unanticipated and sometimes almost unfathomable ways. The assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother three weeks before the assassination of President Kennedy led to a further deepening of American intervention into Vietnam. The murder of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand by a member of the Serbian Black Hand precipitated the First World War and hangs like a shadow over events in that region to this day. The assassination of a British prime minister in 1812 delayed the offering of concessions to the United States that might have prevented the War of 1812. In the 16th century, Spain's Philip II put a price on the head of the hero of Dutch independence, William the Silent, who recovered from one assassin's bullet and sought to make peace before falling three years later to another's. It took an additional six decades before Spain recognized Dutch independence.

The assassination of William the Silent is also notable for its connection with another of history's great calamities: mass murder or genocide on religious or ideological grounds. Entire cities were destroyed by the Spaniards under the Duke of Parma, who also condemned all heretics - that is, Protestants - to death. The Thirty Years War, which destroyed much of Germany, ended in a peace of exhaustion and led to a period of more limited warfare. But more than a century later, the French Revolution became the major proving ground of modern ideological warfare. Many of the familiar techniques of modern journalism, propaganda, and partisan politics, not to mention clothing fashions, may be traced to revolutionary France. Nationalism, socialism, communism, and anarchism owe much of their character to French revolutionary ideologies.

Hannah Arendt's theory of modern totalitarianism includes anti-Semitism as one of the basic ingredients. Pogroms [genocide] against Jews swept through Russia and Poland late in the 19th century. Other groups, like the Armenians, suffered tremendous losses at the hands of Turkish nationalists. The Jewish industrialist, Walther Rathenau, whose economic policies helped keep Germany going during the First World War, was murdered by a German nationalist in an act of anti-Semitic violence that presaged the rise of Hitler's thugs. The word "thug," by the way, comes from the Hindu Thuggees, a band of professional robbers and cutthroats who terrorized British India.

Let us now bring these reflections back into sharper focus so we may see the circumstances of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination in terms of a more specifically Israeli context. The Rabin assassination may be regarded as yet another episode in a long-standing internal quarrel over the nature of Israel itself. The already debate over who was to control the West Bank following any peace settlement risked further polarization due to a little noted historical fact. This assassination was not the first of its kind in modern-day Israel.

During the two years since the Israeli government reached an accord with Palestinian leaders in 1993, the debate in Israel over the future of the occupied West Bank and its Jewish settlements had degenerated into wild accusations and character assassination. Gen. Rabin, the hero of the Six Day War in 1967, was publicly attacked as a murderer and traitor. Some militant rabbis reportedly called for his assassination for appeasing Israel's enemies and giving up a claim to historical Israeli territory. Those who were arrested in connection with the murder lived in the West Bank settlements and had been linked to religious nationalists associated with late Rabbi Meir Kahane, the founder of the militant Jewish Defense League who was murdered five years earlier in New York by an Arab extremist.

Before examining the earlier roots of this dispute in British Mandatory Palestine, let us first reach back to an even earlier period. As much as any other event, it is the Jewish civil war described by Josephus that seems to loom in the background. Bands of Zealots were formed to protest Roman rule and to terrorize Jews who cooperated with the Roman authorities. They wished to drive out all intruders and restore the nation and reclaim the territory of Israel. Armed

with daggers, the Zealots often operated in the open, dispatching their victims with a quick thrust of the blade and before melting away into the milling crowd. This civil war eventually ended in the Diaspora, the dispersion of Jews among the nations, held together chiefly through a rich community life and educational system that preserved their traditions.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the Zionist movement began actively seeking to establish a Jewish national homeland in Palestine, which was then held by the dying Ottoman Empire. After the British seized the area during the First World War, the government's Balfour Declaration opened the doors to a high level of Jewish immigration from central and eastern Europe. In the early 1930s Zionists in Palestine were becoming split over how to respond to growing Arab and German anti-Jewish pogroms.

One faction, known as the Revisionists, was a precursor to the Likud Party. Led by Vladimir Jabotinsky, it sought to organize an international boycott of Nazi Germany.

The other faction, the ancestor of Rabin's Labour Party, made peace overtures to Palestinian Arabs and sent its leader, Chaim Arlosoroff, to Berlin in 1933 to secure the release and transfer of German Jews who wished to emigrate to Palestine. Soon after his return from Germany, Arlosoroff was murdered on a beach in Tel Aviv, allegedly by a Jewish zealot. The accused murderer, Avraham Stavsky, was exonerated and released, but the recriminations continued to intensify.

In 1948, while newly independent Israel was fighting for its life against its Arab neighbors, Stavsky and several other members of Irgun were killed while transporting arms and volunteers to aid the war effort. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who feared that these radicals were plotting to overthrow his government, sought to prevent the ship from landing. It was future Labour Party Prime Minister Rabin who fired upon the ship. And it was future Likud Party Prime Minister Menachem Begin who made a passionate appeal for calm that prevented a civil war.

René Girard, a student of the interaction of religion, culture, and violence, has spent the past half century raising critical questions about the role of what he calls "mimetic desire" and "mimetic rivalry" that lie at the very foundations of civilization. In two of his books, *The Scapegoat* and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Girard strives to account for why the wealthy and the powerful, as well as why sometimes powerful minorities, are so often blamed in the most remarkable ways for all the ills of society. What Girard calls a "mimetic contagious" - in which rancorous passions are whipped up into a frenzy - well describes the state of feverish polarization within a community that so often culminates in explosive acts of violence.

"How are the mighty fallen!" These are the words of David's lamentation over his friend Jonathan and David's enemy, King Saul, Jonathan's father. Late in the twentieth century, two Nobel Peace Prize laureates, Anwar al-Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin, each fell to home-grown assassins while pursuing an elusive peace that remains at best, decades later, a distant hope. One of the great puzzles of the past century has been how to make a place in the Middle East for Israel, which had never found a place in Europe, either. In fact, this age-old question was already posed in the Book of Esther during the time of the Persian Empire: How may Mordecai live, even survive, in the presence of Haman? In so many places that is still the question: How may any people thrive when compassed about by their enemies, internal as well as external?

This question pierces through the fabric of daily life down to the very marrow of the political community. Indeed, addressing such questions requires us to enlarge our field of vision in order to recognize the larger context. A society that wishes to remain free and self-governing must learn to recognize that endemic political violence, including the symbolic violence of character assassination, is an invitation either to tyranny from within or conquest from without. As Edmund Burke put it: "Men of intemperate minds cannot be free; their passions forge their fetters."

As a general rule, we must come to realize that a fixation on the purity of narrow political faiths at the expense of the integrity of the political process coerces people away from politics into the realm of ideology, from civility to fanaticism, so often with disastrous consequences that cause lasting damage. This is the way nations and civilizations perish.