When Terror Took Out the Count
Evaluating Israel’s Response to the Assassination of U.N. Mediator Folke Bernadotte

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The world looked with a woeful eye to Jerusalem in the Fall of 1948. For centuries the holy city was a distinguished haven for spirituality and faith, but on one afternoon it became the site of a nefarious international calamity: the assassination of Count Folke Bernadotte. As the first United Nations Mediator in Palestine, Bernadotte was appointed to bring peace to a region marred by the vehement struggle between Israel and her Arab neighbors. The Count knew that ending the vendetta was a task “of enormous size and might possibly prove completely insoluble.” In the weeks leading to his abrupt death, the revered Swedish diplomat was absorbed in the cause to reconcile leaders from the Jewish State and the Arab League. Preoccupied by the mission to bring regional peace, Bernadotte and his team of U.N. personnel overlooked another inimical conflict within Israel: Jews struggling against Jews over which vision of Zionism would prevail to dictate the future of their national home. It was this civil acrimony that brought Bernadotte to his ultimate fate.

Israel was teeming with radical Zionists long before the Bernadotte tragedy. These Jewish extremists vowed to defend their embryonic homeland from any person or power that threatened its existence. Among their network of ideological adherents were the men and women of Lohamei Herut Yisrael (Lehi)—the “Fighters for the Freedom of Israel”—who deemed Bernadotte an enemy from the outset of his U.N. appointment. To Lehi’s indignation, the Mediator embodied an agent of imperialism who sought to whittle down Israel’s borders and curb its political muscle as a gambit to placate the Arabs. As the Mediator inched closer to actualizing a plan that would partition the Jewish State, Lehi ultranationalists grew increasingly alarmed and resorted to a preemptive, fatal attack to thwart his efforts. In the late hours of September 17th, 1948, Lehi dispatched a four-man team to kill the Count in his travels to the U.N. truce headquarters outside Jerusalem. In a mere instant, a cascade of bullets not only claimed Bernadotte’s life but also left his plans for peace in suspense.

It was a senseless act of violence, precipitated on the volition of only a few hundred radicals who gambled with Israel’s reputation before an international audience. The Count’s death warranted a global outcry “comparable to the murder of Gandhi” and signaled a “new decline of humanity’s moral values.” This lamentation was especially pronounced in the Count’s home country, where the Swedish morning newspaper Stockholms-Tidningen addressed the diplomatic and moral dilemmas facing the months-old State of Israel:

Nobody believes that the Tel-Aviv government shares responsibility for the crime, but the assassination might prove the biggest obstacle to the cause of Zionism even among those who would never sink so low as to join the filthy anti-Semitic agitation... Israel is now open to the charge that it has not achieved the internal stability which is a prerequisite for recognition.

Even though this Swedish recount of the affair dissociates Israel’s Provisional Government from Lehi’s terror regime, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion feared that others would conflate them and, as a dismal consequence, turn against the new Jewish State for good. The Bernadotte affair, compounded with the ensuing Arab war, problematized Israel’s fragile reputation and global position. In the aftermath of the tragic episode outside Jerusalem, a disgruntled international community looked to Israel for answers, and eagerly anticipated how its government

1 Folke Bernadotte, To Jerusalem (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1951), 3.
6 Zuckerman.
would address and adjudicate the crime in Jerusalem.

Lehi’s assassination of U.N. Mediator Count Folke Bernadotte wrought a confluence of social, moral and political dilemmas for Israel. Under these pressures, the Provisional Government responded by staunchly condemning the attack with rhetoric and legislation. While resentful of Lehi and humiliated by the group’s act of terror, Israel also responded in ways that fulfilled its national interests. The affair provided the young Jewish State with an appropriate circumstance to realize certain political goals that were set to protect Israel and ensure its continued existence while fighting both a civil conflict and regional war. After the Count’s murder, the government consolidated military power by eliminating Lehi terrorists who competed with the Israel Defense Force for supremacy. However, Israeli leaders gave Lehi criminals reprieve from harsh punishment in order to allay civil tensions and foster national unity. Finally, Bernadotte’s absence afforded the Provisional Government an opportunity to renege on the Count’s peace plan that limited Israel’s territory, and veer toward a new geopolitical settlement that bolstered its national security.

A Problem in Palestine

A new world order emanated from the turmoil of the Second World War. Political leaders and civilians alike looked to the United Nations as the premier arbiter of peace and conflict resolution, hoping never again to repeat the global calamity that had demolished Europe and left its people in disarray. Despite all that still remained to be fixed in the West, the U.N. directed its diplomatic energy towards the Middle East, where chaos ensued between Jews and Arabs in the British Mandate of Palestine. This intergroup struggle was not unique to the postwar years, but had begun in the late 19th century when scores of Jews took refuge in Palestine after fleeing the anti-Semitism that corrupted their towns and shetlens in Europe. The amalgam of historical memory, rife persecution and pervasive exclusion gave rise to a current of Jewish nationalism that took conceptual form in Zionism—the movement to build, establish and protect a state for the Jewish people in their biblical homeland of Palestine. Finally, the oppressed Jew of Europe could relinquish his enfeebled identity and transform into the empowered and productive Jew of Zion. In their construction of a new sociopolitical order, Jewish settlers cultivated the land and exercised great social, political and economic mobility. After decades of progress, the yishuv—Palestine’s Jewish community before the establishment of Israel—evolved into an autonomous society with the capacity to absorb hundreds of thousands of Jews from abroad by the early 20th century.

The Jews’ euphoric Zionist dream of statehood was met with a harsh reality after 1945. As immigration to the yishuv burgeoned in the years after the Holocaust, local Palestinians and neighboring Arab states believed that “the remnants of Jewish Europe” were overtaking their land. Disputes over territorial and property rights underpinned the outpour of civil violence between Jews and Arabs. Despite Britain’s long-standing military presence and governing mandate in Palestine, they were unable to quell the Arab-Jewish acrimony. “The only neutralizing force” in the coveted and contentious region thus prepared to surrender control and consign Palestine’s fate to the United Nations.

As the new global order tried brokering a settlement that appeased both Jewish and Arab demands, the recalcitrant feud between them grew more acute. Their animus took on a new dimension after May 14th, 1948—the day that Israel’s first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, declared the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel. The pure elation of Jewish civilians coursed the streets of Jerusalem through the ports of Haifa and along the beaches of Tel Aviv, while local Palestinians and the Arab League brooded over a collective feeling of dispossession. Just hours after Israel declared independence, the armies of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt invaded the new Jewish State. The multilateral attack commenced the Arab-Israeli War of 1948, transforming the previous years of spontaneous civil discord into a coordinated, bru-

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tal battle in which an outnumbered Israel seemed doomed to collapse.  

At such a critical moment, the U.N. was pressured to reconcile the Jewish State and the Arab League. As an expeditious response to the ensuing war, the Security Council passed a resolution to deploy a U.N. Mediator to the region. Their chosen emissary was Count Folke Bernadotte, the nephew of King Gustav VI and heir to the Swedish throne. Given his expertise in conflict mediation and history of humanitarianism, Bernadotte was thought to be a felicitous candidate who could fulfill the responsibilities of the first U.N. Mediator in Palestine by abating the Arab-Israeli crisis and bringing a modicum of security and order to the region. His notable vocational background suggested that he was prepared to succeed in the mission. Bernadotte’s diplomatic work began in the 1930s, and he gained international recognition during World War II as chairman of the Swedish Red Cross. In this position, the Count negotiated for the exchange of 10,000 German political prisoners and saved hundreds of Jewish refugees. Alongside his proven ability to arbitrate, Bernadotte impressed the U.N. with his commitment to helping others. It was his conviction “that all activities founded on love and charity have great possibilities for bridging the gap caused by hatred.” The newly appointed Mediator used the composite of his altruism and remarkable pedigree during his short-lived effort to realize “a peaceful adjustment of the future situation in Palestine.” Though qualified and keenly aware of the challenge before him, Bernadotte’s credentials would not be enough to protect him from the dodgy milieu for which he set out to bring peace. His proposal to partition Palestine and cede Israeli territory became the center of harsh polemical debate, and a primary motive for Levi’s terror attack that killed the Count.

**BERNADOTTE’S PLAN FOR PEACE**

Bernadotte began his diplomatic task to resolve the ensuing Arab-Israeli conflict on the Greek island of Rhodes—the Palestine mediation headquarters—where he was greeted by a staff of well-informed aides, senior advisors, and U.N. personnel. After imposing a cease-fire that temporarily allayed the regional warfare, the Swedish statesman tailored the “First Bernadotte Plan.” It proposed the creation of a unified polity that would comprise of two members, one Jewish and the other Arab. Each would have full control over its own domestic affairs and foreign policies. Although this initial pitch for peace included unifying economic and geopolitical strategies to reconcile Israel and the Arab League, it was rejected by both sides. Neither believed that the Count’s goal to institute some form of political union would resolve their already onerous feud and bring lasting peace. Sensitive to their proclivities, Bernadotte drafted another plan that “envisioned the creation of an Arab State, and a Jewish State, and the city of Jerusalem as a corpus separatum under a special international regime administered by the U.N.”

The Count’s colleagues in the U.N. saw the “Second Bernadotte Plan” as a promising resolution to the conflict, while Ben-Gurion chagrined over its mandate that Israel detach from the Negev—Israel’s southern region—and the northern Galilee. Furthermore, it nullified the prospect for total Israeli authority over Jerusalem. The Provisional Government believed that making these concessions would compromise Israel’s national security during the Arab war, and would also be anathema to Israel’s broader political interests. The Plan not only unsettled the Prime Minister, but also those on Israel’s political fringe—in particular the radicals of Lohamei Herut Yisrael. Because of their unfettered ideothological ambition for complete Jewish control over Palestine, Levi derided the Count from the outset of his appointment and frenzied

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17 Ben-Dror, *Ralph Bunche and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 5.
over his perceived cavalier approach to Israel’s welfare and protection. Bernadotte’s Plan thus intensified Lehi’s hatred for foreign interlopers and accelerated its terrorist plot to end the mediation process and the Mediator—indefinitely.25

“Stockholm is Yours, Jerusalem Ours”: Lehi’s Fight for the Freedom of Israel.4

Lehi derived from an offshoot of Zionism that took root in the late 1920s from a small but forceful faction in Eastern Europe. Because of their unrelenting psychosis of fear from persecution in the diaspora, a select group of Jews came to admire the ideological predicate of Europe’s radical right, which they used to form a movement for Jewish self-determination and sovereignty.27 Jewish ultraconservatism would eventually foment in the British Mandate of Palestine, where transplants from Europe censured the administrative authority for hampering the Jews’ endeavor to achieve statehood. With a penchant for protection, these Zionists set out to construct a state—only for and by the Jewish people—built on “monism, militarism, discipline, order and bitter defiance” of any invasive force or figure.28 This robust anti-establishment culture encouraged future radical Zionists to reject all foreign powers perceived to meddle in the affairs of Palestine’s budding Jewish enterprise.29

Avraham (Yair) Stern applied these core tenets of radical Zionism when he founded Lehi—coined the “Stern Gang” by the British—in the dark wartime year of 1940.30 Akin to their extremist counterparts, Lehi Zionists upheld “deceit and murder as a means of driving off danger” posed by foreign enemies.31 Lehi’s preference for using terror earned them a reputation as the foremost “extreme Jewish nationalist group”—a notoriety they relished in public despite the group’s clandestine operation in Jerusalem.32 In He-Hazit, Lehi’s news publication, Sternists noted themselves as “clear-cut terrorists,” four of whom would elect to ambush Bernadotte on the outskirts of the holy city, armed with guns and a skewed moral persuasion to claim the Count’s life on that fateful Friday in September 1948.33

Lehi’s barbaric act of terror was of little surprise to those familiar with the preexisting hatred Stern and his following had for the Mediator. The “Fighters for the Freedom of Israel” had an uncompromising vision for the Jewish State: a biblically ordained land, extending from the Nile to the Euphrates, with Jerusalem at its core.34 The Stern Gang reviled any person who challenged its yearning for Jewish maximalism in Palestine, and the U.N. Mediator, with his mandate that Israel cede so much of its precious and biblically ordained land, was among the group’s greatest foes. Lehi deemed Bernadotte’s plan to reconfigure Israel’s borders as an affront to their unalloyed vision for the Jewish State.35

Because the Count was believed not to have “the interests of the Hebrew people at heart,” he became the focal point of the Stern Gang’s brutal calumny.36 The group recurrently issued statements that articulated its contempt for the Count’s unwelcome interference in Israeli affairs:

It is high time that we should end the Bernadotte affair. It has already cost us dearly and will cost even more if we allow it to go on…[we] cannot prohibit him from speaking to the Arabs…As for us we must not negotiate with an enemy: an agent masked as Mediator. It is up to us to disqualify him for negotiation….37

This scathing reproach shows how Lehi’s unbridled motivation to kill the Count was rooted in Bernadotte’s effort to reconcile Israel and the Arabs. In order to preserve the young Jewish State, the Stern Gang saw it necessary to end the Mediator and his mission. In late July, weeks before

26 Ilan, Bernadotte in Palestine, 212.
27 Gelvin, The Israel-Palestine Conflict, 74.
29 Sprinzak, 27.
32 Perliger, 105.
34 Todd Hoffman, “Count (Folke) Bernadotte’s Folly,” Queen’s Quarterly 103 no. 4 (1996): 730.
36 Heller, The Stern Gang, 239.
37 Al Hamishmar, 15 August 1948, quoted in Ilan, Bernadotte in Palestine, 200.
the attack, a few radicals disclosed Lehi’s intention “to kill Bernadotte and any other uniformed United Nations observers who come to Jerusalem.”38 To the Mediator’s misfortune, the streets of Jerusalem in September 1948 flood-
ed with incensed Lehi rebels who were eager to stave off any force or figure that sought to delimit Israel—the Jews’ long-awaited and newly independent national home.
While the strategy to murder the Count developed over months, it was executed in a fleeting moment. Dressed in what appeared to be Israeli army uniforms, the assassins awaited their target to pass through Jerusalem’s Katamon neighborhood in his U.N. motorcade. Upon its arrival, Yehoshua Zettler, Natan Yalin-Mor and Stanley Goldfoot distracted the first two cars while Yehoshua Cohen approached the Count’s Chrysler, only to unleash a torrent of bullets that resonated throughout the periphery of the holy city.39 The attack left Bernadotte, along with U.N. observer Colonel André Sérot, dead and Israel’s future in question.40 The young country’s nascent global position mandated a robust response to the terror in Jerusalem—and this it did. Without hesitation, Ben-Gurion denounced Lehi’s “gang of rogues, cowards and low-schemers” for killing the Count.41 Such condemnation flowed from a genuine horror of and defense against Lehi’s malign act of terror.

**AN “ACT OF TREACHERY”: CONDEMNING LEHI’S ASSASSINATION OF BERNADOTTE**

Ben-Gurion was perturbed by the news of Bernadotte’s murder. In the late afternoon of September 17th, he sat in his Tel-Aviv home, vexed by the Stern Gang’s recklessness and its corrosive effect on the young Jewish State. He contemplated the moral and political consequences of Ben-Gurion’s lamentation reverberated in the plenary room and throughout the world. Soon after the address, Israeli leaders continued to promulgate a series of carefully phrased public statements that derided the violent episode as an “insane attempt by gunmen to wreck Israel’s relations with the United Nations” and other foreign allies.45 Israel’s Foreign Minister, Moshe Shertok, continued the anti-extremist campaign by renouncing Lehi as a cohort of “criminal outlaws who are executed by the entire Jewish community.”46

To be sure, Ben-Gurion admitted that there was an indelible tension between Israel’s political establishment and Bernadotte.47 Both were under significant pressure

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39 “Count Bernadotte’s Killers Revealed,” 146.
40 André Sérot was a Jewish French military officer who was serving with U.N. forces in Israel just before his death in 1948. Sérot’s wife, Berthe Grünfelder, was among the few Jewish refugees who Bernadotte rescued from a Nazi concentration camp in 1945. As a show of gratitude to the Count, Sérot decided to ride with the Mediator in his U.N. Chrysler that was ultimately assailed by Yehoshua Cohen on September 17th. Sérot’s murder points to an ironic truth of the Bernadotte tragedy: that a group of Jewish radicals readily killed a fellow Jew for the sake of preserving and protecting the Jewish State. Further, Sérot’s death could explain why the Israeli government so decisively condemned Lehi’s act of terror and moved to eradicate the group from Jerusalem. Stanger, “A Haunting Legacy,” 262.
43 Marton, *A Death in Jerusalem*, 231.
47 Marton, *A Death in Jerusalem*, 231.
to respond to the demands of their disparate audiences, which explains why Israeli leaders were reluctant to fully endorse the policies drafted by Bernadotte. In the wake of the interminable Arab war, the Provisional Government was in no position to comply with the Mediator's plan that significantly reshaped Israel's borders. The Count's call to limit critical buffer territory between the invading Arab states provoked an endemic uproar, not only from Jews within Israel but also from those throughout the diaspora with a vested interest in the Jewish State. Despite the constellation of pressures at home and abroad, Ben-Gurion respected the Count for his proven skill in conflict mediation, along with his good judgment and procedure. Even though the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister challenged Bernadotte on his handling of the Israeli-Arab acrimony, they "always wound up as friends." Ben-Gurion noted that the government's history of disagreement with Bernadotte never diminished "the deep respect we felt for his personality and his mission." The deference between Israel's political establishment and the Mediator helps to explain why the Provisional Government responded to his death by vociferously rebuking the Stern Gang.

Israel's condemnation of Lehi's "act of treachery" was not only rhetorical. The government took parliamentary measures to end the group and to deter future incidents of terror like the one that claimed Bernadotte. Just six days after the assassination, the government passed the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (PTO). The multiparty emergency resolution acknowledged the danger of organized terror and outlined Israel's new legal protocol for responding to domestic terrorism, specifically for apprehending terrorists. Article II specified that any Israeli found guilty of "performing a function in the management or instruction of a terrorist organization" would be convicted of an offence and subject to imprisonment. On September 23rd, Israel's Minister of Justice brought an extension of the Ordinance to the legislature where it was formally made into law. Instituting a legal procedure to delineate and adjudicate terrorism was a decisive way that the Israeli government condemned Lehi's assault on the Mediator and terror more broadly.

The Ordinance not only marked a significant legal effort to counteract and denounce terror, but also gave the Provisional Government jurisdiction to carry out a chief national priority: consolidating the Israeli Defense Force by disbanding Lehi from its underground network in Jerusalem. This desire to centralize military power, and to fulfill other national interests, reveals the duality of Israel's reaction to the Bernadotte affair. Condemning Lehi was only part of the Provisional Government's response to the assassination. After September 17th, 1948, the Israelis were given an opportune moment to realize certain political goals that were central to the continuity and protection of the Jewish State—besieged by forces both within and around its borders.

**Consolidating Military Power: Terminating Lehi to Strengthen the Israel Defense Forces**

Just hours following the assassination, the government called for the liquidation of all Lehi's "hidden apostles of terror" from Jerusalem. This course of action could be indicative of how the government condemned Lehi for the assassination. However, its implementation was more so a political strategy to avoid an existential crisis rather than a demonstration of good moral character. Israel's dual response to the tragedy is redolent of how its leaders were mitigating a larger political predicament that, if handled poorly, could have grave repercussions for the Jewish State. The Provisional Government used Bernadotte's murder as a pretext to centralize military power in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) by eliminating Lehi. The young Jewish State was under no circumstance to negate the political advantages attached to the tragedy; Israel not only faced the ordinary struggles of a new nation, but also the travails of a nation at war. A cohort of Arab nations attacked "from the north and south, shelled from the east

48 Marton, 231-232.
49 Gene Currihan, "Hebrew Word for Peace was First that Bernadotte Learned in Israel," New York Times 18 September 1948.
51 Telegram from Israeli Foreign Minister Sharett to Countess Bernadotte, Israel State Archives (Bernadotte), 17 September 1948, File 9, quoted in Stanger, "A Haunting Legacy," 263.
53 Ilan, Bernadotte in Palestine, 228.
and bombed and machine-gunned from the air” while the Provisional Government worked endlessly to develop and sustain its institutional blueprint. As a jingoist paramilitary force, Lehi amplified these pressures by competing with the establishment for military supremacy. Because Israel had a responsibility to protect its people, stabilize its regime, and secure its borders, the Provisional Government used Bernadotte’s murder for their political gain, first by arresting 266 Lehi members to solidify military power in the IDF.34

Lehi threatened Israel’s military unity years before the country was formally established. After proclaiming independence in May 1948, Israel began to formalize its state army by disbanding Lehi and all other militant Zionist groups in order to effectively combat the Arabs.35 The Provisional Government extended amnesty for those Lehi dissidents who joined the IDF. However, a small yet significant number of Lehi operatives rejected the offer and continued to organize by retaining their arms, officers, and underground networks.36 With their staunch “independence of spirit,” Lehi denigrated the authority of Israel’s military, specifically by purporting Ben-Gurion as an inept leader who had no ability to defeat the Arabs.37 They dubbed him “Ben-Mugion”—a jargon for “Son of Fear”—which had significant repercussions in how the world perceived Israel’s military capacity.38 This rhetorical taunt, along with others, undermined Israel’s fight against the Arab Liberation Army, which mandated a unified military force able to resist intimidation from any adversary—foreign or domestic. These incidents explain Ben-Gurion’s ambition to dissolve the Stern Gang in the Fall of 1948. The Count’s murder provided Israeli leaders with a rationale to finally act on the position that there was “no need for a Hebrew underground,” and order Lehi’s total liquidation from Jerusalem.39

“The police hunt for terrorists” was staunch and swift, continuing well into November of 1948.40 Ben-Gurion solicited help from the general public, offering a reward of $20,000 for civilians who gave information about Lehi’s secret compounds or turned in criminals to the police.41 Israeli officials disbanded scores of Lehi dissidents, and captured members from every level of the group’s organizational strata. Days after civil police swept Jerusalem, they accomplished a major “national victory” by arresting the notorious Lehi leader, Nathan Friedman Yellin.42 The New York Times reported that the government’s seizure and arrest of Lehi radicals was not difficult; most emerged boldly from their clandestine niches with full knowledge of their collective fate in the Jaffa jail.43

Even though most submitted to Israeli police, Lehi radicals were especially “defiant, abusive, and imbued with a strong gang spirit” in the prison compound. When a British reporter sought access to the Jaffa holding center, he was denied entry by Israeli military guards who struggled to control the prisoners and were “obviously afraid of them.”44 This rancor behind bars and deliberate torment of the IDF not only reveals the tension between Lehi and the state military, but also reinforces why the Provisional Government wanted to disband the Stern Gang. Although these two groups shared the same patriotic goal of protecting Israel, their civil strife had an antithetical effect. Ben-Gurion, compelled to take action in the already hos-

34 “Arabs Invade Israel and Shell Defenders,” Los Angeles Times, 1948 May 16.
35 Ilan, Bernadotte in Palestine, 228.
36 Eliminating Lehi was a longstanding political goal of the Israeli government, especially after the Altalena affair. At the outset of the Arab-Israeli War, the IDF seized a shipment of military equipment ordered by radical extremists in the Irgun—another dissident group—which incurred a brutal confrontation and multiple deaths. This civil feud not only risked Israel’s national unity but diverted the IDF’s energy and utility in its existential fight against the Arab Liberation Army. Altalena, along with later episodes that exaggerated the IDF, signifies an important event in Israel’s early history that made dissolving Lehi and their counterparts a political priority; the Count’s death created a reason for the Israeli government to finally resolve the Stern Gang’s competition with the IDF. Ehud Sprinzak, Brother Against Brother: Violence and Extremism in Israeli Politics from Altalena to the Rabin Assassination (New York: Free Press, 1999) 45-50.
38 Bell, Terror Out of Zion, 318.
40 Menachem Begin radio broadcast, 15 May 1948, quoted in Bell, Terror out of Zion, 319.
41 Davidson, “More Education, Less Terrorism—“Observer.”
44 Meltzer, “Israelis are Attempting to Root out Terrorists.”
45 “Stern Gang Leader Caught: Arrest in Haifa,” pg. 4.
tile milieu with the Arab states and Palestinian locals, resolved the Lehi-IDF rivalry not only by liquidating the group but also by undercutting them before the legislature.

The Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance, passed days after the assassination, augmented the IDF’s authority by directly stating its role in thwarting terrorism:

The Chief of the General Staff of the Defense Army of Israel, the Inspector-General of the Israel Police, a military governor or a military commander of an area, may decide in writing to close any place serving a terrorist organization or its members, regularly or on a particular occasion, as a place of meeting propaganda or storage; as soon as a decision as aforesaid has been given, it may be carried out by any army officer or police inspector.67

By including the military’s procedure for responding to terror in the PTO, the Provisional Government legitimized IDF authority and simultaneously subverted Lehi under the law. This legal measure was part of Israeli leaders’ politically tinged response to Bernadotte’s death and furthered their effort to bolster the military while diminishing Lehi.

Ben-Gurion’s campaign to consolidate power in the IDF was a marked success that did “expunge the stain of terrorism” from the holy city.68 By the year’s end, virtually every Lehi (and non-Lehi) practitioner of Zionist terror had been either arrested, or surrendered their arms to join the Israel Defense Forces. Sylvia Neulander, an American representative of Palestine’s Jewish Agency, verified at a December fundraiser that the Stern Gang was “nearing collapse” at the hands of Israeli police.69 Bernadotte’s murder enabled this political feat, because it pushed the eradication of Lehi and the consolidation of military power to the fore of Israel’s litany of national priorities. Even though Israeli leaders remained contrite over the international tragedy, they still set out to not only strengthen the military but also to unify a deeply divided Jewish civil society. To do so, they continued to exploit the political moment afforded to them after September 17th.

**Generating Unity: Giving the Stern Gang Reprieve from Harsh Punishment**

After the Bernadotte assassination, Israeli leaders not only consolidated power in the military but also endeavored to unify their nation, still benighted by the rift between Lehi and Israel’s political establishment. Menaced by the invading Arab Liberation Army, the Provisional Government resolved that ending its recalcitrant feud with Lehi was necessary to defeat the Arabs. After their near total liquidation from Jerusalem, the Stern Gang was well aware of its inevitable collapse. However, those who evaded capture refused to surrender without first prodding the political elite. Using Israel’s dire geopolitical situation and bifurcated social order to its advantage, the Stern Gang mandated that Israeli leaders release all Lehi prisoners and give any Lehi members reprieve from harsh punishment in the legal proceedings after Bernadotte’s murder. In exchange, Lehi would agree to concede indefinitely and provide the young state with a chance to end the fratricidal conflict that was pitting Jews against one another. The ultimatum gave cause for the Provisional Government’s to sparingly apprehend Lehi dissidents for the assassination, which shows how—for the sake of civil unity—Israel made use of the opportune political circumstance afforded to them after Bernadotte’s murder.

Ben-Gurion capitulated to Lehi’s biting requests, but only after Sternists barnstormed the nation with vicious threats against the Provisional Government. Although most of their members were in prison, hiding, or totally withdrawn, Lehi had enough leverage to torment the government months after killing the Mediator. Lehi threatened a “last warning” to Ben-Gurion and the government if they chose to negate its outstanding requests in exchange for the group’s willful self-destruction.70 Posters plastered throughout Tel-Aviv touted their ultimatum, declaring that “we shall not tolerate court cases against us, nor shall we tolerate or suffer prisoners.”71 Furthermore, Lehi conveyed intentions to attack Israeli cabinet members as a reminder of the group’s persistent quest and ability to divide the nation.72 As their campaign became more disruptive, Ben-Gurion wrote that the government “must compromise with Lehi” in order to mend the exacerbating

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67 Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance No. 33 of 5708-1948, Article 6.
68 “Palestine Tragedy.”
71 “Stern Band Threatens.”
gulf between political moderates and radical extremists.73

Particular encounters reveal how the Provisional Government reconciled with their domestic foes by meeting the Stern Gang’s terms for dissolution. A correspondence between Yehoshua Zetler, Lehi’s zealous military commander, and Yitzhak Gruenbaum, Israel’s Minister of the Interior, unveils the government’s plan to pardon the jailed Sternists to achieve peace with Lehi. After Zetler demanded unmitigated freedom for the detainees in Jaffa, the Minister assured him of their quick release, and that if they were to receive any legal punishment, it would be limited to a short sentence.74 Aware of the national reward, Ben-Gurion issued a sweeping amnesty under which the entire lot of Lehi criminals were discharged from prison. The Prime Minister pronounced that their liberation marked a “clean slate” in the relationship between Israel’s political fringe and its governing authority.75

To further the cause for civil unity, the Provisional Government imposed a weak punishment on Lehi members who were put on trial for Bernadotte’s murder. In an exchange between Shaul Avigur, Israel’s Deputy Defense Minister, and Yitzhak Shamir76, among Lehi’s triumvirate of leaders and the eventual Prime Minister of Israel, they parleyed over the government’s intention to meagerly prosecute the accused. When Avigur asked Shamir for the names of Bernadotte’s killers, he promised that doing so was only a formality and that “nothing would happen to them” before an Israeli court of law.77 The Deputy Minister’s indication that those culpable in Shamir’s terror regime would be exempt from strenuous penalty not only shows the government’s propensity to square with Lehi; it also foreshadowed the actual result of the trial against Nathan Yallin-Mor, one of Bernadotte’s assassins, and Mattiyahu Shmuelevitch, a Lehi operative.

The outcome of their prosecution reveals how Ben-Gurion chose to indecorously adjudicate the attack on Bernadotte—and Lehi’s terror network more generally—for the political profit of achieving domestic unity. After September 1948, Yallin-Mor and Shmuelevitch were the only members of Lehi indicted by Israel’s Special Military Court. With few corroborating testimonies and only futile evidence, the Court struggled to verify any direct connection the accused had to Bernadotte’s murder; only years later it was confirmed that Yallin-Mor was among the four men who killed the Count.78 Despite the juridical shortcoming, the two men were found guilty of “terrorist activities” according to statutes of the novel Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance, and ordered to serve eight and five-year prison terms respectively. In a profound move to finally end the fratricidal feud with Lehi and render “peace with the underground,” the Prime Minister seized the political moment of the trial to acquit the two criminals on February 24th, 1949—only two weeks after their sentencing.79

Ben-Gurion justified that exonerating Yallin-Mor and Shmuelevitch, along with every other Lehi prisoner, encouraged “the new nation to begin to heal its self-inflicted wounds” that came from Bernadotte’s death.80 A close aide to the Prime Minister affirmed that the government’s chief goal was “to educate Lehi, rather than punish them” for their reign of terror and schismatic effect on Israel’s social order. Giving Sternists a short and trivial penalty for the assassination helped to create a more unified Jewish State. Ultimately, Lehi fulfilled their end of the bargain by abandoning what remained of its terror apparatus. Those in hiding gradually emerged from the underground or returned from abroad, hoping to assimilate into Israeli public life as ordinary civilians with a reticent but proud history as “Fighters for the Freedom of Israel.” However stalwart Lehi’s vision for Israel, it was not potent enough to defy the Prime Minister’s ambition to realize a unified nation of Jewish civilians. The aftermath of Bernadotte’s

73 Palestine Post, 19 September 1948, quoted in Ilan, Bernadotte in Palestine, 231.
74 Kurzman, Genesis 1948, 567.
75 Marton, A Death in Jerusalem, 235.
76 Yitzhak Shamir was among Lehi’s upper echelon of leaders and was eventually elected the 7th Prime Minister of Israel. He joined the Knesset, Israel’s legislature, in the late 1960s—nearly two decades after the Bernadotte affair. Despite his transparency for being involved in the pre-state Zionist terror group, Shamir had potent influence and longstanding participation in Israel’s political mainstream. This shows how the Israeli government, in the aftermath of Bernadotte’s murder, reduced Lehi to a distant memory in order to promote national unity. Shamir’s inclusion in the political establishment reveals how the government used the circumstance after Bernadotte’s affair to foster and maintain unity. Ilan, Bernadotte in Palestine, 196.
77 Conversation between Shaul Avigur and Yitzhak Shamir, quoted in Marton, A Death in Jerusalem, 239.
79 Marton, A Death in Jerusalem, 239.
80 Interview with Israel Eldad, 1994, quoted in Marton, A Death in Jerusalem, 239.
murder provided the government with an opportunity to liaise with Lehi, placate the group’s threat, and generate a morsel of civil accord. Fulfilling this acute political interest augmented Israel’s fight to defend its borders when the Provisional Government decided to forgo the late Mediator’s peace policy.

**Bolstering National Security: Forgoing Bernadotte’s Plan for Peace**

Count Bernadotte’s mission to end the Arab-Israeli War died with him on September 17th. Despite U.N. efforts to enact the Second Bernadotte Plan following the burial of its chief architect and lobbyist, Israeli leaders expressed the same reservations they held when it was first proposed. They snubbed the idea of forfeiting the Negev in the south, the Galilee in the north, and losing the prospect of Israeli control over Jerusalem. Given Israel’s sparse territorial landscape, these regions were a vital buffer between the Jewish State and its attacking Arab neighbors. In the purview of the Provisional Government, keeping them was imperative to Israel’s defense and national security. As the adversity’s vowed “to fight to the last bullet,” the political establishment decisively reneged on Bernadotte’s peace policy after he died in order to secure their borders. Before Lehi assassinated the Mediator, Israel had neither formally accepted nor rejected his suggested list of Israeli territorial concessions. To Ben-Gurion’s relief, the Mediator’s absence provided the Provisional Government with a diplomatic vacuum to forgo his Plan without subjecting themselves to total fallout with the U.N. This calculated decision reveals another way in which the government’s response to the murder was tainted by political interest.

In the “psychological moment” that followed the assassination, the U.N. pushed for Israel and the Arabs to agree upon Bernadotte’s territorial resolution. Dr. Ralph Bunche, Bernadotte’s “invaluable copartner” and ultimate successor as Acting Mediator, precipitated renewed peace talks on the Second Bernadotte Plan. Given the raging war, the Provisional Government opposed its re-entry into negotiations, but did so faintly; they were cognizant that a harsh, incipient rejection of the Plan would be ill-received and exacerbate Israel’s already impaired reputation within the United Nations. It was not until after the Arabs’ rebuffed the Plan when Israel jettisoned its moderate position, and deviated towards another that was more akin to its political interests. With the charismatic and dogged Bernadotte no longer in Rhodes or Jerusalem to endorse its territorial design and dictate events, the Israelis enacted a strategic military course of action to boost their geopolitical position in the hostile region.

The Provisional Government first moved to secure the Negev, a piece of land that provided an indispensable barrier between Israeli-Jewish communities and the Egyptian border. Bunche argued that detaching the Negev from Israel was “the core of the Bernadotte Plan” and therefore the Israelis had no choice but to forfeit the region. His unwavering stance provoked Israel to respond militarily. On October 6th, 1948, Ben-Gurion deployed the IDF to the Negev to stake a geopolitical claim along the Egyptian front. The months-long operation resulted in a decisive Israeli victory, and as the fighting endured, the Prime Minister stridently argued that “any of that land” now under the IDF authority should belong to Israel. In a matter of months, Israel’s military offensive in the south, along with another operation to conquer the Galilee in the north, had successfully eclipsed Bernadotte’s Plan. The government’s manipulation of borders, and larger contravention of Bernadotte’s original policy, impelled Bunche and the U.N. to craft a new territorial design that bolstered rather than burdened Israel’s national security. To be sure, myriad political pressures drove the U.N.’s eventual desertion of the Plan and approval of Israel’s preferred geopolitical terms. However, the IDF’s concerted military efforts—made possible by the Provisional Government exploiting the Count’s absence—contributed greatly to enhancing Israel’s national security during its existential fight against the Arab Liberation Army.

By the time the U.N. General Assembly convened in December of 1948, Israel had successfully recalibrated the global order’s position on borders insomuch that the approved policy was a meager semblance of Bernadotte’s Plan. The Armistice Agreements—a set of treaties that

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81 Ben-Dror, *Ralph Bunche and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 114.
82 Ben-Dror, 114.
85 Correspondence between Reuven Shiloah and Moshe Sharett, 2 December 1948, *Documents on the Foreign Policy of Israel*, vol. 2, 254-255, quoted in Ben-Dror, 132.
86 Ben-Dror, 124.
formally resolved Israel’s territorial disputes with Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan to end the Arab-Israeli War—reify the extent to which the Jewish State welshed on the Count’s Plan in order to ascertain its desired national landscape.” In the final days of the General Assembly meeting, Ben-Gurion proclaimed that Israel “entered the U.N. with the Bernadotte Plan—we left without Bernadotte and with the Negev and the Galilee in our hands. Our military activities in the Negev shine in everyone’s eyes.” Even though many believed the Count’s murder would adopt symbolic meaning as his “final act of mediation” that encouraged reconciliation between Israeli and Arab leaders, Israel’s political establishment thought otherwise.” After Lehi’s episode of terror in Jerusalem, the political establishment redirected its diplomatic focus to securing Israel’s national security, which was only part of a catalog of political ambitions it sought to fulfill after the assassination.

Conclusion

Jerusalem in the Fall of 1948 was certainly a complex milieu. It was a place where Jews congregated to revel in their national redemption, and one from which the Palestinians departed in despair. It remained an epicenter of good faith and moral principle, but soon became a “scene of carnage” that tremored the core of humanity when terror took out Sweden’s beloved Folke Bernadotte. While the Israeli government condemned Lehi for killing the Count, its response was also tinged with political motivation. The affair provided a pretext for the Provisional Government to actualize goals that were imperative to Israel’s continued existence while fighting both a fratricidal feud and a regional war. Given its already hostile relationship with the Stern Gang, the government was relieved to use Bernadotte’s death as a motive to liquidate Lehi and consolidate power in the IDF. Ben-Gurion also saw a need to unify the nation while Lehi dissidents who managed to escape arrest wreaked havoc on Israeli civil society. By offering amnesty to arrested Lehi members, the Prime Minister answered the groups’ ultimatum for peace with reprieve from harsh punishment. Finally, in order to bolster its national security while fighting the Arabs, the government reneged on the Second Bernadotte Plan and initiated a military course of action that successfully established Israel’s desired borders.

Fulfilling these national interests drastically shaped how Israel responded to Lehi’s act of terror. Despite the Provisional Government’s pursuit of political ambitions in the midst of Bernadotte’s death, it would be rash to construe Israel’s leadership as either opportunistic or morally bankrupt without giving full consideration to the unpropitious challenges put before them in 1948. Israel was fighting for its life, not only against a league of Arab nations that vowed to end the Jewish State, but also against a baleful lot of Jewish radicals who regarded the political establishment a loathed enemy. Further, Israel was trying to locate its institutional and diplomatic place as a new nation in the post-war international order. This synergy of pressures, even more pronounced as the Jewish people sought to recoup from the Shoah, forced Ben-Gurion to make critical and highly controversial decisions for the sake of Israel’s continuity. Perhaps the confluence of social, moral and political dilemmas confronted by the Prime Minister led him to tacitly approve of Bernadotte’s assassination. Regardless, the government was in no position to ignore the political opportunities that it provided. The extent to which Israel used Bernadotte’s murder for profit may have evaded norms of ethical diplomacy. However, the government’s response to the Bernadotte tragedy helped the Jewish State endure the exigent circumstances that followed the terror of September 17.

Like all forms of terror, Lehi’s assassination was a strategic means to carry out a political end: to stave off Bernadotte from limiting the sovereignty and size of the Jewish State. The Stern Gang not only meant to end the “one-man-institution” of imperialism but also to signal an ineffaceable warning to all foreign meddlers in Israeli affairs.” Despite this latter objective, Lehi’s terror attack was met by an unintended consequence that came from an Israeli-Swedish altercation after the assassination. In Stockholm, King Gustav VI agonized over his heir’s death and faulted Israel for not persisting to find those who carried

87 Even though Iraq was among the five Arab states that participated in the Arab-Israeli War, they did not sign an armistice agreement with Israel like Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. Instead, Iraq’s terms for withdrawal were detailed in the Israel-Jordan armistice agreement. Shapira, Israel: A History, 171. For [subject of Note 88], see Gelvin, The Israel-Palestine Conflict, 134-135.
88 David Ben-Gurion diary entry, 9 December 1948, quoted in Marton, A Death in Jerusalem, 243.
90 “Jerusalem.”
91 “Count Bernadotte’s Killers Revealed.” 146.
out the “deliberate and planned assassination.”92 Vexed by Israel’s “obvious and serious shortcomings” in handling the murder, the Swedes undertook their own project to determine the truth of what happened on September 17th. In 1950, they issued a scathing report on Israel’s investigative procedure: witnesses had not been questioned, the crime scene had not been sealed off, and clues had been neglected.93 Their findings, compounded with Sweden’s refusal to recognize Israel, put the King in an uncomfortable position; following the recent devastation of the Holocaust, it was deplorable for any European nation to reprimand or shun the new Jewish State. Despite the King’s valid grievance, the backlash for criticizing Israel proved too great to hold firm to Sweden’s call for justice. Ultimately, Sweden agreed to forgive Israel and forget the whole affair on the condition that the Provisional Government admit to its oversights.94 Ben-Gurion followed suit, and after producing an acceptable apology there was “no more talk or research on the affair.”95 Any records or documentation of the murder were filed away as classified materials in the Swedish National Archive until 2000.96 Despite their accessibility today, Bernadotte remains a mostly forgotten character, with Lehi’s warning against foreign intervention also lost in the Israeli-Swedish cover-up.

The faded memory of Bernadotte underlines a significant point on the broader issue of terror: while terror can be extremely powerful it can also be powerfully curbed. Lehi’s intention for killing the Count was manifold; they sought to instill fear, provoke chaos, and isolate Israel. The Stern Gang may have found short-term success, but its objectives were ultimately foiled by heads of state who refused to let Lehi’s terrorist regime reign supreme. Israel’s response to the assassination, along with the subsequent Israeli-Swedish exchange, reveal how terrorism can be overpowered when leaders take action to neutralize its intended purpose; the Prime Minister barred the assassination from damaging Israeli society and diplomacy while the King chose to bury the affair in order to maintain international accord. Their actions reinforce the notion that the effect of terror is only as great as people in power permit it to be.

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92 Statement by General Aage Lundsrom, Chief of Staff, United Nations Truce Supervision and Personal Representative of the Mediator, Jerusalem 17 September 1948 quoted in Bernadotte, To Jerusalem, 266.
95 Ilan, Bernadotte in Palestine, 238.