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Israeli Terrorists, Born in the U.S.A.

By SARA YAEL HIRSCHHORN

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Jerusalem — ON July 31, in the West Bank village of Duma, 18-month-old Ali Dawabsheh was burned alive in a fire. All available evidence suggests that the blaze was a deliberate act of settler

terrorism. More disturbingly, several of the alleged instigators, currently being detained indefinitely, are not native-born Israelis — they have American roots.

But there has been little outcry in their communities. Settler rabbis and the leaders of American immigrant communities in the West Bank have either played down their crime or offered muted criticism.

It's worth recalling the response of the former prime minister Yitzhak Rabin to another heinous attack two decades ago, when an American-born doctor, Baruch Goldstein, gunned down dozens of Palestinians while they prayed in Hebron.

“He grew in a swamp whose murderous sources are found here, and across the sea; they are foreign to Judaism, they are not ours,” thundered Mr. Rabin before the Knesset in February 1994. “You are a foreign implant. You are an errant weed. Sensible Judaism spits you out.”

The shocking 1994 massacre was, at the time, the bloodiest outbreak of settler terrorism Israelis and Palestinians had ever seen. Less than two years later, Mr. Rabin himself would be dead, felled by an ultranationalist assassin's bullet.

Suddenly, a group of American Jewish immigrants that had existed on the fringes of society became a national pariah. A former president of Israel, Chaim Herzog, labeled the United States “a breeding ground” for Jewish terror; the daily newspaper Maariv castigated American Jews who “send their lunatic children to Israel.” One Israeli journalist even demanded “operative steps against the Goldsteins of tomorrow” by banning the immigration of militant American Jews.

But tomorrow has arrived.

After years of impunity for settlers who commit violent crimes, Israel's internal security agency, the Shin Bet, has now supposedly cracked down by rounding up a grand total of four youths believed to be connected to recent acts of settler terrorism — three of whom trace their origins to the United States.

The agency's “most wanted” Jewish extremist is 24-year-old Meir Ettinger, who has an august pedigree in racist and violent circles. He is a grandson of Meir Kahane, a radical American rabbi who in 1971 immigrated to Israel, established the Kach party and served as its lone Knesset member until it was banned in 1988. (Kahane was assassinated in New York in 1990, but his career laid the groundwork for ultranationalist and antidemocratic parties in Israel.)

Another is Mordechai Meyer, 18, from the settlement of Maale Adumim outside Jerusalem. He is the son of American immigrants who claimed he simply wanted to study the Torah and have an adventure in the West Bank. Another American settler, Ephraim Khantsis, was detained for threatening Shin Bet agents in court. The fourth, Eviatar Slonim, is the child of Australian Jews.

Mr. Ettinger, Mr. Meyer and Mr. Khantsis join a long list of settler extremists with American roots. A Brooklyn-born settler, Era Rapaport, played a prominent role in the car-bombing of the mayor of Nablus in 1980. In 1982, a Baltimore transplant, Alan Goodman, opened fire at the

Dome of the Rock, killing two Palestinians and wounding 11. That same year, a former Brooklynite, Yoel Lerner, was jailed for leading a movement to overthrow the Israeli government and blow up the Temple Mount.

These days, rabbis like the St. Louis-born Yitzhak Ginsburg, who heads a yeshiva in the radical settlement of Yizhar, are inculcating the next generation.

Today, according to American government sources and several other studies, an estimated 12 to 15 percent of settlers (approximately 60,000 people) hail from the United States. This disproportionately large American contingent — relative to the total number of American-Israelis — has joined secular, religious and ultra-Orthodox Israelis, and other more recent immigrants. Few of them live in extremist hilltop outposts; a majority live in suburbanized settlements near Jerusalem, but they are considered among the most highly ideological.

RATHER than quoting the Bible or rhapsodizing about a messianic vision, they tend to describe their activities in the language of American values and idealism — as an opportunity to defend human rights and live in the “whole land of Israel” — often over a cup of Starbucks coffee in their boxy aluminum prefab houses or in the mansions of settlement suburbia. To them, living in the West Bank is pioneering on the new frontier; it’s merely an inconvenience that they’re often staking their claims on private Palestinian land. And for a fanatical fringe among them, this Wild West analogy has extended to indiscriminate violence.

Despite living in self-selecting communities that sometimes include violent activists, many law-abiding American settlers continue to see themselves as good liberals (a large percentage were Democratic voters involved in the civil rights movement and anti-Vietnam War struggle before moving to Israel).

As far back as the 1990s, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the founder and spiritual leader of the settlement of Efrat, seized upon this outlook, declaring, “I marched with Martin Luther King and feel very strongly about equal rights.” But, to him, settlers were now the victims. “We’re not fighting against an enemy who plays by the same rules as we do,” he argued. “Given the cruelty and barbarism of the Arabs to their own people, our ethical imperative is not to commit suicide.” He went so far as to compare the settlers to African-Americans during the civil rights movement. Another American settler activist, Yechiel Leiter, drew on Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address to illustrate that “independence and freedom have their price.”

Not only is this belief still intrinsic to the self-image of many mainstream American settlers, they have also learned the value of speaking fluent liberalese on the international stage. By translating Scripture into sound bites, Jewish-American settlers have played a pivotal role in the public relations rebranding of the Israeli settler movement — and these professed liberals are now helping to deflect attention from crimes committed by Jews.

When Mordechai Meyer’s parents held a news conference denouncing their son’s detention, they declared that “we are United States citizens and our children grew up there, in a democracy. And we made aliyah from the United States to a democratic state.” Now, they complained, we “find ourselves with our son in jail and do not know anything.” The Meyers are right that indefinite

administrative detention is antidemocratic, but it's highly ironic that they would focus on the illiberal tendencies of Israel's criminal justice system to distract attention from their son's alleged crimes. (After all, we don't hear settlers complaining when hundreds of Palestinians are indefinitely detained under the same law.)

For all their protestations that they are good liberals, many American settler leaders have been deafeningly silent on recent acts of Jewish terrorism. If these American immigrants believe that violence is a betrayal of cherished values, then why have their rabbis not held news conferences loudly denouncing the terrorists in their own communities and families? Where are their op-eds in American and Israeli newspapers condemning violent Jewish extremism?

For four decades, their condemnation has often been either muted or tempered by attempts to play down Jewish terrorism by framing it as an issue of "understanding the context" — a euphemism for reacting to Palestinian violence. And while there is absolutely no justification for Palestinian terrorism, it is not enough for Jews to preach to Palestinians that moderates must speak out, murderers must be cast out, and incitement must be stopped without taking the same aggressive steps within their own communities.

American Jews at home and abroad can no longer condone these blind spots and damning silences when it comes to Jewish extremism in Israel. It is the obligation of all who seek peace and justice to take up Mr. Rabin's clarion call to spit out the terrorists and their sympathizers in our midst.