Recent events in the Middle East have to be seen in light of the contradictions of the politics of globalization. With the demise of the Soviet Union many national conflicts which had been subsumed into the Cold War rivalry now served no purpose in the new world architecture. The continuation of some of them became dangerously disruptive to the ‘new world order’ and had to be defused, although others, which presented less of a threat to the capitalist world system, were left to linger on. The Israeli-Arab conflict, especially since it is played out in an area that fulfills a major role in the world economy and is close to Europe, fell into the first category. The Oslo peace process was viewed by many observers as the route to an historic compromise agreement and the end of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; and, in its wake, to the end of the Israeli-Arab conflict too.

Yet the interplay of the multi-layered contradictions that compose the Israeli-Arab conflict has produced a very different outcome. While writing this essay, in mid-April 2002, the world is watching with shock and horror the death, devastation and deliberate chaos caused by the Israeli invasion of the Palestinian Authority. The situation has been set back many years. Not only has the rectitude of the Jewish State again become an issue for world debate, but the situation in the Middle East has contributed to interrupting the triumphal march of globalization and shattering the naïve belief in its ideological message of peace, progress, democracy and improved human rights under capitalism. The change of political course in the USA after September 11 has transformed the globalization agenda, and opened up a much more gruesome perspective. Public fear created the acquiescence necessary to push through, without much resistance, ‘anti-terrorist acts’, first in the USA and later in many other countries. These laws
have curtailed human rights and political freedoms and empowered state executives. A global war on terrorism has been declared. Military force against ‘rogue states’ was implemented in Afghanistan and is being prepared against Iraq and other, as yet unspecified, states. An ideological justification for a ‘new liberal imperialism’ is being prepared by various think tanks.\

In this context, the Middle East and many of its regimes are again in the eye of the storm. The USA has declared more ‘rogue states’ in this region than in any other part of the world. The cutting down to size and subordination of nationalist and religious regimes in the ‘new world order’ raises many questions about a possible redrawing of the map of the Middle East, as was the case after World War I. How it will be handled by the USA – the global power – will be determined by the way the US resolves its disagreements with the European powers and with its client states in the Middle East, and on how all this intertwines with the opening up to world markets of alternative oil reserves in Central Asia.

But if the Israeli-Arab conflict is again enmeshed in major global contradictions, the inter-communal struggle between Palestinians and Israelis still remains at the core of the conflict. Indeed, the central argument of this essay is that the contradictions of what I shall call Israeli Judaism are increasingly determining the nature of the conflict, and impinging directly on the form the global contradictions take in the region. The concept of Israeli Judaism is employed here as a way of revealing the central dilemmas of the articulation of the Jewish project in Palestine, especially in relation to the major ideological currents of labour, liberal and religious Zionism. But it is a concept that goes beyond ideology to the realm of culture and to mental constructs, beliefs and ethos prevalent among Jews in Israel.

As with other world religions like Islam and Christianity, Judaism today is many things to different people. Judaism in modernity has a great many articulations. Jews come in different colours, live in many countries – today mainly in the developed world – and belong to different classes. They do not share a common creed or political values. Many accept as fellow Jews only those who have a Jewish mother; others – as in the case of citizenship law in Israel and the definition adopted by the Nazis – include those whose Jewish descent is more remote. Many Jews have, with modernity, become secular or atheists – ‘non-Jewish Jews’, in Deutscher’s famous phrase. Others have reacted to modernity and its threat of assimilation by becoming more observant – the ultra orthodox. Others still have modified their religious observance to fit their modern lifestyle – conservative or reform. The majority of Jews define Judaism as a world religion and see themselves as nationals of their countries of domicile. Others view themselves as a nation defined by its religion, somewhat like the Serbs, Armenians and Greeks. Some view Judaism as a nationality sharing language, culture and tradition, as the Labour Bund did in Central and Eastern Europe. Others define Jews as a world nation united by a common history of exclusion and persecution.

It was the latter definition, of course, that originally motivated Zionism. Zionism was established in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century and those...
who adopted it strove towards the establishment of a state that would be a home
to, and an ingathering of, all the Jews. But it was divided, shortly after its incep-
tion, into three broadly defined creeds: liberal Zionism, labour Zionism and
religious Zionism. Jews who came to Palestine out of conviction, Zionist or
Orthodox, or because they had no choice, were faced with dilemmas specific to
Palestine, different from those facing Jews in other places. They brought with
them their worldviews and responded to new situations accordingly. Zionism is
an oddity among modern nationalisms – it did not just call for self-determi-
ation in the place where its ‘nationals’ resided, but shifted its imagined community
to a different place. Zionism is thus a colonizing ideology and project. The
contradictions of Judaism in modernity have thus been superimposed onto
another set of contradictions – the realities of the Middle East, where, after the
end of World War I, the Zionist project entered into conflict with emerging
Pan–Arab and Palestinian nationalism.

This essay attempts to link the global and the local in relation to Palestine by
showing how the changing architecture of the world system has continually
changed the modalities of the local and regional conflict; and how the continu-
ation of the colonizing project under changing world conditions has determined,
in turn, the shifts of hegemonic political ideology within Israel, first from labour
Zionism to liberal Zionism and then to today’s form of religious Zionism closely
associated with orthodox Judaism, which may properly be called ‘political
Judaism’.

THE ISRAELI-ARAB CONFLICT IN GLOBAL-
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Israeli–Arab conflict has evolved in several stages.3 The initial colonial stage,
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Israel, the first Israeli-Arab war, which ended with Israel holding 78 per cent of Palestine (instead of 55 per cent as stated in the UN resolution on partition) and most of the Palestinians becoming refugees – remaining either inside Israel or expelled from it. The Palestinian state never came into being; its territory was annexed by Israel and Jordan (the West Bank) and by Egypt (which administered but did not annex the Gaza Strip).

In the subsequent inter-state stage from 1948 to 1969, the conflict was mainly between Israel and surrounding Arab states and thus assumed new forms. As well as full scale wars in 1948, 1956 and 1967, there were border skirmishes and infiltrations by state armies and irregulars, attendant growing expenditure on militarization, and economic warfare through direct boycotts by Arab countries and secondary boycotts imposed by appeal or pressure on non-Arab countries to ban all ties with Israel. The conflict also took the form of ideological warfare – a concerted effort by each side to denigrate and isolate the other in international organizations and the world media and thereby to fortify their international alliances. During most of this period, the Palestinians played a secondary role. Various Arab states used instrumentally the Palestinian issue in inter-Arab politics; at the same time, they confiscated much Jewish property and most Jews in the Arab countries felt insecure and emigrated. Inside Israel, the Palestinians who remained after much of their land and property was expropriated obtained a status of second class citizens. The Middle East was still influenced during this stage by the declining colonial powers, Britain and France, but after 1956, the pro-colonial regimes were replaced by revolutionary nationalist governments in several Arab countries, and the superpowers – the Soviet Union and the USA – began the process of penetration and competition in the region.

The beginning of what might best be called the bipolar superpower stage of the conflict is marked by the War of Attrition between Israel and the Arab states following June 1967. In this war Israel completed the conquest of Mandatory Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza) and took over Sinai from Egypt and the Golan from Syria. The superpowers supplied their clients with arms and new technologies, thus subsuming this conflict – as happened elsewhere – into the Cold War and their own global contest. Consequently, the Israeli-Arab conflict became a war by proxy between the superpowers who fought indirectly via their clients (e.g. in 1973). The military build-up at this stage reached proportions far beyond the economic and scientific capabilities of the warring sides. As a result, the opponents become economically and militarily dependent on their patrons and received from them a much higher level of foreign military and economic aid. After 1967, diplomatic and economic ties between Israel and the Soviet bloc were severed. This increased Israel’s isolation and denied it access to significant world markets both in the Warsaw Pact bloc and in the non-aligned countries. The Israeli–Arab conflict also became central in the ideological war between the superpowers. Zionism was equated with racism in a UN resolution backed by the Soviet bloc and Arab and Islamic states. On the other hand, the US demanded the right of Soviet Jews to emigrate and made it
a condition for economic transactions with the USSR. The Palestinians were brought back to the forefront of the conflict when, with Soviet and Egyptian support, they formed the PLO in 1969. It was during this stage that the economic aspect of the conflict began to significantly affect the global economy. The use of oil and petro-dollar power by OPEC countries in solidarity with the Arabs following the 1973 war is usually cited as a major factor in the economic crisis of the 1970s and the slowdown in Western economic growth. The US stepped in to fight the secondary boycott against Israel and break up OPEC’s power.

The beginning of a new stage, defined in terms of American global hegemony, is best marked by the Stockholm Conference (1988) where Arafat announced his willingness to recognize Israel, cease the armed struggle and enter negotiations. This was a pre-condition set by the US and the Europeans to end Arafat’s isolation in Tunis and afford him recognition as the leader of the restive Palestinians in the impending Middle East peace talks. But in fact this new stage was already presaged when Anwar Sadat decided to break Egypt’s alliance with the Soviet Union – a development brought about through disappointment with the Soviets’ inability to force an Israeli withdrawal from Egyptian soil or supply Egypt with superior military technology.

Even before the end of the 1980s it became clear that the ailing Soviet bloc was no longer able to aid and arm its Middle Eastern clients. The new affiliation between Egypt and the US heralded a new era in the Middle East’s place in the Pax Americana, even before the demise of the Soviet bloc. The peace treaty between Egypt and Israel was a triangular peace: between the US and Egypt, and between Egypt and Israel. Egypt received annual economic and military aid; in return, it had to recognize Israel and sign a formal peace treaty. Israel had to return all occupied Egyptian territory, as stipulated by UN resolution 242; in return, Israel received a large aid package as compensation for redeployment. Since then both sides have also received annual economic and military aid. This pattern of triangular peace agreements became the model for future US-brokered accords with Israel. The logic of the US-brokered peace lies in the fact that conflict between two allies of the same superpower weakens that power and it must act to reduce tension and increase solidarity within its camp. But the peace agreement was also the first measure that removed the threat of a major war that could endanger the very existence of the Jewish state. The peace agreement entailed the fixing of borders. Establishing mutually and internationally recognized borders between two sovereignties is a sine qua non condition to any peace agreement.

The agreement with Egypt was a breakthrough in the long-term principled refusal of the Arabs to recognize Israel in any form. Israel’s military might and Egypt’s commitment to stay out of a military coalition against Israel also considerably reduced the chances of any other Arab country going to war with Israel. As a result, Israel could reduce its security budget and divert funds to other uses. The first peace was, therefore, the most valuable, and the price paid for it was deemed worthwhile by the Israeli leadership. Notably, however, it was not
followed by more agreements until the demise of the Warsaw Pact. Nor did the agreement prevent another war by Israel against Lebanon in 1982 (the first war where an Arab capital city was captured by Israel), and large tracts of south Lebanon remained under Israeli control until 1999. Following closely on the return of Sinai, the Lebanon war severely tested the peace treaty with Egypt, and relations between Israel and Egypt remain cold and formal to this day. Social and economic relations are limited to official channels. Egypt is also hostile to Israel in international forums. Hostility to Israel is popular and is maintained in the media and in education curricula in schools.

For the United States in the post-Soviet world, the Middle East has presented a particularly important but difficult area: the ‘dual containment’ policy against Iraq and Iran did not prove particularly successful, and as already noted more ‘rogue states’ have been identified by the US in this region than anywhere else (Iraq, Iran, Libya, Sudan, Syria). The Islamic belt stretching from Pakistan and Afghanistan to the Muslim ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia and up to the former Yugoslavia threatened the globalization process with an apparent ‘clash of civilizations’. It was in this arena that the US chose to demonstrate, for the first time, its new role as ‘Globocop’ in the 1990 ‘Desert Storm’ against its former ally in the war against Iran – Saddam Hussein. The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam and the Arab coalition against Iraq also contributed to the break-up of Arab solidarity; following the war Arab nationalism was at its nadir. It is against this background that the Madrid and Oslo initiatives took place.

Peace with Jordan was, in the Middle East, the first result of American global hegemony, and was made possible by the weakening of Arab solidarity following the Gulf War. It was worthwhile for Jordan to atone for its previous (profitable) sin of being the inroad and the outlet for Sadam’s Iraq. In the wake of the Gulf War, Jordan’s policy took a U-turn to appease the USA. The borders and other issues outstanding between Israel and Jordan were not difficult to resolve as there had long been understanding and cooperation between them. As a result of the Gulf War and this second peace agreement, other Arab states – mainly in the Gulf and North Africa – relaxed their attitudes and established open contacts with Israel; and other Islamic states like Indonesia, or those with a large Muslim population like India, followed suit.

ISRAELI POLITICS IN THE 1990s

The overall effect of this process was the breakdown of the international and economic isolation of Israel and the opening of new markets for its exports. However, although important, all these were secondary effects; the main factor in the rapid economic growth of Israel in the 1990s, was the collapse of the Soviet Union. Israel was one of the main beneficiaries of the fall of the Soviet bloc. Because of Soviet support of the Arabs during the conflict, Eastern bloc countries severed diplomatic and economic relations with Israel. Soviet influence was also responsible for many non-aligned states refusing to establish relations with Israel. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought Israel’s isolation to an end.
Diplomatic relations were renewed or established for the first time and, in their wake, major new markets in Central and Eastern Europe and in Asia were opened to Israel.

A second advantage gained by Israel from the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the attendant growing economic and political instability across its territories, was a major wave of immigration from the former USSR. To date the total number of immigrants has been more than one million. Besides the impact on the demography of Israel, and the reversal of the declining birth rate, the immigration brought Israel a huge amount of human capital. The immigrants included a much larger proportion of highly educated people than had the Israeli population, with a particularly high percentage of scientists. The timing of the immigration was opportune as it coincided with the burgeoning revolution in communications, computing and biological, genetic and medical research. Due to its previous military-industrial complex, Israel had already developed these areas; with the influx of the immigrants Israel was ideally positioned to benefit from this revolution. Moreover, the aid promised by the US for absorbing the Soviet immigrants, in the form of US loan guarantees of $10 billion, gave Israel access to funds at cheap rates of interest.

The coalescence of all these factors – opening markets, immigration of an expert labour force, fortunate timing and cheap loans – brought to Israel the economic boom which it enjoyed during the first five years following the peace process. The trading partners responsible for the major expansion of exports by Israel were not Arab countries but new markets in Europe, Asia and America. The renewal of diplomatic and economic relations with many countries also enabled Israel to improve its terms of trade and to replace expensive home-produced goods with much cheaper imports, increasing the purchasing power of Israeli consumers. Thus, most of the economic benefits of the 1990s came to Israel from the fall of the Soviet Union and not from direct economic relations with the Arab countries. Shimon Peres’s idea of a new Middle East with Israel as its hub immediately met with negative responses from the Arab countries which saw it as a neo-colonial conspiracy. The economic benefits for Israel were not in the surrounding Arab world but rather with the normalization of the status of Israel in the family of nations, and the end of its status as outcast. From the beginning, Zionism created a total separation between the Jewish economy and the surrounding Arab economies. Due to the Arab boycott after 1948, Israel’s areas of specialization and its trading partners were mostly far away in the West. The secondary boycott managed to isolate Israel in other parts of the world, some of which are now burgeoning economies demanding products from Israeli military industries, telecommunications, agribusiness, pharmaceuticals and electronics. It is these markets that Israel covets. The poor developing countries in the Middle East have neither the money nor the need for what Israel sells. They can only be exploited for their cheap labour. The interests of Israeli industrialists were not necessarily as well-served by ending the conflict as by its containment and management.
The Oslo peace process was, in fact, imposed on Israel from outside. The American economic aid mentioned above was part of a deal to bring Israel – under the premiership of Shamir, the ‘peace opponent’ – to the negotiating table in Madrid. Inside Israel, the debate among Israel’s power elite was about timing; whether time plays against Israel or for it, and about the inevitability, or not, of the need to cede most of the occupied territories and finalize the borders of the state. One position, represented by Rabin, Peres and Barak, accepted the ‘inevitable’ and concurred with the US and Europe’s wish to contain and stabilize the conflict, and tried to maximize the benefits for the concessions made. The other approach, represented by Shamir, Netanyahu and Sharon, was to try to delay and prevaricate in order to gain time: to continue a massive programme of settlements in the hope that these will create a new irreversible reality, and that external conditions pressing Israel to get out of the occupied territories would change. The changing attitudes towards peace in public opinion polls and voting did not so much represent a change in the economic interests of Israel, but rather reflected a slow realization of the inevitable, which had been hidden from Israelis by an internally-centred, jingoistic public discourse. This discourse was slowly breaking up under the pressure of global events, the missile attacks on Israel during ‘Desert Storm’ and the opening up of Israel to the world’s media.

The Oslo process was an attempt, initiated by Europe and brokered by the USA, to try to gain a period of calm after the first Intifada (1987–93). This Intifada was mainly an unarmed popular insurrection led by the grass roots organizations of the PLO in the occupied territories, without the national leadership which had been in exile in Tunisia since the debacle in Lebanon in 1982. The idea of Oslo was an exercise in cooptation. It entailed the creation, in the occupied territories, of a representative Palestinian self-rule (Authority) which would gradually take over from the Israeli military government and work obediently with the USA and Israel to impose order. Arafat was chosen to do the job. At the time he was desperate enough after losing his backing in the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia following his support of Saddam. The carrot was the chance to be readmitted among his constituency from which he had been expelled three times in the past: in 1967, when he had to flee from the West Bank; in 1970, after Black September when the PLO was evicted from Jordan, and 1982, when he was forcefully separated by Sharon from the Palestinian diaspora in Lebanon. The creation of a semi-state (the Palestinian Authority) also offered Arafat the spoils of government and the symbols of a head of state as well as much foreign aid (mainly European). The stick, however, was total economic dependency on Israel and a gradual approach that linked further withdrawals by Israel to Palestinian willingness to cooperate in stopping the violence.

The Oslo agreement stipulated three stages over six years of Israeli handover of territory in the West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinian Authority, whose main obligation was to assume effective control over the territories and prevent terrorist acts. At the end of the period, and after trust had been established, the hard questions of Jerusalem and the Palestinian refugees would be dealt with. A
Palestinian state would be established and recognized and the two states would sign an agreement ending the conflict between them. The Oslo process linked willingness to eventually end the conflict with Israeli withdrawal. It depended on both sides’ willingness to accept UN Resolution 242. That meant a new partition of Palestine – around 80 per cent to Israel and 20 per cent to the Palestinians. To Israelis this also meant that the implementation of other UN resolutions – such as Resolution 194 regarding the return of refugees – no longer pertained within this framework. Many believed at the time that the agreement could work, but there was strong opposition to it on both sides.

Rabin’s Labour-based coalition government, which signed the Oslo agreement, had a slim majority and relied on the support of the Arab parties. The nationalist-religious opposition (whose growing influence and power we shall examine in the next section) contested the legitimacy of any decision regarding the future of Israel made by a majority that included non-Jews. This opposition was further strengthened by Rabin’s resolve to reach a simultaneous agreement with Syria that entailed withdrawal from the Golan and an end to the occupation of South Lebanon. This raised the opposition of the security hardliners. The inability or unwillingness of the Palestinians to curb the terrorist activities added to the mistrust. The campaign against Oslo developed into a campaign of civil disobedience and open incitement threatening violence and civil war. It led, in November 1995, to the assassination of Rabin. Shimon Peres, who headed a caretaker government before early elections, lost the support of the Israeli Arabs. This was due to Israel’s assassination of a Hamas master-terrorist which escalated into a wave of terrorist retaliations against Israel just before the elections. In addition, a military campaign against Hizbollah in South Lebanon misfired and resulted in the death of more than 100 Lebanese civilians. Having lost the Arab vote, Peres lost the elections.

Benjamin Netanyahu won by less than a one per cent majority. He formed a narrow Likud-based coalition which relied on the growing religious bloc. His government was characterized by a fundamental contradiction: it was against the Oslo agreement, yet it was expected to respect the obligations undertaken by the previous government and proceed with their implementation. Netanyahu was not able to start open negotiations with the Syrians and could not stop the low intensity war with Hizbollah which continued to exact casualties. He tried to navigate between opposing pressures by yielding to religious demands in internal matters, and to the settlers by starting new settlements, and by endless prevarications and manipulations. One such incident, in September 1996, involved the provocative opening of a tunnel to the Temple Mount which resulted in a flare-up with the Palestinians and scores of casualties. By means of such diversions Netanyahu managed to postpone the second Israeli withdrawal in the West Bank for more than a year beyond the schedule agreed at Oslo. Netanyahu’s coalition lasted for only two and a half years; it collapsed after he was forced by Clinton (at the Wye Plantation Conference) to agree to a second, smaller, withdrawal. The letter of Oslo was saved, but its spirit was long dead.
The religious bloc and the extreme right quit the coalition. In despair Nethanyahu asked Labour to form a unity coalition but Labour’s new leader, Ehud Barak, declined.

Barak came to power by a margin of 12 per cent in the early elections of May 1999. His coalition, like Nethanyahu’s, was based on the support of the religious bloc, which had further increased its power in Parliament. He started negotiations with the Syrians but balked at the prospect of allowing a Syrian foothold in the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Barak’s main achievement in his first year in office was a unilateral pull-back from South Lebanon. Thus, in May 2000, he ended Israel’s occupation which had lasted since 1982. This pull-back earned him the trust of the left which believed he was honestly striving for peace; they overlooked the fact that during this time the Jewish settlements in the West Bank had been growing at a faster rate than under Nethanyahu.

The third pull-back stipulated by the Oslo agreement was by now overdue. In the third instalment Israel was supposed to hand over areas that included many settlements. Barak was not willing to risk, as Rabin had, a clash and civil strife with the right and with the religious bloc. Besides, his coalition differed from Rabin’s in that it depended on the religious bloc. From this constraint the idea was born to skip Oslo’s overdue third stage and move instead speedily into a final settlement. With hindsight it is clear that by taking this approach Barak forced a high-risk situation that, had it failed, would have exploded. He had no alternative as, with the coalition he had, he could not execute the third stage withdrawal.

Barak managed to convince Clinton to accept his approach. In turn Clinton forced Arafat, via Egypt’s President Mubarak, to attend the Camp David conference in July 2000. At Camp David, Barak refused to meet Arafat directly. What Clinton suggested as an outline agreement was not what Barak actually offered at Camp David, and what he did offer exactly is still debated. Some claim it was 91 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza and agreement to the division of Jerusalem, but even if this is so, it is clear that he insisted on absorbing most of the post-1967 settlements into Israel, and that their geographic location would have divided the Palestinian state into enclaves economically and strategically dependent on Israel (hence their designation by critics as Bantustans). In any case, Barak had not prepared Israeli public opinion for significant concessions, even if he did intend to make them. On the contrary, he had vowed never to divide Jerusalem. All the public opinion polls at the time showed that a large majority would have rejected these agreements – and Barak was well aware of the polls. The question of the Temple Mount (Haram Al-Sharif) was not resolved; neither was the question of the refugees.

Clinton put a lot of pressure on Arafat and not as much on Barak. Arafat was not willing to compromise on territory or on full sovereignty over Haram Al-Sharif. On this last issue he was encouraged to stand fast by Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Arafat also refused to commit himself to ending the conflict. Camp David broke up without an agreement and Clinton put the blame on Arafat.
Barak had succeeded in subverting the last stage of the Oslo process and put the blame on the Palestinians. But his success was also his downfall and his coalition broke up. In the few months before the elections in Israel and before Clinton left office there were several attempts to resume the negotiations. The talks in Taba, hosted by Mubarak, lead to some understandings but these came too late. Barak was a lame prime minister, and there was a change of the guard in the White House. Early in September Ariel Sharon, Likud’s candidate for the premiership, seized the opportunity to visit the Temple Mount. This act and its timing was perceived by the Palestinians as a provocation, a gesture of legitimate claim to the place. It was the last straw which set the second Intifada aflame, roughly when the Oslo period was supposed to come to its end.

What we have tried to show in this brief outline is that internal Israeli politics are deadlocked on the issue of withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. Three prime ministers – Rabin, Netanyahhu and Barak – have failed to proceed with the Oslo agreements. Rabin, who committed himself to the process, was murdered; Netanyahhu, who opposed the process, delayed the second stage withdrawal as much as he could, thus contributing to the bad faith between Israelis and Palestinians; Barak found a way out of the process. In Rabin’s case it was because he relied on Israeli Arabs against the religious-nationalist opposition; in the case of Barak and Netanyahhu it was because they relied on the religious bloc. In all three cases governments fell in mid-term. In all three cases the religious bloc was pivotal. We must therefore turn to a closer look at the political power and the attitudes of the religious bloc in contemporary Israeli politics.6

THE RELIGIOUS BLOC AND THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS OF ISRAELI JUDAISM

The religious bloc in Israel comprises three streams: Nationalist Religious, Occidental Ultra Orthodox and Oriental Religious. Of late they have gained about 21 per cent of the vote; their power has been on the rise since the mid-1980s. The main factor in this increase was the meteoric rise of the Oriental Religious party (Shas), which has managed to channel the social grievances of the Oriental Jewish lower classes and articulate them within a religious discourse. This party is now the third largest in Parliament with 13 per cent of the vote. The rise of the religious bloc can be best understood in relation to the decline of the two main parties Labour and Likud, which have always headed Israeli governments. While in the mid-1980s these two parties together marshalled 95 out of 120 Members of Parliament, by 1999 their total had fallen to only 45. In any case, so long as Labour and Likud cannot agree on the issue of a peace programme, the religious bloc holds the key to the formation and dissolution of any government.

What has especially characterized the rise of this bloc is the convergence between religiosity and chauvinism. The National Religious Party (NRP), a Zionist party which tried to combine modernism and religion, had, until 1977, always been a partner in Labour’s coalitions. Since the early 1970s the NRP has...
undergone a profound transformation: it perceives Israel’s occupation of the whole of Palestine in Messianic terms, as a divine act heralding redemption. This party has become the main political and ideological arm of the settlers. NRP supporters have also become more pious and observant, even though, unlike the Ultra Orthodox Jews, they are involved in the economy and society and serve in the army.

Meanwhile, the Ultra-Orthodox have become more nationalistic even as the National Religious have become more Orthodox. The Ultra-Orthodox Occidentals (Ashkenazi) are traditionally non-Zionists. They oppose secular Zionism as a secular rebellion against religion, threatening the spiritual annihilation of Judaism. Though they vote in elections, and sit in the Parliament and in the government, they do so for instrumental reasons, for material and legislative benefits. They do not acknowledge the legitimacy of democratic principles and institutions, and they maintain that a Jewish state should be ruled by religious law (Halacha). The Ultra-Orthodox behave like an elitist sect, led by sages. Unlike Ultra-Orthodox Jews in other countries, many men willingly refrain from gainful economic activity and live poorly on state national security and donations from abroad. They also enjoy cultural autonomy within the state: they live in separate quarters, maintain a separate educational system (which today includes about 20 per cent of all pupils) and have their own civil society. They refuse to serve in the army and the state exempts most of them from military service. In the past they kept a deliberate distance from key national issues. However, their growth in numbers and the need for financial support from the state has moved them closer to national politics. Their Jewish creed sets them firmly against equal citizenship for non-Jews in a Jewish state. The Ultra-Orthodox have also moved to live in the occupied territories and they see the whole of Palestine as God’s patrimony to the Jews.

The Oriental Religious party (Shas) split from the Ultra-Orthodox following accusations of discrimination and the tendency of the Occidental Orthodox establishment to regard Oriental Judaism as inferior. Shas also expresses Oriental Jews’ (mostly immigrants from Arab countries) feelings of resentment against their absorption into Israel under Labour rule during the 1950s and 1960s, and against socio-economic inequalities. Shas articulated this resentment into the accusation that Labour secular Zionism deliberately tried to abolish their traditional religious way of life. Unlike Occidental Orthodoxy, Shas is populist and open. Most Shas followers serve in the army and do not seclude themselves from the rest of Israeli society; on the contrary, they do much missionary work to bring secular Jews back to the fold. But like the Ultra-Orthodox, Shas does not regard itself as Zionist and strives towards a religious state ruled by religious law. In terms of its attitude to non-Jews and to the occupied territories, Shas voters stand to the right of the Likud.

The rising importance of the religious bloc as a key factor in Israeli politics has, somewhat paradoxically, coincided with the effects on Israeli politics of the Russian-Israelis’ search for a political identity. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union now number more than one million out of Israel’s 6.5 million (a figure
which includes one million Israeli-Palestinian citizens). Economically they have integrated well; culturally they tend to maintain their Russian language and culture – there are currently more than sixty Russian-language newspapers and journals in Israel. There are also Russian-language schools and radio stations, and most Russian-Israelis are linked by cable TV to Russian-language (and Turkish) TV stations. Politically there are two ‘Russian’ parties which are now in government. A fair proportion (some say 20 per cent, some say more) of Russian-Israelis are not Jewish by religious definition (i.e. not born to a Jewish mother). They achieved Israeli citizenship through the secular ‘Law of Return’ which defines ‘Jewish’ in wider terms of descent. Though the large majority of the Russian-Israelis are secular, the majority incline towards the right and are strongly nationalistic. Most have imported Soviet conceptions of nationality: they view Jews as a nation (not as a religion) and see Israel as the homeland of the Jewish nation. In Israel, therefore, they believe that only Jews should have full citizenship rights. Non-Jews, such as Israeli-Palestinians, should only have minority rights such as existed for minorities in the various Soviet republics. Liberal conceptions of equal rights for all citizens regardless of religion or ethnicity are alien to the majority of Russian-Israelis. Russian-Israelis also tend to be hardliners on questions of security and see, as in the former Soviet view, the necessity of maintaining buffer territories against possible military invasion (Golan, and the Jordan Valley). Since the 1990s many Russian-Israelis also settled in the West Bank, some for ideological reasons, though mostly for reasons of cheap housing. There is also a trend among Russian-Israelis to return to religion and much missionary work is directed towards them by some Ultra Orthodox sects, especially the Chassidic Chabad, which is also ultra-nationalistic.

These developments have highlighted more than ever the conflict between Israeli Judaism and the modern concept of nationhood and statehood, a conflict which expresses itself in many forms in Israel:

* Israeli Jews waver between a secular conception of territory (Patria) and a Jewish religious conception (Sanctum). Is ‘The Place’ – ‘The Land of Israel’ – a place that one belongs to by birth, language, local culture and personal memories; or is it God’s dwelling place? Is it ‘The Place’ where His third Temple must be built in place of the Muslim Haram al-Sharif? Is it a ‘this worldly’ place where each inhabitant chooses his own lifestyle and creed; or is it a Jewish sanctuary where only Jews can live on condition they maintain a Jewish religious code? Who decides what this code is?

* What is the status of non-Jews in ‘The Place’? Can they be equal citizens or must they have an eternally inferior status (garim)? How can non-Jewish natives or immigrants become citizens? Is the place kept forever as an exclusive place for Jews worldwide, and for them alone? In any case what is a Jew, and who decides?

* What is an Israeli Jew? Can one be simply an Israeli Jew without having further divisory categories imposed on one: Ashkenazi (Occidental) Sephardi (Oriental), Ethiopian, Yemenite, etc? Categories which are carried over from
the divided history of Judaism worldwide and which now reproduce divisions in a place where they want to be one society? What is the Jewish religious customary law applicable to all (observant) Jews in Israel? Even observant Jews cannot eat at each others’ homes. Is there one Israeli Judaism in Israel or many? Can there be freedom of religion, even for observant Jews in Israel (e.g. Reform Jews)? Is there freedom from religion in Israel?

* What is a ‘Jewish society’? Is it just a Jewish community writ large? Can it be a society which evolves voluntarily without legal impositions by the state?

* What should the relation be between state and religion in a Jewish state? Can a Jewish state be a state that maintains full human rights for all its citizens (e.g. can a Jew and a non-Jew marry)? Can one be a secular Jew in Israel without recourse to religion?

These questions, and the contradictions they expose, are now the hub of Jewish Israeli internal politics. When Israel was founded in 1948 (with only 650,000 Jews) its Labour Zionist leaders made a conscious decision not to decide any of the above questions and deferred them to later generations in the hope that a larger proportion of world Jewry living in Israel would resolve them. This is not what happened. Strangely enough, it was during the first days of the Jewish state that Israel was most cohesive. Since then, with more Jews, with a stronger economy and a mightier army, but also with more non-Jews and with more territories, it seems to be less able to resolve these contradictions; they have become more pressing and exact a heavier toll on Israel.

The late Itzhak Rabin understood these dilemmas well when he entered the Oslo process. He explicated them in a speech he made in 1994:

These days we are in the middle of a battle without guns, in a battle without fire, that will probably be one of the most important and decisive in the history of the Jewish people in the last generations: The battle for the character of the state of Israel. We shall have to choose: between the road of fanaticism, tendencies to dreams of grandeur, corruption of moral values and Judaism as a result of domination of another people, blind faith, arrogance – ‘me and nobody but me’ – and the road of maintaining democratic liberal Jewish life which takes into consideration the beliefs of others, amongst us, alongside us, where each lives according to their creed. The battle for the character of the Jewish state in the 21st century has begun. In this battle we return to the graveyards, this time in order to bury old concepts, to bury a lifestyle of a state under siege. We are saying farewell to the world of the albums of victory in wars. The coming years will be shadowed by essential questions: Who are we? Where are we striving to get to? What is our new character? What kind of a nation do we want to be? How are we going to live with those around us? Are we going to be ‘a light to the nations’ or are we going to be a nation ‘like all nations’? Will it be religion that will continue to conserve Judaism? ‘Chosen people’? What is the place of secularism? Will there be a new Jew, a new Zionist, a new Israeli?
Alas, Rabin was lost in the battle, or rather, the battle was lost. In the 1970s hegemony shifted from Labour Zionism to Liberal Zionism. Labour’s state capitalism no longer suited the development of Israel’s economy and its secular Occidental worldview was not able to integrate the Orientals. In the Messianic nationalist fervour after 1967, hegemony passed to Liberal Nationalism: liberal in the economic sense and nationalist with regard to settlement of the newly-occupied territories. This hegemonic phase seems presently to be at its end, Rabin was its last representative. It is being replaced by Political Judaism.

At present Judaism in Israel serves as a political ideology which provides cohesion, justification and legitimacy to a social structure full of unresolved contradictions. It serves the character of state and society under the growing struggle of the Palestinians, both inside Israel within the pre-1967 territories and in the West Bank and Gaza. Judaism (rather than anti-Semitism) has become the main justification for the right to be in ‘The Place’; Judaism is the internal integrative mechanism and the unifying factor both among Israeli Jews and between them and world Jewry. Judaism, not Zionism, has become the reason for western emigration to Israel.

It is not that the majority of Israeli Jews have become more observant, far from it; lifestyles in Israel have never been less observant. What I refer to is the widespread yearning, in various strata of Israeli society, for unity through a closer association with Judaism. It is the feeling of loss of meaning in secular existence. It appears in many forms: in the attachment to progressive (Reform) Judaism by the Zionist left; in the feeling of secular Jewish intellectuals regarding the lack of knowledge of Jewish thinking and tradition, and the Jewish study groups established; in the spread of Jewish mysticism and spiritualism; in projects undertaken by the Center for the Commemoration of Rabin to find a mutually accepted program with the settlers. It is demonstrated in the recent social agreement (the Kinneret Document) produced by prominent Labour members together with Orthodox Rabbis; in the flocking to Nethanyahu of many Ultra Orthodox Jews; the innocent *bon ton* blessing ‘with God’s help’ that has become standard fare; or the apology among secular Jews when they telephone during the Sabbath. Judaism is converging with Zionism and replacing it. The political concomitant of this phenomenon is the convergence of Left and Right.

THE NEW INFITADA

Sharon won the elections against Barak by a landslide: 62.3 per cent to 37.6 per cent. Most Israeli-Palestinian citizens did not cast their vote. Sharon formed a wide unity coalition that included Likud, Labour, the religious bloc and extreme right parties to fight the Intifada. To the world and to many Israelis the issue was – and still is – how to return to negotiations. However, Sharon and the majority of his right-wing government who oppose the peace process have a different agenda. They want to dissolve any possibility of an agreement that would entail dismantling the settlements. In order to achieve this they must destroy the Palestinian Authority – now the only possible partner to an agree-
ment. Sharon had to shift the political agenda in Israel away from the peace process towards a mood of war for survival – and do it whilst maintaining political consensus. For this purpose Sharon needed Labour in the government, in order not to repeat the mass protests that followed the 1982 war in Lebanon. The deepening cycle of violence was also necessary in order to legitimize the use of Israel’s full military might against an asymmetric opponent.

The bloody events of the Intifada served Sharon’s purpose. He did not try to reduce the violence; indeed he fanned its flames. The mounting death toll, cruelties on both sides, erosion of security, economic crisis in Israel and disaster in the occupied territories serve constantly as a self-fulfilling prophecy to both sides that there is no partner for peace. Under these conditions the extremists thrive.

On the Palestinian side, Hamas and Islamic Jihad are rejectionist organizations. They oppose any peace settlement and call for armed struggle to liberate the whole of Palestine, return the 1948 refugees, destroy the ‘Zionist entity’, and establish an Islamic republic in its place. Arafat, on the other hand, has accepted the existence of Israel since 1988 and calls for a two-state solution. Hamas and Jihad’s indiscriminate attacks on civilians are consistent and follow logically from their ideological position. Indiscriminate killings of civilians inside Israel (pre–1967) contradict Arafat’s declared aims and cast doubt on his sincerity and real goals.

Arafat’s indecision, his inability or unwillingness to curb Hamas and Jihad, was seized upon by Sharon’s government. On the pretext that they were stopping ‘ticking bombs’, the Israelis implemented a policy of liquidating Palestinian activists and political leaders; in many cases they killed innocent civilians instead. A careful examination of the so-called ‘targeted killings’ shows that their timing was deliberate and aimed at retaliation and revenge and at forestalling any reduction of violence. The curfews and closures imposed on the West Bank and Gaza brought their economy to a halt and caused the entire population impossible hardship and suffering. Sharon’s government sought and achieved a showdown with the Authority.

Since the beginning of 2002, Arafat’s organizations have also been implicated in suicide attacks against civilians inside the Green Line. From a military viewpoint, the suicide bombers became the most effective weapon in the Palestinian arsenal. They were ‘human guided delivery systems’, the equivalent of smart bombs, they were cheap and they helped to improve, though not to turn around, the ratio of casualties between the two opponents.11

Politically however, indiscriminate suicide bombings and shootings have helped Sharon to convince the Israeli public that Arafat’s real goal was the destruction of Israel – a claim always maintained by the Right. The bombers served Sharon’s purpose of forging unity among Israelis; he could demonstrate the threat to everyone’s personal security and undermine the argument that Arafat is still a partner to peace. The suicide bombings also succeeded in disrupting daily life in Israel and caused heavy losses to the economy, though not to the same degree as the Israelis caused in the West Bank and Gaza. Moderate
voices among the Palestinians who called for a reconsideration of the right of return, and the brave voices criticizing the use of armed struggle or indiscriminate suicide bombings, have been muted. In Israel, too, the peace movement has been greatly weakened, though not silenced. Contacts between Palestinians and Israelis across the Green Line have been curtailed. Relations within Israel between Jews and Palestinian-Israeli citizens have reached a crisis-point. There is little will to listen to the other side’s anguish. Under these conditions of fear, anger and hate, extreme ideas of ethnic cleansing have increased their popularity among Israeli Jews.12 Similar calls for ‘a fight to the bitter end’ and agreement with suicide bombings have increased on the Palestinian side too.

The September 11 attack on the USA occurred when the Intifada had been raging for a year. It changed the world and put the events in Palestine/Israel in a different context. The anti-withdrawal right in Israel has always manoeuvred tactically to prevent the implementation of Resolution 242. Israel was much quicker to understand the long-term global implications of that event, and to readjust its tactics and strategy to fit the new Bush Manichean view of the state of the world in terms of for or against terrorism. The suicide bombings enabled Sharon to present Arafat internationally as one of the rejectionists; subsequently, many Palestinian organizations were added to the USA’s list of world terrorist organizations – a move bolstered by the interception of the Karine A, a ship loaded with arms for the Palestinians from Iran – and the fight against the Palestinian Authority was portrayed as equivalent to, and part of, the global fight against El-Qaida and other terrorist organizations.

Since September 2001 the indiscriminate terrorist attacks have become, in my view, counterproductive for the Palestinians. Arafat, however, was unable to understand this and readjust his strategy. Unlike Arafat, other Arab countries did understand it and trod cautiously in their support of the Palestinians. In that respect, too, Arafat – who still thinks in pan-Arab terms – may have gained the support of the Arab masses but not the full support of Arab governments, apart from Iraq whose side he took in 1989. The Intifada, which started as a war about the settlements, was now repackaged by Israel and marketed internally and internationally as an alliance with the forces of darkness against the forces of light. It worked very well in Israel, reasonably well in America until now, and not so well elsewhere.

Is Arafat a terrorist or a freedom fighter? Posing the question as if it were an either/or situation is misleading. Freedom fighters often use terrorist methods. Those who know the history of the Jewish struggle against the British in Palestine between 1942 to 1947 know that the ‘Fighters for the Freedom of Israel’ (LEHI), better known by their British given name ‘The Stern Gang’, and the ‘National Military Organisation’ known also as the ‘Irgun’ (ETZEL), used terrorist methods against British and Arab civilians. Among many, most famous was the assassination in Cairo of Lord Moyne, Deputy Minister of State for Middle East Affairs and a close aid of Churchill, and the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in which more than 80 people – British, Arabs and Jews – were
killed. One side’s terrorist is the other side’s freedom fighter. After Israel’s inde-
pendence leaders of both these organizations became prime ministers: Menachem
Begin and Itzhak Shamir.\textsuperscript{13} Many similar examples can be added, Ireland and
Algeria to name but two.

The Palestinians did not invent suicide missions. They were used by Japanese
Kamikaze during the Second World War, and by militant non-state armed
groups in Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Pakistan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and in New
York and Washington.\textsuperscript{14} The attack by Baruch Goldstein, a fanatical religious
Jewish settler and member of the racist Jewish Defense League, on Muslim
worshipers during prayer in the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron on January
25, 1994, killing twenty-nine Palestinians before he was killed, also falls into this
category.

Sharon has no alternative peace plan. The occupation and expansion of settle-
ments remains central to his thinking and that of all his coalition partners. Labour
and Likud are both responsible for the colonization of the territories occupied in
1967 with a view to establishing Israeli control and preventing the establish-
ment of a Palestinian state. Labour was in power from 1967 to 1977 and erected the
infrastructure and institutions for the creation and expansion of the settlements.
In this early period settlements were founded in an incremental way, ostensibly
subordinated to ‘security’ considerations. However, security and settlement
in Israeli thinking are existential concepts inextricable from sovereignty
and Jewish state-building. Moshe Dayan once explained why Jewish settlements
in the occupied territories are essential ‘…not because they can ensure security
better than the army, but because without them we cannot keep the army in
those territories. Without them the IDF would be a foreign army ruling a foreign
population’.\textsuperscript{15}

Likud came to power in 1977, and did away with the ‘security’ discourse of
settlement. It justified the morality of wholesale settlement of Jews in all the areas
of the ‘Land of Israel’. Menchem Begin, Likud’s leader, did not see any differ-
ence between the settlements founded before and after 1948 and the settlements
built after 1967. In an address to the Knesset in May 1982 he said that the settle-
ments are the expression of the enduring vitality of Zionism and its moral vision:
‘Settlements – scores, almost one hundred years ago, in areas of the Land of Israel
populated by Arabs and sometimes solely by Arabs – was it moral or immoral?
Permitted or forbidden? One of the two. If it was moral – then settlement near
Nablus is moral … There is no third way’.

In September 1977 Ariel Sharon, then minister of Agriculture in Begin’s
government, unveiled a plan to settle two million Jews in the occupied territo-
ries by the end of the century. In 1972 the number of settlers in the West Bank
and the Gaza strip was only 1500; by 1992, on the eve of the Oslo process, it was
109,784; by the end of 2001 it was already 213,672. In East Jerusalem the
number of settlers was 6,900 in 1972, 141,000 in 1992 and 170,400 in 2001.
These numbers are in addition to the number of settlers in the West Bank. At
the end of 2001 the number of settlements was 130 in the West Bank (on 5,640
sq. km.), 16 in the Gaza Strip (on 360sq. km.) and 11 in East Jerusalem area.

Sharon and his political partners are willing to pay an economic price, antagonize world opinion and sacrifice many casualties. Indeed, during the Israeli invasion of the West Bank in April 2002 new settlements have been started in East Jerusalem, Hebron and the West Bank. For many years, Sharon held the idea that Jordan should be the Palestinian state. The struggle between Palestinians and
Israelis could easily deteriorate into a regional war. There are many internal and regional actors seeking to escalate the conflict. Messianic and nationalist extremists in Israel hope for a regional war and for the breakdown of peace between Israel, Jordan and Egypt. Only under such conditions of general war can the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian-Israeli citizens and Palestinians from the occupied territories to Jordan and Egypt take place. On the Arab/Islamic side, there are pan-Arab nationalists and fundamentalists who dream of doing away with the pro-American Arab regimes and creating Arab/Islamic unity, which will destroy the ‘Zionist entity’ and liberate the Middle East from American domination. These dangers are further exacerbated by the presence on both sides of weapons of mass destruction.

Is there a solution to the present impasse? The obvious answer is that violence must be reduced and the two sides must return to negotiations. Upon coming to power Sharon offered to negotiate a ‘long term interim agreement’ within which Israel will pull out of 53 per cent of the West Bank and Gaza. Coming after the long years of ‘Oslo’ and the bad blood that has since passed between Israelis and Palestinians this is a non-starter, just another prevarication. Negotiations must start where they stopped in Taba before Sharon came to power. This is easier said than done. The events in Palestine/Israel since September 2000 have set us back many years. They have confirmed each side’s worst suspicions and fears about the other. The settlement project of the West Bank and Gaza has been Sharon’s life work and he is unlikely to agree to withdrawal from the settlements. In any case his government will collapse the moment that negotiations appear on the agenda. Sharon would not even have the backing of his own party on this issue.

The problem, however, goes deeper. A newly-elected government could well make Sharon look moderate. The whole political map in Israel has shifted far to the right. Labour has ousted its Oslo leadership and has chosen hardliners instead. Despite this change of face, the polls show that were elections to be held in Israel now (April 2002) Labour, associated in the public memory with the Oslo process, would be decimated and reduced to a third of its present strength. Within the Likud, Nethanyahu marshals as much support as Sharon. The National Religious, the settlers’ party, has chosen a new leader in a secular former general who turned religious and declares that he was chosen by God to lead Israel. He stands openly for war and ethnic cleansing. Further to the right of these are two parties which now have more than six per cent of the vote and who also support ethnic cleansing and, as the polls show, may double their vote.

I have painted a dark picture. I do not think that Israeli society is ripe, from within, for a resolution of the Israeli–Arab conflict. The problem goes much deeper than whether Arafat is a partner or not. Israelis cannot agree among themselves about what peace means in terms of their national aspirations and being part of the Middle East. Until Jews in Israel know what they are, until they decide on the extent of the territory on which they wish to build their state, they cannot agree on borders. Until they agree what kind of society and state they
they cannot accommodate non-Jews whose territories they covet. They cannot even attract the majority of western Jewry as long as there is no religious pluralism in Israel. They cannot be secular until they separate state and religion.

Israeli Judaism is riddled with contradictions; Jews in Israel have not resolved the inner contradictions imposed on Judaism by modernity. Zionism, which proclaimed to have the solution, has only transplanted those problems to the Middle East, a region which, in itself, has not resolved its contradictions with modernity. This is a dangerous brew indeed in a context where the growing contradictions that attend global American hegemony seem increasingly to be coming to a head in this region of the world.

NOTES


2 At a conference on Islam, Judaism and the Political Role of Religions in the Middle East, which I attended last year, philosophers, theologians, Rabbis, Mullahs, historians and political scientists argued *ad nauseam* about ‘essences’ and ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ interpellations and interpretations of those religions. God may be one but there are many Christianities, Islams and Judaisms, and they vary and change in time and place.


7 See D. Shumsky, ‘Ethnicity and Citizenship in the Perception of Russian Israelis’, in Theory and Criticism, 19 (Fall), 2001 [Hebrew].

8 Excerpt from a speech by Itzhak Rabin in the Levy Eshkol prize-giving ceremony, 6 October 1994.

9 See Tzvia Greenfeld, *They are Afraid*, Tel Aviv: Chemed Publishers, 2001 [Hebrew].
12 See Asher Arian ‘Israeli Public Opinion on National Security’, *Jaffé Center for Strategic Studies Memoranda no. 60*, Tel Aviv University, August 2001. www.tau.ac.il/jcss/publications.html#memoranda, also: www.tau.ac.il/peace/peace_index/p_index.html