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TRENDS ANALYSES REPORT

THE JEWISH DEFENSE LEAGUE
An Update

ALISA H. KESTEN
Trends Analyses

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AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE
Trends Analyses Report

On March 10, 1980, aides of President Carter met with leaders of Jewish organizations at the Harmonie Club in New York City to explain the recent United States vote in the United Nations condemning the Israeli settlements on the occupied West Bank. Outside, demonstrators including Rabbi Meir Kahane, founder of the Jewish Defense League (JDL), attempted to break through the barricades and enter the building. A fracas with police ensued.

This widely publicized incident marked Rabbi Kahane's return to active leadership of the JDL, and may well portend renewed militancy by a revitalized Jewish Defense League, after a long period of factionalism, internal bickering and a drastic decrease in membership.

When the Jewish Defense League was organized in July 1968, by Rabbi Kahane, he listed three purposes for the group: Jewish pride, Jewish self-defense and Jewish "political power." Kahane was National Chairman; Bertram Zweibon, a New York attorney, was General Counsel. A 5-member Executive Board and a 12-member National Board determined policy. The identifying slogan of the JDL during the 70's was "Never Again," a reference to the six million Jews murdered in the Nazi holocaust.

Over the years, JDL membership claims have fluctuated from 1,000 (Time magazine, 7/4/69) to "about 7,000"(The New York Times, 5/25/70).

For a number of years, the League maintained Camp Jedel, in Woodbourne, New York, which it used "to build a cadre of Jewish street fighters." It also claimed chapters in Philadelphia, Cleveland, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles "and other smaller cities," as well as Canada.

Rabbi Kahane was ordained at the Mirrer Yeshiva in Brooklyn in 1957. From 1964 to 1967 he was director of the Center for Political Studies, a private research firm in Washington, D.C., as well as an associate editor (1960-69) of the Jewish Press, a flamboyant nationally circulated periodical published in New York. Rabbi Kahane emigrated to Israel in the fall of 1971 but returns to the U.S. often. He maintains a residence in Israel in Kiryat Arba, near Hebron. Kahane tried to win a seat in the Knesset during the 1973 elections, thereby creating a legitimate forum for the JDL, but this attempt failed.

Since Rabbi Kahane emigrated to Israel, the JDL has presented a relatively low profile, with occasional bursts of militancy.

In June 1973, Bertram Zweibon resigned as National JDL Vice-Chairman, and William Perl, a Maryland dentist and militant activist, was elected as National Chairman. Kahane continued to function as "advisor" and assumed the role of International Chairman.

Perl resigned as National Chairman on January 15, 1974, because of "the expense and complexity of directing an organization out of Washington while most Jews live in New York." In April, Rabbi Kahane announced the creation of a new organization, the Jewish Identity Center, based in Jerusalem. The Center, he said, would hold classes and distribute militant literature.

Also in April 1974, David Fisch, a devoted follower of Kahane and JDL activist, became JDL National Director. At that time, the League claimed a membership of 8,000. Fisch resigned two months later, citing disagreements with the Executive Board.

In September 1974, Kahane convened a meeting of 250 JDL activists in New York City to rebuild the organization under the motto, "Strength with Sanity -- Militancy with Normalcy." The convention voted to expel an ultramilitary faction led by Zweibon. On a JDL flyer distributed in January 1975, Mal Lebowitz was listed as Executive Director and Rabbi Kahane as International Chairman.

In 1976, Bonnie Pechter, director of the Philadelphia chapter, assumed the title of National Director. Under her leadership, the JDL initiated a series of militant activities in the Philadelphia area, attracting widespread media coverage.

In October 1976, Kahane announced that JDL members would be assigned the task of "infiltrating and taking control" of major Jewish organizations, and launched a new magazine, Kahane, to disseminate his philosophy. But in 1977, Kahane quit the JDL in a policy dispute with Pechter, accusing her of making "empty threats" against American Nazis in connection with the proposed Nazi march in Skokie, Illinois.

The January 1978 issue of Kahane reported creation of a new "activist, non-violent group" called The Chug (The Circle), to "galvanize" the masses of middle class Jews into action. In March 1978, Irving Rubin, head of the JDL Los Angeles Chapter, was arrested on charges of solicitation of murder when he announced a $500 reward to anyone "who kills, maims or seriously injures a member of the American Nazi Party." The charge is still in the courts.

1978 was also a period of self examination by those few who were still active in JDL administration. Pechter resigned as National

Director of the JDL, because of marital problems and dissatisfaction with her leadership. There was a consensus that the group had alienated the community they had set out to help, that they were involved in too many issues, and that they must moderate their tactics. The leadership decided to concentrate on combatting American neo-Nazis and German war criminals in the United States.

In June 1979, Brett Becker, former director of the Florida chapter of JDL became the group's National Director. Becker appealed for the "establishment of a secret Jewish strike force; an underground that will quietly and professionally eliminate those Jew haters that are both a threat and danger to our existence," an appeal which appears to be at variance with decisions reached in 1978 on new tactics. At the time, JDL units were active in New York City, Miami, Los Angeles and San Diego.

In January 1980, Kahane returned to the JDL as International Chairman. "We've got rid of the crazies and can now rebuild,"(sic) he explained (St. Louis Light, 2/27/80). Irving Rubin is currently listed as JDL National Chairman. It is unclear as to what distinguishes Rubin's position as National Chairman and Becker's as National Director.

In recent months there has been a noticeable increase in JDL activities. Units have been formed in Atlanta and on Long Island, and the national headquarters in New York City has announced formation of a "Chaya Squad" to serve as "a tactical defense unit of the JDL." On January 15, the south Florida JDL unit announced formation of a "Jewish gun club" designed to teach Jews "to defend themselves against attacks by anti-Semites." On January 17, the New York City unit demonstrated to protest the purchase of a Manhattan townhouse by the PLO; and on January 22, it staged a sit-in at the Park Avenue office of the U.S. Olympic Committee. An April 14 JDL demonstration in Philadelphia ended with the beating of two members of the local Ukrainian community. The incident occurred outside the home of a man who allegedly collaborated with the Nazis during World War II. Two JDLers have been charged with various assault and weapons offenses in connection with the incident.

Since his return to the JDL, Rabbi Kahane has undertaken a series of nation-wide speaking engagements before synagogue groups in an effort to raise funds and form new or reactivate dormant JDL groups. Recent reports indicate he is back in Israel where on April 29 he was detained by police on charges of causing a riot in the West Bank town of Ramallah. Kahane's talent for raising money and attracting a dedicated following appears likely to lead to a revived and reactivated Jewish Defense League in the months ahead.

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