

New Light on the Israeli-Arab Conflict and the Refugee Problem and Its Origins

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The partial and limited opening of the Israeli government archives relating to the first years of the state's existence has resulted in a number of surprises among scholars, journalists, and the Israeli public at large.¹ Even though the documentation in question is incomplete—many files are still considered ultra-secret—it has been sufficient to shatter several of the myths dear not only to the Israelis but to western opinion in general. One finds, for example, proof that there was a policy favoring new immigrants from the West over their brethren from the Arab and Islamic countries, this contrary to the propaganda of the time.

But it is the documents involving the conflict with the Arab world, particularly the Palestinians, that have aroused the greatest interest among researchers. The vast majority of Israelis have always believed that Israel and its leaders have consistently done everything possible to achieve peace with their Arab neighbors. In their view, then, full responsibility for the successive wars, the Palestinian refugee problem, the arms race, and so on, falls squarely on the Arabs. As for the 1948 war, justice was totally and unquestionably on their side.

But now, documents of the period—and Israeli documents at that—make it impossible to view these questions in the same light. It is true that the overwhelming majority of the Palestinians were strongly opposed to the dismemberment of their country. Nonetheless, it is now clear that large

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numbers of them did not participate in the fighting that broke out with the UN's 29 November 1947 adoption of the Partition Plan. Israeli documents emphasize this fact in several places. On 15 December 1947, for example, David Ben-Gurion, head of the Jewish community in Palestine, wrote to Moshe Sharett, head of the political department of the Jewish Agency: "The [Palestinian] peasant masses are not taking part in the riots." Three months later, Ben-Gurion stated in a letter to Sharett and Golda Meir: "The [Palestinian] Arabs in their great majority are not seeking war with us." In most regions of Palestine, especially in villages and in the countryside, the local Arab leaders had developed contacts and in many cases even signed pacts with their Jewish neighbors in the hopes of avoiding a generalized conflagration.²

This fact did not alter the strategy followed by the Haganah, the underground army of the Jewish community, to say nothing of the dissident terrorist organizations such as Menahem Begin's Irgun and the Stern Gang. According to numerous documents, all these groups consistently sought war throughout the country with the aim of defeating the Palestinians and driving them from the land. The inevitable consequence was the extension of the battlefield: the slogan of the time was "The front is everywhere." It was thus that Ben-Gurion's advisors counseled him to "wage a total war," "to strike the whole of the [Palestinian] transport and commerce," "to strike ruthlessly and over a vast territory, without any other considerations."³ As early as the beginning of 1948, during the first phase of the war, Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary: "During the assault we must be ready to strike a decisive blow; that is, either to destroy the town or expel its inhabitants so our people can replace them."⁴

The "good neighbor" pacts signed between Jewish and Arab villages did not help the Palestinians escape expulsion or massacre. The pact signed with the Jewish village of Givat Sha'ul, for example, did not spare Dayr Yasin, in the western suburb of Jerusalem, where the two dissident terrorist groups Irgun and Stern slaughtered 254 inhabitants, mostly women and children, on 4 October 1948. The Haganah, later to become the official Israeli army, also committed atrocities during the 1948 war. However most of the files relating to these atrocities remain under lock and key, on the pretext that their opening could harm the national interests. A writer for the *Jerusalem Post*, Benny Morris, petitioned Israel's High Court of Justice to order the state archives to make available the files dealing with a number of massacres committed in 1948, but his request was rejected in October 1986.

Still, researchers have managed to record a number of massacres committed in Palestinian villages, as for example in the village of Nasr al-Din near Tiberias before the creation of Israel, and in the village of Duwaymah, west of Hebron, in October 1948. In the latter, scores were killed by the soldiers of the 89th battalion.⁵

Documents from the state archives reveal that as far back as 1948 Israeli policy had two components: total war against the Palestinians on the one hand and a “Jordanian option” on the other. According to the files, there was an understanding of sorts between the Jewish leaders in Palestine and King ‘Abdallah of Jordan concerning the division of the country between them, although no precise and definitive border had been agreed upon. Four days before the proclamation of the Israeli state, Nahum Goldmann, at the time a member of the Jewish Agency and president of the World Jewish Congress, declared that the Jewish Agency hoped the Hashemite king would represent the Arab community in Palestine and would be recognized as its leader by the United Nations. On the other hand, Moshe Sharett, foreign minister of the new state, favored an agreement with the Palestinians and at the beginning of 1949 still supported the idea of an independent Palestinian government. He was in the minority, however, and subsequently abandoned this preference himself.

On the eve of the creation of Israel, Ben-Gurion, with an eye toward eventual expansion beyond the November 1947 partition plan, vigorously opposed all attempts to draw the boundaries of the future state. His view was approved by his colleagues, except for Pinhas Rosen (named minister of justice several days later) who asked that the frontiers of the emerging state be established. The following dialogue between him and Ben-Gurion was recorded in the archives:

Rosen: There is the question of the borders, which we can't ignore.

Ben-Gurion: Everything is possible. If we [the provisional government] decide here that the borders are not to be mentioned, that is how it will be. Nothing is a priori.

Rosen: It's not a question of a priori, but a question of law.

Ben-Gurion: The law is something that men decide.⁶

Three days before the proclamation of the state, Ben-Gurion explained: “If the Arabs make war . . . we will occupy Western Galilee and the route to Jerusalem; these regions will be part of our state. So why should we take a decision now?”⁷ And indeed, in the course of the 1948 war Israel

extended its borders considerably. While the partition plan had set aside 55 percent of Palestine for a Jewish state compared to 45 percent for an Arab state (whereas the Jewish population at the time was 660,000 as opposed to 1,250,000 Arabs), by the time the 1949 armistice agreements were signed, Israel had occupied almost 80 percent of Palestine. It should be noted that on the eve of the war, the Jews owned only 5 percent of the total land of Palestine.

Given the results of the war, it is not difficult to understand why Ben-Gurion categorized the Arabs' hostility as "blessed." Nonetheless, Israeli researchers are divided on the extent to which Ben-Gurion's strategy itself contributed to hardening this hostility. What is certain is that Ben-Gurion's dreams in 1948 already extended beyond the partition lines. On 24 May of that year, he confided in his journal: "When we break the Arab Legion [the army of Jordan] and bomb Amman, we shall liquidate Jordan, and it is then that Syria, too, will fall." He likewise had "plans" for Lebanon. On the same day he wrote: "Muslim power [in Lebanon] is artificial and easy to smash. We must create a Christian state whose southern border will stretch along the Litani [the river in South Lebanon, between Tyre and Sidon]; it is then that we will sign a peace treaty with it."

Nor do the archives of the young state reveal that burning thirst for peace with the Arab world which had so prominent a place in the public discourse. One example among many others: In January 1949, Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli dispatched an emissary to Paris to contact representatives of Israel in order to initiate a dialogue. The detailed translation of the Hebrew text, copies of which were received on 1 February 1949 by the Israeli minister of foreign affairs as well as by the director general, legal advisor, and political department of the ministry, reads as follows:

The day before yesterday, Alfonse showed me a letter sent to him by Ilyas Nimzar [the Syrian envoy] and meant for us. This "wretch" writes about his intense activity promoting peace between Israel and the Arabs as well as about his success in persuading many people. He said, among other things, that he met the president of the Syrian Republic and that he (al-Quwatli) is prepared to negotiate a peace settlement with us on the basis of two states in Palestine linked by a federation or confederation. Ilyas wants us to reply urgently. If our response is positive, he is prepared to come to Paris with another representative of Shukri al-Quwatli in order to negotiate. I explained "tactfully" to Alfonse that it was better if his "pal" didn't bother us with this business of federation or confederation. Alfonse agreed, and added that he would leave as well and will see the situation with his own eyes.

I conveyed your response to Alfonse concerning his trip. He is awaiting your final decision.

—Zi'amah

Al-Quwatli's successor, Colonel Husni Za'im, likewise proposed a face-to-face meeting with Prime Minister Ben-Gurion in early 1949 in order to negotiate peace, and this even before the armistice agreement had been signed. Za'im went so far as to propose the permanent settlement of half the Palestinian refugees in Syria: 300,000 to 350,000 people out of a total of 700,000. A revolutionary proposal, one could say, at least from the Israeli point of view. But Ben-Gurion's reaction was not equal to the gesture. On 16 April 1949 he wrote in his journal: "The Syrians have proposed a separate peace with Israel as well as military cooperation. But they are asking for half of Lake Tiberias [the Syrians later scaled down their request, asking only for a return to the status quo under the mandate, i.e., that Syrian villagers be allowed to water their livestock on the eastern shore of the lake]. I asked . . . that the Syrians be informed in the clearest possible terms that they must first sign an armistice agreement based on the international border."⁸ The American secretary of state, Dean Acheson, and the U.S. ambassador in Damascus made efforts to persuade the Israeli leaders not to underestimate the Syrian initiative, but to no avail. Even a moderate like Abba Eban supported the prime minister on this subject. The 14 July 1949 entry in Ben-Gurion's diary reads as follows: "Abba Eban came to see me. He sees no need to run after peace. The armistice agreements [he says] are enough for us; if we run after peace, the Arabs will ask of us a high price . . . [he says] we should wait a few years." Tom Segev stresses that a school of thought was emerging in the foreign ministry at the time which believed that peace with the Arabs was not necessary and that Israel could make do with the armistice agreements. Mr. Sharett referred to such thinking as "original." Meanwhile, the Israeli authorities were seeking Arabs with whom to sign a peace treaty. They wanted to create a Palestinian puppet government headed by the lawyer Muhammad Nimr al-Hawari. Mr. Sharett (yet again) supported this attempt, which ended in failure. Subsequently, Mr. al-Hawari was authorized by the Israeli government to return to Nazareth, his home town, where he was appointed judge.⁹

Nor did the problem of the Palestinian refugees unduly preoccupy the leaders of the new state. Ben-Gurion opposed any Israeli involvement in efforts to resolve this painful problem. He was convinced, along with Moshe Sharett and other Israeli leaders, that the problem would disappear with

time. The following evaluation prepared by the Near East Department of the Foreign Ministry is instructive: "The [Palestinian] refugees will find their place in the diaspora. Those who can resist will live thanks to natural selection, the others will simply crumble. Some of them will persist, but the majority will become a human heap, the scum of the earth and will sink into the lowest levels of the Arab world."¹⁰

Israel's spokesmen have always insisted that the Arab countries and the Palestinian leaders had incited the Palestinian population to flee the country and that Israel, therefore, bears no responsibility for the creation or existence of the problem. But the files relating to this question in the state archives reveal a different story. A report from the Arabic section of the political department of the Jewish Agency dated 1 March 1948 underlines that the Arab Higher Committee, the leadership body of the Palestinian community, was making efforts to halt the exodus of the Palestinians. Indeed, there is not a single document, tract, article, or radio broadcast of the time which called on the Palestinian Arabs to leave their homes and flee.

A twenty-four-page report from the military intelligence SHAI (information service) of the Haganah dated 30 June 1948, affirms that "70 percent of the refugees had abandoned their homes at the time of the first wave (up until 1 June 1948) because of hostile acts committed by the Haganah, Irgun, and the Stern group." This first wave involved some 400,000 people. The second wave, of some 300,000, set out for exile between June and December of 1948. It was thus that a number of cities and about 250 villages were emptied of their inhabitants. The two main reasons for the Palestinian exodus of 1948 were expulsion by the Israeli army and fear of massacre. As for the expulsions carried out in 1949, involving another several thousand, and those of 1950 (the inhabitants of the city of Majdal, in the south), they were organized and implemented by the military governors who had already been installed in the regions by that time.

A paragraph from the memoirs of Yitzhak Rabin, former chief of staff of the army, prime minister from 1974 to 1976 and currently defense minister, revealed that after the cities of Lydda and Ramleh were conquered by the Israeli army in July 1948, their 50,000 inhabitants were driven from the country under the orders Rabin received from Prime Minister Ben-Gurion.¹¹ The paragraph, censored in the Israeli edition, was published in its entirety in the American press.

Contemporary documents show that the leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine were counting on the eventual Arab exodus as early as December 1947. At a meeting of the governing bodies of his own Mapai

party on 7 February 1948, Ben-Gurion spoke of “big changes” that would occur in the composition of the population of the country. Tom Segev specified that he was referring to the Arab exodus, which he welcomed.¹² The following month, on 16 March 1948, Ben-Gurion said in a meeting of Mapai’s central committee that “a land with the Arabs is totally different from one without Arabs.”

Yigal Allon, the commander of Palmach (commando unit of the Haganah), always utilized the tactic of leaving “escape routes” for the Arab inhabitants. Speaking of the conquest of Safad in May 1948, he recounted: “We had left the rear lines open so as to ‘assist’ the departure of the inhabitants.”¹³ Another method used in the Galilee to provoke the evacuation of the Palestinian population was for local Jewish leaders to spread rumors about the arrival in the region of vast military reinforcements preparing to launch an assault against the Arab villages. A word of advice was added: better leave now. Tens of thousands of peasants took flight as a result.¹⁴ The famous Plan Dalet of March 1948 prepared by Colonel Yigal Yadin (later deputy prime minister of Israel) established several types of action against the Arab villages “to assure the security of the Jewish defense network”: one was the destruction of those villages that could not be occupied permanently; another was the occupation of a locality followed by the expulsion of its population.¹⁵

Finally, the fate of the Palestinian refugees did not evoke feelings of guilt or remorse among the Israelis. Quite the contrary. The moderate Moshe Sharett wrote on 15 June 1948 that “the exodus of the Arabs is a magnificent phenomenon in the history of the country [Palestine]. From a certain standpoint, it is even more splendid than the creation of the state of Israel It opens possibilities that take one’s breath away for resolving in a radical and permanent fashion the most difficult problem faced by the state of Israel [the demographic problem].”¹⁶ Ben-Gurion’s biographer, the historian Michel Bar-Zohar, recounted at the centennial of Ben-Gurion’s birth how the Jewish leader had watched the Arab exodus from Haifa with the words: “What a beautiful sight!” And when he came to Nazareth after it was conquered, he angrily inquired of the military commander, Brigadier General Haim Laskov: “What are they still doing here, the inhabitants?”¹⁷ According to certain sources, there had been a tacit order to force the local population to leave, but the commander had not implemented it.

After having contributed to the expulsion of the Arab inhabitants from their homes, Ben-Gurion played the innocent, declaring at a meeting of the People’s Council (the provisional parliament) on 4 May 1948: “The events have now proved who is truly tied to this country, who defends each town

and village, even the most isolated, and who is ready to abandon it at the first sign of trouble.”

The files from the state archives relating to the expulsions of the Palestinians in 1948 and 1949 have been off limits to the researchers since May 1985.¹⁸ Some of the file names supplied by Tom Segev are instructive: “expulsion of the inhabitants,” “transfer of the inhabitants,” “destruction of Arab villages,” and so on. Ben-Gurion wrote in his diary of “Ministerial Commissions for Displacement and Expulsion” and “Ministerial Commissions for Transfer.”

Not only during but also after the 1948 war, the abandoned Arab towns and villages were either destroyed or repopulated by new Jewish immigrants. Even the ruined village of Dayr Yasin was resettled, a fact that provoked some criticism from liberal Israelis, including the philosopher Martin Buber. On the other hand, the nationalist right has always bragged about Dayr Yasin. The following are a few excerpts from a heated debate in the Knesset on 1 August 1949:

Yaacov Meridor, Herut (replying to the communist Tawfiq Tubi): It is thanks to Dayr Yasin, sir, that we won the war.

Aharon Cizling, socialist: Don't be proud of Dayr Yasin.

Esther Raziel-Naor, Herut: There is no reason to be ashamed.

Arie Ben-Eliezer, Herut: And how many Dayr Yasins did your people commit? You can ask the defense minister (David Ben-Gurion) if you don't know.

A military government was set up in the Arab regions of Israel before the end of the war. Its principal task was to prevent the Palestinians from returning to their homes; it was also called upon to expel, here and there, those Arabs who had remained throughout the hostilities in areas the Israeli government wanted. The vast goods the refugees left behind were confiscated by the state or taken over by individuals or collective settlements, kibbutzim, and so on. “These abandoned [or confiscated] goods,” wrote the socialist leader Arié Eliav, “are one of the most profound sources of the evil of our existence.”¹⁹ From time to time, voices are raised to express shame about what took place during the 1948 war. The deputy Yussef Lam, of Mapai (social democrat), Ben-Gurion's party, declared during a debate in the Knesset: “Our behavior during the war concerning property and human life—the behavior of all of us—is not what one would have expected of representatives of the Jewish people. We should all be ashamed.”²⁰



1. Among other works which are also based on these documents it is worth mentioning the excellent book by Tom Segev, *1949: The First Israelis* (New York: The Free Press, 1986). Segev is an academic, the former editor of the daily, *Ha'Aretz*, and is currently the codirector of the political weekly *Koterit Rashit*. Segev also consulted the press of the period and conducted interviews with political veterans. The book was originally published in Hebrew and has also been translated into Arabic.
2. Yoram Nimrod, *Meetings at the Crossroads: Jews and Arabs in Palestine During Recent Generations* (in Hebrew) (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1984), 9.
3. At a meeting at the beginning of the war, 1–2 January 1948.
4. Nimrod, 92.
5. *Hadashot*, 24 and 26 August 1984. The journalists of this daily discovered a mass grave at the time of their inquiry.
6. Segev, xviii.
7. Verbal proceedings of the directorate of the provisional government, 12 May 1948, 113.
8. Segev, 16; Nimrod, 148.
9. Segev, 33.
10. Israel State Archives, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Files—refugees, no. 2444/19.
11. *New York Times*, 23 October 1979.
12. Segev, 25.
13. *The Book of the Palmach* (in Hebrew), vol. 1 (Tel-Aviv, 1955), 185.
14. *Ibid.*, 286.
15. *Hadashot*, 11 January 1985.
16. *La Documentation d'Israël*, vol. 1, 163.
17. From a broadcast of the Israeli state radio, channel two, 22 October 1986.
18. *Jerusalem Post*, 30 May 1985.
19. Arié Eliav, *L'échelle d'Israël: le rêve et sa signification*, (Tel-Aviv, 1976), 91.
20. *Proceedings of the Knesset*, vol. III, session of 22 November 1949, 56.