

# Colonial Anthropology: The Haganah Village Intelligence Archives

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Since its formation in September 1940, Haganah's Intelligence Service (Shai) began a complete and systematic survey of hundreds of Palestinian villages.<sup>1</sup> The survey took place between 1940 and 1947 and was supported by different institutions of the Yishuv.<sup>2</sup> The survey included aerial photography and field information on social, political, economic, and topographic aspects of these villages. During this period, six hundred villages out of eight hundred were surveyed,<sup>3</sup> usually by the same method and approach. This study takes the case of al-Bireh,<sup>4</sup> which neighbors Ramallah, to explore two aspects of the "Village Files."

First, the timing of the survey, which preceded the 1948 war, and the nature of the information gathered was a necessary precursor to ethnic cleansing and the obliteration of these villages during and after the 1948 war within the framework of exclusive settler-colonialism: a framework which sees no place for the indigenous population within the new established colonial entity.<sup>5</sup> The selective and concentrated nature of the information recorded in what are known as the "villages files" indicates what the Zionist intelligence wanted to know about these Arab villages. Like any colonial anthropological knowledge, the information was intended to cast light on all aspects of material and moral strength of the indigenous society, with an eye to subjugate them.<sup>6</sup>

Second, although it was not one of the goals of the survey's planners, it is nevertheless possible to use these sources in writing the social history of Palestine during the British Mandate. Its files contain economic and social data that cannot be found elsewhere, including local oral history sources, including, for example, the number of immigrants from each village to the United States or the names of the people who owned radios in 1943, and so on. The Village Files

become even more important in light of the destruction and looting of an important part of the written Palestinian cultural heritage during the Nakba.<sup>7</sup> It is indeed an irony of history to use what was intended to destroy a nation to construct that nation's history.

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From the beginning of the Zionist presence in Palestine in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Yishuv leadership and institutions gave great importance to documenting and archiving all aspects of the indigenous community. Building a national archive, as in the West – from whence the leaders of the Zionist movement came – was an integral part of Israeli state formation and identity building. In parallel, the Yishuv began to gather a variety of information about Palestinians to meet various goals and ends, most importantly intelligence to formulate a strategy of surveillance and control of the indigenous people.<sup>8</sup>

Most Israeli historical literature sees the systematic collection of information about the Palestinian society beginning only in the 1940s (i.e., with the formation of Shai). Studies by Israeli historian Yoav Gelber and Shimri Salomon, however, put forward a different view.<sup>9</sup> Based on my simple personal experience with the Central Zionist Archives and on my understanding of the dynamics of the Zionist project, I argue that the collection of information on different aspects of Palestinian society, including villages, began long before that. In fact, the “village files,” though their goals changed over time, relied on a practice that started even before the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897 (which institutionalized political Zionism under the leadership of Theodor Herzl). In this regard, the archive of Rehovot settlement (founded in 1890 and today a major city) shows an early attention to subjecting Palestinians in the surrounding villagers to surveillance and collecting information about them.<sup>10</sup>

European colonial powers, most notably France and Great Britain, were also looking for opportunities to control the region and fragment the Ottoman Empire for their own interests. They, too, began to collect information about Ottoman Palestine (including its society, culture, and so forth) well before the Zionist enterprise. (The Palestine Exploration Fund, for example, started in the 1860s.) Even earlier, works such as the study of Greater Syria and Egypt by the French historian Count de Volney formed an important database for the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt and Palestine starting in 1798.<sup>11</sup> The geographic and historical survey of the Sinai Peninsula conducted by T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia), as is known, was vital to the British campaign during the First World War.<sup>12</sup> Recent studies show that even European clergy living in the East were often recruited to spy on the Arab world and the Ottoman army during the war.<sup>13</sup> We should consider the Zionist attempts to collect information about the Palestinians as an extension of these previous colonial surveys, despite any different objectives.

From the beginning, the quest to seize the largest amount of Arab land, at the lowest prices, upon which to establish Jewish settlements was the first key factor that pushed the Jewish leaders of the Yishuv to spy on Palestinian society.<sup>14</sup> The Zionists were interested in the identity of landowners and their economic situation, and in understanding local culture. The information gathered served not only as a vital tool to expropriate land, but

also to provide general information about Palestinian society.<sup>15</sup> Zionist land brokers like Yehoshua Hankin (1864–1945), considered the most important broker of land in the history of Yishuv, perfected local dialects and adopted local customs and traditions, and not only succeeded in deceiving the peasants to sell their land, but were able to provide intelligence which was later employed for military purposes.<sup>16</sup>

The second factor that pushed the Jewish leaders of the Yishuv to spy on Palestinian society is complementary to the first, but even more important: using intelligence to counter Palestinian resistance to the Zionist project.<sup>17</sup> Palestinian villagers became a central component in the struggle against Zionist settlers from the 1880s (four decades before the formation of the Palestinian national movement). Because villages enjoyed self-sufficiency and were the main suppliers of the cities with food (including grains, vegetables, fruits, and meats of all kinds) as well as labor and military manpower (all vital to the steadfastness of cities during any war), it is no coincidence, then, that the survey focused on Palestinian villages.

Shimri Salomon, deputy director of the Haganah archives, confirms the priority given to this project by the Haganah in his research on the Village Files project and surveys of Palestinian villages:

During the Arab Revolt [1936–1939] the villages served as bases of departure and places of sanctuary for the gangs – the [Arab] armed groups that acted against the Mandate authorities and against the Yishuv. The villagers also supplied the gangs with money and food, and many members of the gangs were recruited from the villages. Collecting information about the access roads to the village, the places of hiding in its vicinity, its sources of water, its physical structure and the location of observation points in our direction, and the concentration of this information and of other relevant information in a special file was considered a vital and effective means in case the need should arise to act against these villages.<sup>18</sup>

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My case study is based on the analysis of one document from the al-Bireh village file in the Haganah archive: Intelligence Report (105/229/Summer 1943), entitled “al-Bireh. Judiciary and Police of Ramallah.”

It is necessary, first, to explain the reader the historical context of the Palestinian village survey project; its goals; how information was gathered, its sources and accuracy; and, most importantly, why we believe that the material contained in the “villages files,” which was gathered during the 1940s up to 1947 (as opposed to the previous survey of Palestinian villages and cities, which were nearly completed at the end of the 1930s), was designed to implement ethnic cleansing against Palestinian Arab society. Finally, I will try to answer the question: Is it possible to use this information to write the social history of Palestine, even when this was not the objective of those who gathered its data?

## Historical Context of the Village Files

The roots of the first Zionist intelligence agency meant to spy on Arabs go back to 1918, before the end of the First World War (November 1918) and before Britain's occupation of the whole of Palestine (September 1918), when the Zionist Commission headed by Chaim Weizmann arrived in Palestine.<sup>19</sup> The task of the commission, which was recognized by the British government, was to: represent the Yishuv before the British authorities; transform the Balfour Declaration into reality; establish and reorganize Jewish institutions – including the Hebrew University – as a foundation for the nascent Jewish state; and, finally, to prevent land speculation that could harm the process of land sales.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of 1918, the Zionist Commission decided the establishment of Misrad Haydi'ot (the Information Office). Liova Schneersohn, a former activist in the NILI spy network, led the office. Schneersohn recruited men with experience in covert action, especially former NILI members, to work in the office, a fact that indicates the spying nature of the office. The office mission concentrated on gathering information and spying on Palestinian Arab society, especially its leaders and prominent families and closely followed the activities of the nascent Palestinian national movement, which began to organize its ranks after the British occupation through the Muslim-Christian Associations. The Information Office also gave also special attention to land and property and landowners, whether Palestinians or Arabs residing abroad.<sup>21</sup>

The office, which used divide and rule methods and provided British authorities with “security” information, was closed in August 1920 due mainly to internal disagreements.<sup>22</sup> Immediately after its closure, other spying institutions of the Yishuv (the Arab section of the Jewish Agency and the Haganah) inherited the Information Office files and personnel and continued its tasks with even greater vigor and sophistication. By 1939, multiple intelligence arms of the Yishuv completed a valuable and detailed classified survey about the majority of Palestinian villages. Each file within this survey contained details about the number of residents and socioeconomic structure of the village, drawing sketches of its topography (without using aerial photography) and detailing its means of transport, the quality of its land, its access to water, its primary sources of income, the religious affiliations of the residents, the names of important people, and so on.

But this survey was not, for offensive military purposes, fully-fledged and complete. After the end of the Arab Revolt in Palestine and the release of the White Paper in 1939, the Yishuv leadership began to draw lessons from the confrontation with the Palestinian “rebellion.” The leadership questioned several shortcomings that they experienced during the rebellion. First, the information about what was happening on the Arab side, despite its abundance, was insufficient, nor was it centralized in a systematic way, to deal with the new changes sweeping Arab society after the White Paper. Second, the Zionist movement lacked clear plans to work against this society by leveraging the power of the Yishuv.

Indeed, the White Paper of 1939 (issued at the same time that the general survey of the villages had been achieved) was more important than shortcomings of information in pushing the Yishuv leadership to initiate the Village Files project. The White Paper, issued unilaterally by the British government, was a shock in the eyes of the Zionist movement

and a significant retreat from the recommendations of the Palestine Royal Commission (known alternately as the Peel Commission) of 1937. It marked a significant turning point in the process of gathering information. Until the issuance of this paper, the leadership of the Yishuv was confident that it could depend on Britain to uproot the Arab residents that were “found” within the bounds of a nascent Jewish state.

The recommendations of the Peel Commission, which provided for division of Palestine between Arabs and Jews and the transfer of most Palestinian residents within the future Jewish state from their land to an Arab area that was supposed to be annexed into the emirate of Transjordan, was reassuring to Zionist leaders. The White Paper of 1939 – which held that the Balfour Declaration did not mean the establishment of a Jewish state, and limited the appropriation of Palestinian lands, and the immigration of Jews to Palestine – led to the realization among the Yishuv’s leaders that Britain’s role in establishing a national Jewish homeland was nearing its end; Britain would not transfer (that is, expel) the Palestinians on their behalf, and if the Zionist movement wanted to achieve ethnic cleansing it would have to carry it out on its own.

This realization began the countdown to the 1948 war, a war whose main goal from the Zionist perspective was the creation of Herzl’s state of the Jews (and eliminating the presence of Arabs who lived within the boundary of this state). The Zionist leadership realized that such a war required an extra leap in terms of building institutions and at the level of the information collected to accomplish these new tasks. Meanwhile, the Arabs of Palestine were substantially oblivious and completely unprepared for what was being planned for them; after the suppression of the revolt in 1939, the idea of renewed confrontation, not to mention their forced expulsion, was too much to handle.

In September 1940, David Ben-Gurion ordered the creation of Haganah Intelligence Services (Shai).<sup>23</sup> Immediately, Shai opened an Arab department under the leadership of Ezra Danin. The department commissioned the development of a network of Arab informants who would gather information about their communities.<sup>24</sup> It also commissioned experts to collect and archive new and complete information about Palestinian villages and towns to add to and update the previous village survey of 1939.<sup>25</sup> The new material would contain a detailed record of Palestinian villages and towns, including the most important details of its geography and topography, including roads and accessibility, natural obstacles like walls or cactus trees, and caves; the social and economic structure, including population census and religious affiliation; the names of clans, their families and *mukhtars*, and the number of members of each family; relationships between families within the village and between families in the village and other villages; and the quality of its land, including the number and locations of springs and wells, and livestock and agricultural wealth (even such details as the number of chickens); other sources of income such as government jobs or remittances from expatriates; and the collection of detailed political information “about the extent of its involvement in the events of 1936–1939,” the names of fighters, the number and types of weapons available, the villagers’ political sympathies (toward the party of the Mufti al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni or toward the opposition), and relationships with the Mandate authorities.

Zionist interest in collecting information and spying on the Palestinian people was

closely linked to the evolution and pace of the Palestinian national struggle against the colonial settlers. The more the Palestinian struggle grew, the greater the Zionist interest in gathering intelligence. After the events of al-Nabi Musa in 1920 and Jaffa in 1921, interest in gathering intelligence and espionage activity increased. The Buraq uprising of 1929 and especially the 1936–1939 Revolt dramatically heightened the spying process.<sup>26</sup>

After a short period, when it was felt that the department had not made satisfactory progress, it was assigned to Yaacov Shimoni.<sup>27</sup> Work on the Village Files continued and reconnaissance units of the Haganah and Palmach were commissioned to conduct aerial photography of the villages; to “compile an organized archive, complete with files on the personal details of regional and local Arab leaders, leaders of the gangs, agitators and the like”; and to open files concerning Arab population centers in the country and conduct far-reaching intelligence work concerning potential future leaders.<sup>28</sup> They collected details concerning the location of their households, their identities, their relationships, their leisure activities, their movements, their places of work, and even the location of their bedrooms in their houses. A Shai report on Rashid al-Hajj Ibrahim (leader of the Istiqlal party in Haifa with a national profile and opposed to the Mufti of Jerusalem, al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni) shows the nature of the information that was gathered on the Palestinian leadership. The report spans nineteen pages of small print Hebrew. In addition to the first page of the file, which includes general information – his date and place of birth, education, his political orientations, social and political relations, and so on – there is intelligence collected over the years about his daily political activities, arranged chronologically, as well as sensitive information about his personal life, including information about his daughter’s romantic ties.

Later, the Haganah started reading Arabic newspapers, which became a critical source for information about Arabs in the country, and “exerted a lot of effort to connect with Arabs from the highest levels of society.”<sup>29</sup> By the end of World War II, “the Department reached in one way or another a level that suited the needs of the Haganah.”<sup>30</sup> Further, “by the outbreak of the 1948 War, over 600 village dossiers had been completed.”<sup>31</sup>

Israeli geographer and historian Meron Benvenisti, whose father was one of the geographers who contributed to this project and to the committee established after the war to Hebraicize Arab place names, compared the different agendas of these to projects:

[W]hat is permissible for academics often is forbidden for military men. On army maps, enemy territory must not remain terra incognita. And indeed, the information concerning the Arab settlement configuration, which accumulated in the hands of Jewish intelligence personnel, was comprehensive, verifiable, and reliable. Perusal of this information is interesting not only in and of itself but also because it shows us what the Jews were interested in knowing about the Arab communities and what sort of picture emerged from the knowledge they had amassed, selective as it necessarily was.<sup>32</sup>

## Intelligence Sources for the Village Files

The Haganah Village Files utilized a number of sources for their intelligence surveys. The most significant of them were:

*Palestinian and Arab newspapers:* Palestinian newspapers formed one of the most accurate sources to gather information and learn about Palestinian society. In fact, the Zionist movement's awareness of the importance of the role of the Arab, and not only the Palestinian press in influencing the Arab elites, and Arab public opinion toward the Palestinian question,<sup>33</sup> goes back as early as 1908.<sup>34</sup> This awareness and efforts were not limited to Zionist leaders only. Settlers initiated upon themselves to open channels with some of the few journalists who consent to the promotion of the Zionist movement.<sup>35</sup> The awareness has increased in the wake of the Buraq events in 1929, after which the Arab press covered this revolution, and helped crystallize and mobilize the Palestinian and Arab public opinion to advocate for the people of Palestine. While Palestinian and Arab newspapers was read and followed as a source of information since the beginning, the radical change in the forties (and which continued today) was the full systematic and thorough follow-up of all the Arab Press.

*Jewish undercover agents (mista'arvim):* Jews with Middle Eastern features, most of whom immigrated to Palestine from Arab countries, were recruited and trained to absorb Palestinian Arab culture, to talk and behave like Palestinian Arabs, and were planted in the heart of Palestinian Arab communities to penetrate and collect information (as sleeper cells).<sup>36</sup> According to a local source, there was a family of presumed *mista'arvim* that lived in al-Bireh for several years before 1948 and disappeared within months of the outbreak of the war without leaving any trace.<sup>37</sup> The "suspicious" family, whose father worked in a coffee shop, lived in a freestanding house just in front of the village mosque (a strategic point), drawing the attention of some of the town's residents, in part because "they had so many dogs around the house even though they did not possess even a small herd of sheep." Despite these suspicions, the family was never harassed – their Palestinian neighbors had no clue whatsoever about the existence of *mista'arvim*. It is worth mentioning here that *mista'arvim* of various kinds were omnipresent and active in the study of hundreds of villages and many cities during the 1948 war.<sup>38</sup>

Generally speaking, these undercover operatives fell into one of four categories. First are those whose purpose was not merely to collect information, but to infiltrate Arab society so fully as to take on an active political role, even a leadership role. The most prominent example of this is Eli Cohen, who was born in Egypt in 1924, moved to Israel in 1957, and was recruited by Mossad and sent under a false identity to Damascus in 1960 in order to infiltrate political circles, before he was arrested, tried, and executed by the Syrian government in 1965; however, there must be others like Cohen, perhaps numbering in the dozens. The second kind of undercover operatives are those who, like Gamliel Cohen, are planted for several years in Arab societies and whose mission is to gather intelligence; some even married and had children with local women.<sup>39</sup>

The third category of *mista'arvim* includes those who disguise themselves and carry out ad hoc operations. For example, they would arrive at a village and conduct



A sample page from the al-Bireh Village File.  
From the author's collection.

reconnaissance there or spread rumors at a particular moment before battle, and so on. After 1967 in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, undercover operatives would knock on doors disguised as *fida'iyyin* and thus identify those who were willing to shelter fighters or, as is the case in Gaza, bombing groups of Palestinians on patrol.<sup>40</sup> Fourth and finally are those undercover operatives who proliferated after the first intifada in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem. These disguise themselves during demonstrations or arrest wanted men. These are the least talented of the undercover operatives: they know Arabic, but not necessarily fluently; they rely on crews that do their makeup and dress them as Arab youths. Unfortunately, when most Palestinians today speak of *mista'arvim*, they are thinking of operatives of this type.

*Jewish employees in the Mandate administration:*

The (disproportionately high) presence of Jewish employees at all levels of the Mandate administration allowed for the acquisition by Zionist intelligence of an important part, if not all, of the data that the Mandate government collected for different purposes (administrative, political, economic, security, or to prepare reports for various British fact-finding missions).<sup>41</sup> Part of this official data and information was made public only on the eve of the termination of the Mandate.<sup>42</sup> It is safe to speculate that both the confidentiality of this data and its accessibility to high-level employees (particularly Jews) facilitated the task of those who managed the Village Files project.

*Information solicited by Jewish citizens from their Arab friends:* Shai and the Jewish Agency's Arab bureau, as Hillel Cohen has pointed out, exploited almost every honest Jewish and Palestinian relationship to advance narrow Zionist interests. There were, Cohen notes, many Jews who desired only friendship or good business relations with Palestinians but who were eventually identified and enlisted by Shai, which used them to collect information from Arab friends, who provided it in good faith and without knowledge of its intended use, and to recruit Palestinian collaborators. The Jewish Agency even helped establish and finance Neighborly Relations Committees, which initiated mutual visits and Jewish-Palestinian projects, ranging from pest control to sending joint petitions to the Mandate government. The rationale for the creation of these committees was mainly to gather information and recruit collaborators.<sup>43</sup>

*British military or civilians personnel sympathetic to the Zionist movement:* Several reports in the archives of the Village Files indicate the role of Zionist sympathizers among

the British, as authors would at times begin their report by stating: “from a trusted British source.” Intelligence cooperation between the Zionist movement and the British began already in 1916, even before the occupation of Palestine during World War I, through the Jewish Nili spy network. Nili, which worked with the consent and approval of Yishuv leaders, provided important information about the armaments and movements of the Ottoman army. This cooperation continued on various levels after the British occupation of Palestine at the end of 1918, as discussed earlier. On the one hand, Zionist agents provided the British with information, while on the other hand the British passed, through official and non-official channels, important intelligence about the Arabs to the Jewish Agency and the Haganah.

One of the best examples of cooperation between the two sides is the story of the British officer Orde Wingate, who trained the special forces of the Haganah in counter-insurgency strategy. His ruthless methods were employed widely during the 1948 war and after (exemplified by Unit 101, led by Ariel Sharon, which committed many massacres in the 1950s, the most famous being the Qibya massacre of 1953).<sup>44</sup> One of the more “bizarre” areas of cooperation between the British administration and the Haganah was the campaign to eliminate dogs in Palestinian villages during the 1936 revolt. Dogs were considered a problem, since their barking warned of British or Zionist raids on these villages. Thus, British administration announced on radio, newspapers, and through formal instructions to the village *mukhtars* that, to prevent the spread of rabies, they were to get rid of all dogs. The elimination of dogs before attacks on Arab villages have since become an established behavior of Israeli raids (as seen, for example, in the Israeli film *Waltz with Bashir*, which tells the story of eliminating dogs in South Lebanon villages, by snipers).<sup>45</sup>

*Romantic or sexual relationships between Jewish women and British and Arab men:* Even before the creation of the state, Zionists made use of sex (for information, blackmail, or influence) to achieve national goals. To be fair, most intelligence services the world over have, from eternity, used this method. But what distinguishes the Yishuv (and the Jewish state) is the systematic and large-scale use of this phenomenon. Anton Shalhat, based on Daniela Reich’s Master’s thesis in the department of Land of Israel Studies at Haifa University, shows how thousands of Jewish women were organized and oriented, mainly by the Jewish Agency, during World War II to entertain and influence tens of thousands of Allied soldiers.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast with the Zionist historiography, which holds that Arab-Jewish relations were historically characterized by enmity,<sup>47</sup> there were many sentimental and sexual relations between Jewish women and Arab men, especially men from the “mixed cities” of Haifa, Jaffa, and Jerusalem, as well as middle class or rich village landlords. Shai did not hesitate to exploit these relationships and even encouraged them as a source of information (as business ties and friendships between Arabs and Jews were exploited) and in some cases to influence decisions (such as land sales). This tradition continues: Mossad used a married woman to trap nuclear technician Mordechai Vanunu, who leaked sensitive information and pictures about the Dimona nuclear reactor, for example.

*Young Jewish scouts from the Palmach:* These Palmach scouts gathered information by roaming through Arab villages, mountains, and valleys under the guise of “love of nature.”<sup>48</sup>

Meron Benvenisti describes this method, citing a report of the Palmach scouts from May 1944. At this point, the Palestinians had emerged from the 1936–1939 Revolt exhausted. In a state of recuperation, they were oblivious to what was being planned for them. What Benvenisti describes next points to both the kindness and the naiveté of the Palestinians:

three crews of us went out . . . to prepare “dossiers.” For “cover” we took with us botany books in Hebrew, German, and French, and divided them up among us: “We were botanists.” . . . When we arrived at one of the villages, a crowd of villagers would gather and would not leave us alone until we left. And so we would prepare our sketches: at some interesting place, for example beside the mukhtar’s house, I would gather the people, bend down and pick some plant, hold it up and show it to them: “Will you look at this plant?” . . . Then our people would go into the house, ask for water, and until the owner returned, would take note of the details of the house. . . . At the end of the trip we would sit down to relax and while resting – we would write the summary of what we’d seen on the way or corrections of our notes.<sup>49</sup>

Interviews that I gathered from different villages indicate recollections of these scouts, young men and women in short pants, sometimes coming with bicycles, and offered “Arab hospitality” of sweet hot tea and sometimes breakfast with fresh bread just coming from the home’s traditional oven (*tabun*). Palestinian villagers inadvertently facilitated the information gathering by allowing Jewish agents to enter their villages and even their homes to gather information that eventually led to their forced expulsion.

*Aerial photographs:* These photographs allowed for the production of very accurate maps of the villages, necessary for military attacks.<sup>50</sup> Later the main targets in the village, such as the house of the *mukhtar*, the mosque, the main spring, road access, and the houses of known fighters, were marked on the maps before they were provided to field commanders.

*Intercepted telephone conversations:* Female Jewish operators working on telephone exchanges were recruited to spy the higher ranks of Palestinian leadership. The first known case of this tactic dates to October 1929, when Zionists infiltrated the central office of the Supreme Muslim Council in Jerusalem, the headquarters of al-Hajj Amin al-Husayni, leader of the Palestinian national movement during the Mandate. In 1933, intercepting mail and telephone communications became an “institution and important source of information. The fall of Haifa in April 1948 is related directly to a phone call captured by Shai, which led to the ambush in mid-March of the arms convoy led by the military leader of Haifa, Muhammad al-Hunayti. The ambush resulted in the destruction of the entire convoy and led to Hunayti’s death.

*Jewish academics:* Zionist intelligence benefited greatly from geographers who studied the geography and topography of the area; anthropologists who studied popular Palestinian customs, traditions, and culture (for example, the importance of honor); social scientists who researched the structure of Palestinian society; and military and intelligence officers who studied military strengths and weaknesses. Experts in matters of land acquisition

and agriculture employed by the Zionist organizations showed particular interest in Arab villages. They studied the Palestinian land tenure system, farming methods, and economy so as to identify opportunities for land acquisition by the Jewish National Fund – and to be able to respond to accusations of the dispossession of the *fallahin* as a consequence of Zionist settlement activity.<sup>51</sup>

## The Villages Files and Ethnic Cleansing

The intent of ethnic cleansing remains, of course, a matter of intense controversy, with the Israelis arguing, *despite their recognition of archival censorship*, that no documentary evidence of such intension exists. However, as Harvard historian John Womack writes:

reading of the missing “black box” or “smoking gun,” I thought of Hitler’s missing orders for extermination of European Jewry, the lack of which has not yet stopped historians from arguing that the orders we know he did give certainly warrant the argument that he intended to wipe out Jews and others in the way of German rule westward and German demographic expansion eastward – and that his intention in these orders was perfectly clear to his subordinates all the way down to the lowliest German policeman assigned to military duty.

We [historians] have a pitifully narrow and childish idea of how “statesmen” proceed, as if we did not want to know. Not even General Pinochet of Chile said “kill them.” The real political order to kill or to end the presence of a national group is always a euphemism.<sup>52</sup>

Womack’s remarks are a reminder that mass killings or ethnic cleansing should be determined through consideration of acts and common-sense facts (described by Edward Carr as the “raw material of historians”) and not by explicit orders found (or hidden) in classified documents.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, there are many elements that serve as indicators of a planned campaign of ethnic cleansing, for which the village files served as an element of preparation. First, the archival censorship concerning the Palestinian refugees, which continues even 68 years after the Nakba (the 50-year limit on its restriction according to Israeli law expired 18 years ago) clearly indicates that there is something to hide.<sup>54</sup> In mid-July 2010, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed an official order to restrict the freedom of access to certain government documents, including those concerning the refugees, for an additional two decades.<sup>55</sup>

Second, the detailed information about the villages was meticulously catalogued and organized in files not by any civil institution of the Yishuv, but by the planning bureau of the Haganah general staff, and was then held in the organization’s territorial command centers around the country.<sup>56</sup> Third, many village files were destroyed by the Hagana itself due to fears that they would fall into the hands of the British in connection with “Black

Saturday.”<sup>57</sup> My assumption is that the Zionist leaders feared that the British, expert in military and intelligence, would understand the real purpose of these documents. Fourth, the Village Files project was built along with the major military strategic plans (A, B, and C) developed by the Joint Haganah General Staff.

Fifth, as we saw above, villages were already surveyed in the 1930s, before the Village Files, which were gathered during the 1940s up to 1947. Unlike the previous survey of Palestinian villages and cities, which were nearly completed at the end of 1939, some information in the Village Files was of a purely offensive military nature. Finally, and most importantly, the Haganah and later the Israeli Army destroyed hundreds of villages that had been surveyed after the expulsion of their inhabitants. We must focus on the fact that these villages were not destroyed in the course of battle, as was the case in Bosnia, for example, but as a result of decisions based on years of planning.

## **Accuracy of the Village Files**

The Haganah’s file on al-Bireh, edited in summer 1943, is three pages printed in small Hebrew font and provides a brief but comprehensive and accurate background information on the village. It would allow any military commander to know in a few minutes the most relevant information (military or non-military) about the strengths or weaknesses of the “target” in order to conquer it (whatever the reason might be).

Ezra Danin, the first official responsible for the Village Files, boasted, “We have had the opportunity to penetrate the depths of the Arab village and obtain the smallest details of its way of living such that we have acquired quite a full picture of village life.”<sup>58</sup> To our great regret, when we compare the al-Bireh File with available local fact, Danin’s words, though exaggerated in some minor areas, proves largely correct.<sup>59</sup> The report provides us with important and accurate information about the economic and social situation in al-Bireh during the period under study. It gives us an approximate number of immigrants from the village to the United States in the summer of 1943 (five hundred people). Although this is a round number, it is in all likelihood an accurate figure, compared to my own estimates (and it is a subject I have worked on for twenty years).

It is not surprising within this context that superior Israeli surveillance helps explain Israel’s past and ongoing success in defeating Arab armies and societies. The Zionist project was, after all, a continuation of the Western colonialist project and made use of all of its modern technological and research capabilities.

## **Writing Palestinian History from the Village Files**

It is almost certain that there is no country on earth that – by area, by population, or by resources – produces, analyzes, and consumes as much intelligence as Israel. Israel sees its future as depending on a deep knowledge of its enemies and its capacity to

destroy them. This was also true of the Yishuv before the establishment of the state. Is it possible to use this information to write the social history of Palestine, contrary to the goals for which those who gathered it intended it? The Village Files survey, which was intended to destroy Palestinian society, has become, although it certainly was not the intention of those who designed the project, a historical source for the study of economic and social Palestinian history. Perhaps the fact that this material can offer a window into writing Palestinian history is the reason that Israeli officials decided to reclose these files in the Israeli archive.<sup>60</sup> Since these papers are about the Palestinian people, a full copy of the archived survey of villages should become the property of the Palestinian people.

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#### Endnotes

- 1 The Haganah was a paramilitary organization established by the Yishuv leadership in Palestine in 1921. It remained active until 26 May 1948, when the Israeli army was established by decree and the three Jewish paramilitary organizations – the Haganah, the Irgun, and the Lehi – were dissolved and fused into one body, the Israel Defense Forces. The decision to combine the organizations did not apply to the Jerusalem area (253 square kilometers) due to its designation as an international zone. This was the situation until September 1948, following the assassination of Count Folke Bernadotte.
- 2 The Yishuv refers to the Jewish community and its institutions in Palestine before the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.
- 3 Ian Black and Benny Morris, *Hurub Isra'il al-sirriyya: tarikh al-ajhiza al-istikhbariyya al-Isra'iliyya* [Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services] (Amman: al-Ahliyya, 1992), 45. Sources contradict one another with regard to the number of villages surveyed: Mustafa Kabha puts the number at 380, Ilan Pappé at 500, and Benny Morris and Ian Black at 600. I relied on Black and Morris because it is considered the most precise source on the Israeli intelligence services before and after the creation of Israel and because Meron Benvenisti, a specialist in the matter of villages, adopted the same number.
- 4 Al-Bireh now is the twin city of Ramallah (both cities becoming the *de facto* "Palestinian capital" since the Oslo agreement). It did not turn have a municipal council until early February 1952, when one was established upon the decision of the Jordanian interior minister (at that time the whole West Bank was part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan).
- 5 This model *à l'Américain* was implicitly adopted by the Zionist movement at least since Herzl wrote *Der Judenstaat* (The Jews' State) in 1896.
- 6 See, for example: Lahouari Addi, *Deux anthropologues au Maghreb: Ernest Gellner et Clifford Geertz* (Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines, 2013); Gérard Leclerc, *Anthropologie et colonialisme: essai sur l'histoire de l'africanisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1972).
- 7 Saleh Abdel Jawad, "La guerre 1948: entre archives et sources orales," *Revue d'études palestiniennes* 96 (Summer 2005): 59–77; Saleh Abdel Jawad, "The Arab and Palestinian Narratives of the 1948 War," in *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 72–114. See also Gish Amit, "Ownerless Objects? The Story of the Books Palestinians Left Behind in 1948," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 33 (Winter 2008): 7–20.
- 8 Mustafa Kabha, "al-Mawwad wa al-watha'iq al-muta'aliqa bi-li-Filastiniyyin fi al-arshifat al-Isra'iliyya" [Materials and Documents related to the Palestinians in Israeli Archives], in *Awraq 'a'iliyya: dirasat fi al-tarikh al-ijtima'i al-mu'asir li-Filastin* [Family Papers: Studies on the Contemporary Social History of Palestine], ed. Zakaria Mohammad, Khaled Farraj, Salim Tamari, and Issam Nassar, revised by Saleh Abdel Jawad (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 2011), 71–76; Elia Zureik, "Strategies of Surveillance: The Israeli Gaze," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 66 (Summer 2016): 16–19.
- 9 See: Yoav Gelber, *Shorshe ha-havatselet: hamodi'in ba-Yishuv, 1918–1947* [Roots of the Lily: Intelligence in the Yishuv, 1918–1947] (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Press, 1992).
- 10 Ya'acov Ro'i, "Relations between Rehovot and Its Arab Neighbours, 1890–1914," in *Zionism, Studies in the History of the Zionist Movement and of the Jewish Community in Palestine*, ed. Daniel Carpi and Gedalia Yogev (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1975), 337–382. This

- “unexploited” source is a must read.
- 11 Author interview with the late French historian Olivier Carre, Political Science Foundation, Paris, July 1989. Constantin-François Chasseboeuf de Volney traveled in Egypt and Syria, after which he wrote *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte, pendant les années 1783, 1784 et 1785* (Paris: Desenne et Volland, 1787).
  - 12 Author interview with Olivier Carre, Paris, July 1989.
  - 13 Roberto Mazza, “For the Love of France: Père Antonin Jaussen in Jerusalem, 1914–1920,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 66 (Summer 2016): 75–86; Roberto Mazza and Idir Ouhes, “For God and la Patrie: Antonin Jaussen, Dominican Priest and French Intelligence Agent in the Middle East, 1914–1920,” *First World War Studies* 3, no. 2 (2012): 145–164.
  - 14 Michael Fischbach, “British and Zionist Data Gathering on Palestinian Arab Landownership and Population during the Mandate,” in *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine: Population, Territory, and Power*, ed. Elia Zureik, David Lyon, and Yasmeen Abu-Laban (New York: Routledge, 2010), 297–312; Meron Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land since 1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 70.
  - 15 Mahmoud Muhareb, “al-Mukhabarat al-sahiyuniyya: bidayat al-tajassus ‘ala al-‘Arab” [Zionist Intelligence: Early Espionage on Arabs], *al-Mustaqbal al-‘Arabi* 357 (November 2008): 114–15.
  - 16 On Hankin, see: Walter Lehn with Uri Davis, *al-Sanduq al-qawmi al-yahudi* [The Jewish National Fund] (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies and Kuwait University, 1990), 48–49. Information on land brokers’ adoption of local dialects and traditions is based on author interviews with many villagers from the villagers of Zir’in and al-Nawrus (north of Jenin) in 1993 and 1994.
  - 17 Muhareb, “al-Mukhabarat al-sahiyuniyya,” 114.
  - 18 Cited in Rona Sela, “Scouting Palestinian Territory, 1940–1948: Haganah Village Files, Aerial Photos, and Surveys,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 52 (Winter 2013): 44.
  - 19 The Zionist Commission (in Hebrew, Va’ad Hatsirim) arrived in Jaffa by sea on 5 April 1918 and in Jerusalem on 10 April 1918.
  - 20 See: David Fromkin, *A Peace to End all Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914–1922* (London 1991), 323–24; Henri Laurens. *La Question De Palestine: tome premier 1799-1922, L’Invention de la Terre sainte*, Paris, Fayard. 1999. pp.398-401;
  - 21 Muhareb, “al-Mukhabarat al-sahiyuniyya,” 115–17.
  - 22 Muhareb, “al-Mukhabarat al-sahiyuniyya,” 122.
  - 23 After the creation of the state, Shai became *Sherut haBitahon haKlali* – the General Security Services, also known as Shabak or Shin Bet.
  - 24 Ben Zion Dinur, ed., *Sefer Toldot ha-Haganah* [The History of the Haganah] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1973), vol. 3, 244.
  - 25 Dinur, *Sefer Toldot Haganah*, vol. 3, 244.
  - 26 This observation was borrowed by Zionist historians to formulate a narrative that Zionism was forced to resort to violence in self-defense against Arab violence and aggression. Although this narrative was advanced by the end of the 1920s, Israeli historian Anita Shapira best formulated this narrative with an “objective and academic” facade in her book *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). But Shapira does not acknowledge that the use of violence was inevitable from the moment the Zionist movement made clear its desire to establish a purely Jewish state with a national identity creating a sense of cultural, religious, and ethnic homogeneity, similar to the European concept of nationalism. In this state of affairs, the only possibility of non-Jews (that is, the indigenous Arab population), like the indigenous peoples of North America, was to face either ethnic cleansing or genocide. Regardless of the extent of the violence used against colonial settlers, settler-colonialism saw no future for the indigenous population without violence as long as they were not ready to give up their land voluntarily and “take their bags and leave.”
  - 27 A prominent Jewish Orientalist and author of the book *‘Arve Eretz-‘Yisra’el* [The Arabs of the Land of Israel] (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘oved, 1947).
  - 28 Dinur, *Sefer Toldot Haganah*, vol. 3, 247–48. For more detailed information about the aerial photography see Rona Sela, “Scouting Palestinian Territory, 1940–1948: Haganah Village Files, Aerial Photos, and Surveys,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 52 (Winter 2013): 38–50, especially 39, 41–42.
  - 29 Dinur, *Sefer Toldot Haganah*, vol. 3, 247–48.
  - 30 Dinur, *Sefer Toldot Haganah*, vol. 3, 247–48.
  - 31 Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape*, 71.
  - 32 Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape*, 70.
  - 33 Mahmoud Muhareb, “The Zionist Disinformation Campaign in Syria and Lebanon during the Palestinian Revolt, 1936–1939,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 166 (Winter 2013): 6–25.
  - 34 In 1908, elements within the Ottoman army led by the Committee of Union and Progress took power and established freedom of the press. That year, fifteen newspapers appeared in Palestine, though many of them only for a very short time.
  - 35 Ro’i, “Relations between Rehovot,” 378. Ro’i cites a meeting on 18 June 1913 between Elia Zaka, the editor of the Arab newspaper *al-Nafir* from Haifa, and members of the Rehovot Settlement Committee, in which he asked them to subscribe to the newspaper for its services.
  - 36 See Johnny Mansour, “The Arabists: Beginnings, Crimes, Training, and Tasks,” *Journal of Israeli Issues* 15 (Summer 2004): 6–20.
  - 37 Although there is no way to verify the allegation,

- this is based on an interview with a source F. A. J. in his home, 25 September 2016.
- 38 In conducting oral history interviews in a total of 86 villages (with more than ten interviews taking place in certain villages, such as al-'Abbasiyya, Kafa 'Ana, Tirat al-Lawz, Lubyia, al-Muzayri'a) to prepare an (unpublished) research project on Zionist undercover operatives, dozens of villagers mentioned the role of *mista'arvim* during the 1948 war.
  - 39 Gamliel Cohen, *Ha-mista'arvim ha-rishonim: sipurah shel ha-mahlakah ha-'Arvit shel ha-Palmach* [The First Arabists: The Story of the Arab Department of the Palmach] (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2002).
  - 40 My father was the target of an undercover operative of this kind in late 1967. A person came claiming to be a *fida'i* who was part of a group who had carried out an operation near 'Imwas, and that one of their number was injured and needed a doctor. I called my father and he came and welcomed the man into our home. After he had persuaded my father, he sent Dr. Yahya Wahba of al-Bireh (of the Jerusalem Wahba family) to treat the injured "*fida'i*." But there was nobody injured there and after several days, Dr. Wahba was deported to Amman.
  - 41 The disproportionate presence of Jewish personnel in the upper echelons of the British Mandate administration can be attribute to the British desire to ensure the implementation of the Balfour Declaration faithfully; the fact that Jews were in general better educated; and the fact that some British civil servants who worked in the Mandate administration were British Jews.
  - 42 Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape*, 70.
  - 43 Hillel Cohen, *Army of Shadows: Palestinian Collaboration with Zionism, 1917-1948*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 41, 118, 155-165.
  - 44 See: Charles Berges, "Orde Wingate: Rebellious Misfit," *Military History Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 68-77.
  - 45 After the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, poison rather than sniping became the preferred method for eliminating dogs before raiding the homes of "wanted" people. This was because a poisoned dog could be thought to have died naturally or from a snakebite, while the visible wound caused by a firearm attracted attention.
  - 46 See Anton Shalhat, *Fi surat Isra'il: mudakhalat hawla sanat 2000 wa ma ba'duha* [On the Image of Israel: Intervention around the Year 2000 and Beyond] (Ramallah: Madar – al-Markaz al-Filastini lil-dirasat al-Isra'iliyya, 2008), 113-121.
  - 47 Abdel Jawad, "The Arab and Palestinian Narratives," 83-87. Zionist historiography, by integrating the worst episodes of Jewish-Muslim relations from ancient history with the war of 1948, guarantees the image of a perennial conflict.
- This paradigm is not only simplistic and one-sided, but it legitimizes action against the Palestinians and also, at its core, portrays the Palestinian as anti-Semite, thereby justifying Zionism's *raison d'être*: the necessity of an exclusive Jewish state.
- 48 Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape*, 70-71; Sela, "Scouting Palestinian Territory."
  - 49 Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape*, 71.
  - 50 Rona Sela, "It Took a Village," *Ha'aretz*, 20 May 2011, online at [www.haaretz.com/weekend/magazine/it-took-a-village-1.363015](http://www.haaretz.com/weekend/magazine/it-took-a-village-1.363015) (accessed 20 October 2016). This is an excellent brief article on this subject by Rona Sela, based on previous work (mainly in Hebrew) and field and archival research.
  - 51 Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape*, 70.
  - 52 John Womack, personal correspondence with author.
  - 53 Edward Hallett Carr, "The Historian and His Facts," excerpt from Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Knopf, 1961), online at [www.cooperative-individualism.org/carr-edward-historian-and-his-facts-1961.htm](http://www.cooperative-individualism.org/carr-edward-historian-and-his-facts-1961.htm) (accessed 15 October 2016).
  - 54 See "A State Afraid of Its Past" (editorial), *Ha'aretz*, 29 July 2010, online at [www.haaretz.com/a-state-afraid-of-its-past-1.304711](http://www.haaretz.com/a-state-afraid-of-its-past-1.304711) (accessed 20 October 2016); Barak Ravid, "Citing National Security, Israel Likely to Keep Army File on Palestinian Refugees From 1948 Sealed," *Ha'aretz*, 20 September 2016, online at [www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.743055](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.743055) (accessed 20 October 2016).
  - 55 "A State Afraid of Its Past."
  - 56 Sela, "Scouting Palestinian Territory," 39.
  - 57 "Black Saturday" took place in June 1946, when British forces intelligence arrested many Jewish leaders and stormed settlements and offices of the Zionist movement to search for weapons caches and documents after Jewish terrorists bombed the King David Hotel (which served as the headquarters of many British institutions, including British intelligence). Sela, "Scouting Palestinian Territory," 45.
  - 58 Quoted in Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape*, 71.
  - 59 For example, the number and names of al-Bireh men killed during the 1936-1939 Revolt is to a large extent incomplete. Kabha says that only half of the 380 Village Files are "very accurate while the rest are not accurate." Kabha, "al-Mawwad wa al-watha'iq," 74.
  - 60 Mustafa Kabha, "Palestinian Documents and Sources in Israeli Archives and Libraries," lecture, from "Archival Sources in the Galilee, the Triangle, and the Negev: Directions for Research and Means of Cooperation" roundtable, organized by the Palestinian Social Archive Project and the Institute for Palestine Studies, Ankara Suites and Hotel, Ramallah, 3 November 2012.