

Historian seeks release of Israel's secret papers on Kfar Qasem massacre

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Israeli historian Adam Raz is demanding the declassification of documents on the massacre of 51 of Israel's Palestinian citizens in the village of Kfar Qasem in 1956.

The lawsuit in the Military Court of Appeals targeting the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and the Defense Establishment Archives relates to one of the most notorious crimes committed during the forcible expulsion of the Palestinians in the years following the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948. The case, and subsequent interviews and articles in *Ha'aretz*, underscores the longevity of Israel's campaign of ethnic cleansing, under the then Labour government of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion.

Raz works for the Berl Katznelson Foundation and has just published a book, *Kfar Qasem Massacre: A Political Biography*. He believes what has long been rumoured, that behind the horrific event was a secret plan developed at the highest level of the Israeli state—and whose details have never been released—to transfer Israel's Palestinians to Jordan.

Operation *Hafarfet* (Mole), officially designated as Blueprint S-59, envisaged the mass expulsion of Palestinians in a future war against Israel's Arab neighbours. As in 1948-49, the expulsion would involve murderous incidents designed to strike fear into the hearts of the Palestinians and force them to flee their homes for safety.

Raz told *Ha'aretz*, "Most of the material is still classified. ... I was surprised to discover that it's easier to write about the history of Israel's nuclear program than about Israel's policies regarding its Arab citizens."

The massacre took place on October 29, 1956, just days before Israel's invasion of Egypt as part of its joint campaign with Britain and France to overthrow the regime of President Gamal Abdul Nasser who had nationalized the Suez Canal. As part of its preparations

for war, Israel imposed a curfew starting at 9 p.m. on its Palestinian citizens in the villages in the area known as the northern Triangle, close to the West Bank, then ruled by Jordan, who were under military rule that was to continue until 1966. This was supposedly because the authorities feared a Palestinian insurgency against the Suez campaign, the first round in a series of wars with Israel's Arab neighbours. In fact, the Palestinians never participated in any action against Israel, either in 1956 or any subsequent wars.

Unbeknown to the Kfar Qasem villagers, Colonel Issachar Shadmi, the commanding officer who had played a prominent role in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948-49 and served as a commander of a POW labour camp of Palestinian prisoners, brought forward the curfew time to 5 p.m. and ordered his men to shoot at anyone who violated curfew.

According to Shmuel Malinki, the chief of the border police charged with implementing his orders, Shadmi said, "During the hours of the curfew, they can be in their homes and do as they desire ... but whomever is seen outside, who violates curfew, will be shot. Better that a few go down, and then they will learn for the next time."

He continued, "I don't want sentimentality; I don't want detainees."

When pressed on what this meant, Shadmi said, "Allahu Yerhamaum," the Arabic for "God have mercy on them," the blessing for the dead.

The police opened fire on Palestinians returning from work between 5 and 6 p.m., killing 51 people, including men, women—one of whom was eight months pregnant—and children, and causing serious injuries to 13 more.

While the security forces in other villages of the Triangle generally allowed Palestinians to return from work until 9 p.m., less well publicized murder and disappearances of individual Palestinians took place in

Kfar Tira, Tayba and Baqa al-Gharbiyya villages.

Israel said nothing at first, and then sought to justify the curfew with the lying claim that it was a response to Palestinian infiltrators from Jordan. Reporters and legislators were denied access to the village.

After sustained pressure from three Palestinian and Jewish legislators who gathered witnesses' testimonies, the Israeli authorities established a commission of enquiry. Two years later, a court convicted eight of the 11 IDF officers and soldiers, sentencing them to short terms of imprisonment that were later commuted, by the president and chief of staff, so they were released by 1960. Malinki went on to become chief of security at Israel's nuclear reactor at Dimona, in the Negev desert.

Shadmi, the highest-ranking officer to be prosecuted, was cleared of murder, and convicted on a procedural and technical charge of exceeding his authority by changing the hours of the curfew, the task of the military governor. The judge called his action a "blatantly illegal order," but proceeded to impose a symbolic fine of 10 prutot, or one-100th of an Israeli pound, and to issue a reprimand.

The notorious photograph of Shadmi holding a 10-prutot coin as he left the court became the byword among the Palestinians for the value of their lives under Ben-Gurion's Labour government.

The trials were rigged, as Shadmi admitted in an interview with *Ha'aretz* journalist Ofer Aderet and historian Raz, a year before his death at the age of 96 last month, so the outcome came as no surprise to him. He called his trial a "play." He had been promised the best defence and told he could object to the judges if he did not trust them. Meir Shamgar, the deputy military adjutant general and later president of the Supreme Court, told him, "Not to worry."

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Some of the defendants tried to argue they were only implementing Operation Mole, but their lawyers were silenced when they explained that the plan involved imprisoning the Palestinians and then forcing them to escape to Jordan—amid the chaos of a war.

Professor Ilan Pappé, an Israeli historian at Exeter University, writes in *The forgotten Palestinians* that most researchers believe Shadmi acted on the assumption that he was beginning to fulfil the plan. Pappé cites David Horowitz, a political scientist and journalist, who believed that the operation was based on provoking the Palestinians to break the law as the pretext for expulsions.

Raz argues, based upon extensive interviews with

Shadmi and other officials, that the trial was staged to shield Israel's security and political chiefs, Ben-Gurion, IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan, and Shadmi's commanding officer and later IDF Chief of Staff, Tzvi Tzur, from responsibility. Army archives indicate there were calls for more senior officials to be prosecuted.

Ben-Gurion made sure that the military judges appointed to conduct the trial had previously served under Tzur's command. Part of the trial was conducted behind closed doors.

On his own admission, in return for his cooperation and loyalty, Shadmi was not only exonerated but later rewarded with lucrative contracts when he left the army and took up a commercial career as a major Defence Ministry building contractor.

Shadmi also believed that an Israeli trial was meant to prevent the case from reaching the International Court of Justice, recently established by the United Nations in The Hague following World War II. Raz argued that the ICJ could not at that time prosecute Israeli politicians or officials, but Ben-Gurion's response demonstrated that he was "very worried about the potential international response."

Israel grudgingly provided a meagre compensation to the families of those murdered and injured to prevent them suing the government.

In 1997, President Moshe Katzav, a member of Likud, officiating at an official ceremony to commemorate the Kfar Qasem massacre, offered an apology on behalf of the state that became known as "the butcher's apology" because Katzav means butcher in Hebrew. It was a meaningless gesture that committed the government to nothing. In 2015, the Knesset overwhelmingly rejected legislation that would officially acknowledge Israel's responsibility for the bloodbath.



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