

Classified documents reveal Israeli government cover-up of ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in 1948

Jean Shaoul
20 December 2021

Recently released documents, including minutes of Israel's provisional government meetings in 1948, throw fresh light on the Nakba ("Catastrophe") of 1948-49, when around two-thirds of Palestinians living in what is now Israel were driven from their homes.

An investigation by Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research, published in *Ha'aretz*, produces incontrovertible evidence that the conquest of Palestinian villages and the expulsion of their inhabitants during the Arab-Israeli war were achieved by criminal actions amounting to ethnic cleansing. Israel's leaders knew this, with Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion opposing demands for a full investigation with the power to subpoena witnesses and the crimes swept under the carpet.

The Akevot report reveals that testimonies about several massacres of Palestinians and war crimes committed by Israeli military forces during the 1948-49 war were presented to the cabinet in 1948.

The report refutes the government's lying claims that the Palestinians fled of their own accord, or due to the incitement of their leaders. Its public relations machine worked long and hard to portray Israel as a country built on empty, neglected or uninhabited land. Censorship was used to ensure that any evidence challenging such a view was suppressed and any criticism denounced as anti-Semitism. That censorship continues more than seven decades later.

This was bound up with suppressing the fact that the establishment of the state of Israel as a Jewish State, in a country where Jews constituted just one-third of the population, necessitated the forcible dispossession of the Palestinian inhabitants and can only be maintained through constant repression.

According to a 1947 British census, the population of Palestine was 1,157,000 Palestinian Muslims, 146,000 Christians, and 580,000 Jews. Two years later, only about 200,000 Palestinians remained in the parts of Palestine that became Israel. Those that left were to become permanent refugees, scattered in neighbouring countries.

In 2019, the United Nations estimated there were some 5.6 million Palestinian refugees, including those expelled following the 1948-49 Arab Israeli war and the June 1967 war or their descendants, as well as others who have since been expelled from the Occupied Territories or Israel. Denied the right of return to their homes, most have been forced to eke out a wretched existence in refugee camps in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Many now live elsewhere in the Middle East, while others have moved to the West.

The takeover of Palestinian-owned land was even more dramatic: in 1946, Jews had owned less than 12 percent of the land in what became Israel; this rose to 77 percent after the 1948-49 war.

As Professor Ilan Pappé, an Israeli historian, explained in his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, this process began, not as Israel likes to maintain and is generally believed, *after* the Arab armies attacked Israel in

May 1948, but almost immediately after the UN vote for partition. A UN resolution "that refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbour should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date" passed in December 1948, and annually re-affirmed, confirms this.

In the months up to the end of the British Mandate in May 1948, more than 375,000 Palestinian became refugees, driven out by a combination of force, atrocities and a campaign of terror. Several thousand were killed and many more injured.

One of the most notorious incidents was the Deir Yassin massacre on April 9, 1948, when between 117 and 250 men, women and children were murdered by the terrorist Irgun Group led Menachem Begin, who would become prime minister in 1977. The Irgun went from house to house to drive out Palestinians.

As Israeli historian Benny Morris, who used archival material to document some 24 massacres in his ground-breaking 1988 book *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem: 1947-1949*, makes clear, this was far from being a random act of terrorism by an "out of control" group. The Hagana, forerunner of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), aided and participated in the massacre that was part of a broader Zionist plan to systematically empty Palestine of its Arab population. The sheer brutality of Deir Yassin was, Morris explains, one of the most important factors in "precipitating the flight of Arab villagers from Palestine".

The latest revelations of ethnic cleansing

The Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research's investigation adds further evidence of Israel's ethnic cleansing and subsequent cover up. In the last weeks of October 1948, the Hagana launched two large-scale operations. The first was Operation Yoav, designed to open the road to and take control of the whole of the Negev in the south. On October 29, soldiers from the 8th Brigade massacred between 100 and 120 Palestinians in the village of al-Dawayima.

A soldier who witnessed the events explained, "There was no battle and no resistance. The first conquerors killed 80 to 100 Arab men, women and children. The children were killed by smashing their skulls with sticks. There wasn't a house without people killed in it."

According to the United Nations Refugee Relief Project, the Gaza Strip's refugee population rose from 100,000 to 230,000, as a result of the operation.

The second, Operation Hiram, was designed to conquer Galilee in the north, where 120,000 Palestinians were still living, half the number in

November 1947, as well as 14 villages in southern Lebanon. Within a couple of days, Israeli forces defeated the Arab Salvation Army made up of volunteers from Arab countries, overran dozens of Arab villages and took control of Galilee and part of southern Lebanon. They carried out ten massacres of civilians and captured Arab soldiers, causing the flight of all but 30,000 villagers by the end of the operation.

One of the most egregious incidents was the massacre on two successive days of 18 and 15 of the 60 residents of Hula that had remained and surrendered without resistance at the end of October. In Saliha, soldiers executed between 60 and 80 inhabitants by driving them into a building and then blowing it up. In Safsaf, where dozens of residents were butchered, one testimony stated, "Fifty-two men were caught, tied them to one another, dug a pit and shot them. Ten were still twitching. Women came, begged for mercy. Found bodies of 6 elderly men. There were 61 bodies. 3 cases of rape."

The government's systematic cover-up of ethnic cleansing

Days after these events, the cabinet decided to appoint a committee of three ministers to investigate the massacres, but without the power to subpoena witnesses. With soldiers maintaining a code of silence and refusing to give evidence, it was almost impossible to get testimonials. One week later, Ben-Gurion called it off, saying, "Since the committee did not fulfill the role it was tasked with, it is hereby abolished."

Ben-Gurion then called on the attorney general to investigate, and while he brought the main points of the report to the cabinet, as the newly released minutes of the meeting show, the report itself remains classified to this day.

The only person to be charged with murder in Operation Hiram was Shmuel Lahis, the company commander, who shot 15 Arabs. Sentenced to seven years imprisonment, later reduced on appeal to one year, he was pardoned on his release by Israel's president and 30 years later became the director general of the Jewish Agency whose mission is to promote the immigration of Jews to Israel. No one was charged with the massacre at al-Dawayima.

This was not unique. A parliamentary report some six months later referred to an officer who during the fighting had ordered the murder of four wounded individuals, a crime for which he served a six-month prison sentence, while someone who had sold stolen army equipment was sentenced to three years in prison. One month after the war ended, the government issued a retroactive general pardon for any crimes committed during the war.

As part of the government's cover-up of its crimes against the Palestinians, it has systematically hidden evidence of its expulsion of villagers. As Israeli journalist Hagar Shezaf explained in *Ha'aretz*, teams from the Defense Ministry's Malmab, its secretive security department, whose activities and budget are classified, have scoured Israel's archives and removed historic documents relating not only to Israel's nuclear project and relations with foreign governments but also evidence of the Nakba.

Malmab removed documentation from archives illegally and without authority, in some cases even sealing documents that the military censor had previously cleared for publication, or which had already been published, as in the case of Benny Morris. In some instances, Malmab even threatened the archives' directors. In one case, when Akhivot found a crucial document in the United Kibbutz Archive, the military censor refused permission to publish it.

A former head of Malmab, Yehiel Horev, admitted he had launched the project to conceal the 1948 atrocities to prevent unrest among the

country's Arab population. Asked why documents that had already been published about the origin of the refugee problem were being removed or were in open and accessible archives but could not be published, he explained that this was to undermine the credibility of studies about the history of the refugee problem since any allegations could not be substantiated by referring to the source document.

A few years ago, Akhivot found a copy of an Israeli report with the fraudulent title *The Emigration of the Arabs of Palestine*, which Morris had earlier cited and Malmab had censored, but the military censors had authorised for publication. Despite its anodyne title, its contents contradicted the official narrative that Arab politicians had encouraged people to leave their homes and ranked the reasons for their departure in order of importance as:

- "Direct Jewish acts of hostility against Arab places of settlement".
- Their impact on neighbouring villages.
- "Operations by the breakaways," meaning the Irgun and Lehi groups, whose political wing, the Herut Party, was the forerunner of former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party. The report noted that "many in the villages of central Galilee started to flee following the abduction of the notables of Sheikh Muwannis [a village north of Tel Aviv]. The Ashinrab learned that it is not enough to forge an agreement with the Haganah and that there are other Jews [i.e., the breakaway militias] to beware of."
- Orders issued by Arab institutions and "gangs," the term used to denote all the Arab fighting groups.
- "Jewish 'whispering operations' to induce the Arab inhabitants to flee" and;
- "Evacuation ultimatums" including loudspeakers using the Arabic language, particularly in central Galilee.

The report's author insisted that "without a doubt, the hostile operations were the main cause of the movement of the population" and listed the specific causes of the exodus from each of scores of Arab villages.

Under Netanyahu, the Defence Ministry repeatedly extended the confidentiality period for the oldest documents in the Shin Bet and Mossad archives, Israel's domestic and external spying agencies respectively. In February 2019, it was extended again to 90 years. The IDF's archive, which is according to Akhivot the largest in Israel, "is sealed almost hermetically. About 1 percent of the material is open."

That these crimes and their cover-up by successive generations of Israeli politicians are being exposed points to the opposition developing against Israel's growing embrace of apartheid and support for some of world's most authoritarian and fascist regimes. This comes amid a resurgence of the international class struggle and mounting revulsion towards the political disaster created by capitalism, endless wars to assert US hegemony in the resource-rich Middle East, insecurity, poverty, climate change, and now the pandemic, driving the desire for historical truth.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)