

Israel's cover up of the 1956 Kafr Qasem massacre: "The commander said fatalities were desirable"

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3 August 2022

After more than 60 years, Israel's Defence Ministry has released most of the transcripts and primary documents submitted during the trial of officers responsible for the Kafr Qasem massacre of 50 Palestinian citizens in 1956. The documents have been released after years-long efforts by historian Adam Raz of the Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research to expose the truth.

The Kafr Qasem massacre was one of scores of killings of defenceless Palestinians by Israeli forces, aimed at establishing the State of Israel via the systematic expulsion of the Palestinian people that continues to this day. Such a policy, now called ethnic cleansing, involves horrific mass killings and atrocities.

While the massacre is well known, the transcripts reveal the government's plan to exploit Israel's planned invasion of Egypt as the pretext to drive out Israel's Palestinian residents. Israel, Britain and France invaded Egypt in October-November 1956 to overthrow the regime of President Gamal Abdul Nasser who had nationalized the Suez Canal.

The silence of the world's media over the release of such explosive military and court documents is testimony to the backing Israel receives from the major imperialist powers and their own disdain for and flagrant violation of international humanitarian law.

On October 29, 1956, Israel decided to bring forward a night time curfew from 9pm to 5pm with immediate effect across Israel's Arab towns situated in the Northern Triangle area, close to its then border with Jordan.

Long considered a "hostile population," the residents had been subject to military rule that would continue until 1966. While Israeli authorities feared a Palestinian insurgency against the Suez campaign—the first of a series of wars with Israel's Arab neighbours—Israeli Palestinians never participated in any action against Israel, either in

1956 or in subsequent wars. Israel's murderous assault last year on Gaza provoked the first ever protests by Israel's Palestinian citizens.

Despite being warned by the mayor that 400 residents working in agriculture would be unaware of the new curfew, Israeli troops fired on the returning villagers, killing 50 workers, including six women and 13 children under 15.

Israeli commander Colonel Yissachar Shadmi had ordered Major Shmuel Malinki, chief of the border police responsible for Kafr Qasem, to shoot on sight anyone who was found outside their home. Malinki said that Shadmi had told him it would be a good example if, early on, the soldiers were to shoot some Arab citizens. Shadmi reportedly 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."

The press was subject to a gag order preventing all reporting on the massacre. Even after it was lifted two months later, journalists were not allowed to go to the village. It was only after sustained pressure that the perpetrators of the massacre were charged. The trials were a sham. One third of the evidence was heard in secret. The court convicted eight of the eleven IDF officers and soldiers, sentencing them to short terms of imprisonment that were later commuted by the president and chief of staff. All were released by 1960.

Shadmi, the highest-ranking officer prosecuted, was cleared of murder and convicted on a minor charge. He received a derisory 10 prutot fine, less than one cent, symbolising the value of Palestinian lives under David Ben-Gurion's Labour government. Ben Gurion had promised Shadmi the best legal team and no prison

sentence if he cooperated. The trials shielded Israel's security and political chiefs from any responsibility—in the face of calls for more senior officials to be prosecuted—and appeased international public opinion. The Israeli state wanted to prevent the case from reaching the International Court of Justice, established by the United Nations following World War II.

Crucially, some of the defendants had tried to argue they were only implementing Operation Hafeperet (Mole), but were silenced when they explained that this involved imprisoning Palestinians and then forcing them to escape to Jordan amid the chaos of a war. The newly released transcripts confirm the existence of such a plan, first revealed in outline by the journalist and author Ruvik Rosenthal, providing further details.

Some of the witnesses' statements refer to an "evacuation notice to village elders," understood to mean a plan to deport some or all of the Arabs in the Triangle if war escalated to the West Bank, then ruled by Jordan. Others suggested they would be transferred to other parts of Israel.

According to Chaim Levy, who commanded the Border Police's southern company overseeing Kafr Qasem, the order to drive out the Arabs was not a written but a verbal one. "The company commander said that the eastern side [to the West Bank and Jordan] should be open. When they want to leave, they'll leave... I understood that it would be no great calamity if they took this opportunity to go away."

Levy referred to two other aspects of the plan, "Creating enclosures" and "transporting people," meaning the internment of Israeli Arabs in camps and expulsion from their homes. The curfew and the shooting of violators were aimed at scaring the Arabs and encouraging them to flee. Shadmi confirmed this, saying, "It may encourage that thought... that the killing of a few people as an intimidation measure can encourage movement eastward, as long as we hint to them [the Arabs] about the movement eastward."

The transcripts indicate that soldiers understood the purpose of the curfew was to terrify residents or encourage them to flee to Jordan, with one soldier saying, "The immediate goal is to keep them in their houses, and the second goal is to not need to intimidate them in the future, as well as to require less manpower because they will eventually be like innocent sheep."

When one soldier was asked whether Shadmi had explained to his platoon the intention of leaving several people dead in each village, he responded in the

affirmative, adding "the major general said that it would be desirable to have a few casualties, meaning dead... I said it would be best to knock out a few people... so that in the future there would be quiet, and we would not need to have this much manpower overseeing these villages."

This was confirmed by another soldier.

Today, Israel has a host of laws and regulations aimed at intimidating, suppressing and ultimately forcing both its Arab citizens and residents to leave Israel/Palestine. These include:

- Around 200 emergency regulations that enable the government to declare any part of the country a closed military area, exercise administrative arrest and detention without trial, expel and even execute citizens.
- The designation of the 12 villages in the South Hebron Hills, in Area C in the occupied West Bank, as a military zone and the demolition of homes around Masafer Yatta as part of a plan to drive the 100,000 Palestinians from Area C and thus pave the way for Area C's annexation into the State of Israel.
- Last month's decision of Israel's Supreme Court that it was legal for the government to revoke the citizenship of those who "committed an act that constitutes a breach of loyalty in the State of Israel," even though they would be rendered stateless in contravention of international law. Human rights organisations say this ruling will be used to target Israel's Palestinian citizens.

• The gradual expansion of the criteria for revoking Palestinian residency rights in East Jerusalem, considered a war crime, that has led to the revocation of nearly 15,000 Palestinians' residency rights since 1967.

• The introduction last March of a law denying naturalization to Palestinians from the occupied West Bank or Gaza married to Israeli citizens, forcing thousands of Palestinian families to either emigrate or live apart.

In 2007, President Shimon Peres issued a meaningless apology for the Kafr Qasem massacre and in 2014, President Reuven Rivlin attended annual commemorations for those killed. Last October, Israel's parliament rejected a bill to officially recognize the massacre.



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