



THE 1948 ETHNIC CLEANSING OF PALESTINE

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This article, excerpted and adapted from the early chapters of a new book, emphasizes the systematic preparations that laid the ground for the expulsion of more than 750,000 Palestinians from what became Israel in 1948. While sketching the context and diplomatic and political developments of the period, the article highlights in particular a multi-year “Village Files” project (1940–47) involving the systematic compilation of maps and intelligence for each Arab village and the elaboration—under the direction of an inner “caucus” of fewer than a dozen men led by David Ben-Gurion—of a series of military plans culminating in Plan Dalet, according to which the 1948 war was fought. The article ends with a statement of one of the author’s underlying goals in writing the book: to make the case for a paradigm of ethnic cleansing to replace the paradigm of war as the basis for the scholarly research of, and the public debate about, 1948.

ON A COLD WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, 10 March 1948, a group of eleven men, veteran Zionist leaders together with young military Jewish officers, put the final touches on a plan for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine.¹ That same evening, military orders were dispatched to units on the ground to prepare for the systematic expulsion of Palestinians from vast areas of the country.² The orders came with a detailed description of the methods to be used to forcibly evict the people: large-scale intimidation; laying siege to and bombarding villages and population centers; setting fire to homes, properties, and goods; expelling residents; demolishing homes; and, finally, planting mines in the rubble to prevent the expelled inhabitants from returning. Each unit was issued its own list of villages and neighborhoods to target in keeping with the master plan. Code-named Plan D (*Dalet* in Hebrew), this was the fourth and final version of vaguer plans outlining the fate that was in store for the native population of Palestine.³ The previous three plans had articulated only obscurely how the Zionist leadership intended to deal with the presence of so many Palestinians on the land the Jewish national movement wanted for itself. This fourth and

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last blueprint spelled it out clearly and unambiguously: the Palestinians had to go.

The plan, which covered both the rural and urban areas of Palestine, was the inevitable result both of Zionism's ideological drive for an exclusively Jewish presence in Palestine and a response to developments on the ground following the British decision in February 1947 to end its Mandate over the country and turn the problem over to the United Nations. Clashes with local Palestinian militias, especially after the UN partition resolution of November 1947, provided the perfect context and pretext for implementing the ideological vision of an ethnically cleansed Palestine.

Once the plan was finalized, it took six months to complete the mission. When it was over, more than half of Palestine's native population, over 750,000 people, had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed, and 11 urban neighborhoods had been emptied of their inhabitants. The plan decided upon on 10 March 1948, and above all its systematic implementation in the following months, was a clear case of what is now known as an ethnic cleansing operation.

DEFINING ETHNIC CLEANSING

Ethnic cleansing today is designated by international law as a crime against humanity, and those who perpetrate it are subject to adjudication: a special international tribunal has been set up in The Hague to prosecute those accused of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and a similar court was established in Arusha, Tanzania, to deal with the Rwanda case. The roots of ethnic cleansing are ancient, to be sure, and it has been practiced from biblical times to the modern age, including at the height of colonialism and in World War II by the Nazis and their allies. But it was especially the events in the former Yugoslavia that gave rise to efforts to define the concept and that continue to serve as the prototype of ethnic cleansing. For example, in its special report on ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, the U.S. State Department defines the term as "the systematic and forced removal of the members of an ethnic group from communities in order to change the ethnic composition of a given region." The report goes on to document numerous cases, including the depopulation within twenty-four hours of the western Kosovar town of Pec in spring 1999, which could only have been achieved through advanced planning followed by systematic execution.³ Earlier, a congressional report prepared in August 1992 for the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee had described the "process of population transfers aimed at removing the non-Serbian population from large areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina," noting that the campaign had "substantially achieved its goals: an exclusively Serb-inhabited region . . . created by forcibly expelling the Muslim populations that had been the overwhelming majority." According to this report, the two main elements of ethnic cleansing are, first, "the deliberate use of artillery and snipers against the civilian populations of the big cities," and second, "the forced movement of civilian populations [entailing] the systematic destruction of homes, the looting of personal

property, beatings, selective and random killings, and massacres.”⁴ Similar descriptions are found in the UN Council for Human Rights (UNCHR) report of 1993, which was prepared in follow-up to a UN Security Council Resolution of April 1993 that reaffirmed “its condemnation of all violations of international humanitarian law, in particular the practice of ‘ethnic cleansing.’” Showing how a state’s desire to impose a single ethnic rule on a mixed area links up to acts of expulsion and violence, the report describes the unfolding ethnic cleansing process where men are separated from women and detained, where resistance leads to massacres, and where villages are blown up, with the remaining houses subsequently repopulated with another ethnic group.⁵

In addition to the United States and the UN, academics, too, have used the former Yugoslavia as the starting point for their studies of the phenomenon. Drazen Petrovic has published one of the most comprehensive studies of ethnic cleansing, which he describes as “a well-defined policy of a particular group of persons to systematically eliminate another group from a given territory on the basis of religious, ethnic or national origin. Such a policy involves violence and is very often connected with military operations.”⁶ Petrovic associates ethnic cleansing with nationalism, the creation of new nation-states, and national struggle, noting the close connection between politicians and the army in the perpetration of the crime: the political leadership delegates the implementation of the ethnic cleansing to the military level, and although it does not furnish systematic plans or provide explicit instructions, there is no doubt as to the overall objective.

These descriptions almost exactly mirror what happened in Palestine in 1948: Plan D constitutes a veritable repertoire of the cleansing methods described in the various reports on Yugoslavia, setting the background for the massacres that accompanied the expulsions. Indeed, it seems to me that had we never heard about the events in the former Yugoslavia of the 1990s and were aware only of the Palestine case, we would be forgiven for thinking that the Nakba had been the inspiration for the descriptions and definitions above, almost to the last detail.

Yet when it comes to the dispossession by Israel of the Palestinians in 1948, there is a deep chasm between the reality and the representation. This is most bewildering, and it is difficult to understand how events perpetrated in modern times and witnessed by foreign reporters and UN observers could be systematically denied, not even recognized as historical fact, let alone acknowledged as a crime that needs to be confronted, politically as well as morally. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the ethnic cleansing of 1948, the most formative event in the modern history of the land of Palestine, has been almost entirely eradicated from the collective global memory and erased from the world’s conscience.

SETTING THE STAGE

When even a measure of Israeli responsibility for the disappearance of half the Arab population of Palestine is acknowledged (the official government

version continues to reject any responsibility whatsoever, insisting that the local population left “voluntarily”), the standard explanation is that their flight was an unfortunate but unavoidable by-product of war. But what happened in Palestine was by no means an unintended consequence, a fortuitous occurrence, or even a “miracle,” as Israel’s first president Chaim Weitzmann later proclaimed. Rather, it was the result of long and meticulous planning.

The potential for a future Jewish takeover of the country and the expulsion of the indigenous Palestinian people had been present in the writings of the founding fathers of Zionism, as scholars later discovered. But it was not until the late 1930s, two decades after Britain’s 1917 promise to turn Palestine into a national home for the Jews (a pledge that became enshrined in Britain’s Mandate over Palestine in 1923), that Zionist leaders began to translate their abstract vision of Jewish exclusivity into more concrete plans. New vistas were opened in 1937 when the British Royal Peel Commission⁷ recommended partitioning Palestine into two states. Though the territory earmarked for the Jewish state fell far short of Zionist ambitions, the leadership responded favorably, aware of the signal importance of official recognition of the principle of Jewish statehood on even part of Palestine. Several years later, in 1942, a more maximalist strategy was adopted when the Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion, in a meeting at the Biltmore Hotel in New York, put demands on the table for a Jewish commonwealth over the whole of Mandatory Palestine.⁸ Thus, the geographical space coveted by the movement changed according to circumstances and opportunities, but the principal objective remained the same: the creation in Palestine of a purely Jewish state, both as a safe haven for Jews and as the cradle of a new Jewish nationalism. And this state had to be exclusively Jewish not only in its sociopolitical structure but also in its ethnic composition.

That the top leaders were well aware of the implications of this exclusivity was clear in their internal debates, diaries, and private correspondence. Ben-Gurion, for example, wrote in a letter to his son in 1937, “The Arabs will have to go, but one needs an opportune moment for making it happen, such as a war.”⁹ Unlike most of his colleagues in the Zionist leadership, who still hoped that by purchasing a piece of land here and a few houses there they would be able to realize their objective on the ground, Ben-Gurion had long understood that this would never be enough. He recognized early on that the Jewish state could be won only by force but that it was necessary to bide one’s time until the opportune moment arrived for dealing militarily with the demographic reality on the ground: the presence of a non-Jewish native majority.

The Zionist movement, led by Ben-Gurion, wasted no time in preparing for the eventuality of taking the land by force if it were not granted through diplomacy. These preparations included the building of an efficient military organization and the search for more ample financial resources (for which they tapped into the Jewish Diaspora). In many ways, the creation of an embryonic diplomatic corps was also an integral part of the same general preparations aimed at creating by force a state in Palestine.

The principal paramilitary organization of the Jewish community in Palestine had been established in 1920 primarily to defend the Jewish colonies being implanted among Palestinian villages. Sympathetic British officers, however, helped transform it into the military force that eventually was able to implement plans for the Zionist military takeover of Palestine and the ethnic cleansing of its native population. One officer in particular, Orde Wingate, was responsible for this transformation. It was he who made the Zionist leaders realize more fully that the idea of Jewish statehood had to be closely associated with militarism and an army, not only to protect the growing number of Jewish colonies inside Palestine but also—more crucially—because acts of armed aggression were an effective deterrent against possible resistance by local Palestinians. Assigned to Palestine in 1936, Wingate also succeeded in attaching Haganah troops to the British forces during the Arab Revolt (1936–39), enabling the Jews to practice the attack tactics he had taught them in rural areas and to learn even more effectively what a “punitive mission” to an Arab village ought to entail. The Haganah also gained valuable military experience in World War II, when quite a few of its members volunteered for the British war effort. Others who remained behind in Palestine, meanwhile, continued to monitor and infiltrate the 1,200 or so Palestinian villages that had dotted the countryside for hundreds of years.

THE VILLAGE FILES

Attacking Arab villages and carrying out punitive raids gave Zionists experience, but it was not enough; systematic planning was called for. In 1940, a young bespectacled Hebrew University historian named Ben-Zion Luria, then employed by the educational department of the Jewish Agency, the Zionist governing body in Palestine, made an important suggestion. He pointed out how useful it would be to have a detailed registry of all Arab villages and proposed that the Jewish National Fund (JNF) conduct such an inventory. “This would greatly help the redemption of the land,” he wrote to the JNF.¹⁰ He could not have chosen a better address: the way his initiative involved the JNF in the prospective ethnic cleansing was to generate added impetus and zeal to the expulsion plans that followed.

Founded in 1901 at the fifth Zionist Congress, the JNF was the Zionists’ principal tool for the colonization of Palestine. This was the agency the Zionist movement used to buy Palestinian land on which it then settled Jewish immigrants and that spearheaded the Zionization of Palestine throughout the Mandatory years. From the outset, it was designed to become the “custodian” on behalf of the Jewish people of the land acquired by the Zionists in Palestine. The JNF maintained this role after Israel’s creation, with other missions being added to this primordial task over time.¹¹

Despite the JNF’s best efforts, its success in land acquisition fell far short of its goals. Available financial resources were limited, Palestinian resistance was fierce, and British policies had become restrictive. The result was that

by the end of the Mandate in 1948 the Zionist movement had been able to purchase no more than 5.8 percent of the land in Palestine.¹² This is why Yossef Weitz, the head of the JNF settlement department and the quintessential Zionist colonialist, waxed lyrical when he heard about Luria's village files, immediately suggesting that they be turned into a "national project."¹³

All involved became fervent supporters of the idea. Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, a historian and prominent member of the Zionist leadership (later to become Israel's second president), wrote to Moshe Shertock (Sharett), the head of the political department of the Jewish Agency (and later Israel's prime minister), that apart from topographically recording the layout of the villages, the project should also include exposing the "Hebraic origins" of each village. Furthermore, it was important for the Haganah to know which of the villages were relatively new, as some of them had been built "only" during the Egyptian occupation of Palestine in the 1830s.¹⁴

But the main endeavor was mapping the villages, and to that end a Hebrew University topographer working in the Mandatory government's cartography department was recruited to the enterprise. He suggested preparing focal aerial maps and proudly showed Ben-Gurion two such maps for the villages of Sindyana and Sabarin. (These maps, now in the Israeli State Archives, are all that remains of these villages after 1948.) The best professional photographers in the country were also invited to join the initiative. Yitzhak Shefer, from Tel Aviv, and Margot Sadeh, the wife of Yitzhak Sadeh, the chief of the Palmah (the commando units of the Haganah), were recruited as well. The film laboratory operated in Margot's house with an irrigation company serving as a front: the lab had to be hidden from the British authorities who could have regarded it as an illegal intelligence effort directed against them. Though the British were aware of the project, they never succeeded in locating the secret hideout. In 1947, this whole cartographic department was moved to the Haganah headquarters in Tel Aviv.¹⁵

The end result of the combined topographic and Orientalist efforts was a large body of detailed files gradually built up for each of Palestine's villages. By the late 1940s, the "archive" was almost complete. Precise details were recorded about the topographic location of each village, its access roads, quality of land, water springs, main sources of income, its sociopolitical composition, religious affiliations, names of its *mukhtars*, its relationship with other villages, the age of individual men (16-50), and much more. An important category was an index of "hostility" (toward the Zionist project, that is) as determined by the level of the village's participation in the 1936-39 Arab Revolt. The material included lists of everyone involved in the revolt and the families of those who had lost someone in the fight against the British. Particular attention was given to people alleged to have killed Jews.

That this was no mere academic exercise in geography was immediately obvious to the regular members of the Haganah who were entrusted with collecting the data on "reconnaissance" missions into the villages. One of those who joined a data collection operation in 1940 was Moshe Pasternak, who

recalled many years later:

We had to study the basic structure of the Arab village. This means the structure and how best to attack it. In the military schools, I had been taught how to attack a modern European city, not a primitive village in the Near East. We could not compare it [an Arab village] to a Polish, or an Austrian one. The Arab village, unlike the European ones, was built topographically on hills. That meant we had to find out how best to approach the village from above or enter it from below. We had to train our "Arabists" [the Orientalists who operated a network of collaborators] how best to work with informants.¹⁶

Indeed, the difficulties of "working with informants" and creating a collaborationist system with the "primitive" people "who like to drink coffee and eat rice with their hands" were noted in many of the village files. Nonetheless, by 1943, Pasternak remembered, there was a growing sense that finally a proper network of informants was in place. That same year, the village files were re-arranged to become even more systematic. This was mainly the work of one man, Ezra Danin,¹⁷ who was to play a leading role in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

In many ways, it was the recruitment of Ezra Danin, who had been taken out of his successful citrus grove business for the purpose, that injected the intelligence work and the organization of the village files with a new level of efficiency. Files in the post-1943 era included for each village detailed descriptions of the husbandry, cultivation, the number of trees in plantations, the quality of each fruit grove (even of individual trees!), the average land holding per family, the number of cars, the names of shop owners, members of workshops, and the names of the artisans and their skills.¹⁸ Later, meticulous details were added about each clan and its political affiliation, the social stratification between notables and common peasants, and the names of the civil servants in the Mandatory government. The antlike labor of the data collection created its own momentum, and around 1945 additional details began to appear such as descriptions of village mosques, the names of their imams (together with such characterizations as "he is an ordinary man"), and even precise accounts of the interiors of the homes of dignitaries. Not surprisingly, as the end of the Mandate approached, the information became more explicitly military orientated: the number of guards in each village (most had none) and the quantity and quality of arms at the villagers' disposal (generally antiquated or even nonexistent).¹⁹

Danin recruited a German Jew named Yaacov Shimoni, later to become one of Israel's leading Orientalists, and put him in charge of "special projects" in the villages, in particular supervising the work of the informants.²⁰ (One of these informants, nicknamed the "treasurer" (*ba-gizbar*) by Danin and Shimoni, proved a fountain of information for the data collectors and supervised the collaborators' network on their behalf until 1945, when he was exposed and killed by Palestinian militants.²¹) Other colleagues working with Danin and

Shimoni were Yehoshua Palmon and Tuvia Lishanski, who also took an active part in preparing for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Lishanski had already been busy in the 1940s orchestrating campaigns to forcibly evict tenants living on lands purchased by the JNF from present or absentee landlords.

Not far from the village of Furiedis and the “veteran” Jewish settlement, Zikhron Yaacov, where today a road connects the coastal highway with Marj Ibn Amr (Emeq Izrael) through Wadi Milk, lies a youth village called Shefeya. It was here that in 1944 special units employed by the village files project received their training, and it was from here that they went out on their reconnaissance missions. Shefeya looked very much like a spy village in the cold war: Jews walking around speaking Arabic and trying to emulate what they believed were the customs and behavior of rural Palestinians.²² Many years later, in 2002, one of the first recruits to this special training base recalled his first reconnaissance mission to the nearby village of Umm al-Zaynat in 1944. The aim had been to survey the village and bring back details of where the *mukhtar* lived, where the mosque was located, where the rich villagers lived, who had been active in the 1936–39 revolt, and so on. These were not dangerous missions, as the infiltrators knew they could exploit the traditional Arab hospitality code and were even guests at the home of the *mukhtar* himself. As they failed to collect in one day all the data they were seeking, they asked to be invited back. For their second visit they had been instructed to make sure to get a good idea of the fertility of the land, whose quality seemed to have highly impressed them: in 1948, Umm al-Zaynat was destroyed and all its inhabitants expelled without any provocation on their part whatsoever.²³

The final update of the village files took place in 1947. It focused on creating lists of “wanted” persons in each village. In 1948, Jewish troops used these lists for the search-and-arrest operations they carried out as soon as they had occupied a village. That is, the men in the village would be lined up and those whose names appeared on the lists would be identified, often by the same person who had informed on them in the first place, but now wearing a cloth sack over his head with two holes cut out for his eyes so as not to be recognized. The men who were picked out were often shot on the spot.

Among the criteria for inclusion in these lists, besides having participated in actions against the British and the Zionists, were involvement in the Palestinian national movement (which could apply to entire villages) and having close ties to the leader of the movement, the Mufti Haj Amin al-Husayni, or being affiliated with his political party.²⁴ Given the Mufti’s dominance of Palestinian politics since the establishment of the Mandate in 1923, and the prominent positions held by members of his party in the Arab Higher Committee that became the embryo government of the Palestinians, this offense too was very common. Other reasons for being included in the list were such allegations as “known to have traveled to Lebanon” or “arrested by the British authorities for being a member of a national committee in the village.”²⁵ An examination of the 1947 files shows that villages with about 1,500 inhabitants usually had 20–30 such suspects (for instance, around the southern Carmel mountains, south of Haifa,

Umm al-Zaynat had 30 such suspects and the nearby village of Damun had 25).²⁶

Yigael Yadin recalled that it was this minute and detailed knowledge of each and every Palestinian village that enabled the Zionist military command in November 1947 to conclude with confidence “that the Palestine Arabs had nobody to organize them properly.” The only serious problem was the British: “If not for the British, we could have quelled the Arab riot [the opposition to the UN Partition Resolution in 1947] in one month.”²⁷

GEARING UP FOR WAR

As World War II drew to a close, the Zionist movement had obtained a much clearer general sense of how best to go about getting its state off the ground. By that time, it was clear that the Palestinians did not constitute a real obstacle to Zionist plans. True, they still formed the overwhelming majority in the land, and as such they were a demographic problem, but they were no longer feared as a military threat. A crucial factor was that the British had already completely destroyed the Palestinian leadership and defense capabilities in 1939 when they suppressed the 1936–39 Arab Revolt, allowing the Zionist leadership ample time to set out their next moves. The Zionist leadership was also aware of the hesitant position that the Arab states as a whole were taking on the Palestine question. Thus, once the danger of Nazi invasion into Palestine had been removed, the Zionist leaders were keenly aware that the sole obstacle that stood in the way of their seizing the country was the British presence.

As long as Britain had been holding the fort against Nazi Germany, it was impossible, of course, to pressure them. But with the end of the war, and especially with the postwar Labor government looking for a democratic solution in Palestine (which would have spelled doom for the Zionist project given the 75-percent Arab majority), it was clear that Britain had to go. Some 100,000 British troops remained in Palestine after the war and, in a country with a population under two million, this definitely served as a deterrent, even after Britain cut back its forces somewhat following the Jewish terrorist attack on its headquarters in the King David Hotel. It was these considerations that prompted Ben-Gurion to conclude that it was better to settle for less than the 100 percent demanded under the 1942 Biltmore program and that a slightly smaller state would be enough to allow the Zionist movement to fulfill its dreams and ambitions.²⁸

This was the issue that was debated by the movement in the final days of August 1946, when Ben-Gurion assembled the leadership of the Zionist movement at the Royal Mansue hotel in Paris. Holding back the more extremist members, Ben-Gurion told the gathering that 80 to 90 percent of Mandatory Palestine was plenty for creating a viable state, provided they were able to ensure Jewish predominance. “We will demand a large chunk of Palestine” he told those present. A few months later the Jewish Agency translated Ben-Gurion’s “large chunk of Palestine” into a map which it distributed to

the parties relevant to deciding the future of Palestine. Interestingly, the Jewish Agency map, which was larger than the map proposed by the UN in November 1947, turned out to be, almost to the last dot, the map that emerged from the fighting in 1948–49: pre-1967 Israel, that is, Palestine without the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.²⁹

The major topic on the Zionist agenda in 1946, the struggle against the British, resolved itself with Britain's decision in February 1947 to quit Palestine and to transfer the Palestine question to the UN. In fact, the British had little choice: after the Holocaust they would never be able to deal with the looming Jewish rebellion as they had with the Arab one in the 1930s. Moreover, as the Labor party had made up its mind to leave India, Palestine lost much of its attraction. Fuel shortages during a particularly cold winter in 1947 drove the message home to London that the empire was soon to be a second-rate power, its global influence dwarfed by the two new superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union) and its postwar economy crippled. Rather than hold onto remote places such as Palestine, the Labor party saw as its priority the building of a welfare state at home. In the end, Britain pulled out in a hurry, and with no regrets.³⁰

By the end of 1946, even before Britain's decision, Ben-Gurion had already realized that the British were on their way out and, with his aides, began working on a general strategy that could be implemented against the Palestinian population the moment the British were gone. This strategy became Plan C, or *Gimel* in Hebrew. Plan C was a revised version of two earlier plans. Plan A was also named the "Elimelech Plan," after Elimelech Avnir, the Haganah commander in Tel Aviv who in 1937, at Ben-Gurion's request, had set out possible guidelines for the takeover of Palestine in the event of a British withdrawal. Plan B had been devised in 1946. Shortly thereafter, the two plans were fused to form Plan C.

Like Plans A and B, Plan C aimed to prepare the Jewish community's military forces for the offensive campaigns they would be waging against rural and urban Palestine after the departure of the British. The purpose of such actions would be to "deter" the Palestinian population from attacking Jewish settlements and to retaliate for assaults on Jewish houses, roads, and traffic. Plan C spelled out clearly what punitive actions of this kind would entail:

- Striking at the political leadership.
- Striking at inciters and their financial supporters.
- Striking at Arabs who acted against Jews.
- Striking at senior Arab officers and officials [in the Mandatory system].
- Hitting Palestinian transportation.
- Damaging the sources of livelihood and vital economic targets (water wells, mills, etc.).
- Attacking villages, neighborhoods, likely to assist in future attacks.
- Attacking clubs, coffee houses, meeting places, etc.

Plan C added that the data necessary for the successful performance of these actions could be found in the village files: lists of leaders, activists, “potential human targets,” the precise layout of villages, and so on.³¹

The plan lacked operational specifics, however, and within a few months, a new plan was drawn up, Plan D (*Dalet*). This was the plan that sealed the fate of the Palestinians within the territory the Zionist leaders had set their eyes on for their future Jewish State. Unlike Plan C, it contained direct references both to the geographical parameters of the future Jewish state (the 78 percent provided for in the 1946 Jewish Agency map) and to the fate of the one million Palestinians living within that space:

These operations can be carried out in the following manner: either by destroying villages (by setting fire to them, by blowing them up, and by planting mines in their rubble), and especially those population centers that are difficult to control permanently; or by mounting combing and control operations according to the following guidelines: encirclement of the villages, conducting a search inside them. In case of resistance, the armed forces must be wiped out and the population expelled outside the borders of the state.³²

No village within the planned area of operations was exempted from these orders, either because of its location or because it was expected to put up some resistance. This was the master plan for the expulsion of all the villages in rural Palestine. Similar instructions were given, in much the same wording, for actions directed at Palestine’s urban centers.

The orders coming through to the units in the field were more specific. The country was divided into zones according to the number of brigades, whereby the four original brigades of the Haganah were turned into twelve so

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as to facilitate implementing the plan. Each brigade commander received a list of the villages or neighborhoods in his zone that had to be occupied, destroyed, and their inhabitants expelled, with exact dates. Some commanders were overly zealous in executing their orders, adding other locations as the momentum of their operation carried them forward. Some of the orders, on the other hand, proved too ambitious and could not be implemented within the expected timetable. This meant that several villages on the coast that had been scheduled to be occupied in May were destroyed only in July. And the villages in the Wadi Ara area—a

valley connecting the coast near Hadera with Marj Ibn Amr (Emeq Izrael) and Afula (today’s Route 65)—somehow succeeded in surviving all the Jewish attacks until the end of the war. But they were the exception. For the most part, the destruction of the villages and urban neighborhoods, and the removal of their inhabitants, took place as planned. And by the time the direct order had been issued in March, thirty villages were already obliterated.

A few days after Plan D was typed out, it was distributed among the commanders of the dozen brigades that now comprised the Haganah. With the list each commander received came a detailed description of the villages in his field of operation and their imminent fate—occupation, destruction, and expulsion. The Israeli documents released from the IDF archives in the late 1990s show clearly that, contrary to claims made by historians such as Benny Morris, Plan Dalet was handed down to the brigade commanders not as vague guidelines, but as clear-cut operative orders for action.³³

Unlike the general draft that was sent to the political leaders, the instructions and lists of villages received by the military commanders did not place any restrictions on how the action of destruction or expulsion was to be carried out. There were no provisions as to how villages could avoid their fate, for example through unconditional surrender, as promised in the general document. There was another difference between the draft handed to the politicians and the one given to the military commanders: the official draft stated that the plan would not be activated until after the Mandate ended, whereas the officers on the ground were ordered to start executing it within a few days of its adoption. This dichotomy is typical of the relationship that exists in Israel between the army and politicians until today—the army quite often misinforms the politicians of their real intentions, as Moshe Dayan did in 1956, Ariel Sharon did in 1982, and Shaul Mofaz did in 2000.

What the political version of Plan Dalet and the military directives had in common was the overall purpose of the scheme. In other words, even before the direct orders had reached the field, troops already knew exactly what was expected of them. The venerable and courageous Israeli fighter for civil rights, Shulamit Aloni, who was an officer at the time, recalls how special political officers would come down and actively incite the troops by demonizing the Palestinians and invoking the Holocaust as the point of reference for the operation ahead, often planned for the day after the indoctrination had taken place.³⁴

THE PARADIGM OF ETHNIC CLEANSING

In my forthcoming book, I want to explore the mechanism of the ethnic cleansing of 1948 as well as the cognitive system that has allowed the world to forget and the perpetrators to deny the crime committed by the Zionist movement against the Palestinian people.

In other words, I want to make the case for a paradigm of ethnic cleansing to replace the paradigm of war as the basis for the scholarly research of, and the public debate about, 1948. I have no doubt that the absence so far of the paradigm of ethnic cleansing is one reason why the denial of the catastrophe has gone on for so long. It is not that the Zionist movement, in creating its nation-state, waged a war that “tragically but inevitably” led to the expulsion of “parts of the indigenous population.” Rather, it is the other way round: the objective was the ethnic cleansing of the country the movement coveted for

its new state, and the war was the *consequence*, the *means* to carry it out. On 15 May 1948, the day after the official end of the Mandate and the day the State of Israel was proclaimed, the neighboring Arab states sent a small army—small in comparison to their overall military capability—to try to stop the ethnic cleansing operations that had already been in full swing for over a month. The war with the regular Arab armies did nothing to prevent the ongoing ethnic cleansing, which continued to its successful completion in the autumn of 1948.

To many, the idea of adopting the paradigm of ethnic cleansing as the *a priori* basis for the narrative of 1948 may appear no more than an indictment. And in many ways, it is indeed my own *J'Accuse* against the politicians who devised the ethnic cleansing and the generals who carried it out. These men are not obscure. They are the heroes of the Jewish war of independence, and their names will be quite familiar to most readers. The list begins with the indisputable leader of the Zionist movement, David Ben-Gurion, in whose private home all the chapters in the ethnic cleansing scheme were discussed and finalized. He was aided by a small group of people I refer to as the “Consultancy,” an ad-hoc cabal assembled solely for the purpose of planning the dispossession of the Palestinians.³⁵ In one of the rare documents that records the meeting of this body, it is referred to as the Consultant Committee—*Haveadab Hamyeazet*; in another document the eleven names of the committee appear.³⁶ Though these names were all erased by the censor, it has been possible to reconstruct them.

This caucus prepared the plans for the ethnic cleansing and supervised its execution until the job of uprooting half of Palestine’s native population had been completed. It included first and foremost the top-ranking officers of the future state’s army, such as the legendary Yigael Yadin and Moshe Dayan. They were joined by figures little known outside Israel but well grounded in the local ethos, such as Yigal Alon and Yitzhak Sadeh, followed by regional commanders, such as Moshe Kalman, who cleansed the Safad area, and Moshe Carmel, who uprooted most of the Galilee. Yitzhak Rabin operated both in al-Lyyd and Ramleh, as well as in the Greater Jerusalem area. Shimon Avidan cleansed the south; many years later Rehavam Ze’evi, who fought with him, said admiringly that he “cleansed his front from tens of villages and towns.”³⁷ Also on the southern front was Yitzhak Pundak, who told *Ha’Aretz* in 2004, “There were two hundred villages [in the front] and they are gone. We had to destroy them, otherwise we would have had Arabs here [namely in the southern part of Palestine] as we have in Galilee. We would have had another million Palestinians.”³⁸

These military men commingled with what nowadays we would call the “Orientalists”: experts on the Arab world at large, and the Palestinians in particular, either because they themselves came from Arab lands or because they were scholars in the field of Middle Eastern studies. Some of these were intelligence officers on the ground during this crucial period. Far from being mere collectors of data on the “enemy,” intelligence officers not only played a major role in preparing for the cleansing, but some also personally took part in some of the worst atrocities that accompanied the systematic dispossession of the

Palestinians. It was they who were given the final authority to decide which villages would be ground to dust and which villagers would be executed.³⁹ In the memories of Palestinian survivors, they were the ones who, after a village or neighborhood had been occupied, decided the fate of its peasants or town dwellers, which could mean imprisonment or freedom or spell the difference between life and death. Their operations in 1948 were supervised by Issar Harel, who later became the first head of Mossad and the Shin Bet, Israel's secret services.

I mention their names, but my purpose in doing so is not that I want to see them posthumously brought to trial. Rather, my aim here and in my book is to humanize the victimizers as well as the victims: I want to prevent the crimes Israel committed from being attributed to such elusive factors as “the circumstances,” “the army,” or, as Benny Morris has it, “la guerre comme la guerre,” and similar vague references that let sovereign states off the hook and give individuals a clear conscience. I accuse, but I am also part of the society that stands condemned. I feel both responsible for, and part of, the story. But like others in my own society, I am also convinced that a painful journey into the past is the only way forward if we want to create a better future for us all, Palestinians and Israelis alike.

NOTES

1. The composition of the group that met is the product of a mosaic reconstruction of several documents, as will be demonstrated in my book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006). The document summarizing the meeting is found in the Israel Defense Force Archives [IDFA], GHQ/Operations branch, 10 March 1948, File no. 922/75/595, and in the Haganah Archives [HA], File no. 73/94. The description of the meeting is repeated by Israel Galili in the Mapai center meeting, 4 April 1948, found in the HA, File no. 80/50/18. Chapter 4 of my book also documents the messages that went out on 10 March as well as the eleven meetings prior to finalizing of the plan, of which full minutes were recorded only for the January meeting.

2. The historian Meir Pail claims, in *From Haganah to the IDF* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Zemora Bitan Modan, n.d.), p. 307, that the orders were sent a week later. For the dispatch of the orders, see also Gershon Rivlin and Elhanan Oren, *The War of Independence: Ben-Gurion's Diary*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1982), p. 147. The orders dispatched to the Haganah

brigades to move to State D—*Mazav Dalet*—and from the brigades to the battalions can be found in HA, File no. 73/94, 16 April 1948.

3. On Plan Dalet, which was approved in its broad lines several weeks before that meeting, see Uri Ben-Eliezer, *The Emergence of Israeli Militarism, 1936–1956* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1995), p. 253: “Plan Dalet aimed at cleansing of villages, expulsion of Arabs from mixed towns.”

4. State Department Special Report, “Erasing History: Ethnic Cleansing in Kosovo,” 10 May 1999.

5. The Ethnic Cleansing of Bosnia-Herzegovina: A Staff Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations,” U.S. Senate, August 1992, S.PRT. 102–103.

6. United Nations, “Report Following Security Council Resolution 819,” 16 April 1993.

7. Drazen Petrovic, “Ethnic Cleansing: An Attempt at Methodology,” *European Journal of International Law* 5, no. 3 (1994), pp. 342–60.

8. On Peel, see Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2004), pp. 135–37.

9. Smith, *Palestine*, pp. 167–68.
10. Ben-Gurion Archives [BGA], Ben-Gurion Diary, 12 July 1937.
11. “The Inelegance Service and the Village Files, 1940–1948” (prepared by Shimri Salomon), *Bulletin of the Haganah Archives*, issues 9–10 (2005).
12. For a critical survey of the JNF, see Uri Davis, *Apartheid Israel: Possibilities for the Struggle Within* (London: Zed Books, 2004).
13. Shabtai Teveth, *Ben-Gurion and the Palestinian Arabs: From Peace to War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
14. Teveth, *Ben-Gurion*.
15. HA, File no. 66.8
16. Testimony of Yoeli Optikman, HA, Village Files, File 24/9, 16 January 2003.
17. HA, File no. 1/080/451, 1 December 1939
18. HA, File no. 194/7, pp. 1–3, given on 19 December 2002.
19. John Bierman and Colin Smith, *Fire in the Night: Wingate of Burma, Ethiopia, and Zion* (New York: Random House, 1999).
20. HA, Files no. S25/4131, no. 105/224, and no. 105/227, and many others in this series, each dealing with a different village.
21. Hillel Cohen, *The Shadow Army: Palestinian Collaborators in the Service of Zionism* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Hozata Ivrit, 2004).
22. Interview with Palti Sela, HA, File no. 205.9, 10 January 1988.
23. Interview, HA, File no. 194.7, pp. 1–3, 19 December 2002.
24. HA, Village Files, File no. 105/255 files from January 1947.
25. IDFA, File no. 114/49/5943, orders from 13 April 1948.
26. IDFA, File no. 105.178.
27. HA, Village Files, File no. 105/255, from January 1947.
28. Quoted in Harry Sacher, *Israel: The Establishment of a State* (London: Wiedenfels and Nicloson, 1952), p. 217.
29. On British policy, see Ilan Pappé, *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1948–1951* (London: St. Antony’s/ Macmillan Press, 1984).
30. Moshe Sluzki interview with Moshe Sneh in Gershon Rivlin, ed., *Olive Leaves and Sword: Documents and Studies of the Haganah* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: IDF Publications, 1990), pp. 9–40.
31. See Pappé, *Britain*.
32. Yehuda Sluzki, *The Haganah Book*, vol. 3, part 3 [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: IDF Publications, 1964), p. 1942.
33. The English translation is in Walid Khalidi, “Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 38, no. 1 (Autumn 1988), pp. 4–20.
34. See discussion of State D (*Mazav Dalet*)—that is, the transition from Plan D to its actual implementation—in chapter 5 of Pappé, *Ethnic Cleansing*.
35. The plan distributed to the soldiers and the first direct commands are in IDFA, File no. 1950/2315 File 47, 11 May 1948.
36. The most important meetings are described in chapter 3 of Pappé, *Ethnic Cleansing*.
37. “From Ben-Gurion to Galili and the Members of the Committee,” BGA, Correspondence Section, 1.01.1948–07.01.48, documents 79–81. The document also provides a list of forty Palestinians leaders that are target for assassination by the Haganah forces.
38. *Yedi’ot Abaronot*, 2 February 1992.
39. *Ha’Aretz*, 21 May 2004.
40. For details, see Pappé, *Ethnic Cleansing*. The authority to destroy can be found in the orders sent on 10 March to the troops and specific orders authorizing executions are in IDFA, File no. 5943/49 doc. 114, 13 April 1948.