



The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine

After the UN vote in favor of partition in November 1947, the violence between Jews and Arabs escalated, with frequent roadside ambushes and bombings being perpetrated by both sides. Isolated, stripped of most of its weapons, with its leadership sent into exile, and facing an organized and well-armed enemy, the Palestinians proved no match for the Zionist forces, and the gallant resistance movement of Hajj Amin al-Husseini's *Jihad al-Muqaddas* Army was fighting an impossible war. The death of their charismatic and capable leader Abdel Qader al-Husseini at the battle of Qastel on 8 April 1948 was an especially severe blow to Palestinian morale.

In the process of putting down the indigenous resistance movement, the Zionist leadership embarked upon a ruthless program of ethnic cleansing prior to the end of the British Mandate and the inevitable confrontations with the surrounding Arab countries. Knowing that the Arab armies would not intervene before the British withdrawal, the Zionists could turn their full focus on the Palestinian population with frequent and brutal raids on villages, quickly creating a state of unprecedented fear. Villages near Jewish settlements were forcibly depopulated, and the Jewish forces soon took their maneuvers further afield to expel as much of the Palestinian population from Mandatory Palestine as possible.

With the majority of rural Palestinian populations living a simple agricultural existence, most of the *fellahin* had no social, political or economic need for extended contact with the affairs and politics of the major cities. Their participation during the armed conflict between the Zionists and the Palestinians was therefore limited to defending their villages; and with little communication or cooperation between one village and the next, each village undertook its own defense. Concentrating on one village at a time, it was an easy task for the organized, well-armed Jewish forces to effect the depopulation of over 200 Palestinian villages prior to their declaration of nationhood in May 1948. Their undertaking was greatly facilitated by the widespread news of the brutality of their methods; the massacre of Deir Yassin in particular had a traumatic effect on the Palestinian population, and many fled the advancing Jewish forces in terror of being subjected to a similar fate.

Large Palestinian cities presented only slightly different challenges to the Zionist forces. Under pressure to establish a contiguous Jewish territory along the coastal strip before the British withdrawal, Jewish forces launched attacks upon Haifa and Jaffa to secure the coast. Fighting in Haifa had been ongoing since December 1947, but when the British abruptly withdrew their troops in April 1948, the Haganah staged a mass attack upon the city. With the news of Deir Yassin very fresh in the minds of the inhabitants, all but 4,000 of the city's 70,000 Arabs fled in terror, leaving behind all they could not carry.



Deir Yassin

Deir Yassin was a small Palestinian village near Jerusalem which had made and scrupulously abided by a non-aggression agreement with the Haganah. On 9 April 1948, the Irgun and the



Stern Gang launched an unprovoked attack on the village and massacred over 245 Palestinians. According to Benny Morris in *Righteous Victims*, entire families were killed, and reports from Jewish commanders spoke of "barbaric behavior towards the prisoners and dead", with Palestinian villagers being paraded in Jerusalem city streets in trucks before being taken back to the village and murdered. Although the Haganah leadership condemned the operation, it served a useful purpose in their expulsion plan as its psychological effect on Palestinians was devastating.

The accounts from survivors and witnesses were harrowing:¹

"The Jews ordered all our family to line up against the wall and they started shooting us. I was hit in the side, but most of us children were saved because we hid behind our parents. The bullets hit my sister Kadri (four) in the head, my sister Sameh (eight) in the cheek, my brother Mohammed (seven) in the chest. But all the others with us against the wall were killed: my father, my mother, my grandfather, my grandmother, my uncles and aunts and some of their children."

- Fahimi Zeidan, who was 12 in 1948

"[I saw] a man shoot... my sister Salhiyeh who was nine months pregnant. Then he cut her stomach open with a butcher's knife."

- Haleem Lei

"I saw bodies of women and children, who were murdered in their houses in cold blood by gunfire, with no signs of battle and not as the result of blowing up the houses. From my experience, I know well that there is no war without killing, and that not only combatants get killed. I have seen a great deal of war, but I never saw a sight like Deir Yassin."

- Eliahu Arbel of the Haganah, who arrived in Deir Yassin on 10 April

"All I could think of was the SS troops I'd seen in Athens."

- Jacques de Reyner of the Red Cross, the first to reach the site

"It was a lovely spring day. The almond trees were in bloom, the flowers were out and everywhere there was the stench of the dead, the thick smell of blood, and the terrible odor of the corpses burning in the quarry."

- Yeshurun Schiff of the Haganah, who arrived just after the massacre.

Deir Yassin was not an isolated incident, nor were these atrocities limited to the radical Irgun and Lehi fringe groups. The villages of Balad esh-Sheikh, Sa'sa', Hula and ed-Dawayimeh were all the scenes of similar attacks. (See, for example, Sami Hadawi's *Bitter Harvest* for further details).

¹ All quotes from Collins and Lapierre, *O Jerusalem!*, (Touchstone, 1988) and Yitzak Levi, *Nine Measures* (Maarachot, 1986)