



## OPERATION HIRAM REVISITED: A CORRECTION

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*The author revisits the Israeli Defense Forces' October 1948 Galilee operation in the light of newly available archival material and finds that, contrary to earlier findings, orders were in fact issued to clear the Galilee of Arabs. The reasons that most of the population remained in situ are examined, and the pattern of massacres in the region is discussed. The article concludes by emphasizing the cumulative nature of historiography and the way the picture changes in accordance with the available data.*

Occasionally a historian must correct a mistake.

In 1988, I published *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*, which describes the causes and nature of the Arab exodus from parts of Palestine during the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948. Since I completed the work in 1987, a great deal of hitherto unavailable documentation has come to light, especially in the Israel Defense Forces Archives (IDFA) in Giv'atayim. Most of the new material tends to reinforce the descriptions in and conclusions of my work. But some of the new documentation necessitates emendation of certain passages. One such case relates to Operation Hiram.

### THE BASIS OF THE ORIGINAL CONCLUSIONS

On 28-31 October 1948, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Operation Hiram conquered the central-upper Galilee pocket, from the Majd al-Kurum-Dayr Hanna line to the Lebanese border, held by Fawzi Qawukji's Arab Liberation Army and a regular Syrian Army battalion. In *The Birth*, I wrote of the operation and its commander, General Moshe Carmel, the IDF Officer in Command (OC) Northern Front, that

neither before, during nor immediately after Operation . . . Hiram did the Cabinet . . . decide or instruct the IDF to drive out the Arab population from the areas it was about to conquer or had conquered. Nor, as far as the evidence shows, did the heads of the defence establishment issue any general orders to the advancing brigades to expel or otherwise harm the civilian population in their path. Nor, as far as can

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be ascertained, did any general orders issue from the headquarters of the . . . operation or from the headquarters of the . . . brigades involved to their battalions and companies to this purpose.<sup>1</sup>

In the book, I described a chaotic situation in which the IDF units involved in the operation were not directed by central guidelines or a consistent policy, but where each had acted differently toward the conquered Arab communities—here leaving a community in place, there expelling it, in certain villages committing atrocities, occasionally accompanied by an expulsion, in other places acting benignly. In reaching this conclusion, I based myself largely on the postoperational situation in which a large number of communities, both Christian and Muslim, remained *in situ* and on two main documents. The first of these was a letter dated 12 November 1948 from Ya'akov Shimoni, acting director of the Israel Foreign Ministry's Middle East Affairs Department, to Eliahu (Elias) Sasson, the departmental director who was then in Paris. The second document was a letter dated 18 November from Shimoni to the director general of the Foreign Ministry, Walter Eytan.

Shimoni, a former intelligence executive and a man well versed in Middle Eastern affairs, wrote to Sasson as follows:

Too many hands have stirred the [Hiram] broth. . . . So it was that the attitude towards the Arab inhabitants of the Galilee and towards the Arab refugees [temporarily] living in the Galilee villages or near them was haphazard and different from place to place according to the initiative of this or that commander or government official; here people were expelled and there people were left in place, here the surrender of villages was accepted (and with it a sort of commitment to allow the inhabitants to remain and to protect them) and there [officers] refused to accept surrender, here Christians benefitted from positive discrimination, and there [the army] dealt with Christians and Muslims the same way and without distinction. So it was, too, that refugees who had fled in the panic-filled first moments of the conquest were allowed to return to their places.

Our advice [to the army] and our view [i.e., the view of the Middle East Affairs Department of the Foreign Ministry], which were not acted upon, are certainly clear to you: We asked that [the army] make an effort during the conquest that no Arab inhabitants remain in the Galilee and certainly that no refugees from other places remain there. . . .<sup>2</sup>

To Eytan, Shimoni wrote:

After [i.e., during] two trips around the [newly conquered areas of the] Galilee by Ezra Danin [special adviser on Arab affairs at the Foreign Ministry], Zvi Meckler (of the Political [i.e., intelligence] Department [of the ministry]), Shmuel Ya'ari (of the Syrian and Lebanese section in my department) and myself . . . we heard from all the commanders with whom we had contact that during the operations in the Galilee and in Lebanon [in Operation Hiram the IDF also conquered a string of villages on the Lebanese side of the international frontier] they had *no clear orders, no clear line* concerning behavior towards the Arabs in the conquered areas—expulsion of the inhabitants or leaving them in place; harsh or soft behavior; discrimination in favor of Christians or not; special treatment of Maronites; special treatment of Matawalis [i.e., Shi'ites], etc., etc. . . . (As well, those acts of cruelty perpetrated [by the IDF]—certainly some of them were carried out for reasons not connected to these considerations; but I have no doubt that some of them would not have happened had the conquering army had a clear . . . policy regarding behavior [toward civilian populations].<sup>3</sup>

The demographic situation in the wake of the operation reinforced these descriptions: Many villagers, both Christian and Muslim, stayed put and were left in place—and they and their descendants today constitute the core of Israel's current almost one-million-strong Arab minority.

In an interview I conducted with Moshe Carmel in 1985, he explained that he had never adopted a policy of expulsion vis-à-vis the Arab communities he had conquered in 1948, though he admitted that in a number of localities he had authorized expulsions for purely military reasons.

### FRESH EVIDENCE

But Carmel had not told me the truth, and Shimoni had not been accurate in his letters—so it emerges from newly released documents in IDFA regarding Operation Hiram. In fact, there was a central directive by Northern Front to clear the conquered pocket of its Arab inhabitants, though Carmel had shied away from using the explicit word “expel.” It is possible that the “advice” proffered by the Foreign Ministry (as mentioned by Shimoni) to the army command influenced the issuance of this directive.

On the morning of 31 October 1948, Carmel radioed all his brigade and district commanders: “Do all in your power to clear quickly and immediately from the areas conquered all hostile elements in accordance with the orders issued. The inhabitants should be assisted to leave the conquered areas.”<sup>4</sup> On 10 November, Carmel added the following (somewhat “softer”) order:

“. . . (B) [The troops] should continue to assist [in the departure of] the inhabitants wishing to leave the areas conquered by us. This is urgent and must be carried out swiftly. (C) A strip five kilometers deep behind the border between us and Lebanon must be empty of [Arab] inhabitants.”<sup>5</sup>

There can be no doubt that, in the circumstances of late October 1948, the brigade and district OCs understood Carmel’s first order, of 31 October, and perhaps also his follow-up of 10 November, as a general directive to expel.

So, too, was the order of 31 October understood by Major Yitzhak Moda’i (who in the 1980s rose to national prominence as a Likud politician and served as Israel’s finance minister). In his classified, comprehensive analysis of Operation Hiram, written for IDF History Branch in the late 1950s mainly on the basis of IDF archival material, Moda’i devoted a great deal of space to the question of why most of the Arab population in the conquered pocket remained *in situ* (as compared with most of the communities who fled or were chased out in the IDF’s previous offensives in various areas of the country). “One could have believed,” Moda’i wrote,

that the Arab population in the Galilee simply wasn’t forced—as were the inhabitants of other parts of the country—to flee for their lives by the intimidator [i.e., Israel]. But from testimony by commanders and men and from official reports . . . it is clear that our forces in the Galilee did not act with restraint and that their treatment of the inhabitants could in no way be construed as a factor [motivating them] to stay in their villages.

Although [Northern] Front’s and the Brigade HQ’s operational orders for Operation Hiram make no mention of the local population [and its prospective treatment],<sup>6</sup> all were aware of General Staff/Operations stand on this score.<sup>7</sup>

Moda’i refers his readers to the order by Yigael Yadin, OC Operations, from 18 August 1948, stating “that we are not interested in Arab inhabitants [in Israel] and their return [to Israeli territory] must be prevented at all costs.” Moda’i then quotes Carmel’s above-quoted order of 31 October (“the inhabitants should be assisted to leave the areas conquered”) and concludes: “It appears, therefore, that the Arab population in the Galilee by and large stayed put in its villages, despite the fact that our forces tried to throw it out, and often using means which were illegal and not gentle.”<sup>8</sup>

Moda’i suggests a number of explanations for the fact that the bulk of the population stayed put:

(A) The [Arab] Liberation Army’s opposition to flight on the eve of the operation. [Later in his report Moda’i refers to the Liberation Army’s orders in Lebanon to prevent Palestinian refugees from entering that country].

(B) The mountainous terrain of the Galilee areas [i.e., certain villages failed to hear about the IDF conquest until after it had been accomplished, and the topography made flight, especially with baggage, very difficult, so many preferred to stay put rather than get on the roads] and the nature of the villagers.

(C) The presence of a friendly population which was promised good treatment by us in advance and which was not subjected to ill-treatment in the course of the operation [i.e., Maronites and Druze].

(D) The speed with which our forces took over the Galilee's roads.

(E) A lack of initiative on the part of our forces which enabled a great number of villagers to return to their homes, after they had first evacuated.<sup>9</sup>

Moda'i also speaks explicitly of

the lack of a clear and predetermined order, instructing [the troops] to get rid of the inhabitants (if that, indeed, was the aim), the Arabs or the Muslims in the Galilee, [and the absence of] a precise definition of the [appropriate] attitude to be employed towards the various religious and ethnic groups, an ignoring, in the planning and the implementation of the operation, of the question [i.e., problem] posed by the [presence of the] Arab inhabitants, and the fact that no forces were prepared in advance to insure that a "vacuum" would not be created, which would enable the inhabitants to return to their homes—these are the reasons that gave rise to the fact [i.e., continued presence] of the Arab community in the Galilee.<sup>10</sup>

To these explanations one should add that by the end of October 1948 the inhabitants of the "pocket" had heard about the trials and tribulations of their countrymen who had gone into exile during the previous months and had become impoverished refugees. They concluded that they would be better off staying in their places rather than going off into an indefinite exile. Moreover, by that time most of the Palestinians surely understood that they and the Arab states had lost the war and that the refugees would not be allowed back to their homes. One must also pay attention to the date of Carmel's decisive order—31 October. By the morning of that day, Operation Hiram had almost been concluded; that is, by the time the battalions and companies had received Carmel's order, they had already overrun most of the pocket's villages and advanced beyond them. To expel the population of a village during or immediately after its conquest was one thing; to go back to

a village hours or days after it had been subdued and throw out its inhabitants was something else (Carmel's order had been issued at 10:00. Presumably additional time would have had to elapse until it reached the battalion and company OCs who would have had to carry it out.) Lastly, the order itself was couched in somewhat "soft" terms, seeming to leave the commanders in the field a great deal of discretion. Certainly, no commander was subsequently charged with or tried for expelling—or not expelling—villagers.

### "ACTS OF CRUELTY"

Nonetheless, a question arises about events in some of the Galilee pocket villages in the days and weeks following 31 October. When Shimoni had referred to the IDF's "acts of cruelty" and Moda'i to the troops' "lack of restraint," they were referring to the series of expulsions (from Iqrit, Kafr Bir'im, Tarbikha, al-Mansura, etc.) and to the massacres (at Majd al-Kurum, al-Bi'na, Dayr al-Assad, Nahf, Safsaf, Jish, Sasa, Saliha, Ilabun, and Huleh) carried out by Carmel's troops, mostly after the end of the campaign.

The question arises: To what degree were these acts the fruit of local initiatives—by platoon, company, and battalion OCs—and to what extent were they inspired by directives from on high?

As regards the expulsions from the strip along the Lebanese border in the week after Operation Hiram—including those from Iqrit and Bir'im—there is no doubt that they stemmed from one central, expulsive directive. Carmel's second above-mentioned cable, of 10 November, indicates as much.

But what of the massacres? Our knowledge of the details of these massacres is limited mainly to Arab oral and written testimony and some United Nations and Israeli civilian documentation.<sup>11</sup> The IDF documents relating to them—reports from the officers in the field and the testimony given to various inquiry commissions which probed the massacres and their final reports (there were at least two, one by IDF Northern Command itself and the other by Israel's attorney general, Ya'akov Shimshon Shapira)—are still classified and unavailable to researchers.<sup>12</sup> But the general lines of what happened are clear.

I am not arguing here that Carmel gave a general order to carry out massacres and that, as a result, a series of massacres were committed. But two things indicate that at least some officers in the field understood Carmel's orders as an authorization to carry out murderous acts that would intimidate the population into flight. First was the pattern in the actions and their relative profusion (the massacres were carried out by battalions of the three main brigades that participated in Operation Hiram—Golani, the Seventh, and Carmeli—as well as by second-line garrison battalions that replaced the assaulting brigades in the villages). Second was the absence of any punishment of the perpetrators. To the best of my knowledge, none of the soldiers or officers who carried out these war crimes was ever punished.

It is quite possible that the perpetrators looked to Carmel's order of 31 October as inspiration for their actions. The fact that no one was subsequently punished leaves the impression that their interpretation of that order (or accompanying oral instructions or exegesis by officers lower down the chain of command, such as brigade commanders) was sufficiently widespread so as to deter anyone from bringing them to book. Put simply, Carmel or officers and civilian leaders above him may have been deterred by the possibility or threat that those charged would point an accusatory finger upward up the chain of command, to explain the source of their actions.

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(and perhaps even some form of central guideline). Almost all the massacres followed a similar course: a unit would enter a village, round up the menfolk in the village square, select four or ten or fifty of the army-age males (in some places according to prepared lists of persons suspected of helping Qawukji's or Haj Amin al-Husayni's forces), line them up against a wall, and shoot them. Some of the massacres were carried out immediately after the conquest of the

village, though most occurred in the following days. In some cases (as in Majd al-Kurum on 5 or 6 November), the massacre occurred ostensibly as part of the unit's efforts to force the villagers to hand over hidden weapons, though more often it seems to have been connected to a process of intimidation geared to provoking the villagers' flight (as in Ilabun, Jish, etc.).

In *The Birth*, I assumed that there had been no central order to commit the atrocities.<sup>13</sup> The documentation recently declassified in IDFA seems to corroborate this. Three and a half weeks after Operation Hiram, Carmel issued an "Order of the Day" to the units under his command, stating:

Our brilliant victory . . . in the Galilee was marred as some soldiers allowed themselves a shameful outburst by looting and condemnable crimes against the Arab population after its surrender.<sup>14</sup> . . . Ill-treatment of the inhabitants, murder and robbery—are not a military activity or acts of courage. They are a disgrace to our army. . . . The perpetrators of these crimes during the operation and in its wake are standing trial and will be punished . . . [but] it has come to my attention that even now such displays of unrestrained behavior have not completely ceased. *These acts must cease immediately, and with all severity [sic].* Anyone caught committing another crime will be tried immediately and will be most severely punished. I ask the commanders and troops in Northern Front to help stamp out this corruption. Whoever covers for the criminal—is an accomplice in the

crime and he too will not be cleared of responsibility. . . .  
 Honour to the loyal and liberating Hebrew fighter, respect  
 for the pure, defending and crushing Hebrew arms!<sup>15</sup>

As written, this statement appears to point to Carmel's displeasure over these actions, and he even asserts—to the best of my knowledge, without foundation—that soldiers were being tried for these crimes. But, taken together, the profusion of cases (about ten mass killings occurred), the lack of punishment, the pattern of the events, and the delay in the issuing of this "Order of the Day," perhaps point to a more ambiguous conclusion.

### FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In the future, historians will no doubt devote time to a central subject of the 1948 war, namely the norms of behavior in the Haganah/IDF—that subject judgmentally termed "purity of arms" in traditional Israeli historiography. But adequate treatment of that subject will have to wait until IDFA and other Israeli archives declassify all the relevant documentation (at present, IDFA keeps classified almost all documents relating to IDF expulsions or massacres of Arab civilians or prisoners of war, from 1948 on).

Meanwhile, it is worth emphasizing the historiographic point that arises from all of this: the ephemerality or inconclusiveness of the historian's work and the understanding of historiography as a cumulative process in which each historian and each generation of historians add new layers of knowledge and interpretation to those already built by previous historians. The picture of the past thus changes (and must change) in relation to the materials available to each generation of historians, not to mention the effects of political milieu and circumstance, upbringing, and ideology that affect each succeeding generation.

This is starkly true of all that relates to the history of the modern Middle East and the State of Israel. Many of the relevant archives remain completely closed (those in the Arab states) or partly closed (those of Israel's intelligence services, IDFA, the Israel State Archive, etc.). There can be no doubt that the massive still-classified documentation, when declassified, will shed new and strong light on various important events and processes in the Zionist-Arab conflict.

### NOTES

1. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 218–19.

2. Israel State Archives (ISA), Foreign Ministry Papers (FM), 2570/11, Shimoni to Sasson, 12 November 1948.

3. ISA, FM 186/17, Shimoni to Eytan, 18 November 1948 [italics in the original].

4. IDFA 715/49//3, Carmel to brigades, districts, 31 October 1948, 10:00 hours.

5. IDFA 4858/49//495, Front "A" (North) to 2nd and 9th Brigades, 10 November 1948, 09:00 hours.

6. See IDFA 854/52//321, "Operational Order Operation Hiram," Front "A" to brigades, districts, etc., 26 October 1948.

There is no reference in the order to the requisite behavior toward Arab civilian communities in the areas about to be overrun.

7. IDFA 922/75//189, "Operation Hiram," a report by Major Yitzhak Moda'i, undated but from the late 1950s.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. See Morris, *The Birth*, chap. 7, and Benny Morris, "A New Look at Major Zionist Documents," *Alpayim* 12 (1996), pp. 96-97, 101-3 [in Hebrew]. In *The Birth*, I was mistaken in attributing to Yisrael Galili a report delivered by Moshe Erem at the meeting of the Mapam Political Committee on 11 November 1948 about these atrocities. This was corrected in the cited article in *Alpayim*.

12. Nonetheless, the classifiers have not been consistently efficient. For example, one report now open to researchers (in IDFA 1096/1949//65), written on 2 November 1948, apparently by the commander of "C" Company (the signature is indecipherable), 103rd Battalion, explains and (succinctly) describes the massacre of fourteen bedouin in eastern Galilee on 2 November 1948:

Subject: Report on a Search Operation in the Area of 'Arab al-Mawasi Near Position 213. Transmitted by Platoon OC Haim Hayun.

On 2.11.48 at 09:00 hours a force comprising two squads accompanied by the battalion armored squad, commanded by Lt. Z. Kleinman and Haim Hayun set out from the base at Maghar. When they arrived at the site [of 'Arab al-Mawasi, apparently Khirbet Wa'ra al-Sauda, 8 kilometers east of Ilabun], they assembled the adult males and demanded their arms. Seven rifles were collected. The force [then] divided in two; one part, commanded by Kleinman, stayed to keep guard over the adult males; the second part, commanded by Hayun, went up to Position 213 [apparently a hilltop some 2 kilometers west of Khirbet Wa'ra],

where the bones were found of two [IDF] soldiers lost in a previous action at this position. Their identities were determined by articles of clothing that were found nearby. [The bodies were] found headless.

The men set fire to the Arabs' houses and returned to base [i.e., Maghar] with 19 Arab adult males. At the base the men [i.e., captives] were sorted out and those who took part in hostile actions against our army were identified, and they were sent under command of Haim [Hayun] to a place that had been determined and there they liquidated [*ve'sham hushu*] 14 of the adult males. The rest are being transferred to a prisoner-of-war camp.

This massacre is not to be confused with the one that occurred inside Ilabun itself three days before, in which twelve villagers were slaughtered by Golani Brigade troops (see Morris, *The Birth*, p. 229). But that massacre too, appears to have been triggered by the death of the two missing IDF soldiers: the Golani troops appear to have found their heads in one of the village houses.

13. Morris, *The Birth*, p. 230.

14. It is worth noting the order in which these acts are condemned—first looting, then massacres and acts of rape.

15. IDFA 437/49//84, Carmel, "Order of the Day," 25 November 1948. It is worth stressing that Carmel certainly knew of the atrocities on the days they occurred or at most a few days after. Why did he wait two-three weeks to issue this "Order of the Day" condemning them? Perhaps, as he says, it was connected to fresh acts of a similar nature; perhaps he had waited for the various inquiries into the events (by Attorney General Ya'akov Shimshon Shapira or by the Northern Front itself) to be completed. Perhaps his order was issued as a way of persuading officers and men to give evidence to these commissions of inquiry. Or perhaps he had simply tried to refrain from issuing any statement in the matter but in the end was compelled, belatedly, to do so by events, his party (Mapam), or something else. There is no way of knowing with the present evidence available.