

The editors of David Ben Gurion's diaries

expressed their bewilderment at the leader's lack of interest in the military campaigns raging in the month of April 1948. It seems he was more preoccupied with internal political matters such as the new state's relationship with Zionist bodies abroad and similar topics, as if the fate of the state depended on them. His diaries do not even hint at an 'imminent catastrophe' and certainly do not convey the impression that the new state is facing a 'second holocaust', terms and predication he used frequently in his public speeches and addresses (Rivlin and Oren, *The War of Independence*, Vol. 1, Tel-Aviv: Ministry of Defence, page 332 [Hebrew]).

In inner circles, Ben Gurion employed a very different discourse. In the beginning of April 1948, he listed proudly in a special meeting of the secretariat of MAPAI (the leading party), the names of the Palestinian villages already occupied by the Hagana and the other Jewish paramilitary groups. In a long speech, the leader explained that the next objectives of the military effort would be Haifa and Jaffa. In his words, these two principal urban centres of the country were 'islands' in the midst of a Jewish sea. Needless to say these were not 'islands', and the reference to them as such diminished the spatial span to which they stretched. These 'islands' included more than 100,000 people while many thousands more lived in their hinterlands. The process, during April 1948, which I will call urbicide – destruction of urban space and expulsion of its residents - ended with the forced departure of more than 200,000 Palestinians from their homes up and down the land. They would be later joined by another 70,000 urban Palestinians expelled from the towns of Ramallah and Lydda in July 1948.

Palestinians are to be found today in Haifa so, in that sense, the urbicide failed. However, they continue to live in perceived islands within the city surrounded by a Jewish sea threatening to engulf them. The ideology remains intact, partly because Israel's Jewish majority is in denial about what happened in April 1948, refusing to acknowledge its cruelty, inhumanity and suffering.

The fate of Haifa was sealed on March 10 1948 when a small group of Zionist leaders and generals decided on ethnic cleansing for those parts of Palestine they deemed to be part of the future Jewish state. After a very long period of deliberation it was then that they finalised their master plan: Plan Dalet, or Plan D. The group that prepared the plan consisted of well-known figures in the Israeli pantheon such as David Ben-Gurion, Israel Galili, Yigal Yadin, Yigal Allon and Ben-Gurion's experts on Arab affairs, such as Ezra Danin and Gad Machnes. The cleansing process began in February 1948 before the final articulation of the plan. The initial villages targeted included Qaisriya and al-Burj, 35 km south of Haifa. Their inhabitants were easily driven out, and this relative ease encouraged Ben-Gurion to extend the cleansing to the urban space of Palestine as a whole.

The decision of the Arab governments not to risk a direct clash with the British Mandate authority, and their hope that maybe a military operation would be averted by a new UN initiative, sealed the fate of Haifa and the other towns. When they did finally enter Palestine, unprepared militarily and in disarray due to fundamental strategic differences between the various armies, they could do nothing about the towns that were already destroyed. When they were defeated after a few months of fighting, the rest of what became the Jewish State was ethnically cleansed by the Israeli army.

Haifa's Jewish mayor, Shabtai Levi, was trying to convince Palestinians to stay, even promising them they would be safe. This is not as bizarre as it may sound. Not everyone at the national level, let alone at the municipal level, knew about the Dalet plan or the intention to cleanse the Arabs of Haifa. Levy possessed no authority over the army or Ben Gurion's men. Many Jews in the community as a whole did not know the reality or the future plans. In any case, Mordechai Maklef, the officer in charge of the Carmeli brigade, was more important at that moment than Levi. Maklef, who would become the third Israeli Chief of Staff, orchestrated the cleansing operation and gave orders to his troops in the Palestinian neighbourhoods (which according to official Israeli records were already empty of the Palestinians who had 'left voluntarily'):

When the bombardment of the neighbourhoods is concluded, troops will attack fiercely and aggressively and kill every Arab they meet. I am sending you flammable devices as well. You should burn every flammable object. I am sending you sappers with kits for breaking into houses. (Hagana Archives, 69/72, 22 April 1948).

Adherence to these orders within the square mile in which thousands of Palestinians lived inevitably produced panic. Without leadership, without any proper defence or any agency responsible for law and order (which the British army should have been) a massive exodus began; an instinctive, hasty departure, leaving personal and household possessions behind. The masses surged towards the port, hoping to find a ship that would take them away from the city. The moment they left, their houses were broken into and pillaged.

By April 22 the streets near the port were jammed with desperate people looking for refuge and safety in their tens of thousands. The local leadership, trying to organise the refugees, steered them towards the market place where, it was hoped, they could wait until an orderly transfer to the port was arranged. The official Brigade book of the Carmeli, published years later, did not try to conceal what had happened then [...]:

In the early hours of the morning Maxi Cohen (commander of a battalion) informed the Brigade's HQ that the Arabs were using a loudspeaker and calling upon everyone to concentrate in the market place: 'As the Jews occupied Stanton Street and continue to descend toward downtown'. When this information reached the commander of the artillery unit, Ehud Alma was ordered to operate the three inch mortars, stationed near the Rothschild Hospital, and bombard the marketplace. And indeed masses of people congregated. When the bombardment commenced, and shells fell into the market, panic struck everyone. The masses broke into the harbour, pushing away the policemen who guarded the gate, stormed the boats and began escaping from the city. (Zadok Eshel (ed.), *The Carmeli Brigade in the War of Independence*, Tel-Aviv: The Ministry of Defence 1973, p. 147 and p. 138 (Hebrew)).

Eviction was immediately followed by architectural destruction, another important aspect of urbicide stemming from ethnic cleansing. Destruction was meant to reinforce the 'Jewish character' of the city and preempt the return of those expelled. That is why Haifa's eastern market was demolished. The market was, of course, the temporary shelter for the masses and therefore a

very convenient target for the Carmeli's artillery. It was an Ottoman architectural gem of white dressed stone. All that has remained is a pathetically small corner named the 'Turkish Market' by the new city administration.

In any case, the market was only a few hundred metres from the main port gate – the Palmer Gate. When the bombardment started, the panic-stricken mob broke through the gate into the harbour. People stormed the boats. An eyewitness report describes the events:

Men stepped on their friends and women on their own children. The boats in the port soon filled with living cargo. The overcrowding in them was horrible. Many turned over and sank with all their passengers'. (Walid Khalidi, 'Selected Documents on the 1948 War', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 107, Vol. 27/3 (Spring 1998), pp. 60–105)

By May 1948 officials of the Jewish Agency wrote to Ben Gurion that a golden opportunity had emerged – to transform the Arab character of the city. All that was needed was for the new state to "demolish 227 houses" (cf. Ben-Gurion, *Diaries*, 30 June 1948 and Tamir Goren, 'From Independence to Integration: Israeli Rule and the Arabs of Haifa', MA thesis, Haifa University, p. 337). The Prime Minister postponed a final decision until his pending visit to Haifa. After visiting the city, he added only one condition: demolish houses, but leave mosques intact.

Only some 2,000 of the 75,000 Palestinians were left in Haifa. Their representatives were summoned on the evening of July 1, 1948 to the offices of the city's military governor, Rehavam Zvalodovski (later Rehavam Amir); he ordered them to leave outlying areas by July 5 and move into the small, overcrowded and impoverished neighbourhood of Wadi Nisnas.

Leaders attending the meeting were shocked. Many belonged to the Communist party that supported partition and hoped that maybe, now that the fighting was over, they could begin normal life again. "I do not understand: is this a military command? Let us look at the condition of these people. I cannot see any reason, even a military one, that justifies such a move", protested Tawfiq Tubi, later a Communist MK. He ended by saying: "We demand that the people will stay in their homes". Another participant, Bulus Farah, cried "This is racism", and called the move "Ghettoizing" the Palestinians of Haifa.

Even the dry document cannot hide the frosty and metallic reaction of the Israeli military commander. "I can see that you are sitting here and advising me, while you have been invited to listen to

the orders of the High Command and to assist it! I am not involved in politics and do not deal in them. I am simply obeying orders... I am just carrying out orders, and I have to make sure this order is executed by July 5... If this is not done, I will do it myself. I am a soldier." (Tom Segev, *The First Israelis: 1949*, Jerusalem: Domino, 1984, p. 69.)

That was not the end of the trials and tribulations of those left behind. After moving to the Wadi, they became refugees in their own city, witnessed daily pillages of their properties and submitted to frequent abuse by the Jewish soldiers. The abusers belonged mainly to the Irgun and the Stern Gang, but there were also Hagana members among them. Ben Gurion criticised this kind of behaviour but did very little to stop it.

What has remained from this in the Israeli-Jewish collective memory? Nothing. Perhaps one day a different history of this callous cynicism and double talk will be written, and will include genuine abhorrence from descriptions such as the one appearing in Ben-Gurion's diary, written after visiting the deserted and empty city of Haifa:

A dying city, a city of corpses... Warehouses, shops, small and big houses, old and new, without a living person in them apart from stray cats... how did tens of thousands leave in such a panic their city, homes and fortunes? What made them flee? Was it only an order from above? It is impossible to think that such rich people – and there were very rich people here, the richest in the country so they say – left all their capital just because they were ordered to by someone. Was it indeed only fear? (Netanel Lorch, *The History of the War of Independence*, Tel-Aviv: Massada, 1993, p. 180).

The cynicism did not end there. On May 14 1948, David Ben-Gurion read Israel's Declaration of Independence: "We call upon the sons of the Arab People, the inhabitants of the state of Israel, to keep the peace and take part in the building of the state on the basis of full and equal citizenship." By that time the urbicide of Palestine, and that of Haifa, already had become a fait accompli.

Haifa 2009. The criminal urbicide described above has been consistently denied and repressed, but its ghosts return every now and then to haunt the present-day 'City of Co-existence' where a 'Feast of all Feasts' is celebrated every year as if the pre-1948 harmony had never been interrupted by the horrific events of 1948.

This hypocrisy should be challenged daily. Not just to set straight the historical record, but so that a basis for a genuine reconciliation in the present can be built. This involves constant engagement with the urbicide, without repressing or ignoring its most disturbing chapters. It is important to remember the facts, to record the details – unheard and out of sight by the majority of Israeli Jews. I was born in 1954 in Haifa, and all my adult, scholarly life, I have been attempting, without much success, this kind of engagement.

Descriptions like mine are challenged straight away with a pre-constructed ethos of heroism in the face of Arab barbarism, charged with images of past and future holocausts and emboldened by mythologies such as those of a modern-day David and Goliath. The collective memory in today's Israel views the war as beginning on May 15 1948. Everything that happened before is said to belong to the relatively uneventful Mandate period.

Haifa, like Jaffa, was home to the country's political, cultural and economic elite. The cities' institutions served the palestinian people as a political compass and locus of its social consciousness. When in the nineteenth century urban notables replaced rural chieftains as the country's aristocracy, it took place in Haifa and Jaffa. This is where a new cosmopolitan bourgeoisie emerged, holding the keys for a successful fusion of tradition and new ideas from the West. You could watch plays from the Arab world, listen to local and regional poetry, read Palestinian newspapers. People experienced the dramatic transformation of past into present, when in a very short period their large village of Haifa became a town, long before the rest of the countryside changed. This sense of being a gateway to new encounters, to dramatic changes, a hub of social, cultural and economic activity was squashed in April 1948. What was left in the collective Palestinian memory can be read in Ghassan Kanafani's *The Return to Haifa* – a recognition of how deeply this cruelty was burnt into Palestinian consciousness.

It seems that the Palestinian national movement as a whole, and the Haifa community in particular, finds it difficult to embrace this past as a departure point for future development. But there are signs of an active civil society in the Palestinian part of the city while the move of political party headquarters from Nazareth to Haifa is significant.

The appearance on the Jewish side of Zochrot (Remembering), an NGO devoted to investigate the impact of the Nakba on Jewish society also promises that efforts to confront the 1948 urbicide will continue.

The hurdle is high, mainly because the crime was perpetrated by mainstream Zionist leaders representing ‘pragmatism’ and moderation in the eyes of their own community and of the world at large.

This Zionist pragmatism, politically found in the Labour party for most of the state’s existence, was recently adopted by centrist parties like *Kadima*. Their pragmatism is mainly territorial. There is and was a willingness to confine and limit the Jewish space inside Palestine, provided it not be endangered by any significant presence of Palestinians. This is seen as pragmatic since the right wing parties demand the whole of mandatory Palestine and some of them talk openly of expelling the Palestinians or getting rid of Palestinian areas. The protagonists of pragmatism follow the dictum coined by Shimon Peres, the current president of Israel: ‘*maximum shetah, minimum aravim*’ (maximum space, minimum Arabs).

Zionist pragmatism does not preclude acts such as ethnic cleansing and urbicide. The vision of cleansed mixed Mandate towns, becoming purely Jewish was a cornerstone in Ben Gurion’s strategy in 1948. It is important to mention once more that Ben Gurion epitomises Zionist pragmatism in Israel and abroad. He was fully supported by the military elite and very few in the society of his days, or ours for that matter, objected to these policies.

The events of 1948 are a point on a continuum which began in 1882 and has lasted to this day: the translation of these pragmatic ideas into real policies has meant that the Palestinians of Haifa did not only experience the expulsion of 1948, but that they remain under threat of another ethnic cleansing should they be deemed to endanger the demographic majority of Jews in Israel, or should they over-identify with Palestinian nationalism that refuses to accept the Jewish state.

All the same, the past does not only send messages of doom and fear. The social texture of Haifa today is proof that the pragmatic polices did not work fully everywhere. Haifa maintains a Palestinian population and Arab features not because the Zionist movement did not wish to erase both the people and the nature of the city, but because of the resilience of those Palestinians who stayed on and those who joined them later from the Galilee. There is today a small community whose presence is growing. This is not the mixed town of Haifa at the time of the Mandate, but it is also not the purely Jewish city desired by Ben Gurion.

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