

Decades On, Israel Tries to Bury its Darkest Times

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

Global Research, March 27, 2016

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March 2016

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One might expect that only historians would care to revisit the 1948 war that created Israel. And yet the debate about what constitutes truth and myth from that period still provokes raw emotions.

Much rests on how those events are reconstructed, not least because the shock waves have yet to subside. Israelis fear, and Palestinians crave, a clearer picture of the past because it would powerfully illuminate the present. It might also influence the international community's proposed solutions for the conflict.

That is why the unearthing of an Israeli soldier's letter from 1948 detailing what was probably the war's worst massacre – one long buried by Israel – is of more than historical significance.

It comes as Moshe Yaalon, the defence minister, this week [accused](#) Breaking the Silence, an Israeli organisation that exposes military abuses, of “treason” for collecting evidence from the army's current whistle-blowers.

Western understandings of the 1948 war – what Palestinians term their Nakba, or catastrophe – are dominated by an enduring Israeli narrative. Israel's army, it is said, abided by a strict moral code. Palestinians left not because of Israel's actions but on the orders of Arab leaders.

In this rendering, the Palestinians' mass dispossession was the fault of the Arab world – and a solution for the millions of today's refugees lies with their host countries.

For decades Israel's chief concession to the truth was an admission that a massacre took place just outside Jerusalem, at Deir Yassin.

Israel claimed the atrocity was the exception that proved the rule: a rogue militia killed more than 100 villagers, violating Israel's ethical codes in the chaotic weeks before statehood was declared.

Palestinians have always known of dozens of other large massacres of civilians from 1948 carried out by the Israeli army. The barbarity, they say, was intended to terrorise the native population into flight. This account puts responsibility on Israel for taking the refugees back.

But history is written by the victor.

In recent decades a few brave Israeli scholars have chipped away at the official facade. In the late 1990s a Haifa University student collected testimonies from former soldiers

confirming that over 200 Palestinians had been massacred at Tantura, south of Haifa. After the findings were made public, he was pilloried and stripped of his degree.

A decade ago, the historian Ilan Pappé wrote a groundbreaking book, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, arguing that massacres like the one at Tantura were exploited to drive out Palestinians. He and others noted the suggestive titles of military operations such as “Broom” and soldiers’ orders to “clean” areas.

Pappé now lives in academic exile in the UK.

The biggest obstacle to shifting Israeli and western perceptions of 1948 has been the lack of a clear paper trail connecting the political leadership to the massacres. Israel locked away bundles of documentation precisely not to jeopardise the official narrative.

But things are changing slowly.

Last year a key deception was punctured: that Israel urged many of the war’s 750,000 Palestinian refugees to return. In a [letter to Haifa’s leaders](#) shortly after the city’s Palestinians were expelled, David Ben Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, demanded that any return be barred.

Now another letter, located by Israeli historian Yair Auron and [published](#) last week for the first time in English by the Haaretz newspaper, trashes the idea of an ethical Israel army.

Written by Shabtai Kaplan, a soldier and journalist, the letter confirms long-held suspicions of a massacre – one that dwarfs Deir Yassin – at Dawaymeh, near Hebron. Soldiers executed hundreds of men, women and children who offered no resistance.

The massacre, near the end of the war, was carried out by elite troops under the command of Yitzhak Sadeh. He developed the Israeli army’s famous doctrine of “purity of arms”.

Kaplan argues that the Dawaymeh massacre was part of “a system of expulsion and destruction”, with a clear goal: “The fewer Arabs who remain, the better.”

Kaplan’s letter was consigned to the vaults, as were so many other documents from 1948 that officials considered too damaging.

Nearly seven decades later, in an age of 24-hour news and social media, Israel is still desperately trying to conceal its darkest episodes by bullying the army’s current whistle-blowers.

Last week Benjamin Netanyahu’s government launched an investigation into *Breaking the Silence*. On Sunday Mr Netanyahu called the collection of soldiers’ testimonies “intolerable”, indicating that he may try to ban the group.

It is hard not to see parallels between the cover-ups of 1948 and those of today. *Breaking the Silence*’s disclosures, especially those relating to Israel’s series of attacks on Gaza, each of which has left hundreds of civilians dead, similarly give the lie to the army’s continuing claims of ethical behaviour.

In his 1948 letter, Kaplan observed of the failure by the political leadership to hold anyone to account for the massacres: “Inaction is in itself encouragement.”

Israel's politicians hoped then that the Palestinians could be quickly terrorised from their lands. Decades later, the atrocities continue - and to the same end. But Israel must face facts: the days when such systematic brutality could be kept under wraps are now over.

Jonathan Cook is an independent journalist based in Nazareth and winner of the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. You can read all Jonathan's recent reports and commentaries on his website, the View from Nazareth: www.Jonathan-Cook.net and on his blog: www.Jonathan-Cook.net/blog/

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