Special Document File

The Erasure of the Nakba in Israel’s Archives: Akevot’s “Migration Report”

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Abstract: A 2019 investigation by the Israeli NGO Akevot and Haaretz newspaper has uncovered official suppression of crucial documents about the Nakba in Israeli archives. The Journal is publishing print excerpts and a full online version of the buried “Migration Report,” which details Israel’s depopulation of Palestinian villages in the first six months of the 1947-48 war, a document that clearly undermines official Israeli state narratives about the dispossession. In methodical fashion, this report provides contemporaneous documentation of Israeli culpability in the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and the systematic depopulation of so-called Arab villages in the first six months of the war. Alongside a discussion of key revelations in the newly available document, this introduction situates the broader pattern of erasure within historiographical debates over 1948 and questions of archival access. It examines how accounts of Israel’s birth and Palestinian statelessness have been crafted in relation to the underlying question: who is permitted to narrate the past?

In July 2019, the Israeli newspaper Haaretz published a startling feature story about ongoing efforts by officials within Israel’s Ministry of Defense to suppress public access to sensitive files in various state archives relating to the 1947–48 war, known to the Palestinians as the Nakba.1 Among the revelations (published in conjunction with a detailed report by the Israeli NGO Akevot: Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research2) was the existence of a key Israeli intelligence document that contradicts the longstanding Israeli narrative about the making of the Palestinian refugee population in the opening months of the Nakba. Rather than leave their homes at the behest of Arab leaders who encouraged Palestinian “flight,” as Israeli propaganda efforts have long argued, Israel’s own intelligence service documented in real time how military operations by Jewish combatants were the major cause of Palestinian displacement during the early months of the war.

The twenty-nine-page document, prepared by the “Arab Section” of the Intelligence Service, is euphemistically entitled “Migration of Eretz Yisrael Arabs between December 1, 1947 and June 1, 1948.” In methodical fashion, the author provides contemporaneous documentation of Israeli culpability in the expulsion of Palestinians
from their homes and the systematic depopulation of so-called Arab villages in the first six months of the war. The document outlines the variety of means Zionist forces employed—from “whispering operations” to “ultimate expulsion orders” and “fear of Jewish [retaliatory] response”—with the specific form of expulsion identified in each locality during a period in which 300-400,000 Palestinians were forced out of their homes in areas surrounding Jerusalem, Jaffa, Jenin, Haifa, and Acre. A similar number would depart Jewish-controlled areas in the remaining months of the war, from localities that included Lydda, Ramle, the Galilee, and the Naqab. While these methods of depopulation have long been discussed and written about by scholars drawing on oral history sources and a variety of primary material—including work published in this Journal—many historians and every Israeli government since 1948 have routinely denied Israeli agency in the making of the refugee population. The battle over responsibility for the 1948 Nakba thus remains at the heart of a reckoning with the genesis of Israel’s birth and Palestinian statelessness, and it includes questions of intentionality, moral and financial responsibility, as well as which voices get to narrate the tragedy of displacement itself.

In an accompanying online-only supplement to this introduction, the Journal is publishing the first English translation of the original Hebrew document (produced by the Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research) given the crucial nature of this source for historians and the wider public investigating the Nakba and the legacy of Palestinian dispossession. An officer of Shai, the forerunner to the Shin Bet, wrote the “Migration Report” as a contemporaneous effort to explain why so many Palestinian villages were being emptied of their Arab inhabitants during the opening months of the 1947–48 war that culminated in the establishment of the State of Israel. As his introduction plainly states, the overview is an attempt “to evaluate the intensity of the migration and its various development phases, elucidate the different factors that impacted population movement directly and assess the main migration trajectories.” The phases of migration are broken down by month, with a detailed annex providing a village-by-village account of the proximate cause of depopulation and the consequences. As the section of the annex entitled “Causes of Arab Migration” makes clear, the primary factors that drove Palestinians out of their localities included: “Direct Jewish hostile actions against Arab communities”; the related fallout from the “impact of our hostile
actions against communities neighboring where migrants lived”; “actions taken by the Dissidents [Irgun, Lehi]”; and “Jewish whispering operations [psychological warfare] intended to drive Arabs to flee.” A fourth reason listed was “Orders and directives issued by Arab institutions and gangs,” as Arab fighters are described, and the sixth factor listed was “Evacuation ultimatums.”

“Without a doubt,” the author of the report writes, “hostilities were the main factor in the population movement. Each and every district underwent a wave of migration as our actions in that area intensified and expanded.” In accounting for the number of Palestinians driven out by “Jewish military action,” the report states “some 70% of the residents left their communities and migrated as a result of these actions.” To scan through the document’s appendix is to understand the mechanism of violence that drove the exodus of Palestinian Arabs: “Threats and our whispering” in Qaitiyya; “Friendly Jewish advice” in Tira; “Our whispering operation and mortars” in Zuq al-Fawqani; “Received order to leave from Haganah” in Sarkas; “Wanted to negotiate. We did not turn up. Afraid,” in Salihiyya; “harassment by Jews” in Yazur; “attack on orphanage” in Bir Salim; and “conquest and expulsion” in Zarnuga.

The author of the report also took particular note of the influence of “dissidents’ actions,” highlighting events like the Irgun-led massacre in Deir Yassin. “The Deir Yassin action had a particular impact on the Arab psyche. Much of the immediate fleeing seen when we launched our attacks, especially in the center and south, was panic flight resulting from that factor, which can be defined as a decisive catalyst.” A similar phenomenon transpired in the wake of Irgun and Lehi abductions of Arab notables in Sheikh Muwannis, a village near Jaffa (where Tel Aviv University now stands). Under the annex listing of nearby villages and the “degree of evacuation” that resulted, a column notes the village name and how many Palestinians left. “Arab Imrir: Everyone.” The reason listed is “after robbery and murder committed by Dissidents [Irgun, Lehi],” and under the column “Evacuation trajectory,” the authors note where the refugees went: “To the area of Qalqiliyah and Jaljulia. The place is empty.”

In detailing the factors behind these “migrations,” the report even seems to offer guidelines for how to indirectly facilitate mass flight, at a time when as the historian Benny Morris explains, David Ben-Gurion and his Mapai party were being accused of
“waging a ‘war of expulsion’ against the Palestinians” and Israeli negotiators were being pressed by the UN Mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte, to deal with the mounting question of the refugees.⁸ “Note that it was not always the intensity of the attack that was decisive as other factors became particularly prominent—mostly psychological factors,” the author of the report writes. “The element of surprise, long stints of shelling with extremely loud blasts, and loudspeakers in Arabic proved very effective when properly used (mostly Haifa!).”⁹ The report also explains how an “evacuation psychosis” took hold, “like an infectious disease.”¹⁰ Refugees from Haifa would shape the reaction of Palestinians in Acre, catalyzing further departures. Beyond a clinical description of the mechanisms of violence, there is also a suggestion of how the numbers of refugees might be increased in the future. “The impact of extremely loud explosives, loudspeakers, etc., as psychological intimidation actions has on the migration movement must be highlighted (incidentally, no attempt was made to attach loud sirens to the wings of aircrafts that were bombing enemy posts—so these might have a great impact).”¹¹ The document is therefore also a guide to understanding the evolutionary thinking of Israeli intelligence towards the Palestinian refugees as the war was unfolding, a primary source that contributes to the related debate over premeditated population transfer.

Evidence of what transpired during the Nakba was written about in the seminal work of Palestinian historians like Walid Khalidi in the early decades after 1948, and his careful study of depopulated Palestinian villages was later published in English and relied on extensive maps, statistical data, photographs, and oral history interviews.¹² In the 1980s, document declassification within Israeli archives provided extensive evidence of expulsions as well as incidents of rape and massacres, which led to the emergence of the “New Historians” and a historiographical revolution in Israel.¹³ As the work of Israeli scholars like Avi Shlaim, Benny Morris, Ilan Pappé, Tom Segev, and several others helped demonstrate, there was a much more troubling narrative of Israeli agency in the Nakba and the conflict with the Arab world that would have to be reckoned with. Morris himself, the leading scholar in Israel to write about the making of the Palestinian refugee population, first cited a version of the “Migration Report” in a 1986 article that drew on newly opened archival material from 1948.¹⁴ In his article, and the wider work that followed, Morris clarified Israeli culpability in expelling Palestinians and preventing the
return of those who fled, while also shedding invaluable light on atrocities and war crimes committed by Israeli forces. Yet in an Orwellian act of self-censorship that began in the early 2000s, the Defense Ministry’s secretive security department, Malmbab, spearheaded efforts to reclassify documents and methodically remove files from various archive across Israel to hide evidence of Israeli responsibility for the Nakba.

Alongside the censoring of interviews with military veterans describing war crimes in 1948, and the sealing of documents that provide evidence of the extent to which the military government controlled the lives of Palestinian citizens of Israel in the first decades of the state’s existence, Malmbab officials have entered unannounced into the reading room of various archives since 2002 and pressured professional archivists to hand over documents about 1948 without legal authority. This practice continues today, in contravention to existing Israeli law. In an interview with Haaretz, Yehiel Horev—the head of the Malmbab department tasked with censoring material—was asked why material was systematically hidden, especially when several key documents had already been cited in a variety of published historical works. “Isn’t concealing documents based on footnotes in books an attempt to lock the barn door after the horses have bolted?” the interviewer asked. In his response, Horev made a case for undermining evidence and attacking the very concept of truth. “If someone writes that the horse is black, if the horse isn’t outside the barn, you can’t prove that it’s really black.”

The troubling suggestion that the removal of a document can retroactively discredit the work of a historian is indicative of a much broader and pernicious effort to distort the past, one that Akevot is fighting in Israeli courts and through public campaigns that provide primary sources to Arabic-, Hebrew-, and English-speaking publics.

The very act of reproducing documents like the “Migration Report” takes on increasing urgency in this environment of elision, and mitigates the harmful effects of selective declassification as well as digitization. Hosting original replicas of crucial documents in online venues like Akevot or in the JPS (as has been the case with recent efforts to reproduce material on the Sabra and Shatila massacre) provides vital archival resources to those who cannot access original material in Israeli archives, whether due to restrictions on movement or the very fact of plunder in 1948, and again during the siege of Beirut in 1982. There remain ethical questions to consider in the sharing of original
material from Israeli archives, including the legacy of privileged access for Jewish researchers, a discriminatory practice that has its own troubling lineage.\textsuperscript{24}

At the heart of the “Migration Report” and its “rediscovery” remains the central issue of how the past is narrated and who is believed.\textsuperscript{25} For decades, survivors of the Nakba sought to tell others about what they experienced and the nature of their dispossession: in photographs and interviews, poetry and art, historical writing and a variety of memorial practices.\textsuperscript{26} Yet the eyewitnesses to and survivors of the 1948 tragedy were often discredited, their reliability undermined and the veracity of their recollections called into question. In the case of Palestine, the danger that fetishizing documents gives succor to the victor’s version of history has particular resonance. The limits of the New Historians and revelations within the Israeli archives are perfectly clear: there must be a broad range of narrators delving into the Palestinian (and Zionist) past. When taken together, the historiographical innovations within Palestinian scholarship alongside new empirical work drawing on Israeli sources like the “Migration Report” can help inform the crafting of capacious and textured narratives around 1948, linking together the actions and voices of those responsible for the expulsions and the refugees that have been unable to return to their homes ever since.

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\textsuperscript{3} Intelligence Service, Arab Section, “Migration of Eretz Yisrael Arabs between December 1, 1947 and June 1, 1948,” 30 June 1948, Hashomer Hatzair (Yad Yaari) Archive, file 95-35.27(3), English translation by Akevot Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research, \url{https://www.akevot.org.il/en/article/intelligence-brief-from-1948-hidden-for-decades-indicates-jewish-fighters-actions-were-the-major-cause-of-arab-displacement-not-calls-from-arab-leadership/?full#popup/15413e71e82f98865d9e05c83102c4751}.  
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., p. 5.  
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., pp. 13-29.  
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., p. 5.  
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., p. 22.
9 Intelligence Service, Arab Section, “Migration of Eretz Yisrael Arabs between December 1, 1947 and June 1, 1948,” p. 5.
10 Ibid., p. 7.
11 Ibid., p. 7.
15 For an expansive discussion, see Benny Morris, The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Morris later justified acts of ethnic cleansing and expulsion, telling one interviewer “I don’t think that the expulsions of 1948 were war crimes. You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs. You have to dirty your hands…A Jewish state would not have come into being without the uprooting of 700,000 Palestinians. Therefore it was necessary to uproot them. There was no choice but to expel that population. It was necessary to cleanse the hinterland and cleanse the border areas and cleanse the main roads. It was necessary to cleanse the villages from which our convoys and our settlements were fired on.” See Ari Shavit, “Survival of the Fittest: An Interview with Benny Morris,” Ha’aretz, 8 January 2004.
16 This formal effort to block access to official material about 1948 has deep parallels in the erasures that accompany mapping and memorialization practices, urban planning, and architecture in Israel. See for example Noga Kadman, Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Sharon Rotbard, White City, Black City: Architecture and War in Tel Aviv and Jaffa (London, Pluto Press, 2015); and the short film of Danielle Schwartz, director, Mirror Image (2013). Palestine Open Maps is developing an online digital platform for open source mapping of pre-1948 Palestine at https://palopenmaps.org/about. The Israeli NGO Zochrot has worked to raise awareness of the Nakba through a variety of activities, including walking tours, interviews, and online resources that are available at https://zochrot.org/en/content/17.
18 See Akevot, “Silencing: DSDE’s Concealment of Documents in Archives.”
21 For a vital report on these developments, see Shay Hazkani, “Israel’s Vanishing Files, Archival Deception and Paper Trails,” MERIP 291 (Summer 2019), pp. 10–15.

See, for example, Musa Budeiri, “Controlling the Archive: Captured Jordanian Security Files in the Israeli State Archives,” Jerusalem Quarterly 66 (2016), pp. 87–98.
