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Born in sin

By Graham Usher

It may be true that "history is written by the victor". But it is also true that the elaborate mechanisms of denial that are the usual lot of history's losers cannot be sustained indefinitely. This dictum was brought painfully home last week to Israel's Jewish public opinion.

On 19 January, Israel's Maariv newspaper published an account of a hitherto little known massacre of over 200 Palestinians in 1948. The carnage occurred at Tantura, then a Palestinian village of some 1,500 people near Haifa, today a beach parking lot built to service a nearby Kibbutz and over, according to the account, a mass grave for those who perished.

The study was the work of Teddy Katz, a Masters degree student at Haifa University. Based on testimonies of refugees from the village and of members of the Jewish militia who took part in the killings, Katz concludes that Tantura was "definitely one of the biggest massacres [committed by Zionist forces during the 1948 war]". Some Israeli and Palestinian historians have speculated that the toll of deaths at Tantura may even exceed those killed at Deir Yassin, long invoked by Palestinians as the testament to what happened to their society and lands in the Catastrophe of 1948.

Whatever the scale between the two atrocities, the testimony Katz provides to support his case makes chilling reading. "We were taken to the village cemetery, where we were formed into lines," remembers Fawzi Mahmoud Ahmed Tanji, a 74 year old refugee from Tantura now residing in the West Bank town of Tulkarm. "The commander of the Jews came and told his soldiers, 'Take ten,' and they chose ten of us, led them to the Sabra bushes and shot them. Then they came back and took another ten -- Then they repeated it. They shot more and more people."

Another survivor, Razek Ashmawi, recalls "there was a plaza not far from the mosque [in the village]". And "not far from there, they lined the boys up against the walls of the houses. There was a line of about 25 people, and the girls behind them. Ten or 12 soldiers stood opposite and then they simply shot the boys, who fell on the spot."

Nor do the Jewish "combatants" deny that local and unarmed Palestinians were killed at Tantura. "It was war," says Bentz Pridan, who commanded the "Alexandrom" brigade responsible for "taking" the village. "And in war, especially the kind which takes place in urban areas, people get killed. When you see the enemy opposite you, he doesn't have a note saying he doesn't mean to shoot you. When you see him, you

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shoot him. That's how we went from street to street, and that explains why a lot of people were killed."

Many Palestinians from the Haifa region knew of the massacre at Tantura, though even they expressed shock by the extent and nature of the brutalities uncovered by Katz. Nor does any Palestinian need telling that the Jewish state was forged not only from the fires of the Holocaust, but also in the sin of the killing, flight and expulsion of 800,000 Arabs from their homes and patrimony in Palestine.


But the more immediate questions thrown up by the Tantura story are why -- after a silence of 51 years -- a mainstream Israeli newspaper like Maariv feels obliged to narrate a history that once it would have repressed and disputed? And whether this signals a shift in Israeli opinion away from the denial that once characterised its attitude to the Palestinian society that was destroyed by the fact of Israel to a nascent sense of historic responsibility? And whether this augurs a new attitude to the plight of the some 4.5 million Palestinians, inside Israel and beyond, who are refugees as a direct or indirect result of massacres like Tantura?

"I think it's unlikely," says Salim Tamari, a Palestinian sociologist and member of the Palestinian negotiating team on refugees. He acknowledges that cases like the Maariv story are "significant" because they reveal that research by Israeli academia is belatedly starting to address the historical roots of Israeli society. But Palestinians would be "ill-advised" to see this as heralding a change in mainstream Israeli political attitudes toward, say, the right of return for Palestinian refugees. That, predicts Tamari, is a gulf simply too wide for most Israeli Jews to cross.

"Israelis are obsessed with a certain historical consciousness," he says. "A feeling of guilt, yes, but combined with a feeling that an admission of responsibility [over what was done to the Palestinians] would undermine the whole Zionist project."

That project of course achieved its greatest victory on 15 May 1948, the day when Israel as a Jewish state came into being -- and the night, according to Katz's research, that the Alexandrom brigade entered Tantura.



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