

**The Exodus of Arabs from the Villages of Um Al-
Zinat and Tantura in 1948**

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An Abstract

On May 14th, 1948, at the Tel-Aviv Museum, Ben Gurion declared the foundation of the State of Israel. The declaration ceremony, on the eve of the practical and legal termination of the British mandate over Palestine, was intended to create an overlapping between the exiting British government and the Jewish one, so as to avoid, as much as possible, a situation of limbo in between.

But while the ceremonies of departure and declaration were taking place, the sound of cannon balls continued. Mutual hostile acts between the irregular Palestinians troupes

And the Jewish fighting forces continued throughout the country, preparing for the invasion of Palestine by the regular Arab armies.

This study deals with the singular story of two Arab villages located in the Carmel area: Um al-Zinat and Tantura. The first village was captured by the Jewish "Golani" forces one day after the declaration of the Israeli State, on Saturday evening, May 15th, 1948. The second village was captured a week later, on Saturday evening, May 22nd, 1948.

At the end of the chapter is a report of the main testimonies of the events in Tantura, gathered from interviewing 44 Jews, mostly fighters of "Alexandroni", some of them inhabitants of Zichron-Yaakov and its vicinity, and a few others connected to the story in one way or another. Testimonies were collected from 30 Palestinians, mostly refugees from Tantura, who were present in the village the day it was captured. A summary of testimonies of four commanders involved in capturing Um al-Zinat and 16 refugees of this

village, were compared with available archival materials and the written works on this subject. It seems that the testimonies on these events shed a new and different light on one of the most difficult cases in the history of the 1948 war, with regard to Tantura, and on many unknown details on the events in Um al-Zinat. Probably, without these oral testimonies, the story would never become known. In none of the hundreds of documents put at his disposal in the various archives, did the author find even a hint of the stories told by tens of interviewees of Tantura and Um al-Zinat. There are many files in the archives of IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) and in other archives containing unavailable documents which would one day furnish written proof for the facts arising from the oral interviews quoted here.

Such documents would provide a different version about the exodus of Arabs from their towns and villages in 1948.

On November 29th, 1947, following the resolution passed by the United Nation on the partition of Palestine into two states – Jewish and Arabs – a new phase began in the on-going conflict between the two peoples, a conflict which had started already in the previous century.

The Arab rejection provoked hostilities between Jews and Arabs all over Palestine.

One of the more surprising phenomena of the 1948 war was the mass desertion of Arab villages, towns and whole regions without any resistance, even from places where the inhabitants were pleaded with to stay and were promised that no harm would befall them. (One renowned case is in the city of Haifa).

The explanations given over the years, starting with the story of Dair – Yasin and ending with the instruction to evacuate, temporarily, given by Palestinian and/or Arab leadership, whether or not such an instruction was ever even given, are not relevant to our discussion. The sudden desertion created a new reality, insufficiently prepared for by the Jewish population in the midst of the war.

On December 3rd, 1947, soon after the UN partition resolution, a comprehensive discussion at the center of the Labour Party was held, with the intention of taking a stand on the subject of shaping the basis for the Jewish state about to be established and its future moves in various spheres. One of the central issues in this discussion was the attitude of the state toward the Arab minority, which at first was supposed to constitute 40% of the population of the future state, Ben-Gurion spoke about the explicit intention of the Leadership of the state to be, to grant the Arab population full equality of rights, so as to form a bridge and future ties with the hostile Arab nations.

The course of events in the months to come, diverted the attention to an entirely different direction, as the whole land was swept by murderous bloodshed for many long months. The policy makers had time to reconsider the future relationship between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. One may assume that the events of the war and the massive "Arab flight", contributed to a new attitude adopted by Israeli leadership. It was this attitude that Golda Meirson (later Meir) alluded to in her last meeting with King Abdalla, on the eve of the invasion of Palestine by the Arab armies. In this meeting Golda cautioned the king and advised him to keep the peace, for his own good, lest there be a war in which its consequences would be very hard on the Palestinians and the Arabs.

What happened to the hundreds of thousands of Arab-Palestinian refugees, who deserted their villages, towns and townships, by various ways and circumstances, and to their misfortune, as a result of the war?

In the course of the years, different versions were produced by various researchers and various international and other institutes, as to numbers, directions and concentrations of population created over time.

This study attempts to investigate what happened to the inhabitants of the two villages treated here, both as a case study, which may symbolize and characterize, to a certain extent, what happened to the inhabitants of hundreds of other villages all over the country.

UM AL-ZINAT

The inhabitants of Um al - Zinat, according to existing testimonies, abandoned their village in a number of waves, starting at the end of April, and ending with the final departure on the night of May 15th, 1948, when the soldiers of "Golani" encompassed the village.

However, the village itself, according to these testimonies, remained forsaken by its inhabitants. As far as we know Israeli soldiers did not stay there for a long time either, and in time the village became an occasional inn for various rural people who passed by, on their way elsewhere.

One should note that at the time difficult battles were still going on between the IDF and the three villages of "the small triangle", Jaba, Ijzim and Ain - Gazal, and there was probably a lot of sensitivity to every movement in the area.

In the following period the site of Um al - Zinat was on the one hand an important area,

At that time, everyone knew, and even the Jews acknowledged, that the village Um al - Zinat kept quiet and made sure, through a sober perception of the reality, that its inhabitants stayed completely uninvolved in the comprehensive Jewish-Arab conflict, adhering to a preconceived policy of non-interference. Not like in 1948, the inhabitants of this village in 1936 - 1939 were deeply involved in the activities of Abu-dura's gang, including acts of robbery, looting and terrorism.

Some of the inhabitants of Um al - Zinat- remember the experience of sudden invasion, eviction and violent expulsion in the small hours of the night. Their children and grandchildren were brought up and educated for years in the shadow of the acute trauma suffered by their parents.

Sliman Dahud Fahmawi (Abu-Thamer), a civil engineer by profession and the head of a large office of civil engineering, was only a few month old when the village was captured in 1948, but he devotes, in his everyday life, a great deal of time to Um al - Zinat in his thoughts and actions. He owns a large colored map, where the area of the village is divided into plots and segments, and for each plot there is a number, the name of the owner, the agricultural crops, as well as a detailed map, showing the buildings according to families, public places such as the school, the mosque, the public spring, the main square and so on - about 40 acres of built area.

Every few weeks, Abu-Thamer with a few friends and family members, all descendants of Um al-Zinat, travel to the deserted venue of the village, which progressively disappears among the trees in the forests north of the road connecting Elyakim to Daliat - el Carmel. They wander for a while among the barren rocks and the last remains of ruined buildings, reminiscing about past experiences in the old days of Um al - Zinat.

TANTURA

At the meeting of Zichron-Yaacov's council, on June 23rd, 1948, Aba Schechter, the chairman of the council, reported that he had approached the Region Commander regarding the crowded population in Faradis, following the evacuation of all non-fighting residents of Tantura into Faradis. He was referring to the 1600 women, children and old people, requesting that they be returned to their village.

The inhabitants of Tantura had already been uprooted from their village and homes, yet Shechter continued to refer to them as neighbors, and was bothered by the fear that the inhabitants of Tantura may feel deceived by him and his people.

On the other hand, we find an entry in the diary of Joseph Weitz, on May 18th, 1948, five days before Tantura was captured, referring to a discussion on the allocation of the area to Jewish groups intended to settle there. The land of Tantura appeared in the plans of "KKL" – the Jewish Fund for the Acquisition of Lands in Palestine – as if it had always been a part of the Jewish national land.

Thus, Weitz alluded to an explanation of why it was impossible to change the order from above. The inhabitants of Tantura were not to be returned to their land, as this land was likely to be settled by the Jews. The Arab inhabitants of Tantura lived there unaware of that plan, prior to any dispute or battle. To prove this point – exactly three weeks elapsed between the day Tantura was captured and the arrival of the first group of the founders of Kibbutz Nachsholim. While the refugees of the village were waiting in Faradis for a "decision from above" concerning their fate, whether or not they would return to their land, the answer was given to them in the form of new settlers, sent by Joseph Weitz and his

people.

The village of Tantura was included in the list of villages that the "Alexandroni" brigade had to capture as part of detailed instructions given by the military authorities, within the framework of what was then called "plan D". Unlike Tantura, the village Um al - Z inat was not included in the same framework of instructions to the "Golani" brigade. The order to capture it was given just prior to its execution, toward the middle of May 1948, and it said nothing about the need to evacuate the village.

It is worth noting that the Hagana's "Plan D" was originally intended to be executed after May 15th, the expected date for the British departure from Palestine. However, the British started leaving the country a few weeks prior to that date. Thus the situation was created in the various fronts which pushed the "Hagana" forces to react to the new conditions and to capture positions according to the situation at hand. This was intended to prevent the Palestinians from creating new, irreversible facts. The time, at the twilight of the British mandate, was a time of prolonged acts of hostility between Jews and Arabs. It started on November 30th, 1947, one day after the partition resolution, which was rejected both by the Palestinians and the Arab states alike. "Plan D" was abundant in diverse options, dealing simultaneously with raiding enemy areas, taking over main transport routes, exiling their population and guaranteeing that they would not return. They also attacked enemy centers and, destroyed the enemy's armed forces, and when necessary even destroyed entire villages. The versatility of "Plan D" created in the various areas of Palestine different patterns of conduct of commanders and sub-commanders, who determined their policy according to their own interpretation of the various parts of the plan. Thus, each unit created its own singular procedures, affording, at times, excessive

inhabitants of Tantura were killed during the capture of the village and afterwards, since we have heard a number of versions, ranging from 40 or 50 to as many as 250. Yet, this may not even be the most important issue in our discussion. The most essential questions are probably those that were posed at the start of this research, namely: Was there a deliberate policy with clear instructions regarding the conduct of the soldiers after having captured the village? What was to be done with the area and with the inhabitants? And above all: How did it happen that the events described time and again by the people interviewed for this work were never known previously to the host of researchers, let alone the general public? Was there a "conspiracy of silence"? Is it conceivable that such a plot existed among hundreds of people throughout the 50 years of the existence of the state of Israel?

As for the last question – the only reasonable answer is that there was no "conspiracy of silence", nor any attempt to hush the story up. Following many meetings with the people of "Alexandroni", the impression gained is almost uniform. These people faced, since the partition resolution of the UN, almost weekly, hard and bitter battles, some of them even fatal. To the best of their knowledge and awareness, they defended with their own bodies the frontline of the young state of the Jewish people, which in its very first days, was under a real threat of annihilation. They did so with an acute sense of anxiety, which they remember to this day.

The things written here are simply an attempt to find a worthy explanation, which would afford some kind of logical meaning to the actions of the "Alexandroni" fighters in Tantura. These actions ensued the slaughter of their friends who were
Found a week earlier with their amputated sex organs stuck in their mouths, after a

Palestinian ambush had captured a patrolling squad during the battle over Kfar-Sabba. A meaning – but not a vindication; an explanation but not justification, an attempt to deal with the background for the events in Tantura, is recounted in oral testimonies. It may be that these testimonies can shed some light on the dark and insufficiently attended to aspects of the extreme violence of the time, which took place in various places.

The ability of a researcher, as well as that of the readers, to present an in-depth understanding of both sides of the Palestinian/Jewish conflict is vital and the key to the proper study of complex historical issues. If this work has contributed anything in this direction – then this is all we have asked for.