



PERSPECTIVES

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## Reflections on Deir Yassin, the Nakba, and War Crimes

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Two recent books make an important contribution to the study of the Palestinian Nakba. Dr. Adel Manna explores the 1948 fall of the Galilee, based on memories of local Arab inhabitants; while Professor Eliezer Tauber debunks the myth of the Deir Yassin massacre, which became one of the Nakba's foundational events as early as 1948. These studies pave the road to reassessing the Palestinian tragedy within the conflict's past, present, and future wider context: Jewish localities were occupied by Arabs in the 1948 war, war crimes were perpetrated against Jews by Arabs, and present-day Palestinian schoolbooks continue to incite the perpetration of war crimes against Jews.

Two important Hebrew-language books were published recently: *Deir Yassin: The End of the Myth* by Eliezer Tauber (Kinneret, Zmora-Bitan, Dvir 2017), and *Nakba and Survival: The Story of the Palestinians Who Remained in Haifa and the Galilee, 1948-1956* by Adel Manna (Van Leer Institute Press, Hakibbutz Hameuhad Publishing House 2017). The value of these books emanates from their comprehensive presentation of data and facts hitherto not discussed.

Prof. Tauber, of Bar-Ilan University, gathered all the available testimonies related to the Deir Yassin battle from all involved parties, including both villagers and members of the attacking Etzel and Lehi underground groups. On the basis of these testimonies he provides a minute-by-minute analysis of the battle in the village's various areas, indicating the death circumstances of each victim.

According to Tauber, Deir Yassin was the first case of house-to-house fighting in the 1948 war, as the defenders did not run away but fought from their houses

until the end. The attackers broke into the houses by blowing up their doors, hurling hand grenades inside, and storming in while shooting. This resulted in many casualties, including non-combatants. Yet except for one case in which an attacker shot dead non-combatants who had surrendered and stepped out of their house, all the rest were killed during house-to-house fighting.

This conclusion is based on testimonies gathered from both surviving villagers and attackers. The (false) accusations of civilian massacres appeared after the battle had ended, when forces of the Jewish mainstream Hagana underground organization entered the village, saw the many corpses, including women and children, and concluded that they had been murdered by Etzel and Lehi fighters. Due to the bitter enmity between the Hagana and the two groups, the atrocity charges became widespread and hugely inflated.

Another group interested in inflating these charges was the Palestinian Arab leadership, seeking as it did to stir up public opinion in the neighboring Arab states so as to pressure their governments to join the war against the Jews after the end of the British Mandate in mid-May.

Dr. Adel Manna of the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem reviews the war events in the northern part of the country from the perspective of the Arab inhabitants, whose testimonies he gathered for years, embedding in the story the personal dimension of his own family. Through these testimonies, which constitute a very important source of information that has not yet found ample expression in the 1948 war historiography, Manna strives to decipher the policies of the victorious Israeli forces.

According to Manna, these policies involved terrorizing the population through executions as well as attempts at deportation, which failed in quite a few cases. One policy line that did succeed was the prevention of those who had fled their villages during the fighting and found shelter in neighboring villages and towns from returning to their homes. Their villages were destroyed, their lands were confiscated by the government, and Jews were made to settle there. (Manna also analyzes the history of the Arab population of Haifa and the Galilee in the years following the war until 1956, but that is not an integral part of the Nakba discussed in this article.)

The name Deir Yassin and the term Nakba (“catastrophe” in Arabic) are basic elements of the Palestinian narrative, which have in turn made their way into the Israeli narrative with an increasing degree of undisputed acceptance. In this context, the two books represent opposite positions. Tauber's study seeks to debunk the well-entrenched myth of the Deir Yassin massacre, while Manna strives to entrench the Nakba in the Hebrew narrative. Yet a reading of the two books side by side promotes deeper insights into the 1948 events.

The Deir Yassin episode was unique throughout the entire war, not because of the alleged massacre but because its pattern of house-to-house fighting did not recur on a similar scale. According to Arab claims, verified by most scholars, the mere mention of Deir Yassin brought about mass flight or hasty surrender of villagers elsewhere, which made house-to-house fighting largely unnecessary. Consequently, in no other place were women and children killed in similar numbers as in Deir Yassin.

Echoing the standard Arab narrative, Manna in contrast argues that massacres of Arabs by Jews had a role to play as the Jewish leadership had a clear policy of ethnic cleansing of Arabs. According to Manna, this policy was suspended when Nazareth and its vicinity in the Lower Galilee were occupied in the summer, only to be resumed at a later stage in other parts of the Galilee west of Nazareth. In his account, the Arab inhabitants resisted the new deportation attempts or returned to their villages after the soldiers had left the area. This explains why eastern Galilee was almost fully evacuated of its Arab population during the earlier stages of the war, while a considerable Arab population remained in the rest of Galilee that was occupied in late 1948.

In the eyes of Arabs, occupation, massacres, and deportation constitute the essence of the Nakba inflicted by the Jews, who are in turn urged to admit this colossal injustice and perhaps even take upon themselves the responsibility for its redress. Those who make this claim rarely mention that it was the Palestinian Arabs who waged a war of annihilation against their Jewish neighbors in the first place, in an attempt to prevent the creation of a Jewish state in accordance with the UN Partition Resolution of November 1947. Had this assault not taken place, there would have been no Nakba.

Manna fails to mention the legitimacy of the UN partition resolution as representing the will of the international community, nor does he criticize the war against the Jews as such. Rather, he restricts his criticism to the Arabs' failure to adequately prepare for the war they were bent on starting. His main criticism is thus reserved for the attacked party – the Jews – whom he claims perpetrated war crimes against the Arabs that cannot be justified under any circumstances, including the Arab culpability for starting the war.

Leaving aside Manna's factual and interpretational errors (notably the misrepresentation of Plan D as an expulsion program), he should have applied his criticism to all the war's events, as well as to subsequent violent outbursts between the two parties. A notable case in point is the fate of the 17 Jewish localities occupied by the Arabs in 1948, which is generally excluded from the Nakba narrative. Examining them one by one quickly reveals that all the alleged phenomena noted by Manna regarding Galilee were present there too, though on a limited scale due to their far smaller numbers.

The surviving inhabitants of Kfar Etzion, for example, were massacred after their surrender. Likewise, an injured soldier and two civilians accompanying him were executed after having been caught on their way out of Kibbutz Yad Mordechai following the collapse of local defenses. The other surviving defenders managed to flee ("evacuate themselves" in Israeli parlance).

A total deportation of the Jewish population took place in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City following its occupation. In addition, some of the occupied Jewish villages were evacuated before the battle started, mirroring the evacuation of Arab villages before the beginning of fighting.

There was a major difference between the two parties as far as expulsions were concerned. The Jews let tens of thousands of Arabs stay in their homes under Israeli rule. The Arabs, by contrast, did no such thing, destroying entire localities and expelling their populations to the last person. Not a single Jew was left in Gezer, Revadim, Ein Tzurim, Masuot Yitzhak, Mishmar Hayarden, or Nitzanim after their surrenders. The inhabitants of the first four villages were taken to a prisoner-of-war camp in Jordan. In Mishmar Hayarden and Nitzanim, too few inhabitants survived the battle to justify the construction of such camps. The survivors – men and women – were imprisoned in Syria and Egypt, respectively, and returned to Israel after the war alongside prisoners of war who had been held in Jordan. The Jewish presence in the areas occupied by the Arabs during the war was totally eradicated. All Jewish lands were taken over by the Arab authorities, leaving them completely Judenrein.

The prevention of war crimes should be a leading principle among all nations in times of war, rather than a tool for mutual recrimination. No pretext – self-defense, prevention of terrorism, liberation from occupation, fighting against imperialism, jihad, liquidation of racism and apartheid, class struggle, etc. – should be used to justify war crimes. This principle should apply to all – Jews, Arabs, and everyone else. Even those who are no friends of Israel or the Jews should adopt this principle and apply it to their own actions, side by side with their criticism of Israel on the same grounds. The murder of a Jewish family in the West Bank is a war crime even if it is claimed to be residing on "occupied" land. A suicide terror attack on a bus or a restaurant is a war crime regardless of its ideological justification. So are rocket attacks on population centers.

Allowing war crimes under one pretext or another is itself a war crime, especially if it is done by state-controlled media and/or an educational system, as the Palestinian Authority (PA) has done over the past two decades. In 2016, for example, the PA launched a new project of schoolbook publishing. Its new books accuse Israel of (largely nonexistent) war crimes while giving countenance to the perpetrating of such crimes by Palestinians. The following are three examples:

- A poetical verse details what should be done with the 6 million "foreign" Jews living in Israel after the "liberation" and removal of the "usurper" (code name for Israel) from Palestine: "I swear! I shall sacrifice my blood in order to water the noble ones' land, and I shall remove the usurper from my country and shall exterminate the foreigners' scattered remnants" (*Our Beautiful Language*, Grade 3, Part 2, 2016, p. 64).
- A Molotov-cocktail attack on a bus near the Psagot locality in the West Bank is described in one of the stories as a "barbecue party" (*Arabic Language*, Grade 9, Part 1, 2017, p. 61). In other words, the human beings perishing inside the burning bus are barbecued meat around which a party is taking place.
- Dalal Mughrabi, who led the March 1978 terrorist attack on an Israeli civilian bus on the coastal highway, in which over 30 men, women, and children were murdered, is described in two PA schoolbooks as a heroine (*Arabic Language*, Grade 5, Part 1, 2017, p. 14; *Social Studies*, Grade 9, Part 1, 2017, p. 74).

Anyone expressing an aversion to war crimes should be expected to do so with regard to all parties to a conflict. Accusations of war crimes directed at one side only, without the slightest sign of self-criticism regarding one's own atrocities, indicate a fundamental lack of integrity. Moreover, alongside denunciation of past cases, one should emphatically act against incitement to future war crimes, such as those spelled out or implied in the new Palestinian schoolbooks. Anyone who fails to do so is actually encouraging war crimes.

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