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Myths and Historiography of the 1948 Palestine War Revisited: The Case of Lydda

Alon Kadish and Avraham Sela

Arab and Israeli revisionist historiography has taken the events in the town of Lydda (Lod, al-Lud) during the 1948 Palestine War (Israeli War of Independence) as an example of Israel's premeditated expulsion of the Palestinian Arabs in 1948, coupled with a massacre of civilian Arabs by the Israeli forces. Using newly released documents, the article explains the origins of these claims. It concludes that the expulsion was not pre-meditated but a consequence of a complex and ill-conducted battle, nor is there any direct evidence that a massacre took place.

The ever-growing body of revisionist historical studies of the 1948 Palestine War (Israeli War of Independence) has focused primarily on the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem, ascribing to Israel different levels of responsibility for its creation. Blame ranges from massacres and deliberate and systematic expulsion, determined by the Zionist ideology, to the prevention of the refugees' return in the aftermath of the

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war.[1] One of the major cases of massacre and expulsion of Palestinian Arabs revolves around the occupation of Lydda (Lod, al-Lud) and Ramle in July 1948. In its scope and time span the expulsion of the population of Lydda and Ramle and their rural environs stands out in the annals of that war, ostensibly proving Israel's sole responsibility for the creation of the Palestinian refugee problem.

Since the mid-1970s two studies have been published (one of them in this *Journal*) on the occupation of Lydda and Ramle, the massacre of prisoners of war (POWs) in Lydda and the expulsion of their inhabitants, both by Israeli historians.[2] Relying exclusively on the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) records, neither of these studies endeavored to analyze the case under discussion within its broader military and political context, especially the various Arab military forces operating in the area and their interrelations. In the absence of an Arab perspective, the above studies focused exclusively on the Israeli side, its decisions and actions.

This article takes issue with two major claims:

A. The expulsion of the Arab inhabitants in *Operation Dani*, especially from Lydda, was pre-planned and deliberate, owing to "strategic necessity and [as] a goal in itself."[3]

B. The IDF conducted a massacre of defenseless prisoners of war in the al-'Umari Mosque on July 12, 1948, after Lydda had surrendered.[4]

Our main argument is that the decision for expulsion was made within the context of heavy fighting, unexpected military circumstances and calculations determined by the course of the operation.

As to the massacre, it is noteworthy that other than a number of rather doubtful Arab sources, there is no first hand evidence, Arab or Jewish, of a massacre. Accepting the IDF estimate of 250 deaths, Benny Morris attributed them to massacre, a claim subsequently endorsed by Arabs. However, a meticulous reconstruction of the battle on July 11 and events of July 12 offers a better, albeit more complex, explanation of the Arab losses. It also casts severe doubt on, if it does not completely refute, the argument for the massacre in the al-'Umari Mosque.

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1. Walid Khalidi, "Plan Dalet: Master Plan for the Conquest of Palestine," *Middle East Forum*, Vol. 37, (1961), p. 11. See also his "Plan Dalet," reproduced in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 18 (1988): Nos. 1, 5; Nur Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of Transfer in Zionist Political Thought 1882-1948* (Washington, DC: Institute of Palestine Studies, 1992), pp. 191-192; Rashid Khalidi, "Foreword," in Nafez Nazzal, *The Palestinian Exodus from Galilee 1948* (Beirut: Institute of Palestine Studies, 1978), p. ix.

2. Elhanan Oren, *Ba-Derekh el ha-'Ir: Mivtza' Dani Yuli 1948* [*On the Road to the City: Operation Dani, July 1948*] (Tel Aviv: Ma'arachot, 1976), particularly pp. 102-106; Benny Morris, "*Operation Dani* and the Palestinian Exodus from Lydda and Ramle in 1948," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Winter 1986), pp. 82-109.

3. Morris, "*Operation Dani*," pp. 86, 109.

4. Morris, p. 89; for Arab sources of this claim, see below.

LYDDA BEFORE THE OCCUPATION[5]

The United Nations partition plan placed Lydda and Ramle in the Arab-Palestinian State. This was primarily because the two towns and their environs were purely Arab in population. The inclusion of Lydda and Ramle in *Operation Dani* was motivated by the need to establish a secure and substantive territorial link between the coastal plain and Jewish Jerusalem, which was still under Arab threat. Latrun, just east of Lydda and Ramle, was the key Arab stronghold blocking the road to Jerusalem. Even though during the four-week long truce (June 11-July 9) Israel had built and improved an alternative supply route (commonly known as the "Burma Road"), the collective decision of the Arab governments to overrule the UN call for prolonging the truce and to renew the hostilities provided Israel with the opportunity to turn to the offensive, and to try to improve its control over the Jerusalem road.

Lydda's military preparations during this period represent a unique case among Arab-Palestinian towns and villages. This was primarily the result of a strong and efficient local leadership and the ample economic resources of the town's residents. The National Committee (the local emergency Arab authority, officially subordinated to the Grand Mufti's Arab Higher Committee), assumed overall local civic and military powers and effectively mobilized the town's human and material resources. The surviving records of Lydda's military command reveal its efforts in arms procurement, military training, constructing obstacles and trenches, requisitioning vehicles

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5. Unless otherwise mentioned, the ensuing discussion is based on the following sources: A.) The narrative on the preparations of Lydda is based on the documents of the Lydda Military Command (March-July 1948) held at the Israel State Archive (ISA), Jerusalem, primarily 65/438, boxes p/321, p/330, p/336; 65/846 boxes p/321 and p/330; 65/2294, box p/336; ISA, 65/2294, box 336; the Haganah Archive (HA), Tel Aviv, 65/217; 80/281/1; 105,/134,217 and 328 and Israel Defense Forces Archive (IDFA), Tel Ha-shomer, 1/57, files 969, 2062; 922/1975 files 1061, 1175 and 1182. Much of the information revealed by these documents is endorsed by the accounts of Isbir Munayyir, *Al-Lud fi 'Ahday al-Intidab wal-Ihtilal* [Lydda in both Periods of the Mandate and the Occupation], (Beirut: Mu'assassat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 1998), particularly pp. 49-52. B.) For Lydda's military role in the area see, 'Arif al-'Arif, *Al-Nakba: Nakbat Filsatin wal-Firdaws al-Mafqud 1947-1952* [*The Catastrophe: The Catastrophe of Palestine and the Lost Paradise 1947-1952*] (Sidon and Beirut, Al-Maktab al-'Sariyya lil-Tiba'a wal-Nashr, 1959), Vol. 1, p. 277 and Munayyir, *Al-Lud*, pp. 46, 53-54, 57, 59. C.) The discussion of training of and arms supplies to Lydda's militia is based on Salih al-Shara', *Mudhakkirat Jundi* [A Soldier's Memoirs] (Amman: Maktabat al-Muhtasib, 1984), pp. 24-26; and Israel Defense Forces Archive (IDFA), 1/57, files 969, 2062; 922/1975 files 1061, 1175 and 1182. D.) For the pre-conquest Israeli operations in the Lydda and Ramle area see, Oren, *Ba-Derekh el ha-'Ir*, pp. 13-15. E.) The discussion of the Israeli military operations is based primarily on Israel Defense Forces Archive (IDFA), 1/57, files 969, 2062; 922/1975 files 1061, 1175 and 1182. F.) Discussions on the role of Arab Legion and Transjordanian volunteers in Lydda are based on Mahmud Russan, *Ma'arik Bab al-Wad* [*The Battles of Bab al-Wad*] ([Amman]: n.p. n.d.), pp. 135-136, 155, and 157-8: John B. Glubb, *A Soldier with the Arabs* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957), 143-49; Al-'Arif, *Al-Nakba*, Vol. 3, pp. 616-617; Sulaiman Mousa, *Ayyam la Tunsa: al-Urdunn fi Harb 1948* [*Unforgotten Days: Jordan in the 1948 War*] (Amman: Maktabat al-Muhtasib, 1982), pp. 335 and 467; Shara, *Mudhakkirat Jundi.*, p. 59. G.) For Lydda-Ben Shemen good neighborly relations see Central Zionist Archive (CZA), Jerusalem, S25/7719; S25/9046; S25/4147.

and assembling armored cars armed with machine-guns, establishing food and fuel reserves, imposing law and order and issuing instructions for civil defense in case of air attacks. Anticipating a large number of casualties, local medical services were organized, including the training of paramedical teams, procurement of ambulances and improvising a small hospital. Moreover, the National Committee successfully maintained high morale and prevented the evacuation of women and children, which in many other Arab localities became a catalyst for total evacuation of men as well.

As of late March-early April, there was no shortage of arms in Lydda. In fact, Lydda became a center of arms supply, military training and security coordination for the neighboring villagers. By late April Lydda had become a safe haven for thousands of refugees fleeing from Jaffa and the neighboring villages occupied by the Jewish militias, which almost doubled the town's original population.[6] While these refugees constituted a heavy burden on the city's economy and utilities, the military command managed to incorporate part of them into its militia and, during the truce, provided them with arms and training. A Haganah[7] intelligence report of March 10 assessed that "if attacked," Lydda's inhabitants intended "to rely solely on their own forces and not upon undependable and untrustworthy strangers."[8]

The city's military command issued orders to the inhabitants, which forbade sabotaging the railway line, warning that those violating this order would be court-martialed and their weapons confiscated. This policy indicated an interest in avoiding clashes with the British authorities, to whom the railway was vital for completing the evacuation of war materials, but also may have reflected an intention to continue to benefit from pilfering from British trains passing near the city.[9] The vested interests of the town leadership dictated a similar policy of restraint in avoiding attacks on Jewish convoys and willingness to maintain good neighborly relations with Ben Shemen, the Jewish agricultural school three kilometers east of Lydda (provided that the road to the northeast dominated by the Jewish settlement remained open to Arab traffic). This agreement, however, came to an end when in mid-June the IDF blocked that road for fear of an attack by the Arab Legion.

By early April, Lydda increasingly had become an important military center in the region, supporting Arab military activities elsewhere, e.g. Jaffa and Gezer. It is not clear whether this was a result of the tightening siege on some Arab communities by the Jewish forces, the arrival of foreign Arab volunteers in the area, or due to a growing self-confidence following the plundering of arms, including field guns, from a British trains while it was passing through town.[10] In any event, the prevalence of

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6. Munayyir, *Al-Lud*, 70; Report by Asherov, Ministry of the Minorities, January 2, 1949, ISA box 297, file 5.

7. The Haganah was the pre-state Jewish fighting force which became the core of the Israel Defense Force (IDF) with independence.

8. HA, 65/217.

9. A British troop train was derailed near lyda as late as April 25, 1948. *Palestine Post*, April 26, 1948.

10. Munayyir, *Al-Lud*, p. 59, argued that at the end of April the military command of Lydda managed to capture a number of train cars loaded with arms and ammunition, including heavy field guns.

military actions conducted or shared by Lydda's military force prior to the first truce sheds light on the city's leading role in the district as a whole and hence, on the background of the Israeli offensive and occupation of the town.

At the end of April and early May (Operation *Hametz*), the Jewish forces extended their control over the area east of Jaffa, including some villages to the north and northwest of Lydda. At the same time, the Irgun Zeva'i Leumi (the dissident Jewish militia also known as IZL or Etzel) raided Ramle's northern outskirts and by mid-May the Jewish militias occupied the villages of Na'ana, 'Aqir, al-Qubab and Abu Shusa, south of Ramle, between Rehovot and Latrun. This turned Lydda, Ramle and their immediate environs into an Arab bulge with Jewish forces to its west, south, and north.

In the wake of the invasion of Palestine by regular Arab armies in mid-May 1948, after the declaration of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, the IDF forces (as they had now become) were busy trying to block the invasion of the Arab armies and Israeli military operations in the area remained limited. Except for two limited air raids on May 25 and 31, Lydda remained outside the main Israeli military efforts.

Lydda's well-organized force and self-confidence notwithstanding, as soon as Arab regular forces invaded the country the local headquarters appealed to them for protection. Appeals were made both to the Egyptian and the Tranjordanian armies, underscored by attacks launched on Ramle by the IZL and the Giv'ati Brigade as well as by Israeli air raids. At the beginning of June, the Lydda-Ramle local Arab forces reportedly received arms and ammunition from the Egyptian Army. But it was mainly Transjordan's Arab Legion that was in a position to extend any help due to its geographical proximity.

The renewal of hostilities after the four-week truce of June 6-July 9 witnessed a significant increase in Israel's military capabilities, while the UN embargo imposed on May 29 turned out to be disastrous for the Arabs, especially the Arab Legion. Deployed in the Jerusalem-Ramallah-Latrun region, the Arab Legion's main task was to prevent the Israeli Army from advancing towards Ramallah and by holding Latrun, also to block the main road to Jerusalem. Some 200-300 Bedouin volunteers from Transjordan, recruited and led by the Legion's officers, arrived in the Ramle-Lydda sector as of early April. Following urgent appeals from the two towns, at the beginning of June a company-sized force of the Arab Legion, reinforced by armored cars and support weapons, established itself in the police stations in Lydda and on the Lydda-Ramle road.

The appointment, during the truce, of an Arab Legion officer as the military governor of the two towns, responsible both for military and civic matters, carried a definite message of Transjordanian protection. This step was meant to secure Transjordanian King Abdullah's claim over the areas of Mandatory Palestine allotted to the Arab-Palestinian state. Underlying this move were Transjordan's interests and its lobbying its Arab allies to maintain the truce and avoid resumption of hostilities after July 9 due to severe shortages of both ammunition and financial means.[11]

The Transjordanian governor had no authority over the Legion's regular forces, which remained subordinated to the 4th Battalion's headquarters in the Bab al-Wad

11. Sir Ronald Campbell (Cairo) to Foreign Office (813), June 8, 1948, Public Record Office (PRO), FO371/68413/E7747, reporting message received by C in C Middle East Land Forces from Glubb; Glubb, *A Soldier with the Arabs*, pp. 148-150.
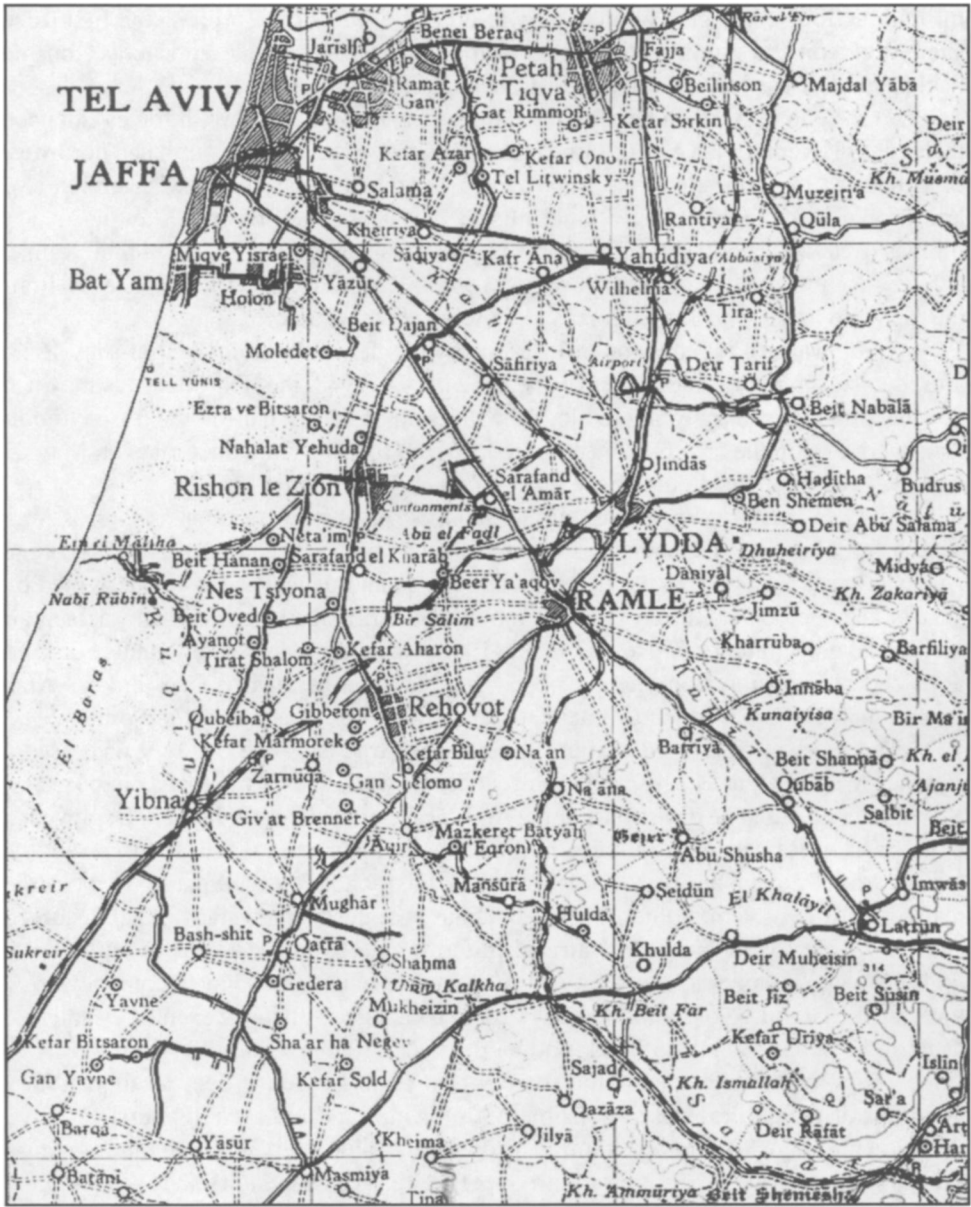
Map above is from *Map of Palestine in Three Sections* (Jaffa: Government of Palestine, Palestine Survey Department, 1947), courtesy Middle East Institute Library. Map opposite is from a large scale Mandatory map, revised to 1942, in which Lydda is the city on the far left, courtesy Alon Kadish and Avraham Sela.
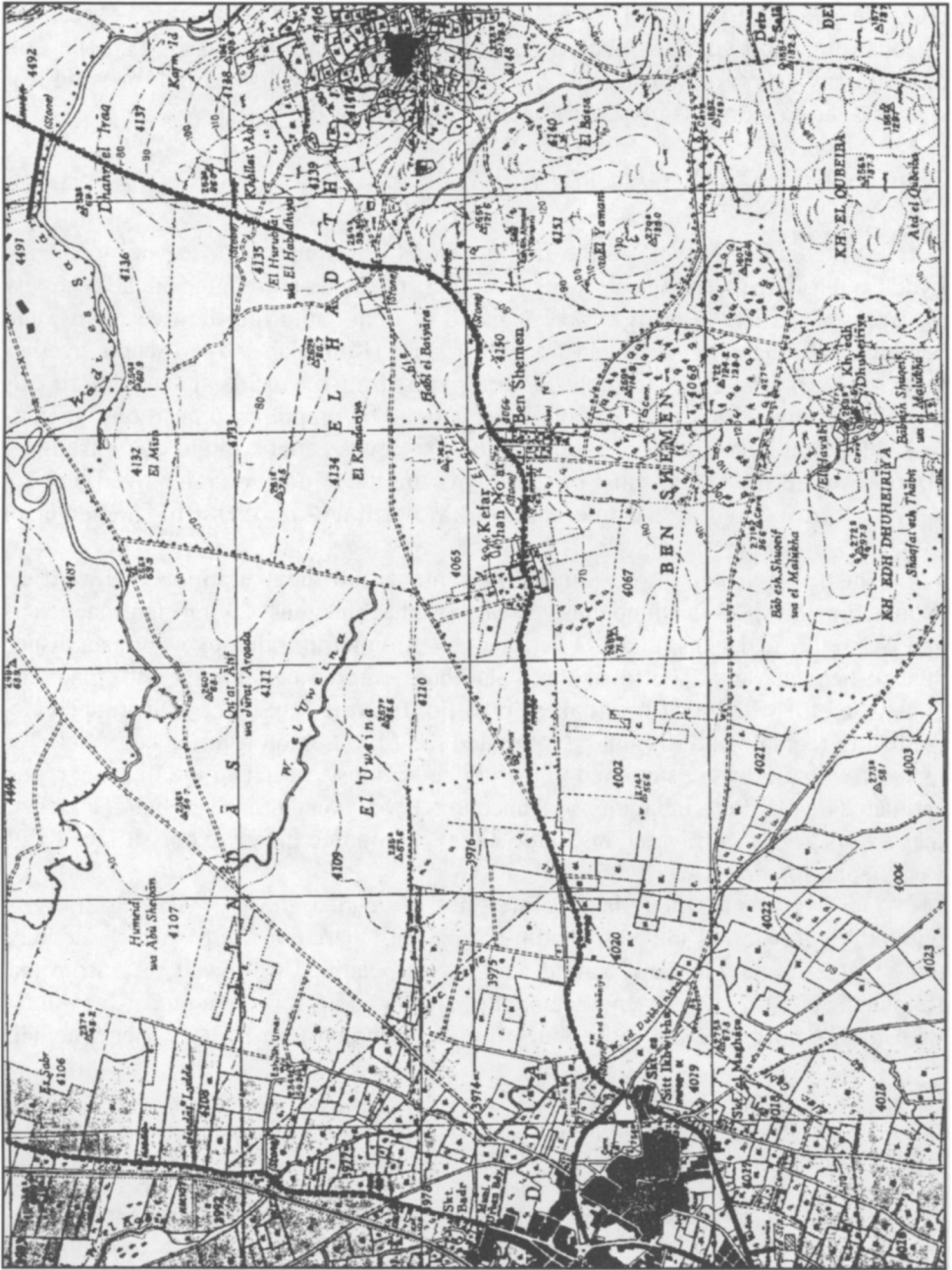
area. The events of July 11, 1948 were to reveal the lack of co-operation between the various forces in Lydda, particularly between the local militia and the Legion's soldiers. In any event, the inhabitants of Lydda and Ramle believed, and for good reason, that the Legion was responsible for the defense of the two towns.

THE OCCUPATION OF LYDDA[12]

At the end of May 1948 the IDF began its preparations for the occupation of Lydda and Ramle revealing a growing awareness of Lydda's strength and the necessity to deploy a sufficiently large force capable of both capturing the two towns, and beating the Arab Legion deployed along the roads to Ramallah and Jerusalem. Lydda's defense plan was intended to keep hostilities away from the residential neighborhoods by constructing an outer line of defense supported by preprepared positions, an anti-tank ditch and field artillery. Assuming that the Jewish attack might come from the airport area in the north, most of the town's military force was deployed along a heavily fortified and armed line about 2 km north and northeast of the center of Lydda.[13]

The local armed force numbered some 1,000 men, equipped with rifles, submachineguns, 15 machineguns, five heavy machineguns, 25 anti-tank launchers and 6-7 light field-guns, and 2-3 heavy ones. Ammunition dumps were established next to headquarters. The town force also had armored cars armed with machineguns, some of which had been taken in battle from the Jews. The IDF (apparently confusing regulars and irregulars) estimated the Arab Legion force to be of 200-300 men, of whom 50 were stationed in the police stations. An Israeli intelligence report estimated that Lydda's inhabitants planned to rely only on themselves and, if attacked, they "would resist firmly and resolutely. They would flee the town only if faced with vastly superior fire power."[14]

On July 7, only three days before the truce ended, the IDF General Staff appointed Yigal Allon as the commanding officer of Operation *Dani*,[15] which included two stages: first Lydda and Ramle were to be occupied, followed by Latrun and Ramallah. It called for the encirclement of Lydda and Ramle in a pincer movement with the two arms of the pincer meeting in the heretofore isolated Ben Shemen,

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12. Unless otherwise mentioned the reconstruction of the course of the battle for Lydda is based on Oren, *Ba-derekh el ha-'Ir*, pp. 83-116, 259-63 269-70, 273-74, and 302; [Mula Cohen], *"Kibush Lod"* [The Conquest of Lydda], in: *Sefer ha-Palmach*, Vol. 2, pp. 569-571; Moshe Dayan, *"Gdud ha-Komando 'Ole 'al Lod"* ["The Commando Battalion Attacks Lydda"], *Ma'arachot*, 62-63 (July 1950), pp. 34-40; IDFA, 1/57, file 2062; 922/1975, files 1018 and 1182; 1277/1949, file 5; HA, section 105, files 217, 307 and 328; ISA, box 297, file 5; Shmaria Gutman, *"Lod Yotzet lagola"* ["Lydda Exiled"], a personal account, *Me-Bifnim*, 13: 3 (November 1948); and Munayyir, *Al-Lud*, pp. 72-80, 90.

13. Letter from Hassan al-Hindi to unidentified person in Amman (n.d., written during the truce), IDFA, 1/57, file 2062; Munayyir, op. cit., 72-80, 90; Intelligence report June 19, 1948, IDFA 922/75, file 1018.

14. Intelligence report, May 28, 1948, HA, 105/328.

15. Initially called LRLR, abbreviation for Lod, Ramle, Latrun, Ramallah.

northeast of Lydda, by the evening of July 10. The forces earmarked for the opera-
tion included the 8th Brigade's 82nd and 89th Battalions, Kiryati's 44th, and the Palmach's
(Yiftach Brigade's) 1st and 3rd Battalions.

The tight schedule of the operation resulted in the urgent and improvised nature
of the preparations, poor intelligence and loose control of the operation's headquar-
ters over its troops. The battle orders of the General Staff as well as the 8th Brigade
specified the tasks of each force only for the initial encircling stage, while specific
assignments for the actual assault on Lydda and Ramle would be determined on the
spot. The late decision on Operation *Dani* and the rushed assembly of the participant
units also resulted in overlooking some valuable intelligence, which revealed that the
Arab Legion's garrison force had been closely and carefully monitoring the IDF's
pincer movement, and requiring immediate reinforcements.[16] The confusion and lack
of coordination were compounded by the injury of Allon and his chief lieutenant
Yitzhak Rabin on July 11, when their vehicle ran over a minefield near the village of
Danyal, southeast of Lydda.[17]

On the night of July 10-11, while Lydda and Ramle were heavily bombed from
the air, only the 3rd Palmach[18] Battalion was available for the attack on Lydda. On the
morning of July 11, at 11:00 am, two of the 3rd Battalion companies left Danyal and
began to advance towards Lydda, supported by a battery of four 65mm field guns.
Defined as an "aggressive patrol," they wrongly believed that the Arab Legion had
deserted Lydda and Ramle and that the eastern defenses in both towns were weak with
no strong resistance expected from the local combatants. Approaching Lydda from
the east along Wadi Dubaniyya, they ran straight into the town's eastern defenses
where they were pinned down by efficient mortar and gunfire. The Palmach units
managed to avoid encirclement but found themselves otherwise unable to advance.[19]

Lydda's eastern defenses were finally breached by another force commanded by
Moshe Dayan's 89th Battalion. Operating on his own initiative and with no direct
coordination with Operation *Dani's* operational headquarters or his Brigade com-
mander, most of the battalion joined the battle at mid-day on July 11, leaving the
northern flank of the whole operation exposed. At c. 16:00, after avoiding an Arab
Legion armored car unit, the 89th Battalion's motorized column, led by an armored
car (carrying a two-pound gun) seized from the Arab Legion the day before, left Ben
Shemen towards Lydda.

Dayan, like the Palmach, assumed that "Lydda's eastern sector was neither for-
tified nor well defended," and that the town's defenders did not expect an attack from
the east. The column advanced along the Haditha-Ben Shemen road and crossed a
stone bridge across Wadi Dubaniyya, north of the area where the 3rd Palmach Battal-

16. Telegrams to the General Staff, July 10, 1948, file 1182, IDFA, 922/1975; Telegram no. 46, July
10, 1948, IDFA, file 1175.

17. Yizhak Rabin, *Pinkas Sherut* [*A Service Notebook*] (Tel Aviv: Ma'ariv, 1979), Vol. I, p. 60.

18. The Palmach was the elite strike force of the Haganah and of the IDF during the War of
Independence.

19. Yifrah Haviv, *Le-Zekher Haverim* [*In Memory of Friends*], (Hulata: The Immigrant Pioneer
Corps, n.d.), We are thankful to Yehezkel Avner for drawing our attention to this volume.

ion had been engaged in battle. After being stopped by the anti-tank ditch encircling the town and the line of defense, the 89th Battalion's column turned southwest following Lydda's municipal boundary, a route which ran east of the ditch and parallel to the town's defense lines and was not mined. While advancing, the column fired from all its weapons "at windows, stone fences and sandbag positions."[20]

According to Dayan's plan, the column was to advance westwards and enter Lydda from the junction across the bridge, break through the town's defenses and seize its center. It was to be followed by the Palmach 3rd Battalion's companies, which would complete the operation.[21] Instead, the 89th Battalion encircled the town from the east, by-passed the old town center and proceeded to Ramle. Along its way the column was subjected to heavy fire by Legion forces, which had barricaded themselves in both police stations in Lydda itself and on the Lydda-Ramle road.

According to an Arab version, when the initial attack from the east began, most of the Arab militia force were deployed at a distance from the town itself. With the repulse of the first Israeli attack many residents assumed that the attack was over and went out into the streets only to face the 89th Battalion's column passing through Lydda's southern outskirts. The Israeli column, led by an armored car just seized from the Arab Legion and its soldiers wearing *kufiyyas* (traditional Arab scarf), as was a common practice then in some units of the IDF, added to further confusion among the Arabs regarding the identity of the incoming forces.[22] According to Dayan, "The town's [southern] entrance was awash with Arab combatants … Hand grenades were thrown from all directions. There was a tremendous confusion."[23] This confused and unexpected encounter between the civilian population and the Israeli military forces may explain the high rate of casualties among the town's residents.

Dayan's column finally came to a halt by Ramle's train station where the wounded were treated and punctured tires were changed. The force re-organized and under continued enemy fire from the police stations drove back to Ben Shemen after sustaining six killed and 21 wounded. Meanwhile, the Legion's soldiers in the police station panicked and desperately called their headquarters for help.[24] Although it had seriously shaken the city's eastern defenses and created pandemonium in the town, the 89th Battalion failed to break through Lydda's defenses and it was left to the 3rd Palmach Battalion to complete the task.

On July 11, at c. 17:00 hours, after Dayan's battalion returned to Ben Shemen, the two companies of the Palmach 3rd Battalion began fighting their way into Lydda. As the latter approached the Lydda police station, one company came under fire and was forced to retreat to a nearby row of houses. Meanwhile, the other company had reached the Great Mosque and the Greek Orthodox cathedral in the old town's center,

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20. Dayan, *Gdud ha-Komando*, p. 38.
21. Oren, *Ba-Derekh el ha-'Ir*, p. 102.
22. *"Ba-Tziburiut ha-'Aravit"* ["In the Arab Public Arena"], July 20, 1948, HA, 105/307; Fouzi El-Asmar, *To Be an Arab in Israel* (London: F. Pinter, 1975), pp.16 and 20.
23. Dayan, *"Gdud ha-Komando,"* p. 38.
24. Arab telegrams no. 24 and 28, July 11, 1948, IDFA, 922/1975, file 1175.

and the battalion's headquarters established itself in the house of the Greek Orthodox Archimandrite Simon, leader of the largest Christian community in town, next to the Great Mosque and opposite the cathedral entrance.

With the permission of the 3rd Battalion's commander, Moshe Kelman, the Archmandrite assembled the town dignitaries, and after a discussion of the situation they decided to surrender.[25] As demanded by the Battalion Commander, Lydda's inhabitants were instructed by the town dignitaries to place their weapons on their doorsteps to be collected by the Palmach soldiers. As evening fell loudspeakers announced a curfew to commence at 21:00 hours. Following its experience in Safad, the battalion realized that the town police station was key to controlling the town. A delegation of town dignitaries, including Lydda's Mayor, Muhammad 'Ali al-Kayyali, and the town's Qadi, left for the police station in an effort to ask the Legion's force there to surrender. The latter, however, refused and opened fire on the delegation, killing the Mayor and wounding several of the dignitaries.[26] Nonetheless, Moshe Kelman, commander of the 3rd Battalion, believing the force in the police station was isolated, decided to accept the town's surrender.

Why the Arab defenses collapsed remains unclear. Perhaps the main Arab defenses had been partly abandoned in the course of the battle with the Palmach by fighters moving to the battle zone east of the route taken by the 89th Battalion. The Arab force fighting the Palmach found itself, much to its surprise, caught between two Jewish forces — the 3rd and 89th Battalions. Fearing that it would be surrounded, the Arab force presumably elected to retreat to the town without surrendering or laying down its arms.

Despite the apparent collapse of Arab resistance, apart from the forces barricaded in the police stations, the 3rd Battalion faced the possibility of a counter attack by the Arab Legion from the direction of Beit Nabala to the northeast. It was this prospect which determined Kelman's deployment of his companies, while keeping his headquarters in the town center. One company was stationed in the market district. Two companies were placed south of the town center, where they kept watch over the force in the Lydda police station, and blocked the road from Ramle. A fourth company remained east of the newly occupied village of Jimzu.

In retrospect, the Palmach commanding officers described the night of July 11-12, as "especially tense," impossible to tell "whether we had conquered or been conquered by the town."[27] At dawn the Palmach soldiers began to comb the old town and occupied the boys' school in the southern part of town where the local military head-

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25. Moshe Kelman, *"Ha-Hevdel bein Deir Yasin le-Lod"* ["The Difference between Deir Yasin and Lydda"], *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, May 2, 1972. The article was a response to Arieh Yizhaki's article *"Deir Yasin - lo Bir'i 'Akum"* ["Deir Yasin - Viewed not Through a Distorting Mirror"], *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, April 14, 1972.

26. Mula Cohen's report, July 12, 1948; Kenneth Wheeler (*The Chicago Sun Times* correspondent), *The Palestine Post*, July 13,1948; *'Al Hamishmar*, July 29, 1948; Munayyir, *Al-Lud*, p. 99.

27. Yigal Allon, *Ha'aretz*, October 25, 1979; Mula Cohen in: *Kibush He'arim ha-'Arviot ve-ha-Me'oravot be-Milhemet ha-'Atzma'ut* [*The Conquest of the Arab and Mixed Towns in the War of Independence*], (Ef'al, Merkaz Galili 1989), proceedings of a conference, December 12, 1987, pamphlet No.8, p.17.

quarters had been located. The building, now deserted, still contained large arms and ammunition dumps and two armored cars. It also turned out that during the night the Arab force garrisoned in the other police station on the Lydda-Ramle road had withdrawn unnoticed. The town itself was quiet but the inhabitants had not handed over their weapons as ordered. That morning Mula Cohen, Commander of the Yiftah Brigade, estimated that "the town houses are packed with armed civilians, though with no contact between them."[28] Although the curfew had ended at 8:00 am, the streets remained empty, except for women bringing food for their imprisoned menfolk. The siege of the Lydda town police station continued and the town's eastern exits were still blocked.

"MASSACRE" AND EXPULSION

Once the Israeli troops began combing the town after its surrender, thousands of residents filled the streets, many waving white flags and scarves. Men of military age were rounded up and placed under guard in Lydda's Great Mosque as POW's,[29] while many civilians gravitated to the Mosque and the Cathedral. About 4,000 men of military age were assembled in the Great Mosque area.[30] On the morning of July 12, 1948, Mula Cohen dispatched a telegram to the *Dani* headquarters demanding that a civil administrator be sent at once to cope with the population.[31]

None of Operation *Dani*'s battle orders mentioned the civilian population or its treatment and there were no preliminary discussions of the subject.[32] On June 14, 1948, the Israeli Government decided to establish a cabinet committee whose mandate included the treatment of Arab refugees and their abandoned property in territories occupied by Israel. Two days later, the Government decided that the Arabs who had fled the area should not be allowed to return for the duration of the fighting. On June 30, 1948, the government decided that "the Arabs are not to be transferred from place to place without the sanction of the Committee for Abandoned Property."[33]

On July 4, 1948 the Committee issued an official order, which was repeated on July 6, as an official military directive, signed in the name of the Chief of Staff and distributed to all units from battalion level upwards. It clearly and strictly forbade,

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28. Telegram No. 4, July 12, 1948 , IDFA, 922/1975, file 1175.

29. Yifrach Haviv, *"Be-Farbarei Lod u-Rehovoteiha"* [In the Suburbs and Streets of Lydda], in: *Yiftah Ahuzat ha-Sufa: Sippura shel Hativat Yiftah-Palmah [Tempestuous Yiftah: The Story of the Yiftah-Palmach Brigade]*, (Bat Yam: 1970), p. 166.

30. "Nahum of Gamzu" [Nahum Bernstein (Carmeli)], *"Massa' Mezoraz"* [Forced March], *Palmach*, No. 67, (July 19, 1948); M. Kelman in *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, May 2, 1972; Gutman, "Lydda Exiled,"; Munayyir, *Al-Lud,* p. 93. The number stated is the estimate given in Mula Cohen's second report on July 12, 1948 in the evening.

31. Telegram No. 4, IDFA, 922/1975, file 1175.

32. Mula Cohen, *The Conquest of the Arab and Mixed Towns*, p. 19.

33. Transcripts of the Interim Government's Meetings, June 14, 1948, June 16, 1948 and June 30, 1948, ISA.

other than in the heat of battle, ... to destroy, burn or demolish Arab towns and villages, to expel the inhabitants of Arab villages, neighborhoods and towns, or to uproot the Arab population from their place of residence without having received, in each and every case, a specific and direct order from the Minister of Defense.[34]

New regulations called for the imposition of curfew and sealing off of newly occupied Arab areas to prevent looting and acts of revenge. Law and order were to be established through local Arab authorities and weapons as well as local and foreign fighters were to be rounded up. The men were to be treated as POWs and the Red Cross was to be given their names. Finally, they forbade confiscation of Arab property by individuals or military units acting on their own. With regard to men of military age, there were no clear orders: whether they were to be taken as POWs or dumped at the border of the Arab-held territories. As for the rest of the population, the Cabinet Committee maintained that those Arabs who wished to remain should be allowed to do so, though there were differences over the conditions. [35]

On the morning of July 12, a reconnaissance of three Arab Legion armored cars reached the northern entrance to Lydda in order to assess the state of the forces beleaguered in the police station. Having arrived from the direction of the 8th Brigade's zone of operations, the armored cars were thought to be a friendly force. Two of the cars entered Lydda and opened fire on the Palmach soldiers combing the area, playing havoc with the Israeli patrols, which had no anti-tank weapons, causing confusion regarding the number and purpose of the Arab Legion armored cars. Additionally, it was thought that some armored cars had entered Lydda from the west aiming to join the Legion's forces fighting around Beit Nabala.[36]

The situation became critical once the local militia, apparently assuming that the armored vehicles were the Legion's reinforcements for the besieged police station, emerged from their houses and joined the fray. The Palmach force came under heavy fire from "thousands of weapons from every house, roof and window," sustaining many casualties. A small patrol was attacked by a rioting mob near the Dhaimash Mosque in the market place. With no chance of immediate reinforcements and unable to identify the enemy's main thrust, Kelman ordered his troops "to open fire on every

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34. General Staff Authorization, 30/8/4/a, IDFA, 2135/1950, file 42, signed by Deputy CoS Ayalon; Tom Segev, *1949, The First Israelis* (Jerusalem: Domino, 1984), p. 42 (Hebrew edition); and Transcripts of the Interim Government's Meetings, July 4 ,1948.

35. Document (n.d., apparently June 10-11, 1948), ISA, box 307, file 35; and "Proceedings of a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Histadrut," July 14, 1948, The Lavon Institute's Archive, Tel Aviv; Cabinet Committee on Abandoned Property, July 13, 1948, ISA, Foreign Office, File 21, box 2401; Morris, *Operation Dani,* pp. 93-94.

36. "In the Suburbs and Streets of Lydda," p. 166; Shara', *Mudhakkirat Jundi,* p. 59. Gutman, "Lydda Exiled," p. 101; M. Kelman, *Yedi'ot Aharonot,* May 2, 1972; Interview with Eldad Avidar, a platoon commander in the battle on Lydda, April 22, 1994.

target... it is a question of either them or us."[37] As the Arab Legion's armored vehicles eventually withdrew, an attempt was made to call the Arabs from one of the mosques' minarets to halt their fire and surrender their arms, but to no avail, and the shooting continued for most of the day.

The number of Arab casualties in Lydda and their causes remain controversial and contentious. At the end of the first day's fighting, the 89th Battalion's operation report of Dayan estimated the Arab losses at 100-150 dead. This was echoed in the newspapers of July 12, setting the Arab losses at about 200.[38] On the morning of July 12, following his visit to Lydda, foreign correspondent Kenneth Bilby recorded that the streets were strewn with the bodies of Arab men, women, and children. In his second report at the end of the day, Mula Cohen put the total Arab losses in Lydda at 250.[39]

Unlike these estimates, which were first-hand and on-the-spot military and personal assessments, Arab estimates of the number of casualties are derived from unidentified sources produced sometime after the battle of Lydda. These estimates range from 176 to as many as 3,000 and do not distinguish between combatants and innocent civilians. Likewise, they do not differentiate between those killed in the course of the battle and those allegedly massacred.[40] Given these discrepancies, any attempt to calculate "actual" numbers of casualties in Lydda would be futile, though one wonders about the effect of memory on the reconstruction of events in Arab historiography. At the time, the events in Lydda brought back to Arab consciousness the memory of the Deir Yassin massacre,[41] though Lydda residents' records mentioned no massacre.[42]

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37. Cohen, in: "The Conquest of Lod," *Sefer ha-Palmach*, Vol. II, 571; Ramallah Radio, July 11-12, 1948, HA, 105/310. Haviv, "In the Suburbs and Streets of Lydda," p. 166.

38. *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, July 12, 1948; *Yedi'ot Ma'ariv*, July 12, 1948; Gene Currivan, *The New York Times*, July 13, 1948. Munayyir, *Al-Lud*, p. 92, explains why so many civilians came under fire in the streets but gives no figures of casualties.

39. Kenneth Bilby, *New Star in the Near East* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1951); Yeruham Cohen, *Le'Or ha-Yom 'uva-Mahshakh* [In the Light of Day and In Darkness] (Tel Aviv, Amikam Publishers, 1969), pp. 158-159; Mula Cohen's Report, July 12, 1948, Palmach Headquarters Archive (PHA), Ef'al.

40. An Arab intelligence agent reported that "the Jews massacred close to 3000," July 18, 1948, HA, 105/31; Muhammad Nimr al-Khatib, *Min Athar al-Nakba* [On the Impact of the Catastrophe], (Damascus: Al-Matba'a al-'Umumiyya, 1951), [/ 350, put the number of Arab victims in Lydda as 1,700; al-'Arif, Vol. 3, p. 605, set the total number of Arab casualties in the battle at 426, of whom 176 were killed in the mosque; Mustafa M. al-Dabbagh, *Biladuna Filastin* [Our Country Palestine], (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 1973), Vol. 4, p. 486, adopted al-'Arif's figures and so did Munayyir, *Al-Lud*, p. 97, adding that more than 100 corpses had been found in the mosque alone. A more recently published memoir of an eyewitness spoke about 95 corpses he himself had removed from the Dahmash Mosque, *"Mahraqat Shuhada' Madinat al-Lud,"* ["The Burning of te Martyrs of the City of Lydda"], *al-Quds* (Jerusalem), November 5, 1998. Shara', *Mudhakkirat Jundi*, p. 59, spoke of 600 dead people in the Great Mosque. The story about the massacre was also adopted by A. Yitzhaki, *Yedi'ot Aharonot*, June 14, 1972.

41. *Ramallah Radio*, July 13, 1948, (at 23:00), HA, 105/302; *Davar*, July 14, 1948, noon edition; *'Al ha-Mishmar*, July 15, 1948, on the Ramallah radio broadcasts.

42. See for example, Asmar, *To Be an Arab in Israel*, pp. 20-21; Elias Munayyir, personal interview, April 11, 1991, Lod Municipality's Historical Archives, compartment 11.2. Isbir Munayyir's version of a "massacre" in the streets and area of "the mosque and church," p. 96, is based on Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-1949* (Cambridge: Cambirdge University Press, 1987), p. 276.

The controversy over the number of casualties derives from the Arab claims of a massacre of more than 100 POWs who took refuge in the Great Mosque. Benny Morris, on his part, accepted the Arab version of the massacre in the Great Mosque and the estimate of 250 Arabs killed on July 12, 1948.[43] No direct evidence, however, has been found to confirm that it ever took place. According to Israeli sources engaged in Lydda, no military action was taken against the Great Mosque (Benny Morris, who is often cited by Arabs as their source for the massacre claim, does not distinguish between the two Mosques in town), which was in front of the battalion headquarters. Rather, a fire fight erupted between armed militiamen who took refuge in the Dhaimash Mosque (not the Great Mosque) and Israeli soldiers outside. In response to attacks originating from the small mosque, an anti-tank Piat shell was fired at the group of 50-60 barricaded armed Arabs, followed by the storming of the mosque, which resulted in the death of 30 Arab militiamen. Some Israeli soldiers recalled that civilians, including elderly, women and children, sheltering in the little mosque were also killed and injured.[44] It is, however, unclear whether these civilians were hit in the course of the fighting in the mosque or had been previously hit and sought shelter in it.

It is indisputable that unarmed civilians had been killed in the streets of Lydda, especially when the situation turned chaotic following the arrival of the Legion's armored cars at midday July 12. There is, however, no evidence to support the claim that defenseless prisoners had been massacred. The shooting in the town persisted until the morning of July 13, when the Palmach discovered that the force barricaded in the police station, acting on orders from their Transjordanian headquarters, had also managed to escape undetected during the night.

Regarding the question of expulsion of the Arabs of Lydda, it is noteworthy that throughout Operation *Dani,* the IDF encouraged the local population to escape eastwards.[45] On the night of the July 12-13, following events in Lydda, the *Dani* headquarters concluded that pressure should be exerted to encourage Lydda's inhabitants to leave. The action, however, required the authorization of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's Prime Minister and Minister of Defense. After consultations with Dani Operation commanders, Yigal Allon and Yitzhak Rabin, Ben-Gurion approved the request by waving his hand in a gesture, which was interpreted as "expel them." Later on, Allon disputed this by saying "there was no expulsion order but rather a provoked exodus."[46]

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43. Benny Morris, "The New Historiography: Israel Confronts its Past," *Tikkun,* Vol. 3, No. 6 (Nov-Dec. 1988), p. 19. See also his *"Operation Dani,"* pp. 88-89. Conversation between Ezra Greenboim and Uri Gefen, Yigal Allon House Archive (YAHA), Kibbutz Genossar.

44. Gutman, "Lydda Exiled," p. 100. M. Kelman, *Yedi'ot Aharonot,* May 2, 1972; Conversation between Ezra Greenboim and Uri Gefen, YAHA. Khatib, p. 350, maintains that all those within the small mosque were killed.

45. Message to the force in al-Qubab, July 10, 1948 (at 16:00), PHA. Munayyir, *Al-Lud,* p. 94, claims that systematic expulsion began on the night of July 11-12.

46. The source for Ben-Gurion's involvement in the decision to expel Lydda's population is Y. Rabin's censured extract from his book, *Pinkas Sherut* (see above) published by David K. Shipler, "Israel Bars Rabin Relating the Eviction of Arabs 48," *The New York Times,* October 3, 1979. For a detailed discussion of the order of expulsion see Morris, *"Operation Dani."* For Allon's denial see, *Ha'aretz,* October 25, 1979; telegram to Dani's headquarters, (at 23:30), IDFA, 922/1975, file 1182.

From a military point of view, the decision to expel Lydda's inhabitants was based on two major considerations:

> 1. The renewed fighting prompted by the appearance of the Legion's armored cars on July 12, was regarded as an insurrection, following the town's surrender, and evidence that Lydda had the potential for further armed resistance, and there were fears "we are on the verge of a Lydda-based offensive."[47] In view of the perceived threat of renewal of hostilities, keeping Lydda under control would have required additional combat forces, which were not available. Moreover, the original plan required that following the occupation of Lydda, the 3rd Battalion was to move to the Danyal-Jimzu area, east of Lydda for the second stage of the operation. Hence, by default the Dani headquarters thought it too risky to continue the operation with an armed and hostile population at its rear.[48]

> 2. Expelling the population eastwards would block the Legion's likely routes of attack while the Israeli forces were in the process of re-organizing for Operation *Dani*'s second stage.[49] The large population of Lydda, which included refugees from Jaffa and the surrounding area, would place a heavy economic burden on the Transjordanian government as well as demoralize the villages and towns en route. These developments in turn would impede any efforts by combined Iraqi-Transjordan forces to launch a counter-offensive to re-capture Lydda.

The decision-making concerning the expulsion from Lydda further illustrates the lack of a cohesive policy vis-a-vis the Arab population in the areas which came under Israeli control. Despite the government's decision of June 16, the authorization of the Defense Minister regarding Lydda was not even a verbal directive but was expressed by a hand gesture the meaning of which was never in dispute.

An exodus of Arab inhabitants under threat of Israeli occupation was common during the war. Deep fear of atrocities and vengeance, desecration of women's honor, and belief in the final victory of the Arabs, combined to convince rural as well as urban Arab communities to leave even when their Jewish neighbors begged them to stay. Indeed, underpinning the rumors and stories of atrocities, mass murders, rapes, enslavement, and destruction of property ascribed to the Jewish forces by Arabs were deep-seated hostility and the unthinkable idea of living under Jewish rule. Escape

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47. Allon's telegram No. 3 to the General Staff, July 13, 1948 (at 02:00), IDFA, 922/1975, file 1175. See also, Kelman's interview with Amos Elon, reported separately in *'Al ha-Mishmar, Ha'aretz* and *Davar*, July 14, 1948, and his interview with Shlomo Tanai, *Ha'aretz*, July 22, 1948, which emphasized that Lydda had to be reoccupied despite its surrender on July 11, 1948. Allon stressed that Lydda's people broke the surrender agreement and renewed fire, *Palmach*, No. 67, July 19, 1948; "Bo'az," "From One Friend to Another, An Old Issue," *Palmach*, No. 68, July 30, 1948.

48. Rabin's evidence, *The New York Times*, October 23, 1979. Telegrams from Yadin to Dani and Yadin to Allon, subordinating one battalion of Yiftach Brigade to direct command of the General Staff, July 14, 1948, IDFA, 1975/922, file 1182.

49. Yigal Allon, *"Mivtza' Dani"* ["Operation *Dani*"], *Palmach*, No. 67, July 19, 1948.

became a common course of action once the possibility of armed resistance seemed no longer realistic, especially when the Arab Legion withdrew from the town. When these fears were amplified by Arab leaders and media, mass fleeing became inevitable.[50] In addition, a few days before the occupation, a Jew caught in Lydda's train station was publicly executed and his body severely mutilated by the city residents, and this exacerbated Arab fears of possible Jewish revenge and contributed to their exodus.[51]

On July 13, 1948 Israeli soldiers notified the population of the impending expulsion and warned them that their lives would be in danger should they elect to stay. Shots were then fired over the heads of the departing population in order to spur them on.[52] Yet, not all of Lydda's population was expelled, and in the railway neighborhood, for example, which before the occupation had 400 residents, 460 persons were counted less than half a year later.

CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis demonstrates that the expulsion of the Arabs of Lydda and Ramle was not premeditated but was the consequence of the uncontrollable nature of an intense battle where the demarcation between civilians, irregular combatants and regular army units hardly existed. The absence of a premeditated plan to expel the population was underscored by the Chief of Staff's decree forbidding any expulsion without the formal authorization of the Defense Minister; the absence of any reference to the civilian population in Operation *Dani*; and the initial request of Mula Cohen for a civil administrator shortly after the capture of Lydda. Seen within the context of the end results, especially from an Arab point of view, the question whether the expulsion was premeditated or circumstantial might seem irrelevant. However, in the absence of any conclusive evidence in support of a deliberate Israeli policy of expulsion, instead of ascribing "logical" intentions to one's actions and taking them as a guideline for interpreting one's actions throughout, the historian ought to consider decisions at each junction as the result of free choice based on one's current calculations and perception of reality.

Even in the midst of large-scale military operations in predominantly Arab localities, the expulsion of Arabs was not the standard practice of the IDF. Indeed as Operation *Dekel* (in the Lower Galilee including Nazareth) — the other major operation conducted during that period — highlights, the capture of Arab areas were not followed by significant expulsion and the vast majority of the Arab population re-

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50. The most salient case in this respect is the exodus from Haifa. However, as Morris showed in his *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, in most of the cases the exodus was voluntary, rather than by direct enforcement. See also Nazzal, especially the cases of Tiberias, pp. 29-30 and Safad, pp. 40-41. See also six testimonies by Palestinian refugees, *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya: Harb 1948*, No. 34 (spring 1998), pp. 124-152. Ramallah Radio, June 21-22, 1948, HA, 105/88, 48/167.

51.The case was examined by the Tel Aviv District Court in March 1953, *'Al ha-Mishmar*, March 15, 17, 18, 24, 25 and 30, 1953 and April 16, 1953.

52. Rabin, *The New York Times*, October 23, 1979.

mained intact. Lydda-Ramle was the only occasion where the commanders requested and received the authorization of the Defense Minister for the expulsion of Arabs, which singles out this case. Nor is there any direct evidence that a massacre of POWs or innocent civilians took place in the Great Mosque on July 12. The "massacre" story possibly stems from the events in the Dhaimash Mosque coupled with the large number of Arabs killed in the town's streets during the fighting as estimated by the Palmach report of July 12, and their eventual interment in mass graves.

The expulsion of Lydda's residents was not an extension of the policy previously enforced during Plan D operations, in which the brigade commanders had been fully authorized to determine the fate of the Arab population and its property in their sector. That policy had been changed on the eve of Operation *Dani* and was expressed firmly and clearly in the order on behalf of the Chief of Staff dated July 6, 1948. The order categorically forbade the expulsion of Arabs or the destruction of Arab property in occupied areas without an explicit authorization from the Minister of Defense. The expulsion of Lydda's population was an exception to the new rule. This explanation does not mitigate the tragedy of the city's residents who became refugees. At the same time, this tragedy might have been averted had the town's surrender proved effective, as may be adduced from the fate of many Arab communities in the Galilee in the later months of the war.

The presence of the Arab Legion in Lydda and Ramle had disastrous consequences for their populations due to its limited size and responsibility. While inadequate for coping with a large-scale offensive, the Legion's presence gave the residents a false sense of security, which collapsed when it was put to the test. Indeed, the very presence of the Legion's troops in town and the proximity of the Arab Legion's main force at Bayt Nabala, six kilometers northeast, account for Lydda's expectations to be rescued by the latter and explains the resurgence of fighting which eventually led to both the death of scores of civilians as well the eventual expulsion on July 13, 1948.