

## WEEKEND

# The cleansing of the Golan Heights

The popular propaganda film ‘Six Days’ glorified Israel’s achievements in the 1967 war – but an intolerable price was exacted during its shooting

**Adam Raz**

Nearly 130,000 Syrians lived on the Golan Heights at the beginning of June 1967. Two months later, their number had dwindled to 6,396, nearly all of them Druze. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, the fate of these Syrians was of little concern to the Israeli public, and the rapid conquest of the land and subsequent Jewish settlement there helped erase their memories of them. Indeed, local history books rarely talk about what befell the native residents of the Golan Heights.

Historian Yigal Kipnis’ informative book “The Golan Heights: Political History, Settlement and Geography since 1949” (Routledge, 2013), relates that “the number of Golan civilian inhabitants who left the area with the [advent of the] Israeli occupation was between 115,000 and 120,000.” The numbers are correct, but what does “left” mean? For various reasons, scholars have not addressed the fate of the tens of thousands of Arab residents of the Heights, whose ruined villages still mar the area’s landscape. The available archival documentation is also very meager, and as with other politically sensitive subjects, accessible documents have been partially redacted.

The Israel Defense Forces captured the Golan Heights on June 9 and 10, after three days of heavy shelling that sparked a flight to the north by those who were living there. The flood of civilians was joined by Syrian troops who were scattered in various command posts. Their senior officer corps, headquartered in the city of Quneitra, also abandoned the area.

Today, there are a variety of estimates, none of them entirely reliable, concerning the number of locals who remained with the end of the fighting, on June 10; they range from a few thousand to tens of thousands. In any event, no proper record of those who stayed put after the war was drawn up until August 10.

Following Israel’s conquest of the Heights, the villagers who remained were placed under a nighttime curfew. Residents who had fled to nearby fields and hills while the fighting raged were, if they were caught, not allowed to return home. In short order those Sunni Muslims who did remain were removed from their towns, taken to Quneitra and sent across the border. At the same time, no entry was permitted to the more than 100 villages that had been abandoned (or whose people had been forcibly expelled by Israeli troops).

Documents stored in the archive of the Yitzhak Rabin Center, and whose



A scene from the film “Six Days.” It turned out that very few of the battles had been documented on film by official bodies, so they were reenacted.

*Alfred Steinhardt/Israel Information Center's Film Service*

texts have been redacted by the Malmab, the Defense Ministry’s security department, shed light on the subsequent annihilation of these villages. Thus, Elad Peled, commander of the IDF’S Ga’ash Formation, which conquered the southern Golan Heights, relates how the decision was made “to eliminate the villages with bulldozers, so there would be nowhere to return to.” Additional evidence is provided by Itzhaki Gal, who conducted an archaeological survey in the region between 1968 and 1971. “What the war did not consume, the bulldozers destroyed,” he wrote in his diary. “Well done, IDF!” he added sarcastically about the demolition of an ancient structure in one of the villages.

## Shocking results

Zeev Rav Nof, the film critic of the newspaper Davar, noted in 1968 that “when the war ended it was clear that anyone who had a bit of filmed celluloid from it was in possession of first-class merchandise. The market was thirsty for a movie about the Six-Day War.”

It turned out that very few of the battles had been documented on film

by official bodies. The Film Service of the Israel Information Center came up with a solution: They would reenact the war. Thus it was that, within weeks of the end of the fighting, a propaganda film entitled “Sheshet Hayamim” (“Six Days”) was made, directed by Alfred Steinhardt, who is credited in it as an adviser.

In 2007, Steinhardt (1923-2012), in an interview with the Israeli Cinema Testimonial Database, recalled the considerable assistance the IDF had provided during the shooting of the film.

“We started to do reenactments,” he said. “The whole army was mobilized... In each place, the commanding officer came and explained to me what had happened and how things had gone. We would signal to the commanders, so that the soldiers wouldn’t step (by accident) on the pyrotechnics and the explosives... It cost a great deal of money. It is a total reenactment of the whole war.”

Released in March 1968, the 90-minute movie was viewed by nearly 750,000 people within three months, according to newspaper reports at the time. Zeev Rav Nof wrote, “The impression is that you are viewing a first-rate historical

document, and there’s nothing to be ashamed of in terms of its cinematic form, either.”

Information about the behind-the-scenes events of the production can be gleaned from foreign sources. Whereas Israeli archives provide sparse documentation of the subject, the archive of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva offers a broad picture. The ICRC had opened a small office in Quneitra after the war, and its staff reported to Geneva about developments on the Golan Heights. Their accounts reflect the dire situation of the Syrian inhabitants who were now under Israeli occupation, the widespread looting of the abandoned villages, and also the ruinous consequences of the filmmakers’ reenactment of the battles: The cameras began rolling about a month after the end of the war, but, at least in the Golan, Israel failed to inform residents that the shelling wasn’t real.

“We took part – whether we liked it or not – in an impressive and extremely reliable reenactment of the takeover of Quneitra by the Israeli forces,” Red Cross representatives reported on July 13. “The reenactment took place directly opposite the house we lived in,

and many of its windows were shattered. The purpose: a film.”

The results were shocking: Those who had remained in the Golan fled in a panic.

“Why did the Israelis not inform the inhabitants that this was only a reenactment in order to shoot a film?” the mukhtar of Quneitra was quoted as asking the ICRC personnel. From the village of Mansura alone, on the outskirts of Quneitra, some 300 people fled.

On July 17, the delegation reported, “These residents fled in the wake of a reenactment, very realistic, three days earlier, which we also saw with our own eyes, of the Israeli takeover of Quneitra. The battle noises frightened them so badly that they preferred to sneak away. The next day, when we left, we verified the flight: Six people remained.”

A census of the Golan Heights conducted by the Israeli military government on August 10 confirmed the Red Cross’ meager tally for Mansura of six.

## ‘Deathly silence’

The ICRC representatives were critical of the “staged shelling” that had prompted the residents to flee, describing it as an insufferable act. A “deathly silence prevails in the village,” they wrote after visiting Mansura on July 18.

They added that an IDF representative, who accompanied the ICRC staff, tried “to get us to believe that the people left in order to look for their relatives in Syria and to bring them back.”

But no one believed that explanation: It was a “myth,” the Red Cross people told their Israeli escort, according to a report dated July 18. They noted that, in response, “he smiled and expressed his agreement.” The hundreds of people who fled in the wake of the filming never returned to their homes.

During the initial months of the occupation, Israel strove to empty the Golan Heights of its Arab population, particularly the Sunni Muslims, who made up 80 percent of the population. The Israeli authorities decided to allow the Druze to remain in their homes, and they fared far better. Residents of other villages were condemned to expulsion.

An ICRC report following a visit to the village of Faraj on July 19 stated that it was completely abandoned, with not a trace of its 60 inhabitants. Moreover, the IDF tried to hamper the Red Cross team from visiting there. When one of the representatives finally made it to the village, he described it as having been hastily abandoned, adding that some of the houses had been looted and ransacked. Other homes had been torched, with all their contents inside.

The delegation concluded that the IDF had systematically expelled the denizens and that most of those who had remained after the war had in the meantime been moved elsewhere. A document, documented August 27, 1967, summarizing the international organization’s position concerning the post-war expulsions states that on June 11, 1967, Israel reported the presence of 1,000 non-Druze on the Golan Heights; a month later Israel reported 600 inhabitants, and a month after that, only 300 non-Druze.

A thorough examination conducted that same summer by the ICRC in Israel and in Syria found that “the majority of the refugees were expelled – whether violently, upon the arrival of the armed forces, or by means of bringing pressure to bear [on them] at a later stage.”

On July 17, the Red Cross delegation reported: ‘These residents fled in the wake of a reenactment of the Israeli takeover of Quneitra. The next day, when we left, we verified the flight: Six people remained.’

Col. Shlomo Gazit, chairman of the political-security coordinating committee in the territories (and later the director of Military Intelligence), had an explanation for the phenomenon: The fact that Syrian residents returned to Syria should not be considered expulsion. That was also Israel’s response to the complaints about the expulsion of Palestinians from the West Bank to Jordan in the early 1970s.

The Red Cross continued to call for a halt to Israel’s ongoing expulsions. In July 1968, Michael Comay, who was Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations from 1960 until 1967, wrote, “The fact remains that the expulsion of the Arabs from Quneitra, which has been continuing for several months, leaves us repeatedly having to address allegations and clarifications of the Red Cross.”

Comay’s suggestion? “It seems to us that if there is no other choice, it is best to remove the problem instantaneously in the most humane way.”

And thus the Golan Heights was cleansed.

*Adam Raz, a historian, is a researcher for the Akevit Institute for Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Research.*