

Arab citizens behind barbed wire

Documents in Israel's State Archives reveal disturbing truths about the military restrictions imposed on Arab city dwellers during the War of Independence

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The curfew and lockdown imposed in Israel during the coronavirus epidemic may have begun to feel like a faded memory, but few know that many of the country's citizens endured a similar situation in the past. Then, however, the approach was quite aggressive, with the use of barbed-wire fences and the demarcation of zones that were called ghettos and concentration camps.

The imposition of a curfew and the sequestration of the country's Arabs began immediately after Israeli forces, during the 1948 War of Independence, conquered cities that were either Arab or mixed (Arab-Jewish) in their makeup. The battles left thousands of urban Arab residents under Jewish control. The majority of the Arabs did not take an active part in the war, and those who remained in the cities constituted a small fraction of a defeated population – weak, without representation and frightened. The long months following the conquest of the cit-

Mapam's Vashitz condemned the fencing off of the Arabs: '[This act] will determine whether Israel will be a democratic state or a feudal state with medieval customs and Nuremberg Laws.'

ies in mid-1948 were a test in miniature of the future relations of the two peoples who shared the country.

In Haifa, which was conquered in April 1948, no more than 3,500 Arabs remained out of a population of close to 70,000 Arabs that had resided there a short time before. Jaffa, which surrendered to the Jewish forces on May 13, had a similar prewar Arab population, of whom only 4,000 were left. Of the 35,000 residents of Ramle and Lod, both of them Arab locales, about 2,000 remained after the Israeli conquest in July 1948. In other cities taken by the Israeli forces – such as Tiberias, Safed, Beisan (Beit She'an) and Be'er Sheva – no Arabs remained. Within a short time, the vast majority (85 percent) of the 160,000 Arabs who remained in the rest of Israel's territory at the end of the war found themselves under military rule, subjected to permanent curfew and a strict regime that demanded authorizations and permits for movement.

The principal documentation about that period is contained in hundreds of files of the Ministry of Minority Affairs, which was then headed by Bechor-Shalom Sheetrit. The ministry, whose staff

had worked hard, in the face of serious limitations imposed by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, to improve the situation of the Arabs who remained in the country, nonetheless found itself shut down in the middle of 1949. Additional documentation of great importance in the Israel State Archives and the Israel Defense Forces and Defense Establishment Archive is still sealed.

In other documents and papers from the period, which were declassified over the years, we sometimes encounter contemporary attempts to conceal and filter various remarks that would grate on Jewish ears. These attempts are recent, and not related to security issues: Censorship is being resorted to solely for propaganda purposes.

Hard-to-swallow term

A flagrant example of an attempt to hide offensive language can be seen in the minutes of a December 1948 meeting of the ministerial committee for abandoned property. The meeting dealt with the decision to concentrate the Arab residents of Lod in certain neighborhoods, so as to make room for Jewish immigrants in the city. In this connection, the director general of the Minority Affairs Ministry, Gad Machnes, said that he "thinks it is no longer justified to hold the Arab residents in fenced concentration camps." That comment was redacted, only recently, by the State Archives in the file holding the transcripts of the committee's meetings. The logic is obvious: Israel's citizens do not have the right to know their past.

An examination of materials concerning the fate of the residents of all of the conquered cities reveals a similar pattern: Ghettos were established in them. The term "ghetto" was hard to swallow even then. The original title of one file in the State Archives, which made use of this charged term, tried to offer a more reasonable substitute: "Transfer of Arabs to security zone (ghetto)."

The same pattern recurred in each case of Arabs being moved from one place to another. When Ben-Gurion visited Haifa, just days after its conquest, he ordered the Arabs who remained to be concentrated in Wadi Nisnas (for Christians) and Wadi Salib (Muslims). The Arabs would have to move to their new places of residence by early July.

Yosef Vashitz, a member of the left-wing Mapam party and a leading figure in its Arab Department (which dealt with issues related to that part of the population), was at the center of the events in Haifa at the time. He reported about the chaos that ensued in the wake of the decision: For the sake of having all the Arabs living in a single neighborhood, they were moved into homes only recently abandoned, with no attempt to ready them for new occupants, and with no water or electricity. Vashitz quoted Arab left-wing figures, according to whom, "This is a racist political action, not a military one, with the intention of



Barbed-wire marking the limits of the area designated for Arabs in Jaffa, in 1948. "It will be best to have special areas for the Jews and areas for the Arabs," the military governor said about the mixed city.

Israel Defense Forces and Defense Establishment Archive

creating an Arab ghetto in Haifa."

Vashitz condemned the fencing-off of the Arabs, maintaining that "this concentration is the most important act done in connection with the Arabs in Israel. This will determine whether Israel will be a democratic state or a feudal state with medieval customs and Nuremberg Laws." The Arabs were forbidden to live where they wished, and were eventually all accommodated in Wadi Nisnas.

In Jaffa, too, it was decided to move the Arabs. "It will be best to have special areas for the Jews and areas for the Arabs," the military governor, Meir Laniado, told the city's Arab Committee in July 1948. Moshe Erem, who headed the Minority Affairs Ministry's department for rehabilitation and relations with minorities, protested to Minister Sheetrit about relocating local Arabs to the Ajami quarter, which was surrounded on all sides by Jewish neighborhoods.

Erem noted that even though there was no problem regarding security in and around the city, "Ajami is about to be closed off with a barbed-wire fence that will rigorously separate the Arab

neighborhood and the Jewish section. That arrangement will immediately render Ajami a sealed-off ghetto. It is hard to accept this idea, which stirs in us associations of excessive horror."

Like Vashitz, Aram, too, thought that establishing such a ghetto would determine the future course of events: "And once more we are thereby sowing a toxic seed... in the heart of the Arabs. A ghetto in barbed wire, a ghetto, cut off from access to the sea. Shall this be our political approach?"

In "Independence Versus Nakbah: The Arab-Israeli War of 1948" (2004), one of the most comprehensive books written about the War of Independence, historian Yoav Gelber wrote that the idea of fencing off the Jaffa neighborhood was rescinded – but that is incorrect. Laniado, the military governor, wrote that he was "thinking about the possibility of reducing the barbed wire and allowing the Arabs greater freedom of movement, so that they do not feel that they are in a detention camp."

But in fact Ajami was fenced off, for a period of months. In fact, the Minority Affairs Ministry, which was constantly

at odds with the military authorities, reported in February 1949 that it was still trying to obtain permits to enable Jaffa's Arab residents "to exit the barbed wire."

One local resident, Ismail Abu Shehadeh, related, "They surrounded us with barbed wire fences in which there were three gates. We were allowed to leave the area only to work in one of the orchards around the city, and for that we needed a permit from the employer." The situation was played down, but Moshe Chizik, who had served as military governor before Laniado, maintained in private conversations that Israel was violating the terms of surrender agreed upon with the Arabs, which had guaranteed them freedom of movement in the city.

In Lod, too, the Arabs were concentrated in a single neighborhood, and placed under curfew. On one occasion, a group of Arab dignitaries from neighboring Ramle wrote to Ben-Gurion to complain how, "old people, women, youth and children were humiliated" and made to stand for eight hours "under the rays of the hot sun without water and food, and for no reason other than to mock, demean and abuse them."

As in other cases, in January 1949, half a year after the conquest, the Minority Affairs Ministry demanded that the military authorities destroy the barbed-wire fence that encircled the zone in which Lod's Arab residents were confined. Freedom of movement was not restored until July, when the rule of the military government in that area was lifted, but the barbed-wire fences were still intact.

Other archival documentation refers to similar relocations and closures of Arab communities in other cities, such as Majdal (Ashkelon) and Acre.

For his part, Minister Sheetrit noted that he "object[s] to the establishment of ghettos for minorities." In a letter to cabinet ministers in mid-1948, he wrote that relations with the Arabs were "flawed and deficient." He called for "laying down a clear policy of equal civil rights," for fear reality would exact its revenge. His remarks are equally pertinent today.

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