

What Happened at Lydda

In his celebrated new book, Ari Shavit claims that “Zionism” committed a massacre in July 1948. Can the claim withstand scrutiny?

By Martin Kramer

“In 30 minutes, at high noon, more than 200 civilians are killed. Zionism carries out a massacre in the city of Lydda.”— Ari Shavit, *My Promised Land*

Perhaps no book by an Israeli has ever been promoted as massively in America as [*My Promised Land: The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel*](#), by the *Ha’aretz* columnist and editorial-board member Ari Shavit. The pre-publication blitz began in May 2013, when the author received the first-ever Natan Fund book award, which included an earmark of \$35,000 to promote and publicize the book. The prize committee was co-chaired by the columnist Jeffrey Goldberg and Franklin Foer, editor of the *New Republic*; among its members was the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. Not only was the choice of Shavit “unanimous and enthusiastic,” but Goldberg and Foer also supplied florid blurbs for the book jacket. Goldberg: “a beautiful, mesmerizing, morally serious, and vexing book,” for which “I’ve been waiting most of my adult life.” Foer: “epic history . . . beautifully written, dramatically rendered, full of moral complexity . . . mind-blowing, trustworthy insights.”

Upon publication last November, the book proceeded to receive no fewer than three glowing encomia in the *Times* from the columnist Thomas Friedman (“must-read”), the paper’s literary critic Dwight Garner (“reads like a love story and thriller at once”), and the *New Republic*’s literary editor Leon Wieseltier (“important and powerful . . . the least tendentious book about Israel I have ever read”). From there it jumped to the *Times*’s “100 Notable Books of 2013” and to the non-fiction bestseller list, where it spent a total of six weeks.

The *Times* was hardly alone. The editor of the *New Yorker*, David Remnick, who is credited by Shavit with inspiring the book and curating its journey into print, hosted a launch party at his home and appeared with Shavit in promotional events at New York’s 92nd Street Y, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, and the *Charlie Rose Show*. Jeffrey Goldberg likewise surfaced alongside Shavit both on *Charlie Rose* and at campus whistle stops.

“What happened during the first week of my book’s publication went beyond anyone’s expectation, beyond my dreams,” marveled Shavit in an [interview](#). In January, he collected a National Jewish Book Award. In short order, he became a must-have speaker for national Jewish organizations from AIPAC to Hadassah, and a feted guest at the Beverly Hills homes of media mogul Haim Saban and the producer-director Tony Krantz. “If you want to see what prophecy looks like among Jews in the early part of the 21st century,” [wrote](#) an attendee at one of these soirées, “follow Ari Shavit around Los Angeles.”

Beyond Shavit's powerful writing style and engaging personal manner, what inspired this outpouring? "My book," he [says](#), "is a painful love story," the love in question being his professed "total commitment to Israel, and my admiration for the Zionist project," tempered by his conspicuously agonized conscience over the misdeeds of that state and that project. It was, undoubtedly, this dual theme that gave the book its poignant appeal to many American Jewish readers eager to revive a passion for Israel at a time when Israel is defined by much of liberal opinion as an "occupier." To achieve his artfully mixed effect, Shavit adopted a particular strategy: confessing Israel's sins *in order* to demonstrate the tragic profundity of his love.

And the sins in question? The obvious one in the book is the sin of post-1967 "occupation." But many readers were especially taken aback to learn of an earlier and even more hauntingly painful sin. This one, detailed in a 30-page chapter titled "Lydda, 1948," concerns an alleged massacre of Palestinian Arabs that preceded an act of forcible expulsion. Shavit's revelation: Lydda is "our black box." In its story lies the dark secret not only of the birth of Israel but indeed of the entire Jewish national movement—of Zionism.

The Lydda chapter gained resonance early on because Shavit's friends at the *New Yorker* decided to abridge and [publish](#) it in the magazine. There, it ran under an expanded title: "Lydda, 1948: A City, a Massacre, and the Middle East Today." The meaningful addition is obviously the word "massacre." An informed reader might have heard of another 1948 "massacre," the one in April at the Arab village of Deir Yassin. But at Lydda? Who did it? Under what circumstances? How many died? Was it covered up?

"Massacre" is Shavit's chosen word, but he doesn't define it. Instead, he proposes a narrative of the events that occurred around midday on July 12, 1948, in the midst of Israel's war of independence, when Israeli soldiers in Lydda faced an incipient uprising. This narrative he claims to have constructed from interviews he conducted twenty years ago, "in the early 1990s." He spoke then with Shmarya Gutman, the Israeli military governor of Lydda who negotiated the departure of its Arab inhabitants; the commander (his name was Mula Cohen) of the Yiftah brigade, which quelled the uprising; and someone identified only by his nickname, "Bulldozer," who fired an antitank shell into a small mosque, supposedly killing 70 persons at one blow. Shavit's dramatic culmination comes in the assertion that leads this article: "In 30 minutes, at high noon, more than 200 civilians are killed. Zionism carries out a massacre in the city of Lydda."

So explosive is this claim that Shavit seems to have realized it could play into the hands of those eager to delegitimize Israel's very existence. "I really take issue with people who pick out Lydda and ignore the rest of the book," he has [lamented](#) (a complaint perhaps best directed to the *New Yorker*). In interviews and appearances over the past months, he has gone farther, insisting that Israel's deeds in Lydda must be seen in the context of a brutal war in a brutal decade; that the Arabs would have done worse to the Jews; and that Western democracies did do worse to their own "Others," from Native Americans to Aboriginal Australians, so who are they to preach moral rectitude to Israel?

This sort of damage control, whatever its short-term effect, is unlikely to negate the one probable long-term impact of Shavit's book: its validation of the charge of a massacre at Lydda, carried out by Zionism itself and thereby epitomizing the ongoing historical scandal that is the state of Israel.

So whether Shavit "takes issue" or not, his narrative of Lydda invites an inevitable question: is it true?

Others have found Shavit's account of Lydda "riveting" (Avi Shlaim), "a sickening tour de force" (Leon Wieseltier), and "brutally honest" (Thomas Friedman). As I read through it, however, the alleged actions and attitudes of Shavit's Israeli protagonists struck me as implausible. To me they seemed to personify much too readily

Shavit's broader thesis: that "Zionism" had been preprogrammed to depopulate the country of its Arabs, and that this preprogramming filtered down even to the last soldier. In Lydda, soldiers licensed by "Zionism" then became wanton killers of innocents, smoothing the work of expulsion.

Perhaps my suspicion was stoked by the fact that, time and again over the decades, Israeli soldiers have stood accused of just such wanton killing when in fact they were doing what every soldier is trained to do: fire on an armed enemy, especially when that enemy is firing at him. That such accusations might even be accompanied by professions of "love" for Israel is likewise no novelty. (See under: [Richard Goldstone](#).) When such charges are made today, they tend to be subjected to rigorous investigation. Could Shavit's narrative withstand a comparable level of scrutiny?

Shavit relies largely on his interviews, conducted those many years ago. Since he doesn't cite documents in a public archive, I have no way of knowing whether he fairly represents his subjects. But it did occur to me that these same protagonists may have told their stories to others. And, with a bit of research, I discovered that they had.

Shmarya Gutman, Mula Cohen, "Bulldozer," and others who fought in Lydda in July 1948 not only were interviewed by others but were even interviewed on film at the very places where they had fought. The evidence reposes in the [archives](#) of the museum of the Palmah (the Haganah's strike force) in Ramat Aviv, where I found it and where it may be consulted by anyone. (I'm indebted to Dr. Eldad Harouvi, director of the archives, who expertly guided me through the collection.) Especially valuable is the uncut footage filmed by Uri Goldstein in preparing a 1989 [documentary](#) on the Yiftah brigade: the Israeli army unit, comprising fighters from the pre-state Palmah, that conquered Lydda. The same museum also holds transcripts of relevant interviews archived in the Yigal Allon Museum at Kibbutz Ginosar.

Some of the testimony in the archives echoes the account given by Shavit. But there are major inconsistencies; not only are these numerous, but they form a pattern. In what follows, I invite you, the reader, to detect that pattern on your own. Remember that the evidence derives largely from testimony given by the same people whom Shavit interviewed only a few years later. I have supplemented it with additional oral testimony by Israeli soldiers whom Shavit should have interviewed, if he had wanted to be thorough.

A caution: "Zionism carries out a massacre" is a lapel-grabbing phrase, meant to excite and provoke. In comparing accounts of a battle, however, sober details make all the difference. As it happens, many of Shavit's readers have praised his book for adding complexity to Israel's story, thus replacing old "myths" with a more nuanced understanding. Shavit himself has [proclaimed](#) that Israel is "all about complexity. If you don't see that, you don't get it." For anyone with a taste for complexity, what follows should constitute indispensable reading alongside the rather simpler tale entitled "Lydda, 1948."

1. Lydda, July 11-13, 1948

First, recall the overarching framework. By the summer of 1948, Israel's war of independence had entered a new phase. Now Israel battled not only local Arab irregulars but also Arab armies, first and foremost the Transjordanian Arab Legion, deployed in Jerusalem and just east of Jewish towns and settlements on the coastal plain. On July 4, 1948, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion approved a military plan called "Larlar," an acronym for Lydda-Ramleh-Latrún-Ramallah. The operation was meant to open a broad corridor to Jerusalem, which was in danger of being severed from the Jewish state.

Lydda, along the route from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, was an Arab city of some 20,000, swollen by July to about twice that size by an influx of refugees from Jaffa and neighboring villages already occupied by Israeli forces. The 5th

Infantry Company of the Transjordanian Arab Legion (approximately 125 soldiers) was deployed in the city, supported by many more local irregulars who had been making months-long preparations for battle.

On July 11, Israeli troops under the command of Moshe Dayan put Lydda (and Ramleh) in a state of shock with a guns-ablaze dash skirting both towns. But the city was not yet subdued. That evening, the 3rd Battalion of the Yiftah brigade moved into southern approaches to the city, took the two landmarks of the Great Mosque and the Church of St. George, and ordered the population to report there. Soon both places of worship, but especially the Great Mosque, were crammed full of men, women, and children. After a brief while, the women and children were sent home.

Still, this left most of the city to be taken, and there were only about 300 Israeli soldiers to take and hold it. It was full of local armed irregulars, while the remnants of the Arab Legion had barricaded themselves in the city's police station.

By the next day, July 12, as Israeli forces were strengthening their hold on the city, two or three armored vehicles of the Arab Legion appeared on the northern edge and began firing in all directions. This encouraged an eruption of sniping and grenade-throwing at Israeli troops from upper stories and rooftops within the town, and from a second, small mosque only a few hundred meters from the armored-vehicle incursion. Israeli commanders feared a counter-attack by the Legion in coordination with the armed irregulars still at large in the city. The order came down to suppress the incipient uprising with withering fire. The Great Mosque and the church were unaffected, but Israeli forces struck the small mosque with an antitank missile.

After a half-hour of intense fire, the battle died down. Overnight, the Arab Legion withdrew from the police station, ending any prospect of an Arab counterattack. The next day, the Israeli military governor reached an agreement with local notables that the civilian population would depart from Lydda and move eastward. Israeli soldiers, acting under orders, also encouraged their departure. Within a few hours, a stream of refugees made its way to the east, emptying the city.

Shavit's claim of a massacre is conveyed in passages relating to the "small mosque" (named the Dahmash mosque), in and around which the massacre supposedly took place. These passages lead the reader in a single direction: in Lydda, unarmed civilians were murdered wholesale by revenge-seeking soldiers, whose commanders then covered up the crime.

Because Shavit breaks up his telling of events with flashbacks, his narrative is choppy. Below, I have reassembled its key passages to tell his story in chronological order and in his own words, italicizing some passages for emphasis. In each instance, I then state the main "takeaway" point and explore why Shavit's narrative poses problems—not only because some other sources contradict it (contradictions in historical sources are inevitable) but because among those sources are the very same people whose oral testimony forms the bedrock of Shavit's reconstruction of events.

In what follows, all translations from Hebrew are my own.

2. A City Resists

Here is how Shavit's reconstruction begins:

In the early evening [of July 11], the two 3rd Regiment [should be: Battalion] platoons [of the Yiftah brigade] are able to penetrate Lydda. Within hours, their soldiers hold key positions in city center and confine thousands of civilians in the Great Mosque, *the small mosque*, and St. George's cathedral. *By evening*, Zionism has taken the city of Lydda.

Takeaway: The small mosque came under Israeli control on the first day, and it was among the places in which Israeli soldiers detained Arab civilians. There they would have been disarmed and placed under guard.

Problem: As long ago as November 1948, only months after Lydda's conquest, the military governor Shmarya Gutman, in a published [account](#), stated unequivocally that the city center wasn't taken by evening: "We went to bed while only that part of the city around the Great Mosque and the church was held by the Israeli army. In the city itself, they had not yet penetrated." Those Arab men who reported to the Great Mosque and the Church of St. George (parts of a single complex on the southern edge of the city) arrived unarmed, and Israeli soldiers put them under guard. But the small mosque, according to Gutman, was not a place where Israeli soldiers concentrated local inhabitants. Gutman emphasized the point in his 1988 film [interview](#) by the documentarian Uri Goldstein. The interviewer, trying to set the scene for later events at the small mosque, wanted first to establish its status.

Goldstein: This firing into the [small] mosque was after grenades were thrown from there?

Gutman: After the grenades were thrown. That's the small mosque.

Goldstein: But people were detained there.

Gutman: There wasn't a concentration of many people there. There they didn't detain. That wasn't a mosque where they detained. And from there they threw on the guys—who moved in formation of twos and threes—began to throw grenades on them.

Goldstein: It doesn't add up. They detained people there, so how did they have grenades and all that?

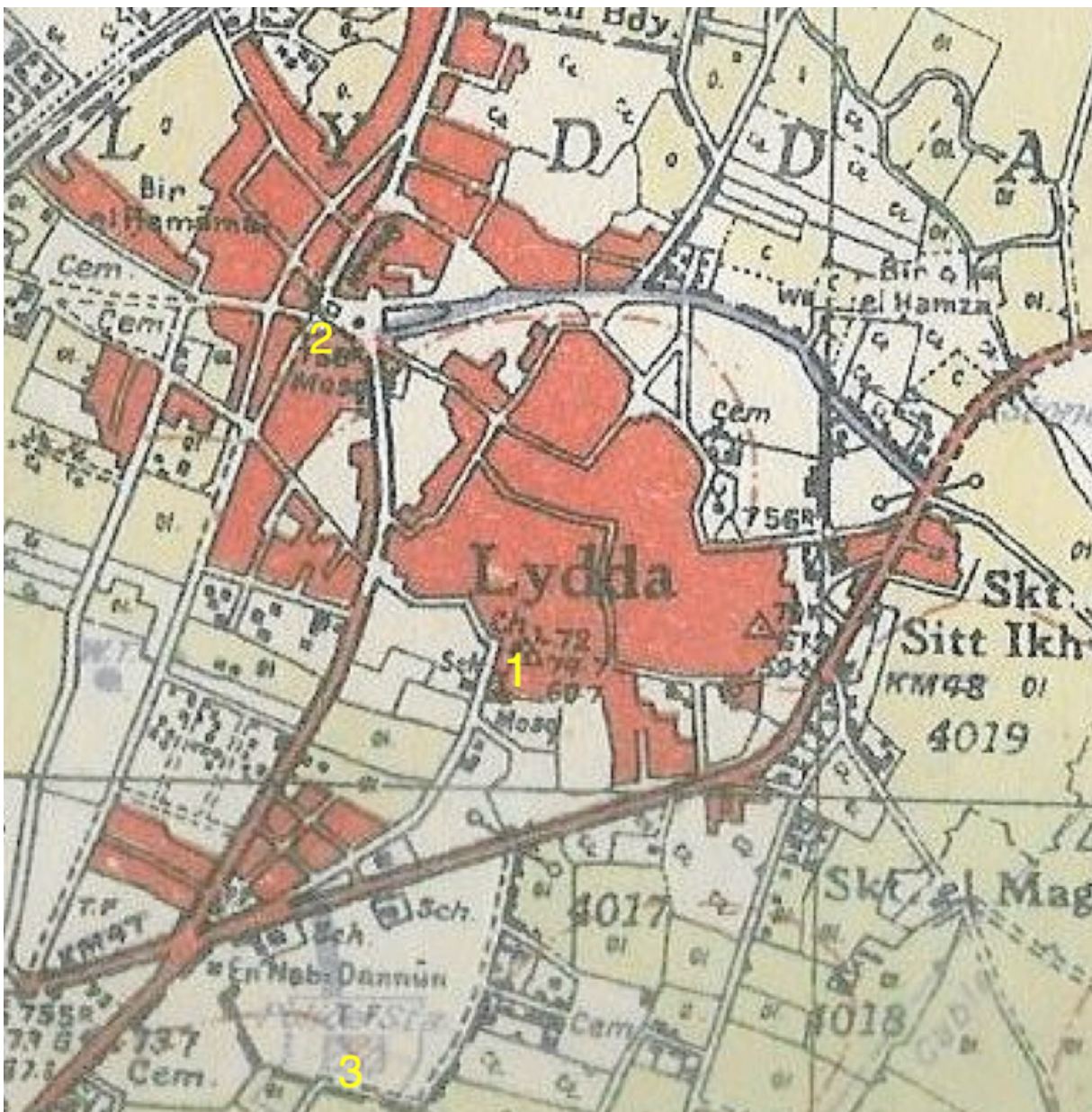
Gutman: They didn't detain people in that mosque. There were two mosques. In the small mosque, which was off on the side, from inside the courtyard they began to throw [grenades]. . . . It wasn't a place of detention.

In this film interview, then, Gutman repeats four times that those in the small mosque weren't detained there by Israeli forces, and that it wasn't a place of detention. On the first night, the small mosque lay beyond the limited zone of Israeli control, which didn't extend into the city proper. (On the British map embedded below and the high-altitude and low-altitude aerial photos found alongside, all showing pre-war Lydda, the area of the Great Mosque and the Church of St. George is marked by a "1" and the small mosque by a "2." They are separated by the old city and the town market.)

If Gutman's recollection is accurate, it means that Israeli forces had no idea who might be in the small mosque, why they had assembled there, or what weapons they might have.



*Shmarya Gutman at Kfar Daniel near Lydda. Screenshot from the 1989 film *Yiftah: From Metulla to the Negev*, courtesy Dor HaPalmah Association.*



In the second key passage, Shavit explains what caused things to go wrong the next day, July 12:

Two Jordanian armored vehicles enter the conquered city in error, setting off a new wave of violence. *The Jordanian army is miles to the east*, and the two vehicles have no military significance, but . . . some of the [Israeli] soldiers of the 3rd Regiment mistakenly believe them to mean that they face the imminent danger of Jordanian assault.

Takeaway: Since the conventional enemy army had retreated and now lay “miles to the east,” the Israeli forces were never under military threat.

Problem: Shavit makes no mention whatsoever of the Transjordanian Arab Legion’s continued presence not “miles to the east” but in Lydda itself, in the former British police station (marked on the map above with a “3”) just over a half-kilometer (roughly 0.3 miles) south of the Great Mosque. This structure—which today houses the national headquarters of Israel’s border police—is a British-built [Tegart fort](#), designed to withstand attack. When Israeli forces entered Lydda, it is where the remaining Arab Legion contingent, reinforced by local police and foreign

volunteers, barricaded itself.

Gutman, in his 1988 film [interview](#), repeatedly refers to the Arab Legion forces in the police station as a looming threat. “From the police station,” he says, “heavy fire was directed at our men, and they couldn’t reach the streets approaching the place. That is, there was a feeling that there was a serious force there.” Even as the civilians streamed to the Great Mosque and the church, “all the time there was firing from the police station. They laid down heavy fire and there was a feeling of war.”

This was precisely the context in which the Israeli commanders interpreted the sudden appearance of the Transjordanian armored vehicles. As Gutman wrote a few months after the events:

It was clear to us that the city wasn’t conquered, and that at any moment the enemy’s armored cars could enter and put an end to our conquest. And above all, the police station was in the hands of the enemy. This was a great fortress, overlooking all of Lydda, from which it was possible to break into the city.

It was “in the midst of the firing from the police station,” says Gutman in his film interview, that “there appeared two armored vehicles from the olive groves, and they began to fire on our troops everywhere. It was something awful. We didn’t have any means against armored vehicles.”

The armored vehicles thus fit into a larger military context. In that context, the Arab Legion force in the police station remained a major concern. Even after the armored vehicles were repelled, Gutman did not believe the battle was over: “We didn’t know that the war was dying down. We were sure it would reignite, because they hadn’t left the police station, and the police station was a fortress.” Indeed, when the Israelis sent a delegation of Lydda notables to plead with the Legionnaires to surrender, the garrison fired on them, [killing](#) one leading notable and wounding a judge.

Only on the night of July 12 did the Arab Legion forces retreat from Lydda. Gutman:

The sturdy police building held by the enemy fighting force encouraged the city. This was a serious military force with great firepower. We hesitated to confront it. We didn’t have a large enough force to outflank it or attack it. So we decided to rain fire on it all night, to break the morale of the besieged. During the night, an offensive was launched, but without attempting to storm and take the station. The entire city shook from the booms of the shooting, and it sometimes seemed that it was being destroyed to its foundation.

Finally, the Arab Legionnaires ran out of ammunition and food and lost radio contact with their HQ. So they slipped away. “We must admit it,” concluded Gutman at the time: “They fought courageously, their command was serious, and they refused to surrender. We could have defeated them only with heavy weapons, but in those hours, such weapons were only in units fighting on the eastern front.”

In retrospect, the threat posed by the Arab Legion forces might seem insubstantial; but only in retrospect. Moreover, as Gutman emphasizes, it was the Legion’s *abandonment* of the police station that finally broke the spirit of Lydda’s inhabitants and persuaded its notables to embrace flight from the city. Here is Gutman’s contemporary report of his dialogue with the city’s notables:

I told them: “I have come now from the police station. There is no sign of the Arab Legion.”

They were dumbstruck and despairing. I learned from this that the city, and they, too, had still pinned their hopes on the police station. They were sure that with its help, they would still strike at the Jewish army.

They sank into deliberations. They still didn’t believe me.

I added for emphasis: “I’ve come just now from there. There isn’t a soul from the Legion. If you don’t believe me, open the window and see for yourselves!”

And they believed. They couldn’t but believe. Depression was etched on their faces. As though their wings had been clipped. They said not a word; they sat dumbstruck, and hung their heads.

Amazingly, both in his book and in the version published in the *New Yorker*, Shavit makes not a single mention of the police station or of the battle surrounding it. It is entirely absent from his own account of Gutman’s dialogue with Lydda’s notables. In Shavit’s conversations with Gutman, over “long days on [Gutman’s] kibbutz,” did the latter omit all reference to the police station? It seems improbable, but only Shavit knows the answer.

3. The Small Mosque

In a third passage, Shavit sets the scene for the mosque massacre as a revenge killing, done outside the chain of command and exceeding any calculation of military necessity:

An agitated young soldier arrives [at the church], saying that grenades are being thrown at his comrades from the small mosque. . . . [Gutman] realizes that if he does not act quickly and firmly, things will get out of hand. He suggests shooting at any *house* from which shots are fired, shooting into every *window*, shooting at *anyone suspected* of being part of the mutiny.

Takeaway: Gutman, despite his “firmness,” didn’t authorize specific action against the small mosque itself, presumably because it couldn’t be deemed a military target.

Problem: According to Gutman’s film interview, he didn’t just “suggest” returning fire against houses, windows, and suspect persons. Instead, he gave authorization specifically to strike the small mosque, which had now become a military target:

From a small mosque, they began to throw bombs at soldiers. Two of our guys were killed. They asked me: “What should we do?” I answered: “It is permissible to fire into the mosque.” And they did it.

Gutman also answered the primary objection to doing so, raised by the soldiers themselves:

They asked me: “It’s forbidden to harm the mosque, it’s a holy place.” I said: “A place from which they throw bombs must be taken out.” And they took it out, and it’s true that there were a few local casualties there.

So a counterattack on the small mosque, according to this interview of Gutman, was a military necessity, sanctioned by Gutman’s own authority as military governor. It was part of the improvised plan to suppress the uprising.

Next, in the fourth passage, Shavit zeroes in on his villain, “Bulldozer,” the operator of a bazooka-like PIAT (Projector Infantry Anti-Tank weapon) whom he has already portrayed at length as someone “traumatized” by war and who took a “delight in killing.” Shavit doesn’t give the name of Bulldozer, but he is plainly identifiable on the Palmah veterans’ website as [Shmuel \(Shmulik\) Ben-David](#). Shavit:

When Bulldozer approaches the small mosque, he sees that there is indeed shooting. From somewhere, somehow, grenades are thrown. . . . One of the training-group leaders is wounded when a hand grenade, apparently thrown from the small mosque, explodes and takes his hand clear off. *This incident provokes* Bulldozer to shoot the antitank PIAT into the mosque.

Takeaway: Bulldozer wasn't acting under orders, but instead allowed an "incident" to "provoke" him.

Problem: According to many sources, the counterattack against the mosque and the resort to the PIAT were done on orders from commanders who (naturally) viewed the enemy use of grenades not as "provocation" but as warfare. As we have just seen, the highest order came from the military governor, Gutman ("They asked me: 'What should we do?' I answered: 'It is permissible to fire into the mosque.'") [Moshe Kelman](#), the 3rd Battalion commander, [told](#) the author Daniel Kurzman that it was his own idea to use a PIAT:

"We've got to pierce those walls" [said Kelman].

"But they're a yard or a yard and a half thick," an officer pointed out. "And we haven't got any artillery."

"We've got a PIAT."

Kelman's direct subordinate, [Daniel Neuman](#), commanded the squad that moved toward the small mosque. In his 1988 film [interview](#) with Goldstein, with Bulldozer standing right beside him at the very spot in Lydda where the action unfolded, he explains how he ordered the PIAT strike:

We somehow dashed forward in formation . . . until we got to this place, where a grenade was thrown at us. Now we were in a double bind. There was the grenade, and we're in a narrow alley, with no room to maneuver, and snipers continue to fire on us. So I looked around, I looked and surmised that from the building next to me, they threw the grenade. I pointed, I indicated to the PIATnik to fire a shell in there. He fired a shell.

[Ezra Greenboim](#), a squad commander who preceded Bulldozer down the alley by the small mosque, would likewise [recall](#) summoning the PIAT operator:

From inside the mosque, grenades were thrown at us. I remember the shout: "Grenade!" We hit the dirt, because there wasn't time to take cover. . . . Because we were certain—I say "certain," maybe it wasn't so—but at that moment because we were certain that grenades were thrown from the window of the mosque, we called the PIATist.

And from Greenboim's testimony in the same interview by Goldstein: "Everyone hit the dirt. There were wounded from the grenade itself, and then the order came to fire the PIAT."

Finally, Bulldozer himself also says, in the same 1988 interview, that he was expressly dispatched to the mosque with his PIAT:

I received an instruction to run immediately with the PIAT to the small mosque. We came running, under fire from both sides of the street, down this alley, where we're standing now. Fire came from the houses, and especially from the second stories. Just as we were running, a grenade was thrown at us from the mosque—not from inside the building, but from its roof. Three people took shrapnel. I was lightly wounded by a fragment, which didn't keep me from functioning.

Bulldozer adds that the appearance of the training-group leader (his name was Yisrael Goralnik) with a hand missing from the battle against the armored vehicles "certainly didn't give us joy, so we decided to take out the mosque from which the shooting originated." But even here, he doesn't ascribe the decision to himself alone.

Indeed, in none of these accounts, including his own, did Bulldozer fire his weapon on his own initiative. Every soldier, in every account, recalls facing deadly grenades and receiving orders to take out their source. Only in Shavit's account does the counterattack on the mosque become one "traumatized" killer's on-the-spot reaction to a mere "provocation."

In the fifth passage, Shavit essentially accuses Bulldozer of aiming at a civilian as opposed to a military target:

He does not aim at the minaret from which the grenades were apparently thrown but at the mosque wall behind which he can hear human voices.

Takeaway: Bulldozer passed over the minaret, a clear and perhaps legitimate target, preferring to zero in on the “human voices” of supposed detainees in the small mosque.

Problem: Bulldozer himself says in his interview with Goldstein that the grenade thrown at him came from the roof of the mosque—not the minaret—therefore presenting no target visible to the soldiers in the alley below. Greenboim, for his part, says they were certain the grenades came from a window, i.e., from inside the mosque itself, and it was at that window that the PIAT was aimed. There is no mention of the minaret in any of the testimony.

In researching this essay, I visited the small mosque to gain a sense of the site. That someone would have thrown grenades from so exposed a position as the mosque’s stout minaret, or would have remained there for even a moment if he had, beggars belief.

Sixth passage:

He [Bulldozer] shoots his PIAT at the mosque wall from a distance of six meters, *killing 70*. . . . And when the PIAT operator is himself wounded, *the desire for revenge grows even stronger*. Some 3rd Regiment soldiers *spray the wounded* in the mosque with gunfire. . . . They told [Bulldozer afterward] that *because of the rage they felt* at seeing him bleed, they had *walked into the small mosque and sprayed the surviving wounded with automatic fire*.

Takeaway: Palmah soldiers wantonly massacred wounded Arabs in a state of vengeful rage, and took pride in it.

Problem: Shavit’s account rests on what Bulldozer remembered being told by some of his buddies while he was hospitalized. Bulldozer himself didn’t enter the small mosque; he had sustained a gash to an artery in his neck from the recoil of the PIAT, and was evacuated immediately. Shavit seems not to have spoken to any Israelis who actually entered the small mosque.

In fact, at least three Israelis were eyewitnesses to the scene inside the mosque: Daniel Neuman, who commanded the counterattack; Ezra Greenboim, who was right alongside Bulldozer when he fired the PIAT and who afterward entered the small mosque; and [Uri Gefen](#), who arrived after the counterattack and also entered the mosque. In 1988, Uri Goldstein interviewed Neuman and Greenboim on camera outside the small mosque; two years earlier, Gefen and Greenboim had shared their recollections in a long conversation, of which there is a transcript.

Daniel Neuman, the squad commander, gives this account of what happened after the PIAT attack:

Two doors or the gate—there was a large wooden gate—flew wide open. I rushed in with the unit, using grenades and submachine guns. And then it was quiet. Inside there were a number of people, I don’t know how many, some of them hit by our action, because what the PIAT left undone, the grenades did. We looked, we searched, we found weapons there. It wasn’t almost certain, it was absolutely certain, that they operated against us from there.

So it was standard combat procedure to follow up a PIAT attack with grenades and gunfire. During his interview of Greenboim, Uri Goldstein returns to the storming of the mosque, and veterans' voices off-camera chime in: "After the PIAT, they went in with grenades. You don't just walk in after a PIAT. You go in with grenades and fire." To these soldiers, it was obvious that you didn't just walk into a place where a surviving enemy might be waiting to kill you.

When Gefen and Greenboim finally did surveil the mosque, they were taken aback by what they saw. Gefen: "The people inside were hurt, hurt badly, some of them killed, some wounded, and it was a difficult scene." Ezra Greenboim was also shocked by the sight. He couldn't believe that a PIAT had done the damage he saw:

After the shot, I went into the mosque. And what I saw, very soon after it occurred, since nothing had changed in the meantime, was indeed a group of people, children, men, the elderly, in a condition I couldn't define, and I couldn't understand what had happened. I'd feared that the PIAT shell hadn't even penetrated the building, because it hit a window bar, but possibly it did penetrate. . . . To this day, I don't know what happened in the mosque. I can speculate. Maybe the PIAT hit some explosives on the site. Maybe it struck a pile of grenades that was in the mosque. I don't think there was anyone there before us. I don't think if they had been wounded in the [initial] conquest of Lydda, the same wounded people would have remained there. . . . The matter of the mosque dogs me; as I said, I don't know what happened, but we didn't do it.

Greenboim does relate a story that would have been worth including in Shavit's account, both because of its poignancy and because of its relevance to the claim that Israeli soldiers sprayed the wounded in a spasm of vengeance:

In the passageway, I remember a wounded Arab on the ground, so badly wounded that I thought it would be an act of mercy to finish him off, because he was torn apart, and I said, this will be a last act of kindness that I can do for this Arab, who was unarmed. And just as I raised my Tommy gun and told the guys around me to move away, so they won't witness the sight—and I, all agitated that I am going to do this, which is the most awful thing I'm capable of doing—the Arab looks at me and says in Yiddish: *hob rahmones*, that is, have mercy on me, but in Yiddish. These words in Yiddish stopped me in my tracks, I froze. Because at that very moment, I heard the *hob rahmones* of many, many Jews who came from over there [in Europe]. This use of Yiddish, which was the language of our people, from over there. . . . I didn't [shoot], I couldn't do it.

Greenboim, it should once again be emphasized, had been right there when Bulldozer was gashed by the recoil of the PIAT: "It was like [Bulldozer] had been slaughtered, he was wounded in the neck. A stream of blood flowed out of him, like a fountain." And the same Greenboim then *nearly* shot an unarmed, wounded Arab with automatic weapon fire—exactly the scenario alleged by Shavit. But the situation was utterly different, the motive was anything but rage and revenge, and he didn't shoot him.

There are, of course, discrepancies in the soldiers' accounts. Gefen says some in the mosque were killed, some were wounded. Greenboim, by contrast, says most were unharmed but were pressed back against the walls in a state of shock. (This seems to contradict his report of his own shock at the extent of the carnage.) These must have been fleeting impressions: Greenboim also recalls that, before encountering the wounded Arab in the passageway, "I saw the sight inside [the small mosque], and I bolted out." How many died from the PIAT attack versus the grenades and gunfire is beyond conjecture.

The soldier Uri Gefen shared with his comrade-in-arms Greenboim the lasting impression left by what they saw in the small mosque: "How many years does a man live? So all our days we will remember it, no helping it, whether we want to or not, we can't escape from it—the small mosque." But in the course of their long and frank conversation, there is no hint that anyone was killed in that place except in the course of combat.

As the small mosque is so central to Shavit's narrative, it is hard to fathom why he didn't make use of such eyewitness testimony, even if he didn't collect it himself. At the very least, it adds layers of complexity that are so obviously (one is tempted to say "painfully") missing from "Lydda, 1948."

As a side note, it is also worth considering how the toll of 70 dead in the mosque may have entered Shavit's account, where it is repeated five times. Shavit doesn't give a source for this number, but it seems to have originated in his visit to Lydda in 2002, when he wrote an [article](#) about the present-day politics in the city. On that occasion he met an elderly Arab school principal, who would have been about twenty in 1948. Shavit, paraphrasing him: "Seventy were massacred there, they say. [The principal] doesn't know himself, he didn't see it with his own eyes, but that's what they say. Seventy."

In 1948, the military governor, Gutman, gave a different estimate: "The Arabs who threw bombs were struck with a PIAT, and 30 fell straightaway." This is the casualty count often given in Israeli sources. Some Arab sources, in contrast, claim casualties in the hundreds. It's not clear why Shavit prefers one account to another, why he doesn't give a range of possible numbers, or, most importantly, why he repeats the figure of 70 dead five times over, firmly imprinting it on the mind of the reader as though it were a well-attested fact.

4. A Battle with Two Sides

Moving on directly from what happened inside the small mosque, we come to Shavit's seventh passage:

Others toss grenades into neighboring houses. Still others mount machine guns in the streets and *shoot at anything that moves*. . . . After *half an hour of revenge*, there are scores of corpses in the streets, 70 corpses in the mosque. . . . In *30 minutes*, at high noon, *more than 200 civilians are killed*. [In the *New Yorker* version: "In 30 minutes, 250 Palestinians were killed."] Zionism carries out a massacre in the city of Lydda.

Takeaway: Palmah troops sank into a Zionism-inspired orgy of revenge killings of civilians, in numbers exceeding the most reliable estimates of those killed two months earlier at Deir Yassin.

Problem: In the book, Shavit writes of more than 200 dead, and in the *New Yorker* of 250. In the latter version, Shavit adds that the more specific figure is "according to 1948 by [the historian] Benny Morris." Morris's own source is a contemporary Israeli military summary of the conquest of Lydda, later published (in 1953) in the official history of the Palmah. More than any eyewitness testimony, it is this figure—especially when contrasted with the small number of Israeli casualties (four dead and twelve wounded)—that has given rise to the claim that what occurred must have been a massacre and not a battle. In [Morris's](#) words, "The ratio of Arab to Israeli casualties was hardly consistent with the descriptions of what had happened as an 'uprising' or battle."

But not all historians believe this body count to be reliable. The Hebrew University historian Alon Kadish, who has looked at the conquest of Lydda in depth, [believes](#) the estimate may be of Arab casualties for the entirety of the fighting over several days, and that "it is doubtful that the number of Arabs killed on July 12 reached 250 or even half that number." Moreover, the official report does not label the dead as civilians—as Shavit does in the book—instead describing those killed as "enemy losses." Even Morris (in his [book](#) on Glubb Pasha, the British trainer and commander of the Arab Legion) describes those killed more comprehensively as both "townspeople and irregulars."

As for the most explosive element of Shavit's claim—namely, that the action in the streets, like that at the small mosque, also had no basis in military necessity but was carried out in "revenge"—here he simply contradicts himself. He cites Gutman and Mula Cohen as *ordering* a harsh response, and the interviews I consulted confirm it. The decision to lay down intensive fire was made by commanders who estimated that they faced an emergency situation.

The brigade commander, Mula Cohen, used just that term in an interview during which he recalled issuing his orders. Told that the city had erupted in sniping, Cohen [announced](#): “This is an emergency, fire in all directions; tell the men to enter the houses of the locals; anyone who walks about with a weapon is an enemy.” Nor does the revenge motif line up with similar orders given by the military governor, Gutman (in this case, as told by him to Goldstein): “We have to lay down fire on all the houses, and put an end to this business.”

In short, as in the case of the small mosque, so in the instance of the battle around it, soldiers were operating under orders to lay down heavy fire, even as they themselves came under fire. “There are still exchanges of fire in the town,” [reported](#) the Yiftah brigade to the overall HQ of the front. “We have taken many wounded.” The fight to repulse the Arab Legion’s armored vehicles, just 200 meters (approximately 220 yards) from the small mosque, was so chaotic that one [Israeli private](#) went missing and was [never found](#). Brigade commander Mula Cohen thought the response had been proportionate:

We didn’t want to kill Arabs. In my opinion, and to this very day, I am sure we did what we needed to do, and no more than that. Of course, in such a situation, there are all sorts of deviations and sorts of things. But in no way was there mass killing.

Mula Cohen’s claim was that a few “deviations” didn’t constitute a “massacre” of 250, and this has been at the core of a very lively debate among leading Israeli historians of the 1948 war. Shavit gives no hint that such a debate exists. Benny Morris, citing the disparity of casualties, persists in calling the events a “massacre,” so Shavit invokes him. But there is another view, championed by Alon Kadish and Avraham Sela (in a [book](#) devoted to the conquest of Lydda), that the events of that day were a straightforward battle. Mordechai Bar-On has [weighed](#) the contesting views, finding merit in both sides of the argument but coming down largely on the side of Kadish and Sela. In short, Shavit, far from representing the consensus of scholarship, has taken one side in an Israeli debate and formulated it in the most extreme way—although his American readers would never know it.

After the fighting died down, the Israelis faced the issue of disposing of the dead. Shavit’s eighth and final passage:

News comes of what has happened in the small mosque. The military governor orders his men to bury the dead, *get rid of the incriminating evidence*. . . . At night, when they were ordered to clean the small mosque and carry out the 70 corpses and bury them, *they took eight other Arabs to do the digging of the burial site and afterward shot them, too*, and buried the eight with the 70.

Takeaway: Gutman, the military governor, knew that what happened at the small mosque was a crime, and sought to “get rid” of the evidence. So dehumanized by now were the Israeli soldiers that they could shoot anyone simply in order to cover up their crimes.

Problem: Shavit doesn’t explain why burying the dead would constitute a cover-up. He himself writes of the “heavy heat” and the “scorching heat” of July, which punished the fleeing refugees from Lydda the next day and which would have rapidly affected the corpses and heightened the urgent need to inter them. Nor does Shavit cite any eyewitness source for this tale of the murder of an Arab burial detail, with its obvious evocation of the Holocaust.

Apparently, Shavit failed to interview an Arab inhabitant of Lydda, aged twenty in 1948, who claimed to have participated, along with his brother and cousin, in a ten-man detail ordered to remove the bodies from the mosque—this, after a delay of several days. This Arab townsman, Fayege Abu Mana (Abu Wadi’), who was still living in Lydda decades later, described the task in a 2003 [interview](#):

They said to go to the mosque and take the corpses out from there. How to take them out? The hands of the dead were very swollen. We couldn't lift the corpses by hand, we brought bags and put the corpses on the bags and we lifted them onto a truck. We gathered everyone in the cemetery. Among them was one woman and two children. They said burn. We burned everyone.

Abu Mana, who passed away in 2011, obviously survived this grim task unharmed. There is even a [photograph](#) of him in the Lydda cemetery, pointing out where the bodies, according to him, were not buried but burned to ash. He numbered them at 70, all but three of them men, and he may have been the local source for that number. In his frequent retelling of the story—a more detailed [version](#) exists in Arabic—he makes no mention of the murder of anyone assigned to the detail. If his wife is to be [believed](#), all were taken prisoner after finishing the job.

5. New Myths for Old?

Even after revisiting Shavit's sources, we can't be certain about what happened in and around the small mosque in Lydda on July 12, 1948. I don't pretend to such certainty, nor do I pretend to have resolved the contradictions in the accounts I've examined. I'm a historian, but I haven't made a study of the 1948 war, and I haven't tracked down every source. There are no documents for this episode, only oral testimonies, with all their attendant hazards. Officers and soldiers contradict themselves, they contradict their comrades, and Israelis and Palestinians obviously contradict one another. But what I uncovered in just a few days of archival research was more than enough to reinforce my initial doubts about Shavit's account, and should be enough to plant at least a seed of doubt in the mind of every reader of *My Promised Land*.

That seed may have sprouted even earlier in the editorial offices of the *New Yorker*, or at least in its fact-checking department. In the magazine's abridgment, tellingly, we learn that Israeli soldiers "confined thousands of Palestinian civilians at the Great Mosque," but the small mosque is omitted as a place of civilian detention. It is then mentioned in only three sentences: "Some Palestinians fired at Israeli soldiers near a small mosque." "One [Israeli soldier] fired an anti-tank shell into the small mosque." And finally: "But then news came of what had happened in the small mosque. The military governor ordered his men to bury the dead."

But what supposedly *did* happen in the small mosque? About that, the *New Yorker* reader is left completely in the dark. Nor is there any mention there of Bulldozer, of 70 dead, or of the Arab burial detail and its alleged liquidation. These are strange omissions in an article whose very headline touts the Lydda "massacre" as a scoop. Do the omissions reflect a judgment that parts of Shavit's story, and his numbers, weren't sufficiently documented? David Remnick, the editor of the *New Yorker*, owes an explanation to his readers.

Beyond such disparities, highly suggestive in themselves, the fact is that not only are some of Shavit's assertions impossible to verify, but by relying on the same eyewitnesses interviewed by Shavit (and on a few he should have interviewed), one can quite easily construct an entirely different story from his. That is the story not of a vengeful "massacre" committed by "Zionism," but of collateral damage in a city turned into a battlefield. This is Lydda not as a "black box" but as a gray zone—a familiar one, since many hundreds of Israeli military operations in built-up areas have fallen into it.

It is in this gray zone, not in Shavit's "black box," that real complexity resides. But nowhere does Shavit give his readers a clue that anything in his dramatic narrative of Lydda is contested. To the contrary, at the end of his source notes is this assurance:

I read hundreds of books and thousands of documents. . . . To make sure all details are correct, oral histories were checked and double-checked against Israel's written history. The exciting process of interviewing

significant individuals was interwoven with a meticulous process of data-gathering and fact-checking.

The details are correct, then; the facts have been checked. The historian Simon Schama, in a gushing [review](#), affirms that the book is “without the slightest trace of fiction.” And many of Shavit’s readers are understandably treating his book and this chapter as history. The book received the National Jewish Book Award in *History*, and the *New Yorker* ran the abridged chapter under the rubric of “Dept. of History.”

Yet Shavit, while claiming that he has followed a rigorous method, also tries to have it both ways: “*My Promised Land*,” he writes in those same source notes, “is not an academic work of history. Rather, it is a personal journey.” That inspires rather less confidence: one cannot make a “personal journey” to a day in 1948. Immediately after insisting that all the details and facts have been vetted, Shavit then adds still another caveat: “And yet, at the end of the day, *My Promised Land* is about people. The book I have written is the story of Israel as it is seen by individual Israelis, of whom I am one.” At day’s end, are we reading oral history after all? Or something still stranger—what Simon Schama, in his review, classifies as “imaginative re-enactment”?

It is this confusion that leaves *My Promised Land* even more vulnerable than the 1958 novel *Exodus* by Leon Uris, the last “epic” account of 1948 to seize the imagination of its Jewish and non-Jewish readers. If *Exodus* was misleading, at least its readers were forewarned that it was *fiction*. Shavit’s readers can’t be sure just what they are reading: “imaginative re-enactment,” the “story of Israel,” oral history, “epic history,” or “Dept. of History” history. Yet how it was written bears on how it should be read, and how many grains of salt the reader needs to add.

At the end of “Lydda, 1948,” Shavit suddenly entertains the thought that “Zionism” may not have committed the massacre after all: “The small-mosque massacre could have been a misunderstanding brought about by a tragic chain of accidental events.” What, then, *was* “Zionism” responsible for? It was, he writes, “the conquest of Lydda and the expulsion of Lydda.” These were “no accident. They were an inevitable phase of the Zionist revolution.”

It’s a debate worth having, but this statement follows by only a few pages the assertion that in Lydda, the massacre was what facilitated the expulsion. Putting a thought into the head of the military governor, Shmarya Gutman, as Lydda’s notables resign themselves to departing the city, Shavit writes: “Gutman feels he has achieved his goal. Occupation, massacre, and mental pressure have had the desired effect.” So perhaps the massacre was desired after all, perhaps even planned? There are those, among Palestinians and their supporters, who already [claim](#) that massacres invariably preceded expulsions, and so must have been willed no less than were the expulsions themselves.

Shavit seems to think he can deflect this reading of his Lydda chapter. “Let’s remember Lydda, let’s acknowledge Lydda,” he protests, “yet let no one use Lydda in order to doubt Israel’s legitimacy.” But of course that is precisely what many are already doing and will continue to do, citing and echoing the confessedly tormented Ari Shavit as they point accusingly not just at the actions of Israel’s soldiers but at the murderous intentions of Zionism itself, with Lydda as a prime exhibit in the ever-expanding criminal indictment against the Jewish state.

If Shavit is sincere in expressing alarm at the misuse of his account, he can take action. He can deposit his interviews in a public archive so that researchers may compare them with other interviews given by the very same persons—and with Shavit’s own account in his book. And he can conduct his own comparison. It isn’t too late to revisit the Lydda “massacre” and honestly flag the points of contention in the forthcoming paperback edition and in the anticipated translations into German, French, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, and Chinese. (He needn’t bother about the Hebrew edition; its reviewers will do the job for him.)

As for the grantees of American Jewish journalism who rushed to praise Shavit’s Lydda treatment, they have a

special obligation to help launch the debate by sending readers to this essay. They know who they are.

Responses

[Distortion and Defamation by Martin Kramer](#)

The treatment of Lydda by Ari Shavit and my respondent Benny Morris has consequences even they didn't intend.

[Zionism's Black Boxes by Benny Morris](#)

Martin Kramer shows how Ari Shavit manipulates and distorts history to blacken Israel's image; but Kramer has an agenda of his own.

[The Uses of Lydda by Efraim Karsh](#)

How a confusing urban battle between two sides was transformed into a one-sided massacre of helpless victims.

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*Shmuel "Bulldozer" Ben-David in Lydda. Screenshot from the 1989 film *Yiftah: From Metulla to the Negev*, courtesy Dor HaPalmah Association.*

The Uses of Lydda

How a confusing urban battle between two sides was transformed into a one-sided massacre of helpless victims.

By Efraim Karsh

In “[What Happened at Lydda](#),” Martin Kramer has performed a signal service by putting to rest the canard of an Israeli massacre of Palestinian Arab civilians in that city in July 1948. The charge has been most recently circulated by Ari Shavit in his best-selling *My Promised Land*. But Lydda is hardly the only instance of such allegations at the time of the founding of the Jewish state—or, for that matter, long afterward. As Kramer suggests at the outset of his investigation, “time and again over the decades, Israeli soldiers have stood accused of just such wanton killing when in fact they were doing what every soldier is trained to do: fire on an armed enemy, especially when that enemy is firing at him.”

Indeed. In late 1947, a violent Arab attempt was made to prevent the creation of a Jewish state in line with November’s UN partition resolution. No sooner had the Haganah rebuffed it than it was accused of scores of nonexistent massacres. The same happened in the run-up to the establishment of the state in May 1948 and the ensuing war launched by the Arab nations to destroy it. The fall of the city of Haifa in April 1948 gave rise to totally false claims of a large-scale slaughter that circulated throughout the Middle East and reached Western capitals. Similarly false rumors were spread after the fall of Tiberias (April 18), during the battle of Safed (in early May), and in Jaffa, where in late April the mayor fabricated a massacre of “hundreds of Arab men and women.” Accounts of a massacre at Deir Yasin (April 9), where some 100 people died, were especially lurid, featuring supposed hammer-and-sickle tattoos on the arms of Jewish fighters and fictitious charges of havoc and rape.

In later years, Palestinians and supporters of the Palestinian cause have even invented retroactive atrocities, unknown to anyone at the time of their supposed occurrence. A notable instance is the “Tantura massacre” of May 1948, an event glaringly absent from contemporary Palestinian Arab historiography of the war. And this is not to mention more recent trumped-up allegations of atrocities committed by Israel in, most notoriously, Jenin (2002) and Gaza (2009).

It is into this crowded field that the prominent Israeli journalist Ari Shavit has stepped. “In 30 minutes, at high noon, more than 200 civilians are killed,” Shavit writes dramatically; “Zionism carries out a massacre in the city of Lydda.” But as Kramer conclusively shows, it is likelier that there was no massacre: only casualties of war, killed or wounded in the fierce fighting between the small Israeli force in the city and the numerically superior force of local Arab fighters supplemented by Transjordanian troops and armored vehicles.

In its broad contours, the story of the conquest of Lydda, followed by the exodus of most of the city’s residents, was a matter of public knowledge shortly after the July 1948 events about which Shavit writes; in subsequent decades,

Israeli historians filled in the remaining gaps. But then, beginning in the late 1980s, revisionist Israeli “New Historians” successfully transformed what the *New York Times* had described at the time as “heavy casualties,” incurred in the course of “considerable [Arab] resistance,” into a massacre of hapless victims.

Since Lydda (together with the simultaneously captured twin town of Ramleh) also constitutes the only case in the war where a substantial urban population was displaced by Israeli forces, the massacre trope won a position of pivotal importance in the larger Arab claim: namely, that there was a premeditated and systematic plan to dispossess and expel the Palestinian Arabs. Shavit has picked up this latter misrepresentation as well, writing that “the conquest of Lydda and the expulsion of Lydda” were “an *inevitable phase* of the Zionist revolution” (emphasis added).

If, however, there was anything inevitable about the expulsion of Lydda, the cause lay not in Zionism but in the actions of Palestinian Arab leaders and their counterparts in neighboring Arab states. Had these notables accepted the UN partition resolution calling for the establishment of two states in Palestine, there would have been no war and no dislocation in the first place. As for Lydda itself, no exodus was foreseen in Israeli military plans for the city’s capture or was reflected in the initial phase of its occupation. Quite the contrary: the Israeli commander assured local dignitaries that the city’s inhabitants would be allowed to stay if they so wished. In line with that promise, the occupying Israeli force also requested a competent administrator and other personnel to run the affairs of the civilian population.

All this was rendered irrelevant when the city’s notables and residents, rather than abiding by their surrender agreement with the IDF, attempted to dislodge the Israelis by force. The IDF, its tenuous grip on Lydda starkly exposed, thereupon decided to “encourage” the population’s departure to Arab-controlled areas a few miles to the east, so as not to leave behind a potential hotbed of armed resistance. In an area where Jordan’s Arab Legion was counterattacking in strength, it was essential to prevent any disruption of ongoing war operations.

As it happens, this spontaneous response by the IDF to a string of unexpected developments on the ground was uncharacteristic of general Israeli conduct. Then and throughout the war, inhabitants of other Arab localities who had peacefully surrendered to Israeli forces were allowed to remain in place. In this respect, Lydda was an one of the very few exceptions that proved the rule, not—as Shavit argues—the rule itself.

Those few exceptions, moreover, accounted for but a small fraction of the total exodus. Vastly more Palestinians were driven from their homes by their own leaders and/or by Arab military forces than by the Israeli army. In fact, no contemporary sources describe the collapse and dispersal of Palestinian society as, in Shavit’s words, “an inevitable phase of the Zionist revolution.” Here, from June 1949, is the (somewhat surprised) report of a senior British official from a fact-finding mission among Arab war refugees in Gaza:

While [the refugees] express no bitterness against the Jews (or for that matter against the Americans or ourselves), they speak with the utmost bitterness of the Egyptians and other Arab states. “We know who our enemies are,” they will say, and they are referring to their Arab brothers who, they declare, persuaded them unnecessarily to leave their homes.

Martin Kramer is to be congratulated for helping to reclaim these historical truths, distorted by decades of propaganda and revisionist history. In disposing of the Lydda “massacre” canard, he has also exposed the disingenuous and shoddy scholarship underlying the ongoing endeavor to rewrite Israel’s history.

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The Dahmash Mosque in Lydda in July 1948, after its capture by Israeli forces. Wikimedia.

Zionism's "Black Boxes"

Martin Kramer shows how Ari Shavit manipulates and distorts Israeli history; but Kramer has an agenda of his own.

By Benny Morris

To begin with, here are the generally undisputed facts of, to borrow Martin Kramer's title in *Mosaic*, "[What Happened at Lydda](#)":

On July 11, 1948, as part of the Israel Defense Forces' "Operation Dani," designed to take control of the road between Tel Aviv and (Jewish) west Jerusalem, armored vehicles and jeeps of the 89th Battalion, 8th Brigade, commanded by Lt. Colonel Moshe Dayan, dashed down from Ben-Shemen through the Arab town of Lydda to the outskirts of its sister town of Ramleh and then back to Ben-Shemen, machineguns blazing. In the foray, which lasted about three-quarters of an hour, dozens of Arabs were killed.

Minutes later, four companies of the 3rd and 1st Battalions of the Palmah's Yiftah Brigade, 300-400 soldiers in all, pushed into Lydda and took up positions in the center of town. In the following hours, Arab men, and some women, were herded or made their way to the town's medieval Church of St. George and the Great Mosque next door. Among the town's 20,000-30,000 inhabitants and refugees were several hundred militiamen, some of whom had not been disarmed. There was no formal surrender, but the Israelis thought the battle was over. The night passed quietly.

Just before noon on the following day, July 12, two or three Jordanian armored cars drove into town and a firefight broke out; the Yiftah men suffered a number of casualties. The sound of the battle triggered sniping by local militiamen from windows and rooftops. The Israelis felt hard-pressed, confused, perhaps even panicky. Moshe Kelman, commander of Yiftah's 3rd Battalion, ordered his men summarily to suppress what they would later call a "rebellion," and to shoot anyone "seen on the street" or, alternatively, at "any clear target." The troops also fired into houses. One of the targets, where dozens apparently died, was the town's small Dahmash Mosque.

Later that afternoon and during the following day, the Israelis expelled the population of Lydda—and of neighboring Ramleh, whose notables had formally surrendered—eastward toward the Jordanian-held West Bank. Today, the descendants of the refugees from these two towns fill the camps around Ramallah and Amman.

And now we have another story, a story of two cherry pickers, each of whom distorts history in his own way.

In his best-selling book *My Promised Land*, the journalist Ari Shavit distorts in the grand manner, by turning Lydda into *the* story of the 1948 war and indeed of Zionism itself. Insisting that, at Lydda, "Zionism commit[ed] a massacre," he writes: "Lydda is our black box. In it lies the dark secret of Zionism." (As an aside, I would suggest here a much more telling "black box" or key to understanding both Zionism and the conflict. It is Kibbutz Yad Mordekhai, where for four to five days in May 1948 a handful of Holocaust survivors held off the invading mass of

the Egyptian army, giving the Haganah/IDF time to organize against the pan-Arab assault on the newborn state of Israel.)

As for Martin Kramer, writing in *Mosaic*, he distorts by whitewashing and/or ignoring the expulsion and by effectively denying that it was preceded by a massacre. Instead, he writes, Lydda was a story of “collateral damage in a city turned into a battlefield”: not a black box but a “gray zone.”

Both Shavit and Kramer present us with a methodological problem: neither of them uses or refers to contemporary documentary evidence—which, in my view, is the necessary basis of sound historiography. Documents may lie or mislead, but to a far lesser degree than do veterans remembering (or “remembering”) politically and morally problematic events decades after they have occurred. In *My Promised Land*, Shavit offers neither footnotes nor bibliography; concerning 1948, he refers only to interviews (about which he provides no details) that he himself conducted decades ago. Kramer, a Middle East expert, relies on interviews done by others, also decades ago.

As it happens, the problematic events at the Dahmash Mosque are not mentioned at all in contemporary IDF documents. One can assume that something very nasty did occur there, since both Jewish and Arab oral testimonies agree on this. But the circumstances surrounding the incident—were the people in the mosque armed or were they disarmed detainees; did they or did they not provoke the Israelis by throwing grenades at them?—remain unclear. I’ll return to this incident below.

Now to our two authors.

In *My Promised Land*, Ari Shavit does something unusual, perhaps even unique, which (apart from his abilities as a writer) may help to account for the book’s American success. He simultaneously satisfies three different audiences. Mainly through his moving portraits of Holocaust survivors, he presents a persuasive justification of Zionism, thus catering to supporters of Israel. But as a bleeding-heart liberal he also caters to the many Jews and non-Jews—call them agnostics—who now find fault with Zionist behavior over the decades. And finally he caters to forthright Israel-bashers: those for whom every new or rehashed or invented detail of Jewish atrocity is grist for the anti-Israel mill.

His chapter on Lydda is the cameo performance. Following the book’s publication, in appearances before largely Jewish audiences, Shavit heatedly argued that he had been misunderstood, enjoined readers to view “Lydda” in context, and denied that he had posited it as the defining narrative of Zionism/Israel. The columnist doth protest too much, methinks. After all, Shavit engineered advance publication of the chapter as a stand-alone piece in the *New Yorker*, and it was he who defined “Lydda” as the key to Zionism.

Well, it isn’t and it wasn’t. Yes, Lydda was simultaneously the biggest massacre and biggest expulsion of the 1948 war. But no scoop there; decades ago, Israeli historians described what happened in great detail. Lydda wasn’t, however, representative of Zionist behavior. Before 1948, the Zionist enterprise expanded by buying, not conquering, Arab land, and it was the Arabs who periodically massacred Jews—as, for example, in Hebron and Safed in 1929. In the 1948 war, the first major atrocity was committed by Arabs: the slaughter of 39 Jewish co-workers in the Haifa Oil Refinery on December 30, 1947.

True, the Jews went on to commit more than their fair share of atrocities; prolonged civil wars tend to brutalize combatants and trigger vengefulness. But this happened because they conquered 400 Arab towns and villages. The Palestinians failed to conquer even a single Jewish settlement—at least on their own. The one exception was Kfar Etzion, which was conquered on May 13, 1948 with the aid of the Jordanian Arab Legion, and there they committed a large-scale massacre.

In any event, given the length of the war, the abundant quantity of Jewish casualties—5,800 killed out of a population of 630,000—and the fact that the Arabs were the aggressors, the conflict was relatively atrocity-free. By my estimate, all told, Jews deliberately killed 800-900 civilians and POWs between November 1947 and January 1949. Arabs killed approximately 200 Jews in similar circumstances. Compare this, for example, with the 8,000 Bosnians murdered in Srebrenica, in civilized Europe, over three days in July 1995 by an aggressor people, the Serbs, who were never seriously in peril.

As for expulsions: in most places in 1948, Arabs simply fled in the face of actual or approaching hostilities, while some, as in Haifa in April, were advised or instructed by their own leaders to evacuate. Most were not expelled, although Israel subsequently decided, quite reasonably in my judgment, to bar the refugees from returning.

Shavit, while checking off the relevant boxes, effectively fails to put “Lydda” in context: the context, that is, of a war initiated by the Arabs after the Jews had accepted a partition compromise and in which the Jews, three years after the Holocaust, felt they faced mass murder at Arab hands. Yes, Shavit does allow in passing that the Arabs rejected the UN partition plan of November 1947. But he writes: “[Immediately afterward] violence flares throughout the country”—as if it were unclear who started the shooting and as if the Palestinians were not responsible for a war that resulted in occasional massacres and masses of refugees.

Martin Kramer’s cherry picking is of a different order. Declining to look at or judge Shavit’s book as a whole, he zooms in on what happened in Lydda on July 11-13, 1948 and especially on the events at the Dahmash Mosque at around 1:00 p.m. on July 12. Describing and quoting Shavit’s account and comparing it with the testimony of various Palmah soldiers 30 or 40 years later, he shows how Shavit has manipulated and tilted the evidence to blacken Israel’s image. He is particularly critical of Shavit’s contention, for which Shavit cites no source, that the Israelis also murdered the eight-man detail assigned to dispose of the Arabs’ bodies. In all, Kramer questions Shavit’s integrity.

Fair enough. But Kramer clearly has an agenda. He more or less justifies the soldiers’ behavior by citing the veterans’ testimony that grenades were thrown at them from the mosque, prompting them to fire a rocket (or rockets) at the building. But they *would* say that, wouldn’t they, after the bodies of dozens of men, women, and children were subsequently peeled off the walls? The mosque stood—and stands—as one of several contiguous buildings in an alley. In the dust and heat and noise and terror of the moment, who could have seen and said with certainty from which building or rooftop a grenade, or grenades, were thrown (if any, indeed, were thrown)?

Dozens of documents were produced in July 1948 by Yiftah Brigade headquarters, the 3rd Battalion, and the IDF general staff about what happened in Lydda during those days, and they are preserved in Israeli archives. As I noted above, none of them mentions the mosque incident. Perhaps those who wrote them knew why.

But the existing documents are crystal-clear on two points, both of which Kramer obfuscates or elides: that there was mass killing of townspeople by Dayan’s July 11 column and, subsequently, even apart from the mosque incident, in the suppression of the sniping; and that the slaughter was followed by an expulsion. About the latter, all that Kramer tells us is that on the morning of July 13, the Israeli intelligence officer Shmaryahu Gutman negotiated with town notables the release of the detained Arab young men, with the notables agreeing to a mass evacuation as a *quid pro quo*.

There is no contemporary IDF documentary reference to this negotiation or “deal”; the story rests solely on Gutman’s say-so. If there really was such a deal, it apparently lacked authorization from Gutman’s superiors, since at 6:15 p.m. on July 13, Dani HQ cabled Yiftah HQ as follows: “Tell me immediately, have the Lydda prisoners been

released and who authorized this?” Kramer adds, as a sort of cover, that Israeli troops “encouraged” the evacuation. Nothing more.

But the documents tell us a straightforward and radically different story. At a cabinet meeting on June 16, 1948, Prime Minister and Defense Minister David Ben-Gurion defined Lydda and Ramleh as “two thorns” in the side of the Jews; in his diary for May and June he repeatedly jotted down that the towns had to be “destroyed.” When news of the shooting in Lydda reached IDF HQ at Yazur after noon on July 12, Yigal Allon, the commander of Operation Dani, pressed Ben-Gurion for authorization to expel the inhabitants. According to Yitzhak Rabin, then serving as Allon’s deputy, Ben-Gurion gave the green light. At 1:30, Rabin issued the following order to the Yiftah brigade: “(1) The inhabitants of Lydda must be expelled quickly, without attention to age. . . . (2) Implement immediately.”

A similar order went out from Dani HQ to the Kiryati Brigade, whose 42nd Battalion had occupied Ramleh. In both towns, the troops began expelling the inhabitants. At 11:35 a.m. on July 13, Dani HQ informed the operations office of the IDF general staff that the troops “are busy expelling the inhabitants.” At 6:15 p.m., Dani HQ queried Yiftah HQ: “Has the removal of the population of Lydda been completed?” By evening, the two towns had been cleared.

It is also abundantly plain from the documents that (although the Hebrew term *tevah*, slaughter, was studiously avoided), the expulsion was preceded by a massacre, albeit a provoked one. Dozens if not hundreds of Arab civilians were shot in the streets and in their houses. Yiftah Brigade intelligence, summarizing the events a few days later, wrote that in Lydda on July 12, the 3rd Battalion had killed “about 250 [Arabs] and wounded a great many.” (The figure appears in the July 1948 documents, not only in the 1950s “official history of the Palmah” cited by Kramer.) For their part, Yiftah’s soldiers had suffered two-to-four killed, two of them apparently as a result of fire from troops of the Jordanian Arab Legion.

This disproportion speaks massacre, not “battle.” Yet Kramer calls what happened “A Battle with Two Sides” and quotes the Israeli historian Alon Kadish, who suggests that the Yiftah body count was wrong or, alternatively, that 250 was the number of Arab dead during all of the fighting in and around Lydda between July 9 and July 18. In her biography of Yigal Allon, the historian Anita Shapira dismisses Kadish’s arguments as “implausible.” I would say the same, basically, about Kramer’s description of what happened.

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Distortion and Defamation

The treatment of Lydda by Ari Shavit and my respondent Benny Morris has consequences even they didn't intend.

By Martin Kramer

The entry of historians into the debate over Ari Shavit's Lydda chapter, in his bestselling book *My Promised Land*, constitutes progress. Efraim Karsh and Benny Morris, who for decades have been in almost continuous dispute over the events of 1948, seem to have converged in opposition to Shavit's turning the July 1948 events in Lydda into the "black box" of the 1948 war and of Zionism. In response to my [essay](#), Karsh [writes](#): "Lydda was one of the very few exceptions that proved the rule, not—as Shavit argues—the rule itself." And Morris [concurs](#): Shavit "defined 'Lydda' as the key to Zionism. Well, it isn't and it wasn't. . . . Lydda wasn't representative of Zionist behavior."

But that's where the convergence over Lydda ends. Karsh congratulates me for "putting to rest the canard of an Israeli massacre of Palestinian Arab civilians in that city in July 1948." Morris condemns me for "effectively denying" that the expulsion of the city's inhabitants "was preceded by a massacre, albeit a provoked one."

It would have been quite an accomplishment to put to rest the "massacre" claim or "effectively" disprove it. My purpose was more modest. I sought to plant a seed of doubt regarding Shavit's baroque narrative of it, using the same range of oral sources he used. This I believe I have done, and as long as Shavit remains silent, that seed of doubt should grow.

In the *New Yorker* [abridgment](#) of his Lydda chapter, Shavit invokes Benny Morris as his source. (Morris isn't mentioned in the book, but the magazine's fact-checkers apparently demanded a published source for the "massacre" claim.) And indeed, Shavit's account ultimately rests on the foundation laid by Morris. Morris's narrative of the "massacre" is austere in comparison to Shavit's, because Morris claims he never resorts to oral testimony to establish a fact, only to add "color." But his own paternity of the "massacre" trope can't be denied, even if he is repelled by the way Shavit has framed Lydda as a litmus test of Zionism. That being the case, in my remarks here I'll focus on Morris in lieu of Shavit, who has not deigned to respond to my essay.

As Morris himself admits, not a single contemporary Israeli document makes any mention whatsoever of the events of July 12, 1948 at the Dahmash mosque: the "small mosque" that was supposedly the scene of one Israeli massacre. What Morris calls the "crystal-clear" documentary proof of a wider "massacre" on the same day is an Israeli military summary of the fighting that lists "enemy casualties" at 250 versus four Israeli dead. According to Morris, "this disproportion speaks massacre, not 'battle.'" And that's it. On this slim reed rests Morris's claim not only that there was a "massacre" at Lydda but that it was the "biggest massacre" of the 1948 war.

The claim is particularly audacious, given that Morris has made mistake after mistake over the years in assembling his narrative. In the first edition (1988) of his book on the 1948 Palestinian refugees, he claimed that “dozens of unarmed detainees in the mosque and church compounds in the center of the town were shot and killed.” In fact, none of the unarmed detainees in the Great Mosque and the Church of St. George was harmed during the fighting. Morris seemed not to know that there was another mosque, the Dahmash or “small” mosque, which was the locus of fighting—something any Palmah veteran of the battle could have told him, or that he could have learned by carefully rereading the [account](#) by Lydda’s military governor, Shmarya Gutman, published way back in November 1948.

Later, after learning of his error, Morris shifted the locus of the “massacre” to the small mosque (whose name he couldn’t pronounce properly, to judge from his spelling of it: [Dahaimash](#)). But he began [referring](#) to those inside it as “POWs,” in which case they all would have been men, under stiff armed guard. In his response to me, he now allows that they included some women and children, and admits that it’s “unclear” whether they were even detainees.

Given this patchy record, it’s hard to regard Morris as a meticulous investigator of the Lydda “massacre.” His interest in Lydda has centered instead upon the flight of its inhabitants—and, specifically, who ordered that flight—and it’s therefore not surprising that he steers his response in *Mosaic* back to that well-worn subject. It wasn’t my focus, but I’ll touch upon it later.

First, to the matter of the small mosque. Morris writes that I “more or less justify the soldiers’ behavior [in striking the small mosque] by citing the veterans’ testimony that grenades were thrown at them from the mosque.” He then effectively accuses the soldiers either of returning fire recklessly or of altogether imagining the grenade attack. Morris seems to think that not a single soldier is credible. After all, he writes, “they *would* say that [grenades were thrown], wouldn’t they, after the bodies of dozens of men, women, and children were subsequently peeled off the walls?” (Thus, by borrowing from the stock of presumably unreliable oral testimony, does Morris add dark red “color.”)

So let me adduce still more testimony for the grenade attack, this time from an entirely different direction. As it happens, the Palestinian narrative of Lydda also has a grenade thrown at the Israelis from inside or nearby the small mosque. Indeed, Palestinians even preserve the name of the supposed grenade-thrower: Jamil Haroun. Here is [Reja-e Busailah](#), a refugee from Lydda and blind poet who became a professor of English in Indiana: “It is said that Jamil Haroun threw a grenade at a group of Jewish soldiers, killing several, and then ran for shelter into the mosque.” The wife of the Lydda resident who claimed to have been forced to remove the bodies from the small mosque [told](#) a similar story: “There was a young man named Jamil Haroun, who threw a grenade on an army vehicle when it was parked in what is now Palmah Square,” where the small mosque stands. And Jamil Haroun is also [named](#), by the Palestinian chronicler Aref al-Aref in his list of 1948 war casualties, as having been “killed with those killed in the mosque” on July 12.

Morris now writes the following about what happened *inside* the small mosque: “One can assume that something very nasty did occur there, since both Jewish and Arab oral testimonies agree on this.” Well, it seems that both Jewish and Arab oral testimonies agree that something nasty happened *outside* the mosque: a grenade attack on Israeli soldiers. If the convergence of oral testimonies is your standard for making assumptions, then you should at least be consistent.

As I showed in my essay, there’s plenty of testimony from Israeli soldiers who entered the small mosque—evidence used neither by Shavit (which is inexcusable) nor by Morris (which is no more than one would expect). And as I showed, the soldiers were shocked by what they saw inside the building. Here is another witness, [Hanan Sever](#), who reached the mosque after the events: “When I entered, a grim scene unfolded before my eyes. The mosque was full of

bodies. There were old people and children, men and women, all of them cast about dead in a jumble, in groups or singly, one atop another. There were 30 bodies there. Maybe more.”

No one disputes that the result was tragic, and the Israeli eyewitnesses say so themselves. But the accidental killing of civilians in war doesn’t constitute “massacre.” Nor can Morris produce evidence of a deliberate targeting of innocents in the small mosque. “In my long study of the Israeli-Arab conflict,” he has [written](#), “and, specifically, the 1948 war, my experience has been that wherever there was smoke, there was fire: almost invariably, a document surfaces corroborating oral traditions of massacre.” Yet here we are, 66 years later, and there’s not a single document regarding the small mosque.

Why? Morris’s answer is conspiracy. He insinuates that Israeli officers made sure to omit the small mosque “massacre” from their reports. “None of [the documents] mentions the mosque incident,” acknowledges Morris, who then hisses: “Perhaps those who wrote them knew why.” Thus does Morris’s argument become absurdly circular: a document would prove a negligent or deliberate “massacre,” but to all intents and purposes, so does the absence of a document. In fact, however, all we have is the testimony of the Israeli soldiers, who claim to have returned fire at enemy fire. Anything else is speculation.

As for a wider “massacre” on July 12, Morris finds his sole documentary evidence in a military report of the day’s fighting, which lists 250 enemy casualties against four Israelis. According to Morris, “this disproportion speaks massacre, not ‘battle.’”

If that were true, then a whole range of recent Israeli (and American) military actions would qualify as massacres. Consider, for example, “Cast Lead,” Israel’s 2008 operation against Hamas in Gaza. What should one call the deaths of 1,166 Palestinians (the official Israeli estimate) in that operation, weighed against thirteen Israeli dead (four from friendly fire)? Indeed, how should one describe Israel’s current military operation in Gaza, “Protective Edge?” Or, for an American example, should the Battle of Mogadishu (of “Black Hawk Down” fame) be renamed a massacre? There, about 500 Somalis died; the American toll: eighteen.

Even this cursory list highlights the absurdity of claiming that “disproportion speaks massacre.” Disproportion poses a question, but it doesn’t answer it. That’s the role of the historian, who then looks beyond the disproportion at circumstances and context.

Then there is the figure of 250 itself: the prime piece of evidence on which the “massacre” edifice rests. In the first edition of his book on the 1948 refugees, Morris claimed that this figure, “while a general estimate, was given in contemporary military dispatches and had no political or propagandistic intent or purpose.” The naïveté of this statement is stunning. The late Israeli general Yehoshafat Harkabi, a battalion commander in 1948 who became a university professor, [wrote this](#) about the 1948 war:

Neither the Arabs nor we had numbers and estimates regarding Arab losses that had any reasonable approximation of certainty. True, we had estimates based on commanders’ assessments of the results of battles. But these were unreliable: at times, the fighters were liable to exaggerate enemy losses.

The historian Itamar Radai, in his just-published history of the 3rd Battalion, [writes](#) that the basis for the Lydda estimate is unclear, and adds: “During the War of Independence, the number ‘250’ sometimes was a symbolic figure, representing a large number of killed. The best-known case was Deir Yassin, in which all sides, each for its own purpose, adopted the number of 254 killed. . . . It later became clear that the number of killed at Deir Yassin was about 100.”

As the Tel Aviv University historian Anita Shapira has [noted](#), the figure of 250 enemy killed at Lydda was “a very high number of fatalities compared to previous battles.” This has rendered it suspect. The Hebrew University scholars Avraham Sela and Alon Kadish have [concluded](#) that “any attempt to calculate ‘actual’ numbers of casualties in Lydda would be futile.” Unfortunately for Morris, his entire argument for a broader “massacre” rests on this one “statistic,” the accuracy of which it is impossible to ascertain.

Unlike the “massacre,” at any rate, the battle between Israeli troops and local fighters is attested by a contemporary document, which Morris himself added to the revised version (2004) of his book on the refugees. It’s a message from the Yiftah brigade to overall HQ of the operation, on the afternoon of July 12: “Battles have erupted in Lydda. We have hit an armored car with a two-pounder [gun] and killed many Arabs. There are still exchanges of fire in the town. We have many wounded.” That perfectly evokes what in my *Mosaic* essay I call “a battle with two sides.” Yet while Morris added the Yiftah brigade message in the revised edition, he didn’t alter his interpretation of the events by one iota. Just as a reminder to him: an image of the message appears at [this link](#).

Lydda was no fishing village or mountain hamlet. It was a market city with an important church, immediately adjacent to the country’s railway hub and airport, and its conquest made headlines in Israel, the Arab countries, and the West. There were plenty of eyes and ears in Lydda. Two “embedded” journalists, Keith Wheeler of the *Chicago Sun-Times* and Kenneth Bilby of the *New York Herald Tribune*, entered the city on July 12, accompanied by Yigal Allon’s aide Yeruham Cohen, and had to take cover on Lydda’s main street when gunfire broke out. (Cohen [remembered](#) “small, uncoordinated battles in various corners of the city.”) The professional photographer Boris Carmi took a [portrait](#) of a smiling Yiftah-brigade soldier right outside the Dahmash mosque. Yitzhak Sadeh, then commander of the 8th brigade, invited two poets, Natan Alterman and Yaakov Orland, to tour Lydda while there were still bodies in the streets. (Alterman declined.) Aside from the hundreds of officers and soldiers of the Yiftah brigade who captured the city, hundreds more from the Kiryati brigade replaced them a day after the fighting.

That the “largest massacre” of the 1948 war could have occurred in this place and in these circumstances, and not generate a single document, contemporary press report, or photograph, defies belief. Were some innocents killed, either in the crossfire or by jittery or undisciplined or even rampaging soldiers? Mula Cohen, commander of the Yiftah brigade, said (in a quote that I included in my essay) that there were “deviations” that day but no “mass killing.” No one has yet proved otherwise.

Scattered atrocities don’t add up to a massacre (a distinction [drawn](#) by Morris himself in his analysis of an alleged “massacre” at Tantura), and neither do the unintended deaths of bystanders in the midst of firefights. Documents may surface one day casting the episode in another light; so far, they haven’t.

Morris also claims that I “obfuscated or elided” the July 11 shock-and-awe sprint along the fringes of Lydda and Ramleh by Moshe Dayan’s 89th Battalion. (A strong [case](#) has been made that this column didn’t enter Lydda, but only skirted it.) The contemporary account of who died was given by the “embedded” reporter Kenneth Bilby: “The corpses of Arab men, women, and even children were strewn about in the wake of this ruthlessly brilliant charge.” In *My Promised Land*, Shavit cuts out the men (that is, those who could be fighters), and writes this: “More than a hundred Arab civilians are shot dead—women, children, old people.” Apparently, the *New Yorker*’s fact-checkers doubted the accuracy of this sentence, including the fatality count (Morris in his book *1948* and in his *Mosaic* response writes “dozens”), so the magazine version of Shavit’s chapter reads thus: “Dozens of Arabs were shot dead, including women, children, and old people.”

Notice how this event gets bargained down on the way from book to magazine: “more than a hundred” becomes “dozens,” and the shooting of women, children, and old people now just “includes” women, children, and old people. A “massacre”? Even Shavit doesn’t call it that, saving the word for the events of the following day, July 12. At one time, Morris too wasn’t so certain about how to describe this episode. In his original book on the refugees, he provided not a single detail about the raid except to say that it “dented” Arab civilian morale and the will to resist. In the revised edition, he wrote that Dayan’s maneuver “combined elements of a battle and a massacre.” In his response to me, Morris now calls it “a mass killing of townspeople.” A massacre is born.

But there’s a reason this famous raid hasn’t gone down in Israeli history as a “massacre” or “mass killing.” It’s largely because Dayan’s column, operating in hostile enemy territory, charged through a rain of enemy fire and lost nine men and many vehicles along the way. There’s also doubt as to how many people the column killed. The late Elhanan Orren, who wrote the detailed military [history](#) of this front, concluded that the enemy casualty figures of between 100 and 150 given in Dayan’s own report were “very exaggerated,” and that the raid “did not cause heavy losses to the enemy.”

The toll of Arab dead from Dayan’s raid isn’t even mentioned in more recent scholarship like Mordechai Bar-On’s [biography](#) of Dayan and Anita Shapira’s [study](#) of Yigal Allon. So Morris’s accusation of obfuscation and elision must apply to those two historians as well. If they concede that Dayan committed a massacre at Lydda, I’ll reconsider.

One thing seems certain, however. Contrary to Morris (in his revised refugee [book](#)), the famed poet Natan Alterman did not compose his [poem](#) *Al Zot*, condemning the killing of innocent Arabs as war crimes, in reaction to Dayan’s raid. The foremost [authorities](#) on Alterman, and most [recently](#) his biographer Dan Laor, insist that the poem was inspired by the wanton killing of Arab civilians in the village of Al-Dawayima, west of Hebron, in October 1948. *Al Zot* has sometimes been adduced (by Morris but not by Shavit) as indirect evidence for brutal conduct at Lydda. It shouldn’t be.

Finally, Morris accuses me of “whitewashing and/or ignoring the expulsion” of Lydda’s inhabitants. I don’t know why: the subject of my essay was the “massacre,” not the “expulsion.” I suppose this is a maneuver so that Morris can repeat here, yet again, his much-contested claim that an order to expel came from David Ben-Gurion himself. Shavit, in his book, echoes that claim: “Yigal Allon asks Ben-Gurion what to do with the Arabs. Ben-Gurion waves his hand: Deport them.”

As usual, things are never as simple as Shavit portrays them. One leading Israeli historian has [argued](#) that Ben-Gurion never “waved” orders, and might just as well “have waved his hand to get rid of a fly.” The entire question has been hotly debated among Israeli historians for decades. I’ll simply refer readers to the contrary view, most thoroughly elaborated by Ben-Gurion’s biographer [Shabtai Teveth](#).

In reading through the oral testimony, I was impressed by an aspect of the Lydda flight that both Morris and Shavit seem to have elided or ignored. A large portion of the Arab population in Lydda in July 1948 wasn’t from Lydda, but consisted of refugees from Jaffa and villages to the west. “There were masses of refugees there,” recalled the military governor, Shmarya Gutman, in a 1988 film [interview](#). “I could determine the names of all the villages from the region that had fled to Lydda. It was possible to estimate the number. The impression was that in the city, where there should have been 12,000 people, there were about 35,000.”

Reja-e Busailah, in his [memoir](#) of the events, reports numbers almost twice as large, but in the same rough proportion of residents to refugees: “Originally we had numbered from 20,000 to 25,000. We grew to from 60,000 to 65,000 by the time the town fell.” These outsiders “had settled on the sidewalks and under the olive trees.”

Those refugees, having already fled their homes to escape the Jews, didn't need encouragement to flee again. A safe road leading east was enough, and that road opened when the Arab Legion abandoned the Lydda police station. Gutman remembered that when he announced to the inhabitants of Lydda that they could leave, "they were so happy. In any case, there were [already] refugees there. Why be refugees in hell? They would be refugees in a safer place."

As for the residents, there is testimony that many fled believing they would return in victory. Buseilah recalls the reaction of some (perhaps most) to Gutman's announcement that they were free to leave:

The oldest male among us finally went out and came back shortly. He was joyous, bubbling almost. Salvation had come. They were going to let us go. And we should go, else they would kill us all. . . . We should return very shortly. It will not take the Arab armies long before they drive them out of Lydda and Ramle, out of Jaffa and beyond. In a matter of weeks, if not days, we should be back. Most believed this, in the face of the new reality.

So the word "expulsion" cannot suffice to describe everything that happened in Lydda. There was also self-propelled flight.

I repeat: I can't construct an absolutely certain narrative of the events in Lydda on July 12, 1948. There are too many gaps and contradictions in the record. But with a little digging, I've had no trouble casting doubt on Shavit's stick-figure dramatization and Morris's smug assertions.

Why does it matter?

"Zionism carries out a massacre in the city of Lydda." Shavit's repellent statement, derided even by Morris, is part of the answer to why it matters. There are those who claim that Israel came into being through massacre, which Zionism facilitated and legitimated. Today it's possible to take a "Nakba" tour of Lydda (now called Lod). There, one will be [told](#) by the Arab guide that what transpired in the town, from massacre through expulsion, was part of a "systematic policy," and therefore "an action of Zionism." How systematic? [Here](#) is a Palestinian professor whose institute collects oral testimonies:

There was a brain behind the massacres, call it a master plan, call it an outline, because there is a pattern to the killings, and a logic to this pattern. After working in different archives, my picture is that Palestine in 1948 was a theater of Israeli massacres, a continuous show of Palestinians massacred, of killings and destruction, and of psychological warfare.

In this narrative, the "original sin" of Israel's birth wasn't expulsion. The Palestinians wouldn't have fled their homes had there not been repeated and planned massacres, which have since been sealed up in "black boxes." Lydda stands as the prime example.

"Disproportion speaks massacre, not 'battle.'" This equally repellent statement, by Morris, is just as defamatory of Israel as Shavit's. On Morris's principle, every occasion on which Israel exacts a numerically "disproportionate" cost in the lives of others—as it often must do, if it is to deter and defeat its enemies—constitutes evidence of massacre; to sustain its very existence, Israel must massacre again and again, decade after decade. There are those who busily quantify and tabulate just that allegation. "Since January 2005," we may read in the latest such [exercise](#), "the conflict has killed 23 Palestinians for every one Israeli it claims." Israel thus can never be legitimate; it is a perpetual war crime, on an ever-larger scale. So saith the "disproportion."

Shavit and Morris thus validate the argument for Israel's dismantlement. As anyone familiar with their politics

knows, that is not their intent. Israel is precious to both of them, and they call themselves Zionists. But at an earlier point in their lives, they became habituated to ripping events from their context, which was the hallmark of what was once called the “new history.” Their treatment of Lydda is a relapse into a past addiction, which consists of simplification, exaggeration, and decontextualization—in short, the very behavior displayed by those now addicted to hatred of Israel.

The other day, someone posted a [video clip](#) from Lod (Lydda). It shows a demonstration by Arab residents (who comprise about a quarter of the town’s population) and possibly some Jews, in Palmah Square, alongside the small mosque. The demonstrators, waving Palestinian flags, are protesting against “Protective Edge,” Israel’s operation in Gaza. They carry a large banner with this message: “Stop the massacre in Gaza.”

At the site of one presumed “massacre,” yet another is presumed. This is how myths evolve into a mythology. And that is why it’s so important to recognize that even in Lydda, supposed site of the “largest massacre” of 1948, we just can’t be certain there was a “massacre” at all.

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An inscription on the Dahmash Mosque in Lydda. It says in Arabic: “The mosque was closed as a result of the monstrous massacre perpetrated by the occupation forces in 1948, and was partially reopened in 1996.” Photo by Martin Kramer.

The Meaning of "Massacre"

The debate between Benny Morris and Martin Kramer over Israel's wartime conduct enters its second round.

By Benny Morris, Martin Kramer

Benny Morris:

I have to admit that, prior to reading his essay, "[What Happened at Lydda](#)," I had never read anything by Martin Kramer. But I had heard that he was a serious Middle East scholar, albeit of subjects far removed from the 1948 war. His essay, however, is imbued with clear political purpose—"Israel is defined by much of liberal opinion as an 'occupier,'" Kramer writes at one point in an essay that ostensibly deals with July 1948—and thus smacks more of propaganda than of history (even though the minutiae of his criticism of Ari Shavit's manipulation of texts and facts regarding one minor episode in the war—what happened at a mosque in Lydda on July 12, 1948—are illuminating, if not so much about the war as about Shavit).

In my [response in Mosaic](#) to Kramer's essay, I argued that "disproportion" speaks "massacre." Kramer has [now replied](#) to my argument in a manner disingenuous if not forthrightly mendacious. Yes, in contemporary warfare between advanced technological societies and Third World societies—the U.S. versus Iraq, for example, or Israel versus Hamas—the application of air power and sophisticated artillery by a Western power can lead to completely disproportionate losses on the part of ill-armed Arab ground forces, and these do not necessarily speak of massacre. But in the Israeli-Arab war of 1948, two or more relatively primitive armies came to grips. When, in a specific battlefield, one side was more powerful than the other, a "disproportion" in losses might arise. That happened, for example, in the successive battles between the Haganah/IDF and Jordan's Arab Legion at Latrun in May-June 1948, where many more Israelis died than Jordanians due to the Legion's efficient use of its mortars and 75-mm artillery batteries and to Israeli paucity in or misuse of heavy weaponry. But when the disproportion is 250:0 or 250:2, as occurred, according to contemporary IDF documents, between the IDF and the Lydda townspeople, some of them armed, on July 12 of the same year, then "battle" is surely not the name of the game; "massacre" is more like it.

To Kramer, this was a "battle with two sides." And now, to mislead his readers, he says in his reply that there was indeed a "battle"—between the Yiftah-brigade soldiers and the two or three Jordanian armored cars that had penetrated Lydda. But that is not at issue. Sure, there was an Israeli-Jordanian battle (or, more accurately, a skirmish, in which there were Israeli casualties) around noon on July 12. But the question is whether what transpired *afterward*, between the townspeople, some of whom sniped at the Israelis, and the Yiftah troops—an action that ended in 250 dead townspeople—was a battle. Given the vanishingly small number of Israeli losses, "battle" is a tendentious misnomer, Kramer's sophistry and verbal acrobatics notwithstanding.

In his reply, Kramer dredges up new oral testimony about what happened at the small mosque. (I bow to Kramer's expertise in Arabic as to how the name of the mosque should be transliterated.) But this testimony still fails to prove that anyone from within the mosque threw a grenade at the Israeli troops outside, triggering the IDF rocketing of

those inside. Anyway, the event at the mosque was merely one (small) part of the Lydda massacre that afternoon (“small” insofar as it accounted, reportedly, for only 30 to 70 of the 250 Arab dead).

Kramer may be right in saying, as he now does, that “250” as recorded in the IDF documents was a rough estimate. I doubt that the IDF soldiers actually counted the bodies as they gathered and buried them, or that they recorded the process. But even if the ratio was 200:0 or 200:2, it would still point to a massacre. Kramer, incidentally, writes of 250 “casualties” when the document actually says “some 250 dead . . . and many wounded.” Historians—indeed, English-speakers—should know the difference between “dead” and “casualties.”

Kramer says that the figure of 250 and its corollary of “disproportion” are my sole proof that a massacre or massacres occurred in Lydda on the afternoon of July 12, 1948. As he puts it: “On this slim reed rests Morris’ claim” of massacre. But that is simply not true. In my books, and in my response to Kramer’s essay, I also quoted from contemporary documents—Kramer, for some reason, avoids documents like the plague, preferring interviews by others conducted decades after the event (was he trained as a historian or as an anthropologist?)—showing that Yiftah HQ ordered its troops to shoot “anyone seen on the streets.” Lastly, Mula Cohen, Yiftah’s commanding officer, when recalling these events in *Sefer Hapalmah*, vol. II (1956), p. 885, wrote: “The brutality of the war here reached its peak. The conquest of the city . . . awakened instincts of revenge [yitzrei-nakam] that sought an outlet.” When you couple a desire for revenge, and shooting anyone seen in the streets, with 250 dead townspeople, what do you get?

As for the run on the previous day (July 11) by Moshe Dayan’s 89th battalion through the peripheries of Lydda and Ramleh, all the documents agree that dozens of people—maybe 100-150—were hit, men, women, and children. True, the column suffered nine dead and some wounded. But the shooting was hardly a targeted killing of militiamen, and couldn’t have been one given the nature of the run (I’m sure even Kramer will agree with this). Granted, it wasn’t a deliberate massacre—but without doubt it was a mass killing that included civilians. Did these comprise many of the casualties? Most of the casualties? I don’t know. No one does.

Perhaps part of the problem stems from the meaning of the word “massacre.” Of course, all would agree that if you line up 100 civilians or unarmed POWs against a wall and shoot them, you have a massacre. But what occurred in Lydda was more complicated. A firefight with two Jordanian armored cars and sniping by armed townspeople provoked mass killing by a small IDF contingent that felt vulnerable and panicky: 300 to 400 men in the center of a town that they thought had surrendered (it hadn’t) and that contained tens of thousands of locals and refugees. And the Arabs were the ones who had started the war.

But whatever the extenuating circumstances, had IDF troops acted in such a manner today, given current legal and moral norms, they would most likely have been put on trial—by Israel. One can argue that one shouldn’t “judge” soldiers’ behavior in the past by today’s standards. Agreed. But this doesn’t change the fact that they committed a massacre.

I shouldn’t really waste time on this, but Kramer’s assurances to the contrary notwithstanding, Natan Alterman’s poem *Al Zot* was indeed probably about Lydda and not, as he says, about Dawayima (a village near Beit Jibrin that was the site of an IDF massacre in October 1948). Why Kramer is so “certain” about this—as he is so certain about almost everything he writes—I don’t know. The fact that Dan Laor, Alterman’s latest biographer, believes it is neither here nor there; Laor offers no proof either way. Certainly, there is no proof; we don’t have anything like, for instance, a diary entry by Alterman saying explicitly that he has composed a poem about Dawayima. But what he describes in *Al Zot* conforms to what happened in Dayan’s raid in Lydda—and the poem does speak explicitly of an incident in a town or city (*ir*) and not a village (*kfar*). In any case, there is no doubt in my mind that Alterman published his poem in the daily *Davar*, on November 19, in protest against a series of atrocities

committed by IDF during October and early November, of which Dawayima was just one. Those interested in the whole series can find detailed descriptions, insofar as the accessible documents allow, in my 2004 book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. (Of course, Kramer might dismiss these descriptions of mine as anti-Zionist propaganda as they are based on IDF, Israeli government, and Western diplomatic documentation from 1948 rather than on oral testimony by the participants given decades after the event.)

Lastly, Kramer continues to elide—in effect, deny—that following the massacre, the IDF expelled Lydda’s (and neighboring Ramleh’s) inhabitants. He says in his reply that this wasn’t the subject of his essay, and that the debate about the expulsion is a “well-worn subject.” (I suppose World War II is also a “well-worn subject,” but I believe historians still write about it.) He denies that he has whitewashed or elided. But that’s precisely what he did, clearly and, to my mind, for political reasons. In his reply he continues to ignore the plain, simple, explicit import of the July 12-13 IDF documentation on the subject. The Lydda (and Ramleh) townspeople were expelled, on orders from on high, and the officers expelling them knew that they were carrying out an expulsion and, at its end, knew that they had carried out an expulsion. This may not have sat well with the conscience of Shmarya Gutman, the Israeli military governor of Lydda; indeed, in his famous November 1948 article on Lydda, Gutman compares what happened to the townspeople with the exile of the Jews by the Romans 2,000 years earlier. But that’s what happened, whatever justifications or stories he may have concocted afterward.

Gutman—and he is the sole source for this story—writes, as paraphrased by Kramer: “The next day, the Israeli military governor reached an agreement with local notables that the civilian population would depart from Lydda and move eastward. Israeli soldiers, acting under orders, also encouraged their departure. Within a few hours, a stream of refugees made its way to the east, emptying the city.” So: there was an Israeli-Arab “agreement” for the Arab exodus and there was some Israeli “encouragement.” Now really. I’m sorry, but what can I do? The documents speak clearly, explicitly of geyrush: expulsion.

In my 2004 book, I give due credence to other factors in the exodus of the inhabitants of Lydda and Ramleh: they wanted their menfolk released, they didn’t look forward to life under Jewish rule, and so forth. But none of this detracts from the fact that the event as a whole was an expulsion. (Kramer’s fellow expulsion-deniers, Alon Kadish, Avraham Sela, and Arnon Golan, the last of whom is actually a good, serious historian, conclude in their Hebrew book on the conquest of Lydda that there was a “partial expulsion,” since some 500 of Lydda’s inhabitants remained in place. Again: now really.)

Kramer’s goal, throughout, appears to be to create or enhance a white-as-snow image of Israel. Like me, he is outraged by today’s widespread, untrue, and ill-willed misrepresentation of Israel, in the media and on college campuses, as a monstrous state. Well should he be outraged. But unlike Kramer, in countering this image I am unwilling to distort and misrepresent the past.

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Martin Kramer:

First, a word of thanks to Benny Morris. His work wasn’t the subject of my [essay](#), but he accepted an invitation from the editors to [wade in](#) as a respondent. Were it not for him, there wouldn’t have been any debate in *Mosaic* at

all. Ari Shavit, the author of *My Promised Land*, whose account of Lydda was the subject of my essay, remains silent. So do those who boosted Shavit's book while shedding belated tears of contrition over Lydda. They haven't so much as tweeted the existence of the essay or the exchange that followed. What are they waiting for?

Here once again, as in his original response, Morris would distract us from his dubious claim (elaborated by Shavit) that Israeli troops committed a "massacre" in Lydda by reverting to the subsequent expulsion of the town's Arabs. He even calls me an "expulsion denier." So I will state my view more plainly for his benefit. On July 12, after the aborted Palestinian uprising in Lydda, an order came down from on high—just how high is debated—to expel the Arab inhabitants. But there were many thousands of Arabs on the road out of Lydda who didn't wait for an order to leave, and never heard one. As I wrote, "the word 'expulsion' cannot suffice to describe *everything* that happened in Lydda" (emphasis added). Whether that makes me guilty of "expulsion denial" (which, like "Nakba denial," draws an abhorrent analogy to Holocaust denial), I leave to readers to decide.

Now back to the Lydda "massacre." Morris thinks the aim of my essay was to "create or enhance a white-as-snow image of Israel." In a summary of my essay that appeared elsewhere on July 1, I wrote [this](#): "My motive hasn't been to protect Israel's honor against the charge of massacre. There are some well-documented instances from 1948. It's just that Lydda isn't one of them." Morris now speculates that I might dismiss those other instances "as anti-Zionist propaganda as they are based on IDF/Israeli government/Western diplomatic documentation from 1948 rather than on oral testimony."

Untrue: documentation dispels doubt. And its absence increases doubt. The Lydda "massacre," according to Morris the "largest" of 1948, is dubious precisely because of the total absence of any IDF, Israeli government, or Western diplomatic documentation—Morris's own catalogue of what it would take to prove it. So he must cling tenaciously to the one shred he has, from a document not kept secret but published almost sixty years ago: the disproportion, in the Yiftah brigade's report of the battle, between 250 enemy killed versus only two Israelis. According to Morris, in a battle between "relatively primitive armies" in which neither side has a clear advantage in firepower, that "speaks massacre."

But the battle in Lydda (after the retreat of the Arab Legion) wasn't between "relatively primitive armies." It was between the Israeli army, outnumbered but equipped with antitank PIATs and heavy machine guns, versus many more locals [armed](#) with "sten guns, tommyguns, rifles (French, Italian, and German), and some dating back to the Ottoman period." Morris again: "If, in a specific battlefield, one side was more powerful than the other, a 'disproportion' in losses might arise." Isn't that a precise description of the Lydda battle? What is the story of the small mosque, if not one of superior firepower (a PIAT) exacting a high toll ("dozens," writes Morris) with one shot? The sides to an exchange of fire don't have to be equal for their (mis)match to be a battle, and that battle doesn't become a "massacre" simply because the outcome is lopsided.

But just how "disproportionate" was the killing in Lydda? That still depends largely on whether the figure of 250 deserves to be taken seriously. Even Morris now recognizes that it wasn't the result of a count. "I doubt that the IDF soldiers actually counted the bodies as they gathered and buried them," he concedes. (Indeed, they may have imposed that task on the remaining Arabs: one veteran of the battle [said](#) that "we didn't gather the bodies. It wasn't our business.") So even Morris has no idea how the number was reached.

As I mentioned in my essay, the historian Alon Kadish was the first to [discount](#) the number, and deeply ("it is doubtful that the number of Arabs killed on July 12 reached 250 or even half that number"). And as I noted in my earlier reply to Morris, the historian Itamar Radai has [warned](#) that in the 1948 war, 250 was probably a "symbolic" number, simply meaning "a lot"—like the estimate for Deir Yassin, where 254 turned out to be 100 (or like Teddy

Katz's discredited claim about a "massacre" at Tantura, which he also put at 250). In his latest reply, even Morris seems willing to bargain to make a point: so what if it was 200? (Perhaps if we go another round, he'll come down some more.)

I empathize with Morris: he needs to find estimates of Arabs killed and expelled to do his work, and the main (sometimes only) source is Israeli battle reports. But from the Bible to Vietnam, enemy body counts are the most inflatable figures in history. I wasn't shocked when I read Yehoshafat Harkabi's matter-of-fact [statement](#) that Israeli commanders often exaggerated enemy losses in 1948. I don't imagine the exaggeration was ever on the scale of Samson killing a thousand with a jawbone, but it would have conveyed the same message: a courageous handful of men, with few means, defeated the many.

While the "disproportion" may speak massacre to Morris today, it seems safe to assume that Mula Cohen, the Yiftah commander who signed the report of the battle, didn't imagine he was confessing to a "massacre." And I doubt that the editors who included it in the heroic *Sefer Hapalmah* in the 1950s regarded it as the smoking gun of a war crime. So just what did such "disproportion" speak at that time? A handful of courageous Palmahniks, with few means, defeated the many—and conquered Lydda.

Why does that last phrase need to be emphasized? After his earlier, guns-ablaze race past Lydda and Ramleh, Moshe Dayan met with Mula Cohen, who would [remember](#) the encounter this way:

Dayan said: "I'm going to Tel Aviv to Ben-Gurion, to inform him that I conquered Lydda." And that's the whole big story of "I conquered Lydda." In the meantime, they didn't conquer Lydda. We advanced slowly, we added a company of the 1st battalion to the 3rd battalion. Night falls, and Dayan's battalion is gone.

So who conquered Lydda? Moshe Dayan's 89th battalion, made up of former Lehi fighters and village boys, in its 47-minute blitzkrieg? Or Cohen's (and Yigal Allon's) Yiftah brigade, led by kibbutzniks, who occupied the town, repelled the Arab Legion's incursion, put down an incipient uprising, and drove the Legion out of Lydda's police station? Dayan's report claimed he killed 100-150 of the enemy ("very exaggerated," [wrote](#) the campaign's historian); Cohen's report claimed (counter-claimed?) 250. Are we supposed to take these numbers literally? Or did commanders err on the side of glory? It's a valid question, for which there won't ever be a clear answer. What's certain is that for the persons who reported the figure of 250 enemy killed on July 12, 1948 and published it in *Sefer Hapalmah* a few years later, the number didn't "speak massacre." It shouted that the Palmah, and no one else, conquered Lydda.

As supporting evidence, Morris adduces Cohen's statement that the conquest of Lydda put the soldiers in a vengeful mood. This, says Morris, primed them for massacre. (His quotation isn't from a contemporary document but from a later recollection by Cohen, proving once again that Morris never relies on the flawed memory of soldiers—except when he does.) There are two problems here. First, Morris has torn the quote from its context. Cohen was explaining why the soldiers of the Yiftah brigade descended into *looting*. Stealing and theft, not killing, were the "outlet" that "relieved the tension." (The full page in *Sefer Hapalmah* is [here](#).)

Second, there is testimony by squad commander Hanan Sever, given even earlier than Cohen's, to a very different mood among the conquering soldiers after they took the town:

In all the coffee houses, soldiers sat sipping fine coffee from demitasses. The tension dropped and slacked off entirely. The battle ended in carelessness, as each man turned to amuse himself. We entirely forgot the fact that

we were conquerors who numbered only 300, whereas the conquered numbered in the thousands, many of whom were Arab Legion soldiers still with their weapons; in only a few minutes, the conquest could turn into a defeat. Still, for some reason, a deep sense of confidence settled in our hearts, and with the carelessness of youth, we pushed aside the last bit of caution.

(An evocative [photograph](#) of Yiftah soldiers in Lydda, by Boris Carmi, perfectly illustrates this passage.) On the morning of the “massacre,” Sever [said](#) his own soldiers patrolled streets “in apathetic and calm relaxation,” and he had to urge them to stay alert. If Morris thinks he can establish the “massacre” by portraying Yiftah’s soldiers as prowling Lydda for revenge, he’ll have to work harder—and with oral testimony.

Morris finally hits the nail on the head with this sudden observation: “Perhaps part of the problem stems from the meaning of the word ‘massacre.’” Morris should know, since he’s confused the meaning by expanding it. When he first wrote about Lydda, in the first edition of his book on the refugees (p. 206), he didn’t use “massacre” to describe the events there, reserving it for cases such as Deir Yassin and Al-Dawayima. But in the revised edition (p. 428), he inserted the word in a sentence on Lydda without any new evidence or explanation. Lydda thereafter [featured](#) prominently on his list of 24 wartime massacres. Not only that, but Morris presumed that all 250 enemy supposedly killed in Lydda were massacred (see his book on Glubb Pasha, p. 177).

Still, despite his condemnation of other historians for denying the “massacre,” Morris himself now allows that the issue isn’t obviously self-evident. In this second response to me, he admits that the Lydda case is “more complicated” than his archetype of massacre allows. In his earlier response, he even created an entirely new sub-category for Lydda, describing it as “a massacre, albeit a provoked one”—the provocation presumably consisting of enemy bullets and grenades flying at soldiers. In fact, nowhere does Morris provide any rigorous definition of “massacre,” how it differs from “mass killing” (of which he accuses Moshe Dayan), or how it relates to “atrocities” (which he applies to Tantura). Instead, he substitutes repetition for definition—reiterating the same claim again and again, as if this established it as a fact.

I’m not a historian of 1948, but I’m a historian practicing in a much larger and more established field of study, and I know best practices when I see them. I just don’t see them in the narrative of a “massacre” at Lydda. Indeed, were it not for the bogus claim of “massacre” at Tantura, the Lydda accusation would constitute the most blatant excess of Israel’s “new historians.” As the 1948 veterans disappear, such claims have grown ever more extravagant: first, the creeping reclassification of complex battles as “massacres,” then the spread of the [notion](#) that Israel’s leaders “covered up for the officers who did the massacres,” and finally the florid elaboration of freshly discovered “massacres” in popular works ranging from [“imaginative reenactments”](#) to theatrical [plays](#).

For the last 30 years, new myths (in the guise of “new history”) have replaced old ones (the much-derided “old history”). This process has now peaked in a single decadent sentence, written by Ari Shavit and indebted to Benny Morris: “Zionism commits a massacre in the city of Lydda.” That this misplaced and overwrought confession has gone unchallenged by American Jewish thought leaders is proof that they aren’t competent to reconstruct an accurate narrative of Israel. Perhaps a few younger readers of this exchange will be inspired to attempt the task.

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