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Sharon ordered expulsion of 3,000 Bedouin, new biography reveals

Book: During secret 1972 military exercise in Sinai, dozens of children and elderly were expelled in the bitter cold of night, and died.

By Anshel Pfeffer | Feb. 12, 2014 | 3:00 AM | 23

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Haim Bar-Lev and Sharon, 1973 Photo by GPO

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It was one of the most important, expensive and creative exercises the Israel Defense Forces had ever held - an entire armored division crossing a large obstacle of water. Exercise "Oz" (valor) strengthened the Israeli strategy that envisaged crossing the Suez Canal and fighting on the Egyptian side if war was to break out again in the Sinai Peninsula.

Twenty months later, that was the scenario that played out in the critical stage of the Yom Kippur War. The exercise, the largest the IDF had ever held to date, began in the southern Negev and proceeded deep into Sinai and its center, the crossing of an artificial lake near Abu Agheila, created by opening the Rueifa Dam. It took six days, beginning on February 20, 1972, in the presence of Prime Minister Golda Meir, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and Chief of Staff Lieutenant General David (Dado) Elazar and was carried out in deep secrecy.

Neither the leaders nor the thousands of soldiers taking part were aware that a few weeks earlier, the man whose idea the exercise was, head of Southern Command, Maj. Gen. Ariel Sharon, had ordered the expulsion of three thousand civilians, members of two Bedouin tribes whose encampments and grazing grounds were in the exercise area. The expulsion took place without warning, during a freezing desert cold snap, without time for the Bedouin to take their belongings, causing around forty deaths, mainly of children, babies and old people.

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The story has not been told for 42 years and even after it was revealed to Lt. Gen. David Elazar who ordered to return the Bedouin to their homes, no-one was ever held responsible. It was published for the first time last month in "Arik," a new biography of Ariel Sharon, written by former Haaretz editor-in-chief David Landau. The belated revelation is based on a report written in 1972 by Israel's foremost researcher of Bedouin life, Clinton (Yitzhak) Bailey.

Bailey, an immigrant from the United States lived and taught Hebrew at Kibbutz Sde Boker and was making his first steps in researching the Bedouin tribes of the Negev and Sinai. He heard of the expulsion at the end of February 1972 when he met a sheikh of the Tarabin tribe in El-Arish. The sheikh told him of a large group of his kinsmen who had been expelled from their lands near Abu Agheila and had been forced to walk dozens of kilometers and relocate south of the Jabel Khalal mountain.

"I went out there with my jeep and met them living there in groups in makeshift tents," Bailey told Haaretz this week. "They had been forced to leave most of their property behind. They told me that IDF officers had arrived at their encampments in the night, some with jeeps, others on camels and ordered them to leave at once." The expulsions took place over three nights in January 1972 and at least in one case where the Bedouin refused to leave, the IDF soldiers had fired in the air and began tearing up their tents.

They lead him to two temporary burial grounds where Bailey recorded and photographed at least 28 little graves. "I returned to El-Arish and spoke with a few officers of the military governorship who told me the Bedouin had been removed on Sharon's orders and Arik probably wants to use their land now for Israeli settlement." Bailey, himself a reserve officer in the governorship decided to notify his commander, Military Governor Brig. Gen. Shlomo Gazit. "Gazit said he would look into it" recalls Bailey, "but nothing happened and the Bedouin weren't allowed to go back."

He next turned to Haaretz's veteran reporter in the south of Israel, Mordehai Artzieli, who was a friend of Sharon's and of other senior officers. Artzieli, who died in 2004, chose not to publish the report (it probably would have been blocked by the military censorship due to the secret exercise) but updated the chief of staff instead.

Lt. Gen. Elazar had only a few weeks earlier been forced to order a high-level investigation into another expulsion ordered by Sharon of Bedouin living in the Rafah Salient. That case had reached the press and caused an uproar in the government and a High Court petition after Negev kibbutz members embarked on a campaign on behalf of the Bedouin. Anxious to prevent another scandal, Elazar summoned Bailey to his office in Tel-Aviv and called Sharon in his presence. "Dado was surprised by what I told him and read my report then and there. I don't think he was putting on an act. His tone when he called Sharon was cold and formal. 'Why haven't they been allowed to return?' he asked. 'Make sure they are back tomorrow.' Sharon asked him how he knew about it and Dado told him about me and my report."

A few days later Bailey was invited to meet Sharon at Southern Command in Beer Sheva. "Sharon was very friendly and told me how much he loves the Bedouin and visiting the Azazme tribe. He said 'I didn't know what happened to those Bedouin' though I knew it was his orders. I realized later he was trying to neutralize me and he had issued an order forbidding my entrance into all IDF bases in Sinai. I had to appeal to Dado to have that order rescinded." Over the years, Bailey, who was to become a lieutenant-colonel in the Civil Administration in the Territories and an advisor on Arab affairs to the Defense Ministry, would meet Sharon a number of times. "A love-hate relationship developed between us," he said. "He was always suspicious of me but he appreciated that I was a field man and wanted to see my maps and reports."

It is still unclear which unit carried out the expulsions. A number of officers who served at the time in Southern Command and in the military governorship told Haaretz they do not remember or were not aware of this case. Maj. Gen. (res.) Gazit, whom Bailey first notified, said this week he has no recollection of an expulsion at Abu Agheila, though he remembers

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By Jonathan Lis, Gili Cohen, Ido Efrati and Barak Ravid

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the Rafah Salient case. "I would have to take care of such a thing but I don't remember it. There were various canal-crossing exercises but I don't remember that specific one." It is clear that the senior officers who were aware and the chief of staff who heard about it from Bailey wanted to keep the case under wraps due to the secrecy of the exercise and their desire to prevent another public scandal.

The Sharon family was not interested in commenting. Arik's son, Omri, said "I don't know about it and have no interest in dealing with this."

The IDF also preferred not to comment. The IDF Spokesperson's Unit confirmed that the case is known and has been documented by the army's history department but since all the officers involved have left the army long ago, it does not want to comment.

Forty years passed between Bailey's first attempt at interesting Haaretz's correspondent in the south in reporting the case to his approaching David Landau who was researching for his biography of Sharon where the story has now been published for the first time. "No-one has ever accounted for what happened to the Bedouin and those deaths," Bailey said.

"I didn't really think about that at the time. I only wanted them to be allowed to go home and I was happy that happened. I'm not proud of this as an Israeli. You have to remember the situation then. No-one criticized the army and Sharon; the hero of the Six Day War was a demi-god, larger than life. I was a thirty-year-old researcher. The treatment of the Bedouin then was awful; they were constantly under suspicion and Sharon was Sharon - a man who always saw whoever stood in his way, especially Arabs, as expendable. He wanted his big exercise and the Bedouin were just an incidental nuisance. He didn't care about civilians getting hurt in the way. They could have been temporarily evacuated in a humane way, with proper transport and shelter. But that just didn't occur to him."

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