Kafr Bir'im

Kafr Bir'im: A Depopulated Palestinian Village in the Safad District

Kafr Bir'im was a Palestinian village in the Safad District, located approximately 11.5 km northwest of Safad in Upper Galilee, at an average elevation of about 750 metres above sea level. Its population was overwhelmingly Christian, and agriculture—particularly olives, fruit trees, and cereals—formed the basis of village life. Kafr Bir'im finally came under Israeli occupation in early November 1948, in the immediate aftermath of Operation Hiram. Its inhabitants were subsequently removed on what was presented as a temporary measure for “security reasons.”

Although the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in 1952 that there was no reason to prevent their return, the Israeli army destroyed most of the village in 1953.

Item	Information
Subdistrict	Safad
Distance from district center	11.5 km northwest of Safad
Average Elevation	750 m above sea level
Population in 1931	554
Number of Houses in 1931	132
Population in 1944/1945	710 – 700 Christians and 10 Muslims
Estimated Population in 1948	About 824 – a later demographic estimate, not an official census
Total Land Area in 1945	12,250 dunams
Attack and Depopulation	The village surrendered in early November 1948, when Galilee fell to Israeli occupation forces during Operation Hiram; its inhabitants, like those of other border villages, were then expelled 'temporarily' for 'security reasons': some were driven across the border, while those found hiding in nearby caves were taken to the village of Jish. Although the Israeli Supreme Court ruled in July 1952 that there was no reason to prevent their return, the Israeli army levelled the village in 1953.
Final Israeli Control	Early November 1948, when the village surrendered as Galilee fell during Operation Hiram (28–31 October 1948); the available sources do not give the day of its surrender. A United Press report of its fall on 18 May 1948 is not confirmed by the village's own entry
Military Operation	Operation Hiram
Military Unit	The available sources do not identify the unit that occupied the village; Operation Hiram was carried out by units from four brigades: the Seventh (Sheva') Brigade, the Carmeli Brigade, the Golani Brigade and the Oded Brigade.

Item	Information
Cause of Depopulation	Expulsion by Israeli occupation forces, 'temporarily' and 'for security reasons', like the inhabitants of other border villages, who were then prevented from returning to their village despite a 1952 Israeli Supreme Court ruling
Settlements Documented on Village Lands	Bar'am, founded in 1949 by members of the Palmach northeast of the village site, a little farther away from it; and Dovev, established in 1963 on village land northwest of the site

Location of Kafr Bir'im

Kafr Bir'im stood on a rocky hill that rose only slightly above the surrounding terrain and faced north and west.

The village was approximately 11.5 km northwest of Safad and had an average elevation of about 750 metres above sea level.

A secondary road linked it with villages to the east and west and connected with both the coastal highway and the road to Safad.

Its lands bordered those of Fara, Jish, Sa'sa', al-Ras al-Ahmar, and the Lebanese frontier.

Part of the village lands was forested, while gardens, olive trees, and vineyards surrounded the residential area.

The Name Kafr Bir'im

Walid Khalidi suggests that the name Kafr Bir'im may be a corruption of the name of an ancient Canaanite settlement rendered as Periya'm or a similar form.

Palestine Remembered additionally associates the old name with the meaning “abundant in fruit,” but Khalidi's principal entry does not establish this as a certain linguistic etymology.

The safest formulation is therefore that Kafr Bir'im may preserve the name of an

earlier Canaanite locality without treating a specific translation of the ancient name as conclusively established.

Architecture of Kafr Bir'im

In the late nineteenth century, Kafr Bir'im was described as a stone-built village surrounded by gardens, olive trees, and vineyards.

The houses stood very close together and were principally built of stone.

The built-up area amounted to approximately 96 dunums in the 1944/45 statistics.

The village church was one of its most prominent buildings and became the principal intact structure to survive the later destruction of Kafr Bir'im.

Religion in Kafr Bir'im

The overwhelming majority of Kafr Bir'im's inhabitants were Christian.

In the 1944/45 statistics, the village had 710 inhabitants: 700 Christians and 10 Muslims.

Kafr Bir'im may therefore accurately be described as predominantly Christian, but it was not exclusively Christian immediately before the Nakba.

Education in Kafr Bir'im

Palestine Remembered preserves photographic documentation of an elementary school in Kafr Bir'im, including a photograph captioned as showing pupils and teachers in 1939.

The principal approved sources used here do not provide a verified founding date or enrollment figure for the school.

The existence of the elementary school is therefore recorded without adding

unsupported dates or statistics.

Economic Life in Kafr Bir'im

Agriculture irrigated by the village's abundant springs was the principal source of livelihood.

The villagers were especially active in olive and fruit cultivation and also grew cereals. Vineyards and other orchards surrounded the village.

In 1944/45, 3,718 dunums were devoted to cereals and 1,101 dunums were irrigated or used for plantations.

Palestine Remembered separately records 143 dunums of olive groves. This is treated as a detail within the agricultural land rather than added again to the cultivable-land total.

Some local accounts contain additional details concerning grain milling, olive presses, tobacco processing, and lime production. These specific industrial claims are not documented in the principal Khalidi/PalQuest village entry and are therefore not presented here as established statistical facts.

Land Ownership in Kafr Bir'im

The total registered land area of Kafr Bir'im was 12,250 dunums in the 1944/45 statistics.

Total	**12,250**
Ownership category	**Area in dunums**
Palestinian	12,244
Transferred to Zionists	0
Communal	6

No land was recorded in the category “Transferred to Zionists” in the 1944/45

ownership statistics. Almost all registered land was Palestinian, with only six dunums classified as public/communal.

Land Use in Kafr Bir'im, 1944/45

Total	12,244	6	12,250
Land use	**Palestinian**	**Communal/Public**	**Total**
Plantations and irrigable land	1,101	0	1,101
Cereals	3,718	0	3,718
Built-up area	96	0	96
Non-cultivable land	7,329	6	7,335

A total of 4,819 dunums, approximately 39 percent of the village lands, was cultivated or cultivable.

Built-up and non-cultivable land together amounted to 7,431 dunums, approximately 61 percent of the total.

Palestine Remembered presents all 7,335 dunums of non-arable land in its Palestinian column. PalQuest's detailed statistics show that 7,329 dunums were Arab land and six dunums were public land. The communal/public category is therefore separated above.

Population of Kafr Bir'im

Population of Kafr Bir'im in selected years

Year	Population	Nature of figure
Late nineteenth century	Approximately 300–500	Historical estimate from the Survey of Western Palestine
1922	469	Official British Mandate census

Year	Population	Nature of figure
1931	554	Official British Mandate census
1944/45	710	Official statistics: 700 Christians and 10 Muslims
1948	824	Later estimate published by Palestine Remembered
Estimated refugees in 1998	5,058	Later estimate published by Palestine Remembered
The 1948 and 1998 figures are later estimates rather than official British Mandate census figures. The figure of 1,050 inhabitants for 1948 found in some material is not supported by the principal statistical sources used here.		

Number of Houses in Kafr Bir'im

Number of houses in Kafr Bir'im

Year	Number of houses	Nature of figure
1931	132	Official British Mandate census figure
1948	196	Later estimate published by Palestine Remembered
The 1948 house count is a later estimate rather than an official Mandate census figure.		

Archaeological Remains in Kafr Bir'im

Kafr Bir'im was an important archaeological site reflecting a long history of settlement.

The documented remains included ancient olive presses, tombs, water cisterns, and a synagogue.

The ancient synagogue should not be confused with the religious composition of the village immediately before the Nakba, when the overwhelming majority of Kafr Bir'im's inhabitants were Christian.

An Earlier Report of Kafr Bir'im's Capture in 1948

An earlier report complicates the chronology of Kafr Bir'im's final occupation.

In PalQuest's entry for neighboring Saliha, Khalidi cites United Press and Arab military sources in Amman as reporting that Saliha and Kafr Bir'im fell to Israeli forces on 18 May 1948.

Khalidi indicates in the Saliha discussion that this occupation may have been temporary. His dedicated Kafr Bir'im entry instead places the village's final surrender in early November 1948.

The 18 May report is therefore preserved as evidence of a possible earlier temporary occupation rather than treated as the final depopulation date.

Operation Hiram and Kafr Bir'im

Israeli occupation forces launched Operation Hiram in Upper Galilee from 28 to 31 October 1948 following the second truce.

At the broader operational level, the Sheva' (Seventh), Carmeli, Golani, and 'Oded brigades took part in the offensive; PalQuest's operation metadata also lists Giv'ati among units associated with Operation Hiram.

Within a few days, Israeli forces occupied most of Upper Galilee. Some Palestinian villages were emptied immediately, while inhabitants of other border villages were expelled in the following days and weeks under the stated objective of clearing the frontier.

PalQuest lists Kafr Bir'im among the villages affected by Operation Hiram but does not identify a specific brigade as the village-level occupying unit.

Occupation and Displacement of Kafr Bir'im

Kafr Bir'im surrendered in early November 1948, immediately after Operation

Hiram and the Israeli occupation of Upper Galilee.

Palestine Remembered lists 4 November 1948 as the specific occupation date, while Khalidi's principal entry states only “early November.”

Since PalQuest formally dates Operation Hiram to 28–31 October, it is more precise to describe Kafr Bir'im's final surrender as occurring in the immediate aftermath of the operation and during the subsequent expansion of Israeli control along the Lebanese frontier.

The villagers were not initially told that their removal would be permanent. Like residents of other border villages, they were expelled “temporarily” for stated “security reasons.”

Some inhabitants were expelled across the frontier and were later allowed to return inside the new Israeli state, but not to Kafr Bir'im itself.

Other residents who were found hiding in caves near the village were taken to Jish, approximately 3 km southeast, and placed in houses that had previously been emptied of their inhabitants.

- Earlier report of a possible temporary capture: 18 May 1948.
- Military context of the final occupation: Operation Hiram and the subsequent clearing of the frontier zone.
- Formal dates of Operation Hiram: 28–31 October 1948.
- Final surrender according to Khalidi: early November 1948.
- Date listed by Palestine Remembered: 4 November 1948.
- Village-specific occupying brigade: not established in the principal source.
- Stated reason for the residents' removal: a “temporary” security measure.
- Fate of part of the population: some were transferred to Jish, while others were expelled across the frontier.

Occupation and Depopulation Chronology

Stage	Date	Details
Unconfirmed report of the village's occupation	18 May 1948	Citing Arab military sources in Amman, the United Press reported that Saliha, along with Kafr Bir'im, was occupied by Israeli occupation forces on 18 May 1948, as Khalidi records in his entry on Saliha, where he suggests that the occupation may have been only temporary. Kafr Bir'im's own entry does not mention this report and places the village's surrender in early November 1948.
Beginning of the military operation	28 October 1948	Israeli occupation forces launched Operation Hiram with units from the Sheva' (Seventh), Carmeli, Golani and Oded brigades; it lasted until 31 October 1948, and the whole of Upper Galilee was occupied during it. PalQuest lists Kafr Bir'im among the villages affected by the operation.
Final occupation	Early November 1948	The village surrendered when Galilee fell to Israeli occupation forces during Operation Hiram; the available sources give neither the day of its surrender nor the unit that entered it.
'Temporary' expulsion of the inhabitants	Probably November 1948	The villagers, like the inhabitants of other border villages, were expelled 'temporarily' for 'security reasons'; Khalidi gives no date for the expulsion but places it after the village's surrender. Some were driven across the border, and some of these were later allowed to return to Israel but not to their village, while those found hiding in nearby caves were taken to the village of Jish (3 km to the southeast) and settled in its previously emptied houses.
Settlement on village lands	1949	Members of the Palmach founded the settlement of Bar'am northeast of the village site, a little farther away from it; Khalidi lists it among the settlements on village lands.

Stage	Date	Details
Israeli Supreme Court ruling that nothing prevented their return	July 1952	The Israeli Supreme Court ruled that there was no reason to prevent the displaced inhabitants of Kafr Bir'im from returning to their village.
Destruction of the village	1953	The Israeli army levelled the village despite the Supreme Court ruling; only the church and its belltower were left standing.
Settlement on village lands	1963	The settlement of Dovev was established on village land, northwest of the village site.

The Return Case and the Destruction of Kafr Bir'im

Kafr Bir'im differed from many depopulated Palestinian villages in that the inhabitants' removal had been presented as temporary and a number of villagers remained inside Palestine and continued to demand their return.

In July 1952, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that there was no reason to prevent the inhabitants from returning to Kafr Bir'im.

The ruling did not result in their return.

In 1953, the Israeli army demolished most of the village, approximately five years after its occupation and after the Supreme Court ruling.

It is therefore historically inaccurate to state that Kafr Bir'im was destroyed during its initial occupation in 1948. The village remained standing after its inhabitants were removed and was largely destroyed later, in 1953.

Israeli Settlements on Kafr Bir'im's Lands

Two settlements were established on Kafr Bir'im's lands after the Nakba:

- Bar'am: established in 1949 northeast of the village site by members of the Palmach.
- Dovev: established in 1963 northwest of the village site on Kafr Bir'im's

lands.

Kafr Bir'im Today

According to the field description published by Walid Khalidi in *All That Remains*, Kafr Bir'im was demolished, with the church and its bell tower remaining as the principal intact structure.

Crumbled walls, partially collapsed houses, and extensive rubble remained scattered across the hillside and were overgrown with bushes and wild grasses.

Some archaeological remains were also still visible.

At the time of Khalidi's field documentation, the village site had been closed off and the surrounding area designated as an archaeological and tourist site.

Palestine Remembered preserves later user-contributed documentation of the village, including photographs of the church and house ruins from 2000, 2003, 2016, and contributor photographs dated June 2025.

These later materials are useful for documenting the site's continuing visible remains but are individual contributions rather than a comprehensive independent field survey.

The principal field description therefore remains Khalidi's historical documentation, supplemented cautiously by later photographs. The approved sources used here do not provide a sufficiently comprehensive independent 2026 field survey to establish the precise present condition of every part of Kafr Bir'im.

Sources

- PalQuest – Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question: Kafr Bir'im
- PalQuest – Operation Hiram
- PalQuest – Saliha: reference to the early 18 May 1948 report concerning

Kafr Bir'im

- Palestine Remembered – Kafr Bir'im, Safad District
- Palestine Remembered – Kafr Bir'im entry from All That Remains
- Institute for Palestine Studies – All That Remains, Walid Khalidi