Ain El-Zeitoun Massacre

The Ein al-Zeitun Massacre (1948)

The **Ein al-Zeitun Massacre** was committed by Zionist Palmach forces in May 1948 against prisoners from the village of Ein al-Zeitun, in the Safad district, during **Operation Yiftach**. After the village was captured, about **70 prisoners** were executed with their hands bound in a nearby gully, on the orders of Palmach Third Battalion commander **Moshe Kelman**.

The Village

Ein al-Zeitun was located on the western slope of Wadi al-Dilb, beside the main road leading to Safad (Safed), about one and a half kilometers north of the city, and was considered one of its suburbs. It was known for its stone houses and natural springs.

- **Population:** 820 residents in 1945.
- **Houses:** 127 houses.
- **Land:** in 1944, 280 dunums were used for cereals and 477 dunums were irrigated or used for orchards.

Earlier Attacks

The village was attacked by Zionist forces months before its capture. On January 3, 1948, a Zionist group threw several bombs at houses in the village, killing one of its residents.

The Capture of the Village

As part of Operation Yiftach, which paved the way for the capture of Safad, Palmach forces advanced on Ein al-Zeitun from the north and shelled it with mortars. After clashes with the villagers, who eventually ran out of ammunition, the Palmach captured the village on May 1, 1948.

Most of the villagers fled or were expelled, while dozens of men were taken prisoner. Palmach sappers then blew up and burned the village's houses on May 2 and 3.

The Massacre

A day or two after the capture, Palmach Third Battalion commander **Moshe Kelman** ordered the prisoners to be executed. According to Israeli historian **Benny Morris**, Kelman had difficulty finding soldiers willing to carry out the killings, and eventually assigned the task to two men.

About **70 prisoners**, many of them young men from Ein al-Zeitun, were killed with their hands bound in a gully between the village and Safad. Their bodies were left in the gully for two days.

When word of the massacre leaked out, and fearing the arrival of the Red Cross or British or UN investigators, Kelman ordered the bodies to be untied before burial, to conceal that the prisoners had been executed in cold blood.

The Testimony of Netiva Ben-Yehuda

Netiva Ben-Yehuda, a Palmach member who was in the village when the massacre took place, described it in her book *Through the Binding Ropes* (*Miba'ad La'avutot*, 1985). She wrote that the prisoners were tied up and thrown into the gully, and that she was among the soldiers ordered to untie the bodies and bury them.

Preventing Return and the Impact of the Massacre

Over the following days, several villagers tried to return to their homes, but Palmach forces opened fire on them and prevented their return, killing one of them, **Rashid Khalil**.

The destruction of Ein al-Zeitun and the massacre spread terror among the Arabs of Safad and contributed to their flight from the city in the following days, until its fall on May 10, 1948.