The Qibya Massacre: Operation Shoshana, 1953

The Qibya Massacre: Operation Shoshana, 1953

On the night of **October 14–15, 1953**, Israeli forces under the field command of **Ariel Sharon** attacked the Palestinian village of **Qibya**, located near the armistice line separating the West Bank from the territories under the control of the **State of Israel (Occupied Palestine)**. At the time, the village was under Jordanian rule.

In Israeli military terminology, the operation was known as **Operation Shoshana**. It was carried out primarily by **Unit 101**, the special operations unit commanded by Sharon, with the participation of troops from the **890th Paratroopers**

Battalion.

By the end of the attack, dozens of Palestinians had been killed, many of them beneath the rubble of their homes after Israeli forces placed explosives in residential buildings and detonated them.

Later historical sources place the death toll at approximately **69 Palestinians**, with women and children constituting a large proportion of the victims.

More than forty houses and a number of other village buildings and facilities were also destroyed.

The massacre provoked widespread international outrage. The United States and other countries condemned the attack, and on **November 24, 1953**, the United Nations Security Council adopted **Resolution 101**, issuing its strongest censure of the Israeli operation.

Qibya Before the Massacre

Qibya lies northwest of Ramallah, only a short distance from the armistice line established after the **Nakba and the occupation of large parts of Palestine in 1948**.

Like many Palestinian villages situated along the Green Line, Qibya became part of a highly unstable and tense frontier zone after the 1949 Jordan–Israel Armistice Agreement.

Palestinians displaced during the Nakba crossed the armistice lines for various reasons. Some attempted to return to their homes or agricultural land, recover property and crops, visit relatives, or seek employment, while others carried out armed operations.

In response, the **State of Israel (Occupied Palestine)** developed during the early 1950s a military policy based on what it called **“reprisal operations”**, targeting villages, military positions, and police posts on the Jordanian, Egyptian,

Syrian, and Lebanese sides of the armistice lines.

Qibya became one of the deadliest examples of this policy.

Unit 101 and Ariel Sharon

In August **1953**, the Israeli military established **Unit 101**, a small special operations force placed under the command of officer **Ariel Sharon**.

The unit was created to carry out infiltrations, raids, and reprisal operations across the armistice lines.

Its operations relied primarily on surprise, nighttime movement, the use of explosives, and rapid withdrawal after completing an attack.

The Qibya Massacre later became the best-known operation associated with Unit 101.

During the attack on Qibya, the unit was reinforced by Israeli paratroopers.

Contemporary United Nations observers described the attacking force as approximately **half a battalion of regular Israeli troops**. Later historical estimates differ regarding the precise number of participants, and therefore claims that 600 soldiers directly took part in the assault on the village cannot be treated as a firmly established figure.

Why Was Qibya Selected?

Qibya was a Palestinian civilian village located close to the armistice line, in an area Israeli authorities believed had been used by infiltrators to cross the frontier.

The operation, however, was not planned as an attempt to arrest specific individuals suspected of involvement in the Yahud incident.

Accounts based on Israeli military documents indicate that the operational instructions included inflicting severe destruction on the village and causing heavy

casualties as part of a policy intended to create deterrence and place pressure on populations living in frontier areas.

The village and its civilian buildings therefore became part of the military objective itself, rather than the operation being confined to targeting a specific armed group.

Operation Shoshana

The Israeli military command named the attack **Operation Shoshana**.

Israeli sources associate the name with one of the two girls killed in the Yahud incident.

Ariel Sharon commanded the attacking force, which included members of Unit 101 and paratroopers.

Additional Israeli forces were deployed in surrounding areas to prevent Jordanian reinforcements from reaching the village, block roads, and secure the withdrawal of the forces participating in the attack.

The operation was therefore not a spontaneous border raid but a planned and organized military assault involving multiple units.

The Attack Begins

At approximately **9:30 p.m. on October 14**, Israeli forces crossed the armistice line and began their attack on Qibya.

Mines were laid or roads leading to the village were blocked in order to isolate it and delay the arrival of Jordanian forces.

Supporting Israeli forces also moved toward the neighboring villages of **Shuqba and Budrus**.

During the withdrawal of the attacking forces, the area around Budrus was also subjected to mortar fire.

Inside Qibya, Israeli soldiers moved through the village using machine guns, hand grenades, demolition equipment, and large quantities of **TNT**.

Resistance Inside the Village

A number of Qibya residents and members of the **National Guard** attempted to resist the attack.

The defenders, however, possessed limited weapons and ammunition compared with the regular Israeli forces, which had been equipped in advance with machine guns, explosives, and supporting units.

Jordanian units from surrounding areas attempted to advance toward Qibya, but Israeli forces positioned along the access routes obstructed their arrival.

The disparity in firepower, planning, and weaponry left the village with an extremely limited ability to resist the assault.

Homes Blown Up with Their Occupants Inside

The deadliest phase of the operation began when Israeli demolition teams moved from house to house.

Explosives were placed in a large number of homes and then detonated.

Many villagers had taken refuge inside their houses during the shooting.

When United Nations observers entered Qibya after the attack, they found bodies beneath the ruins of homes and recorded consistent testimonies stating that the attacking forces had moved through the buildings **blowing up houses, firing at doors and windows, and throwing grenades into homes**.

Unexploded Israeli-manufactured grenades and bags containing TNT were also found in and around the village.

The Scale of Destruction in Qibya

Contemporary reports differ slightly regarding the final number of buildings destroyed.

Jordan’s initial complaint to the United Nations stated that Israeli forces had destroyed **40 houses, in addition to the village school and a water reservoir**.

Later historical studies, meanwhile, report that approximately **45 houses** were destroyed and also refer to damage to the village mosque and other structures.

Regardless of the limited variation in figures, the destruction was extensive and directly concentrated on civilian and residential buildings in the village.

Victims of the Qibya Massacre

The death toll rose gradually as villagers and rescue teams continued removing rubble after the Israeli forces withdrew.

Initial Jordanian information reported the recovery of **42 bodies** and stated that 38 of the victims were women and children.

United Nations observers subsequently recorded that bodies continued to be recovered from beneath the destroyed houses and that the number of dead had risen above fifty.

Later historical sources place the final death toll at approximately **69 Palestinians**.

A large proportion of the victims were **women and children**.

Many were not killed during an armed exchange of fire but were found beneath the rubble of homes that had been blown up during the military operation.

Families Killed Beneath the Rubble

The massacre had a devastating impact on Qibya’s families.

Palestinian testimonies document families in which large numbers of members, and in some cases most of a household, were killed inside the same home after it was demolished.

Survivors emerged from the rubble or returned to their homes to find parents, mothers, children, siblings, and relatives among the dead.

For this reason, Qibya has not been remembered in Palestinian collective memory merely as a military raid across the armistice line, but as **a massacre in which Palestinian families were killed inside their own homes**.

What Did the United Nations Observers Find?

United Nations observers arrived in Qibya on **October 15, 1953**, only hours after the attack had ended.

The findings of their investigation were clear regarding the organized military character of the operation.

The observers concluded that the attack had been **well planned** and carried out by men trained in sustained and organized military operations.

They considered it highly improbable that an irregular force could have carried out an operation of this scale, using such quantities of explosives and weapons, without suffering accidents or casualties from its own fire and demolition charges.

This evidence contradicted the account later presented that the attack might have been a spontaneous act carried out by angry Israeli civilians living near the frontier.

The Armistice Commission Condemns Israel

On **October 15**, the **Israel–Jordan Mixed Armistice Commission** held an emergency meeting.

It concluded that a force from the **regular Israeli army** had crossed the armistice line and attacked Qibya.

The Commission determined that the operation constituted a violation of the General Armistice Agreement between Jordan and Israel.

It also addressed the shelling and attacks affecting Budrus and Shuqba.

These findings became some of the most important evidence later considered during the United Nations Security Council debate.

Ben-Gurion Initially Denies Army Responsibility

Despite the evidence gathered by United Nations observers, Israeli Prime Minister **David Ben-Gurion** initially denied publicly that the Israeli army had carried out the Qibya Massacre.

In a radio address on **October 19**, he presented an account suggesting that Israeli residents of frontier areas, angered by earlier attacks, might have crossed the border and carried out the raid on their own.

The United Nations investigation did not support this account.

The observers concluded that the scale and coordination of the operation, the type of weapons used, the expertise demonstrated in explosives, and the military tactics employed all showed that it had been an organized military operation.

The responsibility of Israeli forces for the Qibya Massacre subsequently became a documented historical fact and was confirmed by the Security Council itself.

The United States Condemns the Qibya Massacre

The massacre produced an unusually strong American reaction.

On **October 18, 1953**, the United States Department of State expressed sympathy for the families of the victims and described the reports it had received regarding the loss of life and destruction in Qibya as **“shocking.”**

It also stated that those responsible for the attack should be held accountable, and the United States joined Britain and France in calling for the deteriorating situation to be brought before the Security Council.

Washington later supported the Security Council resolution condemning the Israeli operation.

Did the United States Freeze Aid Because of Qibya?

Some accounts repeatedly state that the United States suspended economic assistance to Israel as direct punishment for the Qibya Massacre.

The historical record, however, is more complicated.

Washington had already delayed the allocation of part of its economic assistance **before the massacre occurred** because of a separate dispute between Israel and the United Nations concerning an Israeli water-diversion project in the demilitarized zone on the Syrian frontier near **Banat Yaqub**.

The Qibya Massacre significantly intensified American criticism of Israeli policy and political pressure on the **State of Israel (Occupied Palestine)**, but it was not the sole original reason for the decision to delay the aid.

The funds were later released after the Israeli government agreed to suspend the disputed water-diversion works pending consideration of the issue through United Nations mechanisms.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 101

On **November 24, 1953**, the United Nations Security Council adopted **Resolution 101**.

The Council determined that the retaliatory action at Qibya carried out by the **armed forces of Israel** on October 14–15, 1953 constituted a violation of the ceasefire provisions and was inconsistent with the parties' obligations under the Jordan–Israel General Armistice Agreement and the Charter of the United Nations.

The Security Council expressed its **strongest censure** of the Israeli action and called upon Israel to take effective measures to prevent the recurrence of such operations.

At the same time, it called upon Jordan to continue taking measures to prevent unauthorized persons from crossing the armistice line and urged both parties to cooperate fully with United Nations observers.

Resolution 101 remains one of the clearest contemporary international documents formally establishing the responsibility of Israeli military forces for the attack on Qibya.

Spreading Fear Along the Armistice Line

The demolition of dozens of homes in a civilian village and the deaths of such a large number of people, including women and children, sent a severe message to Palestinian communities living along the armistice line.

Accounts concerning the operational orders, which point to an intention to inflict extensive damage and heavy casualties, reinforced the interpretation of the attack as part of a policy of deterrence through overwhelming force.

Qibya After the Nakba

The massacre took place only about five years after the **Palestinian Nakba of 1948**.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees were still living near the armistice lines, often only a short distance from the villages, towns, orchards, and lands from which they had been displaced.

The armistice lines established in 1949 also separated Palestinian families from their lands and divided economic and social networks that had been interconnected before the Nakba.

Within this context, the Qibya Massacre demonstrated the vulnerability of Palestinian villages caught between the unresolved consequences of displacement, crossings of the armistice line, Jordanian military rule, and Israel’s increasingly aggressive military reprisal policy.

From Qibya to Later Israeli Raids

The Qibya operation represented an important stage in the development of Israeli special-operations methods.

Unit 101 was later incorporated into the paratroopers, while Ariel Sharon continued to play major roles in subsequent Israeli military operations.

During the following years, Israeli reprisal operations increased in both scale and firepower.

Palestinian and Arab communities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip experienced further attacks, including military operations at **Nahhalin, Gaza, Khan Yunis, al-Rahwa, Husan, and Qalqilya**.

The cycle of crossings, attacks, and escalating military reprisals contributed to the regional tensions that preceded the **Tripartite Aggression against Egypt in**

1956.

The Historical Significance of the Qibya Massacre

The Qibya Massacre exposed the fragility of the system established by the Armistice Agreements after 1948.

It demonstrated that the Green Line was not a stable border between two societies living in peace, but a militarized and volatile line shaped by the unresolved consequences of the Nakba and Palestinian displacement.

The operation was also associated with the emergence of military methods and commanders who would later play major roles in the history of the **State of Israel (Occupied Palestine)**.

At the time of the Qibya Massacre, **Ariel Sharon** was a young officer commanding Unit 101. He later became one of Israel’s most prominent military and political leaders and eventually served as prime minister.

In Palestinian memory, however, his name remained closely associated with Qibya and with a night in October 1953 when dozens of Palestinians were killed beneath the rubble of their homes.