Bayt Daras Massacre 1948: Siege and the Killing of Fleeing Villagers



In May 1948 a Zionist force backed by armoured cars encircled the village of Bayt Daras in the Gaza district and pounded it with artillery and mortar fire. When the women, children and elderly left through the southern side of the village, the attackers opened fire on them, unarmed as they were. [1] [2]

Palestinian massacre lists date the massacre to 21 May 1948, and the circulating account speaks of 260 killed. [1] [2] It is one of the Zionist massacres against the Palestinian people.

Contents

1. The Bayt Daras massacre at a glance
2. The village of Bayt Daras
3. The March 1948 attacks
4. The massacre: the siege and the shooting of women and children
5. The fall of the village and the attempt to retake it
6. Bayt Daras today
7. Frequently asked questions
8. Sources and references

The Bayt Daras massacre at a glance

Item	Details
Date	21 May 1948 according to massacre lists, amid repeated attacks between March and June 1948 [1] [2] [3]
Place	The village of Bayt Daras, Gaza district, 32 km from Gaza City [3]
Perpetrator	Zionist forces backed by armoured cars; the Givati Brigade in the May assault [2] [3]
Method	Encircling the village, shelling it with artillery and mortars, then firing on the women, children and elderly leaving it [1] [2]
Toll	260 killed according to the circulating account; 9 killed documented in the 27–28 March attack [3]
Fate of the village	Its people expelled, its homes blown up, and settlements built on its land in 1950 [3] [1]

The village of Bayt Daras

Bayt Daras was a Palestinian village in the Gaza district, 32 kilometres from Gaza City. It stood on flat land rising to the west and southwest to a hill on which the Crusaders built a castle. In the Mamluk era it was a mail station between Gaza and Damascus, with a khan. [3]

Its population was 1,804 in 1931, in 401 houses, rising to 2,750 in 1945. It had two mosques and a primary school opened in 1921, with 234 pupils by the mid-1940s. [3]

Its economy rested on farming, poultry, crafts and trade. In 1945, 14,438 dunums of its land were devoted to cereals, 832 to citrus and bananas, and 472 to irrigated farming and orchards. [3]

The March 1948 attacks

Bayt Daras came under repeated attacks in March and April 1948. [1] On 27–28 March Zionist forces shelled the village with mortars, killing nine of its people, all non-combatants, and starting a fire that destroyed crops and livestock. On 29 March fighting broke out again around the village after another Zionist attack. [3]

The massacre: the siege and the shooting of women and children

In May 1948, at the start of “Operation Barak,” the Givati Brigade attacked the village, shelling and then storming it; its people fled, and its houses were blown up as part of “clearing” the southern front under “Plan Dalet.” [3]

Palestinian massacre lists record that on 21 May 1948 a Zionist force backed by armoured cars encircled the village to prevent reinforcements from reaching it, then shelled it heavily with artillery and mortars. [2] The women, children and elderly left through the southern side of the village while the men stayed to defend their homes. As soon as they reached the edge of the village, the attackers opened fire on them, unarmed as they were. [1] In the Palestine Remembered account, it was the besieging force itself that called on the villagers to leave “in peace” through the southern side, then mowed them down as they left according to its instructions. [1] In another circulating version, the men resolved to hold out and sent out the women, children and elderly, not knowing the village was surrounded on all sides. [1]

The circulating account speaks of 260 killed, but we found no detailed source documenting this figure or the victims' names. [1] [2]

The fall of the village and the attempt to retake it

Egyptian sources say Zionist forces did not finally occupy the village until after the first truce began on 11 June 1948. Gamal Abdel Nasser, then a staff officer in the Egyptian army, said the occupation forces used the truce to consolidate their positions and occupy Bayt Daras. [3]

After the truce ended on 9 July, Arab forces tried to retake the village and a Sudanese force entered it. But a soldier fired the red withdrawal signal instead of the green success signal, Egyptian artillery shelled the area, and the Sudanese were forced out, in what Nasser called "a comic stroke of bad luck." [3]

Bayt Daras today

After the massacre the attackers blew up the village's homes and burned its fields. [1] In 1950 the settlements of "Azriqam," "Emunim" and "Givati" were built on its land, and in the 1950s the "Zemorot" farm was built on Khirbat Awda, which belonged to it. [3]

All that remains of the village today is the foundation of one house and scattered rubble, overgrown with wild plants, cactus and eucalyptus, while one of its old streets is still recognizable. [3]

Conclusion

The people of Bayt Daras held out against repeated attacks from March 1948 and paid for their steadfastness in blood. When they tried to move their women, children and elderly away from the shelling, they found the village surrounded, and the attackers fired on the unarmed. The village was then demolished, and

settlements bearing the name of the brigade that attacked it were built on its land.

Frequently asked questions about the Bayt Daras massacre

When did the Bayt Daras massacre take place?

Massacre lists date it to 21 May 1948, amid a series of attacks on the village between March and June 1948.

Where was Bayt Daras?

In the Gaza district, 32 kilometres from Gaza City.

How many people were killed in the Bayt Daras massacre?

The circulating account speaks of 260 killed, a figure we could not document; what is documented is nine killed in the attack of 27–28 March 1948.

Who attacked Bayt Daras?

Zionist forces backed by armoured cars, and the Givati Brigade in the May 1948 assault at the start of “Operation Barak.”

What was built on the land of Bayt Daras?

The settlements of “Azriqam,” “Emunim” and “Givati” in 1950, and the “Zemorot” farm.

Sources and references

Arabic-language sources are listed with translated titles.

1. “Zionist Massacres between 1947 and 1996,” Palestine Remembered.
2. Hana al-Kahlout, “The Assassination of a Homeland: 37 Israeli Massacres in the Year of the Nakba,” Arabi21, 15 May 2014.

3. “Bayt Daras,” Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question, Institute for Palestine Studies.