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THE OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE IRGUN ZVAI LEUMI

Description

An analysis of the aims and actions of the Irgun Zvai Leumi, with particular reference to its role in illegal immigration and anti-government violence as well as its position in relation to the rest of the Palestine Jewish community.

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Summary

The Irgun Zvai Leumi is an underground, quasi-military organization with headquarters in Palestine and branches in Poland and other European countries. Its members are fanatical Zionists who wish to convert Palestine and Transjordan into an independent Jewish state and who advocate the use of force both against the Arabs and the British to achieve this maximal political goal. In the past the Irgun was responsible for organizing illegal Jewish immigration into Palestine. It has conducted since February of this year periodic raids on government buildings as a protest against the British White Paper policy. Irgun activities have been condemned by the rest of the Palestine Jewish community as irresponsible, misguided, and harmful to the Zionist cause.

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THE OBJECTIVES AND ACTIVITIES OF THE IRGUN ZVAI LEUMI

1. The nature of the society. The Irgun Zvai Leumi (National Military Organization) is an illegal, paramilitary society in Palestine, composed of fanatical Zionists who desire to convert Palestine and Transjordan into an independent Jewish State and who advocate the use of force both against the Arabs and the British to achieve this maximal political goal. Recently these activists have become obsessed with the idea that Britain has failed to carry out its pledge to the Jews contained in the Balfour Declaration at a time when European Jews, murdered and persecuted by the Nazis, have been in greatest need of a haven of refuge and that violence is the only way to persuade the mandatory power to change its present restrictive policy. Although the Irgun was originally intended to serve as the military arm of the Revisionist Party in Palestine, it has gradually become independent of the latter's control. Nevertheless the Irgun recruits are drawn almost exclusively from among the Revisionists. Moreover, Bitar, the rigidly-disciplined Revisionist youth movement, provides pre-military training for potential Irgun members. In fact, Irgun members are able to conceal their affiliation with the secret society by assuming active roles either in the Revisionist Party or in Bitar. Thus, for example, Eri Jabotinsky, as head of the Bitar Immigration Department (1938-40) was able to direct Irgun's organization of illegal immigration into Palestine.¹ Although Irgun headquarters are in Palestine, branches of the society were established in pre-war days in Poland and other European countries. The Palestine unit has

1. Based on a report from the files of the Palestine Criminal Investigation Department.

tended to fluctuate in size and at present has about 3-4,000 members, most of whom are well-educated and idealistic and would not normally have engaged in criminal pursuits.

2. Irgun objectives. The members of Irgun are persuaded that only by the use of violence can the society realize its ultimate objective: the "liberation" of Palestine (including Transjordan) from the "foreign oppressors" and its establishment as the national state of the Jewish people. Irgun's immediate aims have been adjusted to the changing relations between the Palestine Jews on the one hand and the mandatory government and the Palestine Arabs respectively on the other. At the time of Irgun's creation in the early months of the Palestine Arab revolt (1936-39) the primary function of the society was to retaliate for the murder of Jews by Arabs.¹ As the Jewish position in East-Central Europe began to deteriorate rapidly in the final months of peace and the mandatory government introduced severe restrictions on Jewish immigration into Palestine, the Irgun undertook to organize illegal Jewish entrance into the country, resorting to force when necessary. The Irgun became vehemently anti-British after the appearance of the 1939 White Paper, which was interpreted as a concession to Arab violence. But a truce was declared immediately upon the outbreak of war, when the society offered its services to assist Britain against the common enemy. In fact, it cooperated closely with the British Middle East military forces in the early part of the war, particularly in the Iraqi and Syrian campaigns of 1941. Irgun leaders became disillusioned, however, as the

1. "Illicit Arming by Arabs and Jews in Palestine," R & A 1014, 30 September 1943, pp. 13-14.

immigration deadline provided in the 1939 White Paper approached. The mandatory power was warned early in 1944 that the "armistice...declared at the beginning of the war" had been "disregarded by the British Government" and had, therefore, been terminated. The Irgun accordingly embarked upon a program of violence directed against the British, with a view to intimidating the governmental authorities into abrogating the White Paper.¹

3. Irgun's part in illegal immigration. The precise volume of illegal immigration is impossible to determine. The Palestine Government, however, has registered close to 20,000 illicit entrants since May 1939, the overwhelming majority having arrived before 1941. During the past three and one-half years illegal immigration has all but disappeared as a result of the tightened military-civilian frontier controls, the breakdown of transportation facilities from Europe to Palestine, and, most recently, the general admittance of all Jews who have succeeded in escaping from Nazi-occupied Europe into Turkey. On the other hand, large numbers of Jews entered the country unlawfully before May 1939 and not all of the illicit settlers after that date have been recorded. It may be estimated that as many as 50,000 illegal immigrants probably reached Palestine since the formation of Irgun in 1937. There is no way of calculating the percentage of those who have entered the country under Irgun auspices, although it may be presumed that the society was responsible for a substantial share of the total. The organization of illegal immigration proved to be a lucrative venture, since in addition to charging the prospective immigrants what the traffic would bear, Irgun representatives in the US and elsewhere

1. R & A 1090.64, 17 June 1944, pp. 4-7.

collected funds for the support of their "humanitarian" undertaking. These funds have largely been used to train and equip with arms the members of the society and to defray the costs of terrorist activities.¹

4. Anti-government violence during the past year. After having refrained from the use of violence for more than four years of war, the Irgun has conducted since February of this year periodic raids on government buildings as a protest against the British White Paper policy. Emphasis has been placed on the destruction of property by the use of land-mines and bombs; efforts have usually been made to avert the shedding of blood, but in most of the forays there have been police and constabulary casualties, Arab and Jewish as well as British. Irgun leaders with the bravado of the former Arab rebel commanders "proudly" assumed responsibility for these terrorist activities, usually by the distribution of illegal broadsheets. The following is a list of Irgun terrorist exploits during the past nine months:

a. The offices of the Palestine Department of Migration at Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, and Haifa were partially destroyed by bombs on the night of 12 February. The only casualty was a constable who suffered from shock.²

b. The government revenue offices in the same three cities were blown up by mines on the night of 26-27 February; no casualties were reported.²

c. The headquarters of the police and the Criminal Investigation Department in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Haifa were seriously damaged by

1. The Irgun created in 1943 its own fund-raising body in Palestine, called Has Hazit Israel (Jewish Front Tribute), which attempts to collect funds by threat of violence if ordinary solicitation proves ineffective; see R & A 1014, p. 14 and OSS 34545, 22 June 1944.
2. R & A 1090.49, 4 March 1944, pp. 5-6.

explosives on the night of 23 March. Casualties were reported at Jerusalem and Haifa.¹

d. The Palestine Broadcasting Service transmission station at Ramallah was seized on the night of 18 May; the attempt to make use of the station was foiled, but some damage was done to the equipment.²

e. In the early morning hours of 14 July a building occupied by the government land registry offices and the Jerusalem district police was thoroughly demolished. Irreplaceable files were destroyed and several casualties were reported.³

f. The Jaffa divisional police headquarters and two police stations on the Jaffa-Tel-Aviv boundaries were attacked with bombs and gunfire on the night of 22 August, resulting in a number of casualties.⁴

g. Police stations at Bayt Dajan, Qalqilyah, Qatrah, and Haifa (eastern station) were attacked on the night of 27 September; several casualties were reported.⁵

5. Jewish reactions in Palestine to Irgun violence. The irresponsible activities of the Irgun have been roundly condemned by the Zionist press and leaders in Palestine. An editorial in Ha-Ares (15 February) dealing with the explosions in the Migration Department offices doubtless expressed the sentiments of the vast majority of the Palestine Jewish community. The editors of this independent and liberal daily censured the perpetrators for

1. R & A 1090.53, 1 April 1944, pp. 7-8.

2. R & A 1090.64, 17 June 1944, p. 6.

3. R & A 1090.69, 22 July 1944, pp. 4-5.

4. Palestine Post, 24 August 1944, p. 3.

5. OSS source S, 30 September 1944; and JTA bulletin, 1 October 1944.

having harmed the cause of the Jewish people at a time when important decisions regarding Zionism were pending in London and Washington. The Jewish community was urged to exert greater efforts to curb the terrorism and to eliminate the terrorists, who are prepared "to bridge over all too lightly the gap between political debates and murder." Following the destruction of the Land Registry offices in Jerusalem on 14 July, the Palestine Post (18 July 1944), the largest Zionist daily in the country, had the following to say: "For the misguided criminals there is nothing but public condemnation. They are young fanatics, crazed by the sufferings of their people into believing that destruction will bring healing."

When the affiliation of the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation (HCNL) with the Irgun became publicly known in Palestine in May, further editorial comments were forthcoming. At that time, Mishmar (22 May 1944), the daily organ of the leftist ha-Shomer ha-Sa'ir (The Young Guard), stressed the fact that the Irgun's activities both in Palestine and in the US betrayed all the ugly symptoms of fascism. In Palestine, Irgun members have been killing British and Jewish police from ambush, in order to "drive out the conquerors;" in the US, they have helped to defer the solution of the political problems of Palestine. The terrorist acts in Palestine and the ^{HCNL} political mockery in the US, warned Mishmar, were dangerous symptoms of a malignant disease. The only remedy was to do everything conceivable to isolate the Irgun and the movement which produced it - Revisionism.

The ~~Revisionist~~ Revisionists have publicly dissociated themselves from the HCNL as an editorial in Ha-Mashqif (24 May 1944), the Revisionist mouthpiece, bears witness. Although ~~the~~ observes the paper-- the youths who created the HCNL grow up and were educated within the Jewish nationalist movement in Palestine, they have conducted their American activities from the start entirely on their own. Since their earlier committees¹ had proclaimed positive objectives, they merited "our unmitigated support." The enlistment of specially accredited institutions was not required for the purpose of rousing public opinion to the urgent need for saving the European Jewish masses. The new committee--Ha-Mashqif goes on to point out--~~emphatically~~ does not deserve support, because according to HCNL ideology the Hebrew nation consists only of the Palestine Jews, the stateless European Jews, and those Jews who may wish voluntarily to join the HCNL. All other Jews, in the view of the HCNL are nationals of the countries in which they live: they are not English or American Jews, but merely Englishmen or Americans. The HCNL, moreover, has announced that its sole task for the duration will be the rescue of Jews. For that reason it has "postponed" the settlement of the political and boundary problems of Palestine until after the war. In so doing--concludes the editorial--the organizers of the HCNL have relinquished Vladimir Jabotinsky's stand in favor of that of Weizmann.² While refusing to recognize the political ideology of the new group, Ha-Mashqif nevertheless recommended continued endorsement of HCNL's endeavors to rescue European Jews.

1. The names of these committees are: the American Friends of a Jewish Palestine, the Committee for an Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews, the Emergency Committee to Save the Jewish People of Europe, and the American League for a Free Palestine; see FN 148, 13 January 1944.
2. Vladimir Jabotinsky, father of Eri, founded the Revisionist movement, which regards Weizmann, Zionist president, as an opportunist.