

# Researching the Past, Looking to the Future

# The Israel Police History Department



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“A nation unfamiliar with its past will see a poor present and uncertain future.” This phrase, written by Yigal Alon in his book *Curtain of Sand*, is the guiding light of the Israel police in the field of history and heritage. In order to fulfill the obligation of being familiar with the past, the Israel Police operates a history department, under the authority of the Chief Education Officer in the Education Corps. The history department officers are responsible for three main fields: Documentation of the organization's activities, historic research and police heritage.

## Documentation

Documentation is conducted in two main areas. The first is documentation of the organization's major activities for the purpose of preserving organizational memory and enabling future research. For example, the history officers observe large-scale national events, such as national elections or a visit from a world leader, and document any incident of an unusual nature or scope, such as escalations in security disturbances or other emergencies. The department accompanies the various managing teams and their operations, collecting the documents produced during the staff work carried out before and after each event, and interviewing all the

parties involved. The purpose of the documentation work is to enable preparation for future events of a similar nature based on conclusions drawn from documented past events.

The second area dealt with by the department is conducting and recording interviews with Israel Police veterans. The purpose of these interviews is to preserve the stories of police officers who have taken part in meaningful events in the organization's history. In recent years the interviews have focused on the “founding generation,” i.e. the people who served in the Israel Police during its first years of existence. A large part of the interviews is conducted by cadets in the officer training course with the aim of connecting the officers of the future to the organization's past. Needless to say, the information gathered in these interviews is priceless – it sheds light on the early years of the Israel Police and reveals elements in the history of the organization and the state that have hitherto been unknown.

All the information gathered from documentation efforts is stored in a computerized database, enabling easy access to every item. The database, which contains interviews, files, books, recordings, films and photos, is available across the police intranet.

## Historic Research

The historic research conducted by the history department serves two main purposes: The first – to promote organizational study by focusing on operational issues and the way in which they were handled in the past. For example, on the night of the visit of U.S. President Obama to Israel in 2013, the department's officers conducted a comprehensive review of the main conclusions drawn by the police following previous visits of foreign leaders and important figures in Israel. The review contained everything from the 1977 visit of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat to the 2009 visit of the Pope.

Another example is a study that was published by the department, analyzing the methods with which police around the world deal with the aftermaths of earthquakes. This research was part of the Israel Police's preparation for a national home front drill concerning such a scenario.

An additional purpose of the historic research is to gain further knowledge on issues of policing and public security in Israel, and increase academic and public familiarity with the Israel Police's involvement in the state's history – a subject that is not well known enough. One example of such activity was the department's research on the Israel Police's investigation of former Kapos<sup>1</sup> in the early 1950s and Bureau 06 – the division for Nazi crime investigations. Additionally, the unit also aids academic researchers who wish to study police history, by directing them to appropriate resources.

## Police Heritage

Israel Police heritage is the third field of activity dealt with by the history department. The goal is to enhance police officers' identification with the organization in which they serve, as well as their sense of pride, by focusing on the police's activities and contributions within the wider context of the history of the early settlements and the state of Israel.

The main project conducted by the history department in the field of heritage is a book it published entitled *And See What the Land is Like* (a quotation from the book of Numbers). The book, written over a period of a year, reviews the stories of 40 historic police buildings across Israel – from the facilities of the Ottoman regime's Gendarmerie and the Tegart forts, to the stations established by the Israel Police. The history of each structure is followed by a story about a historic event that took place in the area or a police unit that operated at the site. A recommendation for a hiking trail in the area is also mentioned. The book aims to increase

<sup>1</sup> Kapos: Jewish prisoners forced to oversee other Jews held in concentration camps during the holocaust.

familiarity with the history of policing and public security in Israel among police officers and the public by introducing them to lesser-known heritage sites.

Additional heritage projects include a set of posters that portray the history of policing in Israel, which were distributed to police stations across the country; helping plan the new police museum, currently under construction at the police training center near Beit Shemesh; writing the script for a film about the Israel Police, produced for the History Channel; conducting tours and lectures on the subject of the Israel Police and its history; and aiding police units in organizing heritage events. Additionally, the department is also responsible for information on the Israel Police's website about police history and heritage, and for managing the Facebook page of the Israel Police Historian, the goal of which is to provide information about police history to both police officers and the public.

The Israel Police is an integral part of Israeli society and has been since the inception of the state, often instrumental in major events and important affairs. The Israel Police sees the preservation of its rich history as very significant, both as a tool for education and professional improvement, as well as a means for instilling its heritage in those who serve in the Israel Police and in residents of the state of Israel.

The Israel Police heritage book, 'And See What the Land is Like'



# Timeline of the Israel Police



## 1920: Pre-state Israel during the British Mandate

The Palestine Police Force was the organization responsible for policing and public security in Israel during the British Mandate. The police force, established in 1920, revolved around a national headquarters which ruled over territorial districts and various divisions. The police force also contained the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) and various Gendarmerie units, and was comprised of two sections: a British section and a Palestinian one. The majority of the high ranking officers were British while most of the policemen were locals – Arabs and Jews.

The Palestine Police Force operated as a colonial police force, focusing more on maintaining order than fighting crime. Towards the final years of the British Mandate, the police was at the forefront of the fight against the foundation of a Jewish state in Israel, resulting in the police facilities and staff becoming major targets for the Jewish underground groups, particularly the Irgun (The National Military Organization in the Land of Israel) and the Lehi (Fighters for the Freedom of Israel).



Above: The cover of a Zichron Yaakov police log from April-July 1948. The log includes May 14, 1948, the day on which Israeli independence was declared. Right: The page of the log from May 14, 1948, which, among the routine entries, contains the following remarks on the second line, in red: 'The British Mandate is dead! The state of Israel is alive. Long live the Jewish state...'



Israel Police officers greet Moshe Sharet - then Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister - upon his return from the UN, where Israel was accepted as a member-nation, May 23, 1948. (National Photo Archive)

Despite this, the Palestine Police Force was the basis upon which the Israel Police was founded. The operating procedures and orders used by the Palestine Police Force, for the most part, remained intact when the state of Israel was founded; even the uniforms and rank names remained identical until 1958.

## 1951: Foundation of the Israel Border Police

The tension relating to the newly-established country's security, and the fact that hundreds of thousands of Arab refugees were living in camps around the country's borders, prompted widespread infiltration attempts into Israeli territories. The IDF's unsuccessful attempt to cope with the phenomenon – the establishment of a designated force, the Frontier Force – led to the foundation of three border police divisions in 1951 under the command of the Israel Police.



Border Police officers on the Syrian border, 1957 (National Photo Archive)

Following the border police divisions' success in thwarting infiltrations, the three divisions were finally united in 1953 by the Israel Police into one unified Border Police Force. The Border Police was then entrusted with the responsibility of guarding the borders alongside the IDF, and designated to operate in crisis situations under the command of the IDF.

## 1960: The Eichmann Trial

In May 1960, Adolf Eichman – a former SS officer responsible for the planning and execution of the “Final Solution” (i.e. the Nazi plan to annihilate the Jews during World War II) – was captured in



Adolf Eichmann, guarded by Israel Police officers during his trial in Israel (Israel Police History Department)



YAMAM Counter-Terrorism training, 1980s  
(Israel Police History Department)

Argentina. Upon his arrival in Israel, the Israel Police was entrusted with the responsibility of keeping him safe in his incarceration, investigating the charges against him and preparing the case. Special units were established for the trial, including a unit to keep watch over him while incarcerated, guard him in the courthouse and conduct the investigation (Bureau 06).

## 1967: The War Against Palestinian Terrorism

Following the Six Day War in 1967, the Palestinian terrorist organizations launched a wave of assaults against both military and civilian targets in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, as well as in Israeli cities. The Israel Police and the Border Police worked in cooperation with the IDF and the Israel Prison Service in order to prevent and thwart the actions

of the terrorists, while significantly contributing to the dismantling of the terrorist organizations in the Judea and Samaria region.

## 1974: Dual Purpose Police

Following the end of the Yom Kippur War, and around the time that the Palestinian terrorist organizations were becoming established in south Lebanon, a wave of terrorist attacks broke out against Israeli targets. Following several severe terrorist attacks in mid-1974 – the most infamous of which was the attack on the town of Ma'alot, (on May 14th, 1974), during which 22 children were murdered – the Israeli government decided to make the Israel Police responsible for the country's public security, thus making the Israel Police a "dual purpose police": a police force that deals with traditional policing roles as well as issues of national security within the state's borders.

As part of the police's preparation for its new duties, several organizational and structural changes took place, including:

- The establishment of the Operations Division
- The establishment of the Israel Civil Guard
- The establishment of the National Bomb Disposal Squad
- The establishment of the Special Central Police Unit (YAMAM) to combat terrorism

## 1977: Visit of President Sadat

In late 1977, the president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, landed in Israel. Sadat was the first Arab leader to conduct an official visit to the state of Israel. The security of the Egyptian president's visit, code named "Gate 77," required the Israel Police to conduct special preparations within a very short time and deploy thousands of police officers.

## 1990: The Gulf War

On January 18th, 1990, a day after the coalition armies under the leadership of the United States launched an attack on Iraq, the first Scud missiles were fired from Iraq at Israeli cities. The missile fire, which lasted for 40 days, forced the police to operate under a state of emergency in order to send help to damaged areas and provide aid to the other emergency and security forces.



Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, visiting Israel in 1977



Traffic police, late 1980s (Israel Police History Department)



A police officer in the new uniform (Israel Police Spokesperson)

## 2001: The War against Suicide Bombers

Fighting and assaults by the Palestinians in the early 2000's quickly transformed into a full-fledged, lethal, terrorist onslaught – an Intifada – by Palestinian organizations. In the following years, hundreds of Israelis were murdered in dozens of deadly terrorist attacks all across the country, most of which were suicide bombings. For many months the police operated under a state of emergency, with police officers, Border Police officers and volunteers standing at the front lines facing suicide bombers.

The terror attacks reached their murderous peak in “Black March” of 2002, during which 105 civilians were murdered and 26 soldiers were injured in a string of attacks. On March 27th, 2002,

the first night of the Jewish Passover holiday, a suicide bomber exploded in the Park Hotel in Netanya, killing 30 Jewish civilians who were celebrating the holiday with their families. As a result, on March 29th, the IDF launched Operation Defensive Shield in order to destroy the terrorist infrastructure in the Judea and Samaria region and return security to the residents of Israel. The Israel Police played an active and significant role in these operations, maintaining close cooperation with other security forces. Due to these operations, the number of terrorist attacks by suicide bombers decreased substantially.

