

Palestine of Wiretapping and Ciphers: Communication Intelligence - 1929-1948

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Beginning in 1929, Communication Intelligence evolved out of nothing through the self-strength of the Jewish pre-state community in Palestine. Understanding of the intelligence potential, technological capabilities and adherence to the effort by professionals, have made it a significant contributor to the political and the military efforts and success. This is the unrecognized root of the IDF 8200 UNIT.

The Communication Intelligence [1] in the years before the establishment of the State of Israel is almost unknown, received little mention, and its importance and contribution to the political and security struggle is almost unrecognized. This BRIEF review presents for the first time, the development of the communication intelligence of the Jewish community in Palestine from its beginnings after the Disturbances of 1929 until the establishment of the State of Israel and its incorporation into the IDF Intelligence Service in 1948.

The communications intelligence was initially based on the wired telephony infrastructure established by the British Mandate during the 1920s and the 1930s in the major cities, and in some peripheral localities. Wireless communications appeared only in the mid-1930s, in the service of the British Mandate Police, while Arab wireless communications began to operate only in early 1948 in the service of the Arab Liberation Army (Kaukji's Army).

The Jewish community was able to identify the intelligence potential of this infrastructure for the secret collection of reliable, authentic and rapid political and security information and to adopt it to its political and security struggle. The operation and the collection of this intelligence were carried out by the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, "Shai" - the intelligence service of the Haganah organization, and to a limited extent also by the Irgun ("Etzel").

From 1929 Disturbances to the Great Arab Revolt of 1936-1939

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With the exception of one-off activity in Jaffa in 1920, the practice of communication intelligence in an institutionalized effort began immediately after the 1929 Disturbances. The tragic results of the events, which erupted surprisingly, revealed the absence of intelligence to defend the Jewish community. Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, one of the heads of the National Committee, and later the second President of the State of Israel, had previously felt the growing tension, and had begun to establish intelligence collection capabilities in Jerusalem. This was initially based on human intelligence (HUMINT) – undercovers servicemen, the most prominent of which was a Haganah member Aharon Haim Cohen and Arab informants. For the first time, a permanent wiretapping to the telephone line of the Supreme Muslim Council was established, and according to the records that we have found, the monitoring to conversations began at the latest on September 30, 1929 and operated from Jerusalem City Council House, that housed the Haganah city headquarters from 1928 to 1930 (now 15 Ethiopia Street, Jerusalem).



City Council House, 15 Ethiopia Street, Jerusalem - the first listening intelligence site

Gershon Slutskai, the Haganah commander of the Geula neighborhood, and other Arabic speakers were the operators, with technical assistance by Oscar Egozi, a Jewish engineer in the Telephone Service. [2] The detailed records of the telephone calls found [3], indicate that it was held continuously, and that it provided valuable information on the intentions and positions of the Arab leadership, their relationship with the British Mandate authorities as well as Arab bodies outside Palestine, strikes terror and demonstrations events, firearms smuggling, organizations and attitudes. The information was passed on to Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, and probably to other parties, and it assisted in the ongoing political and security activities. As part of the political struggle of the Zionist administration at the time, the original records in Arabic were transferred to London [4] to prove to the Shaw Committee that investigated the events, the organized nature of the disturbances by the Arab leadership.

Jerusalem - the capital of the Mandate as a center for Communication Intelligence

During the Great Arab Revolt (1939-1936), the focus of the communication intelligence was on Jerusalem, which housed the centers of the British Mandate rule, the Jewish and Arab leaderships and representations of churches and newspapers offices. Until the outbreak of World War II, there were also German and Italian missions in the city. The municipal telephone system allowed access to valuable sources, and the Jewish Community communications intelligence operations was based on several collection modes: (a) Direct monitoring of key telephone lines, (b) Tracking phone calls by employees at city telephone exchanges and at the CID (the Criminal Investigation Department of the British Mandate Police) monitoring centers and (c) Special operations, e.g. – microphones tapping the internal hearings and meetings of the Peel Commission (Formally: the British Royal Commission of Inquiry to Palestine).

Direct monitoring telephone lines of Arab leaders and institutions

This effort covered telephone lines of the Supreme Arab Committee in Jerusalem and of its senior members and officials, including the Mufti Amin al-Husseini, newspapers offices and local leadership in the major cities. Obviously, it provided reliable and extensive information by direct access to these targets. The extracted information from the telephone calls included the leadership intentions and actions before and after their conventions; internal disagreements and disputes among leaders and representatives; the general strike considerations; the Arab states (mainly Iraq and Transjordan) attempts to influence the local Arab leadership to assume compromised and realistic policies; shutdown of the Jaffa Port; the policy towards Peel Commission and its recommendations and further more. Monitoring the telephone calls contributed also to the hidden contacts of the Jewish Agency with Emir Abdullah of Transjordan who sought for at least some sovereignty in Palestine. Emphasis was placed on tracking the involvement of the Arab states due to Ben-Gurion's concerns from the deterioration of the local conflict into a comprehensive conflict with the Arab world. [5]

The telephone calls wiretapping, was conducted by Shalem Arazi and the oversighting responsibility of Aharon Haim Cohen of the Arab Bureau of the Jewish Agency's Political Department, and was code named as "The Safe Source" or "The Crate".

The collected information was reported directly to Ben-Gurion, Moshe Shertok and Izthak Ben-Zvi, [6] and was released in intelligence bulletins, edited by Aharon H. Cohen, in a very limited distribution. In addition, it was shared with Eliyahu Golomb at the Haganah Headquarters in Tel Aviv, and in some cases with the British through the liaison of Bernard Joseph (Dov Yosef) and Reuven Zaslani (Shiloah) to assist them in their fierce fight against the Arab terrorism. The information was also used in public influencing and propaganda in order to disrupt political measures of the Arab leadership.

In October 1937 the Mufti and key members of the Arab leadership were expelled by the British from Palestine, an act that dried up this valuable source of intelligence. Over a short time period, the effort was renewed to other targets

such as Arab opposition leaders, Arab consulates in Jerusalem and Arab reporters.

At its early days of operations, the Irgun ("Etzel") also operated in the field of wiretapping. As early as 1936, the Irgun, in parallel with the Haganah, set up a wiretapping to telephone lines of the Schneller German orphanage in Jerusalem which was in ex-terrestrial status. [7] This effort made it possible to track the security assistance provided by pro-Nazi Germans to the Arabs, and to the activities of the Nazi party in Palestine.



Aharon Haim Cohen

CID employees and Telephone and Telegraph Operators Contribution

Haganah trustees among telephone exchanges and telegraph offices operators in Jerusalem and in other cities collected information from telephone calls or telegrams that passed through them. This including encrypted telegrams that were deciphered later by using keys obtained in creative ways. In addition to these operators, Jewish employees in the CID in charge of monitoring local and international telephone calls according to lists that were frequently updated reported to the "Shai" urgent information and alerts about arrests. In Jerusalem alone prior to World War II, 40 telephone lines were constantly monitored, including those of the King David Hotel, the Mufti's residence, foreign consulates, cafes and even public telephones.

In addition, copies of encrypted and decrypted telegrams content were smuggled out to the Shai hands from the CID offices[8].

Special operations - Peel commission

An important contribution to the Zionist political campaign were special operations. The first of these was wiretapping the internal meetings of the Peel Commission in the Palace Hotel (now Waldorf Astoria) in Jerusalem.



Palace Hotel (now Waldorf Astoria)

Source: Wikipedia

The Commission arrived to Palestine in 1936 to investigate the events of the Great Arab Revolt, and to offer solutions to the situation. Zeev Gasco and other employees of the Public Works Department, who set up the committee's offices at the hotel, after receiving approval from Moshe Shertok attached hidden microphones in the conference room and in the lintel of Lord Peel's office door. The microphones were connected through the telephone network to the Jewish Agency compound. The microphones were provided by Eliyahu (Alik) Sokhchver, the director of the Hebrew University's workshops. Sokhchver, a Haganah member, testified that the audio quality was excellent and that the listeners were senior members of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency - Eliyahu Sasson, Eliyahu Epstein (Eilat) and Reuven Zaslani (Shiloah). [9]

Tel Aviv - The beginning of wireless communication intercept

British restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine and the persecution of Jews in Europe made illegal immigration a first-rate effort in the late 1930s. Ephraim Dekel-Krasner, the leader of the "Shai" in Tel Aviv, who had previously worked to promote communication intelligence, recruited Mordechai Vertzman (Almog) in 1938 to establish intercept capability to the British police's wireless communications. Vertzman and his friends, trained in wireless and morse code in the British Police, began intercepting the police network traffic from apartments in Tel Aviv through two hidden radio receivers. Their effort was a significant help receiving a real time information about the Police operations and movements before, during and after the illegal immigrants' ships arrival and landing. The encrypted messages of the British Police and their cracking were a major challenge in this activity. Named 181 (AHA), this unit operated until the establishment of the State of Israel. The technical services for its operations were supported by the Haganah Communication Service.

The coverage of the telephony wired communications in the Tel Aviv area and vicinity, was carried out by establishing a monitoring facility in Beit Hadar (now

Menachem Begin and HaRakevet streets junction), that operated from 1938 to 1946 [10]. The facility included a dummy commercial front office and an internal classified room with monitoring posts attached to a telephone cable that went to the nearby new automatic telephone exchange center. In 1946 the area was closed off by the British and its activity moved to Beit Romano in Tel Aviv.

Communication Intelligence in the 1940s

During World War II and the period that followed the Great Arab Revolt the communication intelligence activity was reduced to monitoring German, Italian and other radio stations broadcastings in Arabic to the Middle East.

The post war years, quickly turned into the final years of the British Mandate with the struggle against the British Mandate and the beginning of the War of Independence. The situation significantly expanded the communication intelligence activities in Jerusalem and in the major cities.

Jerusalem

Communication monitoring activities were continuously held at least from 1946. In 1946, unscrambling technology was developed by the Technion in Haifa to enable the tracking of scrambled conversations of the British High Commissioner, the Chief Secretary, and the head of the CID. Unfortunately, a leakage uncovered this capability after few months of its use in Jerusalem. [14] In addition, "Shai" managed wiretap the telephone line of one of the senior members of the British Police (Richard Kittling), and thus obtained a great deal of information. [15]

At the end of 1947, two significant communication intelligence facilities were active in Jerusalem:

- **"Arnevet" (Rabbit)** . This facility was operated in the basement of the Jewish Agency compound in Jerusalem. 30 telephone lines from the central telephone exchange in Jaffa Road were routed to this facility by Yitzhak Gasco of the Haganah and Shlomo May of the Telephone Service. The facility made it possible to monitor any telephone subscriber in the city, including the Arab and British headquarters, the Jewish underground organizations and Nenturi Karta (an anti-Zionist extreme Orthodox Jewish group). The professional level of the operators was high with their academic Middle Eastern studies background. The facility made a significant contribution in the battles of Gush Etzion, and was also crucial in the battles of San Simon (Katamon), the seizure of the Allenby camp, the battles of the Castel and more. It also made a great contribution to obtaining important information about Arab defeats, fall in battle of their top commander, Abd al-Qadir Husseini, and leadership corruptions. This information was used in radio broadcasting in Arabic to influence the morale of the Arab public.[11] Yitzhak Levy (Levitza), the head of "Shai" in Jerusalem from 1948-1946, recounted in his book, **Jerusalem in the War of Independence** about this contribution: "The information that reached us through this wiretapping network brought us a tremendous benefit, saved many lives and helped us to develop psychological warfare against the Arab side" [12].
- **"Shafan" (Bunny)**. This facility operated from January 1948 at a hidden room in the apartment of Gershon Agron, Editor of the **Palestine**

Post (and later the mayor of Jerusalem) at 4 Rashba Street in Rehavia neighborhood. On April 1948 the facility moved to the Schneller Orphanage compound with a team of about 25 operators. Its original mission was intercepting wireless networks of British police and military forces in Jerusalem. It was later changed to those of the local Arabic militia forces, the Transjordan Legion forces and the UN observers and headquarters. Jewish-American students served in intercepting the English-language communication, while Arabic-speakers to Morse code and Arabic communications.

In addition to these two facilities, special wiretapping operations were held too. The earlier target was the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry, which arrived and met in March 1946 at the YMCA Building in Jerusalem. The later was UNSCOP Committee, which arrived in June 1947, supported the termination of the British Mandate in Palestine and proposed the Plan of Partition.

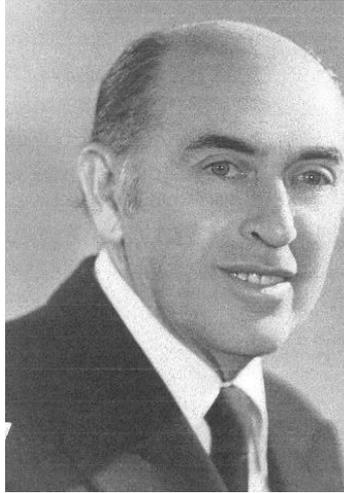
Monitoring the UNSCOP Committee telephone conversations was assisted by a special monitoring center dedicated to the tracking of telephones calls of the committee members and the committee in its place of seat at the YMCA Building and Salvia Hotel (now Yad Harav Nissim, 44 Jabotinsky Street, Jerusalem). This telephone calls tracking was a component in a first of its kind intelligence operation headed by Haim Hertzog, that involved all means of intelligence collection to support an effective representation of the Zionist position in the Committee hearings, that finally led to the adopting of the Plan of Partition by the UN General Assembly on 29 November 1947[13].

Tel Aviv-Jaffa and the Central Area

By an initiative led by Issar Harel, the “Shai” leader in Tel Aviv, a wiretapping facility (‘Berez” - Faucet) was established in Mikve Israel, an agricultural school near Tel Aviv in early 1948. The facility was connected to Jaffa-Ramleh underground telephone cable and enabled wiretapping local and international calls routed to Egypt and overseas through “Palestine Central” telephone exchange in Ramleh. The facility provided highly valuable information on incidents and organizations in Jaffa and its surroundings, casualties, military movements, arrival of external paramilitary support units, local leadership positions, the internal economic and financial situation and moods in the city.

The wireless intercepting center, headed by Mordechai Vertzman (Almog) who was mentioned above, continued its main mission to track the British police operations and efforts against the illegal immigration. From the beginning of 1948, the center began to cover the Arab Liberation Army (Kaukji’s Army), and later the Mufti network as well as the networks of Arab armies in their advanced movements prior to their invasion into Palestine.

The Irgun (“Etzel”) also wiretapped telephone lines in Jaffa area in April 1948, ahead of the surrender of the city.



Mordechai Vertzman-Almog

Haifa and North

In 1947, the Shai began to develop a wiretapping capacity in Haifa with the help of Arabic language teachers from the Reali School and engineers inside the Telephone Service. This system connected private apartments in the Carmel neighborhoods to the city's telephone exchange. It provided access to calls of the Palestinian leadership with centers and activists in Damascus, Beirut and Cairo, and to calls from the British airport in Ramat David that discussed air patrol reports and other airfield operations. Kaukji's army's wireless communications were also covered in the north of the country and the break of the codes in use helped to a close watch of its movements and logistics. A remarkable alert in Haifa was the one that led in March 1948 to the explosion of the firearms convoy from Lebanon near Kiryat Motzkin. One of the consequences of this event was the abandonment of Haifa by its Arab residents in April 1948. [16]

In Haifa, the international telegraph traffic was also in coverage. Transmissions of telegrams to the High Commissioner and even to the King of Iraq and the King of Transjordan were collected by a trusted Haganah member who delivered them frequently to a trusted courier.[17]

Other communication intelligence centers operated in Afula and in Tiberias since the beginning of 1948. The center in Afula provided a vital information before and during the Battle of Mishmar HaEmek (April 15-4, 1948). Kaukji's Army maneuvering, artillery capabilities, ammunition supply and casualties were transparent in telephone conversations received at the Afula exchange (Code name "Maayani"). [18] Another early warning from Afula led to defeating Kaukji's Army in Tirat Zvi battle.

Challenges

In spite of the long-term success during this two decades, the communications intelligence system encountered challenges and obstacles of various kinds:

- Strict classification prevented the sharing of valuable information to the fighting units in the battlefields.
- The limited deployment of the telephone network outside the main cities and the periphery, masked information about local militia gangs and their members.
- Frequent sabotage to telephone poles and line cuts made the continuity of coverage a challenge.
- Unavailability of communication means to report, shortage in combat forces to take preemptive or reactive actions and disregard of alerts and warnings by commanders (e.g., the warning to the Nabi Daniel convoy).
- Minimal coordination in advance and during military operations.
- Absence of analysis capabilities to compile the wealth of the raw information into an overall picture.
- Military networks communication practices and terminology, in particular of the Arab armies, were unfamiliar.

The Transition from Haganah to IDF

The invasion of the Arab armies and the gradual stabilization of the ceasefire lines made the wireless communications of the Arab states and their armies the main targets for communication intelligence. The telephone lines wiretapping facilities in the mixed population cities became redundant, and tactical listening squads attached to the brigades and front headquarters greatly aided main IDF operations.

With the dissolution of the "Shai" and the establishing of the Military Intelligence Service as part of IDF General Staff (June 30, 1948), the Communication Intelligence service was integrated into this newly announced Service as Intelligence Service/2 ("Shin.Mem.2"). During the years 1948-1949 the unit in Jerusalem ("Shafan"), which was originally affiliated to "Da'at" - the Political Department of the Foreign Ministry was integrated in the new organization. The tactical squads' integration was concluded too, with secondment to the Fronts headquarters.

This entire structure became the establishing base of Unit 8200 of our days.

Summary

Communication Intelligence has evolved out of nothing through the self-strength of the Jewish pre-state community in Palestine.

Understanding the intelligence potential, technological capability, and adherence to the task by professionals, have made it a significant contributor to the intelligence collection.

Beginning in 1929, Communication Intelligence made a major contribution to the political and defense struggle. The ability to quickly obtain reliable and authentic information through this source gave it significant advantages relative to the other means of collection. Communication Intelligence was a direct aid to the Zionist top leaders and to the defense and the illegal immigration organizations despite its limitations.

Due to secrecy and strict classification Communication Intelligence is almost absent from the documentation and literature dealing with the political and security struggle in the pre-state period. On the other hand, its contribution was recognized and appreciated by the leadership and the senior command. This recognition was reflected in allocation of budgets and human resources and the high appreciation to those who took part in its early years. Their successors in Unit 8200 of our days are the followers of these pioneers in values, dedication and innovative spirit to meet and overcome their challenges.

- 2 -

(המשך)

20 - 660 12

תקבל העתקה מהטלגרמה שקבלנו עכשיו: בטול הצהרת בלפור, ונמשיך הלאה מהומות עד שלא נפטר מהצהרת בלפור. בנוסף זה קבלנו טלגרמות ממצרים, עמן, בירות, ועוד מקומות. 20 אומר: האם התכוונת בעיר, ע"י ועד הפועל תלו יותר מששים דגלים. כדאי את זה לצלם.

119 - 660 12.15

יצחק אפנדי נמצא? 119 עונה: הוא אצל המופתי. 660 עונה: אין דבר תן לי אותו. 119 שואל: מי מדבר? 660 עונה: דג'ני. מה עשיתם על אודות קפיטן קנג. 119 עונה: אינני יודע כלום. 660 אומר: צריכים לדעת כדי שאנאל שיוכלו להודיע ליפו שתשלח לקבל את פניו. 119 שואל: יש חדש? 660 עונה: כן יש לי חדשות. אני מקבל מהצעירים הערבים ומוטר את זה היכף למטרה ומשתדלים להרגיע אותם.

402 - 660 610

הדר' נמצא? 402 עונה: לא, הוא בחיפה. 660 שואל: מהי יבוא? 402 עונה: מחר

660 615

פחרי נשטיבי מדבר עם 1077 עבדים בק הודיעו לנו ששני צעירים ערבים טילו כרחוב יפו ושוטר בריטי הכה אותם. 1077 עונה: שני הצעירים הלכו בצורה חשודה ועמדו במקום שלא היו צריכים לעמוד. בא שוטר בריטי ואמר להם ללכת. הם לא שמעו לו ועמדו. אז השוטר דחף אותם. אני ושויקי היינו נוכחים בזמן המעשה. 660 עונה: טוב

660 - 324 ג. 645

מוראנעם הקפיטן "קינג" יבוא ביום השני יצא מחר ממצרים. תבוא לועד הפועל מחר.

Example of recording of telephone calls from November 2, 1929. 660 is the telephone number of the the Supreme Islamic Council in Jerusalem (Courtesy of the Haganah History Archive)

Comments and references

(All the referenced sources are in Hebrew)

- [1] Intelligence collection discipline based on interception of electromagnetic signals intelligible to humans (voice, messages, or images). For reasons of uniformity and authenticity it will be referred to in this review as "wiretapping", "Monitoring" or "Intercept".
- [2] The Haganah History Archive, Gershon Slutsikai, testimony, symbol 138.40, 9 May 1957.
- [3] Some of them were located in the Central Zionist Archive and some in the The Haganah History Archive.
- [4] Central Zionist Archive, File No. S25\22329.
- [5] David Ben-Gurion, **Diary Pages** 7.11.36 Page 11 and continued on 13.11.1936, Ben-Gurion University, Ben-Gurion Institute for Israel Studies and Zionism, Ben-Gurion Archive, Diaries, File 5/11 / 1936-26/11/1936. The content reviews the "intervention" of Arab kings. It is apparent that the great detail is based on listening to telephones and telegraphy in April-October 1936.
- [6] Examples of referring raw information to Ben-Gurion, Shertok and Ben-Zvi can be found in the files of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, such as the Central Zionist Archive, File No. S25\22836 S25\22272.
- [7] Yaakov (Yishka) Eliav, **Wanted**, "Mevukash" (Required), Underground Publishing, Maariv Library, Jerusalem, 1983, pp. 64-63.
- [8] The Haganah History Archive, Israel Weiner testimony, Symbol 151.8, 1960.
- [9] The Haganah History Archive, Zeev Gasco testimony, symbol 138.20, 30.9.1964; Eliyahu (Alik) Sukhchover testimony, symbol 161.20, 19 February 1950.
- [10] The Haganah History Archive, Avraham Brexon, Recorded Testimony, 1979.
- [11] Yossi Dagan, "Jerusalem of Wiretapping and Cipher", (in Hebrew) **Roim Malam**, Issue 81 (July 2018), pp. 17-14.
- [12] Yitzhak Levy (Levitza): **Jerusalem in the War of Independence**, (in Hebrew), Ministry of Defence, Tel Aviv, 1986, p. 395.
- [13] Asa Lefen, **The Roots of the Israeli Intelligence Community**, Ministry of Defence Publishing, Tel Aviv, 1997, pp. 174-172 (in Hebrew); Tamar Eshel in an interview with the author, 16 January 2019.
- [14] The Haganah History Archive, Haim Ben Menahem testimony, Symbol 19.30, 16 Sept 1955
- [15] Levy (Levitza), 1986, p. 393.
- [16] Menachem Biderman, "The Contribution of Listening to the Occupation of Haifa - 62 Years of the Explosion of an Arab Ammunition Convoy in the Kiryat Motzkin Area", **Migdalor**, Issue 14 (January 2011), p. 31.
- [17] Yosef Segal, testimony of his work at the Telegraph Center in Haifa, 4 January, 2017.
- [18] "Battle of Mishmar HaEmek", review for Tene/A, 8.5.48, the document is kept in S.M/2 archive. The review is based exclusively on information from "Maayani" (Afula central telephone exchange).

