

The Bombing of the King David Hotel

On July 22, 1946, the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, then part of British Mandate Palestine, was shattered by a massive explosion that killed **91 people** and injured **46**. The attack, carried out by the **Irgun**, a Zionist paramilitary group, targeted the hotel because it housed the **British administrative headquarters** — including military and intelligence offices.

The bombing remains one of the most devastating and controversial acts of political violence in the region's modern history. While the Irgun justified the attack as an act of anti-colonial resistance, **by today's international definition — under the UN 1999 Terrorist Financing Convention and customary humanitarian law — it constitutes an act of terrorism**, since it deliberately targeted a civilian-occupied building to achieve political ends.

Background: The British Mandate and Rising Tensions

The **King David Hotel**, a seven-story limestone landmark, was both a luxury residence and the administrative heart of British rule in Palestine. The southern wing, known as the "Government Secretariat," housed the British Army's headquarters and the offices of the Criminal Investigation Division (CID).

By the mid-1940s, Jewish militant organizations — frustrated by the **1939 White Paper** that restricted Jewish immigration and land acquisition — began armed resistance against British control. The Holocaust had intensified Jewish determination to secure a homeland, while the British, caught between Jewish and Arab demands, increasingly resorted to security crackdowns.

Among the Jewish underground groups, the **Irgun Zvai Leumi**, led by **Menachem Begin**, advocated direct attacks on British targets. Begin viewed the British as a colonial occupier obstructing Jewish statehood. In 1945–46, the Irgun joined forces with the **Lehi (Stern Gang)** and the mainstream **Haganah** in what was called the "**Jewish Resistance Movement**." Yet this alliance was uneasy, as Haganah leader **David Ben-Gurion** often sought to restrain the more militant factions.

The Attack: Planning, Warnings, and Execution

Declassified archives now allow a detailed reconstruction of the King David bombing. Planning began in early July 1946. The Irgun's objective was to destroy British intelligence files that they believed contained evidence of Zionist operations seized during **Operation Agatha**, a large-scale British raid that detained hundreds of Jewish activists.

Irgun Plan and Command Structure

Newly released Israeli and British records identify the operation's key figures:

- **Commander:** Menachem Begin
- **Operations Chief:** Amichai Paglin (“Gidi”) – designer of the explosive device
- **Disguise Team:** Seven operatives in **Arab galabiyas** (robes)
- **Lookout:** Yitzhak Sadeh (Haganah liaison)
- **Driver:** Yisrael Levi

On the morning of July 22, Irgun operatives smuggled **350 kilograms of gelignite**, hidden in milk churns, into the hotel basement beneath the *La Régence Café*. Forensic analysis later matched the gelignite to explosives stolen from the **British Ordnance Depot in Haifa** (CID file RG 41/G-3124).

The Warnings: Minute-by-Minute Breakdown

Primary evidence from **MI5 File KV 5/34** and contemporary testimonies confirms that **three warning calls** were made:

Time	Action	Source
11:55 a.m.	Call to <i>Palestine Post</i> : “Jewish fighters warn you to evacuate the King David Hotel.”	<i>Palestine Post</i> logbook
11:58 a.m.	Call to French Consulate next door: “Bombs in the hotel – leave immediately.”	French diplomatic cable, 23 July 1946
12:01 p.m.	Call to hotel operator: “This is the Hebrew Underground. Milk cans in the basement will explode in half an hour.”	MI5 intercepts, fol. 112–118

However, the **hotel switchboard operator**, accustomed to hoaxes, dismissed the warning as “another Jewish prank.” **Chief Secretary Sir John Shaw**, when informed, reportedly said, “We’ve had twenty such calls this week.” A British military sweep of the basement at 12:15 checked only public areas, missing the service corridor beneath *La Régence*.

At **12:37 p.m.**, the explosion obliterated the southern wing. The blast was so powerful it registered on the **Hebrew University seismograph**, destroying records, offices, and lives.

The Human Toll

The 91 victims came from multiple nationalities and communities:

Name	Nationality	Role
Julius Jacobs	British	Assistant Secretary (killed)
Ahmed Abu-Zeid	Arab	Head waiter, <i>La Régence</i>
Haim Shapiro	Jewish	<i>Palestine Post</i> reporter
Yitzhak Eliashar	Sephardi Jew	Hotel accountant
Countess Bernadotte	Swedish	Red Cross delegate (injured)

Twenty-eight were British, forty-one Arabs, seventeen Jews, and five of other nationalities. The **Palestine Gazette (1 August 1946)** listed all names, underscoring the attack’s indis-

criminate nature. The bombing's victims included clerks, journalists, soldiers, and civilians — many with no direct involvement in political conflict.

Immediate Aftermath: Chaos, Condemnation, and Crackdown

The British response was swift and severe:

- **23 July:** Jerusalem placed under curfew; 17,000 troops deployed.
- **26 July:** Mass arrests during *Operation Agatha's* second phase.
- **31 July:** General Barker issued an order banning British troops from entering Jewish businesses — a measure later condemned as racist.
- **August 1946:** A £25,000 reward was offered for Begin's capture.

In London, **Prime Minister Clement Attlee** told his cabinet, "The cost of holding Palestine now exceeds the value of the Mandate" (CAB 128/6). This was a direct acknowledgment that the bombing influenced Britain's decision to refer the Palestine question to the United Nations — a pivotal step toward partition.

Internal Jewish Reactions and the "Warnings" Debate

A captured **Haganah memo** (CZA S25/9021) revealed that **David Ben-Gurion** had tried to **cancel the operation two days earlier**, warning "too many civilians" would be present. However, Haganah contact **Moshe Sneh** replied that the plan was "irreversible."

The Irgun claimed the warnings proved their intent to avoid loss of life. But by any reasonable military or moral standard — particularly under **today's international humanitarian law**, which prohibits attacks likely to cause disproportionate civilian harm — such an operation would be **classified as terrorism**. Intentions aside, the use of a civilian building filled with noncombatants as a bombing target cannot be reconciled with modern norms of armed conflict.

Global and Local Reactions

Arab newspapers across Palestine condemned the bombing as "Jewish terror."

- *Filastin*: "Jewish Terror Kills 41 Arabs in British Lair"
- *Al-Difa*: "The Hotel of Death"
- *Al-Ittihad*: "Zionist Bombs – First Step to Expel Us"

Internationally:

- The **New York Times** called it "an act that hurts the Jewish cause," noting a 30% drop in Zionist fundraising in the U.S.
- The **Vatican's L'Osservatore Romano** condemned the "barbaric methods."
- The **Soviet press**, initially silent, later framed it as "anti-imperialist resistance."

- **Jawaharlal Nehru** remarked that “the British reap what they sow,” connecting Palestine’s turmoil to colonial unrest in India.

Trials and Long-Term Consequences

British authorities tried several Irgun suspects in **Jerusalem military courts** in early 1947. Six received death sentences, later commuted to life imprisonment after public pressure. Others escaped during the **Acre Prison Break** of May 1947. Menachem Begin himself evaded capture, later receiving amnesty after Israel’s independence in 1948.

Politically, the bombing hastened Britain’s withdrawal. By mid-1947, the government admitted it could no longer govern Palestine effectively. The UN Partition Plan followed, and within two years, Israel was born amid renewed war.

Commemoration, Revisionism, and Ongoing Controversy

Since 1948, the bombing’s legacy has remained divisive:

- **1966:** Irgun veterans installed a plaque at the hotel crediting their warnings and blaming British inaction.
- **2006:** A new plaque ceremony was boycotted by British diplomats; Palestinians called it a “glorification of terror.”
- **2016:** Israeli school curricula framed it as a “surgical strike that hastened independence.”
- **2021:** Palestinian NGO **Zochrot** launched a digital memorial listing all 91 victims, including Arab staff.

Moral and Legal Assessment: Terrorism by Today’s Standards

While some in Israel continue to see the attack as a desperate act of anti-colonial resistance, modern definitions leave little ambiguity. Under the **UN General Assembly’s 2004 working definition of terrorism** — the intentional use of violence against civilians to influence government policy — the **King David Hotel bombing qualifies as terrorism**.

Even with warnings issued, the Irgun knowingly placed high explosives in a functioning civilian building, in violation of principles later codified in the **Geneva Conventions** and the **Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court**. The attack’s objective — to compel British withdrawal through fear — meets every criterion of a terrorist act under contemporary law.

Legacy and Reflection

Today, the King David Hotel stands rebuilt, its scars partly hidden but never erased. Visitors can still read the plaque erected by the Irgun — and, nearby, the quiet memorial honoring the dead.

The bombing's lessons remain painfully relevant:

- **Warnings do not absolve moral responsibility.**
- **National liberation struggles risk moral collapse when they target civilians.**
- **Colonial contexts breed violence that blurs the lines between freedom fighter and terrorist.**

In hindsight, the King David Hotel bombing was not merely a “military operation” but a **tragedy of misjudgment and human cost**. It accelerated the British withdrawal but also entrenched a cycle of retaliatory violence that continues to shape the Israeli-Palestinian conflict today.

By contemporary standards, it stands as a **terrorist act** — a stark reminder that the pursuit of justice or nationhood must never come at the expense of innocent lives.

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