

## The Arab-Israeli Military Engagements of 1948

The events of 1948 have been portrayed as the victory of an outnumbered Israeli people attacked by a monolithic Arab army determined to “drive the Jews into the sea.” This “David and Goliath” version of events, which was given weight by the saber-rattling rhetoric of Arab propaganda vowing to prevent partition, has become one of the founding myths of the Israeli State and one which continues to define both the identity of Israelis and their attitudes towards their neighbors. However, even the most superficial analysis of the facts proves that version of events to be false on all counts. There was no miraculous victory, nor did the Israelis win a war alone; with massive international support – both diplomatic and material – and a fractured and weak opponent, the partition of Palestine was a predictable outcome.

The widely held notion that the Arab armies were a united force acting with the sole aim of defending Palestine is very far from the truth. Even if the popular voice on the Arab street clamored for their countries to come to the aid of their brethren in Palestine, at no stage was this the real goal of the Arab leaders. In practical terms, the Palestinians were on their own from the very beginning.



King Abdullah of Transjordan, President Bechara al-Khoury of Lebanon, President Shukri Quwatli of Syria and Crown Prince Abdul Ilah of Iraq

The essence of the events of 1948 can be defined as a conflict between Hashemite and anti-Hashemite Arab blocs as they attempted to rearrange their borders in the wake of the British withdrawal from Palestine. Behind a veil of Arab unity against a Jewish state which they had accepted was going to survive the conflict, the Hashemite rulers of Transjordan and Iraq joined forces in an uncomfortable alliance of mutual mistrust and jealousy to test the shrewdness of Syria and Egypt both in gaining control of land in Palestine and in protecting their borders from their neighbors.

Caught in the middle of this triangular conflict were the Palestinians. Crippled by the machinations of their Arab brethren, the Palestinian guerrillas were the only Arabs truly fighting for the Palestinian cause, and the only ones with everything to lose. The Grand Mufti’s *Jihad al-Muqaddas* army numbered only several hundred men and had some early successes under the capable leadership of Abdel Qader Husseini, but suffered from many strategic disadvantages. The first and most obvious was numerical; in addition, their morale was affected by the absence of their leader Hajj Amin, who was in exile since 1937. Strategically, they were crippled by having been suppressed and disarmed during the British Mandate while the Zionists had been



Abdul Qader Husseini



Hasan Salameh

allowed to build up organized, well-armed and well-trained forces, many of which had gained experience with the British in WWII. Their approach was that of a guerrilla army, capable of victories in small engagements but ultimately ineffective without a wider long-term strategy or the support of regular armies.

The Palestinian resistance suffered a serious setback even before the military involvement of the Arab nations when Abdel Qader Husseini was killed at the battle of Qastel on 8 April 1948. When his successor Hasan Salama died at the battle of Ras al-Ein on 2 June, the Palestinian fighters were left leaderless and in disarray, and the Israelis no longer faced a serious threat from within the borders of Mandatory Palestine.

The Grand Mufti, understanding the intricacies of inter-Arab politics, had always argued against the intervention of Arab countries into Palestine and appealed simply for financial and material support. He was disappointed on both counts. At a meeting of Arab leaders held in Cairo (right) under the patronage of King Farouk of Egypt, King Abdullah was declared the High Commander of Arab Forces in Palestine.



Abdullah with Farouk

### Military Capability

Most of the Arab armies had little or no combat experience, were hampered by a lack of suitable weapons and ammunition and were manned in the main by local police forces. The only army with good training, adequate equipment and combat experience was King Abdullah’s Arab Legion, which comprised only 4,500 of the approximately 20,300 Arab troops deployed at the beginning of the conflict.

The Israeli forces at the beginning of the war consisted of approximately 27,000 troops, bolstered by a centralized command structure, good training, many soldiers with combat experience from WWII, massive financial support and a carefully planned military strategy. In addition, they had as many as 90,000 reserve troops in settlements, youth battalions and home guard, as well as the Irgun and Lehi. Once they had received their first arms shipments and reinforcements from overseas, the Zionists were superior in every military aspect.

Figures by Walid Khalidi, quoted in Simha Flapan, *The Birth of Israel*, Toronto, 1987, p. 196.