

NAKBA

The Process of Palestinian Dispossession



Egyptian commander Mohammed Said Taha Bey negotiating the evacuation of Jewish troops from the Negev. On his left is future Israeli PM Yitzhak Rabin.

The subsequent Egyptian contribution to the conflict was badly organized, poorly led, and planned along very optimistic intelligence analysis and a refusal to acknowledge the quality of the Jewish forces they would be facing. After a campaign in which Egyptian troops surged into the Negev, they soon assumed a passive strategy with their forces in a defensive line, a situation complicated by their support routes passing through a large group of Jewish settlements behind their lines. When Jewish forces under the command of Yigal Allon launched "Operation Yoav," they broke through the defensive line and attacked Egyptian forces from the rear. Beersheba fell within days and the bulk of Egyptian forces retreated in disarray. All that remained of fighting Egyptian forces was a small contingent in what became known as the "Fallujah pocket", where the surrounded and isolated soldiers fought superbly against Jewish attacks for four months, withdrawing only after the UN-brokered armistice agreement. One of the senior Egyptian officers in the Fallujah pocket, whose angry colleagues would join him in forming the Free Officers movement that would topple Farouk in 1952, was future President of Egypt Gamal Abdul Nasser.



Gamal Abdul Nasser

In his memoirs, Nasser reflects on Egypt's entry into the conflict in 1948:

"This could not be a serious war. There was no concentration of forces, no accumulation of ammunition or equipment. There was no reconnaissance, no intelligence, no plans. Yet we were actually on the battlefield... The only conclusion that could be drawn was that this was a political war, or rather a state of war and no-war. There was to be advance without victory and retreat without defeat."¹³

Nasser credits his experience with the unprepared and fragmented Arab forces in the military conflict of 1948 as the origin of his drive for Pan-Arabism.

¹³ *Memoirs of the First Palestine War*, translated and annotated by Walid Khalidi, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. II, No. 2, 1973.

Iraq

Following UN Resolution 181, Iraqi public opinion was putting intense pressure on the Iraqi leadership to come to the aid of the Palestinians, with demonstrations and hunger strikes by Iraqis clamoring for intervention. On 15 May 1948, three Iraqi battalions numbering approximately 2,000 men deployed from Baghdad through Transjordan towards Palestine under the command of General Baker Sidki.

The Iraqi campaign was characterized by miscommunications between Baghdad and the generals on the ground, and by confusion between the generals themselves. After initial unsuccessful and costly frontal assaults on Jewish positions on the hills of the Jordan Valley, Iraqi troops took up defensive positions and inflicted heavy losses on counterattacking Jewish forces. When the Jewish troops withdrew to regroup, the Arab Legion handed over control of the Jenin-Tulkarem-Nablus triangle to the Iraqis to deal with the growing Jewish pressure on Jerusalem. Wary of the Jewish forces, short of funds and ammunition and increasingly mistrustful of their Transjordanian allies, the Iraqis made no attempts to reach the Mediterranean or the crucial Tel Aviv-Haifa road only 6 miles away, which would have cut Israel in two, and were content to hold the north of what is now the West Bank.



King Abdullah of Transjordan reviewing Iraqi troops during a visit to Iraq in 1941. Left to right: General Nuri as-Said, Iraqi Prime Minister Emir Abdul Ilah and Transjordan's King Abdullah.

Lebanon

Although listed in the Israeli narrative as one of the massed Arab armies bearing down on Israel in the military engagements of 1948, Lebanon's contribution was merely a token gesture of Arab solidarity. In the wake of its recent independence from France, it had been left in a delicate political balance between the various Lebanese factions and was in no political or military position either to engage in a war against an organized enemy or to alienate its own Muslim community. A small Lebanese contingent holding parts of the Galilee was defeated by the Jewish forces towards the end of the military conflict.



Lebanese PM Riad al-Sulh (center) at an Arab League meeting in Cairo, 1948. On the far left is Hajji Amin al-Husseini, and on the right are Mardam Bey of Syria and Azzem Pasha of the Arab League.