

Syria

Syria's leadership was preoccupied with three central concerns: internal instability in the wake of its independence from France in 1946, opposition to King Abdullah's ambitions to rule over a Greater Syria, and an interest in acquiring the water resources just within the borders of the British Mandate. These had been carefully included in Palestine by the British drawing the borders in 1923, with a 10-meter wide stretch of shoreline denying the Syrians access to Lake Tiberias and a strip of land between 50 and 400 meters wide on the Syrian side of the river from Lake Tiberias to Lake Hula securing it for Palestine.

With these considerations in mind, President Shukri Quwwatli supported the Arab League's plans to create the Arab Liberation Army in order to delegate the expense and manpower of combat within Palestine to volunteers, enabling him to keep his troops close to Syria's borders. Just as importantly in the context of the political instability in the country, any defeat endured by the ALA would reflect upon the Arab League and not upon his personal leadership.



President Shukri Quwwatli

President Quwwatli was very boastful of his army's ability to defeat the Zionists prior to the engagement of the Arab armies, telling Palestinian politician Musa Alami that "I am happy to tell you that our Army and its equipment are of the highest order and well able to deal with a few Jews." He went on in a display of vanity and bluster: "I can tell you in confidence that we even have an atomic bomb... It was made locally; we found a very clever fellow, a tinsmith..."¹⁴

In spite of these words, Quwwatli was very aware of the inferiority of the Syrian army and was reluctant to engage in maneuvers that might leave his border with Transjordan vulnerable to King Abdullah's ambitions. When the Syrian regular army finally entered Palestine, Glubb Pasha estimated their numbers at only 3,000 of 4,500 available troops, while the CIA estimated a deployment of 1,000 troops by late June and 1,500 more near Syria's border. Heavy defeats in the first week of hostilities at Samakh in the Galilee and defended *kibbutzim* left 300 Syrian soldiers dead. The subsequent outcry by the parliament and press, accusing the government of failing to make adequate preparations for the war, forced President Quwwatli to fire both his Chief of Staff and his Defense Minister. The new appointee to the Defense Ministry was Colonel Husni al-Za'im, who would lead a coup against Quwwatli's government in 1949.



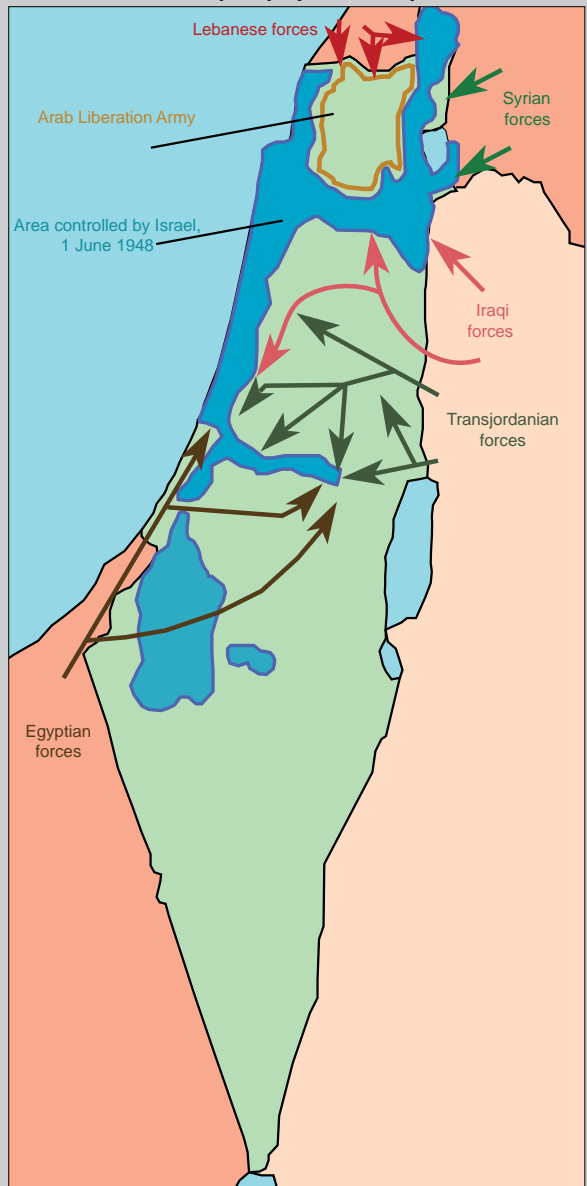
Colonel Husni al-Za'im

By the end of hostilities, the Syrians had penetrated just far enough to seize the strategic water resources near the border and were content to defend them for the duration of the military confrontation with Jewish forces without challenging them any further. They had taken no more than 66.5 square kilometers of land, and had denied the ALA any assistance as they were being driven north into Lebanon by the advancing Jewish forces.



Former Syrian PM Saadallah al-Jabri, PM Jamil Mardam Bey and Iraqi PM Nuri as-Said consulting in the mid-1940s.

Arab Troop Deployments, May 1948



¹⁴ Jeffrey Furlonge. *Palestine is my Country*. London, 1969.