# The Arab Armies' Invasion of Israel - May 1948: Interests and Implementation

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Britain's announcement in the UN in late September 1947 that it intended to evacuate Palestine forced the Arab states to hasten their moves toward a possible intervention. Meeting in Aley, Lebanon, the Arab League's political committee decided to set up a military committee, headed by the Iraqi general Ismail Safwat, to examine the military situation in Palestine. Just as the UN was about vote on the partition of Palestine into two states, Safwat submitted the military committee's report to the Iraqi chief of staff and secretary of the Arab League. The report's conclusion was based on an analysis of the conditions and balance of forces in Palestine:

"Palestinian irregulars alone will not be able to defeat the Jews. Well-trained Arab regulars, equipped with the best weapons and assisted by the Palestinian gangs, must be brought into the campaign."[1]

According to Safwat, the brunt of the fighting would have to be borne by the regular armies with the help of Palestinian irregulars and volunteer reserves from the Arab states. Since none of the Arab armies were ready for a drawn-out war the fighting had to be gotten over with as quickly as possible.

The Arab leaders, however, dismissed these recommendations, ordered the establishment of an all-Arab volunteer army, and assigned Safwat the task of implementing this decision.[2]

At the same time, Palestinian Arabs and foreign volunteers began organizing on the basis of local, regional, and family affiliations, building a military force that would provide the initial response to the expected developments in the region. Two Palestinian paramilitary organizations - Najda and Futwa - that had been set up in 1945 were still the inchoate stage.[3]

The implementation of the Arab state's assistance plans, that were discussed in the conferences of late 1947, were characterized by domestic interests and regional factors that revealed bitter

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[1] Shmuel Segev (editor), *Behind the Curtain* (Tel Aviv, 1954, pp. 70-77).

[2] Yoav Gelber, *Buds of the Fleur-de-Lis* (Israel Defense Ministry, 2000, p. 78).

[3] Yoav Gelber, *Uprising and Disaster*, Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab States, 1948 (Kineret, Zmora Bitan Modan, Dvir, Or Yehuda, 2004, p. 30).

disagreement and rivalry among the parties, as well as disorganization, paucity of resources, and shoddy control mechanisms that precluded effective military assistance.[4]

If the Hashemites in Jordan and Iraq believed that their regular armies would be the sole intercessors in Palestine at the end of the Mandate, then their assessment proved illusory by the rapid development of war in Palestine following the UN Partition Resolution on November 19, 1947. Syria, which had an existential interest in a preventative war, assumed the lion's share of the burden of organizing, training, and leading the irregular volunteers.

The morning after the UN vote, stormy demonstrations erupted in Arab countries, and the masses took to a semi-spontaneous wave of volunteer registration and outpouring of contributions for the establishment of a volunteer army. On the initiative of Syria's president, Shukri al-Quwatli, who chaired the Arab League in Damascus, a link was created between Qawukji,[5] who had been operating independently until then, and the league's military committee. In December a retired Iraqi general dwelling is Syria, Taha al-Hashimi, was appointed general inspector of the Arab Liberation Army. On December 6, Qawukji was named its field commander. Fighting forces that the mufti of Jerusalem (Haj Amin al-Husayni) had recruited - the Army of the Holy War - did not come under the command of the Arab Liberation Army because of the mufti's strong opposition to Qawukji whom he distrusted and considered an adversary. On December 12 the secretary of the Arab League gave Safwat command of the Arab Liberation Army.[6]

This force was to be made up of Palestinian and foreign volunteers armed and financed by the Arab states. A training base was set up in Qatana, Syria, and volunteers from Egypt underwent basic training at the Hakstep Camp near Cairo.[7]  At its height, the number of volunteers in the Liberation Army came to 1000 Palestinians, 3000 Syrians, 2000 Egyptians, and a few hundred from other Arab states including Judea and Samaria and Lebanon. The Palestinians and the Syrians (some of whom had served in the French Army of the Levant or participated in the armed rebellions against the French in 1945) arrived in Qatana, where Iraqi volunteers were also

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[4]  Avraham Sela, "The Arab Salvation Army in the Galilee in the 1948 War" in Alon Kadish (ed.) *The War of Independence 1948-1949, a Reevaluation* (Defense Ministry, Tel Aviv, 2004, p. 208).

[5] Fawki al-Qawukji, a Lebanese-born Arab nationalist who fought against the French in Syria in 1925, stood at the head of the Arab volunteer force in Samaria in the 1936 Revolt, took part in the Rashid Ali al-Keilany revolt in Iraq, and remained in Germany during World War Two.

[6] Avraham Sela, "The Question of Eretz-Israel in the Inter-Arab Struggle from the Founding of the Arab League to the Arab Armies' Invasion of Eretz-Israel, 1945-1948," Ph.D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1982, pp. 414-423.

[7] Amitzur Ilan, "The Balance of Power and Readiness for War," in Alon Kadish (ed.) *The War of Independence 1948-1949, A Reevaluation*, Defense Ministry (Tel Aviv, 2004, p. 96).

organizing. Syrian army officers and men were allowed to volunteer as instructors and staff roles, and even volunteer for combat units. In December 1947 several Syrian officers resigned their posts in the army in order to join Qawukji's forces[8] that now numbered seven battalions: three Syrian, three Iraqi, and one Palestinian.

The Syrian groups were led by their own officers and were divided into the following units:

- The First Yarmoukh Battalion – deployed in the area between Jenin and Beit She'an.
- The Second Yarmoukh Battalion – deployed in the area between Tzfat (Safed), Acco (Acre), and Nazareth.
- The Mt. Druze Battalion – deployed in the Upper Galilee.
- The Aleppo Platoon – deployed in the Jerusalem region.[9]

Until January 1948 only Syria supplied weapons and equipment to the volunteers.[10] On October 16, 1947, the Syrian army cancelled all discharges and began collecting ammunition and weapons (old service rifles plus a few cannons and armored cars) from regular and irregular units,[11] though these munitions didn't amount to much mainly because the Syrian army suffered from a serious shortage.[12]

As the rioting in Palestine escalated in December the military committee was forced to send the volunteer forces into combat earlier than planned. The first matter to deal with was equipping the Palestinian Arabs, especially in the mixed Arab-Jewish cities, with defense munitions. The volunteer formations were now officially termed "The Arab Salvation Forces" (better known as "The Arab Liberation Army"). The military committee determined organizational and operational procedures, appointed commanders, and assigned missions.

The vanguard of the "Arab Salvation Army" entered Palestine on the night January 10-11, 1948 - several hundred troops of the Second Yarmoukh Battalion, mostly Syrians from the Hama region under the command of the Syrian general Adib Shishakli, infiltrated via Lebanon and deployed in the Galilee. On the night of January 20-21, the First Yarmoukh Battalion under the

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[8] *Syria*, al-Jedida al-Ramsi, 1947, p. 1876.

[9] Amin al-Nafuri, *The Syrian Army in the 1948 War*, p. 30.

[10] Avraham Sela, "The Arab Salvation Army in the Galilee in the 1948 War," p. 210.

[11] Amin al-Nafuri, *the Syrian Army in the 1948 War*, p. 30.

[12] Amitzur Ilan, "The Balance of Power and Readiness for War," p.97.

command of Muhammad Safa penetrated the Samaria area (northern West Bank) from the Jordan River crossings between Damia and Jericho. In February a force of about 200 Jordanian volunteers (discharged troops and some on AWOL from the Arab Legion) invaded the northern Galilee and linked up with Shishakli's forces.

In the second half of March the Arab Salvation Army, reinforced with a platoon from the Samaria sector, deployed in the Galilee. At the same time an independent Druze battalion, directly subordinate to Damascus, under the command of Shakib Wahab, entered the Galilee and deployed in the Shfaram area. There was no chain of command or coordination between this force and Shishakli's headquarters.

In addition to these units, two large groups of Palestinian irregulars and foreign volunteers subordinate to the Mufti's command also operated in Palestine: one, under the command of Abu Ibrahim al-Jarir, deployed in the Lower Galilee, and the other, under the command of Abd al-Qader al-Husseini, operated in the Jerusalem area.[13] In early March, Qawukji arrived in Samaria and commenced operations even as bickering and power struggles between the Mufti and his opponents raged in the background.

The questions of force structure, chain of command, and deployment remained unresolved. Under Safwat's overall command from his headquarters in Damascus (and from February 16 from Zarka in Jordan) the following picture of regional commands and irregular forces operating in Palestine comes into focus:

**North** (under Qawukji's command):

- Shishakli's battalion, the Druze battalion, and Abu Ibrahim al-Jarir's forces in the Galilee.
- Muhammad Safa's battalion and Iraqi forces in Northern Samaria; their main base in Nablus (a major city in the West Bank).

**Center**

- Abd al-Qader al-Husseini (headquarters in Bir Zeit, north of Jerusalem) operated in the Jerusalem area; an Iraqi volunteer unit under the command of Lieutenant Fadel Rashid also operated in the Jerusalem area.
- Hasan Salama was fighting in the west, mainly in the coastal plain and Ramle region, where an independent Iraqi force, under the command of an officer by the name of Shwiki, also operated.

**South**

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[13] Yoav Gelber, *Buds of the Fleur-de-Lis*, pp. 84-86.

- A Sudanese colonel, Tariq Bei, was in charge of "Muslim Brotherhood" forces.[14]

**Mixed cities**

- Separate Arab forces under foreign command served as reinforcements for the local militias in Yafo (Jaffa), Haifa, and Acco (Acre).

The Palestinian leadership preferred to wage the struggle from safe bases outside of Palestine – Cairo, Beirut, and Damascus – and by doing so it effectively abandoned the Arab public to its fate.[15]

By mid-April Arab forces in Palestine were estimated at 6000-10,000. For four months the Palestinians and Arab League failed to develop the war effort. They accumulated strength and managed to dispatch a few thousand fighters and a large quantity of weapons into Palestine; they also set up local militias in Arab population centers. On the other hand, they failed to establish a chain of command or generally accepted political leadership that could direct the pan-Arab war effort.[16]

The diversity of forces and commanders and absence of a joint general staff precluded cooperation. There were almost no cases of reinforcements being sent from one sector to another (except for the short-lived evacuation of Qawukji to the Jerusalem area after his rout at Mishmar Ha'emek).

Despite these drawbacks, Arab force build-up soon had a telling effect on the country's road network. The initiative in the struggle for the roads lay in the Arabs' hands and they exploited their quantitative advantage in a series of successful attacks on Jewish convoys in late March.

The Muslim Brotherhood began infiltrating Palestine in March. Most of its ranks were filled with Egyptians who were opponents of the regime or members of armed groups. Some Sudanese and Libyans also joined in group. The brotherhood's order of battle (ORBAT) attained battalion-level strength but the British overseers (who officially left Palestine only on May 14) did nothing to counter their intrusion. Muslim Brotherhood actions were directed from Egyptian army headquarters in El Arish (northeast Sinai), which had direct control over the volunteer units.

The surprising fall of Tzfat to Palmach forces sent shockwaves through the Arab population in the Galilee. The Syrian government, too, was stunned, especially since it viewed the Jewish

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[14] Yoav Gelber, *Buds of the Lily*, p. 89, according to a British study from March 19 on the Arab Liberation Army.

[15] Yoav Gelber, *Uprising and Disaster*, p. 37.

[16] Yoav Gelber, *Buds of the Fleur-de-Lis*, p. 319.

capture of the eastern Galilee as a threat to its security and a major obstacle to any attempt by the Syrian army to penetrate the Galilee after the British departure. The Arab Salvation Army's prestige plummeted. Its display of passivity and lack-luster soldiering lost it the respect of the Palestinian Arabs. The battle for Tzfat illustrated the discrepancy between size and ability of the Arab Salvation Army when it was forced to prove its mettle in the Galilee.

On May 1, in the midst of the battle for Tzfat, Shishakli launched a major attack that was part of the Arab Salvation Army's campaign to capture "key areas" in the Northern Galilee in advance of the expected invasion of the Arab regular armies. The failure of the effort left the 2ed Yarmuk battalion with the task of protecting the volunteer forces still remaining in the Galilee (Shishakli's battalion and the Druze battalion) that were charged with implementing Syrian plans prior to and during the invasion. The Arab armies' intention to invade Palestine created the mistaken impression that the attack would come from Lebanon, while in reality the Syrian force was transferred to Tzemah (south of the Sea of Galilee) and the Jordan Valley sector.[17]

Muslim Brotherhood forces, that did practically nothing prior to the Egyptian expeditionary force's invasion, had been organized within the Arab League army and reinforced with troops from Tunisia and Libya. The invasion force was divided into three battalions commanded by Egyptian officers. On April 25 the First Battalion entered the combat theater in an attack on Kfar Darom. All three battalions were subordinate to the Egyptian army.

On February 16 General Ismail Safwat established Arab General Headquarters in Zarka, Jordan. On February 23 the Arab foreign ministers concluded that Palestine could be saved only by military intervention. The Arab chiefs of staff were instructed to order the Arab regular armies to carry out this decision.

Throughout April and May, Jewish forces launched an all-out attack and defeated the Arab irregulars. These setbacks intensified the pressure on the Arab governments to intervene. Of all the Arab states, only Jordan actually intended to send its regular army (the Arab Legion) into Palestine at the end of the British Mandate. Syria and Lebanon, each for its own reasons, were willing to take "some" part in military action. The Egyptians remained noncommittal. The Joint Command, which the Arab League had set up, was determined to dispatch Arab armies to Palestine.[18]

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[17] Avraham Sela, "The Arab Salvation Army in the Galilee in the 1948 War," pp. 218-226.

[18] David Tal, "Military Decision in the Shadow of Political Bickering," in Alon Kadish (ed.) *The War of Independence 1948-1949,* pp. 423-424.

On April 30 the chiefs of staff met in Zarka to discuss war plans, determine each country's military objectives, and the make-up of the ORBAT needed to liberate Palestine. The decision: six divisions backed by six fighter squadrons would be sent to the frontiers of each Arab state bordering Palestine.

In a meeting in Damascus the Syrian chief of staff presented the Syrian and general invasion plans:

- Syrian and Lebanese military units would attack the coastal axis. The objective: to isolate the Jews' transportation routes between the coast and hinterland of Haifa and the Galilee, and prevent supplies from reaching Palestine by sea. After this the Hula Valley and Tiberias would be cut off from the coast, the Upper Galilee including Tzfat captured, followed by an advanced flanking movement in the direction of Nazareth in order to link up with the Iraqi and Jordanian invasion forces.

- The Iraqi and Jordanian armies would move from the Jordan Valley and West Bank toward the Mediterranean coast while capturing Beit She'an and Nazareth on the way, followed by an attack in the direction of Netanya and link-up with the Syrian and Lebanese armies.[19]

- The Egyptian plan was to advance from Sinai and Gaza along the coastal axis with the objective of reaching Tel Aviv where the army would pin down and destroy the Jewish forces, thus contributing to the victory.

- The last stage of the plan, after most of Palestine had been captured, had the armies' uniting in a steel ring and strangling the enemy's capital: Tel Aviv [sic].[20]

But this ambitious plan was rejected because the Higher Command was now under King Abdullah's charge. The plan that was finally agreed upon set the invasion for May 15 (the date of British forces' exit from Palestine). The joint plans of the Arab Headquarters in Zarka were reversed at Abdullah's insistence, and the Syrian army was ordered to change the direction of its attack. Realizing that without the Arab Legion's active role in the fighting the Arabs would be

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[19] Amin al-Nafuri, *The Syrian Army in the 1948 War*, p. 0.

[20]  Shmuel Segev (editor), *Behind the Curtain*, The Iraqi Parliamentary Committee on the War in Israel, translated by Sh. Segev (Tel Aviv, 1954, pp. 123, 148-154). *In the Eyes of the Enemy: Three Arabic publications on the War of Independence*, translated by Sh. Segev, Tel Aviv 1954, pp. 82, 89-90.

hard pressed to thwart the Partition Plan, the Syrians agreed to the change,[21] which called for their army attacking from the Golan Heights on May 15 rather than from Lebanon.

The main points of the new plan were as follows:

- The Lebanese army would proceed south on the coastal axis from Rosh Hanikra to Acco (Acre).

- The Syrian army would attack the Hula Valley and advance to attack from the Banias and Bnot Yaakov Bridge toward Tzfat and Nazareth.

- The Iraqi army would commence operations from the Jordan Valley and move in the direction of Beit She'an and Afula.

- The Jordanian army would engage the enemy in the Jerusalem area and Sha'ar Hagai (the entryway to the Jerusalem Corridor) and join forces with Egyptian units in the Hebron area.

- The Egyptian army would proceed from Rafah and Auja al-Hafir (Nitzana) in the direction of Gaza and the coastal axis with the aim of isolating the Negev.

The plan also envisioned Syrian and Iraqi forces converging on Afula, then advancing in tandem toward coast and slicing the country in half in the Netanya area.[22]

Major engagements between Arab regulars and the IDF commenced with the May 15 invasion. The beginning of this stage of the fighting is actually the second stage in the war, when the Arab armies' held a temporary advantage in quantity and quality of weapons, if not in the size of their forces. However they failed to exploit their advantage, and committed only negligible forces to the fighting in the first two weeks (until the end of May). The invasion armies sorely lacked effective coordination. They failed in almost every engagement with the IDF mainly due to vacillation, faintheartedness, and irresolution. The general staffs acted far too independently instead of setting clearly-defined objectives for their forces. The general plan merely called for "seizing territory." The enemy was able to block the Arab regulars already in the first stage of their ingress.

On May 19 the Arab leaders met in Dar'a, Syria to evaluate the initial stage of the invasion. The atmosphere bristled with suspicion, dissension, and disgruntlement, especially on the part of the Syrians whose army had been diverted at the last moment from Lebanon to the Jordan Valley in

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[21] Guy Ma'ayan, "Losing the North: Arab States and the Galilee in the 1948 War," in Alon Kadish (ed.) *The War of Independence 1948-1949,* p. 274.

[22] Amin al-Nafuri, *The Syrian Army in the 1948 War*, pp. 30-31.

the Tzemah area. The Syrians wanted to return to the original plan and enter Palestine from Bint Jbeil in Lebanon, but again the plan was overruled in favor of King Abdullah's designs to gain control of Palestinian territory, including the international city of Jerusalem, and have the holy sites come under Jordan's protection.

The Syrians regarded the Dar'a conference as the last chance for Arab cooperation, and now saw their plans go up in smoke. The lack of cooperation from Jordan and Iraq made it clear to Damascus that the joint invasion plan had been scuttled, and that from this point on Syria would have to act on its own.[23] The dismantling of the invasion force's United Joint Command during the first ceasefire (June 11-July 8, 1948) merely reflected the rampant division in the Arab camp.

The leaders of Lebanon's defense establishment – in particular the chief of staff Fuad Shahab – had serious misgivings over Prime Minister Raid Bey as-Solh's pan-Arab policy. They viewed the Lebanese army as primarily a defense force and were deeply concerned that an entanglement in Palestine would jeopardize the integrity of the republic - especially the Christian hegemony in the fragile power balance in the Land of Cedars. Interestingly, Lebanese Christians actually supported the Zionist Movement and considered Lebanon's involvement in the war to the south as involvement in a mess that was none of its business.[24] Even many Shiites in South Lebanon opposed Lebanon's participation in the invasion.[25] Taking all these influences and interests into consideration, President al-Khoury sought a symbolical role for Lebanon participation in the form of defending Lebanon's southern frontier from Jewish intrusion.

Only the Jordanian government explicitly intended to invade Palestine at the termination of the British Mandate. King Abdullah saw this as a historical opportunity to realize the dream of "Greater Syria" (even if in a whittled down version) and was determined to annex parts Western Palestine (later called the West Bank) to his kingdom. Abdullah's intentions seem to have coincided with British plans that opposed the establishment of a Palestinian state. According to British plans, the Arab Legion would gain control of Palestinian areas that weren't under Jewish hegemony, including the south of the country (the Negev), and annex them to the Hashemite Kingdom.

In Egypt, differences of opinion broke out between the government and King Farouk. The government wanted to drastically limit the army's involvement in Palestine, but the king took steps

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[23] Guy Ma'ayan, "Losing the North: Arab States and the Galilee in the 1948 War," p. 278.

[24] Ibid., pp. 275-276.

[25] Yoav Gelber, *Uprising and Disaster*, p. 210.

that made Egyptian intervention irreversible. He dismissed the cautionary advice that the army was unprepared for combat operations, and went ahead with the plans to send Egyptian forces into action because of public pressure and his own aspiration for Egypt to preserve its standing in the Arab world.[26] The army's mission in the first stage was to serve as a diversion that would draw Jewish forces to the south and thereby relieve pressure on the main Arab effort in the north. In the second stage, the Egyptian army would join the Arab forces converging on Tel Aviv.

The Iraqi chief of staff dispatched an expeditionary force of five divisions. (The Iraqi has participated in all the Arab-Israeli wars.) The army's low-level logistical ability and the great distance between the homeland and frontlines hampered any significant contribution on the part of the Iraqi armed forces despite their relatively large size.

In the later stages of the war, when the Arab armies finally received reinforcements, they had already forfeited the momentum to expand the areas under their control. The IDF was larger, better equipped and better positioned. The Arabs, though insufficiently prepared and lacking tactical and strategic coordination, had launched the invasion. The scarcity of reserves was felt, and once the British ammunition stockpiles were depleted the Arabs were left with no alternative source.[27]

By October 1948 the balance of forces had shifted heavily in the IDF's favor. The newly formed Israeli army relentlessly pursued the offensive in the last stages of the fighting and succeeded in routing the Arab armies and dislodging them from large swaths of land they had captured earlier.

The Arab invasion not only failed to achieve its initial goal of rendering the State of Israel "dead on delivery" but also the limited goal of stunting the size of the area intended for the Jewish state. The Syrians, Lebanese, and Arab Salvation Army could have isolated the Galilee panhandle had they acted in coordination as planned. The Egyptians, too, could have captured vital areas in the Negev as a first step in gaining control of the entire south. The Iraqi army, whose original mission was to reach Haifa, changed its objective and moved into the Samaria sector (northern West Bank) in order to assist its Hashemite ally. Ironically, only King Abdullah's Arab Legion, which from the outset had opted for a less than decisive goal, managed to secure Jordanian rule on the West Bank (until 1967).[28]

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[26] David Tal, "Military Decision in the Shadow of Political Bickering," pp. 423-427.

[27] Amitzur Ilan, "The Balance of Power and Readiness for War," in Alon Kadish (ed.) *The War of Independence 1948-1949, A Reevaluation*, Defense Ministry (Tel Aviv, 2004, p. 81).

[28] Elhanan Oren, "The War of Independence – Goals, Stages, battles and Results," in Alon Kadish (ed.) *The War of Independence 1948-1949*, p.48.

The war ended in a series of ceasefire agreements that stabilized Israel's borders for decades. Iraq alone refused to sign.

Overall Arab troop losses of the Arab are estimated at 3600. The military defeat of the expeditionary armies shook most of the Arab countries to their core and precipitated military revolutions. Only Jordan emerged from the war with tangible gains – hegemony on the West Bank and control of East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount – but even King Abdullah, was assassinated in 1951. The government, however, has remained in Hashemite hands till today.