

ISRAEL'S WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

I

1947-1949

by

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Preparation for Invasion

Arabs coordinate plans for a blitz victory

The Inspector General appointed by the Arab League to coordinate the war effort of its members wrote at the end of March 1948: "I am firm in the conviction that in order to prevent the establishment of a Jewish government and to compel the Zionists to give in to Arab demands ... the participation of Arab armies, with all the equipment and the armaments which are now at their disposal, is inevitable"; and he appealed to the Arab governments to begin immediately all necessary preparations so that "they will be prepared by the time the Mandate is terminated."

The Arab League, however, was in no hurry to accept his recommendations. Mutual suspicion, partial military success, and above all the political success which manifested itself in American retreat from support of partition, all these combined to convince Arab leaders that they had time on their hands. Only at the end of April, following the liberation of Haifa and Tiberias and the encirclement of Jaffa, did the Arab League call a meeting of its military com-

manders, demanding from them a plan for the intervention of regular Arab armies in the battles being conducted in Palestine.

If Arab military leaders had been inclined to scorn Jewish potential at the beginning of the war, now they had changed their minds; representatives of the general staffs of the neighboring Arab countries reached the conclusion that the Jewish forces could not be defeated with less than five divisions and six squadrons of bomber and fighter planes. This force was not available to the Arab states at the time. Thus their plan implied a poorly veiled request to postpone invasion for an indefinite time. The politicians would not agree. The political committee of the League insisted on invasion immediately following the termination of the Mandate on May 15, with forces then available.

"It was evident," claimed the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, "that the members of the Political Committee were convinced that the concentration of forces and a show of determination to engage

in battle would suffice to prevail on the major powers to intervene on behalf of the Arabs, and that thus the Jews would be forced to comply with Arab demands." It will be remembered that at that time a Special Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations had been called at Lake Success to consider the American Trusteeship Plan as a substitute for Partition. In addition, the fear of additional Jewish victories and conquests certainly played a part in making an imminent invasion advisable.

At the "Palace of the Republic" in Damascus the Arab chiefs of staff met now, for the first time, the Egyptian chief of staff was present to work out a "safe" plan, as it was defined. It seems to have been based on two principles: a) a blitz attack, since Arab armies did not possess a sufficient reserve of ammunition and supplies for a long drawn out battle; b) the isolation of Jewish settlements in the interior of the country from the coast from which alone reinforcements and supplies could reach them. The main effort was to be developed in the north of the country, while pinning down and diversionary operations were to take place in the south and center.

The plan seems to have been based on the assumption that Haifa and the oil pipeline leading toward it were the vital areas in western Palestine. Four Arab armies were to operate in the northern area in the form of a pincers movement, of which the Syrian and Lebanese armies would constitute the northern arm, the Arab Legion and the Iraqi army the southern one. The Syrian and Lebanese armies would advance from north to south, their objective being to reach the area of Tiberias, Safed, and Nazareth. As soon as the two armies had pinned down most of the Jewish forces in the north, the main effort would be opened by the Iraqi army and the Arab Legion on a front extending over about ten miles south of the Lake of Galilee, between Zemach and Bet Shean. The Iraqi army and the Legion would move west along two routes, the Tiberias-Nazareth and the Bet Shean-Afula roads. In the Nazareth area they would link up with the other arm of the pincers coming down from the north, and all four armies would then join in the final blow directed against Haifa.

According to one of the sources now available, Haifa was to fall on May 21, six days after the beginning of the invasion. The Egyptian army seems to have undertaken within the framework of this master plan pinning down and diversionary operations only, in the first phase. During the first days of its advance it would go as far north as Yavne and open a large-scale attack on the Jewish settlements protecting the approaches of

Tel Aviv to divert as many Jewish forces as possible to the defense of this area, which constituted the largest center of population in the Yishuv.

Inter-Arab friction

This plan was never put into operation. King Abdullah had never consented to it and was the first to take exception. The battle of Geshur on April 27 had taught him and his senior commanders that Jewish settlements were not easily captured. The Arab Legion had to give preference to the principle of security over and above any other principle of war. As a professional military force, requiring many years of training, based on a country small in population, it could not expect reinforcements within a short period. The very existence of Transjordan was dependent on a strong Arab Legion.

In addition, Abdullah was well aware that all his conquests would be worthless if he did not retain enough forces intact to defend them against his Arab enemies, above all the Mufti and his associates. If in Iraqi eyes the city of Haifa, the harbor, the terminus of the pipeline, the refineries constituted the vital area in Palestine, in Abdullah's eyes Jerusalem was no less vital. The son of the Sherif of Mecca whose family had for centuries enjoyed prestige in the eyes of all Moslems as the guardians of the holy places wished to possess at least one of the four holy cities of Islam, to control the Mosque of Omar in Jerusalem, whose Arab name, El Kuds (the Holy One), indicates its importance. Because of all these reasons Abdullah decided to direct his main effort on the Jerusalem-Ramallah-Hebron area, in spite of urgent appeals from the commanding general of the Arab League, the Iraqi General Nur-ed-Din. Abdullah's plan was to secure for himself control of all Arab settlements in the area and subsequently to "mop up" any remaining Jewish centers of resistance, first and foremost Jewish Jerusalem.

In secret negotiations conducted in October 1947, Abdullah had solemnly agreed to be content with the annexation of Arab Palestine to his kingdom without engaging in war with the Jews. The Jewish Agency Executive, therefore, decided early in May 1948 to make a last-minute effort to reach agreement with the King on that basis. On May 10, 1948, Golda Meyerson (Mrs. Golda Meir, former Foreign Minister of Israel), a member of the Jewish Agency Executive, disguised as an Arab woman, set out to meet King Abdullah in the house of a friend in Amman. Abdullah did not deny his previous promise, but claimed the situation had changed. "Then I was alone," he

said; "now I am one of five." But if the Jews agreed to refrain from proclaiming a state, ceased immigration, enabled him to annex the whole of Palestine to his kingdom, it was possible he might prevail on the more moderate among his colleagues to desist from preparations for war. "Why were the Jews in such a hurry to establish their state?" he asked.

His proposal was rejected forthwith. "If His Majesty wants war, there will be war. Who knows, we may meet again after the establishment of our state," Mrs. Meyerson said.

Two days later the Arab Legion carried out its first attack against the Etzion bloc; and in another two days it dispatched the rest of its forces to join in the battle, particularly in the area of Jerusalem and the corridor.

Transfer of the "schwerpunkt" of the Legion's effort southward from the sector earmarked for the main effort necessitated other far-reaching changes in the original plan. Further changes became necessary when the Liberation Army ceased for all practical purposes to be a military factor. Fawzi el Kaukji, its commander, insisted that his forces should be relieved and released for a period of reorganization in Syria, because of the exhaustion of his men, and his own unwillingness to subordinate himself to Abdullah. Kaukji had considered the latter a traitor since 1941, when he sided with Rashid Ali in the Iraqi rebellion, while Arab Legion forces, under British command, came to fight against him.

Finally, Haganah successes in the first weeks of May, and particularly in the last days before invasion, added to the confusion of the Arab planners. When Lebanese forces lined up at Rosh Hanikra, they found Carmeli Brigade in firm possession of whole of western Galilee, with its lines of communications to Haifa stable and well protected. Safed, designed to play a major role as a base for invading Syrian forces, had been captured by Yiftach Brigade.

The main Arab effort was dissipated. Forces were moved farther south, the Arab Legion converged on Jerusalem. The Iraqi army, following its initial failure in Gesher and Belvoir,

entered the northern triangle on the right flank of the Arab Legion, occupying many positions previously held by the Liberation Army; the Syrian Brigade, which on May 15 had reached Bint-J'bel, northwest of Lake Huleh and almost due north of Safed, was recalled the following day and moved to the Zemah sector, southeast of Tiberias. The northern sector was thus left to the small Lebanese army.

Changes in the Arab High Command were introduced at the last minute. On May 12 Nur-ed-Din, an Iraqi general, had been appointed as commander-in-chief, replacing Ismail Safwat, who had previously served as inspector general on behalf of the Arab League. Two days later King Abdullah was appointed to the post at his own request. However, the title turned out to be an honorary one; the Egyptian and Syrian armies never heeded his instructions and the other armies soon followed their example. The Arab armies operated without any effective unified command from the beginning of the invasion.

Arab armies invade

In spite of the numerous obstructions encountered by the original plan before the time came for its implementation, the chances were still, as Haganah's Chief Operations officer had stated, in favor of the Arab countries. Regular and fresh Arab forces opposed Haganah forces with many months of battle behind them. Above all, Arab armies with artillery, armor, air force and navy support opposed Jewish forces which still lacked all of these. Some planes and guns had, however, been obtained overseas. It was clear that if the Yishuv could gain time, it would be able to fight guns with guns, armor with armor, planes with planes. Time was the decisive factor. That was the situation when, on the night of May 14-15, 1948, within eight hours of the declaration of the Jewish State, the Arab armies began their invasion. An Arab victory would mean, as their slogan implied, driving the Jews into the sea. The Yishuv was determined to defend the State of Israel. As one brigade commander put it to his soldiers: "Death to the invader!"