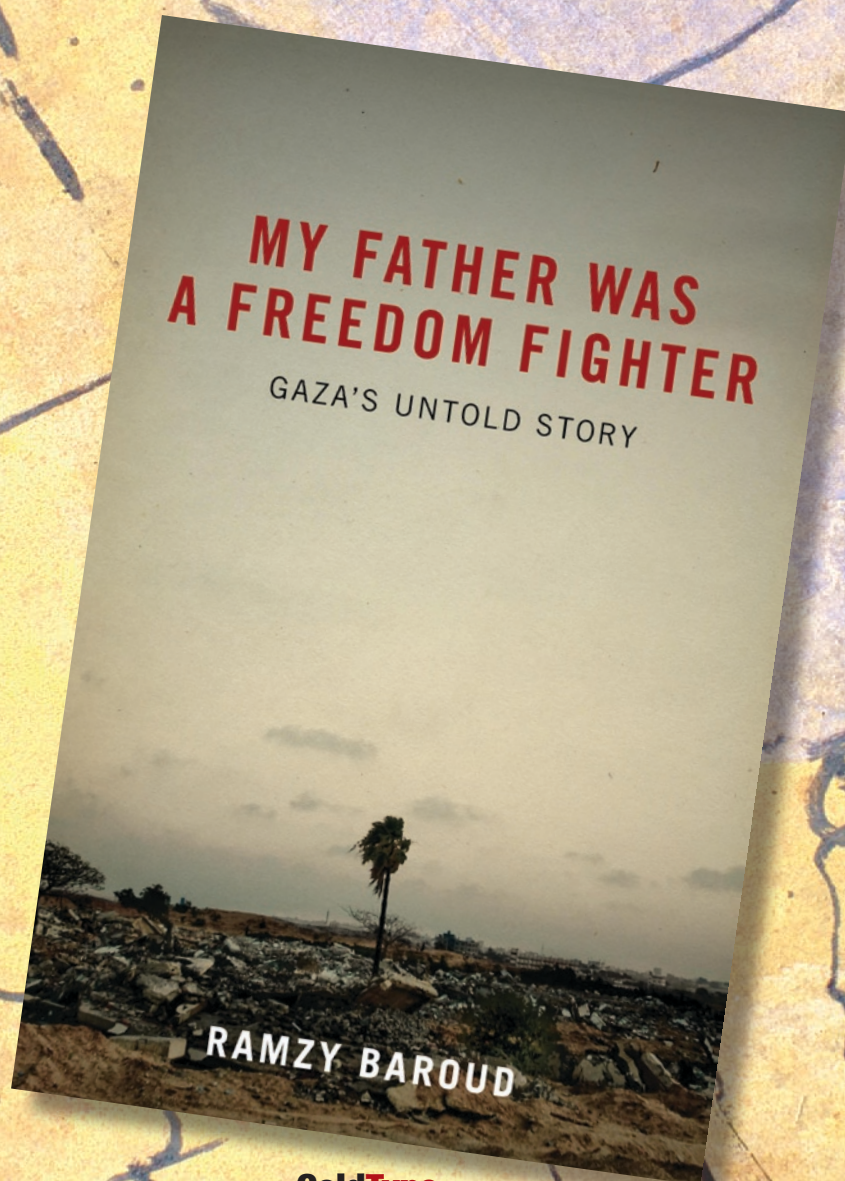
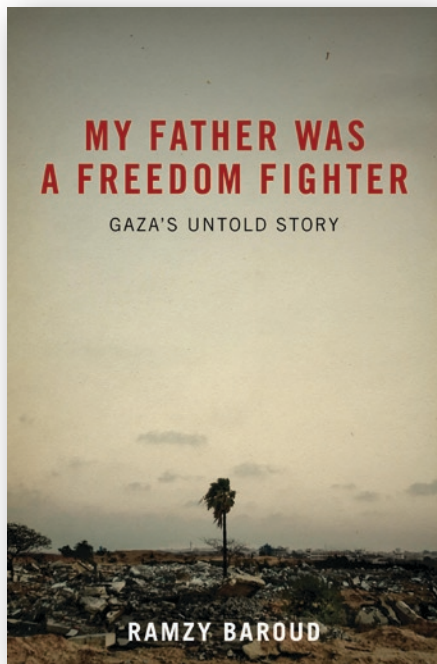


TAKING FLIGHT

**An excerpt from
MY FATHER WAS
A FREEDOM FIGHTER
By RAMZY BAROUD**



ColdType



THE AUTHOR

Ramzy Baroud is a syndicated columnist, veteran journalist and Editor-in-Chief of PalestineChronicle.com. He has taught Mass Communication at Australia's Curtin University of Technology, and has appeared on numerous television programs including CNN International, BBC, ABC Australia, National Public Radio and Al-Jazeera. His previous books include **Searching Jenin: Eyewitness Accounts of the Israeli Invasion** (2003) and **The Second Palestinian Intifada: A Chronicle of a People's Struggle** (Pluto, 2006).

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“Now, you’re sure you have your passport?”

“In my pocket, Dad.”

“Just check one more time.”

“I have, Dad, a hundred times.”

“Just humor me, son. You don’t want me to die from stress.”

“Okay Dad, here is my passport. Here is the army’s special permit for the airport. Here is the army’s permit to travel in Gaza. Here is my magnetic card to cross the Eretz checkpoint to Israel. I think that about covers it.”

“Where is the 8-hour permit to wait for the plane?”

“Right here. It’s the same as the Eretz’s crossing permit. Believe me, Dad. I’ve got everything.”

The recollection of my father’s worn and wise face, standing beside our family home in a Gaza refugee camp, remains as vivid today as the day I left him. He was wearing yellow pajamas and a wrinkled gray robe, both quite likely older than his adult children. Conflicting expressions were gathered on his wrinkled face. His body language told me distinctly that he

“

Another plea from the increasingly irritated taxi driver alerted my father to the inescapable fact that his son was leaving for a distant country, and perhaps, if life remained as it was, he would never see him again

was upset. But the anger was overpowered by other sentiments. Fear. Regret. Hope. Worry. I had to constantly reassure him that I had everything I needed to be on my way, the only thing left was a father’s blessing bestowed on his traveling son. But my father was still relentless.

“Do you have everything you need? Do you have enough money?”

“I do, Dad, just please go in the house, the soldiers could show up any minute.”

Another plea from the increasingly irritated taxi driver alerted my father to the inescapable fact that his son was leaving for a distant country, and perhaps, if life remained as it was, he would never see him again. The potency in his voice softened. The officious questioning came to a complete halt, as his eyes filled with tears. His strongest and weakest moments were always separated by a very fine line. The thundering father of many demands and expectations was also a gentle, loving dad who defined his happiness as that of his children, and his misery as the same. As his voice broke into a strand of unintelligible murmurs, the neighbors interfered,

urging me to kiss his hands and leave with no further delays. As we finally sped off, I watched from the back window my father's face fixated on the taxi. He was surrounded by local friends. To me, he had never appeared as broken as he did at that moment.

My shame reminded me that I was leaving behind an ailing, distraught father to resume his eternal desolation in a refugee camp in Gaza, while I embarked on building a new life for myself in the United States. This feeling would stay with me for many years, and it would flood over me when my father died in the refugee camp fifteen years later.

But my departure was “absolutely the right thing to do,” as my father had often declared, an assertion that was corroborated by any given friend or neighbor that happened to be in his company, especially if that person happened to have children of his own. Life in the refugee camp seemed to create a common denominator, if not a bond, among all the parents, who simply wanted to send their children away to safety. Many times during my youth he smuggled us away to solace in places that allowed him to retrieve us at short notice; thus our prolonged stay in the Gaza Valley, in the house of relatives from whom he was estranged, in an endless orchard of citrus trees, hiding away in a one-room, woven-palm hut that belonged to an old friend, miles from water or electricity. My father's sense of humor was hardly enough to distract us from the grimness of this place. At night, we would hang a blanket for a door, and when wild dogs would close in on the unfamiliar scent of me and my brothers, my heart would palpitate so fast, and the trembling of my body would keep me awake all night. We didn't dare use a flashlight or light a candle because such places were



My father: the shy, eccentric warrior.

Thanks to him, I am alive today, and my brothers and I have the privilege of telling a story that in many ways is unique to him and to us

commonly used for young fighters and we couldn't risk being found. It was only at dawn when a faraway minaret would comfortingly announce the call to prayer that sleep came.

Still, from a father's point of view, it was a worthy price to pay to be spared the unpredictable life in a revolting refugee camp, where thousands of soldiers were entrusted with the mission of turning the lives of its inhabitants into a living hell. The graveyard, which immediately bordered our house in the camp, was a busy place during those days. It was the center of many activities, notwithstanding the burial rituals of many of those killed in the daily clashes with the Israeli army. The old graveyard, renamed “Martyrs Graveyard,” certainly lived up to its new name, for most of its fallen were youths (often children), who were carried on stretchers, wrapped in Palestinian flags, as solemn crowds of men were followed by weeping mothers, wives and daughters. Of the endless number of processions that stood in the shadow of our house, the burial of a “martyr” was never an ordinary scene. A sinking feeling always came at the sight of a mother slapping her face, pulling her hair, tearing at her clothes, and reaching out to touch her lifeless child one last time.

Although my taxi made it past the Martyrs Graveyard, the water tower, Red Square, the outskirts of the camp, and then into the main road that stretches across the whole of the Gaza Strip, from Rafah in the south, to Beit Hanoun in the north, my thoughts hardly deviated from those I was leaving behind.

My father: the shy, eccentric warrior. Thanks to him, I am alive today, and my brothers and I have the privilege of telling a story that in many ways is unique to him and to us. In other ways, it resembles

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the untold story of millions of Palestinians refugees everywhere.

I have found it a great mercy that although my father had to endure the first Palestinian Nakba, among other tragedies, he was spared that grief when Israel carried out a massacre whose magnitude paled only in comparison to similar slaughters executed by Zionist militias in 1948. Starting December 27, 2008 and for many days, Israel carried out a most barbarous attack on the Gaza Strip, coined “Operation Cast Lead,” sealing all borders to prevent the flight of civilians, pulverizing entire neighborhoods, killing and wounding thousands, mostly civilians, mostly children and women. It is in the honor of all those innocents, in the honor of my mother and my father, exiles in their own homeland, that I write this book.

If my dad was alive now, he would have preferred that I “kept my big mouth shut.” His fears of Israeli intelligence were countless, and every single one legitimate. But now he is gone. Israeli soldiers can no longer raid, search and ravage his house. They can no longer deny him permission to travel for medical treatment. No more humiliation from a smart-ass teenage Israeli soldier at a checkpoint. No more questioning and no more abuse. It is only now that my father has passed away that I can start to tell his story.

And so I begin: “His name was Mohammed Baroud, and he was a good man.”

My father was only 9 years old when the Zionist military campaign to take over Palestine rolled into action. No one in his village, not even his wise and learned father, was to foresee the atrocities that followed: the uneven war, the dispossession, the massacres, the



If my dad was alive now, he would have preferred that I “kept my big mouth shut.” His fears of Israeli intelligence were countless, and every single one legitimate

betrayal, and the lifelong suffering. What my father found particularly unfair was that although he and other village children would pay such a heavy price, they hardly understood why their lives would be forever altered.

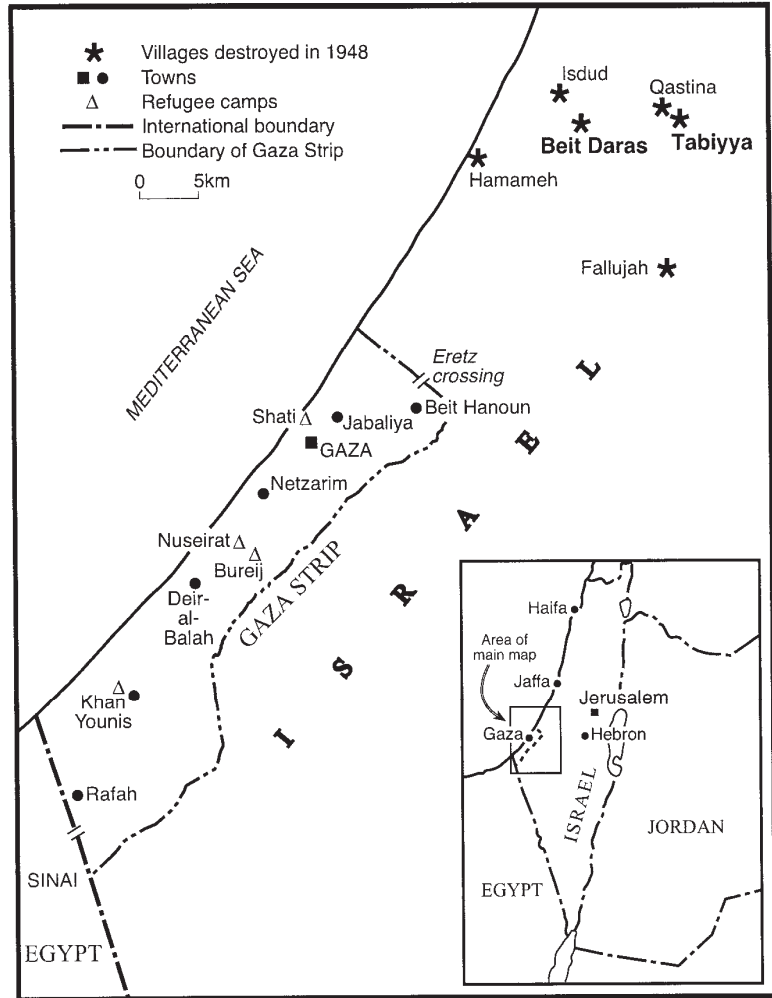
Tabiyya was hardly just an other village bordering Beit Daras that happened by sheer demographic coincidence to be populated solely by Jewish residents; it was also strategically positioned in southern Palestine as a gateway to Hebron, and subsequently to the Negev. The role that Tabiyya played in the war was so significant that it was regarded as the Zionist stronghold that eventually drove the Egyptian army out of Negev in the concluding stages of war. It follows that Beit Daras too became of immense importance to the Zionists, to Palestinian fighters and to the Egyptian army, as was later demonstrated. The attempt to eradicate any possibility of resistance in Beit Daras was an early and central priority for the Zionist leadership. But even before the Egyptian army or any other Arab armies became involved in the war – and a belated involvement at that – the fighters in Beit Daras had put up a tough fight in successive battles that further contributed to their reputation of strength and prowess.

BIT ETTABIYYA

Palestinian sources tell little of Tabiyya, known formally as Bit et Tabiyya, aside from the fact that it was a Zionist colony that played a vital role in the 1947-48 war. Those from Beit Daras who can recall the pre-war years spoke of Tabiyya as more or less a friendly surrounding with which Beit Daras had peaceful relations. The vil-

lage, or colony, of Tabiyya as it were, was briefly, if not rashly mentioned as an anecdote of betrayal, where the residents of Tabiyya turned against the very Beit Daras villagers who had taught them so much, amongst them the art of husbandry, without which Tabiyya would have not survived for long. But the fact is Tabiyya was never intended to be just another enclave among scores of Palestinian villages in southern Palestine. It was a part and parcel of a Zionist strategy that preceded the turmoil of the first half of the twentieth century, and indeed the official inception of the Zionist movement in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Founded in 1887, Tabiyya is linked to the earliest years of Zionist settlement in Palestine.

Zionist sources say that the colony was established on land that was purchased by Baron de Rothschild. But little is said of the strategic rationale behind that purchase. As far as Beit Daras villagers were concerned, Tabiyya was on land that belonged to various villages, but mostly Beit Daras and Qastina. In fact, Tabiyya was first named after Qastina. The new Qastina was soon abandoned, due to “Arab harassment and scarcity of water.” In 1896, it was populated again and renamed Be’er Toviyya, only to be abandoned yet again in 1929, following Palestinian riots and Palestinian-Jewish clashes. A year later, it was populated for the third time, and with successive expansions that managed to claim 15,000 dunums of land, acquired almost entirely from areas that belonged to Beit Daras. In 1947, Tabiyya’s population was estimated at 642. While its size was significant enough from the viewpoint of relatively small villages like Beit Daras and Qastina, especially as the expansion of the village took place at the expense of Palestinian land, in the great



“**Equally puzzling was the existence of a British army supply camp at the border of Tabiyya and Beit Daras. Innocently, the residents of Beit Daras referred to it as a “police station”**

scheme of things, neither the size of Tabiyya nor its population seemed so significant as to explain the doggedness of the Zionist leadership to risk the safety of its inhabitants by populating such a small piece of land three times in the course of 60 years. Is it possible that early Zionists had already envisioned a role for Tabiyya and persisted in maintaining that role for so long, until it was finally realized, with implausible success during Israel’s “War of Independence”?

Equally puzzling was the existence of a British army supply camp at the border of Tabiyya and Beit Daras. Innocently, the residents of Beit Daras referred to it as a “police station.” But the camp certainly

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was much more than that, and again, had served Tabiyya and later Zionist army units in ways that guaranteed their dominance, and eventually victory over the Arab inhabitants of that area. My father had jokingly referred to the British presence near his village, as he and Belt Daras boys would follow the soldiers on their daily patrols: “The British occupied our village for decades, and all they taught us was ‘fuck you’ and ‘zig zag.’” I still haven’t a clue what “zig zag” means, but I am almost certain that the former term was used abundantly to chase away troublesome village boys, or to humiliate villagers during nightly raids. It was funny every time he said it, but in some strange way it seemed analogous to the type of relationship that the British had with Beit Daras’s residents.

Indeed, Tabiyya was not an ordinary “village” or even an ordinary colony, for it also bordered on an airport that was operated by the British but was frequently used to smuggle arms to the Haganah. Without reliable airborne and safe supply routes, the Haganah’s fight to conquer southern Palestine would have proven much more difficult. When the Zionists began attacking Beit Daras, they fully comprehended the strategic significance of destroying the village and driving out its inhabitants. When the villagers fought back, they simply did so to defend their families, their honor and their land. It was only when the Egyptian army intervened to regain the village after its final demise, that they began to appreciate the value of Beit Daras in terms of Zionist war plans. But by then, it was too late.

But in other ways, Tabiyya was just another colony. It was part and parcel of strategic Zionist positioning of Jewish colonies in rural areas, mostly as outposts to guard supply routes, as gateways to



At the start of the Mandate, 90 percent of the population was Palestinian Arab. The British role in the ethnic cleansing that followed can hardly be contested

more important, and larger colonies, and as part of its later revealed plans aimed at the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in the countryside. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé explains:

Most of the Zionist settler colonies in the rural areas lay far apart from each other; in some areas, such as the Galilee in the north and the Naqab [the Negev] in the south, they were effectively isolated islands amidst the surrounding Palestinian countryside. This isolation meant these colonies were built like military garrisons rather than villages: what inspired their layout and design were security considerations rather than human habitation. Their introverted seclusion contrasted bizarrely with the open spaces of the traditional Palestinian villages with their natural stone houses and their accessible, unhindered approaches to the nearby fields and the orchards and olive groves around them. That so few Jews had settled in the Palestinian countryside proved to be a serious problem for those who wanted to base their solution to the growing conflict between the two communities on the principle of partition.

But were Tabiyya and the numerous other Zionist colonies in the Palestine countryside an aberration, inconsistent with a mainstream Zionist agenda that favored Partition?

PARTITION

When early British plans suggested the partition of Palestine, Zionists celebrated, but hardly ceased to contend that Palestine, all of Palestine, was theirs. The logic behind the celebration was the generous offerings that these plans had made to the Zionists in ways that are grossly dis-

proportionate to their population. When the British absolved themselves from the conflict in Palestine, and relegated the issue to the United Nations, the reality on the ground was greatly altered, thanks in part to British policy that had for many years supported mass Jewish immigration to Palestine. By the end of 1947, as the UN was assuming a greater role in Palestine – although largely manipulated by the United States and Britain – the indigenous Palestinian Arab majority was estimated at two thirds of Palestine’s total population. The rest were Jewish newcomers. At the start of the Mandate, 90 percent of the population was Palestinian Arab. The British role in the ethnic cleansing that followed can hardly be contested. However, the land was still mostly Palestinian. All the shady purchases that took place during and even prior to the Mandate years, all the unwarranted confiscations for “military purposes,” all the land that was seized illegally, hardly altered the land division. Maybe the population had become “mixed” due to the pro-Zionist policies of Britain, but land ownership was hardly mixed at all. In fact, “almost all of the cultivated land in Palestine was held by the indigenous population [while] only 5.8% percent was in Jewish ownership in 1947.”

The numbers cited above however seemed to matter to no one, save the Palestinians. The United Nations General Assembly – under intense pressure from the US government and President Truman himself – voted in favor of Resolution 181, which recommended the partition of Palestine into three entities: a Jewish state, a Palestinian state and an international regime to govern Jerusalem. If the British proposal of 1937 was angering enough for the Arabs, the UN resolution was a reason for total dismay, as it allocated 5500 square



Once again, Zionist celebrations and Arab dismay, each reacting to the same skewed logic that provided an alien party the right to rob someone of their land and hand it over to another

miles to the proposed Jewish state, and only 4500 square miles to Palestinians – who owned 94.2 percent of the land and represented twothirds of the population. The fact that only 600 square miles of the proposed Jewish state was actually owned by Jews seemed not to irk the 33 member states who voted in favor of partition. Once again, the Zionist leadership was jubilant, knowing fully that the partition resolution was originally a Zionist plan that the US president had endorsed as early as 1946. Once again, Zionist celebrations and Arab dismay, each reacting to the same skewed logic that provided an alien party the right to rob someone of their land and hand it over to another. The Zionist leadership was hardly content with the UN’s iniquitous division, but it was a milestone worthy of festivities, for it was now the international community, led, or coerced, by the United States that was championing the Zionist vision, and had reached a point of generosity that was truly unexpected. Palestinians and Arabs on the other hand, who had hoped that the US with its constant emphasis on self-determination would shift the slanted British policy in favor of those Arabs who had long been denied self-determination on their own land, were experiencing yet another rude awakening as the tilted policies of Britain were now adopted, with a new impetus by the Americans. Any little chance for sanity seemed to have vanished.

The inhabitants of Beit Daras were particularity distressed, as their village was of the many unfortunate villages and towns that fell overnight, due to some political considerations, from being historically a Palestinian Arab village, into a village that belonged to a Palestinian minority in a proposed Jewish state. Grandpa Mohammed’s world must have felt so limited when he learned that, according to the

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new arrangement, he would no longer be able to travel to Hebron, Jerusalem, Jaffa, Ramleh, or Lydda, as his village was now trapped in the environs of a Jewish state in which, he, a native Palestinian, was a minority.

NEW REALITIES

By the end of World War II, and the increasing dominance of the United States over world affairs, including the Middle East, new terminologies were now entering the Palestinian-Arab lexicon. The intense debate over the Zionists, the Jewish immigration, the British bias, and so on, were joined by new alien topics about the Holocaust and Hitler, and how such more recent happenings were cementing the Zionist claim over Palestine. While Arab ambassadors at the UN were decrying the injustice of having Palestinians redeem the sins of Europe, the villagers of Beit Daras were scantily aware of the new circumstances that would seal their fate. Grandpa Mohammed, savvy regarding issues relevant to his time and surroundings, was not aware of who Hitler was and how this man with a funny mustache would deeply influence the future of Beit Daras and its very existence. And as Arab delegates at the UN appealed to the International Court of justice to deny the UN the right to carry out the recommendations made in Resolution 181 to no avail, Beit Daras was preparing to defend its land no matter what international institutions resolved and dictated. Grandpa Mohammed was not the least prepared to give away the land he bought, complete with a deed and a seal, and which had been in the hands of villagers of Beit Daras for as long as anyone could remember; his memories, his love and loss, his struggles were all he needed to prove that Beit Daras was his. And Grandpa Moham-



As for villages and urban neighborhoods that were suspected of planning operations, “everything possible in them should be burned and the houses of those who had incited or participated in operations should be blown up”

med was hardly the exception.

As Palestinians were reaching the imminent conclusion of an approaching war, thus the need to prepare militarily, the Zionist leadership was finalizing a plan that dated back to May 1942 to take over the whole of Palestine. The main Zionist fighting force was the Haganah, under the command of the Jewish Agency; the latter already functioned as a government, while the former was an army. But the Haganah's history is much more convoluted, for it had “evolved in the early days of the Mandate as an offshoot of the preMandatory Hashomer (Watchman), itself descended from the secret societies of Czarist Russia. In 1947 the Haganah had a continuous existence of at least thirty years.” Meanwhile, the Anglo-American Committee estimated Zionist military preparedness in a 1946 report at 62,000 well-trained fighters. There was no mention of Palestinian readiness whatsoever. A Haganah memorandum sent to the Anglo-American Committee on March 25, 1946 read:

As far as the strength of the Arabs in Palestine is concerned, we are in possession of well-founded information. There is no doubt that the Jewish force is superior in organization, training, planning and equipment, and that we ourselves will be able to handle any attack or rebellion from the Arab side without calling for any assistance from the British or the Americans. If you accept the Zionist solution but are unable or unwilling to enforce it, please don't interfere, and we ourselves will secure its implementation.

Considering that Resolution 181 was originally a Zionist plan that gained the US government's vote of confidence, and eventually the United Nations', the Zion-

ist leadership was well prepared for all possibilities that could result from partition. In the May 1946 plan, the Haganah developed a military concept of “counteraction” which adopted two military tactics: “warning” and “punitive,” both aimed at “inflict[ing] physical harm,” taking hostages and liquidating them, with the battlefield being “clubs, cafes, and other meeting places, communication centers, flour mills, water plants and other vital economic installations.” As for villages and urban neighborhoods that were suspected of planning operations, “everything possible in them should be burned and the houses of those who had incited or participated in operations should be blown up”. The UN partition plan however, compelled a more aggressive and pro-active strategy than that of warning and punitive actions, thus Plan Dalet (D). Plan Dalet’s objective was to claim areas designated by the LTN as parts of the Jewish state. But it was also “obvious that no Jewish colony outside the state would be abandoned or vacated and that the Haganah would do everything to organize their resistance.”

The ethnic cleansing of Palestine began immediately after the Partition Plan was adopted by the UN. In December 1947, supposedly reacting to Palestinian riots protesting the partition of the country, determined Zionist attacks on Palestinian areas resulted in the exodus of 75,000 people. The delayed Arab response to calls for help left the Palestinian population most vulnerable. Only in September 1947, years after the gathering and exhaustive preparation of tens of thousands of Zionist troops in Palestine, did the Arab League form their Technical Military Committee to assess the situation. In December, the league agreed to supply the committee with a few thousand rifles and recruit



At the height of the battle, Belt Daras possessed 19 rifles, seven of which didn't work. Kitchen knives were sharpened, clubs were prepared and the chosen few were entrusted with old Turkish rifles, which, according to my father, required cleaning after every bullet fired

three thousand volunteers (the Arab Liberation Army), which would first receive its training in Damascus, then be deployed to specific areas, mostly to defend the proposed Palestinian state. Considering such a pitiful response in most urgent times, the war to save Palestine was lost before it even began. However, nothing was to convince the villagers of Belt Daras to concede an enormously unequalled, ill-fated fight. The men scrambled to invest in a few rifles. Women volunteered their gold, and men donated much of their savings to purchase the rifles, an operation that was handled in extreme secrecy in nearby Isdud. At the height of the battle, Belt Daras possessed 19 rifles, seven of which didn't work. Kitchen knives were sharpened, clubs were prepared and the chosen few were entrusted with old Turkish rifles, which, according to my father, required cleaning after every bullet fired. While retrospectively, the fight looked incredibly desperate, in Beit Daras, at the time, a great sense of pride prevailed, and, in fact, hope. They labored to hold steadfast, long enough to keep the Zionist forces at bay, until the Arab armies would emerge and bring the fight to an end. The Arabs, however, seemed to have other plans, if any at all.

BEIT DARAS AND PLAN DALET

The Zionist leadership, however, had a master plan. Plan Dalet was devised in stages and altered to accommodate political necessities. The final version, launched in April 1948, manifested in six major operations. Two of them, Operations Nachshon and Harel, aimed at destroying the Palestinian villages in and around the Jaffa-Jerusalem border. By cutting off the two main central areas that composed the proposed Palestinian state, according to the UN partition plan,

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the Zionist leadership wanted to break up any possibility of Palestinian geo-political cohesion, deny Arab fighters important supply routes, and protect isolated Jewish colonies in the south and the Negev. The two operations immediately pushed Belt Daras into the heart of the hostilities, despite the fact that the rest of the south was not yet a priority for Zionist military encroachment. Considering the fact that Belt Daras was already appreciated by Zionist strategists as a valuable area due to its proximity to Tablyya, a military supply airport, and so on, the significance of the small village was now compounded. Indeed, Beit Daras came under heavy shelling in the first week of the war. The heaviest shelling was on March 27-28, 1948, killing nine villagers and destroying large areas of the village's crops." The shelling originated from Tabiyya.

Um Mohammed al-Yazuri, now a grandmother living as a refugee in the Gaza Strip, was 10 years old at the time. As a child, she was delegated by her father, a farmer from Belt Daras, to guard the field from birds and unruly children. She said the bombing originated from the area between Belt Daras and the village of al-Sawafir, in the east:

They started shelling us from there. The shells fell on the houses. They killed children, cattle, and also men. We didn't have shelter in which to hide. We hid in the houses, but the bombs fell on the houses. They would go through the wall and fall on the houses, because the houses then were made of mud. [But] we stayed.

On March 29, the village fighters struck back, ambushing a Zionist military caravan that was passing by the village. Although details of this particular engagement are sparse, it became clear to the



The succession of small battles that preceded and accompanied the transfers of the large cache of weapons must have also classified Beit Daras in the category of the most militant of villages, whose fate must be exceptionally harsh

Zionist military leadership in that area, even to David Ben-Gurion himself, that the Beit Daras threat had to be extinguished. The editors of Ben-Gurion's diaries made several mentions of Belt Daras, the first in reference to his decision on March 31 to organize a large military contingent to receive and ensure the safety of a large shipment of weapons that was about to land in "Beit Daras airport." According to the diaries, the first airplane, laden with weapons from Czechoslovakia, was smuggled through Belt Daras airport. "Smuggled" is of course a misleading term, considering that the airport was under the authority and watchful eyes of the British. The succession of small battles that preceded and accompanied the transfers of the large cache of weapons must have also classified Beit Daras in the category of the most militant of villages, whose fate must be exceptionally harsh. On April 13, the Zionist militias returned with a vengeance and in greater numbers, now that they had realized the resolve of the village. Um 'Adel, mentioned in Chapter 1, recounted the second battle:

They came a second time from two different directions. They shelled us first, then lots of soldiers poured in. It was a tough battle, but they couldn't occupy Belt Daras. We defeated them. They killed ten more people, including Thelb Abu Zeina. But once again, they pulled out. Human remains were everywhere.

Again, Um Mohammed:

It was in April. The vegetables were just sprouting. The tomatoes, the apricots, the wheat, the barley, everything was in bloom. They [the people of Belt Daras] resisted. They resisted. But, whenever the British army realized that the Palestinians were defeating

the Jews, it would intervene to support the Jews. On that afternoon, my mom left with my younger siblings .

The British intervened to shield Zionist fighters on more than one occasion; most notably on May 1. Zionist forces had moved into the village, from the direction of the elementary school, and stationed themselves there. Such a breakthrough would have not been possible were it not for the intense shelling that preceded the move. Beit Daras seemed incapable of withstanding the military pressure, as the school was located on a higher elevation, a strategic point that allowed Zionist snipers an unmatched advantage. However, Beit Daras, a village of stubborn men and women, was not to go down easily, as fighters from al-Majdal, Hamameh, Isdud, Fallujah, al-Sawafir, and more, descended with a show of solidarity that fundamentally changed the direction of the battle. Once again, the British intervened to aid fleeing Zionist troops. Who would have thought that Beit Daras, a village of a few thousand and a few rifles, would put up such a fight? But the stakes were much higher and Beit Daras was expecting the worst.

Um Mohammed's mother left for al-Majdal, as did a few other families. At-Majdal, a major town by the standards of that area, offered more security as it was not yet on the Zionist military's hitlist. Um Mohammed's father remained, and so did Um Mohammed and her sister, for a while; they chose to stay and look after their father and the family farm. The Zionist militias were soon to return.

But what about Grandpa Mohammed, Zeinab and their children?

Grandpa fought on the frontlines. The few rifles made it impossible for the men to all take part in the battle at the same



Grandpa fought on the frontlines. The few rifles made it impossible for the men to all take part in the battle at the same time. So they divided the day into shifts, and each served guard and engaged in the fighting for a few hours

time. So they divided the day into shifts, and each served guard and engaged in the fighting for a few hours. Grandpa faithfully served his shift, and, like the rest of the villagers, made his crops and belongings available for all. As the village's future was being determined quite rapidly, Beit Daras lived its most communal time. Men shared all, and women cooked for all. It's unclear whether fighters from the Arab Liberation Army (ALA) reached Beit Daras by then. However, a peculiar name, Tariq al-Ifriqi, seemed to resurface throughout my research. "Al-Ifriqi" means "the African," and it's a surname unfamiliar in the village. At times, Al-Ifriqi led the fight and trained the villagers. Knowing that the village was later defended by a Sudanese contingent, was al-Ifriqi a Sudanese volunteer with the ALA?

THE FINAL BATTLE

The date of the decisive battle, the one that emptied Beit Daras completely of its inhabitants is not easy to pinpoint, partly because Beit Daras was not defeated in a single battle, and the fight to regain Beit Daras had in fact extended to the closing stages of the war.

Israeli historian Benny Morris determined May 10 as the date that Beit Daras was defeated, an account that is not consistent with Ben-Gurion's own diaries. Morris determined that the main attack on Beit Daras was conducted by a Haganah unit known as the Givati, in an operation known as Mivtza Barak, Operation Lightning:

On 9 May, the clearing of the southern end of the Givati's zone of control in anticipation of the Egyptian invasion began in earnest with the launching of Operation Lightning. The objective of the operation was: "To deny the enemy a base ... creating general

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panic and breaking his morale ... It can be assumed that delivering a blow to one or more of these centers [that is, al-Majdal, Isdud, Yibna] will cause the wandering [that is, the exodus] of the inhabitants of the smaller settlements in the area. This outcome is possible especially in view of the wave of panic that recently swept [the Arabs] of the country. Givati's attacks created the desired wave of panic and flight in the satellite villages. Mortaring almost invariably preceded each ground assault. The attack on Belt Daras on 10 May prompted the flight of its inhabitants and affected neighboring villages. The village houses were blown up.

Um Mohammed:

The town was under bombardment, and it was surrounded from all directions. There was no way out. They surrounded it all, from the direction of Isdud, al-Sawafir and everywhere. We wanted to pursue a way out. The armed men [the Belt Daras fighters] said they were going to check on the road to Isdud, to see if it was open. They moved forward and shot few shots to see if someone would return fire. No one did. But they [the Zionist forces] were hiding and waiting to ambush the people. The armed men returned and told the people to evacuate the women and children. The people went out [including] those who were gathered at my huge house, the family house. There were mostly children and kids in the house. Should a bomb hit the house, it would've killed them all. The armed men came and said, "The road to Isdud is open, evacuate the people." The



The Jews let the people get out, and then they whipped them with bombs and machine guns. More people fell than those who were able to run"

Jews let the people get out, and then they whipped them with bombs and machine guns. More people fell than those who were able to run. My sister and I ... started running through the fields; we'd fall and get up. My sister and I escaped together holding each other's hand. The people who took the main road were either killed or injured, and those who went through the fields. The firing was falling on the people like sand. The bombs from one side and the machine guns from the other. The Jews were on the hill; there was a school and a water reservoir for people and the vegetables. They showered the people with machine guns. A lot of the people died and got injured.

But many fighters remained in Beit Daras. Not even a massacre would weaken their resolve. The wounded were gathered in many houses, but with little medical care to count on. Some of the dead were hurriedly buried. Many others were unreachable, lying in the sun amidst the blooming fields of spring.

Grandpa Mohammed mounted his faithful donkey with a few of the family's belongings and his young daughter Mariam. Ibrahim was in his mother's arms. Ahmed walked alongside his father, and my father, Mohammed, barefoot and confused, trotted behind. It was another trail of tears of sorts.

Neither parent had answers to the children's incessant question: "Where are we going?"

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