

SPECIAL DOCUMENT

THE FALL OF LYDDA

SPIRO MUNAYYER, WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY
WALID KHALIDI

Spiro Munayyer's account begins immediately after the United Nations General Assembly partition resolution of 29 November 1947 and culminates in the cataclysmic four days of Lydda's conquest by the Israeli army (10–14 July 1948) during which 49,000 of Lydda's 50,000 inhabitants ("swollen" with refugees) were forcefully expelled, the author himself being one of those few allowed to remain in his hometown.

Although the author was not in a position of political or military responsibility, he was actively involved in Lydda's resistance movement both as the organizer of the telephone network linking up the various sectors of Lydda's front lines and as a volunteer paramedic, in which capacity he accompanied the city's defenders in most of the battles in which they took part. The result is one of the very few detailed eye-witness accounts that exists from the point of view of an ordinary Palestinian layman of one of the most important and tragic episodes of the 1948 war.

The conquest of Lydda (and of its neighbor, Ramla, some five kilometers to the south) was the immediate objective of Operation Dani—the major offensive launched by the Israeli army at the order of Ben-Gurion during the so-called "Ten Days" of fighting (8–18 July 1948), between the First Truce (11 June–8 July) and the Second Truce (which started on 18 July and lasted, in theory, until the armistice agreements of 1949). The further objective of Operation Dani was to outflank the Transjordanian Arab Legion positions at Latrun (commanding the defile at Bab al-Wad, where the road from the coast starts climbing toward Jerusalem) in order to penetrate central Palestine and capture Ramallah and Nablus.

Lydda and Ramla and the surrounding villages fell within the boundaries of the Arab state according to the UNGA partition resolution. Despite their proximity to Tel Aviv and the fall of many Palestinian towns since April (Tiberias, Haifa, Jaffa, Safad, Acre, and Baysan), they had held out until July even though little help had reached them from the Arab armies entering on 15 May. Their strategic importance was enormous because of

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their location at the intersection of the country's main north-south and west-east road and rail lines. Palestine's largest British army camp at Sarafand was a few kilometers west of Lydda, its main international airport an equal distance to the north, its central railway junction at Lydda itself. Ras al-Ayn, fifteen kilometers north of Lydda, was the main source of Jerusalem's water supply, while one of the largest British depots was at Bayt Nabala, seven kilometers to its northeast.

The Israeli forces assembled for Operation Dani were put under the overall command of Yigal Allon, the Palmach commander. They consisted of the two Palmach brigades (Yiftach and Harel, the latter under the command of Yitzhak Rabin), the Eighth Armored Brigade composed of the Second Tank Battalion and the Ninth Commando Battalion (the former under the command of Yitzhak Sadeh, founder of the Palmach, the latter under that of Moshe Dayan), the Second Battalion Kiryati Brigade, the Third Battalion Alexandroni Brigade, and several units of the Kiryati Garrison Troops (Khayl Matzav). The Eighth Armored Brigade had a high proportion of World War II Jewish veterans volunteering from the United States, Britain, France, and South Africa (under the so-called MAHAL program), while its two battalions also included 700 members of the Irgun Zva'i Le'umi (IZL). The total strength of the Israeli attackers was about 8,000 men. The only regular Arab troops defending Lydda (and Ramla) was a minuscule force of 125 men—the Fifth Infantry Company of the Transjordanian Arab Legion. The defenders of Lydda (and Ramla) were volunteer civilian residents, like the author, under the command of a retired sergeant who had served in the Arab Legion.

The reason for the virtual absence of Arab regular troops in the Lydda-Ramla sector was that the Arab armies closest to it (the Egyptian in the south, the Arab Legion in the east, and the Iraqi in the north) were already overstretched. The Egyptian northernmost post was at Isdud, thirty-two kilometers north of Gaza and a like distance southeast of Ramla-Lydda as the crow flies. The Iraqi southernmost post was at Ras al-Ayn, where they were weakest. And although the Arab Legion was in strength some fifteen kilometers due east at Latrun, the decision had been taken not to abandon its positions on the hills between Ras al-Ayn and Latrun for fear of being outflanked and cut off by the superior Israeli forces in the plains where Lydda and Ramla were situated. Indeed, as General Glubb, commander of the Arab Legion, informs us, he had told King Abdallah and the Transjordanian prime minister Taufiq Abu Huda even before the end of the Mandate on 15 May that the Legion did not have the forces to hold and defend Lydda and Ramla against Israeli attacks despite the fact that these towns were in the area assigned to the Arabs by the UNGA partition resolution. This explains the token force of the Arab Legion—the Fifth Infantry Company. Thus, the fate of Lydda (and Ramla) was sealed the moment Operation Dani was launched.

The Israeli forces did not attack Lydda from the west (where Lydda's defenses facing Tel Aviv were strongest), as the garrison commander Sergeant Hamza Subh expected. Instead, they split into two main forces,

northern and southern, which were to rendezvous at the Jewish colony of Ben Shemen east of Lydda and then advance on Lydda from there. After capturing Lydda from the east they were to advance on Ramla, attacking it from the north while making feints against it from the west.

Operation Dani began on the night of 9–10 July. Simultaneously with the advance of the ground troops, Lydda and Ramla were bombed from the air. In spite of the surprise factor, the defenders in the eastern sector of Lydda put up stout resistance throughout the 10th against vastly superior forces attacking from Ben Shemen in the north and the Arab village of Jimzu to the south.

In the afternoon, Dayan rode with his Commando Battalion of jeeps and half-tracks through Lydda in a hit-and-run raid lasting under one hour “shooting up the town and creating confusion and a degree of terror among the population,” as the Jewish brothers Jon and David Kimche put it. This discombobulated the defenders, some of whom surrendered. But the following morning (11 July) a small force of three Arab Legion armored cars entered Lydda, their mission being to help in the evacuation of the beleaguered Fifth Infantry Company. Their sudden appearance both panicked the Israeli troops and rallied the defenders who had not surrendered. The Israeli army put down what it subsequently described as the city’s “uprising” with utmost brutality, leaving in a matter of hours in the city’s streets about 250 civilian dead in an orgy of indiscriminate killing. Resistance continued sporadically during the 12th and 13th of July, its focus being Lydda’s police station, which was finally overrun.

As of 11 July, the Israeli army began the systematic expulsion of the residents of Lydda and Ramla (the latter having fallen on 12 July) toward the Arab Legion lines in the east. Also expelled were the populations of some twenty-five villages conquered during Operation Dani, making a total of some 80,000 expellees—the largest single instance of deliberate mass expulsion during the 1948 war. Most of the expellees were women, children, and elderly men, most of the able-bodied men having been taken prisoner. Memories of the trek of the Lydda and Ramla refugees is branded in the collective consciousness of the Palestinians. The Palestinian historian Aref al-Aref, who interviewed survivors at the time, estimates that 350 died of thirst and exhaustion in the blazing July sun, when the temperature was one hundred degrees in the shade.

The reaction of public opinion in Ramallah and East Jerusalem at the sight of the new arrivals was to turn against the Arab Legion for its failure to help Lydda and Ramla. Arab Legion officers and men were stoned, loudly hissed at and cursed, a not unintended outcome by the person who gave the expulsion order, David Ben-Gurion, and the man who carried it out, Yitzhak Rabin, director of operations for Operation Dani.

PREPARATIONS TO DEFEND THE CITY

After the United Nations adopted the partition plan at the end of November 1947, the inhabitants of Lydda began preparations for the defense of their city and their homeland against the Haganah, IZL, and other Jewish military organizations. A National Committee¹ consisting of local notables known for their nationalism and including Shihadeh Hassuna, Shams al-Din al-'Alami, Ilyas Hilita, Shakir al-Muhtadi, Muhammad 'Ali Dahmash, Hajj Ibrahim Hamza, and Abu Kweik² was selected to organize the defense of the city in cooperation with the Lydda municipality. A number of other committees were formed as well, which came to constitute a kind of local government.

Thus, the Military Committee, charged with organizing and training the city's youth in the use of arms, put together a garrison command. Hamza Subh, who had been a sergeant in the Transjordanian army, was appointed to head it, seeing as he had more military experience than any of Lydda's other residents. Hundreds of young men volunteered for military service. The garrison command established its headquarters in the government boys' school because it was away from densely populated areas and because its many rooms were suitable for offices and sleeping quarters and its spacious courtyards for military vehicles. In addition to a military administration, the committee organized a civil administration to work closely with the National Committee and the municipality.

The First Aid Committee, charged with setting up clinics and training young people in medical assistance, was headed by Hajj Ibrahim Hamza, with Yusif 'Isa Munayyer as secretary.³ They rented a house and turned it into a clinic. Young men and women who belonged to the city's many clubs volunteered to serve as nurses and received training under the supervision of Dr. Mustafa al-Zahlan and Dr. Najib Abu Jawdeh. The committee also launched a drive to collect donations for the purchase of medical supplies and equipment. Large quantities of medicines and first aid supplies were stockpiled, and an ambulance was purchased. Later, when the fighting broke out, the clinic proved inadequate to cope with the high number of casualties, so the First Aid Committee took over a larger building that had been used as a dormitory for students coming to the city to study from surrounding villages. That building had thirty beds and a fully equipped kitchen. At the same time, a second ambulance was purchased, and, a little later, a third. An operating room was set up to deal with light to middling surgery. Serious surgery had to be performed at the Nablus and Ramallah hospitals, where the critically wounded were transported by ambulance at night.

The Local Security Committee was set up to guard against thieves and criminals as well as Jewish spies and infiltrators. Neighborhood committees were set up in each quarter, and these in turn created guard units to patrol the streets, especially at night. These volunteer units carried light arms and set up barricades on the roads leading into the city at night, searching incoming cars.

The Merchants' Committee, charged with stockpiling food reserves in preparation for a siege or a breakdown in transportation, began importing large quantities of staples such as wheat, sugar, oil, and so on from the towns of the interior (i.e., Nablus, Ramallah, Jinin, and Tulkarm). According to the committee's own estimates, enough food was laid in to meet the needs of Lydda's population for at

least six months. Food supplies were increased further when the city's defense forces, learning that a train carrying food for the Haganah would be passing through Lydda on its way north, set up an ambush northwest of the city, at a point where the train would still be moving slowly after having just left the station. Units of our defense forces managed to detach several cars loaded with food and fired on the remaining cars to hasten their departure. They then broke the locks on the detached carriages, had the food carted off in lorries to warehouses around the city, and pushed the railway cars to a distant location north of the city. The entire operation was executed so quickly that the British forces arriving shortly thereafter to guard the carriages found nothing. In this way, available emergency food supplies for the city exceeded the goals of the plan.

Finally, the Arms Purchase Committee sent delegations to countries in the region and succeeded in buying large quantities of arms and munitions, which were stored in well-guarded caches scattered around the city. A brisk arms trade came into being. Even those not required to bear arms sold their women's gold jewelry to buy rifles and light machine guns. The garrison command also built fortifications inside and outside the city and dug trenches around the perimeter in preparation for the battle of destiny.

ALI BEY AND HIS TRANSLATOR IN LYDDA

A few months after the partition resolution, a man calling himself 'Ali Bey, who claimed to speak no Arabic, arrived in Lydda in the company of his personal translator with a letter allegedly from Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the mufti of Jerusalem, appointing him military commander of the city. The letter asked all those in positions of responsibility in Lydda, particularly the military, to cooperate with its bearer and to acquaint him with all matters concerned with the defense of the city. The people of Lydda were pleased, especially when 'Ali Bey introduced himself as a high ranking Turkish officer—whom the mufti had placed in charge of the city's armed forces, so as to organize and train them to defend Lydda. The city leaders gave him a building in the city center that had housed the Workers' Association, which he turned into his headquarters and private residence. The garrison command also gave him a car for his personal use. He would visit the garrison's headquarters, always in the company of his translator, and make the rounds of the battle lines on all fronts. He spent over a month in Lydda,⁴ making inquiries about the military command structure, the number and type of arms the city had, the frontline sectors, the number of combatants—in short, all the city's military secrets. Then suddenly one day he and his translator vanished. He never told anyone that he intended to leave the city, or why. Rumors soon spread that 'Ali Bey and his translator were spies for the Jewish forces. The people of Lydda were alarmed, and the garrison command had to alter its defensive lines on all fronts and make other changes in military plans. Nothing is known to this day about the true identity of either the man or his translator.⁵

Some time later, a volunteer force of forty bedouin fighters armed with rifles arrived from Transjordan to help the people of Lydda defend their city. This force participated in some battles and helped reinforce the garrison at Lydda airport. They were brave and zealous, qualities which they manifested particularly in the

battle for Kibbutz Gezer east of Ramla, along the Jerusalem road, which they closed off. In April, a small force of Transjordanian *hajjanah* rode their camels through the city to boost morale.⁶ We went out to watch them, and I still remember what they sang:

Once on our camels
We ignore
What fate has in store.

BATTLES IN DEFENSE OF THE CITY BEGIN

Not long after partition, the city's garrison blockaded the colony of Ben Shemen three kilometers east of Lydda. Food and military supplies were brought to the colony twice a week from Tel Aviv by a convoy guarded by British police armored personnel carriers. Given that our command expected that the main battlefield would be west of the city, near the villages of Sarafand and Safiriyya facing Tel Aviv, it was felt that these reinforcements threatened Lydda's rear. Our forces laid an ambush along the convoy's route, inflicting a number of casualties in dead and wounded, including some policemen escorting the convoy. That was the first military operation carried out by the city's forces.

After that, the *mukhtar* of Ben Shemen, a Jew called Dr. Lehman who was known to the people of Lydda, came to the city and met with the mayor and the members of the National Committee to ask for safe haven for the colony. He promised he would not permit any of the residents, or anyone else, to launch hostile acts from his colony against Lydda or the road to it. He said: "We are peaceful people who harbor no ill will for the population of your city. We are neighbors, we know each other, and we want to live in peace. The road between Lydda and the mountain villages which passes through Ben Shemen will remain safe and open, and there will be no harassment." The mayor and the members of the National Committee agreed to his demand, and the road through Ben Shemen remained open.

But by mid-May 1948, Ben Shemen had become a fortress surrounded by barbed wire and minefields. In mid-June, the Haganah closed off the road to the hills and mountain villages, the shortest and most accessible route for the transport of goods between Lydda and the interior. The Haganah paved an airstrip to the northeast of the colony, which handled one flight per day carrying food supplies, munitions, and light military reinforcements from Tel Aviv.⁷ The Lydda garrison managed to shoot down one plane about a kilometer east of the city with an anti-aircraft gun at the end of June. The plane's wreckage is still there.

Much later, I asked one of the elders of Ben Shemen, by the name of Aharon: "Why did you break your agreement with the people of Lydda under which you would remain in your colony and enjoy safe haven?" He replied: "The *mukhtar* strongly objected to the Haganah abrogating the deal with the people of Lydda, but he was unable to convince them not to turn the colony into a fort and not to block off the road. He resigned in protest and left."

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THE BLOWING UP OF HASAN SALAMEH'S HEADQUARTERS

In March 1948, following his appointment as commander of the Central Region by the Arab Higher Committee led by Hajj Amin al-Husayni, Hasan Salameh arrived in the region to take up his duties.⁸ He was accompanied by dozens of armed men, most of them bearing only light arms, in three trucks. After looking around for a suitable location for his headquarters and barracks for his men, he settled on the Hajj Amin Orphanage, established by the Higher Muslim Council,⁹ which consisted of a large three-story building and a number of small annexes in the middle of an orange grove. The complex lay to the west of Ramla, between Ramla and the British army camp at Sarafand. It also lay about two kilometers northeast of the Jewish colony of Bir Yacov, a fact which Hasan Salameh apparently did not take sufficiently into account.

About eighty men under Hasan Salameh's command took up residence in the orphanage. Four guards were placed around the headquarters and three on the roof. During the night of 4-5 April 1948, a Haganah unit surrounded the building and fired on the guards.¹⁰ Meanwhile, another Haganah unit sneaked into the ground floor of the building and placed large quantities of explosives around the pillars. The explosion, which was heard all over Lydda and throughout the region, destroyed a large section of the building. Forces from Lydda and Ramla rushed to the scene, with residents of both cities following to offer help. Some thirty men died, and many more were wounded. We saw bits of human anatomy hanging from trees. It was a horrible sight that set one's teeth on edge. Ambulances from Lydda and Ramla began to treat the wounded and transport them to hospital. It turned out that Hasan Salameh had not been in the building. When the news reached him, he ordered the immediate evacuation of the complex, which was occupied several days by Haganah. This brought the Jewish forces' front lines very close to the Sakanat Fanus neighborhood west of Ramla, which was now frequently hit by Jewish bullets.

The Lydda and Ramla garrison commanders decided to mount a joint counter-attack to drive Israeli forces away from the city. In the early hours of the morning, a two-pronged assault against Bir Yacov began, one from the southeast, the other from the southwest. After several hours of heavy fighting involving light and medium arms as well as heavy mortars, Haganah forces pulled back to Bir Yacov to defend it against the southwestern prong, which had reached the colony itself. The enemy suffered heavy casualties in dead and wounded and left many weapons behind. The fighters from Lydda and Ramla also suffered a number of dead and wounded and the small city hospital was filled to capacity—it was after this that we had to find another location for the hospital.

Meanwhile, the daily battles for Jaffa were raging, and the National Committee of Jaffa called on our National Committee for help. After consultations with the leaders of the city, it was decided to send a unit of the Lydda garrison to Jaffa as of mid-April, which was assigned the task of defending the city's Abu Kabir neighborhood. The village of Salama east of Jaffa was under constant attack by the Haganah and other Jewish forces. Lydda repeatedly sent reinforcements as the Jewish attacks intensified, and the telecommunications unit in the Lydda garrison provided Salama with a network of military telephones for use in the front

lines between it and Tel Aviv. I was in charge of that unit at the time, seeing as I had served in the engineering unit at the post office.

REFUGEES FLOOD THE CITY

As a result of the fierce battles in and around Jaffa, thousands of people from that city and the nearby villages began flooding into Lydda. Our city overflowed with hapless refugees who had fled for their lives, leaving behind their homes, shops, and belongings. Not a single house or habitable room was left vacant in Lydda. Then, at the end of April, the Haganah occupied the villages between Jaffa and Lydda/Ramla, such as Yazur, Bayt Dajan, Safiriyya, Kafar 'Ana, Sarafand al-'Amar and Sarafand al-Kharab, and Saqiya, and expelled their populations, who sought refuge in Lydda.¹¹ Our city could not absorb them all—some were forced to sleep under the trees, and a camp was set up to the west of the city for refugees from Sarafand al-'Amar, Sarafand al-Kharab, and Safiriyya.

With continuous skirmishes taking place on the outskirts of the city, Lydda's National Committee and Military Committee decided not to allow any of our residents to leave. The rationale was that departing families, especially women and children, would weaken the determination of the fighters to stand fast and give it all they had. So roadblocks were set up on all the routes leading out of the city to prevent the departure of Lydda's families. Jamil Hairun, an employee of the municipality, was put in charge of this endeavor.¹²

Life in the city became untenable. The alleys and streets were teeming with people and strewn with rubbish; although the city employed additional sanitation crews, the streets were so clogged with people that the workers were unable to perform their jobs. Basic food items became scarce. The population of Lydda, which normally was 22,000, had swelled to 50,000 within a few weeks. The National Committee dispatched trade delegations to areas of Palestine not yet occupied by the Haganah to stock up on food supplies and medicines to meet the needs of the swollen population. Despite everything, the morale of the population and their confidence in their armed forces remained high. Jaffa, however, surrendered in early May after many days of uninterrupted warfare. Part of the population was evacuated by sea south to Gaza and another part to Ramallah and al-Bireh by way of Lydda.

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THE HAGANAH CLOSES IN

On 4 May, the Haganah succeeded in occupying the village of 'Abbasiyya, three kilometers north of Lydda airport, bringing the airport within the range of Jewish heavy mortars. It became apparent from the 'Abbasiyya operation that Haganah's objective was to tighten the noose around Lydda and Ramla. The same day, another Jewish force left the Kibbutz Gezer two kilometers east of Ramla and occupied the Arab village of Abu Shushah between the kibbutz and the main Jaffa-Jerusalem road, the only road link between Ramla and the Latrun region and Ramallah and al-Bireh and other cities further east. After occupying the virtually deserted village of Abu Shushah, whose inhabitants had fled out of

fear of the Jews, the Gezer force headed north and occupied part of the Jaffa-Jerusalem road. Thus Ramla was encircled from the south, west, and east. Jewish forces had only to seize the Ramla-Lyddá road, four kilometers to the north.

The Ramla garrison command asked the Lydda garrison's help in a joint plan to drive Jewish forces back to the Kibbutz Gezer and to open the road to Arab transport. A unit of the Arab Legion, numbering around 120 soldiers accompanied by armored vehicles and two light field artillery pieces, had just arrived in the area. The Ramla garrison command asked the command of the unit to join the forces of Lydda and Ramla in reopening the road. The commander of the Legion unit agreed, and at noon on 5 May 1948, a force of two hundred fighters and three armored cars made a sortie from Lydda to the northern front line, while a force of about one hundred fighters made a sortie from Ramla, accompanied by ten Legion soldiers and the two light field artillery pieces. According to schedule, the artillery opened fire on the Haganah based in Kibbutz Gezer. Meanwhile, the forces from Lydda and Ramla advanced under the cover of the Legion's artillery and opened fire on the Israeli forces in the village of Abu Shushah, while the Ramla force protected their rear.

A fierce battle ensued, at close range. The Haganah withdrew, bearing their dead and wounded, into Kibbutz Gezer. The Lydda force advanced, the three armored vehicles leading the way and laying down a hot barrage of machine gun fire, as the artillery continued to pound the enemy positions inside Kibbutz Gezer. I had been asked to accompany the Lydda forces with an ambulance and driver to help evacuate wounded, so I witnessed this battle in person. After about six hours of combat, the forces from Lydda and Ramla succeeded in capturing the kibbutz, inflicting heavy casualties on the Haganah force. Twenty-six Jewish soldiers (both men and women) were taken prisoner and placed in the custody of the Legion unit. The Arab forces lost eleven killed and seventeen wounded. One of the dead was Zakaria al-Shillah, who was killed by one of the Transjordanian volunteers who mistook him for a Jew because of his fair skin.

The people were conscious of the gravity of the situation and, after what had happened in other cities, were well aware that this war would determine whether they would be able to remain in their city and homeland. Thus they were grim faced and silent when they buried their martyrs and even asked their women to stop wailing and crying. It seemed as though they found solace in silence.

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THE MARTYRDOM OF HASAN SALAMEH

On 28 May 1948, Israeli forces tried to occupy Ras al-Ayn,¹³ a small but strategically located village twenty kilometers north of Lydda. They were opposed by forces under the command of Hasan Salameh. A long and fierce battle ensued, which lasted until the morning of the next day. Hasan Salameh was critically wounded and was taken to Lydda hospital. Shrapnel from a mortar that hit his vehicle had penetrated his back and lodged in his lungs. The doctors said there was no hope of recovery. At nine o'clock in the morning of 29 May, the Israelis managed to take Ras al-Ayn, isolating Lydda-Ramla from the Triangle¹⁴ and cut-

ting off our access to food and other supplies we had been importing to feed the thousands who had fled their villages and taken refuge in the city.

Despite the severity of his wounds, Hasan Salameh had not lost consciousness. He summoned Hamza Subh, commander of the Lydda garrison, to the hospital to discuss the fall of Ras al-Ayn. As Hasan Salameh's personal orderly, I was present at the meeting. Hasan Salameh, who was writhing in agony, said:

Hamza, Ras al-Ayn has fallen to the Jewish forces, and this has created a new and very dangerous situation, since Ras al-Ayn lies at the crossroads of the route from the coast and the south to the cities in the Triangle. The railroad from the south to the north also runs through it, which will make it easy for the Haganah to occupy the Triangle.¹⁵ In addition, they have also cut off your supply route from the Triangle and the north of the country. I want you to be aware of the danger this poses to your city, since the conquest of Ras al-Ayn is another link in the drive to encircle Lydda. I want you to put together a strong force from your city's garrison and mount a counterattack to regain Ras al-Ayn before the Jews consolidate their position and build fortifications. I know the strength of Lydda's forces and the courage of its fighters. I am confident that this counterattack will succeed in liberating Ras al-Ayn from the Jews.

He spoke slowly and pantingly, in excruciating pain, pausing after every sentence to catch his breath. A number of doctors and nurses were at his bedside, besides Hamza Subh and his aides. Hamza, promising that he would organize a strong force and mount the operation, said: "Rest assured, Abu 'Ali,¹⁶ the operation will be underway before dark." Hasan Salameh looked at him and said: "Hamza, do not promise me immediate action if you do not mean it, thinking that Hasan Salameh will soon be dead and there's no harm giving him some comfort before he passes on." But Hamza swore that he was sincere in his promise and said he was leaving immediately to organize the forces that would launch the attack that very day.

Hamza returned to his garrison's headquarters and put together a large force and several armored vehicles equipped with light field artillery and heavy machine guns. He led this force to a position south of Ras al-Ayn, where he launched a pincers' movement, attacking from the east and the west while the main body of his forces drove up from the south. The attack was swift, fierce, and devastating, using light artillery, mortars, and a force of three hundred men. The fighting lasted three hours. Lydda's fighters attacked stubbornly and relentlessly, heedless of the heavy casualties. The wounded were transported to hospital as they fell with three ambulances that belonged to the city. The Israeli army withdrew, carrying their dead and wounded, leaving behind a lot of arms and military equipment, including a military wireless set.¹⁷

It seems that the intensity and speed of this attack took the Israeli army by surprise. Ras al-Ayn was recaptured the same day. Hamza Subh was back in the city by four in the afternoon. He rushed to the hospital to give the good news to

Hasan Salameh, who was still conscious, twisting and turning with pain, awaiting word of the battle. The garrison commander told him of the recovery of Ras al-Ayn and informed him that he had posted eighty men with three armored vehicles to guard the position. He described how the Israeli soldiers had fled before our men and spoke of the many arms and boxes of munitions our forces had captured. At that point Hasan Salameh asked: "Were you really victorious? Did you really win back Ras al-Ayn?" Hamza swore that it was true. Hasan Salameh slid his hand under his pillow and drew out his personal revolver. He gave it to Hamza, saying: "Take this revolver. It is a gift to you and the men who scored this victory," adding: "This revolver is dear to my heart. It was a gift to me from Hajj Amin. You deserve it and are worthy of it. Take this gift as a token of the appreciation of Hasan Salameh, who will soon depart this life."

The next day, Hasan Salameh, near death, was taken to the hospital run by to the Egyptian medical mission in Ramla, where he died a martyr for his country and nation, may God rest his soul.¹⁸ About an hour before he was moved, Israeli planes, apparently acting on intelligence that Hasan Salameh was there, tried to bomb the hospital but missed. Instead, they destroyed the house next door, inhabited by refugees, killing two little boys and gravely wounding their mother and a third brother. The blast did, however, shatter the hospital windows, causing light injuries among a number of patients.

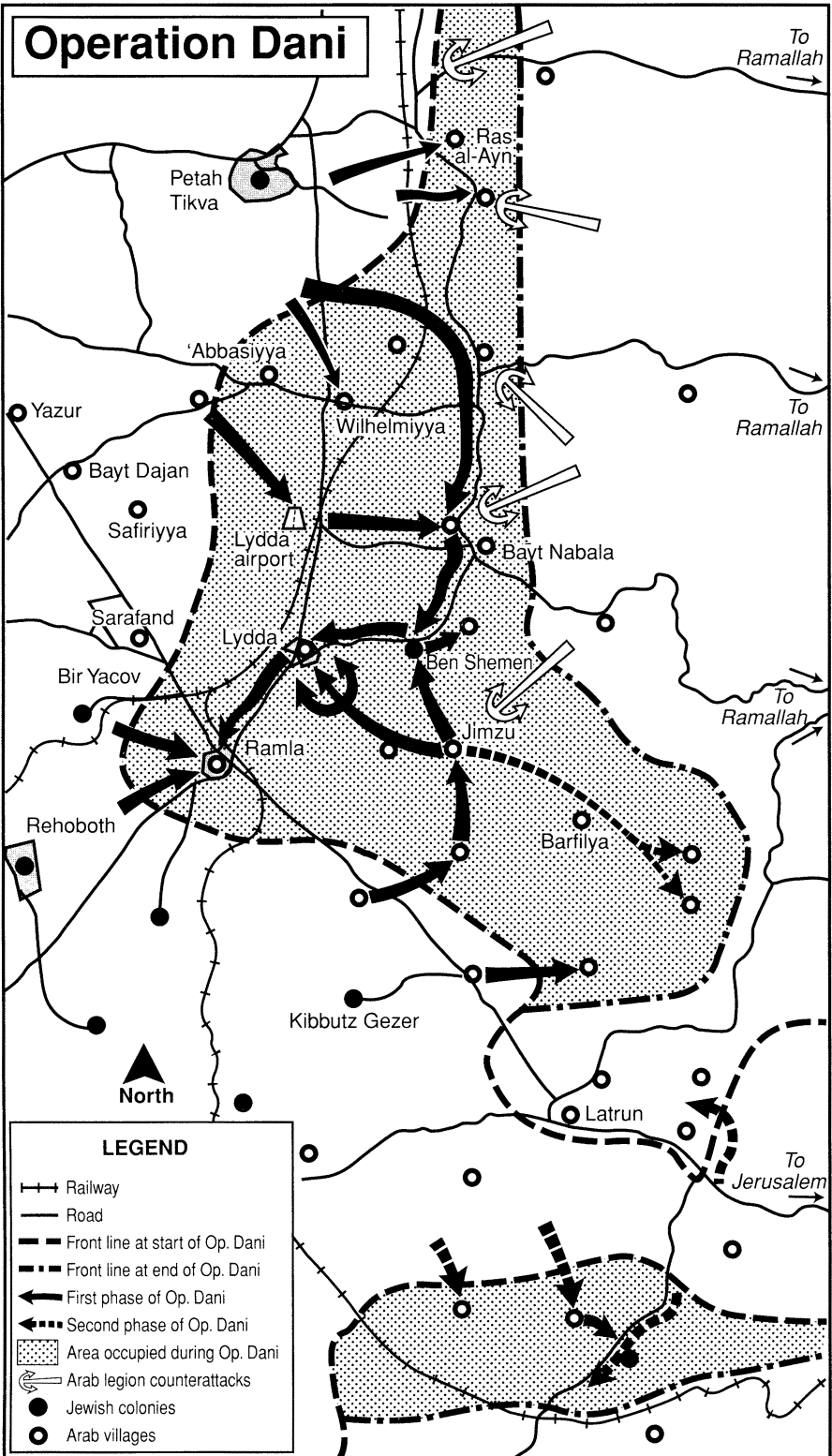
Several days after the Lydda garrison had recaptured Ras al-Ayn and stationed an eighty-man force there to defend it, an Iraqi armored car transporting ten Iraqi soldiers arrived and informed the garrison at Ras al-Ayn that they were taking over the defense of the location and asked them to go back to Lydda.¹⁹ The Ras al-Ayn garrison refused, saying: "Just the casualties our forces suffered regaining this location outnumber your entire force. This is not to mention the scores of wounded. It would be irrational for us to hand over the position to just ten soldiers." The argument grew heated and almost led to a fight, but the commander of the Lydda garrison telephoned the commander of the Iraqi force, and it was agreed that the Iraqi army would send over a garrison strong enough to withstand Israeli attacks, following which the garrison from Lydda would withdraw. And that is precisely what happened a few days later. . . .

THE FATEFUL BATTLE FOR THE REGION BEGINS

Fighting broke out on all fronts around Lydda in the early hours of Saturday, 10 July 1948.²⁰ The sounds of bullets and artillery could be heard all over the city, and the ambulance sirens wailed as they collected the wounded and dead from the fields of battle. Men and women, even boys and girls, came out of their houses and stood around anxiously, trying to pick up bits of news.

Fierce combat raged for hours north of the city. The Jewish forces, vastly superior in numbers and weaponry, captured the village of Rantiyya, north of Wilhelmiyya, after a terrible battle waged in close quarters by the village's small guard unit. . . . The fall of the airport and of Wilhelmiyya, as well as the numbers of dead and wounded, considerably affected the morale of our men. . . .

Meanwhile, Israeli planes had been carrying out raids on the city from morning until evening. This led to a further deterioration in morale, as there were



many civilian casualties. Yet when a few people proposed sending a delegation to negotiate terms with the enemy, there was a great uproar.

Lydda's hospital was overflowing. Stretchers being used as make-shift beds filled the corridors and offices as well as the operating rooms. The entire hospital staff—doctors, nurses, kitchen and sanitation workers—were working around the clock. The hospital's courtyard and gardens were packed with relatives inquiring about the wounded. We had to deploy a number of men to prevent them from gaining entry to the hospital lest they get in the way of the medical staff; still, distraught relatives managed to get through.

At noon, we received word that Lydda's forces in the village of 'Annaba had been attacked by a very large armored Israeli force equipped with tanks, heavy artillery, and heavy mortars. . . . An hour later we learned that they had withdrawn from 'Annaba and linked up with the emergency reinforcements sent by Lydda garrison command to the village of Jimzu.²¹ Subsequently there was a request for ambulances to evacuate the wounded from Jimzu. . . . It became clear to the Lydda garrison command that our forces, which had suffered heavy losses and which were strung out along the northern and western fronts as well as the eastern front, could not stand their ground. The garrison command ordered Lydda's forces on the eastern front to withdraw and redeploy close to the city, along the east and the south. . . .

By evening, all was quiet in the city and along all fronts. The calm—the calm before the storm—continued into the next morning. A sergeant of the British army, a Scotsman who had volunteered to defend the city at our side,²² told me that morning that the city would fall at noon. "What makes you think so?" I asked. He replied that he had been a soldier for years and had enough military experience to predict an imminent disaster. . . .

THE CITY IS OCCUPIED

At about noon on Sunday, 11 July, a large Israeli force launched a massive attack on the city itself. The fortifications to the southeast of the city were overrun, and the Israelis reached some houses at the city's perimeter. The Lydda garrison, which was ready for action, counterattacked with nearly its full strength, throwing the attackers back and fighting them to the outskirts of Jimzu.

While most of the city's garrison was thus engaged, a strong Israeli armored force with tanks, armored vehicles, and jeeps packed with soldiers launched an attack on the eastern front, supported by heavy artillery and mortars. Indiscriminate mortar fire had been going on for hours, inflicting numerous civilian casualties, mainly among elderly men, women, and children. After two hours of heated combat, these forces penetrated the city's defenses from the direction of the colony of Ben Shemen. They opened fire on the inhabitants, shooting through doors and windows. The streets had been crowded with people who had flocked from the outlying quarters to the less exposed areas of the center when the assault began, and many were killed or wounded when the Israeli tanks penetrated the inner city streets and started firing at everyone in sight.²³

Very few members of Lydda's garrison were inside the city to defend it, having been engaged on the various other fronts. The few remaining fighters were at

the garrison headquarters and the nearby police station. Still, repeated attacks failed to overwhelm this small force. . . .

At the hospital, we saw two wounded men about five meters from the gate. They were lying on the ground bleeding, having dragged themselves that far but without the strength to go farther. Some of the Jews were already near the great mosque, about sixty meters away, and were shooting at everything that moved. We tried to reach the two men, displaying a large Red Cross flag, but the soldiers shot at us anyway and we had to turn back. A pool of blood was forming around them. We threw out a rope for them to hold on to so we could drag them in, but though they caught the rope they were too weak to hang on. We watched them die, very upset because we believed we could have saved them.

Around four o'clock in the afternoon of 11 July, the vanguard of the Israeli troops reached the quarter of the grand mosque and the Khader.²⁴ They were dressed in khaki but were not wearing any insignia of rank, so that we could not tell an officer from a soldier.²⁵ Other sizable forces came in their wake and fanned out in small units around the church and mosque. They began going into houses, hauling out the residents and gathering them inside the mosque and its courtyard. At the same time, enemy soldiers scaled the walls of the mosque to the roof, with some climbing the minaret to get a bird's-eye view of the city, including the main police station, which was half a kilometer away as the crow flies. The soldiers fired from the minaret on the police station. Our men inside the police station returned the fire and hit some of the soldiers.

Bit by bit, the mosque and its courtyard filled up with the hundreds of families who had been evicted from their houses. Then it was our turn, the orderlies, nurses, doctors, and hospital staff; a few soldiers came and ordered us out into the hospital yard with our hands up. When we were all gathered there, they ordered us to line up facing the wall with our hands over our heads. Our throats went dry, and we were afraid they would kill us. We remained like this for a quarter of an hour, which seemed like an eternity, awaiting the mercy of God.

Thanks be to God, our fears did not materialize. We were ordered to march, hands up, to the grand mosque not far away. We found it teeming with people, especially women and children and the elderly. The soldiers ordered us inside. We had prepared Red Cross emblems to make the soldiers think we were affiliated with the International Red Cross, and we wore them on our sleeves. We asked them what would become of the wounded in the hospital, but they just shoved us inside. People were being rounded up and herded under guard into the mosque in an endless stream. It was July and terribly hot; the air was stifling. The only water was in the fountain for performing ablutions, but we could not reach it. People started passing water vessels from hand to hand. There was a tremendous crush, bodies squeezed against each other with no room to sit; movement was almost impossible. Many fainted from heat, thirst, and fear. To top it all, soldiers were firing over our heads to intimidate us and keep us quiet.

When evening fell, the soldiers ordered the women and children to go home. The throng eased somewhat, but in barely half an hour it was back to what it had been as the stream of new people being brought into the mosque had not halted. Then the soldiers ordered the Christians to the church, which was right next to the mosque. When the church filled up, they started taking people to the Greek

Orthodox monastery across from the church. This left only Muslim men in the mosque who by then suspected that they were going to be killed and began to cry out, "Confess your faith in God, O Muslims! Pray before you are martyred!"

The hours dragged on, and the wounded in the hospital—most of them in critical condition—had been left without anyone to look after them. I was among those being held at the monastery, and we asked the officer in charge to allow the hospital workers to return to their duties. Our persistent entreaties paid off, and he let us go. By the time we got back to the hospital it was past midnight. Skirmishes were still going on around the city, where Lydda's forces were still holding on, and loud explosions could be heard. The most intense fighting was around the police station.

During the night, the soldiers began going into houses in areas they had occupied, rounding up the population and expelling them from the city. Some were told to go to Kharruba and Barfiliyya, while other soldiers said: "Go to King Abdullah, to Ramallah."²⁶ The streets filled with people setting out for indeterminate destinations. The important thing was to get out of the city.

FIGHTING ON THE SECOND DAY OF THE OCCUPATION

Fighting died down after midnight of the first day. We no longer heard the shrill whistle of bullets or the roar of explosions. It was as though the combatants on both sides had arrived at a tacit cease-fire. It remained quiet until the dawn of the next day, 12 July, when fighting flared up in several quarters that the occupiers had not yet been able to enter due to the resistance of the defenders. When dawn broke, we could see through the telescope at the top floor of the hospital numerous bodies lying in the streets and alleys as well as a growing stream of the evicted population, weeping and moaning, carrying only a few light belongings as they crawled along like swarms of ants.

At twelve noon, there was a crescendo of bullets and explosions in all parts of the city, particularly in the northwest. The expelled population started running helter-skelter, screaming with fear while the bullets of the occupying soldiers whizzed over their heads. Many were separated from their families; the city rang with the screams of women who had lost their children and the cries of children calling out for their mothers and fathers. Some men were intoning: "O merciful and compassionate God, Lord of the universe, have pity on us, be our shield."

Word got around that a force of Transjordanian armored vehicles had mounted a strong attack on the Israeli forces in Lydda and that some civilians had joined the fighting in the streets.²⁷ Gunfire and bombs could be heard everywhere. . . . Meanwhile, a large number of people had taken refuge in the Dahmash Mosque,²⁸ thinking that the occupiers would not dare violate the sanctity of houses of worship. However, the soldiers and their leaders, in violation of all conventions, stormed the mosque and killed everyone inside. I heard from some colleagues who had helped remove the dead from the mosque that they had carried out ninety-three bodies; others said that there were many more than a hundred casualties. . . .²⁹ The Dahmash Mosque is closed to this day, its walls and floor stained with the blood of the martyrs.

In the evening, before sunset, intense fighting broke out anew and firing could be heard from all directions, particularly from the southwest and east. We learned that the occupying forces had tried to storm the police station, where our fighters were still holding out despite the artillery fire pounding the building. At that point, the occupying forces collected a few notables who had not yet left the city and formed them into a delegation to negotiate with those inside the police station, offering them safe conduct if they surrendered. The notables who were forced to parley with our fighters were Father Simon Ghurfah, father superior of the Orthodox monastery in Lydda; Shaykh Tahir Hammad, a *shari'a* judge; Mabruk Hassuna (Abu Rajab), the dean of the Hassuna family; Hajj Ibrahim Hamza; and the mayor, Muhammad 'Ali al-Taji (al-Kayyali).³⁰ They tried to make their way to the police station, but they came under fire. Some claim that our fighters in the police station had fired on them, but others doubt it. In any case, Mabruk Hassuna was killed, and Shaykh Tahir Hammad was seriously wounded in the thigh and hip and afterward could not walk without the help of a cane. After this attempt failed, the occupying soldiers collected a sizable number of women and made them sit on the ground behind the great mosque facing the police station. The Israeli soldiers took up position behind the women and fired their guns at the police station over the women's heads. The women were yelling and screaming fearfully, as if to alert the fighters inside of their presence, and our men could not return the enemy's fire. Still, mortar fire continued to be heard from all directions, and combat continued through the night. Someone heard an Israeli officer say that if Lydda's fighters had not surrendered by morning, they would bomb the city from the air.

The stream of refugees continued throughout the night. The next morning we learned that the Transjordanian armored cars that had fought their way through the city had returned to their bases. It seems that their mission had been to rescue the unit under the command of Idris Bey at the central police station between Lydda and Ramla and that when they succeeded in this they withdrew. . . .

THE EXPULSION GATHERS FORCE

By the morning of 13 July, the Israelis had succeeded in occupying the rest of the city, except for the police station, where fierce fighting continued with the defenders, including some Transjordanian soldiers. Before noon, the occupying forces had managed to surround the building and immediate vicinity on the north, east, and west sides, but the southern side was still open and fighting was continuing there. The Israeli soldiers directed artillery and mortar shells at the building, and the defenders continued to fire back.

In the afternoon, a large Israeli force stormed the building under a heavy artillery barrage. This time there was no return fire, but the Jews continued shelling the building anyway, until they discovered that our men were no longer in the station, having managed to withdraw.

Meanwhile the Israeli forces were proceeding with their other task: speeding up the expulsion of the population still remaining, entering the houses and dragging out the inhabitants, ordering them out of the city and on to Ramallah and al-Bireh. The flood of displaced persons clogged the roads, a seemingly endless

stream flowing east, with enemy soldiers firing over their heads every now and then. A number of Lydda residents, who had sneaked back at night after having hidden out in fields and orchards, reported that the occupying soldiers had set up roadblocks on all the roads heading east and were searching the refugees, particularly the women, stealing their gold jewelry from their necks, wrists, and fingers and whatever was hidden inside their clothes, as well as money and everything else that was precious and light enough to carry. . . .

At the hospital, we had been continually busy taking care of the wounded but began to worry about our relatives, not knowing whether they had been killed or wounded or expelled. Finally we went to the officer in charge and asked what they were going to do with us. Were we to be allowed to stay or would we be expelled like the rest of the population? We said we longed to know what had become of our families. He told us that his orders were for us to stay, and to take care of the wounded. He said his commanders had been in touch with the Red Cross and had asked them to arrange to move the wounded and us with them. He said they would come in cars to move us all. We asked him for permission to go to our houses and fetch our relatives, in case they were still there, so that we could all be evacuated together. He granted us permission, but he said he would not be responsible for what happened to us and that we should wear Red Cross emblems on our sleeves.

I found my way home, passing bodies everywhere, in the middle of the streets and along the sidewalks, including bodies of acquaintances. When I reached the beginning of our street, my knees shaking with fear, I saw my family leaving our home with some light belongings. My father, God rest his soul, was carrying some water, saying that was what we needed the most. They told me that three Israeli soldiers had forced their way into our house and ordered everyone to leave at once, warning that anyone still there when they returned in fifteen minutes would be shot dead. I brought my family to the garden of the hospital, but the Red Cross vehicles never came. At sunset we could still hear the firing of automatic weapons which went on until nightfall, when silence descended on the city. We no longer could hear shooting nor the crying of children nor the lamentations of women. It was as though the city itself had died.

Of the 50,000 people in our city a few days before, including both regular inhabitants and refugees, only about 500 remained. They were staying near the grand mosque and the church. We later found out that another 500 people or so were still living near the railroad station. The occupation authorities had kept them there to run the station and operate the trains so as to transport food and munitions for the Israeli army.

As for the four doctors remaining at Lydda's hospital, Dr. Sami Bishara and Dr. George Habash³¹ were expelled with the residents of the city. We were very sorry for that, because the hospital was filled with critically wounded patients in need of intensive care, and the two doctors who were allowed to stay could not cope by themselves.

On Wednesday, 14 July, the city was quiet. We heard only the sound of army vehicles transporting soldiers and heavy trucks carting away everything they could find in Lydda's shops, which they left completely empty, their doors wide open.³²

NOTES

1. National Committees were set up in 1948 in all Palestinian cities by the Arab Higher Committee, the highest Palestinian political body, headed by the exiled Hajj Amin al-Husayni, mufti of Jerusalem.

2. The members of Lydda's National Committee, like those of the other National Committees, came from the land-owning, merchant, and professional sectors of society. Of Lydda's seven committee members, one (Ilyas Hilta) was a Christian. Of Lydda's population of 22,000 at the end of 1947, approximately 12 percent were Christian.

3. The secretary of the First Aid Committee was a relative of the author.

4. 'Ali Bey must have spent the month of February 1948 in Lydda.

5. If Ali Bey had been an Israeli agent, the official *History of the Haganah* [Yehuda Slutsky, *Sefer Toldot ha-Haganah* (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 1972)] would almost certainly have mentioned such a successful intelligence coup. In all probability the Bey and his translator were charlatans.

6. The camel riders and the bedouin volunteers were sent by the Arab Legion command.

7. We know from the official *History of the Haganah* that Ben Shemen was a forward post in Tel Aviv's defense perimeter. In early January 1948, the British army in Palestine sold the Jews some twenty light (Auster) planes, which were invaluable for reconnaissance and for communicating with the outlying colonies. They were subsequently fitted with machine guns and bomb racks.

8. Hasan Salameh, a veteran Palestinian guerrilla leader who had fought against the British in the Great Rebellion of 1936-39, was second in stature only to 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni. The *History of the Haganah* describes him as "one of the bravest" Palestinian guerrilla leaders.

9. Hajj Amin had been president of the Higher Muslim Council from the early 1920s until 1937, when he was dismissed from his post by the British for leading the ongoing rebellion and fled the country to escape arrest.

10. The attack on Salameh's headquarters was the opening move in the implementation of Operation Nachshon, the first of a series of operations in the all-out

offensive launched by the Haganah under Plan Dalet before the end of the British Mandate on 15 May 1948.

11. See the introduction to the "Fall of Jaffa" special document in *JPS* 107 for Operation Bi'ur Hametz, whose harvest was the refugees flooding Lydda at this time.

12. The explicit orders of the Lydda National Committee against the departure of civilians was typical of the orders issued by the National Committees throughout Palestine in direct first-hand refutation of perennial Zionist allegations that the Palestinian authorities themselves encouraged the exodus of Palestinian refugees.

13. Ras al-Ayn was the site of the sources of the Yarkon River, which supplied water to Jerusalem.

14. The Palestine Triangle is the region bordered by the cities of Nablus, Jinin, and Tulkarm in central Palestine, where the Iraqi army was deployed.

15. We know from Ben-Gurion's *War Diary* that the second phase of Operation Dani was the conquest of the Triangle. See David Ben-Gurion, *Yoman Hamilhama, Milhemet Ha'atzma'ut, Tashah-Tashat* [The war diary, the War of Independence, 1948-1949], 3 vols. Ed. Gershon Rivlin and Elhannan Orren (Tel Aviv: Israel Defense Ministry Press/The Society for the Dissemination of David Ben-Gurion's Thinking, 1982).

16. "Father of 'Ali." Hasan Salameh's son, Ali Hasan Salameh ("Abu Hasan"), a high-ranking PLO intelligence officer, was assassinated by the Israelis in Beirut in January 1979.

17. Hamza Subh reported to Hasan Salameh at the hospital that 134 weapons had been seized from the Jews, including a large wireless set.

18. Hasan Salameh died on 2 June.

19. Ras al-Ayn was the southernmost point of deployment of the Iraqi army whose sector extended from Jisr al-Majami' south of Lake Tiberias on the Jordan River, westward through Jinin and Tulkarm, and then southward to Ras al-Ayn.

20. This was the opening phase of Operation Dani, for which see the introductory note.

21. Compare the map and the introductory note.

22. Some six to eight British soldiers, incensed at the operations against them by the IZL and Lehi during 1947–48 and earlier, had deserted to join the Palestinian irregulars under Hasan Salameh and ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni.

23. This was the hit-and-run raid carried out by Dayan’s Commando Battalion mentioned in the introductory note.

24. Khader is the Arabic name for St. George, who is also revered under that name by Muslims.

25. These were the Palmach units, which had not yet been fully integrated into the Israeli army.

26. These two villages lay east of Lydda close to the Arab Legion lines at the Latrun front. Ramallah lay within the sector held by the Arab Legion (hence the reference to Abdullah) in the southern half of the Triangle, the northern half being held by the Iraqis.

27. Compare with the introductory note. This is an exaggerated reference to the three Arab Legion armored cars sent to rescue the Fifth Infantry Company of the Arab Legion that had been stationed as a token force in Lydda. The renewed fighting is what is described in Zionist literature as the “Uprising.”

28. Dahmash Mosque was built by a leading Lydda Muslim family of that name.

29. According to the Palestinian historian Mustafa Dabbagh, the number killed inside the mosque was 176. An additional 250 people were killed in the streets during the suppression of the “Uprising.”

30. The Kayyali family, a leading Lydda family of burghers and professionals, had in the late nineteenth century supplied the first mayor of Lydda, whose first names were Muhammad Ali. According to local legend, the first and last mayors of Lydda were to bear the name Muhammad Ali Kayyali. And so it was.

31. Dr. Habash describes his experiences during the conquest of his native city and the mass expulsion of his compatriots as the formative event of his life. He had only just graduated from the Medical School of the American University of Beirut and was one of the many thousands forced to trek on foot toward the Arab Legion lines. He went on to found the pan-Arabist Arab National Movement and later the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

32. Having emptied Lydda and Ramla of its inhabitants, the elite units of the Israeli army (the erstwhile Haganah and Palmach) helped themselves to the belongings of the former inhabitants. According to Tom Segev, the plunder of Lydda alone required 1,800 lorries to transport to its new ownership. Tom Segev, *1949: The First Israelis* (New York and London: Free Press and Collier Macmillan Publisher, 1986), p. 69.