

Document A: “*The Arab-Israeli Wars,*” Chaim Herzog (1982)

By far the most effective and best-trained Arab force was the Arab Legion, commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir John Bagot Glubb (better known as ‘Glubb Pasha’), a veteran of the First World War. Fluent in Arabic, he and a group of British officers had transformed the Legion from a desert frontier force into a modern army. His total identification with the highly-individualistic Bedouin tribesmen and his personal authority had helped to create a formidable force by applying British discipline and organization to the inherent qualities of the Bedouin. The Legion at that time comprised over 10,000 troops organized in three brigade groups, a number of armoured battalions and artillery elements. The Egyptian army was nominally the strongest of the Arab armies and was prepared to commit an expeditionary force of some 5,000 troops, consisting of a brigade group with an armoured element. In the north, the Syrian force numbered 8,000 troops, in two infantry brigades with a mechanized battalion of French-built tanks, and a small air force. The 2,000-man Lebanese contingent allocated to the Palestine operation included four infantry battalions with limited artillery and armoured forces, while the Iraqi Army assigned 10,000 men – four infantry brigades, an armoured battalion and supporting troops, in addition to an air unit. ...

Thus, the Arab armies that were to invade Palestine, in addition to the crack Transjordan Arab Legion, Kaukji’s Arab Liberation Army and the Mufti’s Army of Salvation, were: the armies of Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Iraq; contingents from the Saudi Arabian Army were subsequently attached to the Egyptian expeditionary force. All these various elements coordinated their activities to a degree, while at the same time pursuing their individual partisan aims – a situation that did not always allow for effective military control over, and cooperation between, the 30,000-plus troops committed to the invasion. Well-equipped by 1948 standards with small-arms, artillery, armoured and air elements, and well-organized in conventional modern military terms, they nevertheless made a striking contrast to the Israeli forces – a proportion of which had only small-arms, and in which no artillery, armour or air units of any consequence existed whatsoever. Such were the very unevenly matched forces that were ranged one against the other at the outset.

Attempts have been made by Arab historians to portray the situation as one in which the military advantage lay with the Jews because of interior supply

lines and a flexible mobilization system. But the first of these assumptions ignores the fact that all the Jewish lines of communication were highly vulnerable because of a large, armed, hostile population sitting astride them. The second assumption misses the fact that the bulk of the Arab forces were regular military organizations equipped with conventional modern military weapons of the time. The Jewish loss of one per cent of its population is perhaps the best indication of the intensity of the struggle and its one-sided nature. Ranged against professional Arab armies was a civilian population fighting as a militia. The avowed and openly proclaimed purpose of the Arab forces was to drive the Jewish population into the sea: the new Jewish state found itself fighting a war for its very existence – a war that was to become its War of Independence.

Source: The Arab-Israeli Wars, Chaim Herzog, Vintage Books, New York, 2010, (Originally published 1892), p. 23-24.

Document B: “A Soldier With the Arabs”, John Bagot Glubb (1957)

[John Bagot Glubb, commander of the Arab Legion, describing the scene as his troops marched through Amman, Jordan’s capital, on the way to invade Israel.]

It was a sultry May day, with a haze of dust hanging over the roads. In the city of Amman and in every village along the road the people were gathered, cheering and clapping wildly as each unit drove past. The flat roofs and the windows were crowded with women and children, whose shrill cries and wavering trebles could be heard above the roar and rattle of the vehicles, and the cheering of the crowds of men beside the road. The troops themselves were in jubilation. In some trucks, the soldiers were clapping and cheering. In others, they were laughing and waving to the crowds as they passed. Many of the vehicles had been decorated with green branches or bunches of pink oleander flowers, which grew beside the road. The procession seemed more like a carnival than an army going to war.

Source: A Soldier With the Arabs, John Bagot Glubb, London Hodder And Stoughton, United Kingdom, 1957.

Document C: “Ben-Gurion”, Michael Bar-Zohar (1977)

The first days of the state’s existence were filled with horror. In the north, there were bloody battles against the Syrians and the Lebanese; in Jerusalem, the Arab Legion had reversed earlier Jewish gains and cut the route to Mount Scopus; Egyptian forces captured a strategically located police fortress in the northern Negev. The enemy was in control in the air, and a heavy bombing raid on Tel Aviv’s central bus station left forty-two dead. The planes that Ehud Avriel had bought in Czechoslovakia had yet to arrive, and the arms shipments were still in European warehouses or on board ships at sea. Ben-Gurion’s immediate aim was therefore to gain time. He knew that each additional day brought further prospects of the long-awaited arms arriving and rejected all appeals to evacuate embattled settlements. ...

The worst day of all was 22 May. From the south, an Egyptian armored column lunged towards Tel Aviv. The Egyptians also entered Beersheba and attacked a number of settlements to the north. One after another, the Arab Legion captured the Jewish quarters at the edge of Jerusalem and was not threatening the entire Jewish section, bombarding it incessantly. Legion units also held the Latrun police fortress, which controlled the road to Jerusalem. In the center of the country, there was concern that the Iraqi expeditionary force, together with the Legion, would break through the Jewish defense lines and reach the sea, thereby cutting the state in two.

Ben-Gurion spent the entire night in feverish consultations with members of the General Staff. “There was nothing left to fight with,” a Mapai leader later related. “That Saturday night was the most critical moment ... Ben-Gurion stalked about like a wounded lion. All the craftsmen were mobilized into battalions to defend Tel Aviv. That evening, one of the heads of the staff said to me: ‘Another seventy-two hours and it will all be over!’”

Source: Ben-Gurion, Michael Bar-Zohar, Adama Books, New York, 1977, p. 164-166.

Document D: “*The Arab-Israeli Wars,*” Chaim Herzog (1982)

The Arab attack on the Deganias began at dawn on 20 May with a heavy artillery bombardment. The main thrust was directed against Degania A, in which the total defending force numbered 70 men. The attack was led by an infantry company spearheaded by five tanks and an armoured car unit. ... But the Israelis held on, and gave not an inch. At midday, the Syrians pulled back from Degania A, having lost two more armoured cars, and concentrated their attack on Degania B.

Here, eight tanks and armoured cars moved forward in attack, this time led by two infantry companies. The infantry were driven off and, again, a large Syrian armoured force attacked with infantry support but was driven back. At noon on that day, the first artillery of the Israel Defence Forces made its debut on the battlefield. The crews had never even trained on them – the guns had been unloaded but a few days earlier in Tel Aviv and rushed to the north. From the hills overlooking the Sea of Galilee, the first practice shots were fired into the water to ‘zero in’. They were then aimed at the area occupied by the Syrian support weapons and armour concentrations. The effect of their first shells on the Syrians (who, until now, had held a monopoly of artillery on the field of battle) was immediate: they withdrew, abandoning Zemach, Shaar Hagolan and Massada, which were re-occupied immediately by Israeli forces.

The Israelis had won the battle for the Jordan valley by 23 May. ... The significance of the victory at Degania lay less in the fact that the main thrust of the Arab invasion in the Jordan valley area had been blocked than in the electrifying effect it had on the whole of the Jewish population in the newborn State of Israel. Degania, situated on the River Jordan where the waters emerge from the southern shore of the Sea of Galilee, is known as the ‘Mother of the Kibbutzim’, for it was the first co-operative settlement of the type known as the ‘kibbutz’ to be established in Palestine in 1910. The fact that the first major battle against an invading army was taking place at Degania was seen in many ways as an omen. The disparity in numbers and equipment had not prevented a handful of settlers from beating back an attack by a regular Arab army. The morale-boosting effect of this success was to be decisive in the desperate days that followed.

Source: The Arab-Israeli Wars, Chaim Herzog, Vintage Books, New York, 2010, (Originally published 1892), p. 53-54.

**Document E: “*The Edge of the Sword,*” Netanel Lorch
(1961)**

The Egyptians may have believed that they could forego the capture of Nirim and Kfar Darom for both settlements are somewhat removed from the coastal highway, but not so Yad Mordechai, the next settlement on their way north, situated right by the highway and one of the oldest and stablest settlements in the Negev. The settlement had been named in honor of Mordechai Ankelevitz, leader of the desperate Warsaw Ghetto rising in 1943. Many of the settlers were themselves veterans of that rebellion or of partisan warfare against the Germans in World War II, who had hoped to establish a permanent home there.

On May 16, Egyptians were seen digging in on the hills south of Yad Mordechai, but it was not till the 19th, after additional forces, an enlarged brigade, had arrived in Palestine (overland in Gaza and by sea to Majdal) that they opened their attack. The day began with artillery fire directed against the settlement and the pillbox to its south. After three hours of battle when the pillbox had been completely destroyed, its defenders were compelled to retreat, abandoning their position to the Egyptians, who attempted to exploit their success without delay by penetrating into the settlement itself, but were beaten back in a hand-to-hand battle.

The attack was resumed the following day. One tank and an armored car armed with a six-pounder were brought up to the pillbox position from where they systematically ravaged the settlement's positions. Four separate assaults were beaten back by the settlers, the last with the help of reinforcements from Gevar Am. Casualties of the second day were eighteen killed and twenty wounded. Yad Mordechai clamored desperately for reinforcements, arms and ammunition. Finally that night another platoon arrived. During the following two days no assaults were undertaken by the Egyptians, but shelling and the bombardment continued. The Egyptians continued to dig in on the hills around and draw their net tighter. The condition of the wounded was dismal as there were no adequate facilities for their treatment. On May 22 Yad Mordechai signaled: “The men's morale is sinking; they approach exhaustion. There is fear of another Kfar Etzion. The settlement must be reinforced or abandoned. It is vital that women and wounded be evacuated immediately.” ...

The Egyptians renewed their attack on the afternoon of May 23. Two task forces each comprised of tanks and armored cars penetrated the settlement. The last machine guns in the settlers' hands had by now become unserviceable. Reserves of ammunition were rapidly being depleted. Some positions reported they had been left with only a few hand grenades; all their ammunition had been used up. ...

Just before sunrise on May 24, 180 members of Yad Mordechai, the immigrant youth group that had been living and working with them, and soldiers of the Negev Brigade infiltrated through Egyptian lines toward Gevar Am. They left in two groups: the members of the settlement crossing the road close to the village, then turning north; the Palmach soldiers moving north through orange groves, and then cutting east toward Gevar Am. In the course of their attacks against Yad Mordechai, whose defenders amounted to little more than one infantry company, the Egyptians had employed two infantry battalions, one armored battalion and one artillery regiment, i.e. approximately half of the entire force that had moved north along the coastal road. It was estimated that they had suffered about three hundred casualties in killed and wounded in the battle. At least one of their best infantry battalions had to be deactivated for a considerable length of time. However, the Egyptians' main loss was on another plane – the race for time. On account of Yad Mordechai's gallant stand five days had been gained for Israel: Five days for reinforcing the Negev, for preparations and fortifications farther north, for acquisition and transportation of armament. If the Egyptians had reached Ashdod on May 24, it is doubtful whether it would have been possible to counter them with fighter planes or guns.

Source: The Edge of the Sword, Netanel Lorch, G.P. Putnam's & Sons, New York, 1961, p. 208-209.

Document F: “Ben-Gurion”, Michael Bar-Zohar (1977)

On 22 May, the situation in Jerusalem deteriorated dramatically. A telegram notified Ben-Gurion that the Legion was capturing village after village in the vicinity. Ben-Gurion was horrified. “I demanded that, without delay, a military column be sent to Jerusalem, with all the units that are trained and armed ... The units are to receive all the weapons available. The armored cars are to be transferred immediately. They are to take ... all the surrounding villages and break through to Jerusalem.”

A stormy argument broke out between Ben-Gurion and [IDF Chief of Staff Yigal] Yadin. An immediate attack on the Jerusalem road required a frontal assault on the Latrun police fortress, which controlled the route. The Legion had occupied this fortress with strong and well-trained forces, backed by armor and artillery. The Haganah, on the other hand, had no forces available. The only force not in action at that moment was the newly formed 7th Brigade. At the last moment, Ben-Gurion personally reinforced the brigade with hundreds of untrained recruits, immigrants just off the ships. They had never held a rifle in their lives; they spoke a motley of languages and did not understand Hebrew. Frantically, their officers tried to give them basic weapon training, and the recruits parroted a number of basic Hebrew commands. In Yadin’s view, the 7th Brigade had yet to become a combat unit, but Ben-Gurion did not take his objections into account. On the evening of 22 May, he called an urgent staff meeting. When he found out that the 7th Brigade’s 3,000 men had been confined to their camp for three days, Ben-Gurion erupted in anger: “Three thousand soldiers are idle in their camps; nine thousand ‘soldier days’ have already been wasted at a time when Jerusalem can fall at any moment!”

Ben-Gurion proposed that the operation to open the road to Jerusalem be undertaken by the 7th Brigade, reinforced by a battalion from the Alexandroni Brigade. The commander of Alexandroni expressed his fear that this would weaken his forces, which faced the Iraqi army; the Iraqis might break through and cut the link between Tel Aviv and Haifa. But Ben-Gurion was not deterred: “I’m prepared to take responsibility for the risk,” he said.

The attack was scheduled for the night of 23 May. However, in the course of the day, it transpired that the brigade was not yet prepared, and it was

impossible to attack that night. With great effort, Yadin managed to persuade Ben-Gurion to postpone the operation by twenty-four hours. Ben-Gurion was experiencing growing tension. Talks had already commenced about a truce, and if fighting were halted while the Jerusalem road was in Legion's hands, the city would remain cut off and its population's morale could break. From Jerusalem itself, the news was grave. The Legion's shells were landing everywhere, and food and water were being rationed out in tiny amounts. The Jewish Quarter of the Old City, which had been cut off from the rest of the Jewish neighborhoods, was sending out desperate appeals for help. All kinds of defeatists were beginning to talk of "compromise", of "saving human life", and various other terms that signified one thing: capitulation.

On the eve of the operation, Yadin flew to the Kibbutz where the assault forces were massing. His impression was that the brigade was in a state of chaos. Together with its officers, he came to the conclusion that it was essential to postpone the attack for a few days. He returned to Tel Aviv and tried to convince Ben-Gurion that the operation had to be put off. Ben-Gurion's response was laconic: "Attack, whatever the cost."

The Jerusalem road winds through a broad valley at the foot of the Latrun heights, which are dominated by the police fortress. Nearby is the picturesque Trappist monastery surrounded by vineyards. The view from the heights was of an open field covered with ripening corn; and it was from there that the Arab Legion observed the assault column ponderously making its way toward its objective as dawn broke on 25 May. The Legion's artillery and machine-guns poured a murderous barrage at the attackers, who suffered heavy losses. Many of the untrained men lost their heads, withdrew and began to flee. The day began with a burning easterly wind and as the fleeing soldiers stumbled through the wheat field, they were harassed by thirst and swarms of tiny flies. From the hillsides came crowds of Arab villagers armed with rifles and daggers, eager to kill the wounded soldiers. With great difficulty, some of the officers managed to get themselves organized enough to cover the retreat of their troops. The assault ended in disaster, and the casualties numbered nearly 200. The 7th Brigade was badly mauled in its baptism of fire, and the long convoy of trucks standing by to carry provisions to Jerusalem remained where it was.

That night, Ben-Gurion was eager to find out when it would be possible to mount another attack on Latrun. Like a bulldog, he stuck to his resolve to attack Latrun as many times as necessary until the road to Jerusalem could be opened. He even sent the newly assembled Messerschmitts to bomb Latrun and the neighboring Arab village of Emaus. Shocking news arrived from Jerusalem: the Old City's Jewish Quarter had fallen to the Legion and its defenders had been taken captive. In the meantime, the U.N. was pressing for a truce. On 30 May, Ben-Gurion again hurled his army against Latrun – and again, he failed. ...

But Ben-Gurion did not give up. On 9 June, he hurled in two additional brigades, with Yigal Allon commanding the operation. At operation headquarters was Yitzhak Rabin, the commander of one of the reinforcement brigades. It was a last attempt to capture Latrun before the month-long truce went into effect. But this attack also ran aground. The Latrun fortress remains intact, as a reminder of the army's most painful setback in the War of Independence.

Source: Ben-Gurion, Michael Bar-Zohar, Adama Books, New York, 1977, p. 167-169.

Document G: “A History of Israel,” Howard Sachar (1976)

A single alternative remained for opening the Jewish supply line. During the previous weeks, Colonel David Marcus, an American Jewish volunteer and West Point graduate serving as area commander for the road, had been using a path south of Latrun and Bab al-Wad to infiltrate troops on foot through the hills to Jerusalem. Marcus speculated that the path might be widened to enable vehicles to pass through. With Yadin’s approval, hundreds of laborers were now summoned from Tel Aviv and immediately put to work clearing boulders and dynamiting rock sidings. There was no opportunity for rest, even in the fiercest heat, for a United Nations truce was to come into effect on June 11. If the “Burma Road” were not completed before then, no further efforts would be permitted after the truce deadline, and Jerusalem would starve. Finally, by June 9, a primitive roadbed was cut through the Jerusalem mountains. The first trucks, loaded with cans of food and water, ventured out on the pitted makeshift highway. Several hours later they entered Jerusalem, where they were greeted rapturously by the awaiting Jewish population.

Source: A History of Israel From The Rise of Zionism to Our Time, Howard Sachar, Alfred A. Knopf, 3rd ed., New York, 2007 (originally published 1976), p. 325-326.

**Document H: “*The Edge of the Sword*,” Netanel Lorch
(1961)**

So ended the first round in the northern front. In spite of tactical failures, particularly in the last phase of the fighting in the Malkya and Mishmar Hayarden sectors, Haganah, which had by now become the defense army of Israel, attained its major defensive strategic objectives. The Arab attempt to overrun the country in a blitz campaign had failed. Even their success in establishing a bridgehead at Mishmar Hayarden had not benefited the Syrians, but compelled them to pin down considerable forces in inconvenient positions, thus depriving them to a large extent of maneuverability. Lebanon had given up active military participation following the capture of Malkya, intent on preserving its army and its independence. The Liberation Army, which had returned confident and hopeful following its reorganization, had been defeated at Sejera. ...

The considerable Iraqi forces, which had penetrated the triangle to use it as a firm base for offensive action, had been forced to give up their plans. ...

The Jerusalem front had seen many battles, heavy casualties, bitter failures, loss of all Jerusalem's outposts to the north, east, and south, loss of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, and the failure of the attacks on Latrun. However, the Arab Legion had been prevented from attaining its objective of taking Jewish Jerusalem or preventing it from linking up with the coastal plain. ...

In spite of failures and casualties, the defenders of the Darom and the Negev were entitled to be proud of their achievement. Although two settlements had fallen, Yad Mordechai and Nitzanim; although they had been forced to withdraw from a number of places and some attacks, including major ones, had been failures, they could not but observe that the Egyptians like other Arab armies had failed to attain their major objective. The State of Israel had not been destroyed.

Source: The Edge of the Sword, Netanel Lorch, G.P. Putnam's & Sons, New York, 1961, p. 166-224.