
1955 is a significant year in Arab history in general, and in the history of the Palestinian cause in particular. It was then that the colonialist designs of Western alliances, their plans for nationalising [Palestinian] refugees, and the proposals for peace with Israel reached their zenith. Furthermore, during that year, the leadership of the Egyptian revolution, following the deposition of Major General Naguib, shifted its politics from the manoeuvring phase to a phase of active and effective opposition to the alliances. The Egyptian government played a central role in trying to force the Council of the Arab League to expel Nouri as-Said’s Iraq after he joined the Baghdad Pact.

As usual, the aggressive Israeli administration took action to “punish” Egypt, so it launched a barbaric attack on the Gaza Strip on the night of 28 February 1955. This was done with a clear political aim, which was to render subservient revolutionary Egypt and force it to accept the allies’ plans in order to protect itself, as per the recommendations of Nouri as-Said and to render subservient the people of the Gaza Strip pushing them to agree to nationalisation and resettlement of refugees as well as peace with Israel.

However the will of defiance and determination won as always. All the people of the Gaza Strip condemned the aggression and demanded to be armed. It was not hard for the inhabitants of the Strip to realise the other meaning of the aggression: peace and settlement. For this reason, the slogan of the civil revolution was “No peace or settlement O American lackeys!” (La Sulh wa la iskan y a‘umala al Amrekan).

The proposals of nationalisation, peace and the alliances fell apart. A new era began, and this shall be the subject of our research, which itself forms the fifth chapter of a long study of the Gaza Strip between the years 1947 and 1967. This chapter covers the period from the Israeli raid on 28 February 1955 until the tripartite aggression on Egypt and Gaza on 29 November 1956.

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The Israeli raid on the Gaza Strip on 28 February 1955, and the uprising of the Gazan masses on 1 March 1955 were important events in the history of the Gaza Strip, the Egyptian Revolution, and the region in general. These events represented the breaking point between two the political phases that the revolution experienced. Now the phase of hesitation was over, and the revolution made its decision. The raid, followed by the uprising, proved that it was impossible to delay taking action on the Palestinian cause, or to underestimate Israel’s danger and postpone an imminent conformation. [170]

Many things have been said about the effects of the Gaza Raid, perhaps the most eloquent of which were the words of Kenneth Love who described the raid as an attempt to “seed the storm cloud”, noting that it was “not [a] freely chosen action but rather reaction and counter-reaction”. Love quotes Gamal Abdel Nasser describing the Gaza Raid as a “turning point” and the aggression as “an alarm bell”. This was especially true as the raid did not only affect the Gaza Strip, but also spilled over into the Egyptian side, given that most of the casualties were Egyptian soldiers which greatly affected Egyptian public opinion.

The reaction to the raid involved the soldiers stationed in the Gaza Strip whom Nasser had visited shortly before the raid where he “personally assured the troops that there was no threat of battle there.” Following the raid, Nasser both felt embarrassed and responsible for his soldiers and their needs for armament. According to Love, Nasser could no longer “tell visiting members of Parliament and soldiers at the frontier…that he…did not intend to make Israel’s mistake of spending 60 percent of the national budget on arms.” The turning point occurred after the Gaza raid. It was then that Nasser famously proclaimed that “We shall rely on our own strength, not on the Security Council or its resolutions….The commander in chief of the Armed Forces has been instructed to answer aggression with aggression.”

New politics manifested in the changes in the policies of Egypt on the Arab and international levels, and on the front of fighting Israel. The government escalated its war against the pacts, and as a response to the Hashemite axis – one of which signatories, Iraq, had signed a joint defence agreement with Turkey - the Egyptian government formed an axis composed of Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia. In spite of the fragile foundations on which this alliance rested, given the presence of Saudi Arabia, this did not belittle the significance of Egypt’s attempt to confront the Hashemite pact in an active way.
On the International level the policies of the revolutionary government materialised in the Egyptian-Czech arms deal which was declared by Nasser in a speech he gave on 27 July 1955 which was “the most important speech of his” and one that “created the most important crackle in the history of the region.” Some sources indicate that Nasser’s decision to rearm his troops was taken during the night of the Israeli raid on Gaza, and that his request for eastern arms took place on 18 May 1955 when he asked the Russian ambassador about Russia’s willingness to give Egypt arms. The deal was as much political as it was military. It was the first time that the Egyptian government broke the barrier of “the complex of the hostility towards communism” establishing direct contact with a communist state. With this deal Egypt closed the chapter on the era of sending delegates to search for arms in Western countries (to no avail). The arms deal was justified “because Egypt realised the hostile intentions of Israel, and did not want the tragedy of the Palestinians to be repeated”. The deal heralded Egypt’s entry into a new international domain in which many horizons were opened for it. Egypt was also taken out of the sphere of Western states, which were aiming to have it join one of their colonial pacts.

The signing of the Egyptian-Czech arms deal coupled with Egypt’s attendance of the Bandung Conference in April were significant events as they brought Egypt to a completely new political sphere. They meant that the Egyptian government was acting in congruence with the political stance against the question of forming pacts it had adopted previously. However, unlike the shift in Egypt’s Arab and international policies, there were no crucial changes in its local policies, whether in Egypt itself or in the Gaza Strip. In spite of recognising and, subsequently responding to [171] the political aims of the Gaza uprising, the Egyptian government undertook repressive measures against those it deemed responsible for the uprising.

A day after the demonstrations stopped in Gaza, Egyptian security forces arrested people from all around the strip, accusing them of having agitated the demonstrations. Although these arrests could be perceived as a precautionary measure against new demonstrations, the treatment of the detainees indicate otherwise; that they were strictly punitive measures. The detainees were accused of being spies and as such were tortured in the most horrific ways.

Given that the Gaza detainees were either members of the Muslim Brotherhood or were Communists, their treatment were affected and aggravated by the Egyptian Revolution’s stance from both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communists. This stance was hostile especially after...
both sides joined the National Front which empathised with the ousted president Mohammad Naguib, and in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, after their assassination attempt on Nasser. Thus, the poor conditions of the Gaza prisoners persisted until the signing of the Egyptian-Czech arms deal and the attendance by Nasser of the Bandung Conference, because only then did relations between the communists and the regime in Egypt improve.«

_Police Measures in the Gaza Strip_

As a result of the March uprising, the Egyptian administration drafted a number of laws and took some repressive measures in Gaza that were complementary to its campaign of arrests that took place on 14 March. Less than three days after the Egyptian administration responded to the demands of the March uprising, the administrative ruler issued the following decree:

Due to the disturbances that took place on 1 March 1955 in Gaza and Deir El Balah, the following decisions have been made:

**Article One:** It is completely prohibited for any person living in the areas that fall under the jurisdiction of administrative ruler of Gaza or Deir El Balah to walk between 8 pm of 1 March 1955 and 9 am of 2 March 1955 and between 7 pm to 6 am on the following days.«

It should be noted that this decision was not a temporary decision aimed at containing the rioting days only. Instead, it was intended to last long after, as was made clear from the text of the decree issued on 15 May 1955, which stipulated that “wandering around is permitted in the cities, villages, and refugee camps only in the areas that fall under the supervision of the Egyptian forces in Palestine, during Ramadan and Eid Al Fitr.”«

It is evident from the decree that the right to wander around is restricted by time and place, for the decision was valid for the month of Ramadan only and the Eid El Fitr. As for the place, the decree stipulated that wandering can only take place in cities, villages and camps. [172]

_The Dissolution of the Union of the Teachers of Refugee Schools:_

It is well known that the teachers’ union was a public facade for both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communists who carried out their political and mobilising activity through it. Through its administrative body, the Union

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2 Translator's note: I am not sure whether this is a reference to UNRWA teachers, as no mention of UN schools is made in the text.
played a significant role in combatting nationalisation plans as well as taking part in the March Uprising. As such it has been affected by the Egyptian government’s repressive measures, with the general administrative ruler issuing the following decree about it:

**Article 1:** All registration procedures for the Union of Refugee Schools Teacher shall cease immediately.

**Article 2:** The Aforementioned Union shall be immediately dissolved.

**Article 3:** The Administrative Ruler of Gaza shall undertake all procedures to dissolve the union and freeze its money and assets, terminating its businesses, and reserving the net money to be handled, by a decision from us. The ruler is permitted to use all his authorities to accomplish his task. 

It was not possible to evade this decree because it was coupled with another one issued on 15 November 1954 that stipulated the termination of the work permits of clubs which belonged to the banned parties. Furthermore, the decree gave the administrative ruler the authority to ban any club, “if it were found with the purpose of reviving a previously closed club or with the purpose of using it as a cover up.”

A third decree was issued on the same date by the same authority that banned the right to strike and demonstrate. This new decree expanded a previous article so that the ban would now also include the following: Encouraging strikes or sit-down protests in any shape or form, the incitement to make joint complaints, taking a hostile stance against the recognised committees of this region, spreading calls for demonstrations, breaching of peace, rioting, or using violence.

**Article 2:** To the article (20) a new paragraph shall be added after the fourth paragraph, stating the following:

The administrative ruler has the right to close down the club by his own decision if the rules of the first, second and fourth paragraphs of article (20) are breached, on the condition that he appoints someone to whom the money of the club would be sent after its liquidation.

**Public Opinion**

In spite of the aforementioned repressive measures, public opinion stood firmly behind the demands of the uprising [173] and the Egyptian
government could not go back on the commitments it made in the wake of the uprising.

Unlike previously, when people were passive and apathetic to the arrest of opposition forces by the Egyptian government, this time, they expressed huge concern and empathy for the detainees and worked to get them released. Those who demanded their release included government officials, government employees and even members of the traditional leadership. They also made sure to visit the detainees and take care of them with little concern to the potential punishment of the Egyptian government. This is in contrast to the widespread apathy that took over during the previous arrest campaigns in Gaza in the 1950s. The demands to release the prisoners could have escalated the confrontation between the people of Gaza and the Egyptian government, if it were not for the new changes in the political scene at the time, by which we mean Egypt’s international policy and its launching of the Fida’iyeen War, both of which changed the attitude of the Gazan masses towards the Egyptian government.

Border Tensions Return, UN Takes Action

After the February Raid, the rate of clashes on the Gaza border rose and the UN had to take steps to ease the tensions. The UN had already condemned Israel’s February attack on the Gaza Strip, by issuing Security Council Resolution 106 on 29 March 1955. The resolution, which was unanimously approved, stated the following:

1. The Security Council, having heard the report of the Chief of Staff of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in Palestine and statements by the representatives of Egypt and Israel, noting that the Egyptian-Israeli Mixed Armistice Commission on 6 March 1955 determined that a "rearranged and planned attack ordered by Israeli authorities" was "committed by Israeli regular army forces against the Egyptian regular army force" in the Gaza Strip on 28 February 1955:

   Condemns this attack as a violation of the cease-fire provisions of Security Council resolution 54 (1948) and as inconsistent with the obligations of the parties under the General Armistice Agreement between Egypt and Israel 2, and under the United Nations Charter.

2. Calls again upon Israel to take all necessary measures to prevent such actions.
3. Expresses its conviction that the maintenance of the General Armistice Agreement is threatened by any deliberate violation of that Agreement by one of the parties to it, and that no progress towards the return of permanent peace in Palestine can be made unless the parties comply strictly with their obligations under the General Armistice Agreement and the cease-fire provisions of its resolution 54 (1948).\textsuperscript{xvii}

The following day, on 30 March 1955, the UN Security Council issued resolution 197 in which it stated the following:

*The Security Council,*

Taking note of those sections of the report by the Chief of Staff of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in Palestine which deal with the general conditions on the armistice demarcation line between Egypt and Israel and the causes of the present tension, \[174]\n
Anxious that all possible steps shall be taken to preserve security in this area, within the framework of the General Armistice Agreement between Egypt and Israel,

1. Requests the Chief of Staff to continue his consultations with the Governments of Egypt and Israel with a view to the introduction of practical measures to that end;

2. Notes that the Chief of Staff has already made certain concrete proposals to this effect;

3. Calls upon the Governments of Egypt and Israel to co-operate with the Chief of Staff with regard to his proposals, bearing in mind that, in the opinion of the Chief of Staff, infiltration could be reduced to an occasional nuisance if an agreement were effected between the parties on the lines he has proposed;

4. Requests the Chief of Staff to keep the Council informed of the progress of his discussions.

*Adopted unanimously at the 696th meeting.*\textsuperscript{184}

The suggestions made by the Chief of Staff of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in Palestine (UNTSO), E. L. M. Burns, were featured in UNSC Resolution 107, adopted on 30 March 1955, as follows:
1. Joint patrols along sensitive portions of the demarcation line;
2. A local commanders’ agreement
3. A barbed-wire obstacle along certain portions of the demarcation line;
4. Outposts and patrols to be manned by regular Egyptian and Israeli troops only.

Burns explains the purposes of his four suggestions as follows: “The purpose of the first of these measures was obvious. If Egyptians and Israelis were patrolling together along the ADL the patrols would not be fired on from either side, nor would mines be placed in their tracks.” As for the second suggestion, Burns notes previous local commanders’ agreements between Jordan and Israel, claiming that “the idea behind the agreements was that they would permit unimportant incidents of the infiltration, exchange of prisoners who had committed no crime except the technical offence of infiltration, exchange of cattle that had been impounded, and so forth, to be handled by the local commanders of each side meeting together.” Burns further explains his second suggestion by saying that the idea of a local commanders’ agreement appealed to him “as a practical means of settling minor incidents, without the legal, formalistic procedure of the MAC.” The third suggestion was meant to ensure that “both sides really want to stop infiltration.” Finally, Burns discusses the aims of his fourth suggestion as follows:

The last provision, that all outposts and patrols on both sides should be manned by regular troops, was put in because the reserves, militia, national guard, or whatever they happened to be called, were in the nature of things less disciplined than regular troops…these non-regular troops were usually residents in the vicinity and often bore grudges against the other side, perhaps because of casualties in a recent incident. They were hence more likely to take a shot at the hated enemy, if they saw a good chance of doing so without being detected by a superior officer.- [175]

Burns states that he discussed these proposals with both sides but had made little progress. He also notes that “besides the incidents which happened from time to time on the Gaza border, two other affairs exacerbated Egypt-Israel relations between November 1954 and February 1955. One was the attempt to pass the Bat Galim, a vessel under the Israel flag, through the Suez Canal in defiance of the Egyptian blockade. The other was the trial of a number of Jews in Egypt for espionage and sabotage, and the subsequent execution of some of them.”
Border incidents, most notably the incident of 28 February pushed Burns’s proposals to the fore. Israel, on the other hand, actively used UN resolutions and recommendations to serve its political designs. Furthermore, it exploited the tense atmosphere which resulted from its attack on Gaza to try to pressure Egypt into an agreement. Describing the situation on the Gaza-Israel border in the period that followed the February attack, Burns writes:

When I returned from New York after the Security Council meetings on the Gaza raid incident, I found that the situation of the Gaza border was bad, and I reported to the Council about it. Since the February 28 raid there had been firings across the ADL, both Israeli and Egyptian, nearly every day, numerous crossings by parties of armed men, and seven minings of Israeli command cars patrolling along the ADL. …These incidents thus tended to increase in seriousness.

Unless Egypt repressed the firing and mining firmly, and the Israelis also stopped patrolling in an unnecessary provocative manner, the situation would get worse...The Egyptians had requested that UNMOs be placed in positions on the Egyptian side of the ADL, so that they would be able to see who was really starting the incidents. This seemed to me an indication that the Egyptians at the top did not want trouble; but the difficulty seemed to be that the Egyptians lower in the military scale, of the Palestinians who now were holding part of the line, did not respect those wishes, and, as I have said, would take a shot at an Israeli if they thought they could get away with it."

Israel Exploits Tensions to Bring Egyptians to Negotiation Table

In light of the tensions depicted by Burns, Israel made a number of proposals aimed at resolving the security problem on the Gaza border and achieving some of its political goals. Thus, around mid-April, the Israeli leadership, knowing that “the Egyptian Army was not really ready to challenge the Israelis in open warfare...put forward proposals for a conference at a “high level” between themselves and the Egyptians, to discuss the means of improving security in the Gaza Strip area. Mr Walter Etyan, of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs would be Israel’s representative, if the Egyptians would appoint someone of equivalent status.”

Israeli sources mention the practical side of the Israeli proposals claiming that:
For several weeks, negotiations took place in Cairo through the mediation of the Chief of Staff of UNTSO over Israel’s request that a high level meeting takes place to ease tensions and restore peace on the border. [176] Israel proposed the establishment of a security zone in the form of a mine strip that would be 100 metres wide with barbed wire on both sides. It also proposed a meeting for the leaders and direct contact by phone. Western countries backed this proposal pressing for a high level meeting themselves. They pressured Egypt to accept this plan, but Egypt continued to evade through various manoeuvres and disputes to prevent an effective settlement."

Furthermore, “the U.S. Ambassador in Cairo, then talked to Dr Mahmoud Fawzi, the Foreign Minister, about it. Dr Fawzi did not appear enthusiastic, but left the door open.”– Burns believes the position of the Egyptians was a result of “their suspicion that the Israelis wanted to get them at the same table, and then gradually turn the conversations into discussion of terms for a general peace.” He then confirms these suspicions by writing that “the Israelis, by the way, had a fixed idea that if they could get the Egyptians or any of the Arabs, to “sit down with them” they could win them to a complaisant – that is to say, peacemaking – attitude.”– Egyptians rejected Israel’s proposals especially those related to the high level conference. Thus, the proposals made have failed, for while Burns was trying to bring the two sides together, the Egyptian and Israeli points of view only coincided at their apathy towards his proposals. The Israelis “did not want them, unless they could have them on the high level that might be represented as leading in the direction of a peace on their terms – otherwise they would prefer to continue to apply retaliations and the threat of force. The Egyptians…wanted to avoid compromising themselves with the Israelis, in the eyes of other Arab states.”

At the end of May another serious clash took place at the border:

It began by and Israeli jeep being fired on from an Egyptian post near Kilo 95. The Israelis returned fire to extricate it, and then small-arms and mortar fire extended along quite a length of the border. The casualties were fairly severe: one soldier killed and four wounded on the Egyptian side, one soldier and one civilian killed and four soldiers and four civilians wounded on the Israeli side. The border defensives Kibbutzim of Ein Hashelosha, Kissufim, and Nirim had been mortared. It happened that on this occasion some UNMOs had been in a position to see who had begun the shooting, and they were sure it was the Egyptians."

_Egypt’s Role According to Israel: A Border Guard to protect Israel’s Borders_
In the meantime, the Israeli Foreign Minister gave an interview to *Newsweek* magazine in which he stated, “Egypt had forfeited her right to control the Gaza Strip, through her failure to implement the armistice agreement.”

Burns points out that Mr Walter Etyan, of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, suggested to him, during a meeting in this period, that he travel to Egypt “and impress the danger of the present situation on Prime Minister Nasser.” At the same meeting, Mr Etyan conveyed to Burns “a definite threat that Israel would use armed force if the incidents on the Gaza border were not stopped.”

Burns flew to Cairo, where he explained the situation to Nasser and “suggested several practical measures to get better control: the removal of unreliable elements among the locally recruited troops and civil population; the making of the demarcation line with barrels, so it could be seen from a distance; having more officers on duty in the outposts more co-operation with the UNMOs.”

Nasser, according to Burns, “proposed that each side withdraw its posts and patrols one kilometre from the demarcation line. He was ready to put this measure into effect. But he could not issue drastic orders imposing a strictly passive attitude on the troops in the Gaza Strip. Such orders to men who had been shocked by the Gaza raid would destroy their morale.”

Jean Lacoutre, to whom Nasser’s proposal were “surprising”, speculates that they could have been a “trick of war, given that an acceptance by Tel Aviv would have led the Israelis to evacuate several border kibbutzim, and since the fedayin would have been able to avoid this regulation.”

Burns describes the period that followed his meeting with Nasser as follows: In fact, things took a better turn from this time on – for the next three months. Some firmer orders to the local Egyptian command must have been issued. There were no serious incidents, and we began arranging for the discussions of the measures I had proposed to reduce tension.

Indeed, a relative calm prevailed over the Gaza Strip because the Egyptian Government was strict in monitoring border infiltrators as well as taking measures like imposing a curfew, as stipulated by the following decree:

**Article One**: It is forbidden for anyone under the area governed by the Egyptian forces in Palestine to be out of doors between 12 pm and 4 am, subject to the rules of article 2 of this order.

**Article Two**: It is completely forbidden for anyone to be in the area between the stations of the armed forces, east of the railway, and the demarcation line between 6 pm until 6 am, with the exception of the main road that connects...
between the villages of Jabalia and Beit Hanoun, east of the railway. The ban on the aforementioned road is from 5 pm until 5 am.

Article Three: Security forces, the army and whoever is given permission by the relevant authorities are exempt from the rules of this decree.

As Burns points out, there were many attempts at reaching an agreement between the two sides. Talks of previous Israeli proposals and the well-known Egyptian point of view were renewed.

One of the most controversial points were whether there should or should not be a direct of phone-line between the Egyptian commander and the Israeli local commander. The Egyptian side fought this, and the Israelis equally pressed it. The Israelis seemed to be anxious to include in the agreement provisions which would allow the local commanders of the two sides to meet, without the presence of anyone from the United Nations Organization.

Burns proceeds to say that “this effort to arrange “direct negotiations” even in less important matters, seemed to have become a policy the Israelis pursued with a great deal of pertinacity. The Egyptians…resisted it.”

In this way, the Egyptians stopped the Israelis from using the issue of the security of the Gaza border as a means to begin negotiations on wider political issues.

Border conflicts were only a small part of the wider issues; Israel was preoccupied with more than just security. By then Knesset elections had already taken place, and the new leader of the government promised his voters that force would be used with Egypt if negotiations did not succeed in making Egypt lift its naval blockade, which prevented navigation to the Eilat port.

Ben Gurion’s statements clearly demonstrated that in the minds of Israelis the issue was about much more than just security at the Gaza border. Egyptians, in turn, were trying to gain time and arms, as well as consolidate their international position. In the meantime, the United Nations Emergency Force attempted to revive Burns’s earlier suggestions. However, instead of making progress, the word fida’iyyen began to enter the political dictionary of the Gaza Strip. On this topic, Burns writes that they tried to “get the talks going again, but before these could have any effect a renewed wave of violence began. We heard for the first time the expression fida’iyyen applied to the Palestinian
agents sent into Israel to carry out attacks on the population and destroy property.”

This marked the end of the initial stage, which started after the February Raid, and was dominant by the politics of gaining time. Now, the retaliation phase, through the Fida’iyeen War began.

*The Fida’iyeen War*

The period of resistance by the *fida’iyeen*, which took place between the last few months of 1955 and ended with the Suez War of 1956 was one of the most significant periods in the history of the Gaza Strip. That period came to represent a new level of conflict with Israel. Indeed, guerrilla warfare was the natural result of developments taking place in Gaza, which at the time, was one of the main stages of action in the Arab-Israeli conflict. However Gaza was to face much bigger problems, given that both Arabs and Israel practiced the policy of brinkmanship with each side exerting pressure on the other in the hope that the other side would give up and submit to its demands. There is no doubt that Israel used this policy extensively because of its desire to force Arabs to accept its political demands, which were always hidden under its security demands and reinforced by its military operations on the borders, which in turn kept the political front as tense as the borders. Israel had always placed its bets on the belief that Arabs were militarily weak, a fact that would eventually make them surrender to Israel’s demands. However, as military attacks and therefore political strikes increased, the choice for Arabs, who had aborted the option of postponing confrontation, was becoming clearer and clearer. [179]

Israeli pressure left Arabs with only two options: a military confrontation, or acquiescence to Israeli demands of direct negotiations, and free navigation of Israeli ships in the Suez Canal, the Straits of Tiran and Gulf of Aqaba. Moshe Sharett explicitly stated this policy on 2 March 1955 by saying that “Egypt must choose between the existing situation, with all its losses and dangers, or absolute abstention from hostile actions, strict observance of the Armistice Agreement and progress towards peace.”

Under these circumstances Gaza itself was as important as all of Palestine, and since Gaza constituted the joint Israeli-Egyptian border, it transformed into the main conflict zone. In Gaza, both parties practiced their brinkmanship skills. Throughout the years 1949 – 1955 Israel attacked Gaza with political motivations. Arabs, for their part, rebuffed the attacks, both to
abort Israel’s goals and to prove that violence was not the prerogative of one side alone. In this way Gaza was a symbol for the entire Palestinian cause.

**Prelude to the Fida’iyeen War**

The *Fida’iyeen War*, which reached its apex between September 1955 and the Suez War of 1956, had started long before that (although the term *fida’iyeen* had only entered the political dictionary of the Gaza Strip in that period). Border crossings into the Occupied Lands had occurred since 1948, and the events of 1955-56 were the culmination of these previous crossings. The culmination happened due to a number of factors. The long prelude to the *Fida’iyeen War* included the 1948 War and its aftermath, and the operations of the Egyptian Fida’iyeen in the Suez Canal in 1951/1952. Both led to a rise in the calls for the launching of a guerrilla war to confront Israel. These calls emanated from the belief that “that any delay in fighting Jews is in their interest as it gives them the chance to continue their preparations and their expansion at the expense of Arabs. Therefore we must find a way to hinder their preparations and disrupt the ongoing movement of construction in Israel. This can only be achieved in two ways that go hand in hand: an economic blockade and a guerrilla war.” It should be noted that this is not an individual point of view but the view of a party with popular support.

Furthermore, individual border crossings from the Gaza Strip into the occupied lands did not stop since the Nakba. Sobhi Yassin describes the beginnings as follows:

A few months after the Nakba, individual raids into the occupied territories began. A hungry *mujahid* (fighter) would take up a weapon and enter his village to reclaim one of his cows or sheep. Another *mujahid* would kill a Jew, and seize his rifle. A third *mujahid* would reclaim back his money that had been buried underground in the yard of his stolen home. A number of fighters would seize a herd of cattle from the enemy and take it to Arab lands to feed the refugees. Another group of fighters would attack an Israeli police station and seize the money and weapons of Jews…etc. As such, the fictitious myth of Israel began unravelling, and people would talk in secret sessions about the heroism of the fighters who crossed the borders, stole, murdered and came back with the spoils. It should be noted that this is not an individual point of view but the view of a party with popular support.

Although the political horizon of these individual operations was unclear, it had been intertwined, to a large extent, with the political and social problems suffered by the Strip, especially given that Gazans was aware of the political origin of their dire economic situation. Their lands were there for them to see.
They can look to the east and see wide fields, once Arab land, cultivated extensively by a few Israelis, with a chain of kibbutzim guarding the heights or the areas beyond. It is not surprising that they look with hatred on those who have dispossessed them.\textsuperscript{xliii}

What made crossings easy was the refugees’ detailed knowledge of the nature of the land, in addition to the weakness of the guard duty, given that the Israel had not yet fully developed its border defence system. Therefore, during that period, there were daily border crossings, which could not be stopped even after Egypt imposed its strict ban. Egyptians went as far as accusing anyone who crossed the border of espionage, an accusation that was referred to in a statement released by the Arab Higher Committee for Palestine, after the Caireen Magazine \textit{Al Musawwer} launched a campaign of attack on Gaza. The statement read as follows:

The reality of those who cross the borders from the Gaza Strip [into the occupied lands] is unclear to some magazines and newspapers so they designate them as spies, even though these people are not spies, but are adventurers who cannot make a living in the Gaza Strip, and so try to infiltrate to gain sustenance and daily bread.\textsuperscript{xlv}

Gaza refugees would often cross into the occupied lands and reach as far as the West Bank retuning via the same route, with many of them losing their lives in the process. There were no military operations on the border apart from the casual clash that takes place when a refugee is spotted. The ambiguity of the political horizon of those border crossings does not undermine their political significance. The refugees only crossed into the occupied lands, and nowhere else. Furthermore, all theft took place inside the occupied areas, not the Strip.

After the Egyptian Revolution these border crossings began to assume a more organised nature and their purpose slightly changed. The refugees now were used for fact-finding missions and for collecting data on the Israeli enemy. In this respect we refer to what has been written by an Israeli source on “the incursion of an insurgent group that belonged to a government organisation 70 km or more towards the colony of Rishon LeZion from the Gaza Strip and their taking of important official documents.”\textsuperscript{xlvi} Elsewhere, Efraim Tamly mentions “the collusion of a guerrilla group during its retreat to its base in Gaza with an Israeli patrol, which killed one of the guerrilla members, and found in his pockets reports on the movement of Israeli vehicles on the southern road.”\textsuperscript{[181]}

15
Furthermore, Burns writes that the Egyptian administration in Gaza organised some units, and called them the Palestinian Army. Some of these, mainly officered by Egyptians, from time to time formed part of the garrison of the Strip... But others were trained for intelligence work within Israel. They knew the country, or some part of it, intimately, for it had been their home. Hence they could penetrate as scouts, or spies, and bring back information. UNTSO had pretty definite information that there was a sort of intelligence course run by the Egyptians for these people. The passing-out test was to go into Israeli territory, and observe traffic on certain roads, noting down vehicles that passed, and so forth.xlvii

This was confirmed by Nasser who said, “The fida’iyeen was an old organisation from the War of 1948, but they were not fida’iyeen then. They were Palestinians organised to get information; not to fight, just to get information. And they were small in number.”xlviii

These operations took place like other ordinary border crossings. However, the ordinary border crossings decreased due to the Egyptian authorities’ crackdown on infiltrators and due to the improvement of Israel’s surveillance. In addition, there was a relative improvement in the economic situation of the Strip which made sacrificing one’s life not worthwhile.

These were the preludes to the Fida’iyeen War. Added to them of course was the political context which we have been discussing: the Gaza raid and subsequent months which witnessed the beginning of various border clashes that involved mutual raids carried out by the regular armies of both sides, and which further paved the way for the launching of the Fida’iyeen War and the official sponsorship of their work. President Nasser referred to the decision by the Egyptian authorities to launch and prepare for the fida’iyeen War by saying:

After Gaza we had a meeting and we decided to increase the number because, according to the circumstances of the raids, Israel was always in the better position. So we thought that the best way is to have commandos. And after Gaza we decided to have this organisation of commandos based on the small organisations which were only for information.xlix

Nasser did not mention the date of the decision or the number of fida’iyeen involved, but Moshe Dayan “on the basis of Israeli intelligence reports, places the decision in April 1955, more than a month after Gaza, and he says the original strength of the fida’iyeen was 700 men. The fida’iyeen did not go into action until 25 August 1955”l.
By sponsoring the *fida’iyeen*, the Egyptian authorities were merely backing an already existing organisation. That endeavour produced a group of trained, courageous members which were familiar with the occupied lands and their changes after the occupation as well as the location of settlements and guard posts. These factors meant that the endeavour undertaken by the *fida’iyeen* would start from a relatively advanced position achieving immediate results.

The Egyptian authorities assigned lieutenant colonel Mustafa Hafez, one of the Egyptian intelligence officers who had previously worked in the Gaza Strip, with the task of organising the *fida’iyeen*. There is general agreement that this officer carried out his assigned duties and policies to the best of his ability. He gathered all the members suitable for the required task and he released from jail all those accused of infiltration. There is no precise data for the number of men who worked under Hafez, but there is a circulated approximate number of about 1000 men. Moshe Dayan estimated their number at 700.

During that period, the Egyptian authorities responded to the persistent popular demand in Gaza by declaring that it opened the door for volunteering to the Palestinian militias. By analysing the conditions they imposed on membership, it is noted that the goal of forming such militias was to enhance the work of the *fida’iyeen* by having the best fighters join. The conditions were as follows:

1. The preference is for those who have good knowledge of Palestinian lands and routes, and
2. Those who had previously served in the military, and
3. Those who can read and write or who have a skill or who speak other languages, especially Hebrew.

With this decree the Egyptian administration was accommodating the demands of Gazans who had been calling for the creation of a Palestinian Liberation Army. A memorandum on this matter had been submitted to the Egyptian Authorities. The Egyptian administration put the law into effect, and the volunteers who joined the *fida’iyeen* ended up even fighting in the 1956 War. In fact, after the creation of the Palestine Liberation Organisation they formed the pillars of the Palestinian Liberation Army in Gaza.

In addition, several decrees and laws were issued by the general administrative governor of the Gaza Strip in order to pre-empt Israel’s reaction. The “Passive and Civilian Air Defence” decree, which can be
regarded as the “defensive” side of the previous law was issued. Its goals were set as follows:

A. It aims to protect civilians, public facilities, buildings and industries, prepare the projects related to civil defence works, assign tasks and roles necessary for these works, study their latest methods, publicise their instructions amongst the people, and look into compensations for raids and vandalism.

B. It aims to address the following issues and put them into effect:
   1. Surveillance and Warning.
   2. Preventive Measures.
   3. Dispossession and Evacuation of Cities.
   4. Regulating fire extinguishing and bomb disposal systems.
   5. Relief and Medical Services.
   6. Rescue and Debris Removal.
   7. Securing and maintaining public facilities.
   8. Teaching and training civilians on civil defence methods.

Later, the “Palestinian Civil Guard” decree was issued and it stipulated the following:

In the areas under the jurisdiction of the Egyptian forces in Palestine, a force known as the Palestinian Civil Guard Force shall be created. Its duties are to guard the refugee camps situated across the demarcation line at night against any Israeli attack and to carry out any other duties assigned to it by the appropriate authorities.\(^{[183]}\)

*The Fida’iyeen on the Battlefield*

Sobhi Yassin divides the activities of the *fida’iyeen* during that period into the following major stages:

The first stage took place between 29 August and 5 September 1955; the second between 6 and 13 April 1956, and the third took place in November 1956. Yassin then lists the operations carried out by the *fida’iyeen*, which started by aiming at “targets that affected the enemy psychologically, economically and militarily.” These extended to include targeting military vehicles and killing their passengers, putting land mines, and attacking military settlements and posts, where the *fida’iyeen* would sometimes reach deep enough to hit a military vehicle around 40 Miles in the heart of the occupied lands. At times several *fida’iyeen* groups would form under one
leader to carry out operations inside the occupied lands. These operations involved blowing Israel’s wireless international communication station, as well as water and electricity plants, and placing land mines. The operations area of the first stage covered 40 square miles. The largest *fida’iyeen* group to enter the occupied territories in a single day was formed of 300 members, who carried out a raid after Israel’s bombardment of the Gaza City Hospital by heavy artillery on 15 April 1956.

_Fida’iyeen Operations from Israel’s Point of View_

Israel acknowledged most of the operations mentioned by Yassin, in addition to the mutual crossfire incidents between Israel and Arab forces stationed behind the borders. In _Israel’s Wars_, which contains a whole section on the subject, Ephraim Talmy describes the activities of the *fida’iyeen* as follows: Arabs created gangs of suicidal murderers whom they called the *fida’iyeen* and sent them into Israel. The number of victims of the guerrilla warfare was high, and their operations were not confined to the deserted and desolate areas, for they moved beyond the Negev and ‘Araba into Israel proper, attacking people causing deaths and injuries. They also carried out theft and acts of vandalism.

Elsewhere, Talmy writes that the *fida’iyeen* “would invade Israeli settlements to commit murder, vandalism, destroy and steal everything they could get their hands on.”

UN reports confirmed the accounts of both Arab and Israeli sources regarding the attacks by the *fida’iyeen*, their numbers, type and scope. Burns notes that the Israelis “listed 180 incidents of aggression against Israel in the three months between 5 December and 9 March.” He describes one incident:

By about ten o’clock on the night of 7 April messages began to come in, reporting attacks during the day on vehicles on the Beersheba-Tel Aviv road. By 1 A.M. seven attacks had been reported, including grenade-throwings and demolitions. It was clear that the *fida’iyeen* operation had begun on a large scale.

As for how far into Israel did the *fida’iyeen* penetrate, Burns speaks of an operation “not far from Rishon LeZion, forty-seven kilometres from the border, and only about fifteen kilometres from Tel Aviv, were slaughtered by sub machine gun fire.” He also mentions another incident “near Rehovot, forty-three kilometres from the ADL.” Furthermore, Burns discusses the tactics used by the *fida’iyeen* as having included the “mining of Israeli
vehicles, night ambushes of Israeli military and civil vehicles, blowing up of various water pipes and a radio tower, and other attacks on civilians.” Burns offers an explanation for the brutality that characterised the attacks of the *fida’iyeen*, especially those carried out immediately after Israel targeted civilians (like its bombing of the Gaza hospital where it killed and injured around a hundred people mostly patients), by writing that “while some of the *fida’iyeen* may have been mere hired cutthroats, it is probably true that the majority were Palestinian Arabs who had a burning sense of the injustice that they had suffered at the hands of Israelis.” On the level of their training, Burns admits in a report that “the number and nature of these acts of sabotage perpetrated well within Israeli territory suggest that they are the work of organised and well-trained groups.”

The aftermath of the operations of *fida’iyeen* became clear from the Israeli response, its barbaric raid on Gaza, the number of complaints it submitted to UNTSO, as well as the media campaign it launched against the *fida’iyeen*, who, for a while, became the principal target of Israeli propaganda. Despite some of the reservations we have on official Israeli statistics, we can still try to understand the impact of these border clashes, especially of the *fida’iyeen*’s raids, by comparing Israeli casualties from these clashes to the casualties in its three wars and the inter-war years. The following numbers are taken from *Israel’s Wars*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Period</th>
<th>Casualties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arab-Israeli War 1948 - 1949</td>
<td>4487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the signing of the ceasefire treaty in March 1949 until Operation Kadesh 1956</td>
<td>1176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kadesh/ Sinai War 1956</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Kadesh until the 6 Day War</td>
<td>795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 6 day war 5 -10 June 1967</td>
<td>795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the 6 day war to 3 May 1969</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to human losses, the *fida’iyeen*’s war on Israel incurred economic losses [185] through direct sabotage of its economic institutions and facilities, or indirect sabotage through increasing its security budget. Israel, Talmy argues, “could have ventured into the field of economic independence, if it were not for the heavy expenses of defence.” This was especially true as Israel’s economy was weak at the time, and Israeli leaders were attempting
everything possible to create the perfect conditions to develop the economy in order to meet the demands and challenges of the new immigrants.

The effects of the *fida’iyeen’s* attacks struck at the core of the entire Israeli society, not just the military. For instance, Israel’s development plans for the Negev were entirely threatened with paralysis, and this was expressed in Ben Gurion’s speech in Beer Sheba on 9 July 1955 when he spoke of the necessity “to bring water and youth from the North to the Negev.” This issue reflected a personal stance as much as an official one by Ben Gurion, who following his resignation in the 1950s, inhabited the Sde Boke kibbutz in the Negev. The Negev, which colonisation and settlement were encouraged by Ben Gurion, was one of the most infiltrated areas, and as such threatened Israel’s settlement policy. Therefore it was not strange that Ben Gurion would summon youths from the North to the Negev. It was clear, thus, that the attacks of the *fida’iyeen* threatened not only security, but Israel’s colonisation policy. As such, it is no surprise that the issue of the *fida’iyeen* took the size it did. Indeed, from then on, Israel would shape its political proposals to include the demands to stop the *fida’iyeen*. The following quote illustrates the impact of the *fida’iyeen* on Israeli society:

The ghost of the *fida’iyeen* has been haunting the Israelis following the occupation of the Gaza Strip in 1965. Israeli’s obsession with the *fida’iyeen* continues to emerge whenever the future of the Gaza Strip after the withdrawal of Israeli troops is discussed:

We shall return to this later.

*Israel’s Response*

During the period of high *fida’iyeen* activity (August 1955 – Suez War 1956), tensions on the borders worsened and Israel responded in several ways. We must note that while border tensions were certainly exacerbated by the attacks of the *fida’iyeen*, they cannot be solely attributed to them. One must always remember that Israel’s actions cannot be analysed within the narrow, simplistic, framework of “action and reaction”. This is because Israel’s behaviour is based on the logic of brandishing power, using it when necessary to achieve whatever political end it sought to. We have discussed the motives behind Israel’s deadly raids on Gaza in February 1955 and Khan Yunis in May 1955, which left 22 people dead and 20 others injured. It was evident that those two raids were essentially political raids that had little to

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3 Translator’s note: no actual reference was given in the original Arabic document.
do with the security problem in Gaza and the borders. [186] In essence, they were forms of pressure exerted by Israel on the Arabs for force them to surrender to its demands.

The aforementioned was intended to clarify the meaning of the word response; the simultaneous occurrence of incidents does not necessarily mean the relationship between them is causal. Israel’s main goals were political, but it used the border incidents, to play a power game.

Israel’s actions during that period took three courses: military, politics, and media.

Israel’s Military Activity

During that period, Israel’s attacks on the Gaza border and in the no arms zone intensified. In addition, Israel carried two big attacks on Khan Yunis and Gaza City. Burns describes the attack as follows:

During the night of August 31-September 1…A light armoured Israeli unit, in half-tracked scout cars, advanced through about six kilometres of the Egyptian-occupied territory to the police station at Khan Yunis. The opened covering fire on the loopholes and windows of the fortified post with machine-guns and mortars, and then forced an entry into the ground floor and blew up most of the building with heavy explosive charges, buying a good number of the garrison in the ruins…The attacking Israeli party had passed through the village of Bani Suheila, and to keep the inhabitants from interfering with them had machine-gunned right and left, but without inflicting more than one or two wounds. The Egyptian defensive position near Abasan, an adjacent village, was also attacked by fire, to cover the main attack.

The Egyptian reported casualties of thirty-six killed and thirteen wounded-soldiers, policemen, and civilians. UNTSO had difficulty in establishing the exact number of casualties…The Israelis claimed, in the newspaper reports of the attack, that Khan Yunis police station had been chosen as a target because the Fida’iyyeen campaign had been Arab sources confirm the details of the incident described by Burns. They give details of the timing of the operation, which began at 9:05 pm and ended at 11:30 pm. The casualties according to them are estimated at 46 dead and 50 injured. Israeli sources on the hand insist on mentioning Egyptians in the accounts of the attack, because the attack itself took place on an Egyptian military camp. They estimate the number of casualties as 60 killed and 10 injured.
Israel re-created the Khan Yunis massacre in an even more gruesome way on 15 April 1956 when “an Israeli major ordered fire by 120-mm. mortars on Gaza. A heavy fire was poured in, centred on the middle of the town, full of civilians about their ordinary business. Fifty-six Arabs were killed and 103 wounded, men, women and children.” Some of the injured died later on bringing the total number of those killed to 60 civilians, out of them 27 women, 29 men and 4 children. Talmy describes the incident as follows:

On 5 April 1956 The Israeli Army carried out a strike using mortar fire that reached all of the Gaza Strip, Khan Yunis and Der El Balah, killing dozens of Arabs and wounding many others.

Israel tried to blame a local commander for issuing the orders, and it even claimed that its mortars were “firing at military objectives.” General Burns explains how this excuse was shown to be a lie:

Unfortunately for this contention, the UN observers were able to investigate the occurrence before the mortar-shells had ceased falling, and the location of the hits was promptly plotted. It showed the “mean point of impact” right in the middle of the town, in the principal square while the Egyptian mortars were upwards of two kilometres away, somewhere near Ali Muntar. Later, the Israelis averred that there was some undefined kind of headquarters in Gaza which had been their target, but we found no evidence that there were such headquarters. The well-known Police H. Q. in the “Taggart Fort,” also cited by the Israelis as a justifiable target, was about 1500 metres distant from the Israelis’ point of aim. However, argument on this point was soon stopped, for in a few days the fida’iyeen were sent into Israel as a reprisal.

In addition to daily border clashes, and Israel’s raids on Gaza and Khan Yunis, Israel resorted to individual assassinations through parcel bombs. Egyptian Lieutenant-Colonel Mustafa Hafez, who was in charge of organising the operations of the fida’iyeen, was killed by a “bomb which had been sent to him in the form of a parcel” on 13 July 1956. On the following day, 14 July 1956, a similar parcel exploded in the face of Colonel Salah Mustafa, the Egyptian military attaché in Amman, leaving him with severe wounds. He died a few days later.

4 It must be noted that Israel resorted to mortar attacks on the town as a vengeful retaliation to the fida’iyeen’s raids, whereas its operations had previously been conducted through mobile or stationary units that would carry out the bombing and destruction, as had happened in the raids on Gaza and Khan Yunis on 28 and 31 August 1955 respectively. It is certain that the existence of the fida’iyeen and the fact the people had arms contributed to making Israel change its tactics, even though these new tactics were disadvantageous in several ways.
Arabic Sources do not provide sufficient information on these two incidents; instead, they say of Hafez, “he was martyred while carrying out his duties.”

It would be useful to explain how the parcel bob reached Hafez. This version of the events appears in both the accounts of eyewitnesses and the account mentioned by Kenneth Love in his aforementioned book. Some *fida'iyeen* were recruited to work as double-agents for Israel. These *fida'iyeen* had direct contact with Hafez for reasons the *fida'iyeen* leadership knew. Their leadership mistakenly believed that Israel did not know the truth behind the double-agents, but it did. Israel, in turn, tried to use these double agents for its own interests. Sometimes it would try to increase the double agent’s trust by facilitating for him the process of obtaining information his leaders wanted. Israel, knowing where the double agent’s real loyalties lied, was certain that any member of the *fida'iyeen* assigned with the task of taking parcels would deliver them first to Hafez. This is precisely what happened. The agent arrived in Gaza around 2 am in the morning, went straight to the leadership headquarters and asked to meet with Hafez who was not there at the time, but came for the meeting on being informed of Israel’s instructions. Hafez opened the parcel in the presence of the agent and other officials in the room. Then, the unexpected happened, as the parcel exploded, killing Hafez and wounding the agent in his eyes. With the death of Hafez, the *fida'iyeen* lost their main man in Gaza. This event had a very negative impact on the activities of the *fida'iyeen*, an impact which we’ll come to when we evaluate their experience.

**No Reaction from the Security Council**

The Security Council did not pass any resolutions to condemn Israel for its attack on Gaza and Khan Yunis, even though there was sufficient evidence for such a condemnation. The strongest evidence lied in Israel’s claim that it was aiming at military objectives when it shelled the centre of Gaza with a mortar. However, the head of the international emergency force pointed out that the closest military spot was 1500 metres away from the spots targeted by the Israelis. Thus proving Israel’s lies.

Rather than condemning Israel, UNSC passed a resolution proposed by the US, the UK and France which “called on both parties forthwith to take all steps necessary to bring about order and tranquillity in the area…called on both sides to effectively separate their armed forces, and asked both parties to have their representatives meet with the Chief of Staff of UNTSO and to cooperate fully with him.” [189]
Burns argues that UNSC did not condemn the attacks because “Egyptians were as much to blame as the Israelis, if not more, for the break-down of the negotiations which had been conducted in accordance with the Council’s 28th of March resolution.” Similarly, the Security Council did not pass any resolutions regarding Israel’s bombardment of Gaza city on 5 April 1956.

Israel’s Political Activity

During the Fida’iyeen War, the region witnessed heightened Israeli political activity because, as we have previously discussed, Israel exploited border clashes to advance its political agenda. It did so by practicing its favourite power game: bombing Arabs to force them to admit their impotence and surrender to Israel.

Israel’s politics in that period were consistent with its past political manoeuvres in which it used negotiations over border issues as a door to discuss other unresolved political issues, whereas Arabs wanted to confine those negotiations to matters of security rather than delve into deeper politics. During a period of high tensions at the border, Ben Gurion, continuing with Israel’s policy of direct negotiations with the Arabs, offered to meet Nasser. “He, Ben-Gurion, was ready to meet Nasser at any time to discuss peace, or an improvement in relations between the two countries.” As for the nature of the issues to be discussed, Ben Gurion wanted to negotiate “a complete cease-fire, to include all fida’iyeen activities.” There was also the problem of Egypt not allowing “Israel shipping to pass through the Suez Canal or use the port of Eilat” which according to Israel violated UN laws. Thus Israel’s politics emanated from the present situation whereas the Egyptians “took the stand that they would not relax their restrictions on Israel shipping while Israel absolutely refused to make any concession towards meeting the UN General Assembly resolution providing for return of the Arab refugees to their former homes.”

As a result of Israel’s political manoeuvres and its complaints to the UN in order to seek attention and exert pressure in the international scene, in November 1955 discussions were made about bringing troops, under the aegis of the UN, to “make a sort of a buffer zone between the Israelis and Egyptians in the sensitive areas, and so prevent serious clashes which would lead to war.” Burns notes that Selwyn Lloyd, British Foreign Secretary at the time, asked him about this issue on 13 March 1956 during a short visit he made to Israel. [190] He further recalls that Dag Hammarskjold, the UN general secretary, mentioned the issue a short while after and that a “general study of the military factors was accordingly made.”
According to Burns the proposed troops would consist of British, French and American forces. The troops' ability to carry out their duties was predicated on the condition that “each side could be assured that no invasion of its territory by the other would be possible without immediate intervention by the Three Powers.” Rafah and El Auja were proposed as the areas in which the United Nations Force would be stationed because the success of any invasion “from either direction, would have to pass through either El Auja demilitarised zone, or the area of Rafah, or both.” As for the troops’ armament it ought to be a “sufficient air support at call, should be placed with its main elements in Rafah, and the equivalent of a battalion with supporting arms in El Auja.”

This proposal was rejected by both Egypt and Israel, because it would have frozen the situation on the ground, and made it difficult for Israel to play its power game. In addition, the proposal turned the existent problem into one of border clashes, whereas Israel insisted on giving a political dimension to any suggested proposal. It always insisted on having a meeting between the Egyptian and Israeli deputies without the presence of a representative of the UNEF. The Egyptians, on the other hand, “disliked the idea of having foreign troops on their territory nearly as much as the Israelis did, and were in process of getting rid of the last of the British garrison in the Canal Zone.” From the proposal it appears that Britain was trying to re-enter the region through the back door, after having been expelled from the Suez Canal, except that this time it was doing it in the name of peace keeping.

Israel’s Media Activity

_Fida’iyeen_ raids were the subject of an extensive Israeli propaganda campaign. The first part of its campaign was aimed at foreign audiences as Israel tried to make “the Arabic word _Fida’iyeen_ synonymous with marauders, cutthroats, murderers.” Furthermore, when discussing the _fida’iyeen_, Israeli writers and media would conveniently forget “to mention anything about the dead and wounded Arab civilians in Gaza.” Israel tried to present itself as the victim while emphasising the savagery of the actions of the _fida’iyeen_. Israel also made great efforts to present the Egyptian side as the original enemy in the conflict, as it avoided mentioning Palestinians. The sites and officers were Egyptian, the _fida’iyeen_ were Arab, and the dead and wounded were Arab too. In short, Egyptians were always to blame. Indeed, after arresting any member of the _fida’iyeen_, Israel would force him to confess to the responsibility of the Egyptians behind any operation, as had happened when it arrested one fighter near Majdal Askelon. “The Israelis had obtained this information by
interrogation of prisoners they had captured, but they would never let an UNMO be present at the interrogations. They doubtless obtained other information by interrogation of prisoners they had captured, but they would never let an UNMO be present at the interrogations.”—[191]

Israelis propaganda aimed at Arabs intended to create disunity between Palestinians and Egyptians. It depicted Palestinians as unsatisfied with Egypt’s policies and its organisation of the guerrilla war on Israel. For example, an article in the Jerusalem Post referred to “the growing embitterment of the refugees at the increasing number of Egyptian-trained and commissioned Fida’iyeen killed or detained by the Israeli security forces while the Egyptians themselves sit back and suffer no casualties.”—[192] The propaganda campaign, which was aimed at both Palestinians and Egyptians, made use of the assassination of Hafez to bolster its claims. The Jerusalem Post, for example, “published circumstantial stories that Lieutenant-Colonel Mustafa Hafez had been the victim of revenge taken by refugees, who were supposed to have become embittered by Hafez’ strong-arm methods of recruiting fida’iyeen, and the fact that many of the young men so recruited were captured or killed by the Israelis.”—[193] These claims were intended to stir up Egyptian public opinion against ungrateful Palestinians who assassinated an Egyptian commander. At the same time, it would agitate feelings of bitterness in the families of the fida’iyeen who were killed. Furthermore, Israel’s propaganda depicted the guerrilla activity as if it were directed by a single individual forcefully recruiting young men. This depiction distorted the truth behind the guerrilla war, which, as we have shown, started long before Egyptian involvement.

Rumours as Weapons

Rumours were some of Israel’s most potent weapons. Israel would use individual errors made by the fida’iyeen to try to cause disunity in the internal front and shake confidence between citizens and officials. After Hafez’s death, rumours increased and negatively affected the actions of the fida’iyeen. For one, the new leadership was not as competent as the previous one. Secondly, as time progressed, Israel became better prepared to counter the threat of the fida’iyeen, as all the entry and exit points which the fida’iyeen were accustomed to using became known to Israel and were now heavily guarded. All of this led to an increase in the number of casualties amongst the fida’iyeen. Israel capitalised on this situation and spread its rumours, starting with the rumour that an angry spy killed Hafez. After that, any failure by the fida’iyeen would be attributed to these embedded spies. Furthermore, rumours circulated about the advanced information Israel had regarding the fida’iyeen, and where
this information might have come from. It was rumoured that Israel had knowledge of the movements of the fida’iyeen even before they started. Stories circulated about this or that member of the fida’iyeen who was killed or captured, or this or that member of the fida’iyeen who encountered an Israeli patrol waiting for him in the middle of the road calling his full name through speakers demanding that he surrender. These rumours were successful and the fida’iyeen began to lose confidence in their leadership. [192]

The fida’iyeen now firmly believed that “Israel knew beforehand about their crossings into the occupied land. Those who wanted to make sure they entered the occupied lands, carried out their missions and returned alive, had to take a different route to the one determined by the leadership”. Such beliefs further increased the negative impact of rumours as now guerrilla patrols would take different routes than the ones set for them, because they thought Israel had exposed their original plans. This in turn made the fida’iyeen look for random routes to take, and as a result the number of casualties amongst them increased. This in turn further fuelled rumours and badly affected guerrilla activity inside the occupied lands.

An Evaluation of the Fida’iyeen War

This guerrilla war was a milestone in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and especially that of Gaza. Although it lasted for less than a year, the Fida’iyeen War created a major shift in the conflict, shaking some of its basic premises, such as the idea that Israel always held the power to propose initiatives. This time, the Fida’iyeen War became a daily concern in Israel, as the conflict transformed from one of border clashes which barely affect the average Israeli citizen, to an internal issue that majorly affected Israeli lives. This, in turn, meant that for Israel ending the activities of the fida’iyeen was as important as its other political and strategic demands like peace and direct negotiations. This is evidenced by the extent of the brutality of Israel’s raid on Gaza, which took place during the period of fida’iyeen activity, as opposed to its other raids prior to the guerrilla war. Although we continue to stress the fact that Israel used excessive force for its mainly political, rather than security, goals, we also argue that its raids had a vengeful aim. Israel, after all, bombed civilians in Gaza with mortar shells. In addition, the fida’iyeen constituted a major obsession for Israeli soldiers and leaders when they occupied Gaza later on. This was reflected in their preoccupation with

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5 Translators’ note: Abul al-Naml does not reference this quote in his article, neither in the text nor in the endnotes.
preventing the Strip from re-establishing itself as a base for the *fida’iyeen* as it had done in 1956.

The *Fida’iyeen War* came to agitate the masses in Gaza because it dealt a blow to the beliefs which Israel desperately tried to plant in the minds of the refugees: that the return of the refugees to their homes is impossible and that the only possible option left for them is to accept nationalisation plans or starve to death in refugee camps. Israel’s constant bombing of the Gaza Strip was aimed at showcasing its power and its invincibility and proving that Egyptians could not protect themselves or the Palestinians, thus leaving no option for Arabs but to surrender. However, the *Fida’iyeen War* dispelled this myth. Instead, the *fida’iyeen* restored the idea that return is possible and demonstrated that Israel was not as invincible as it seemed. This played a big role in sustaining the defiance of the people of Gaza.

In addition, the *Fida’iyeen War* led to a change in the image of Palestinian refugees. UN reports used to depict Palestinians as idle refugees who sat and waited for aid. This image was completely turned around by the *fadayeen*, as they demonstrated that the Palestinian cause was essentially a matter of politics, not humanitarian aid, and that refugees were willing to sacrifice their lives for their cause.

Furthermore, the raids of the *fadayeen* led to a major shift in the balance between the two parties of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Arabs, who had traditionally been on the defensive, had for the first time the decision making powers in their hands. Despite its limitations, the launching of the war of the *fadayeen*, was the first proactive decision made by Arab leaders, and the first in a series of other decisions that shifted the course of the conflict and the dominant mode of thinking up until then. As a result, Arab politics transformed from the position of willingness to “surrender” parts of Palestine, to a new strong position of insisting on reclaiming back occupied lands. In the era that followed, this new mode of thinking dominated Arab politics. Although it did not always materialise on the battlefield, the liberation of Palestine was no longer negotiable.

Moreover, the *Fida’iyeen War* significantly improved the relationship between the people of Gaza and the Egyptian Administration. The war was launched following tensions in the Strip that had culminated in the March uprising. These tensions were exacerbated by Israel’s recurrent aggressions and attacks on the one hand, and by the endless talks of nationalisation plans on the other. The *Fida’iyeen War* came to weld the bond anew between Gazans and Egypt. For once the masses of Gaza noticed the Palestinian dimension to the
July Revolution. All in all, the *Fida'iyeen War* marked a new phase in the relationship between Gaza and the Egyptian Government. This new relationship reflected on the stance of Gazans on unity with Egypt after the 1956 War, when attempts were made at severing the ties between the two. Quite tellingly this time Gaza, rather than being annexed to Egypt as had happened in 1949, voluntarily joined Egypt.

Furthermore the transformation in Gazans’ attitude towards Egypt reflected on the steadfastness of the people. For example, although there was a civil uprising in Gaza following the Al-Mahatta massacre in February 1955, Gaza did not witness any similar uprisings following the subsequent raids on Khan Yunis and Gaza City. Therefore the people of Gaza were proving their willingness to sacrifice hugely when the sacrifice was justified.

The *Fida'iyeen War* had positive outcomes, but it also had a negative side that cannot be ignored, and which harmed the operations the *fida'iyeen* and their political path.

The *Fida'iyeen War* was a people’s war that could have only succeeded with the sacrifices of Palestinians, who willingly put their lives on the line for their cause. However, Palestinians were led by an official administration with grave shortcomings that in turn affected them.

The emphasis on the operations of the *fida'iyeen* as mere matters of military action had a negative impact on the internal Palestinian front; that is the people. Ordinary Palestinians were neglected and no attempts were made to improve their situation and make them engaged with the resistance front, even though at the time everyone in Gaza was ready to combat. After the Palestinians leadership in Gaza was suppressed however, Gazans became mere receptors and clappers for the operations and victories of the *fida'iyeen*. The strip was taken over by a general sense of idleness and relaxation; one which Israel took advantage of to make its raids on the Strip even more successful. We do not claim that if Gazans were properly mobilised that it would have stopped Israel from carrying out its attacks, but at least, it would have limited Israel’s winnings and lowered the number of Palestinian casualties. As an example, let us observe the Israeli raid on Khan Yunis:

a) The attack targeted the police centre in the middle of the city.

b) Israeli forces marched 6 km inside the border.

c) Israeli forces did not secretly sneak in; they clashed with Palestinians in other areas – the villages of Bani Suheilan and Absan – before they
reached Khan Yunis. Both of these are villages situated between Khan Yunis and the borders.

d) The raid did not occur as a sudden attack. It lasted from 9:05 to 11:30, which gave sufficient time for assistance from other areas to be called.

e) According to UN reports and Arab League, Israeli forces blew up the building killing several soldiers in it.

f) The Israeli raid and choice of target were both predictable, given that Israel had already bombed a similar target on 28 February 1955 in an attack known as the Al-Mahatta massacre.

These events demonstrate that in Gaza people were not very aware of the degree of the threat of Israel, and that the Strip did not even have defence forces that would protect it, in the same way that it had a force of attack (the fida’iyeen). [195] In other words, no proper action was taken on the internal front that was on the same level as the action on the enemy front. The success of Israel’s raids contributed to the offsetting of the positive outcomes of the fida’iyeen’s operations.

Immeasurable Sacrifices and The Limitations of Politics

The operations of the fida’iyeen were tied to and dependent on Egyptian politics and the willingness of the Egyptian government to escalate its confrontation with Israel. The fida’iyeen’s activity was subject to negotiations or even cessation if Israel was willing stop the clashes on the border. In other words, Egypt perceived the fida’iyeen as a bargaining chip in its negotiations with Israel. This becomes clear when one observes the developments occurring prior and after the 1956 war. The Egyptian government was willing to adhere to a complete cease fire had Israel not insisted on including political issues in the border negotiations. This policy was confirmed during and after the 1956 assault, since the activities of the fida’iyeen ceased completely.

Furthermore, assigning the leadership of the fida’iyeen to security service officer like Hafez meant that the fida’iyeen were removed from the context of the popular struggle, and instead, made into a traditional army platoon, a platoon whose only duty was to fight and be mobilised with traditional and primitive methods. The fida’iyeen, thus, were not politically nurtured. In addition, the leadership was centralised revolving around the figure of Hafez. This turned the relationship between the fida’iyeen and Hafez into a paternalistic and very personal relationship, which was advantageous in that it created a high degree of confidence between the fida’iyeen and their leader who had knowledge of every detail of their work. However, this would change with the assassination of Hafez because the new leadership could not
succeed in the same paternalistic model which led to devastating results. The fida’iyeen become governed by an atmosphere of lack of trust and lack of discipline. Their activities deteriorated and Israel exploited their mishaps to spread its highly successful rumours. One of the most evident examples of the central approach of Hafez was the fact that he was especially summoned to open the package that eventually killed him. Israel, no doubt, must have studied Hafez and learnt that this man, owing to his highly centralised system of power, would open the package himself. [196]

Prior to the Fida’iyeen War, the Gaza Strip was beginning to witness an active political life as well as the emergence of organised political parties. These parties could mobilise Gazan masses for particular causes such as the anti-nationalisation cause, which eventually led to the downfall of nationalisation projects.

Political life in Gaza, which was severely repressed by the Egyptian government, could have developed again in a way that could have transformed many of the prevalent beliefs in the Strip at the time through contributing to the political and intellectual growth in the Strip. During that period, the political expression of Gaza’s masses was mostly confined to these organisations. The Fida’iyeen War came to represent the political alternative to the people of Gaza, who now revolved around the fida’iyeen and their operations, assuming the role of observers and supporters. This also meant that the people of Gaza would support the Egyptian government because it sponsored the fida’iyeen. Thus, the political parties lost their potential members, whom they needed for party life to be effective, and instead, transformed into small circles of members and supporters. Gaza witnessed a diminution in its existent party life. The impact was made clear following Israel’s occupation of the Strip in 1956, as the activities of the parties were affected by the political events. At the same time, the fida’iyeen, whose leadership left immediately after the attack, found themselves leaderless and transformed from a united fighting force into a group of individuals with nothing in common. [197]
Endnotes

10. From an interview with Mu’in Bssesso. Translators’ note: no other details were given.
Burns, op. cit., p. 84.

Love, op. cit., p. 87.


A Statement issued by The Arab Higher Committee for Palestine, *op. cit.*, Holdings of the research centre.


Ibid.

Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 87.


Ibid.

Ibid., p. 86.


“Al Waqai’ Al Falastiniyya”56, 1 January 1956.


Yassin, *op. cit.*, p. 182-190.

Talmy, *op. cit.*, p. 5

Ibid., p. 124.

Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

Ibid., p. 141.

Ibid., p. 88.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 89.

Ibid., p. 88.

Ibid., p.89.

Talmy, *op. cit.*, p.78.

Ibid., p.30.

Burns, *op. cit.*, p.82.


Talmy, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

The Arab League, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

Talmy, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

Ibid., p.140-141.

Ibid., p.164.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Sobhi Yassin, *op. cit.*, p. 190. Translator’s note: Incorrectly marked as note 76 in the original Arabic version article.


Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

Ibid., p. 104.

Ibid., p. 106.

Ibid., p.146.
— Ibid.
— Ibid., p.136.
— Ibid.
— Ibid., p.136-7.
— Ibid., p.137.
- Ibid. Translator’s note: Abu el-Namil’s citation is inaccurate here.
— Ibid., p. 85.
— Ibid., p. 86.
— Ibid., p. 87.
— Ibid., p. 86.
— Ibid., p. 164.