The Battle of Jenin 1948: When the Iraqi Army and Palestinian Fighters Liberated the Town



In early June 1948 the Zionist militias advanced from Afula on **Jenin** with thousands of fighters, occupying the villages to its north, encircling the town and entering most of its quarters, and besieging its small Iraqi garrison, together with civilians, in the town’s fortress. But the Iraqi army and Palestinian fighters from Jenin and its villages turned the battle round within a day and a night, breaking the siege and pursuing the attackers until they withdrew on the morning of Friday **4 June 1948**, leaving some 350 dead on the field. [1][2]

The Battle of Jenin is the most famous battle fought by Iraqis in Palestine and a

symbol of their courage alongside Palestinian volunteers; without it, Jenin and many of its villages might today be counted among the depopulated towns and villages. The cemetery of the Iraqi army's martyrs in Jenin still bears witness to the blood that mingled with its soil. [3][4]

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At a glance

Item	Details
Date	Night of 2–3 June to the morning of 4 June 1948, with a second phase in July 1948
Place	Jenin town and fortress, Khirba bridge, the Burqin hills and the villages north of the town
Arab forces	An Iraqi garrison under Lt Col Nuh Abdullah al-Jalabi, the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Infantry Brigade under Lt Col Omar Ali, a second battalion from Nablus, and the fighters of Jenin and its villages
Palestinian commander	Fawzi Jarrar, with local leaders from Rummana, Umm al-Fahm, al-Yamun and Jenin
Enemy forces	4,000–5,000 fighters in four groups advancing from Afula

Item	Details
Enemy losses	About 350 dead left on the field, by Omar Ali’s count, including the commander of the attack
Martyrs	50–56 Iraqi martyrs, 20–37 Palestinian fighters and 46 civilians
Booty	Mortars, machine guns, rifles, mines and thousands of rounds
Outcome	Jenin liberated, the siege of its fortress lifted, and the town kept Arab

[1][2][5]

The Iraqi army comes to Palestine

The Iraqi army’s operations began in earnest on 15 May 1948, when it crossed the Jordan River and attacked the fortified Gesher fort, built by the British during the Second World War as part of the “Eden” defence line; it reached the walls and blew the gate, before orders came to move on Nablus and al-Jiftlik. Iraqi forces then deployed in Nablus, Tulkarm and Qalqilya. [3][2]

The battalion that liberated Jenin – the 2nd Battalion of the 5th Infantry Brigade under Lt Col Omar Ali – set out late from northern Iraq, from Aqra to Kirkuk and Mosul, boarding the train on the evening of 26 May, crossing the western desert in four stages, reaching Mafraq at midday on 31 May and crossing the Jordan on 1 June to arrive at Nablus, a journey that left its soldiers exhausted. [3][5]

Jenin before the battle

From mid-May Arab leaders met in Jenin and its villages to organise its defence, and the townspeople bought arms from neighbouring Arab countries. From 16 May the Zionist militias began preparing to advance on the town; their aircraft bombed it daily, and they attacked the villages to its north and occupied several of them, including Zir’in, Sandala and al-Jalama. [1][2]

On 28 May an Iraqi garrison under Lt Col **Nuh Abdullah al-Jalabi** of Mosul

reached Jenin and began organising its defences together with Palestinian volunteers, setting up its headquarters in the town’s fortress, the police post. [3][1]

The attack and the siege

The Zionist militias massed at Afula, some 12 kilometres north of Jenin, between four and five thousand fighters in four groups, three for the assault and one in reserve. On the night of 1–2 June a force was sent to seize Arrana, al-Muqaybila and al-Jalama, and they then advanced on three axes: a right wing through Wadi Burqin west of the town, a left wing from the direction of Arrabuna and al-Mazar, and a centre along the main road that halted at the Khirba bridge. [1][2][6]

The Iraqi guards at the bridge held out for over an hour, delaying the advance, and Palestinian fighters – among them Muhammad al-Mithqal at the town’s entrances – fought street by street and house by house, while villagers rushed in with reinforcements that held up the advance for about two hours. But by the night of 2–3 June the militias had taken most of the surrounding hills and entered most of the quarters, some of them disguised in Arab and military dress to deceive the inhabitants. [1][6]

The Iraqi garrison fell back into the fortress, where the elderly, women and children took refuge with it; with its ammunition nearly gone, Lt Col Nuh called for help from every Iraqi force in Palestine. When Omar Ali later suggested withdrawing, he refused, because there were civilians in the fortress who could not be abandoned. [3][2]

Omar Ali breaks the siege

At dawn on 3 June Omar Ali set out from the Deir Sharaf area with three rifle companies, mortars and Vickers machine guns, gathering fighters from Nablus, Jenin, Arraba, Burqin, Rummana, Silat al-Dhahr and Sanur. His column was bombed from the air on the way but did not stop, advancing through Arraba and Qabatiya and defeating a Zionist force near Qabatiya, three kilometres from Jenin. [5][4][2]

Rather than charging down the open road, Omar Ali took the heights overlooking Jenin, outflanked the enemy and struck it from behind, while Iraqis pushed along the main road and Palestinian fighters descended from the surrounding hills. Iraqi artillery shelled the militia positions, the eastern and western heights and the Burqin hills were retaken, and some of the fighting was with the bayonet. [3][1]

The same day a second Iraqi battalion arrived from Nablus to cover the flanks, and after nightfall about a hundred Palestinian volunteers from Wadi Burqin joined the fight. At around three in the morning of 4 June a night assault was launched after a mortar and machine-gun barrage, and by six the fortress gate was open and the siege of its garrison lifted. [3][5][2]

The liberation of the town

The militias began to withdraw at about 3:30 on the morning of Friday 4 June; the fighters cleared the town house by house, and its liberation was complete before Friday prayers. Omar Ali counted some 350 bodies left by the attackers on the field, among them that of the attack's commander, on whom papers were found revealing a plan to push on beyond Jenin to Deir Sharaf, Tulkarm and the Wadi al-Badhan–Nablus road. [1][2]

The Iraqis and fighters captured heavy, medium and light mortars, assorted machine guns, rifles and grenade launchers, mines, steel helmets and thousands of rounds; the historian Jabbar al-Shammari puts the booty at 300 rifles, 10 mortars, 20 machine guns and 4 wireless sets. [5][3]

The martyrs

Jenin and those who defended it paid dearly. Between 50 and 56 Iraqi servicemen were martyred – according to the Palestinian Encyclopedia, 19 at the Khirba bridge, 15 inside the fortress, 13 in retaking the northern villages and the rest in the Jenin hills. The register of Iraqi martyrs on WAFA preserves the names of 26 who fell in Jenin on 3 June 1948 alone, among them First Lieutenant Abd al-Latif Sabri of the 1st Mechanised Battalion and soldiers of the 2nd Battalion, 5th

Brigade, and of the artillery. [1][2][7]

Between 20 and 37 Palestinian fighters were martyred, along with 46 civilians, including women and children. The Iraqi martyrs were buried in the “Iraqi Army Martyrs’ Cemetery” at the Jenin–Qabatiya–Nablus junction, and before withdrawing the Iraqi army and Jenin municipality erected a memorial in the town centre to the martyrs of Jenin and its villages. [1][4]

The second phase: retaking the villages

After the first truce ended on 9 July 1948, the Iraqis and the fighters attacked militia positions in the villages north of Jenin and within two days retook seven villages: Qafu’a, Arrana, Sandala, al-Jalama, Arrabuna, Deir Ghazala and al-Muqaybila. On the night of 11 July some 400 fighters under Fawzi Jarrar moved on Zir’in and al-Mazar to retake them, but that same day the Iraqi forces received orders to withdraw from Jenin towards Nablus. [1]

The men of the battle

Omar Ali: born in 1910 in Kirkuk to a Turkmen family of the Bayraqdar line, he graduated from the Military College in Baghdad in 1928 and then the Staff College, becoming a staff colonel in 1946. His name became bound up with the liberation of Jenin; he died in 1974. [4]

Nuh Abdullah al-Jalabi: commander of the Iraqi garrison in Jenin, from Mosul, who held out in the besieged fortress and refused to withdraw in order to protect the civilians. [2]

The Palestinian fighters: led by Fawzi Jarrar, their organisers included Najib al-Ahmad of Rummana, Mustafa al-Asmar of Umm al-Fahm, Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Hamid of al-Yamun, Abd al-Ghani Sinan of Jenin, and Muhammad al-Mithqal. The Iraqi army granted several of them the honorary rank of first lieutenant, among them Fawzi Jarrar, Najib al-Ahmad, Mustafa al-Asmar, Muhammad al-Mithqal, Muhammad Salim al-Shanar, Sami al-Ahmad and Abd al-Rahman Abd al-Hamid. [1]

Between the accounts

Date of the battle: Al Jazeera Net (2021) dates it to 31 May 1948, while the other sources agree that the main assault came on the night of 2–3 June and ended with the militias' withdrawal on the morning of 4 June. [3][1][5]

Iraqi martyrs: 50 according to the Palestinian Encyclopedia, 56 according to Al Jazeera Net (2023), 20 soldiers and officers according to Arabi Post, while al-Shammari puts combined Iraqi and Palestinian losses at about a hundred killed and wounded. [1][2][4][3]

Enemy losses: about 350 dead according to Omar Ali's count as relayed by Aref al-Aref, and about 300 killed and wounded according to al-Shammari. [2][3]

Name of the garrison commander: given variously as Nuh Abdullah, Nuh al-Jalabi and Nuh al-Halabi. [1][3][6]

Timeline

Date	Event
15 May 1948	The Iraqi army crosses the Jordan and attacks the Gesher fort [3]
16 May 1948	Daily air raids on Jenin begin; attacks on its northern villages [1]
26 May 1948	Omar Ali's battalion leaves Mosul by train [5]
28 May 1948	Iraqi garrison under Nuh al-Jalabi reaches Jenin [3]
1–2 June 1948	The militias seize Arrana, al-Muqaybila and al-Jalama [6]
2–3 June 1948	Assault on Jenin; the garrison besieged in the fortress [1]
3 June 1948	Omar Ali's battalion advances via Qabatiya and outflanks the enemy [5]
4 June 1948	Siege of the fortress lifted; militias withdraw; town liberated [1]
9–11 July 1948	Seven villages north of Jenin retaken [1]
11 July 1948	Iraqi forces withdraw from Jenin towards Nablus [1]

Frequently asked questions about the Battle of Jenin 1948

When was the Battle of Jenin 1948?

It peaked on the night of 2–3 June 1948 and ended with the withdrawal of the Zionist militias on the morning of 4 June. [1][5]

Who led the liberation of Jenin?

Lt Col Omar Ali, commander of the 2nd Battalion of the Iraqi 5th Infantry Brigade, together with Lt Col Nuh al-Jalabi, commander of the garrison, and the Palestinian fighters under Fawzi Jarrar. [3][1]

What were the Zionist militias' losses?

Omar Ali counted some 350 dead left on the field, including the commander of the attack. [2][1]

How many Iraqi martyrs fell at Jenin?

Between 50 and 56 according to the sources; they are buried in the Iraqi Army Martyrs' Cemetery in Jenin. [1][2]

Why does the Battle of Jenin matter?

Because it saved Jenin and many of its villages from occupation and expulsion in 1948, and became a symbol of Iraqi and Palestinian blood shed together. [3]

Did the northern villages stay liberated?

Seven villages were retaken in July 1948, but the Iraqi forces were ordered to withdraw towards Nablus on 11 July. [1]

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