Biriyya

Biriyya – Depopulated Palestinian Village of the Safad Subdistrict

Biriyya was a Palestinian village in the Safad Subdistrict. It stood on the southern slope of a high hill overlooking the city of Safad to the south and facing Mount al-Jarmaq to the west. The village lay approximately 1.5 km from Safad at an average elevation of about 900 metres above sea level.

Biriyya had an official population of 240 in 1944/45, and its registered lands covered 5,579 dunums.

A Palmach unit captured Biriyya on 1 May 1948 during Operation Yiftach as part of the preparations for the assault on Safad. Its Palestinian inhabitants were depopulated during the occupation. A fortified Zionist settlement bearing the same name had already been established on part of the village lands in 1945.

Name of Biriyya

The village is recorded in Palestinian sources as Biriyya.

Walid Khalidi relays the possibility that the village stood on the site of an ancient Roman-period locality known as Berai or Biri. This identification should be understood as a proposed archaeological connection rather than a conclusively established fact.

Secondary Palestinian sources offer additional etymological interpretations connecting the name with ancient words for wells or a fortress, but the principal sources reviewed do not establish any one of these derivations conclusively.

Location

Biriyya stood on the southern slope of a high hill north of Safad, overlooking the city to the south and facing Mount al-Jarmaq to the west.

A deep wadi ran below the slope. Agricultural land separated Biriyya from Safad, and a main road crossing those fields connected Safad with nearby towns and villages.

PalQuest gives an average elevation of approximately 900 metres, while the Palestinian Encyclopedia gives about 955 metres. The difference is limited and may reflect different reference points within the hilly village area.

Biriyya Through History

In 1596, Biriyya was part of the nahiya of Jira in the Ottoman district of Safad, with

an estimated population of approximately 319.

The villagers paid taxes on wheat, barley, and olives, as well as goats, beehives, vineyards, and a press used for processing either olives or grapes.

In the late nineteenth century, Biriyya was described as a stone-built village surrounded by cultivated land, with approximately 100–150 inhabitants, predominantly Muslims.

Village Layout

Biriyya was a small stone-built village on a high hillside. Its cultivated lands were concentrated primarily southeast of the built-up area.

The built-up area covered approximately 25 dunums in the 1944/45 statistics.

The village relied heavily on nearby Safad for basic services, while its inhabitants marketed their agricultural produce in the city.

Population of Biriyya

Year	Population	Nature of Figure / Notes
1596	Approx. 319	Estimate derived from Ottoman fiscal records rather than a modern census.
Late 19th century	Approx. 100–150	Estimate recorded by the Survey of Western Palestine.
1922	128	Official Government of Palestine census; all inhabitants were recorded as Muslims.
1931	170	Official census; all inhabitants were Muslims and were recorded in 38 houses.
1944/45	240	Official Government of Palestine figure.
1948	278	Later Palestine Remembered estimate, not an official census.

Year	Population	Nature of Figure / Notes
1998	1,710 refugees	Later Palestine Remembered estimate of refugees originating from the village and their descendants.

Number of Houses

Year	Number of Houses	Nature of Figure
1931	38	Official Government of Palestine census.
1948	62	Later Palestine Remembered estimate, not an official Government of Palestine count.

Land Ownership in Biriyya

Biriyya's registered lands totalled 5,579 dunums in 1944/45.

Using the ownership terminology employed by Palestine Remembered, the distribution was:

Ownership Category	Area in Dunums
Palestinian	408
Transferred to Zionists	5,170
Communal/Public	1
Total	**5,579**

This corresponds arithmetically to the official 1944/45 categories of 408 Arab dunums, 5,170 Jewish dunums, and 1 Public dunum.

Land Use in 1944/45

Land Use	Arab	Jewish	Public	Total Dunums
Cereals	328	2,336	0	2,664

Land Use	Arab	Jewish	Public	Total Dunums
Plantations and Irrigable Land	53	111	0	164
Built-up Area	25	0	0	25
Non-Cultivable Land	2	2,723	1	2,726
Total	**408**	**5,170**	**1**	**5,579**

A total of 2,828 dunums, approximately 51 percent of the registered land, was cultivated or cultivable, while built-up and non-cultivable land amounted to 2,751 dunums.

Approximately 30 dunums of Arab land were planted with olive trees. This was a crop-specific subset of the plantation and irrigable category and should not be added again to the village total.

Economic Life in Biriyya

Most of Biriyya's Palestinian inhabitants depended on agriculture. Their cultivated lands were concentrated primarily southeast of the village.

In 1944/45, 328 Arab dunums were devoted to cereal cultivation and 53 dunums to plantations and irrigable agriculture. Approximately 30 dunums were planted with olive trees.

Wheat, barley, olives, fruit trees, and vineyards formed part of the village's longer agricultural history, with olive and grape production documented as early as the Ottoman period.

Residents marketed their produce in Safad and also relied on the city for basic services.

Water Resources

Several springs flowed in the vicinity of Biriyya and provided water for household use and for irrigating crops.

The principal sources reviewed do not provide a sufficiently secure list of all spring names, so none is invented or transferred from neighboring localities.

Education and Public Services

Walid Khalidi states that Biriyya depended on Safad for basic services. His village entry does not document a separate formal school or provide pupil figures for the village.

No school or other village institution is therefore added without independent documentation.

Archaeological Background

Walid Khalidi relays the possibility that Biriyya was built on the site of the Roman-period locality Berai or Biri.

The identification derives from an archaeological reference cited through Khalidi and should therefore be presented as a possible identification rather than as an uncontested archaeological conclusion.

The 7 April 1948 Skirmish

A New York Times report cited by Khalidi recorded a skirmish in the vicinity of Biriyya on 7 April 1948.

The Haganah announced to foreign correspondents that twenty Arabs had been killed in an engagement near Mount Canaan outside Safad.

The report did not establish that the fighting took place inside Biriyya or that the dead were residents of the village. Khalidi therefore states only that Biriyya may have been involved because of its position on the mountain slope.

Occupation and Depopulation of Biriyya

On 1 May 1948, a Palmach unit captured Biriyya while another force took the neighboring Palestinian village of 'Ayn al-Zaytun.

The capture of the two villages formed part of the preparations for the attack on Safad. It enabled Palmach forces to establish lines of communication with the Zionist garrison inside the city and facilitated its subsequent capture.

The source discussed by Khalidi does not provide an independent detailed account of how all of Biriyya's residents left at the moment of occupation. Khalidi considers it probable, by comparison with events at 'Ayn al-Zaytun, that the inhabitants were forced to leave and that some may have been killed in the process.

The securely established fact of Palmach occupation should therefore be distinguished from Khalidi's inference concerning the precise circumstances of the villagers' removal.

Operation Yiftach

Biriyya was captured in the context of Operation Yiftach, carried out by Palmach forces from 15 April to 25 May 1948 within the framework of Plan Dalet to seize eastern Galilee before the end of the British Mandate.

PalQuest explicitly lists Biriyya among the Palestinian villages affected by Operation Yiftach.

The capture of Biriyya and 'Ayn al-Zaytun on 1 May was a direct preparatory step toward the assault on Safad, whose final attack took place on 10–11 May.

The fall of Biriyya was also reported to have undermined morale among Safad's Palestinian population, with departures from the city beginning after the village fell.

Was Biriyya Occupied During Operation Matate / Broom?

An abbreviated Palestine Remembered field associates Biriyya with both Operation Matate, or “Broom,” and Operation Yiftach.

The detailed historical chronology does not support treating Matate as the operation that captured Biriyya. Biriyya was taken near Safad on 1 May in preparation for the city's assault, whereas Operation Matate was launched on 4 May in a different area north of Lake Tiberias and west of the Jordan River.

The securely documented military operation associated with Biriyya's occupation is therefore **Operation Yiftach**.

Military Unit

Khalidi's village-specific account states that a Palmach unit captured Biriyya on 1 May 1948.

Palestine Remembered identifies the Palmach First Battalion as the attacking unit, and PalQuest confirms that the First Battalion spearheaded Operation Yiftach as a whole.

The village-specific Khalidi entry, however, does not independently identify the battalion number of the force that entered Biriyya.

The most precise formulation is therefore: **military operation: Operation Yiftach; attacking force: Palmach; the First Battalion is consistent with the broader operational context but is not independently established in the principal Biriyya entry.**

Occupation Chronology

Stage	Date	Details
Skirmish near Mount Canaan	7 April 1948	The Haganah reported twenty Arab deaths in fighting near Mount Canaan. Biriyya may have been affected, but its direct involvement is not independently established.
Beginning of Operation Yiftach	15 April 1948	Palmach forces launched the operation to seize eastern Galilee.
Occupation of Biriyya	1 May 1948	A Palmach unit captured Biriyya while another force captured neighboring 'Ayn al-Zaytun.
Depopulation	In the context of the 1 May occupation	Khalidi considers it probable that the inhabitants were forced to leave, based on the pattern documented at neighboring 'Ayn al-Zaytun.
Impact on Safad	Early May 1948	The capture of Biriyya and 'Ayn al-Zaytun opened communications with the Zionist garrison in Safad and reportedly undermined Palestinian morale in the city.
Final assault on Safad	10–11 May 1948	Zionist forces captured Safad during Operation Yiftach.

The Pre-1948 Zionist Settlement on Biriyya Village Land

Biriyya is distinctive because a fortified Zionist settlement bearing the same name was established on village land in 1945, before the Nakba.

On 5 March 1946, British Mandatory authorities searched the settlement following reports of shooting toward a nearby military camp. Weapons were discovered and the settlers were arrested.

About ten days later, approximately 3,000 additional settlers marched up the mountain and attempted to establish another settlement, but British troops dispersed them.

Following further confrontations, the detainees were released and the British eventually evacuated the site on 7 June 1946.

Israeli Settlements on Biriyya Village Lands

After the occupation of Palestine in 1948, the earlier settlement site was reused and was taken over by a religious kibbutz in September 1948.

The settlement of Biriyya subsequently expanded until it incorporated the site of the former Palestinian village itself.

Khalidi's village-specific account does not identify 'Ammuqa as a settlement established on Biriyya land. It is therefore not listed here as such without additional village-specific documentation.

Biriyya Today

In the field documentation published by Walid Khalidi in *All That Remains*, approximately fifteen Palestinian village houses remained standing and were inhabited by residents of the expanded settlement of Biriyya.

Four additional houses were semi-deserted or used as storage buildings.

Stones taken from demolished Palestinian houses could be seen incorporated into some settlement walls, while old almond, fig, olive, and eucalyptus trees remained scattered across the site among trees planted later.

Palestine Remembered labels photographs associated with Khalidi's documentation as dating from 1990. This description therefore represents historical field documentation from around 1990, prior to the publication of *All That Remains* in 1992, and does not constitute direct and comprehensive verification of the site's condition in 2026.

Sources

- PalQuest – Biriyya
- PalQuest – Operation Yiftach
- Palestine Remembered – Biriyya, Safad
- Palestine Remembered – Biriyya entry from Walid Khalidi's All That Remains
- Palestinian Encyclopedia – Biriyya
- Institute for Palestine Studies – Walid Khalidi, All That Remains
- Government of Palestine – Census of Palestine 1922
- Government of Palestine – Census of Palestine 1931
- Government of Palestine – Village Statistics 1944/45, digital reference