Lifta

Lifta: A Depopulated Palestinian Village

Lifta was a Palestinian village in the Jerusalem District, located at the western entrance to the city along the historic Jerusalem–Jaffa road. Beginning in December 1947, the village was subjected to repeated attacks by Zionist armed organisations, which resulted in the displacement of its inhabitants and the destruction of many of its houses.

Basic Information

Item	Information
Subdistrict	Al-Quds (Jerusalem)
Distance from district center	5 km West of Jerusalem

Item	Information
Average Elevation	675 meters above sea level
Population in 1931	1,893 inhabitants - Official census
Number of Houses in 1931	410 houses
Population in 1944/1945	2,550 inhabitants - Official statistics
Estimated Population in 1948	2,958 inhabitants - a later demographic estimate, not an official census
Total Land Area in 1945	100% dunams
Attack and Depopulation	On 28 December 1947, members of the Stern Gang attacked one of Lifta’s coffeehouses with submachine guns and hand grenades. Palestinian historian Aref al-Aref reported that six customers were killed and seven others wounded.
Final Israeli Control	The first weeks of January 1948
Military Unit	The Haganah, Irgun, and the Stern Gang in the attacks that completed the village's depopulation
Cause of Depopulation	Military assault by Zionist troops
Settlements Documented on Village Lands	Northern Jerusalem neighbourhoods, including Romema Illit, Kiryat Belz, Kiryat Sanz, Har Hotzvim, Sanhedria Murhevet, Ramat Eshkol, Giv'at HaMivtar, and Ramot Alon.

Location and Geography of Lifta

Lifta stood on the slope of a steep hill, facing north and northwest and overlooking Wadi Salman. The Jerusalem–Jaffa road passed immediately southwest of the village, while dirt roads connected it with neighbouring Palestinian villages.

The village lands covered 8,743 dunums and bordered the lands of Jerusalem, Bayt Iksa, Shu‘fat, Qalunya, Dayr Yasin and other surrounding communities.

Lifta’s spring, located in Wadi al-Shami, was one of the village’s most important landmarks and water sources. The surrounding valley was used for rain-fed agriculture and the cultivation of fruit trees.

The Name of Lifta Through History

Lifta is believed to have been established on the site of “Mey Nephtoah,” an ancient water source near Jerusalem, although scholars have disagreed over this identification.

The site was known as Mey Nephtoah during the Roman period and as Nephtho during the Byzantine period. During the Crusader era, the village was referred to as Clepsta.

History of Lifta

Lifta appeared in the Ottoman tax registers of 1596 as a village in the subdistrict of Jerusalem. Its population was estimated at approximately 396.

The inhabitants paid taxes on wheat, barley, olives, fruit, orchards and vineyards. In 1834, Lifta was the site of a battle in which the Egyptian army, commanded by Ibrahim Pasha, defeated local rebels led by Shaykh Qasim al-Ahmad.

In the late nineteenth century, Lifta was described as a village situated on the side of a steep hill, with a spring and rock-cut tombs to its south.

Architecture of Lifta

Most of Lifta’s houses were built of stone and arranged along the natural contours of the hill. The old village lanes followed curved paths that adapted to the steep terrain.

The village expanded significantly toward the end of the British Mandate. Construction spread eastward along the slopes of of Khallat al-Tarha, connecting the village with the buildings of the Rumayma neighbourhood in northwestern Jerusalem. Building also extended toward the foot of the hill in the south and southwest, along the Jerusalem–Jaffa road.

Palestinian built-up land covered 324 dunums. The 1931 census recorded 410

houses within the statistical unit that included Lifta and the Schneller Quarter.

Population of Lifta

Most of Lifta’s inhabitants were Muslims. In 1945, the population reached 2,550, including approximately 20 Christians.

The figures for 1948 and the estimated number of refugees and their descendants in 1998 are demographic estimates rather than official census figures.

Population figures for Lifta

Year	Population	Status
1596	396	Estimate based on Ottoman tax records
1922	1,451	Official census
1931	1,893	Official census
1945	2,550	Official statistics
1948	2,958	Estimate
Refugees and descendants in 1998	18,165	Estimate

Education and Social Life

Lifta had two elementary schools: one for boys and another for girls, established in 1945. The village also had two coffeehouses, a social club and several shops.

At the centre of the village stood a mosque and a shrine dedicated to Shaykh Badr, a local religious figure associated with Lifta and the surrounding area.

Economic Life in Lifta

Lifta had strong economic ties with Jerusalem and was effectively considered one of its suburbs. The villagers sold their agricultural produce in Jerusalem’s markets and relied on the city for various services.

The inhabitants cultivated cereals, vegetables, olives, grapes and other fruit trees. Rain-fed agriculture was concentrated in Wadi al-Shami, in the lowlands southwest of the village and along the surrounding slopes.

In 1944–1945, Palestinian villagers cultivated 3,248 dunums with cereals, while olive groves covered approximately 1,044 dunums.

Land Ownership in 1945

Ownership of Lifta’s land in dunums

Ownership category	Area in dunums	Approximate percentage
Palestinian Arab ownership	7,780	89%
Jewish ownership	756	8.6%
Public land	207	2.4%
Total	8,743	100%

Land Use in 1945

Use of Lifta’s land in dunums

Land use	Palestinian Arab	Jewish	Public	Total
Cereal cultivation	3,248	288	0	3,536
Built-up land	324	102	0	426
Non-cultivable land	4,208	366	207	4,781
Total	7,780	756	207	8,743

Palestinian olive groves covered 1,044 dunums. This figure represents a subcategory of cultivated land and should not be added separately to the total land-use area.

Historical and Archaeological Landmarks

Lifta contained several historical landmarks, including its spring, rock-cut tombs, old stone houses, mosque and the shrine of Shaykh Badr.

The village’s stone architecture, terraced fields and winding lanes demonstrate how its urban and agricultural development adapted to the mountainous landscape.

The Attack on Lifta’s Coffeehouse

On 28 December 1947, members of the Stern Gang attacked one of Lifta’s coffeehouses with submachine guns and hand grenades.

Palestinian historian Aref al-Aref reported that six customers were killed and seven others wounded. A contemporary report published by *The New York Times* placed the number of people killed at five.

The attack marked a turning point in the village’s depopulation. Most inhabitants left after the assault, while the remaining families departed as armed raids and house demolitions continued.

Occupation and Depopulation of Lifta

The Haganah initiated military escalation in Lifta and the neighbouring areas of Rumayma and Shaykh Badr in December 1947. These attacks were connected to efforts to secure the western entrance to Jerusalem and remove the surrounding Palestinian communities.

Following the coffeehouse attack, the Haganah, Irgun and Stern Gang repeatedly raided Lifta and Rumayma. On 11 January 1948, Haganah forces demolished the house of the mukhtar of the neighbouring Shaykh Badr quarter.

Two days later, another raid damaged or destroyed twenty houses in Shaykh Badr. Most houses on Lifta’s eastern outskirts were also demolished. According to Israeli historian Benny Morris, the purpose of these demolitions was to force the Palestinian inhabitants from their homes.

The armed attacks, bombings and destruction of houses led to the complete displacement of Lifta’s Palestinian population during the opening weeks of 1948,

before the end of the British Mandate and the establishment of Israel in May.

Occupation and Depopulation Chronology

Stage	Date	Details
The Attack on Lifta’s Coffeehouse	28 December 1947	On 28 December 1947, members of the Stern Gang attacked one of Lifta’s coffeehouses with submachine guns and hand grenades. Palestinian historian Aref al-Aref reported that six customers were killed and seven others wounded.
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Israeli Settlements and Neighbourhoods on Lifta’s Land

Mey Niftoach and parts of Giv‘at Sha’ul were established on Lifta’s land. Over time, much of the village’s territory was incorporated into the expanding suburbs of West Jerusalem.

Lifta Today

A significant number of Lifta's stone houses remain standing, although most are abandoned. A small number have been restored and occupied by Jewish families, while the ruins of other houses are scattered across the site.

The mosque and the village social club remain visible north of the spring. Lifta's cemetery lies west of the mosque and is covered with trees, bushes and wild vegetation.

Fig and almond orchards remain at the bottom of the valley beside the stream flowing from the spring. The surviving terraces and stone buildings continue to bear witness to the Palestinian village's architectural and agricultural character.

Sources

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- Institute for Palestine Studies – Lifta: A People's Record, History, Cultural Heritage and Struggle
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- Aref al-Aref, *Al-Nakba: The Nakba of Jerusalem and the Lost Paradise*.
- Government of Palestine, *Census of Palestine, 1922 and 1931*, and *Village Statistics, 1945*.