

Al-Qastal



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Al-Qastal was a Palestinian village located approximately eight kilometres west of Jerusalem. It occupied a commanding position above the principal paved Jerusalem-Jaffa road. While the road passed the area at an elevation of approximately 525 metres above sea level, the village stood on a hill rising to roughly 725–790 metres. This elevated position made al-Qastal the strategic western gateway to Jerusalem.

In April 1948, al-Qastal became the site of one of the most consequential battles on the approaches to Jerusalem. Palestinian forces led by Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni fought to defend and recapture the village after it was attacked by Zionist forces seeking control of the Jerusalem-Jaffa road. Al-Husayni was killed during the battle on 8 April. The Palmach ultimately reoccupied al-Qastal on 9 April, after which the

village's houses were largely destroyed and its Palestinian inhabitants were prevented from returning.

Field	Information
District	Jerusalem.
Historical Administrative Location	Jerusalem Subdistrict, Mandatory Palestine.
Distance from District Center	Approximately 8 km from Jerusalem.
Direction	West of Jerusalem.
Average Elevation	Approximately 790 meters above sea level.
Population in 1922	43 inhabitants according to the official census; all were Muslims.
Population in 1931	59 inhabitants according to the official census: 55 Muslims and 4 Christians.
Houses in 1931	14 inhabited houses according to the official census.
Arab Population in 1944/1945	90 inhabitants.
Jewish Population in 1944/1945	0.
Total Population in 1944/1945	90 inhabitants.
Estimated Population in 1948	104 inhabitants according to Salman Abu Sitta's estimate.
Total Land Area	1,446 dunums.
Land Ownership	Palestinian: 1,415 dunums; Transferred to Zionists: 7 dunums; Public/Common: 24 dunums.
Date of First Occupation	3 April 1948; the Palmach's Fourth Battalion attacked and occupied the village.
Palestinian Recapture	8 April 1948; Palestinian fighters recaptured al-Qastal during the battle in which Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini was killed.

Field	Information
Date of Final Occupation	Night of 8–9 April 1948; Palmach forces reoccupied al-Qastal, with final control established on 9 April.
Military Operation	Operation Nachshon. The first seizure occurred at the opening of, or immediately before the full formal launch of, the operation; the final occupation took place directly within its military context.
Military Unit	Palmach Fourth Battalion during the 3 April attack; Palmach forces during the final assault on the night of 8–9 April.
Cause of Depopulation	Repeated military attacks and fighting around the village. The Palestinian newspaper Filastin reported that residents left after an attack in mid-March 1948, while a number of village men remained to defend it.
Extent of Destruction	Very extensive destruction. After the final occupation, Palmach units began demolishing the village houses; Aref al-Aref states that all village buildings, including the mosque and shrine, were destroyed.
Settlements Established before 1948 on Village Land	No pre-1948 settlement on al-Qastal land was confirmed in the sources used.
Settlements Established after 1948 on Village Land	Ma'oz Tziyyon – 1951, established on al-Qastal land. It was later joined with Mevasseret Yerushalayim, founded in 1956 on Qalunya land, to form Mevasseret Tziyyon.

Historical and Geographical Overview

Al-Qastal's strategic importance derived from its control over the Jerusalem–Jaffa road. A network of secondary roads also connected it to Suba, Khirbat al-'Umur, Bayt Naqquba, Bayt Surik, Ayn Karim, Sataf, and Qalunya.

Wadi Qalunya, the upper section of Wadi al-Sarar, flowed approximately two kilometres east of the village. The shrine of Shaykh al-Karki stood on its western side. The village's stone houses followed a circular or semicircular layout. Although construction extended along the eastern slopes of al-Qastal Hill, the built-up area

covered only five dunams in 1945. Public facilities and services were limited, and residents depended heavily on nearby Jerusalem for many of their needs.

The village stood on the summit of a high, rounded hill that offered extensive views in every direction. It overlooked the Jerusalem-Jaffa road to the north and northeast, giving the site exceptional military and strategic significance.

Architecture and Built Environment

In the late nineteenth century, al-Qastal stood on the summit of a rocky hill, with several springs located to its east. The British Mandate government's *Palestine Index Gazetteer* classified al-Qastal as a hamlet. Its overall layout resembled a semicircle, and most houses were built of stone. More recent construction extended along the eastern slopes and curved around al-Qastal Hill.

Origin of the Name

The name *al-Qastal* is derived from the Latin word *castellum*, meaning a small castle or fortified place. The name referred to the ancient fortress that once stood at the site.

Economic Life

The inhabitants of al-Qastal depended on nearby Jerusalem for many essential goods and services. Their economy was also based on rain-fed cereal cultivation and the growing of vegetables, fruit, and olive trees. Most cultivated land lay within a rectangular strip extending southeast of the village.

In 1944–1945, 42 dunams were allocated to cereals and 169 dunams were irrigated or used as orchards, including 50 dunams planted with olive trees.

Land Ownership in Al-Qastal

Ownership category	Area (dunams)*
Palestinian ownership	1,415
Jewish ownership	7
Public land	24
Total	1,446

Land Use in 1945

Land-use category	Palestinian-owned land (dunams)*	Jewish-owned land (dunams)*
Irrigated land and orchards	169	0
Cereal cultivation	42	0
Built-up area	5	0
Total cultivable land	211	0
Uncultivated land	1,223	7

* One dunam equals approximately 1,000 square metres.

Population of Al-Qastal

Year	Population*
1922	43
1931	59
1945	90
1948	104
Estimated refugee population in 1998	641

Number of Houses in Al-Qastal

Year	Number of houses
1931	14

Year	Number of houses
1948	24

The Battle, Occupation, and Depopulation of Al-Qastal

The Palmach's 4th Battalion attacked and occupied al-Qastal on 3 April 1948 during Operation Nachshon. Palestinian historian Arif al-Arif reported that approximately fifty Palestinian fighters defended the village and withdrew only after exhausting their ammunition. According to contemporary reporting, Haganah forces fortified their positions with barbed wire on 5 April. Two days later, training aircraft were used to bomb Palestinian forces surrounding the village.

On 8 April, Palestinian forces recaptured al-Qastal in a battle during which Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni, commander of Palestinian forces in the Jerusalem district, was killed. The loss of al-Husayni was a decisive moment in the battle and had a profound effect on Palestinian military organization and morale in the Jerusalem area.

Palmach forces retook the village in an assault launched during the night of 8–9 April. Palestinian positions had been substantially depleted as many fighters left to attend al-Husayni's funeral in Jerusalem. Palmach units surrounded the village with armoured vehicles to prevent reinforcements from arriving and then advanced into the site. The final assault coincided with the massacre at Dayr Yasin, located approximately five kilometres from al-Qastal.

Occupation Chronology

Date	Stage	Details
Mid-March 1948	Attack and departure of residents	According to the Palestinian newspaper Filastin, as cited by Walid Khalidi and PalQuest, the residents left al-Qastal following an attack in mid-March, while a number of village men remained to defend it.

Date	Stage	Details
Night of 16 March 1948	Destruction of the mosque	A New York Times account states that the village mosque was destroyed on this night; Aref al-Aref, however, associates the destruction of the village buildings, including the mosque, with the later occupation.
3 April 1948	Attack and first occupation	The Palmach's Fourth Battalion attacked al-Qastal before dawn and occupied it. PalQuest places the seizure at the opening of Operation Nachshon while noting that it preceded the operation's full formal launch.
5 April 1948	Fortification of the position	Haganah forces fortified their positions in al-Qastal and surrounded them with barbed wire as fighting and Palestinian counterattacks continued.
7 April 1948	Bombing of Palestinian forces	The occupying forces used training aircraft to drop bombs on Palestinian forces surrounding al-Qastal.
8 April 1948	Battle of al-Qastal and death of Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini	Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini led the fighting to recapture al-Qastal and was killed during the battle on this date.
8 April 1948, approximately 3:00 p.m.	Palestinian recapture	Groups of Palestinian fighters entered al-Qastal following a counterattack supported by mortar and machine-gun fire and regained control of the village.
Night of 8–9 April 1948	Final assault	Palmach forces launched another assault to retake the village and surrounded it with armored vehicles to prevent Palestinian reinforcements from reaching it.
9 April 1948	Final occupation	Palmach forces reoccupied al-Qastal permanently while many of the Palestinian fighters who had retaken it were attending the funeral of Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini in Jerusalem.

Date	Stage	Details
From 9 April 1948 onward	Destruction of the village	After the final occupation, Palmach units began demolishing the village houses and leveling much of the built-up area to prevent the position from being retaken.
1951	Establishment of a settlement on village land	Ma'oz Tziyyon was established on al-Qastal land and was later joined with Mevasseret Yerushalayim to form Mevasseret Tziyyon.

Israeli Settlements Established on the Lands of Al-Qastal

Ma'oz Zion was established in 1951 at the foot of al-Qastal Hill and on land associated with the village. Mevaseret Yerushalayim was established in 1956, principally on land belonging to Qalunya. In 1963, the two settlements were united under a single local council named Mevaseret Zion, which now encompasses parts of al-Qastal's former lands.

Al-Qastal Today

Rubble from destroyed houses and the remains of stone terraces cover the southern, northern, and eastern slopes of the village site, much of it partly concealed by wild vegetation. Remnants of the old fortress remain visible on the summit. An underground shelter was constructed southwest of the fortress, while military trenches remain to its north and east.

Carob, fig, and olive trees grow along the northern and western edges of the site, and cactus plants remain along its southern edge. The site, including portions of the fortress and the surviving military landscape, has been incorporated into an Israeli national park and tourism complex.