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The 1938 Raid on Atlit Prison: Abu Durra's Rebels Free the Prisoners



In the summer of 1938, at the height of the Great Palestinian Revolt, hundreds of rebels attacked Atlit prison, which the British Mandate authorities had set up on the coast south of Haifa, to free the Arab rebels and patriots held there. The attack was planned by the commander Yusuf Said Jaradat, “Abu Durra,” one of the revolt’s five leaders, and led in the field by Salim al-Sa’bi and Yusuf al-Hamdan. The rebels fought the prison guards and British reinforcements for some three hours, then withdrew to Mount Carmel, having freed the Arab prisoners. [1][2][3]

Palestinian sources date the attack variously between mid-July and 17 August 1938, and say the rebels killed some 20 British soldiers and a Zionist officer, while one fighter from Qabatiya was martyred. [2][3][1]

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At a glance

Item	Details
Date	Summer 1938 (17 August according to al-Hayat al-Jadida, 19 July according to WAFA, 16 July according to the Encyclopedia of Palestinian Villages)
Place	Atlit prison on the coast south of Haifa
Planner	The commander Yusuf Said Jaradat, “Abu Durra”
Field commanders	Salim al-Sa’bi and Yusuf al-Hamdan
Number of rebels	About two hundred according to WAFA; “hundreds” according to other sources
Duration	About three hours
Enemy losses according to the Palestinian account	Some 20 British soldiers and a Zionist officer
Martyrs	The fighter Muhammad Qasim al-Shawahin of Qabatiya
Outcome	The Arab prisoners freed; the rebels withdrew to Mount Carmel

Sources: [1][2][3]

The commander Abu Durra

Yusuf Said Jaradat was born in 1900 in the village of Silat al-Harithiya west of Jenin, to a poor family, and was nicknamed “Abu Durra.” He worked the land, then moved to Haifa and worked on the railway, where at the Istiqlal Mosque he met Sheikh Izz al-Din al-Qassam, joined his circle and fought beside him at the battle of the Ya’bad woods in 1935, in which al-Qassam was martyred; Abu Durra escaped the British cordon around the woods. [1][3]

He joined the Great Revolt under Sheikh Atiyeh Ahmad Awad, attacking Zionist settlements and positions with his comrades, blowing up bridges and ambushing British and Zionist forces between Jenin and Haifa. After Sheikh Atiyeh was martyred at the battle of al-Yamun, he took command of the area and became one of the revolt’s five leaders in Palestine. [1]

The attack on the prison

The Mandate authorities had set up Atlit prison on the coast south of Haifa and thrown a number of Arab rebels and patriots into it. Abu Durra planned to storm it and free the detainees, and the attack was led in the field by Salim al-Sa’bi and Yusuf al-Hamdan at the head of hundreds of rebels. [3][1]

The rebels split into four groups: the first seized a house some 300 metres from the prison, the second fired on the guard posts, the third lay in wait on the road to cut off reinforcements coming from Haifa to the north, and the fourth engaged the reinforcements coming from the south. The battle lasted about three hours, and then the rebels withdrew to Mount Carmel. [2][3]

Results

The rebels freed the Arab prisoners from Atlit prison, and Palestinian sources say they killed some 20 British soldiers and a Zionist officer, while the fighter Muhammad Qasim al-Shawahin of Qabatiya was martyred. [2][3]

These sources say the rebels took six people captive; some accounts identify them as the prison’s deputy director with his wife, son-in-law and three children, while another describes them as Zionists. Abu Durra released the three children and referred the other three to the revolt’s court, which sentenced them to death, and the sentence was carried out. [3][2]

Abu Durra’s fate

Abu Durra went on leading the revolt, fighting the battle of Umm al-Zinat on Carmel in November 1938 and attacking the British army barracks in Jenin. When the revolt ended in 1939 he withdrew to Damascus and then came back through Transjordan, where he was arrested and handed over to the Mandate authorities, which sentenced him to death; he was executed in Jerusalem on 30 September 1939. [1][2][3]

Differences between the accounts

Palestinian sources differ on the date of the attack: al-Hayat al-Jadida gives 17 August 1938, WAFA and Rmix 19 July 1938, and the Encyclopedia of Palestinian Villages 16 July 1938. The rebels may have attacked Atlit more than once that summer, and the accounts become mixed. The sources also differ on the identity of the six captives, whether the British deputy prison director and his family or a Zionist family. We found no independent source confirming the figure of twenty British dead. [3][1][4][2]

Timeline

Date	Event
1900	Yusuf Abu Durra born in Silat al-Harithiya [1]
November 1935	The battle of the Ya’bad woods; al-Qassam martyred [1]
16–19 July 1938	The attack on Atlit prison according to WAFA and the Villages Encyclopedia [1]

Date	Event
17 August 1938	The attack on Atlit prison according to al-Hayat al-Jadida [3]
November 1938	The battle of Umm al-Zinat on Carmel [2]
30 September 1939	Abu Durra executed in Jerusalem [1]

Frequently asked questions about the 1938 raid on Atlit prison

When was Atlit prison stormed?

In the summer of 1938; Palestinian sources date it between 16 July and 17 August 1938. [3][1][2]

Who planned the attack?

The commander Yusuf Said Jaradat, “Abu Durra,” with Salim al-Sa’bi and Yusuf al-Hamdan leading in the field. [3][1]

What was the aim of the attack?

To free the Arab rebels and patriots held in the prison. [1]

What were the results?

The Arab prisoners were freed; some 20 British soldiers and a Zionist officer were killed according to the Palestinian account; one fighter from Qabatiya was martyred. [2][3]

What became of Abu Durra?

He was arrested after the revolt ended and handed to the British Mandate, and was executed in Jerusalem on 30 September 1939. [1]

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Sources and references

1. WAFA – Palestinian National Information Centre, “Pioneers”: “Sheikh Yusuf Said Jaradat (Abu Durra)” (in Arabic).
2. “Silat al-Harithiya,” Encyclopedia of Palestinian Villages (in Arabic).
3. “Yusuf Abu Durra: The Forgotten Rebel,” al-Hayat al-Jadida (in Arabic).
4. “78 Years since the Martyrdom of Yusuf Abu Durra,” Rmix (in Arabic).