Battle of Sur Baher 1948: How a Jerusalem Village Held Off Three Settlements

The Battle of Sur Baher was a series of clashes south of Jerusalem between 26 January and 17 February 1948. It peaked on 17 February, when Zionist forces attacked the village of Sur Baher from three settlements encircling it, Talpiot, Ramat Rachel and Mekor Haim. The village's defenders stood up to the assault, broke it and kept the village from falling. [1]

The attack on Sur Baher came amid fierce fighting in Jerusalem, when Arab fighters were besieging the Jewish quarter of the Old City while British forces provided cover for the Zionist side. [1]

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At a glance

Item	Details
Period	26 January – 17 February 1948
Place	The village of Sur Baher south of Jerusalem, and the Old City

Item	Details
Defenders	The people of Sur Baher and its young men in the Holy Jihad Army, with Muslim Brotherhood volunteers from Egypt
Attackers	Zionist forces from the settlements of Talpiot, Ramat Rachel and Mekor Haim, under British protection
Climax	17 February 1948: the attack on Sur Baher
Arab losses	One killed and one wounded on 17 February, and the village mill’s guard killed
Outcome	The attack was repelled and the village was not taken

Sources: [1][2]

Sur Baher among the settlements

Sur Baher is an Arab village south of Jerusalem. It had about 2,450 inhabitants in 1948 and lands of 9,471 dunams, of which Jews owned only 540, about 6%. [1]

Yet the village was ringed to the north, south and west by three Zionist settlements, Talpiot, Ramat Rachel and Mekor Haim, which put it on the front line south of Jerusalem from the moment the partition resolution was passed. [1]

The defenders of Sur Baher

The people of Sur Baher prepared to defend their village. Among its sons was Muhammad Jad Allah, born there in 1921, whom the Arab Higher Committee chose for military training at the Qatana camp in Syria in summer 1947. He trained for six months in weapons, explosives and commando work, then returned to train the village’s young men and joined the fourth company of the third battalion of the Holy Jihad Army as a first lieutenant. [2][3]

The company dug trenches and built fortifications along the lines of contact with the settlements on Sur Baher’s land, helped by Muslim Brotherhood volunteers from Egypt under Captain Mahmoud Abdo. Jad Allah recalled that the defenders’ weapons were old, rusty and scarce, against an enemy armed from British

Mandate stores. [2]

The fight in Jerusalem: 26 January – 4 February

On 26 January 1948 Arab fighters surrounded the Jewish quarter of the Old City, which British forces were guarding. They blew up three buildings, fired on the quarter and its British guards, and cut off its supplies. [1]

By 4 February the siege had reached its peak. The British advised the quarter's residents to leave, but they refused, while the fighters made surrender their condition for lifting the siege. [1]

17 February: the attack on Sur Baher

On 17 February 1948 fierce fighting broke out at the entrance to the Jewish quarter; one Arab was killed and another wounded, and several Zionists and British soldiers were wounded. Under British protection the Zionists blew up the house of the al-Nimr family and fired into the courtyard of the Haram. [1]

It served as cover for a broad attack on the village of Sur Baher launched that same day from the three settlements around it. The village's defenders stood up to the attackers, drove them back and kept them from taking it; in revenge the attackers burned the village mill, killed its guard and blew up a house on its outskirts. [1]

Results

The battle ended with the failure of the Zionist attack on Sur Baher, and the village held firm against the three settlements. On 17 February one Arab and the village mill's guard were killed and another man wounded; the available Arab sources give no full tally of either side's losses. [1]

Sur Baher's men kept fighting in the battles of Jerusalem throughout 1948, among them al-Qastal, Sheikh Jarrah, Nabi Yaqub, Jabal al-Mukabbir, al-Dheisheh, Beit

Safafa and Qatamon, according to Muhammad Jad Allah's testimony. [2]

Differences between the accounts

This article rests mainly on the WAFA file "Battles of the Nakba," which groups under the name "Battle of Sur Baher" both the siege of the Old City's Jewish quarter and the attack on the village, since the latter was launched under cover of the former. We found no names of the battle's commanders or martyrs in the available Arab sources, nor the number of attackers or their losses. [1]

Timeline

Date	Event
Summer 1947	Muhammad Jad Allah of Sur Baher trains at the Qatana camp in Syria [2]
26 January 1948	Arab fighters surround the Jewish quarter of the Old City [1]
4 February 1948	The siege peaks; the British advise evacuation [1]
17 February 1948	Fighting at the quarter's entrance; the al-Nimr house blown up; the attack on Sur Baher repelled [1]

Frequently asked questions about the Battle of Sur Baher

When was the Battle of Sur Baher?

Between 26 January and 17 February 1948, peaking on 17 February. [1]

Where is Sur Baher?

An Arab village south of Jerusalem, ringed by the settlements of Talpiot, Ramat Rachel and Mekor Haim. [1]

Who defended Sur Baher?

The villagers and their young men in the Holy Jihad Army, among them First Lieutenant Muhammad Jad Allah, helped by Muslim Brotherhood volunteers from Egypt. [2]

What happened on 17 February 1948?

Zionist forces attacked Sur Baher from three settlements under cover of the Old City fighting; the defenders drove them off, and the attackers burned the village mill and killed its guard. [1]

Did Sur Baher fall in 1948?

No; the Zionist attack in February 1948 failed and the village held. [1]

What was the British role?

They guarded the Jewish quarter of the Old City and gave the Zionists cover when they blew up the al-Nimr house on 17 February. [1]

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- The Battle of Qatamon
- The Battle of Bab al-Amud, 1947
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Sources and references

1. WAFA – Palestinian National Information Centre, “Battles of the Nakba”: “The Battle of Sur Baher” (in Arabic).
2. Asil Jundi, “Jad Allah: An Aged Jerusalem Fighter Recalls the Nakba,” Al Jazeera Net, 12 May 2019 (in Arabic).

3. Juman Abu Arafa, “The Aged Jad Allah, Witness to the Naksa and What Led to It,” Al Jazeera Net, 5 June 2017 (in Arabic).