



In Search of Fatima

Fateful Days in 1948

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On the night of January 4, 1948, three days before Christmas, we went to sleep as usual. It was raining heavily with occasional bursts of thunder and lightning. Fatima was staying with us that night and was sleeping on her mattress on the floor of our bedroom. Suddenly, at some time in the night, I awoke from a deep sleep and found myself in the middle of a nightmare crashing with thunder and lightning. For a few seconds, I could not distinguish dream from reality. The bedroom seemed to be full of strangers until I realised that they were my parents. There was a tremendous noise of shattering glass, shootings and explosions which seemed to be coming from our back garden. Rex was barking wildly. My mother dragged me off the bed and sat me up with Ziyad against the bedroom wall. The floor was cold against my warm body. She sat in front of us, her back pushing against our knees. The room was strangely lit up and as I twisted round



Al-Karmi family portrait.

towards the window I saw that the sky was orange, glowing and dancing. "Is it dawn?" I asked. "Is that the sun?" No one answered and I could feel my mother's body shaking in her nightdress. My father was on the other side of Ziyad, sitting against the wall with Siham and Fatima squeezed in next to him. They all stared ahead and Fatima was intoning in a whisper the words of the Fatiha, the opening chapter of the Quran, over and over again:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise be to the God of the worlds, the Merciful, the Compassionate, Lord of the Day of Judgement. You do we worship and to You do we turn for help. Guide us to the true path, the path of those whom You have favoured. Not those

who have incurred Your wrath. Nor those who have strayed. Amen.

I thought that my mother was whispering something too, but I did not know what it was. A shattering bang shook the windows as a great clap of thunder exploded overhead. And then I knew that I was afraid, more afraid than I had ever been in my life before. As Ziyad turned his face towards the window, I saw that his eyes were enormous but he never made a sound. After who knows how long, the noise outside began to abate. And with that, my mother started to move forward. "Stop!" my father hissed. "There may be another explosion." He made us wait a little longer until the sky stopped being so red. It now had a far-away glow, like the embers in our charcoal stove. My leg was numb and the palm of my hand hurt

where I had pressed it against the floor. We got up and groped our way out into the liwan. It was about two o'clock in the morning. Torrential rain lashed against the shutters. Fatima made coffee, but neither I nor Ziyad wanted anything, and our mother made us go back to bed. Siham followed soon after, but I don't think our parents slept at all the rest of that night.

By morning, when we got up, jaded and tired, we found no one in the house and the street looked deserted too. Everybody had gone to the scene of last night's explosion, the Semiramis Hotel in the road directly behind ours. This hotel was owned by a Palestinian Greek and had been fully occupied on the night when it was blown up. We decided to go and see for ourselves, walking through the wet, slippery streets in a howling icy wind with Rex close on our heels. The windows of several houses in the vicinity gaped, their glass shattered by the explosion of the night before. There was a great crowd around the devastated building which was still smoking and there was a strong smell of kerosene. Their faces were cold and pinched and many people were crying.

Municipal workers and British soldiers were trying to clear the rubble and still dragging bodies out. Some of these were very dark-skinned, Sudanese kitchen workers. As the crowd surged forward to see the bodies, in case there was a relative or friend amongst them, the soldiers pushed them back. Because Ziyad and I were small, we had got right to the front and they shouted at us to go back home. All the dead and wounded who were accessible had been taken away in the small hours, but the search was now on for others still buried beneath the slabs of concrete and stone and unlikely to be alive. An elderly couple next to where we were standing pressed forward repeatedly to get close to the digging. "They must find him," the

man kept saying. But she said, "No. It's no use, he's gone. He could have been alive, standing and watching just like these people, but he's not."

We pulled away to go back and noticed for the first time that amongst the debris on the ground was a large quantity of headed hotel stationery, some of it grubby, and stacks of wet envelopes. Ziyad bent down and started to pick it up and I followed suit. "Stop that!" cried Siham but we kept hold of what we had picked up. Neither of us could take in the enormity of what we had just seen; to us this was an opportunity for play and mischief. But the images would remain to haunt us one day. Later that morning, it emerged that it was the Haganah which had planted the bombs in the hotel, thinking that it was being used as a base for an AHC unit, "a hotbed of armed Arabs," as they called it.

In fact, this was not the case, although Arab journalists were in the habit of staying at the Semiramis and it was a well-known meeting place for activists of all political persuasions. Some thirty people perished in the bombing, amongst them the hotel owner and the Spanish consul. The rest included several families all of whose members were killed, except in one case where the parents died and their three children lived. We saw them wandering about in the rubble looking dazed.

The Haganah command expressed condemnation of the incident and regret and said that it had been carried out without its knowledge by a splinter group. But everyone around us said, "Liars and sons of dogs!" People demanded that greater protection be provided by the AHC or from the *Jaysh al-Inqath* (the army of salvation), which consisted of volunteer soldiers from Arab states recruited by the Arab League. The AHC had national committees in the towns all over the country, but the defence of

Jerusalem was part of a special force. A unit of this force arrived in Qatamon at the beginning of the year and took up residence in Abu Ahmad's house in the road above ours, which had stood empty ever since he and his family had left for Egypt.

It was headed by a man called Ibrahim Abu Dayyeh who had a reputation for bravery, but the men he commanded were few in number and poorly armed. Jewish soldiers, who were better armed and better trained, frequently chased them around and, though they assured everyone that they would defend us against all odds, it was obvious to everyone that they did not have the capacity. One evening, we even found one of them hiding in our garden shed, having been chased by an armed Jewish unit. He was very young, not much older than Siham, and trembling with fright. "It's no good. We can't compete with the Jews. They've got more men, more arms and more money," everyone said.

We heard that the men of the area met at the house of Khalil Sakakini to discuss what security measures ought to be taken. After the devastating attack on the Semiramis, it was clear to everyone that we were vulnerable and alone. The men decided to put up barricades at both ends of the roads and to have them manned. But only five people had guns and the rest did not know how to use weapons. There was consternation and in the end they drew up a rota of the people with weapons whose job it would be to guard the defence posts every night. Our father did not share in this rota, but he and others who did not take part paid a monthly fee towards the costs. This effort did not last long, however, for one night, Jewish gunmen shot and killed the man on duty.

There was terrific shock and mourning and then recriminations. "For God's sake, who is there left to guard anyway?" asked Daud

Jouzeh sadly. He said this because in the days which followed the bombing of the Semiramis, there was a panic exodus from Qatamon. The months of instability and fear, culminating in this incident, had finally broken people's resistance. Those of the Arabs who were still holding out murmured, "They ought to be ashamed of themselves. They're doing just what the Jews want them to." The National Committee tried to persuade them not to go. They had received orders from the AHC on no account to allow anyone to leave. "If you go, the Mufti will only order you to return," they warned. "Or he will bring in Arab fighters to take your place. So, better for you to stay."

Whether because people heeded this or not, they first tried moving only from one part of Qatamon to another, hoping it would be safer, but others like my mother's friend Emily went to the Old City for the same reason. Yet others went out of Jerusalem or Palestine altogether, and often in such cases the women and children were evacuated first and the men stayed behind. But as the danger grew without any visible support from anyone, least of all the AHC and its local committees, many of the men followed their families and the majority left Palestine. "Fine for them to talk, but who will care when our children get killed?" they said as they came to say goodbye to us. "Still, it won't be for long. Just until the troubles die down."

But far from dying down, the troubles continued to get worse. It was as if the Jewish forces no longer felt restrained from unleashing all-out attacks against our neighbourhood after the small number of Jews who had lived amongst us departed. The Kramers went to Tel Aviv at the end of 1947 in the wake of the turbulence which followed the partition resolution, but the Jewish doctor hung on into the new year. When Arab snipers shot at him as he walked

along the road soon after the Semiramis bombing, he left for Tel Aviv too.

At the end of January, the Haganah blew up another building in our vicinity, this time the big Shahin house on the edge of Qatamon. The Shahins were a wealthy family and had a beautiful villa standing in open ground at the top of Qatamon; no one could think why they had been targeted, except perhaps that the house might have been used at one point as a base by Arab snipers. Ever since one such sniper had shot dead a Jewish cyclist in Rehavia, the Haganah had instituted a policy of blowing up any Arab house which they suspected of harbouring gunmen. As February came, the sound of gunfire in the air was a frequent occurrence. From time to time, it was punctuated by explosions which vividly brought back the memory of the Semiramis. We had found this difficult to forget and whenever anyone even banged a door shut in the house, Siham would jump and start trembling.

Word came to my father at his office from a family friend of ours in Tulkarm, Hamdan Samara, urging him to move his books out of Jerusalem. "I will store them for you in Jenin where they can be safe," he wrote. Jenin was a town to the north of Tulkarm. "You may be forced to leave your house, and you never know, the Jews might pillage your library." My father had an extensive and unusual collection of books in Arabic and English, lovingly bought over the years, which he treasured. "Will you take up his offer?" my mother asked. "No," he laughed. "We're not going to be leaving and no one is going to harm my books."

By now, Ziyad and I were told not to go out onto the road because it was too dangerous. He and his friends took no notice of this, however; they found the whole thing rather exciting, especially when they went out on

patrol with Abu Dayyeh's men like real soldiers looking for Jewish snipers. They never found any, but usually came back with a collection of the spent cartridges and used bullets which had been fired by the snipers. These had foreign markings, Belgian, French, Czech and others, and Ziyad would line them up excitedly according to shape and place of origin. "What do you want with those horrible things?" our mother said. "Get rid of them!"

At other times, he went out on his own with Rex in tow, apparently unafraid. On one such jaunt, he ventured as far as Talbiyya which was a mixed Arab-Jewish neighbourhood. As he walked down a street which, unknown to him, was mostly inhabited by Jews, he saw a foreign-looking man on a balcony above him suddenly spring up and aim a rifle directly towards him. Rex started to jump up, barking and growling, and the man shouted out in broken Arabic, "Go away! Get out!" He was so threatening, and the street so empty, that Ziyad turned and ran off as fast as he could. He arrived home, panting with fear. After that, he never tried going to Talbiyya again.

The assault on our part of town was especially concentrated because, in company with other West Jerusalem neighbourhoods like Talbiyya, Sheikh Jarrah, Romema and Lifta, we formed the "seam" with the Jewish areas to the west of us and thus came under repeated attack by the Jewish forces. All these districts were either mixed or predominantly Arab, and the news which reached us from there was all grim. Because of the attacks, people were frightened and were starting to leave their homes. All through January and February, long queues of cars packed with people and luggage filed out of the streets on their way to safer places. The AHC were worried; they issued threats through the local committees and imposed punishments against anyone leaving. But as had happened in Qatamon, no one took any

notice. What was a verbal threat from the AHC compared with the reality of a Jewish sniper shooting at you from the rooftops as you walked along the street? Or with the Haganah van which toured your neighbourhood, as happened in Talbiyya, with loudspeakers blaring, urging you to leave or you and your house would be blown up?

All the while, the Arabs retaliated by attacking the Jews and trying to cut off their supplies, and the more they did this the more inflamed the situation grew. The Jewish neighbourhoods had been the object of Arab snipers for months. The Jews complained bitterly about us in Qatamon from where their neighbourhood of Rehavia was under attack. They also protested about Sheikh Jarrah because the Arabs fired on Jewish traffic going to the Hebrew university or to the Jewish Hadassah hospital from there.

My mother had friends in Sheikh Jarrah, the Mansour family, whom she used to visit frequently. The father, Abu Ya`qub, was elderly and sick, but before he died in January of that year, he would sit up in his bed and call out to his children, "Get me my rifle from under the bed!" He had had this old rifle since Ottoman days and it was rusty from disuse. "By God, I'm going to get up and shoot those Jews myself!" After his death, his sons, as if not to let him down, used to stick pumpkins on tall poles which they covered with a kuffiyya, the traditional Arab head-dress. They would then hold these pumpkins aloft and juggle them about, as if to make out that they were men. This invariably fooled the Jewish snipers on the other side who would start to shoot frantically at the pumpkins and, it was hoped, exhaust their ammunition.

In response to Arab sniping from Sheikh Jarrah, the Jews used armour-plated vehicles to get their patients and students through, but it was still unsafe. So the Haganah invaded

the area and terrorised the Arab residents, more of whom now prepared to leave. The British ordered the Jewish army to withdraw on the promise that they would forbid Arab fighters from re-entering Sheikh Jarrah. But the Haganah complained that the British reneged on their promise and that the Arabs were back in no time. Both sides accused the British of helping the opposing camp. In our neighbours' house, they said the same, but Mr Wahbeh said, "I tell you the British don't care about us or them. All they want now is to get out and then they'll leave us to it. Look at them, all they do is keep the route to Haifa open for their troops to clear out when the time comes."

Since the start of the new year, everyone had finally begun to face the unthinkable, that we would indeed be abandoned by the British without proper arms or a proper army. What a tragic turnabout, that those who had been oppressors were now seen as saviours, the malady and its cure rolled into one. And even then, they would betray us again. That, I suppose, was the essence of what it meant to be colonised.

"They say the Arab League is sending in a big army," said my mother hopefully.

No one was impressed. "If you mean that small band of irregulars from Syria," said our neighbour, "I don't call that an army." In January, several hundred Arab volunteers under the leadership of the Syrian commander, Fawzi al-Qawaqji, had come across the Syrian border into Palestine in order to help in the resistance against the Jews. People thought highly of Qawaqji and of the Syrians. They believed in him and said that he would save the situation. His forces joined local Palestinian troops which by then had begun to organise better than had been the case before. They had now formed themselves into three separate groups with

headquarters in Jaffa, Jerusalem and Gaza. But they had no proper arms, no training and little idea how to organise effectively.

It was no secret that the weaponry possessed by our side was out of date and far smaller in quantity than that of the Jews. There were no Arab weapons factories in Palestine and no way of making anything other than simple bombs. The Haganah, by contrast, had several arms factories producing bullets, grenades, sub-machine-guns and mortars. When, in addition, the Jewish forces later received shipments of modern arms from Czechoslovakia, everyone looked on in envy and alarm. There was a belated attempt to organise a country-wide Arab defence. The AHC's network of national defence committees, which functioned in towns and cities, should have provided a coherent organisation. But it was undermined by the fact that each locality had its own militia which usually ignored AHC orders and behaved autonomously. Likewise, the Palestinian villages had their own armed defence bands, untrained and acting independently of each other. To make matters worse, the whole arrangement was constantly undermined by internal feuding and rivalry.

"Well, you can't blame people for taking matters into their own hands," said Mr Jouzeh on one occasion when he and his wife had come across to our house for coffee. "The Jews are trying to take over the country, that's all there's to it and we can't rely on anyone. Everyone has let us down."

"Even if the Jews succeed - and they haven't yet -" said his wife, "they won't last long in this land. Look at what happened to the crusaders. They stayed in Palestine for a long time, but in the end, they were thrown out. And that's what's going to happen to the Jews now if they try it."

"And who's going to get rid of them?" asked her husband.

"Oh, all the Arabs and all the Muslims together," she answered firmly, looking at us, since we were the only Muslims in the gathering. My parents fidgeted uneasily and looked away.

But as February slipped into March with no sign of relief for our plight, hopes that the Arab states were going to leap to our defence were dwindling fast. Everyone said that the Mufti had received volunteers and arms from Egypt to continue the war effort, but we saw no change in our lives, which remained as isolated and defenceless as before. The rumour was rife that the Arab League had no real intention of helping to rescue the Palestinians, but only wanted to control the future of Palestine for its own ends. The exodus from Qatamon continued relentlessly, as from elsewhere in the country. By March, people had fled from large parts of the coastal plain area between Tel Aviv and Hadera, north of Tulkarm. Everywhere the story was the same, that the Jewish army and the Jewish irregulars attacked the peasants, village by village, and threatened them with worse. So they ran for their lives either in the immediate aftermath of a Jewish attack or because they feared that their turn would be next.

They poured into Tulkarm and its vicinity, since this was the first safe haven they could find. The panic they brought with them infected the people of Tulkarm, some of whom began to fear that the Jewish advance would not stop at Haifa. There was no one to tell people what was happening, why the Jews were on the attack and who, if anyone, would defend them. My aunt Souad gave refuge to one family from a village outside Haifa who came saying that Jewish soldiers had suddenly entered their village, shooting at

anyone they saw. No one had any arms and so they fled. They never knew how many people had been killed. These and similar stories fuelled the terror in Tulkarm, and some began to flee towards the villages further inland. News from our family was increasingly hard to get, but we heard that the Bedouin outside the town brought out their machine-guns, which had been with their fathers since the days of the Ottoman Empire, in readiness for the Jewish attack. They were soon joined by Bedouin from Wadi al-Hawarith, a village by the coast near to Tulkarm, who had fled before the Jewish forces. The situation was said to be chaotic.

"To think", my cousin Aziza said afterwards, "that those Jews in Hadera who were our neighbours in good faith, as we thought, should have turned on us like that. We should have remembered that the Jews can never be trusted. Did they not betray the Prophet himself?" Aziza was referring to that time in Arab history when Muhammad made an alliance with the Jewish tribes to ensure their neutrality, an agreement which they then broke, going to the aid of his adversaries. Neither Aziza's mother nor that generation would ever have said such a thing. But after Israel's creation, such anti-Jewish sentiments became common amongst Muslim Palestinians in a futile attempt to find explanations for their defeat.

Hadera was a rural Jewish settlement, established at the end of the nineteenth century, which lay to the north-west of Tulkarm and whose lands adjoined those of Aziza's family. "We never thought of them as enemies until then. And then we began to be afraid of them when we saw how they were putting up the barbed wire fences around their land and bringing in arms and big dogs."

In Jerusalem, we were feeling more and more besieged. By March, the neighbourhoods in our vicinity were emptying fast. People had left in large numbers from Romema, Lifta, Sheikh Jarrah, Musrara and Talbiyya, and many among these were friends or acquaintances. My mother put her head in her hands. "Oh God, they say the Jews are taking over all the empty houses." The villages on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Beit Safafa, Abu Dis, al-Aizariyya and Beit Sahour, were also being evacuated as people fled. Sometimes at night, when there was a thunderstorm and we imagined that the Semiramis bombing was happening all over again, Fatima would shake her head and say, "I wonder which poor village the Jews are attacking now."

My father came home and told us that the Jewish leaders were celebrating "the new Jerusalem". You can go through the western part of the city, they were saying, without meeting a single Arab, thank God. "Surely that's not true," Siham said. "What about us then?" We were still hanging on, but it was dismal to realise that so many people we knew had already left. Our road seemed more and more deserted. The Khayyats had gone just after the Semiramis bombing, and so had my mother's old friend Um Samir al-Sharkas. Emily and her family had gone too. Before they left for the Old City they gave us the keys to their house and told us to stay there if we needed to. This was because it stood inside the British zone and as such was more secure than where we lived, exposed to direct attack. Emily and my mother embraced and hung on each other weeping, as if they would never meet again.

"It will be over," said Emily to my mother. "It must end soon, and we'll be back." Randa and I did not hug each other or cry, I think because we did not fully comprehend what was happening. The Old City was not far

away and it was not such a long time since we had gone there to see my aunt Khadija. It did not seem possible that we would not be going there again. And Randa's departure in the bewildering and extraordinary situation of our lives at that time did not seem especially dramatic. More worrying was the fact that Abu Samir, the grocer to whose shop we went for sweets and nuts and drinks, closed down. Many of the houses on the opposite side of our street were now empty.

Ziyad and I had nowhere to go and few friends to play with any more. In March, even the Jouzehs, our neighbours for all the time we had lived in that house in Qatamon, finally left. They cried when they went, for leaving their home and for leaving us. "How much longer do you dare stay?" they asked. "The Jews are not going to drive me out of my house," my mother declared staunchly, but she said this only afterwards in order not to upset them. "Others may go if they like, but we're not giving in."

The only people to agree with her were the young couple who had moved into the old Muscovite's house next door to us on the other side. This was a truly amazing event, given that everyone was deserting Qatamon as fast as they could. The couple who bought the house came from the village of Ain Karim, just outside Jerusalem, and, strangely enough, were also called Karmi, but written differently to our surname in Arabic, with a long "a". No one could credit such a purchase in the dangerous, besieged place that Qatamon had become. But they had got it for a very low price and were delighted. My mother said to them, "How can anyone buy in Qatamon at a time like this?" But they were unperturbed. "It's a good investment. People say that the Jews are going to take over Qatamon, but it won't happen, wait and see." And my mother felt vindicated in her own view.

One evening not long afterwards, we were sitting in the *liwan* after dinner. The radio was on, and both our parents were listening intently as usual. It was the only link we had with outside events, since most roads from Jerusalem and even from Qatamon were dangerous or impassable. Suddenly, Rex started to bark and there was a sound of scuffling at the back of the house. All our shutters were tightly closed, as had become our habit since the Semiramis bombing, and so no one could see out. But my parents froze and my mother turned the radio off. We sat absolutely still, listening. There was no doubt about it, someone was in our garden. There was a sound of heavy running feet, and as we sat scarcely breathing, the silence was shattered by a loud bang of gunshot followed by shouting. Fatima, who came up behind me where I was sitting on the floor, put her hands tightly over my ears and curled my head over my chest. But this frightened me even more and I wriggled out of her grasp. My father sprang up towards the door and my mother called out, "No! Please, no!"

By now there was a sound of running feet everywhere, as if an army had descended on our house. Although it seemed close, in fact the sound came from behind the wall at the back of the garden. There was a great deal of shouting which we could now make out as something like, "Not that way! There, over the wall!" The running sound seemed to change direction. It came alarmingly close to the side of our house and then moved towards the garden gate. My father went to the front door and began opening it cautiously. And as he did so, I noticed with sudden anxiety that Rex was not barking any more. I rushed to the door and tried to look into the dark outside. "Sst!" my mother shouted and pulled me back. "But Rex ... " I implored. "Is this a time to worry about dogs?" she demanded.

A while later, as we tried to calm down, Abu Dayyeh from the Defence Committee came to see us. He said that a few of his men had been pursuing a group of Jewish irregulars who ran into the garden - "like the cowards they are" - behind the Jouzehs' house. From there they had crossed into our garden where the Arab soldiers caught up with them, and that was what we had heard. He said he was sorry for the disturbance it had caused us, but it was necessary in the war against the Jews, and he wondered what my father was doing, letting his family stay on in the house. The AHC had now advised everyone in the neighbourhood to evacuate all women, children and old people. Did we realise that Jewish snipers had been occupying the empty houses on the opposite side of our road from where they were preparing to shoot at people? To me, this instantly conjured up a nightmare image of menacing shadows lurking unseen behind the dark windows of Abu Samir's deserted shop. "And will your men evict them?" asked my father. "Of course," Abu Dayyeh answered confidently, "you and your family can be assured of that". As soon as he went, my father said, "Hmm, I wonder who was chasing who." On several occasions in the last few weeks we had almost got used to the sight of Abu Dayyeh's men being pursued by armed Jewish men who ran through our garden and even onto our veranda, as if our house were a public highway. We found these pursuits terrifying, but they usually happened in the daytime and no shots were fired.

The very next morning, as if the Jewish snipers had heard Abu Dayyeh's boast, a Bedouin walking along the road was shot dead right in front of our house. He was one of the dwindling numbers of street peddlers that still braved the danger to come round the houses, selling foodstuffs. The chaotic conditions prevailing in the country had hit the poor hardest of all, and they were obliged to

continue what trading they could despite the hazards. This Bedouin had come into our street with a great sack over his shoulder, the kind his people usually used to carry their wares: yoghurt, *samn* and goat cheese. In the time before the troubles, my mother had always bought such things from the Bedouin, which she said were the tastiest of all. We were out on the veranda and Fatima was hanging out the washing at the back when it happened. He was rather dusty and bedraggled, wearing a brown cloak and *kufiyya* on his head and he walked in the middle of the road as there were very few cars about. As he drew level with our gate, shots rang out from the houses opposite and, as if the two events were unconnected, he suddenly crumpled up and fell down hunched over his sack. There was screaming from somewhere, perhaps from our house. Someone, I think Fatima, dragged me and Ziyad back inside and closed the door tight.

That night, we decided to start sleeping at Emily's house in "the zone", as the British sector was usually known. Although it was not far away in terms of distance, getting there seemed interminable. We tried not to walk along the road as far as possible and crossed over the gardens behind the houses. Most of these were deserted and it was a strange, ghostly experience to see them so dark and still and to remember how noisy and full of people they had been. When we arrived, it was to find a cold, unheated house, its shutters closed and the carpets all rolled up, not covering the floors like ours. The place had a look of complete abandonment which my mother and Fatima tried to dispel by lighting the fire and turning on the radio and bustling about. Emily's house, where Randa had lived and where we had had such fun, now filled me with gloom. I hated going there, especially as we had to leave Rex behind. Every time we left in the evening, he leaped up all over me and Ziyad. "Silly Rex,"

Ziyad would tell him and ruffle the fur around his neck and ears, "don't worry, we'll see you tomorrow." And each time we returned home, he would be standing behind the garden gate, waiting for us to appear. And each time he would realise too late that we were coming through the garden route and not the road and would run around maniacally, as if to hide his embarrassment.

The situation in Palestine was so bad that the UN met to discuss it. We heard on the radio that the United States considered the 1947 partition plan unworkable and the country should be placed under UN trusteeship. The few people left in Qatamon heaved a sigh of relief. "Well, now maybe we will see some order restored in the country instead of this madness." The Jews, however, rejected the American proposal out of hand. They were furious at the United States which they accused of betraying them "for the sake of Arab oil". The Jewish Agency declared that the trusteeship idea represented an assault on the rights and sovereignty of the whole Jewish people. We did not know it, but the idea that the Jews of the world had an unassailable right to Palestine was by then deeply entrenched. Since Jews had been deserted by the world, the Agency argued, it meant that they would have to fight on alone and the struggle for Palestine would be that much harder. And indeed we heard that Jewish schoolteachers, doctors and dentists who had never contemplated military action before were lining up at Haganah headquarters asking for guns and rifles.

The news from the UN was a fillip to the Arab side which now succeeded in gaining control of the communications between Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, the three main cities where Jews were concentrated. The part of the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem road which

passes between Bab al-Wad and Jerusalem was under the control of Abdul-Qadir al-Husseini. This man was one of our few charismatic and popular commanders, a relative of the Mufti (whom, however, he did not get along with) and a leader of an irregular Arab force called *Jaysh al-Jihad al-Muqaddas* (the army of the holy jihad). He had started life as a surveyor in Ramleh where my father first met him when he and my mother lived there. He thought him decent and loyal with a reputation for being brave, perhaps foolhardy, but totally dedicated to fighting the Jews. In the course of this effort, Husseini had tried to incite the villages outside Jerusalem to attack Jewish settlements. But many of them were too afraid of Jewish retaliation to do so and refused. But though he failed in this, he redeemed himself by holding the road into Jerusalem, strangling Jewish traffic and attacking their convoys successfully. "Perhaps he will save the city for the Arabs," people said in hope.

Life for our aunt Khadija in the Old City was also becoming troubled. Ever since the partition resolution was announced, there had been clashes around the Jewish Quarter, not far from her house. They were not too worried at the beginning because the British intervened repeatedly to keep order. But the Haganah were not satisfied and sent in their own soldiers to protect the Jewish Quarter. They made out that the British wanted the Jews out of the Old City to leave it all in Arab hands. This was unthinkable, they said, because the place was sacred and a holy trust for the Jewish people. The Arabs heard this with considerable scepticism. "No one believes a word of it," said my aunt. "They're only looking for an excuse to get themselves a foothold in the Old City." My aunt's husband Abu Isam, whose shop was in Mamilla near my father's office, told him much the same thing. "They say the Jews

want to take control of the Old City." But my father reassured him that it could not happen.

The Haganah started smuggling arms and ammunition into the Jewish Quarter. When the British discovered this, they confiscated the arms in the face of fierce Jewish resistance. At the same time, Arab irregulars continued to attack the Jewish Quarter and the Haganah forces who were based there. Fighting then broke out between the Haganah and the British army. Several British soldiers were killed, and at the end of March a cease-fire was agreed. However, this turned out to be only temporary and the hostilities started all over again. By then my aunt's family was finding life difficult, especially as my cousins were all very small. My aunt's husband was getting few customers in his shop and they did not know what to do. They could no longer come to see us because of the danger on the roads, nor could we visit them for the same reason. "What a situation," my mother said to us, shaking her head. "Your aunt is not more than ten minutes away from here, but she might as well be in Syria for all the chance we have of seeing her."

As March drew to a close the violence in Qatamon was worse than ever. Sometimes we found it hard to sleep at night for the whistling of bullets and the thunder of shells. We were now sleeping on the floor most of the time, which was hard for my father who had recurrent back pain (he called it "lumbago" and continued to suffer from it intermittently for much of his life). He would groan loudly every time he laid down or got up. There was little respite from the shooting in the day either, when machine-guns could be heard firing, sometimes continuously. Explosions shook our house without warning and we spent our time in anticipation of the next attack. None of this seemed to worry Ziyad who was still collecting bullets and playing at being soldiers in the garden.

But to me this was terrifying and bewildering, so far removed from anything I recognised as normality that I think I became a little shell-shocked. After a while, I accepted each blow silently without protest, as if we were fated to live like that. I learned to adapt by clinging to the small routines of our life which still went on despite everything. Siham had gone to board at her school which left me and Ziyad and Fatima in our bedroom at night. A suspicion bordering on conviction had taken hold of people's minds that the Jewish forces meant to take over Qatamon and that the battle to repel them would get fiercer. Everyone was afraid, especially the children who screamed and wailed uncomprehendingly through the bombing and the shooting. And so more families packed up and left. But still we hung on, like the Sakakini family and a few others, because we simply could not imagine leaving our home and still believed that somehow a last-minute rescue by the British or the Arabs would take place.

Our parents said no matter what happened, Siham had to take her exams. And in any case, we had nowhere to go. Many of the families who had left had gone to relatives elsewhere, or the men had found temporary work, or they were wealthy enough to bide their time away from Jerusalem in comfort. For everywhere the word went out that, until the problem was solved, leaving the danger zone was only a temporary measure.

My mother kept saying that help must come soon, that the English, the Arab League, the UN or some combination of these could not stand by and allow the Jews to drive us out. In saying this, she echoed many other people who waited impatiently for the Arab armies to enter Palestine and defeat the Jews. But whenever she said this, my father dismissed her hopes with a show of cynicism. "You can believe what you like. They've not done much

for us so far." But perhaps he secretly also looked for some such salvation.

At that time, there was much talk of a separate status for Jerusalem when the Mandate was terminated. The city would be put under UN trusteeship and, even if the rest of Palestine was divided into two states, Jerusalem would not be part of either and might continue more or less as it was. The

Jews had never accepted this and people around us said that they secretly planned to make Jerusalem their capital. But everyone discounted this as Jewish wishful thinking and further evidence of their greed for our country.

Ghada Karmi is a Palestinian physician and writer living in London.

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