



Qatamon, 1948: The Fall of a Neighborhood

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Introduction

Most studies of the 1948 battle for Jerusalem have focused on the political and military aspects of that struggle. This article aims to fill a gap in the field of social history by taking the Qatamon neighborhood in Jerusalem as a test case to study the transformational processes through which the Palestinian-Arab middle class passed during this crucial period. With very few, if notable, exceptions, this aspect of Palestinian social history under the British Mandate has so far been unduly overlooked.¹

The overall education, occupational pursuits, economic conditions, and way of life of the residents of Jerusalem's Qatamon neighborhood encapsulate the profile of the Mandate-era Palestinian-Arab middle class: bourgeois, generally well-educated, mainly Christian, with an occupational structure similar to that of the new classes emerging in the West since the late eighteenth

The house of Hanna Zananiri in al-Qatamoun in Jerusalem in the early 1940s. *Source: Library of Congress, Matson Collection.*

century.² In addition to being a quintessential Arab middle class neighborhood, Qatamon is an appropriate object of study because of its strategic location, which rendered it a major locus of fighting in south Jerusalem, inflicting great hardship on its residents, some of whom nevertheless stayed on and tried to maintain a civil life in the shadow of the war.³ The main contention of this essay is that the distinctive middle-class characteristics of the neighborhood accelerated the process of collapse by rendering it ineffectual in responding to a severe crisis during the decline of colonial civil order mainly brought about by Jewish military pressure.

The Eruption of War

On 29 November 1947 the General Assembly of the UN adopted the resolution to partition Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. In its wake, Britain declared that its Mandate in Palestine would terminate on 15 May 1948. Even though the UN resolution called for Jerusalem to become a separate international zone, it triggered a fierce intercommunal war in the city, as elsewhere in Palestine. The situation escalated rapidly, as hostilities erupted between armed groups and the civilian population became the target of terrorist activities.⁴

In Qatamon, a local guard force was organized, consisting of a loosely knit group of residents who possessed or had access to private weapons.⁵ Exchanges of fire between Qatamon and the adjacent Jewish neighborhoods soon became commonplace. On the stormy night of 5 January 1948, a group of *Haganah*, the main Jewish militia, attacked and blew up the Semiramis hotel, a family establishment in Qatamon, without facing any resistance. The attack was claimed to be retaliatory, and Semiramis was chosen as a target following mistaken intelligence reports that it was the area headquarters of the Qatamon guard.⁶ The hotel's eastern wing collapsed; eighteen people were killed and dozens wounded. Most of the dead belonged to the families of the hotel's co-owners.⁷ The explosion illuminated the sky above the neighborhood for several minutes and shook the walls of houses hundreds of meters away. Frightened residents leaped out of bed and rushed to find shelter in the lower regions of their homes. Some residents close to the site of the explosion went into shock.⁸

Few people dared to leave their homes in the dead of night to see what had happened. Those who did saw a heap of ruins into which British soldiers were digging in a futile attempt to rescue any trapped survivors. Hala Sakakini, a young teacher who remained at home, heard about the event the following morning from a neighbor, Cocone Tlil, who had gone to the site during the night to offer first aid to the victims. Throughout the day residents were seen carrying their belongings and leaving the neighborhood: the explosion had brought about the first wave of Arab departure from Qatamon.⁹

On the day after the explosion the men of the immediate neighborhood met at the Sakakini family house and decided to assume the defense of their homes. However, of the approximately twenty men present only four had rifles, three others had pistols,

and the majority did not know how to use firearms. They decided to collect money to purchase additional weapons and hire guards. Afterwards the group, along with local children and some women erected roadblocks made of barrels filled with dirt and stones at the two entrances to the semicircular main street. Three engineers who lived on the street went from house to house pointing out vulnerable places and showing the inhabitants where to put up barriers. The group felt confident about their first aid capabilities, as two physicians lived on the street, in addition to women volunteers. It was decided that everyone who owned a weapon would do guard duty that night. The well-known intellectual, educator and writer Khalil Sakakini (Hala's father) summed up the developments in his diary, with characteristic levity tinged by sarcasm: "We have turned our neighborhood, which is encircled by a road and is a kind of island, into an entrenched fortress, compared to which the fortresses of Sebastopol, Verdun, Gibraltar and Malta are as nothing."¹⁰ But the defense effort was soon abandoned, after a guard was shot one night, probably by fire from a Jewish outpost or patrol.¹¹

The blowing up of the Hotel Semiramis was the most extreme in an unfolding sequence of events that made normal civilian life in Qatamon increasingly difficult to maintain. The exchanges of sniper fire between the Arab and Jewish neighborhoods made travel to work or shopping in the city center or in the Old City dangerous, and sometimes the road would be cut off. Similarly, deteriorating security meant that agricultural produce was no longer being delivered. With basic commodities increasingly difficult to obtain, the neighborhood committee decided, in early January, to distribute food in return for coupons. The distribution center was in the house of the architect Daud Tlil. The anxiety felt by all the children in Qatamon was further heightened after they were forbidden to leave their homes and when government schools did not reopen after the New Year holiday.¹²

The situation in Qatamon led 'Abd al-Qadir Al-Husayni, commander in the Jerusalem area of the 'Holy War Army' [HWA, *Jaysh al-Jihad al-Muqaddas*], the main Palestinian militia, to appoint Shafiq 'Aways, a former police officer, as the commander of the neighborhood. 'Aways had a force of about sixty, consisting of local villagers and volunteers from Iraq and the Hijaz.¹³ Their deployment in Qatamon led to an escalation in the exchange of fire with the Jewish neighborhoods,¹⁴ and soon caused a dispute with the residents, who were opposed to the 'Aways force's attacks on the Jewish neighborhoods. The underlying cause of the disagreement was apparently the entry into Qatamon of strangers and villagers, with their very different customs and way of life. In addition, at least some of the residents realized that the aggressive tactics were prompting retaliatory attacks that were endangering their lives and property. Already after the blowing up of the Hotel Semiramis, the secretary of the neighborhood's committee, Anton Albina, had written to the British District Commissioner, "We do not want innocent people to be butchered in their sleep in the middle of the night and at the same time we are most anxious that no one whoever he may be should be assaulted in this quarter by irresponsible elements who are strangers to the place and do not care about the result of their action." In his letters Albina reiterated his opposition to harming civilians, whatever their communal identity.¹⁵

Throughout the war the Sakakini house continued to be a social magnet for the neighborhood's residents. A routine developed so that every evening a few neighbors, some of them relatives, would gather there in order to pass the tense hours together, conversing, listening to the radio, playing cards, or otherwise socializing. In some cases the gatherings were disturbed by attacks in the area. In her diary, Hala Sakakini described the evening of 13 March and the morning after:

We [...] were all sitting in the dining room when an explosion took place. It was followed by shooting, so we all ran for safety to the hall. The firing was so strong everybody's nerves were on edge and we all began ordering each other to take safer positions in the hall. Then two more loud explosions shook our house and we guessed that they were very near. Fadwa Sfeir [a relative] was almost panic-stricken, so we hurriedly took our coats and some blankets and ran downstairs where we stayed cold and shivering until things began to quiet down around midnight [...] when it had calmed down a little, our neighbours [...] joined us [...] and shared our bottle of cognac with us. Shooting did not cease until morning. It was a terrible night. Today, from early morning, we could see trucks piled with furniture passing by. Many more families from Katamon are moving away, and they are not to blame. Who likes to be buried alive under debris?! The defense system of Katamon is just miserable and no one of the responsible people is doing the slightest thing about it. If strong security measures are not taken immediately, our turn of leaving our home will come soon. We cannot be expected to wait empty-handed for the Jews to come and blow us up.¹⁶

Following the bombings in March another wave of residents fled Qatamon, after much of the neighborhood had emptied out in the two previous months. Those who could afford it made for Arab metropolitan areas outside Palestine – Beirut, Damascus, Alexandria, Cairo – where they used to vacation. Families with more restricted means found shelter in the Old City or made do, for the time being, with moving into the British security zone adjacent to Qatamon.¹⁷

The Fall of Qatamon

As a result of their incompetence and discord with the residents, 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni removed 'Aways and his men from Qatamon. They were replaced, on 15 March, by a force of about 130, mostly Palestinian-Arab villagers, under Ibrahim Abu Dayyeh, one of the finest commanders in the HWA.¹⁸ Shortly after the arrival of Abu Dayyeh the residents' sense of security improved somewhat, despite incessant exchanges of fire with the Jewish neighborhoods.¹⁹ Abu Dayyeh was popular and even admired by some of the residents, owing to his personality and his spirited nationalism. Khalil Sakakini wrote about him in his diary:

He is a young man in the springtime of his life, small and lean, but in an emergency is as strong as a lion. Nevertheless, the newspapers do not mention him, as though he is the Unknown Soldier [...] if this young man were from a city, from this or that family, people would drum and sing and hold parties for him, in his presence or his absence, and ply him with huge sums of money. I am apprehensive that he will notice this himself, or that someone will draw his attention to it, and then we will return to the townsman versus peasant tune and all will fall apart, heaven forbid...²⁰

The enthusiastic support for Abu Dayyeh by the Sakakini family and their circle in Qatamon was reflected as well in Hala's diary:

I am determined to stay here as long as Ibrahim Abu Dayyeh is here to defend us. I adore that man. He is wonderful, overflowing with patriotism, working day and night tirelessly, not caring for food or comfort. He is intelligent. He is genuine. Abu Dayyeh and Abu Ata [his deputy] drop in almost every evening. We drink coffee and have a little chat together [...] He is a character that I shall never forget so long as I live. When he talks he fascinates you. He uses short sentences, his words are powerful, his remarks original and just right. You feel he is capable of overcoming all obstacles.²¹

The ability of Abu Dayyeh, a relatively uneducated villager, to integrate into a sophisticated bourgeois urban society was probably due to his natural charisma combined with his admirers' romantically idealized notion of village life. Though most of the remaining Qatamon residents viewed Abu Dayyeh as their defender, savior, and last hope for being able to remain in their homes, they remained passive in the war effort. Some were even highly critical of the villagers' militant approach and its consequences. Thus, a local physician wrote on 24 April:

Yes, I am still in Qatamon; in fact I am the only one who has not yet evacuated his apartment, and I have no intention of doing so. Jerusalem is now a war zone, and filled with irresponsible people carrying Bren machine guns and wearing 'abayas [village attire], who shoot at the moon at night and during the day at the horizon. They think they are having a good time.²²

On some occasions, according to Khalil al-Sakakini, the villagers even confronted the urban population. In one occurrence, Fakhri Jawhariyya (brother of musician Wassif Jawhariyya) was briefly arrested by Abu 'Ata for denigrating the villagers after they prevented him from moving his home furniture from Qatamon. In another case, when Daud Tlil was summoned by the same Abu 'Ata and allegedly refused to go, he was beaten by the guards with rifles-butts and fists. Sakakini summed up the situation thus: "We were facing one danger [the Jews], and now we face two." But he immediately expressed his willingness to forgive the fighters, explaining that they were risking

their lives day and night for the sake of the residents.²³

Qatamon's Arab population continued to shrink. On the evening of 13 April mortar shells were fired into the neighborhood, a few of them falling near the Sakakini house. Over the next few days relatives of the Sakakinis visited them to bid farewell before leaving the country. Day by day the population of Qatamon dwindled. Hala Sakakini described the evenings in the family house during her final days in Qatamon:

We have a special slogan for the evening nowadays. Not a day passes without Mr Daoud Tleel asking in his sarcastic way, "What do you say, shall we flee tomorrow?" When we are in high spirits, and that is usually after Abu Dayyeh had visited us, we answer in the negative, but when there are explosions and shooting to be heard, we would answer, "Tomorrow we'll leave, that's final!"²⁴

A week later, on 29 April, she wrote:

We are now the only family left in Katamon [...] Mr Daoud Tleel and his family and Mr Elias Mansour and his family left for Syria about a week ago. I think Mrs Anton Albina has remained with her husband in Katamon.²⁵

The Sakakinis themselves planned to leave the next morning for Egypt. In the evening they invited Abu Dayyeh and Abu 'Ata to their house. They talked about the possibility of a fierce assault on Qatamon. Abu Dayyeh said that he expected such an attack imminently but that he was well prepared.²⁶ The final attack on Qatamon came that night, 29 April 1948, mounted by the *Palmach*, the *Haganah*'s "strike force." Hala Sakakini described the events of that night as witnessed by the last Arab residents of Qatamon:

... At twelve o'clock (the usual hour), not long after our visitors [Abu Dayyeh and Abu 'Ata] had left us, the attack on Katamon began. It was stronger than ever. The firing was heavy and continuous and it sounded so very near all of us thought that the Jews had reached our street. Every one of us deep down in his heart feared that before morning we would all be dead. When at last morning came the firing had not ceased. It went on and on, loud and strong. At about half past five, as I was standing on Sari's porch (which is protected by sandbags) I saw Abu Ata who had come to use our telephone, as no other telephone in the whole [of] Katamon is working. We asked Abu Ata about the situation and he said that everything was all right and that they were only short of certain bullets. After a while, however, Abu Dayyeh himself arrived in our square. He was nervous and shouting. We understood from him that everything was not all right at all. The Jews had come in very large numbers and they were trying to surround Katamon and besiege it. Already fifteen of our fighters had been killed and thirty wounded. The

Arab [Transjordanian] soldiers in the Iraqi Consulate came running across the Consulate grounds to the fence along our street to offer their services to Abu Dayyeh. He began to give them orders. How great this young man was, standing there in his abaya and pointing out to those trained soldiers the positions they ought to take. His strong personality expresses itself in his every gesture and his every word. [...] I saw other soldiers in the Consulate giving handfuls of bullets to our fighters. All this was thrilling to watch.²⁷

To the Sakakinis' surprise, their driver arrived at the appointed time of six in the morning. Quickly they loaded their luggage into the vehicle and moved on. After they left Qatamon, they waved to Anton Albina and his wife, whom they saw entering a house in search of shelter.²⁸

The battle for Qatamon raged unabated until the evening, when the remaining fighters of Abu Dayyeh had to withdraw, and the battle was lost. The Sakakinis, who arrived in Cairo on 30 April 1948, lodged in a hotel for about a month, until they found an apartment to rent. They felt fortunate compared to other refugees, and even to their relatives, who had remained in Qatamon two hours longer than they did and in the end fled to the Old City with only the clothes on their back.²⁹ Khalil Sakakini lamented his lost house and its contents, which he knew had been looted: the clothes, the furniture, the library, the piano, even his beloved narghila, which he had forgotten to take, along with his notebooks and papers. Above all, he grieved for the loss of his books, which he had collected painstakingly in the course of a lifetime. He would never know their fate. His only solace was that he had moved his diaries to a safe place.³⁰ The neighborhood was ransacked, the properties were expropriated and shortly afterwards re-populated by Jews, many of whom were ironically themselves war refugees from the Old City. Qatamon remains, today, a Jewish neighborhood in West Jerusalem.

Conclusion

As elsewhere during the 1948 War, the collapse of the Palestinian-Arab civil population in Qatamon under Jewish attacks, which were the ultimate cause of flight, came even before the military defeat. The residents found themselves caught up in a maelstrom of events and a spiral escalation over which they had no control, and no means to prevent the fall of their neighborhood. The Qatamon test case also reveals the seeming inconsistency between the declared nationalism of the upper middle-class urban residents and their unwillingness in practice to fight and make sacrifices for national goals. Their bourgeois values and way of life, along with habitual reliance on the rapidly vanishing colonial protection and patronage, left them unwilling and incapable of participating concretely in the war effort. Disparate social backgrounds generated feelings of alienation and sometimes even hostility between those urban residents and the rural fighters. The Christian sectarian affiliation of the majority

of the residents probably reduced the participation in fighting as well.³¹ Those characteristics had most probably influenced the outcome of the war on a nationwide scale, especially in the larger towns, in which members of the middle class constituted a large proportion of the Palestinian-Arab population.

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Endnotes

- 1 The pioneering study of this aspect is Salim Tamari, "Factionalism and Class Formation in Recent Palestinian History," in Roger Owen (ed.), *Studies in the Economic and Social History of Palestine in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Two recent exceptions are: Sherene Seikaly, *Meatless Days: Consumption and Capitalism in Wartime Palestine, 1939-1948*. Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2007; and Deborah Bernstein and Badi Hasasi, "'Buy and Promote the National Cause': consumption, class formation and nationalism in Mandate Palestinian society," *Nations and Nationalism* 14 (1), 2008. These two studies refer to the middle class of entrepreneurs and capitalists, mainly through the prism of consumption patterns, rather than the middle class of white-collar officials and professionals, which was more typical to the southern suburbs of Jerusalem, particularly Qatamon. For a full account on the collapse of the middle class in Qatamon in 1948, see Itamar Radai, "The Collapse of the Palestinian-Arab Middle Class in 1948: the Case of Qatamon," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 6, November 2007 (961-982).
- 2 Jurgen Kocka, "The European Pattern and the German Case," in idem and Alan Mitchell (eds.), *Bourgeois Society in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp. 3-4; Eric Hobsbawm, "The Example of the English Middle Class," *ibid.*
- 3 Itamar Radai, "The Arab Irregular Forces and Communal Organization in Jerusalem, December 1947 – May 1948," (MA thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2002, Hebrew), pp. 124-129.
- 4 HQ Palestine, "Weekly intelligence review," 5.12.1947, The National Archives, London (hereafter: TNA), WO 275/120; Yitzhak Levi, *Tisha Qabin: Jerusalem in the War of Independence* (Tel Aviv: Maarachot, 1986, Hebrew), p. 13; Radai, "Irregular Forces," pp. 24-35.
- 5 "Foreign document delivered by Yossef, deputy commander of zone 4," 5.1.1948, "On the matter of Qatamon," 13.1.1948, IDF Archive, (hereafter: IDFA), 1949/2605/3.
- 6 "Hotel Semiramis – a regional Arab base in Qatamon," 8.1.1948, Central Zionist Archive, Jerusalem (hereafter: CZA), S25/4013; Y. Berman to G. Myerson, 8.1.1948, *ibid.*, S25/9200; "Foreign Document delivered by Yossef," IDFA 1949/2605/3; Levi, p. 183.
- 7 *Filastin* (Jaffa), 6.1.1948; "Hotel Semiramis," 8.1.1948, CZA S25/4013; report on two other women who perished in Semiramis, *al-Difa'* (Jaffa), 9.1.1948; obituary, *Filastin*, 10.1.1948; Wassif Jawhariyya, *al-Quds al-intidabiyya fi al-mudhakkarat al-Jawhariyya* (Jerusalem: Institute for Jerusalem Studies, 2005), p. 595.
- 8 Ghada Karmi, *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 86-7; Hala Sakakini, *Jerusalem and I* (Jerusalem: Commercial Press, 1987), 5.1.1948, pp. 110-111; Jamil I. Toubbeh, *Day of the Long Night: A Palestinian Refugee Remembers the Nakba* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), pp. 27-8.
- 9 H. Sakakini, pp. 110-111; Toubbeh, pp. 27-8; John Melkon Rose, *Armenians of Jerusalem: Memories of Life in Palestine* (London: Radcliffe, 1993), p. 182.
- 10 Khalil al-Sakakini, *Yawmiyyat Khalil al-Sakakini*, (ed. Akram Mussalam) vol. 8 (Ramallah: Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2010), p. 238.
- 11 Karmi, p. 90.
- 12 Toubbeh, pp. 26-7; H. Sakakini, 8.1.1948, p. 112; Rose, p. 186; Karmi, pp. 79-80, 91-2,

- 102, 106; "An Arab named Tlil," 3.1.1948, Haganah Archive, 105/23.
- 13 'Shafiq 'Aways', "Arab command in the Jerusalem area", IDFA 1949/7249/283 (hereafter: Arab command), p. 12; 'Arif al-'Arif, *al-Nakba* (Sidon and Beirut: al-maktaba al-'asriyya, 1956-1960), p. 291, claims that 'Aways and his fighters arrived in Qatamon even before the Semiramis bombing.
- 14 H. Sakakini, 10-12.2.1948, pp. 113-15.
- 15 "Arab newsletter," 25.2.1948, IDFA 1948/500/59; Albina to District Commissioner, Jerusalem Municipality Historical Archive, 848/5-03/1, 5, 19.1.1948.
- 16 H. Sakakini, 14.3.1948, pp. 115-16 (Spelling of names in quotations follows the English original).
- 17 Karmi, pp. 102-3; Toubbeh, pp. 13, 25-6, 30.
- 18 National Committee of Jerusalem's liaison officer to the fighters, report submitted to Hajj Amin al-Husayni on the security condition in Jerusalem, Beirut 19.3.1948, Israel State Archive, 65/1633; cf. "Arab newsletter," 17, 21.3.1948, IDFA 1948/500/59; see also "Ibrahim Abu Dayyeh" and "Shafiq 'Aways," *Arab Command*, p. 12.
- 19 "Arab newsletter," 7.4.1948, IDFA 500/1948/59; H. Sakakini, Jerusalem, 30.3.1948, to S. Sakakini, Cairo, in idem, pp. 116-17 (Sari Sakakini went to Cairo to seek medical treatment for a heart condition in late March 1948).
- 20 K. Sakakini, 28.3.1948, p. 253.
- 21 H. Sakakini, 23, 26.4.1948, p. 119.
- 22 "Operation of Rachil/Yair, Arab letter to America," CZA S25/9209; cf. Karmi, pp. 9-14, 93, 101, 112.
- 23 K. Sakakini, 20.3.1948, p. 248.
- 24 H. Sakakini, 24.4.1948, pp. 119-120; See also K. Sakakini, 13.4.1948, p. 256-259.
- 25 H. Sakakini, 29.4.1948, pp. 119-120.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 H. Sakakini, 30.4.1948, p. 121; cf. "We should not forget" (lectures given under this title), in K. Sakakini, pp. 300-303 (given in Cairo, 11.10. 1948, 5.11.1948).
- 28 H. Sakakini, 30.4.1948, p. 121.
- 29 H. Sakakini, 2, 20.5.1948 (Cairo), pp. 122-3. The Sakakinis remained in Egypt until the deaths first of Sari (from heart attack), and shortly afterwards his father Khalil, in 1953. A short while later the sisters Hala and Dumya returned to the West Bank and settled down together in Ramallah, both remaining unmarried. Hala died there in 2002, a short time before her sister's death.
- 30 "We should not forget" (lectures given under this title), in K. Sakakini, pp. 300-303 (given in Cairo, 11.10. 1948, 5.11.1948). Sakakini moved his diaries to the house of his married sister in Old Jerusalem.
- 31 Christian participation in the fighting was usually lower than their proportion in the population. Thus, for example, only five Christians were among 80 Arab commanders in the Jerusalem area, even though they comprised nearly 50 percent of the Arab population in Jerusalem. See "Arab Command in the Jerusalem Area," IDFA 1949/7249/283; only one Christian was among ten cadets chosen by Jerusalem's National Committee for officer training in Damascus. See *Filastin*, 7 April 1948. For a fuller discussion of this phenomenon see Radai, "The Collapse of the Palestinian Arab Middle Class".