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## British Army and Palestine Police Deserters and the Arab-Israeli War of 1948

British servicemen and policemen who had been stationed in Palestine towards the end of the British Mandate and deserted their units to serve with either Jewish or Arab forces have only received cursory academic attention.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this is a relatively unique occurrence, in the sense that in no other British withdrawal from colonial territories did members from the security forces desert in notable numbers to remain in the territory to partake in hostilities. In making their decision these deserting personnel left their employment, the chance to return home to Britain untainted, and criminalised themselves in the process. Regardless of whether these men had pro-Arab or pro-Jewish leanings, they saw greater value in remaining to fight in Palestine than returning home to Britain irrespective of the consequences.

It is difficult to be certain of their number, and reported figures have varied. For the pro-Jewish group of deserters, one article put the number at twelve, while a Jewish veterans' association estimated the number at around 20.<sup>2</sup> We have identified 17 deserters by name, all of whom joined the Israel Defence Forces (IDF). The pro-Arab deserters were more dispersed, with individuals joining the irregular Palestinian Arab militia al-Jihad al-Muqaddas (Holy War Army), led by Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini and Hasan Salama, as well as the Arab Liberation Army (ALA), a force established by the Arab League, with Fawzi al-Qawuqji as its main commander.<sup>3</sup> Deserters were also witnessed fighting with Transjordan's

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *O Jerusalem!* (New York: Simon And Schuster, 1972), 192-193; Haim Levenberg, *Military Preparations of the Arab Community in Palestine 1945-1948* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), 90; Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (London: Yale University Press, 2008), 108; Joseph Nevo 'The Arabs of Palestine, 1947-48: Military and Political Activity', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 23.1, (1987), 16; Norman Rose, *'A Senseless, Squalid War': Voices from Palestine, 1890s-1948* (Pimlico: Random House, 2010), 187.

<sup>2</sup> Arie O'Sullivan, 'Dad's Army', *Jerusalem Post*, 18 May 2001; Joe Woolf, 'Mike Flanagan', *World Machal*, [http://machal.org.il/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=766&Itemid=1175&lang=en](http://machal.org.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=766&Itemid=1175&lang=en) [date accessed: 27/8/2016].

<sup>3</sup> Morris, *1948*, 89-91; Haganah Archives (HA) in Tel Aviv, 124/general/8, 'Yediuth Tena', 22 March 1948 [Hebrew].

professional and effective force, the Arab Legion, commanded by the seconded British officer, John Bagot Glubb.<sup>4</sup> A low estimate of this pro-Arab group of deserters was put at 53,<sup>5</sup> while the highest estimate set their number at around 200.<sup>6</sup> After analysing numerous reports on and mentions of these pro-Arab deserters, a figure between 100 and 200 spread across all three forces seems correct.

This article draws parallels and highlights contrasts between both groups of deserters, analysing their motivations, contributions, experiences and how they were remembered after the war ended. In doing so, it illuminates prevalent attitudes among British forces at the end of the Mandate. We argue that this willingness to stay on and fight was a result of the ideologically-charged nature of the first Arab-Israeli war as well as the pre-1948 experiences of deserters, either during the Second World War or in the British counterinsurgency campaign in Palestine in the years leading up to Britain's withdrawal. We begin with a contextual analysis of the environment in which decisions to desert were made, whether in the British Army or Palestine Police. The effects of the Jewish insurgency on British personnel created widespread prejudices against the Jewish community - the Yishuv - and a degree of sympathy toward the Arab community.<sup>7</sup> The article goes on to examine individual reasons for deserting. Commentators, past and present, have assigned various motivations to the deserters:

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<sup>4</sup> John Roy Carlson, *Cairo to Damascus* (Alcester: Carlson Press, 2008), 324; 'Homesick Deserters', *The Sunday Post*, 12 September 1948; 'Palestine Loses Glamour For British Soldiers', *The Advocate* (Australia), 2 October 1948.

<sup>5</sup> Dalia Karpel, 'The Irish Rover', *Haaretz*, 17 December 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/the-irish-rover-1.331149> [date accessed: 28/10/2015].

<sup>6</sup> Rose, 'A Senseless, Squalid War', 187.

<sup>7</sup> For studies on the British administration in Palestine, its reaction to the insurgency and the final days of the Mandate, see: Avi Shlaim, 'Britain and the Arab-Israeli War', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 16.4, (1987), 50-76; David A. Charters, *The British Army and the Jewish Insurgency in Palestine, 1945-47* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Ilan Pappé, *Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); Saul Zadka, 'Jewish Armed Struggle in Palestine in the 1940s: Its Impact on British Morale and Public Opinion', *Israel Affairs*, vol. 5.4 (1999), 181-197; Motti Golani, 'The "Haifa Turning Point": The British Administration and the Civil War in Palestine, December 1947-May 1948', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 37.2 (2001), 93-130; Motti Golani, *Palestine Between Politics and Terror, 1945-47* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2013).

money, love and youthful adventurism.<sup>8</sup> While the deserters in opposing groups differed fundamentally in their sympathies and antipathies towards the local communities, we contend that there are striking similarities between the two groups in terms of common motivations and characteristics. The article shows that the wartime and post-war fortunes of both groups were largely tied up with the fortunes of the forces they joined. It concludes with a reflection on how these British deserters fit into the emerging literature on transnational military service.

The picture presented here is incomplete. Although every effort was made to source material in several archives, a range of primary and secondary literature as well as from the press, the actions of these deserters has been difficult to piece together. Some potentially relevant sources, such as proceedings of court martial cases against servicemen, have been destroyed by the War Office, while additional information has been withheld by veterans in the oral history testimonies they have given.<sup>9</sup> Information on the deserters who served in Arab units is particularly patchy, not only because they deserted, but also because they fought for a cause that was subsequently defeated.

In this respect, the deserters differ from other, more intellectual or publicity-oriented transnational soldiers who took part in this war and in other conflicts. While foreign volunteers such as George Orwell (Spanish Civil War) and Harold Livingston (Jewish-American volunteer for the Israeli Air Force in 1948) showed no embarrassment in retelling their experiences, and although some of today's Islamist 'foreign fighters' brazenly boast on social media outlets about their actions, not a single one

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<sup>8</sup> Collins and Lapierre, p. 192; Karpel, 'The Irish Rover'; Ronald Monson, 'Arabs Are Fighting Wary War', *Argus*, 18 May 1948.

<sup>9</sup> Since 1945 all court proceedings of court martial cases against servicemen have been destroyed by the War Office except in seven cases of interest. Only one of these is relevant to this article, involving the charge against a British soldier who deserted to fight in the Haganah. The National Archives (TNA) in London, WO 71/1189, 'Spriggs, 'W. J. Offence: Desertion and Theft', 29 November 1949. Some oral accounts given by police and army veterans made clear that they were withholding information on deserters. See, for instance: interview With Walter Gibbons, St. Antony's Middle East Centre Archive (MECA), Oxford, GB165-0388; Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (IWMSA), Gerry Power, 19030/1; and John Joseph West, 12367/1.

of the pro-Arab deserters felt compelled to give an account of their service.<sup>10</sup> One of them, Peter Madison, attempted during the war to sell his story to a journalist but was rejected.<sup>11</sup> There is fragmentary evidence that can be drawn from letters written by Arabs during the war and captured by Jewish forces or intercepted by the British postal service and transferred to the Yishuv intelligence.<sup>12</sup> Historian Shay Hazkani, for instance, has located a small number of letters written by Arab fighters, mentioning British deserters. These letters express the fighters' surprise at encountering pro-Arab deserters and comment on the latter's conduct in battle.<sup>13</sup> However, the absence of more detailed sources means that the history of the deserters to Arab units presented here does not reveal the full picture.

None of the deserters who joined the IDF published memoirs or diaries from their service either. Two, however, gave interviews to Dan Kurzman for his book *Genesis: 1948*.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, some gave interviews to John Burrows Jr, the son of a deserter, who contributed to an article for the *Jerusalem Post*.<sup>15</sup> Although there were significantly fewer deserters in the pro-Jewish group, more material is available and their motivations and experiences can be understood to a greater degree.

## I. Service in Palestine Before the 1948 War

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<sup>10</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin Books, 2000); Rachel Briggs and Tanya Silverman, 'Western Foreign Fighters: Innovations in Responding to the Threat', published by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2014), 18; Jytte Klausen, 'Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 38.1 (2015), 1-22.

<sup>11</sup> John Phillips, *Bled to the Gutter: A Photo Reporter's Story* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1962), 246-249.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance: Central Zionist Archives (CZA) in Jerusalem, S25/9209, Haganah summaries, letter from Yusra Salah (Nablus) to A'ida Audi (Ramallah), 14 April 1948.

<sup>13</sup> Shai Hazkani, '1948 from Below: A transnational history of the war for Palestine' (PhD thesis, New York University, 2016). We are grateful to Dr Hazkani for sharing this information with us.

<sup>14</sup> Dan Kurzman, *Genesis 1948: The First Arab-Israeli War* (London: Mitchell, 1972)

<sup>15</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Dad's Army'.

All of the deserters in question chose to leave their British units between November 1947 and June 1948. This period saw intensifying communal violence that began following the UN vote to support the partition of Palestine in late November 1947. It ended when the last units stationed in the country were withdrawn from Haifa over a month after the formal British Mandate ended in mid-May 1948.<sup>16</sup> This period came after two years of heightening insurgent violence conducted by Jewish paramilitary and terrorist groups. During the period 1945-1948 the dissident organizations, the Irgun and the Stern Group, unleashed a bloody campaign against British military and civic targets. The more professional paramilitary organisation of the Haganah, the precursor to the IDF, mainly focused on infrastructure attacks and aiding illegal immigration, and were less violently anti-British than the dissidents. In studying British security personnel during the period, a number of aspects become clear. Firstly, a substantial change occurred in the opinions of British servicemen during the insurgency, resulting in hostility towards the Yishuv and prevalent anti-Semitism in the ranks. Feelings towards the Arab community were less passionate but many expressed sympathy, with some believing that, as a result of Britain's withdrawal, the Arabs were being let down.<sup>17</sup> This helps to explain the significantly larger figure of deserters who fought for the Arabs. Two issues of indiscipline are also significant for this study. Firstly, soldiers and policemen taking matters into their own hands, engaging in reprisal attacks on the Yishuv, once again highlighting the hostility against the latter. Secondly, the development of a black market for army and police surplus goods during 1948 put British personnel into direct contact with the Jewish and Arab underground, forging relationships in the process.

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<sup>16</sup> 'Theft of British Tanks Angers Palestine GOC', *Daily News* (Perth), 30 June 1948, 3.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance: IWM, 'Narrative Of Events From February 1947 Until Withdrawal Of All British Troops By Lieutenant General G.H.A. Macmillan, WSC/46; IWMSA, Alan Peter Humphries, 21736/3, IWMSA, Francis Robert Charles Johnson, 23204/2 IWMSA, George Richard Richards, 9860/1; IWMSA, Peter Roome Thomas, 15485/1; Eric Lowe, *Forgotten Conscripts: Prelude to Palestine's Struggle for Survival* (Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2006), 63; MECA, Interview with Gerald Green, GB165-0404; Rose, 'A Senseless, Squalid War', p. 120; Zadka, 'Jewish Armed Struggle', 182-184.

On arrival in Palestine, the evidence suggests that soldiers and policemen were either supportive of the plight of the Yishuv and Jewish immigrants, or ambivalent. In a letter to his father, Lieutenant Jack Harris spoke about Jewish immigrants, saying: 'Our troops could not be other than sympathetic towards them. We had seen Belsen in Germany before coming here.'<sup>18</sup> Yet the insurgency brought terror and threats to security personnel, resulting in a polarisation of attitudes. This created disdain for the Yishuv amongst British ranks, and alienated moderate elements of the Yishuv against the Administration's repressive responses. Indeed, military intelligence at the time commented that soldiers faced frequent denunciations from the Yishuv, resulting in 'friction, irritation and frustration.'<sup>19</sup>

The effects of terror cannot be understated, as military personnel were the prime targets and the dissidents successfully carried out effective and high-profile operations such as the King David Hotel bombing in July 1946 and the hanging of two British sergeants in July 1947. In total, during 1945-1948, 388 British subjects were killed in Palestine.<sup>20</sup> The effects on morale were noticeable. In the autumn of 1946 the UK Government received reports from the Army Headquarters in the Jaffa-Tel Aviv district that 'morale both with officers and ordinary soldiers is particularly low' due to the curfew placed upon Tel Aviv and it being out of bounds for servicemen.<sup>21</sup> This decline continued into 1947 with servicemen spending a great deal of time either in barbed-wire 'Bevingrad' camps or on operations where they encountered hostility, being shouted at, spat on as well as seeing aggressive posters labelled with slogans such as 'Death to the Brits'.<sup>22</sup>

The subsequent effects on the attitudes of British servicemen were substantial. Many veterans expressed confusion at being targeted and resented surviving a 'proper' war against the Germans only

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<sup>18</sup> Lowe, *Forgotten Conscripts*, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Zadka, 'Jewish Armed Struggle', 183.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Silver, *Menachem Begin: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1984), 85.

<sup>21</sup> WO 261/647, in Zadka, 'Jewish Armed Struggle', 181-182.

<sup>22</sup> Lowe, *Forgotten Conscripts*, 70; IWMSA, Leslie Scott Hatt, 22343/1; Kenneth Herbert Lee, 4795/1; Humphrey Edgar Nicholson, 12139/8; Zadka, 'Jewish Armed Struggle', 181.

to be shot in the back in Palestine.<sup>23</sup> The initial sympathy for the Yishuv quickly dissipated, to be replaced by prevalent attitudes of anti-Semitism within the Army and Police. For instance, in October 1946 another internal British report noted how the attitude of the Army toward the Yishuv was becoming 'increasingly anti-Jewish,' and this comment was again shared in an Army Intelligence Report in 1947.<sup>24</sup> Numerous personal testimonies also attest to this development within both the Army and the Palestine Police, making clear that hostility against the Yishuv was expressed throughout the security services.<sup>25</sup> There were exceptions to this general attitude, but such instances only re-emphasise the widespread hostility towards the Yishuv. One veteran felt he had a duty to the Jewish immigrants but admits he was in a minority compared to others who were 'very anti-Jew.'<sup>26</sup> Over the course of 1945-1948 an attitude expressed by soldiers, policemen and administrators alike was that the British had their hands tied, were vulnerable to attack and could put an end to the insurgency if only they could 'take off their gloves.'<sup>27</sup>

Occasionally, these sentiments were acted upon by elements within the Army and Police. In November 1946, for instance, members of the Palestine Police left nine civilians in hospital after terrorising residents and smashing store fronts after three of their colleagues were killed.<sup>28</sup> The diary of Captain W. C. Brown also noted extra-judicial activities carried out by elements of the Army: 'whenever a soldier was killed, we shot one of theirs... an eye for an eye.'<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, after the hanging of the two British sergeants in July 1947, British personnel ran amok in Tel Aviv and Haifa firing on civilian

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<sup>23</sup> IWMSA, James Common, 22364/2; Henry Ronald Esler, 12527; Charles Richard Warrens Norman, 8973/3; John Waddy, 21036/4.

<sup>24</sup> WO 261/526 & WO 261/647, in Zadka, 'Jewish Armed Struggle', 182, 184.

<sup>25</sup> IWMSA, James Common, 22364/2; Charles Richard Warrens Norman, 8973/3; Dennis Richardson, 9795/5; George Richard Richards, 9860/2; Peter Roome Thomas, 15485/1; MECA, GB165-0390, interview with Martin Duchesne; GB165-0404, interview With Gerald Green; GB165-0395, interview with Roy Rodrick.

<sup>26</sup> IWMSA, Alan Peter Humphries, 21736/3.

<sup>27</sup> IWMSA, Gordon Ross Mitchell, 14996/4; David French, *The British Way In Counter-Insurgency, 1945-1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153; MECA, CM III/III/1080, Sir Alan Cunningham Papers, Telegram to Secretary of State for Colonies, 15 March 1948.

<sup>28</sup> French, *The British Way*, 153.

<sup>29</sup> Rose, 'A Senseless, Squalid War', 147.



transport and assaulting residents.<sup>30</sup> Examples of such acts persisted into 1948. On 12 February, four Haganah men were arrested by an army patrol and released into the Muslim quarter of the old city of Jerusalem, only to be found beaten to death three hours later.<sup>31</sup> The theme of vengeance can be traced in the motivations of a number of British deserters later in the conflict.

Sometimes British security policy was the cause of excessive violence against the Yishuv rather than vengeful episodes by rogue personnel. The most notorious example of this was the 'Farran Affair.' In March 1947 the Palestine Police established 'special squads' to take the fight to the insurgents in Palestine. Among those drafted in from the UK was a decorated SAS Major named Roy Farran who saw himself as having 'a free hand...against terror when all others were so closely hobbled.'<sup>32</sup> Farran's mission to terrorise the terrorists with extra-judicial violence soon ended in disgrace. On 6 May 1947 his squad of four snatched a very junior teenage member of the Stern Group named Alexander Rubowitz from a street in west Jerusalem. Over the next few hours, Farran took Rubowitz to a remote olive grove, tied him to a tree and 'interrogated' him before killing him by smashing his head with a rock and repeatedly stabbing him in the chest.<sup>33</sup> Although Farran was arrested and charged with murder he was subsequently acquitted during his court martial, by which time the matter had attracted attention from American and British newspapers, embarrassing the authorities in Palestine. The Yishuv saw the scandal as a further rift between them and the British Administration, exacerbating the already poor relationship. To David Cesarani, the Farran Affair 'added to the erosion of British authority and the delegitimation of the Mandate.'<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> French, *The British Way*, 148; Rose, *'A Senseless, Squalid War'*, 165.

<sup>31</sup> Arthur Koestler, *Promise and Fulfilment: Palestine, 1917-1949* (London: Macmillan, 1949), 172-173.

<sup>32</sup> David Cesarani, 'The War on Terror that Failed: British Counter-Insurgency in Palestine 1945-1947 and the "Farran Affair"', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, vol. 24.5 (2012), 657.

<sup>33</sup> David Cesarani, *Major Farran's Hat: Murder, Scandal and Britain's War against Jewish Terrorism, 1945-1948* (London: Vintage, 2010), 96.

<sup>34</sup> Cesarani, 'The War on Terror that Failed', p. 663.

In contrast, this acrimonious relationship was not replicated with the local Arab community in Palestine. In fact, a number of Army and Police veterans recall favourably the general pro-Arab disposition of their units. Policeman Gerald Green was of the belief that '95% of us Brits were pro-Arab.'<sup>35</sup> However, these sentiments seem to be more the result of British appreciation for Arab passivity as opposed to any shared political sympathies. Policeman Terence Shand articulated this sentiment, commenting that 'we obviously became more biased to the people who haven't caused us murders.'<sup>36</sup>

The final days of the Mandate saw the emergence of a widespread black market that developed between elements within the British Army and Arab and Jewish militias. The military had decided to destroy much of the equipment stationed in Palestine, as it was unable to return it to Britain and the situation made clear that it could not be left to the use of either the Arabs or Jews. As a result of this and the looming full-scale conflict, both Jewish and Arab agents made frequent efforts to entice servicemen who could be tempted into selling their equipment rather than destroying it.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its illegal nature, no accounts by veterans have been found which admit to selling equipment to local forces, but a number have commented on being approached and also on the extent to which others in the army were engaged in the activity. The veterans Tim McElhaw and Peter Roome Thomas, for instance, commented on the Haganah offering them £8,000 for RAF spitfires and armoured cars respectively, whilst George Richard Richards recalls that 'certain things were being sold left, right and centre'.<sup>37</sup> In February 1948, Major General Sir John Nelson met the Arab Liberation Army commander, Fawzi al-Qawuqji. The latter lamented the skill of his force and offered Nelson money for equipment and also a job with a salary of £20,000 a year, a very substantial sum of money

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<sup>35</sup> IWMSA, Francis Robert Charles Johnson, 23204/2; Alan Peter Humphries, 21736/3; Richard Arthur Smith, 11077/3; MECA, GB165-0404, interview with Gerald Green.

<sup>36</sup> IWMSA, Terence Shand, 19027/1.

<sup>37</sup> IWMSA, Michael Burke, 10125/2; Tim McElhaw, 33837/2; George Richard Richards, 9860/1; and Peter Roome Thomas, 15485/1.

in 1948, which he declined.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, these examples demonstrate that, as British soldiers' discipline was waning, they were increasingly coming in contact with the Jewish and Arab underground who were both in need of expertise and equipment. While many simply sold weapons and made money, it is clear that elements of the armed forces and police made working connections with Arab or Jewish militias, highlighting another instance of British indiscipline which is important in understanding the environment from which the deserters made their decisions.

## II. Personal Motivations and Characteristics

Analysis of the contextual atmosphere alone fails to account for the decision to desert and fight for either of the opposing sides in Palestine. In fact, many of the British soldiers who had served in Palestine declared that they were overjoyed to be returning home.<sup>39</sup> Transnational soldiers, in the 1948 War and in other conflicts, were often spurred into action by a combination of political and personal reasons. Therefore, the personal motivations of deserting soldiers and policemen are important to understand their dramatic decisions. Though the pro-Jewish and pro-Arab deserters fundamentally differed in their sympathies toward the local communities, the more personal motivations exhibited by deserters in both groups highlight a substantial degree of similarity. For these fighters, desertion was not just about political sympathies or prejudices. Desertion actually represented an opportunity, whether it was for love, money, adventure or a fresh start. These striking similarities between the groups continue if their characteristics are compared in relation to age, marital status and rank.

Of the approximately 20 British deserters who fought in the IDF, their perspective on the conflict represented a minority view within the British Army and Palestine Police. For the deserters Johnny

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<sup>38</sup> Sir John Nelson, *Always a Grenadier* (London: Regimental HQ, Grenadier Guards, 1984), 63.

<sup>39</sup> IWMSA, Alan Peter Humphries, 21736/3; Kenneth Herbert Lee, 9485/2; and John Robert Tremble, 12724/3.

Burrows, Thomas O’Sullivan and Mike Flanagan, their experiences of liberating the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945 instilled in them a strong sympathy for the Jewish people and their struggle for independence.<sup>40</sup> Burrows, for instance, was so ‘disgusted with the way the Jews were being treated’ that he deserted before the UN Partition vote and the British announcement of withdrawal.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, British deserters Kit Wilkes-Chase and John Watson felt shocked by the way Jewish refugees were treated, compelling them to desert.<sup>42</sup> This alienation was similarly expressed by John ‘Paddy’ Cooper after he witnessed an Arab massacre against a Jewish convoy en route to Mount Scopus in Jerusalem that left 78 dead, many burnt alive. Due to the hesitant reaction of his British unit, Cooper deserted that same night and, according to his receiving officer, stated ‘I cannot serve in an army that allows atrocities like that.’<sup>43</sup> For such soldiers, the insurgency had little effect on their sympathies, in contrast to the resentful attitude of much of the Army against the Yishuv.

Alternatively, for the British deserters who fought for the Arabs, the limited source material available suggests that political sympathy for the Arab cause was less important, though for some it was a priority. A deserter known as ‘Frank’ who led ‘Frank’s Band’ which included eight British deserters and a former German SS officer within the Arab Liberation Army, spoke in May 1948 to a *Chicago Tribune* journalist. Frank declared: ‘I could not stomach the way the Arabs who should really own this country are being treated by not only the UN but by the government in Palestine... I made my protest with the only thing that mattered to me – my career.’<sup>44</sup> Similarly, a soldier who did not desert recalled that ‘one

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Celinscak, *Distance from the Belsen Heap: Allied Forces and the Liberation of a Nazi Concentration Camp* (London: University Of Toronto Press, 2015), 115.

<sup>41</sup> O’Sullivan, ‘Dad’s Army’.

<sup>42</sup> John Sutherland, ‘John Watson – Obituary’, *The Guardian*, 29 March 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2011/mar/29/john-watson-obituary> [date accessed: 14/11/2015]; ‘Kit Wilkes-Chase, Obituary’, *The Telegraph*, 22 November 2002, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1413909/Kit-Wilkes-Chase.html> [date accessed: 3/3/2016].

<sup>43</sup> Karpel, ‘The Irish Rover’; Morris, 1948, 128-129.

<sup>44</sup> Clay Gowran, ‘English Army Deserters Join up with Arabs’, *Chicago Tribune*, 21 May 1948, <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1948/05/21/page/2/article/english-army-deserters-join-up-with-arabs> [date accessed: 11/12/2015]; Phillips, *Bled to the Gutter*, 237.

or two' fellow soldiers had joined the Arabs partly because they felt that the Arabs had been 'let down.'<sup>45</sup>

In the main, however, for this pro-Arab group the common motivation was the chance to take revenge. These deserters, although taking the attitude to a violent extreme, displayed the resentment towards the Yishuv that was prevalent in British security forces. One of them was Eddie Brown, who led a brief, but deadly bombing campaign under Arab commander, Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini. His actions were motivated to an extent, by the death of his brother at the hands of Jewish terrorists.<sup>46</sup> This vengeful zeal was also uncovered by Sam Souki, a correspondent for the United Press Agency, when he came across four British deserters in Damascus. One, originally from Liverpool, commented 'mates I had down there (Palestine) were killed – three of them when Jews attacked us in a café. I swore I'd get even.'<sup>47</sup> Sam Pope Brewer, who interviewed 'Frank's Band' for the *New York Times*, commented that their main motivation was 'to avenge friends killed by terrorists in Palestine or to retaliate for the tension they had lived under.'<sup>48</sup> Desertion gave these men a chance to retaliate in a way that was not possible within the structure of the Army.

A less violent explanation for deciding to stay on in Palestine was the influence on British soldiers of romantic relationships with local Jewish and Arab women. With the growth in the number of British personnel who were stationed in Palestine during the Arab Revolt (1936-1939), the Second World War and the post-1945 Jewish insurgency, the number of romantic encounters with local women increased.<sup>49</sup> For some of the deserters, the importance of personal relationships trumped remaining

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<sup>45</sup> IWMSA, George Richard Richards, 9860/1.

<sup>46</sup> Collins and Lapierre, *O Jerusalem*, 173-175.

<sup>47</sup> Sam Souki, 'Liverpool Accent in Syria', *Palestine Post*, 7 May 1948, <http://web.nli.org.il/sites/JPress/English/Pages/Palestine-Post.aspx> [date accessed: 2/2/2016].

<sup>48</sup> Sam Pope Brewer, 'Britons, German Help Arabs', *New York Times*, 18 May 1948, <http://search.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/108179334/10C7F07317E94296PQ/24?accountid=14664> [date accessed: 2/2/2015].

<sup>49</sup> Motti Golani and Daniela Reich, 'Emissary or Excommunicate: A Preliminary Look at the Charged Interaction between Jewish Women and British Imperial Soldiers in late Mandatory Palestine (1940–1948)', *Zion*, 73 (2008), 325-348 [Hebrew].

in the British forces, even if it meant joining units that had been previously considered as enemies. Despite withdrawing with the police in 1948, John Joseph West reflected on why policemen he knew deserted: 'Usually women were behind it, there was usually an Arab girl or a Jewish girl that had got at them and convinced them of the right of their cause.' A particular acquaintance of his became very fond of a local Arab woman, converted to Islam and joined their fight.<sup>50</sup> After the war ended, a number of pro-Arab deserters made their way to Amman to be processed back to Britain. According to the British Minister there, Sir Alec Kirkbride, a number of those had been influenced to desert by their Arab girlfriends.<sup>51</sup>

Another example of a romantic motivation is that of Regimental Sergeant Major Desmond Rutledge, who saw his Jewish girlfriend Miriam as often as he could in Tel Aviv. As the end of the Mandate drew closer in early 1948 and their future together was in question, Miriam suggested that he should stay and fight with her friends in the Haganah. He agreed, as long as they were to be married. Many years after the war, Rutledge gave an interview to historian Dan Kurzman in which he stated to have had some, but not passionate, sympathy for the Jewish cause. Deserting gave him the chance to marry his sweetheart and start a new life in Palestine.<sup>52</sup> Evidently, romance and the opportunity for a fresh start were motivations for deserters on both sides in the conflict.

Some deserters on both sides also saw desertion as an adventure. British Minister Kirkbride identified the three main motivations of the pro-Arab deserters he encountered as racial prejudice, romantic relationships and most commonly, a 'love for adventure.'<sup>53</sup> The Military Attaché to High Commissioner Cunningham, Major Towers Clark, also believed some deserters to be of 'romantic minds, with

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<sup>50</sup> IWMSA, John Joseph West, 12367/1.

<sup>51</sup> Alec Kirkbride, *From the Wings: Amman Memoirs, 1947-1951* (London: Frank Cass, 1976), 100.

<sup>52</sup> Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 114-155. Another deserter, known as 'Pearson', was also alleged to have deserted in order to be with his Jewish girlfriend. TNA, WO 71/1189, 'Spriggs, W.J. Offence: Desertion and Theft', 30 November 1949.

<sup>53</sup> Kirkbride, *From the Wings*, 100.

'Lawrence of Arabia' attitudes.'<sup>54</sup> Journalist John Roy Carlson, who came across British deserters fighting for the Arab Legion, noted that one of them, 'Sidney', gave a letter addressed to his parents for Carlson to deliver. It sent his wishes and stated 'I am still alive and having a wonderful time fighting the Jews in Palestine.'<sup>55</sup> The thrill of action seemingly gave deserters an exciting alternative to returning back to Britain.

Adventurism also featured as a motivation among those who had other reasons to stay on. Rutledge, who stayed primarily in order to be with his girlfriend, foresaw that returning to Britain would be a 'humdrum experience', and explained that 'life would certainly be more interesting fighting for a cause, helping to shape history, than teaching it to a horde of bored children in a gloomy London classroom.'<sup>56</sup> British deserter Albert Melville saw action with the IDF in Jerusalem. One of his comrades during the siege later commented that Melville had remained to fight with the Jews partly because he was an idealist but also because he wanted an adventure.<sup>57</sup>

The third related motivation exhibited by deserters in both groups was financial gain. The contact that was made between the various underground groups and British servicemen provided opportunities for offers for the latter to desert. Although his political sympathies were formed during his participation in liberating Bergen-Belsen, it seems that the primary motivation for Mike Flanagan was financial gain, and the possibility of a new life that this could fund. Along with Harry Macdonald, he began selling equipment to the Haganah in March 1948. As the final British withdrawal drew ever closer, his contact enquired about purchasing two Cromwell tanks, offering £3,000 if the mission was successful. Flanagan himself had previously commented to Macdonald, 'only the rich get anywhere in Britain. I'm going to emigrate to Canada or Australia or somewhere. Maybe there'll be more opportunity there.'<sup>58</sup> Evidently then, before the offer was made, Flanagan was keen to leave Britain.

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<sup>54</sup> IWM, Private Papers of Major Peter Towers-Clark, Diary Entry 20 March 1948, 14871.

<sup>55</sup> Carlson, *Cairo to Damascus*, 376.

<sup>56</sup> Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 114.

<sup>57</sup> John Phillips, *Jerusalem: A Will to Survive* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 65.

<sup>58</sup> Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 115.

The duo subsequently accepted and, knowing that the agreement could only be achieved if they deserted, they duly did so in late June 1948.<sup>59</sup> They were not the only two persuaded. Another soldier, known as ‘Smithy’, sold a Sherman tank for £2,000 and deserted to the Jews.<sup>60</sup>

The race to purchase equipment and acquire personnel was replicated by Arab units. A string of news reports from January to April of soldiers and policemen deserting to the Arabs with weapons and armoured cars indicates that this practice was taking place on both sides.<sup>61</sup> In April 1948, while reporting on the ALA leadership, *Life* photographer John Phillips came across a flashy British deserter in an Amman bar who bragged about selling explosives to the Arabs.<sup>62</sup> According to a Haganah source, a British policeman stole an armoured personnel carrier from Jaffa and passed it to Abd a-Qadir al-Husseini’s headquarters.<sup>63</sup> On the Arab side, as Major Nelson’s story highlights, individual expertise was sought as well as equipment. The deserter Eddie Brown gave the killing of his brother as the main reason for his desertion, but it is also important to note that he and fellow deserter Peter Madison sold their skills with explosives to Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini for £500 each.<sup>64</sup> Former policeman Denys Hodson later recalled how, in the final days of the Mandate, Arabs were offering £100 for a night’s work by ‘any qualified person who could operate a Bren gun’ and suspected that a number from the police took the offer.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> ‘Theft of British Tanks Angers Palestine GOC’, *Daily News* (Perth), 30 June 1948, 3.

<sup>60</sup> IWMSA, Gerry Power 19030/1.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Changing Loyalties’, *Palestine Post*, 11 January 1948; Sam Pope Brewer, ‘Blows At Britons Go In Palestine’, *The New York Times*, 24 February 1948; Sam Pope Brewer, ‘Haganah Accord On Irgun Reported’ *The New York Times*, 9 March 1948; Sam Pope Brewer, ‘British Deserters Seized With Arabs’, *The New York Times*, 11 March 1948; ‘3 B/C’s Desert With Arms’, *Palestine Post*, 15 March 1948; ‘Three British Soldiers Desert’, *Palestine Post*, 11 April 1948; Henry Gurney, *The End Of The British Mandate: The Diary Of Sir Henry Gurney*, ed. Motti Golani (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 26.

<sup>62</sup> Phillips, *Bled to the Gutter*, 237.

<sup>63</sup> HA, 124/general/8, ‘Yediuth Tena’, 29 February 1948 [Hebrew].

<sup>64</sup> Collins and Lapierre, *O Jerusalem*, 173-175; Phillips, *Bled to the Gutter*, 247.

<sup>65</sup> Nick Kardahji, ‘A Measure of Restraint: The Palestine Police and the End of the British Mandate’ (MPhil thesis, Oxford University, 2007), 73.



However, money was not important to all deserters. Perhaps to validate his sincere support for the Arab cause, 'Frank' would not let anyone into his motley crew if they asked about pay or food.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, John Burrows insisted only on being paid the standard salary, and the evidence suggests that for most pro-Jewish deserters, money was not the main incentive.<sup>67</sup> Regular wages on the Arab side were lower than under British service. According to Haganah intelligence reports, there were ten British deserters serving under Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini in March, with each receiving a mere £40 per month. A number of deserters from the Palestine Police in the Jenin area received the same wages, alongside full board, free beer and two packs of cigarettes a day.<sup>68</sup>

Motivations aside, there are also parallels in the general characteristics and profiles of both the pro-Arab and pro-Jewish groups. Most deserters were aged between 18 and 25. The only exceptions to this, based on the available source material, were pilot Jack Freedman, who had 11 years' service before deserting to the Israeli Air Force (IAF), and a couple of older deserters who joined the ALA.<sup>69</sup> Although the general make-up of 'Frank's Band' was mostly very young, they were led by two sergeant majors with 12 and 18 years' experience. Out of these two experienced soldiers, one is also the only deserter that is known to have been married and had children in Britain.<sup>70</sup> These men therefore were young and had short military careers. In addition, they lacked the family commitments that many other soldiers in Palestine would have had. This emphasises clearly the reduced responsibilities of many of those who made the decision to desert. Furthermore, for those deserters who had met or hoped to meet Jewish or Arab women and remain in Palestine, the opportunity presented itself as a chance to start anew, and break with their previous lives in Britain.

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<sup>66</sup> Phillips, *Bled to the Gutter*, p. 237

<sup>67</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Dad's Army'.

<sup>68</sup> CZA, S25/9209, Haganah summaries, 5 May 1948; HA, 124/general/8, 'Yediuth Tena', 23 March 1948 [Hebrew].

<sup>69</sup> Yaacov Markovitsky, *Machal: Overseas Volunteers in Israel's War of Independence* (Tel Aviv: World Machal, 2003), p. 23.

<sup>70</sup> Gowran, 'English Army Deserters'.

Out of the deserters who are known, it is also notable to highlight that most came from the non-commissioned ranks of the Army and were not in the officers' class. This most likely indicates that the men tended to come from unprivileged backgrounds and may have been less career minded than their superiors, again limiting responsibilities and their opportunities within the British Army. The background of those who fought in the Arab Legion is largely unknown. Considering that, at the start of hostilities in May 1948, around 40 British officers were serving in the Legion, it is possible that further British officers may have deserted and fought for the Legion but this cannot be ascertained.<sup>71</sup> Dov Joseph, the Israeli Military Governor of Jerusalem during the War, was certain that some British deserters were 'educated men' with 'nostalgic memories of Kipling's Empire.'<sup>72</sup>

Religious background seems to have played a negligible role for deserters who fought on both sides. None of the deserters were Jewish or Muslim when they made their decision, though some later converted. However, Catholic and Irish servicemen seem to have had a disposition towards sympathising with the Jews in Palestine. Tank operator Flanagan saw the Jews as fighting the same fight against the British that his own people had fought a couple of decades previously.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Thomas O'Sullivan of Sixth Airborne held anti-British opinions because of his Irish background, and John 'Paddy' Cooper later commented to his girlfriend that he deserted because 'I know what it is like to suffer discrimination because as an Irishman I suffered discrimination like the Jews.'<sup>74</sup>

### III. Wartime Experiences

The evidence suggests that whether desertion was pre-planned or spontaneous, it was easy to join their new units after absconding from their posts. While those who had planned their desertion had

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<sup>71</sup> Ron Pundik, *The Struggle for Sovereignty: Relations between Great Britain and Jordan, 1946-1951* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 103.

<sup>72</sup> Dov Joseph, *The Faithful City: The Siege of Jerusalem* (London: Hogarth Press, 1962), 116. For some circumstantial evidence, which may support Joseph's assertion, see: Harry Levin, *Jerusalem Embattled: A Diary of the City under Siege* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1950), 94.

<sup>73</sup> Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 115.

<sup>74</sup> Karpel, 'The Irish Rover'.

arranged agreements for doing so, the more impulsive deserters also seem to have found enlisting in Arab and Jewish militias easy and did so within a day.<sup>75</sup> 'Frank' for instance, contacted the Arab underground and was with them within 12 hours.<sup>76</sup> In both groups a degree of integration followed, including deserters adopting new names. Desmond Rutledge became Zvi Rimer for instance, while John Kenny, serving with a band of Arab irregulars, became Hamid Sharkaf. According to John Roy Carlson, a journalist who had met Kenny, this was the fashion adopted by many pro-Arab British deserters.<sup>77</sup> Other reports of those deserters who fought with the Arabs describe them wearing Arab dress with *kuffiyahs* draped around their head, eating Arab food and speaking basic Arabic.<sup>78</sup> Unlike many other transnational soldiers in modern conflicts, the deserters were not complete newcomers to the warzone, slightly – though not completely – easing their ability to adapt.

However, the differences between the two groups of deserters become starker when examining their experiences and contributions to the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The contribution of the deserters who fought in the Arab Legion cannot be fully assessed. Although it is reported that several dozen fought with the Legion during victories in Jerusalem, the details are limited, restricting conclusions on how important their contribution was.<sup>79</sup>

The most visible contribution by deserters to the conflict came from those who joined irregular Arab forces. In February 1948, while the conflict was still limited mainly to the warring local communities within Palestine, the detonation squad of Abd al-Qadir al-Husseini's Holy War Army carried out three deadly bombing attacks on Jewish targets in Jerusalem. The first, on 1 February, blew up the offices of the pro-Zionist English-language newspaper, the *Palestine Post*, whilst the second, on 22 February,

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<sup>75</sup> Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 235-236; 'Kit Wilkes-Chase – Obituary'.

<sup>76</sup> Gowran, 'English Army Deserters'. This seems to refute Ilan Pappé's assertion that 'pro-Palestinian Britons... could not always locate those they wished to help.' Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 129.

<sup>77</sup> Carlson, *Cairo to Damascus*, 233-234; Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 717.

<sup>78</sup> 'Homesick Deserters', *The Sunday Post*, 12 September 1948; 'Palestine Loses Glamour For British Soldiers', *The Advocate*, 2 October 1948; Souki, 'Liverpool Accent In Syria'.

<sup>79</sup> Carlson, *Cairo to Damascus*, 324.

was the infamous car bombing on Ben Yehuda Street, which left 58 people dead.<sup>80</sup> Almost immediately allegations were made against the British Administration as being complicit in the attacks. Whilst active personnel did not participate, it seems that a total of six deserters from the Army and Police took part.<sup>81</sup>

The allegations had dire consequences for British servicemen and politicians alike. The dissident Jewish organizations Irgun and Stern Group took to the streets that night, killing 16 British troops. A British troop train was bombed near Rehovot a week later, leaving 28 soldiers dead.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, the alleged involvement of British personnel in the Jerusalem bombings was reported internationally and months of correspondence attest to the pressure that High Commissioner Cunningham faced to prove the claims false. The matter also received attention in the House of Commons, with representatives of the British Government facing questions from a number of MPs, including Anthony Eden, on the severity of the situation and the urgency of finding evidence to refute the allegations against British personnel. The issue of British deserters serving with Arab units was soon heard in the House on 3 March.<sup>83</sup>

While the attacks generated substantial international publicity, the actual use of this group of deserters was limited in time. British deserters were useful for these attacks because they could pass through Haganah checkpoints without scrutiny and reach targets, to devastating effect. Yet, despite British deserters making some bombs for irregulars,<sup>84</sup> on these occasions they were made by an Arab bomb expert named Fawzi al-Kutub.<sup>85</sup> The actions of these deserters in this case amounted to driving to the location, parking the vehicles, lighting the fuse and making a getaway.

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<sup>80</sup> Morris, *1948*, 107-108.

<sup>81</sup> Nevo, 'The Arabs of Palestine', 11.

<sup>82</sup> Morris, *1948*, 108

<sup>83</sup> Hansard, HC Deb, 03 March 1948, vol. 448 cc382-3; TNA, CO 537/3858, 'Outrages: Ben Yehuda Street, Jerusalem Incident', 27 February 1948.

<sup>84</sup> Carlson, *Cairo to Damascus*, 73.

<sup>85</sup> Morris, *1948*, 107.

The subsequent contributions of most of this squad was minimal. Two within the group, George Ross and Godfrey Allan Stephenson, both former police constables, were arrested by British forces near Neve Yaakov, a Jewish settlement 10 kilometres north of Jerusalem, on 10 March. Along with another deserter, the two had taken part in an Arab attack on the Jewish settlement and were captured while driving a stolen British armoured car.<sup>86</sup> Within a matter of days, the deserters William Alfred Harrison and George Anthony White, also alleged to have participated in the Ben Yehuda bombing, died as they attempted to dismantle a bomb in Nablus.<sup>87</sup> Peter Madison and Eddie Brown reportedly fled to Cairo after the Ben Yehuda attack, to seek payment from the exiled Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, who sent them away empty handed.<sup>88</sup> At least one if not both of them subsequently returned to Palestine. Madison was back in Jerusalem and still participated in the fighting in late May. Beforehand, in April, it was reported that another deserter who had been involved in the bombing had been killed by a Haganah attack on an Arab force. It is possible that this ex-constable was Eddie Brown.<sup>89</sup> The initial devastating impact of this group was therefore limited in time, with most of them no longer serving a month before the full-scale war broke out.

Elsewhere, it is difficult to assess the contribution of the pro-Arab deserters, largely because of the absence of source material. A minor example of their utility can be seen when Arab forces captured Neve Yaakov between 14 and 16 May.<sup>90</sup> The reports of three different journalists testify that, once the Jewish defenders had withdrawn, 'Frank's Band' took charge of the advance party, neutralising the mines which had been left by the Jews for the Arab irregulars. Yet, this was their only known engagement, and after de-mining Neve Yaakov they carted off a case of liquor to drink.<sup>91</sup> One of the three journalists, John Phillips, had previously spoken of a British deserter who kept himself busy by

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<sup>86</sup> Sam Pope Brewer, 'British Deserters Seized with Arabs', *New York Times*, 11 March 1948, 18.

<sup>87</sup> 'Capture of Three Constables', *Palestine Post*, 11 March 1948, 1.

<sup>88</sup> Collins & Lapierre, *O Jerusalem*, 194-195.

<sup>89</sup> 'Ex-Constable Killed with Arab Gang', *Palestine Post*, 18 April 1948.

<sup>90</sup> Morris, *1948*, 217.

<sup>91</sup> Phillips, *Bled to the Gutter*, pp. 242-244.

drinking and living the high life in Amman.<sup>92</sup> Professionalism was therefore somewhat lacking in some of these instances. Generally speaking, the fortunes of British deserters who fought with Arab irregulars was tied up with the failure of their units. Indeed, eye-witness accounts and newspaper articles all suggest that those British deserters who fought with Arab irregulars faced high casualties and a number were imprisoned either by the Israelis or by British authorities.<sup>93</sup> For most of this group of deserters, their service in the war was over by early September.

The contributions of the deserters who fought in the IDF were somewhat different. Their impact exceeds their numerical size of around 20. One of the pro-Jewish deserters was Jack Freedman who headed a team in the Haganah's Air Service that restored 20 former RAF Auster light planes that had been brought from British scrap, and built the Israeli Air Force's (IAF) first spitfire. He also left an important legacy – that of training young mechanics with technical expertise.<sup>94</sup>

The most significant contribution in expertise was demonstrated by the small band of deserters who formed the basis of the Israeli Armoured Corps. The two Cromwell tanks stolen by Mike Flanagan and Harry Macdonald were the first in use by the IDF. Together with Johnny Burrows, Desmond Rutledge, Bill Brown and William Spriggs the British tank operators and their technical know-how proved valuable in several major battles. For instance, these tanks gave muscle to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in Operation Dani, during which Ramla and Lydda, two Arab towns on the important road between Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, were captured.<sup>95</sup> Israel's Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion, noted in his diary on 14 July that the two Cromwell tanks 'inherited' from the British made possible the conquest of the airport near Lydda.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Phillips, *Bled to the Gutter*, p. 237.

<sup>93</sup> 'Capture of Three Constables', *Palestine Post*, 11 March 1948; IWM, Private Papers of Major Peter Towers-Clark, diary entry 20 March 1948, 14871; '162 Arab P.O.W.'s Cross Lines', *Palestine Post*, 11 April 1949; 'Ex-Constable Killed With Arab Gang', *Palestine Post*, 18 April 1948.

<sup>94</sup> Markovitsky, *Machal*, 23.

<sup>95</sup> Morris, *1948*, 287-294.

<sup>96</sup> David Ben Gurion, *The Restored State of Israel* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1966), 202 [Hebrew].

This group's subsequent actions also proved valuable in autumn 1948. In October, the two Cromwell tanks were used in the assault on the village of 'Iraq al-Manshiya. Soon afterwards, Rutledge alongside another British deserter led the offensive which took the police fort at 'Iraq Suwaydan.<sup>97</sup> Both positions, roughly 30 kilometres north-east of Gaza city, were taken from Egyptian forces. Highlighting the adventurous aspect of his service, Rutledge later remarked that driving in these dangerous battles 'was better than being a small-town teacher in a stuffy, stratified English society that judged a man by his class.'<sup>98</sup> Rutledge's actions feature a great deal in Dan Kurzman's book on the war. Although some of the heroic language used seems to exaggerate his contribution, he remained a useful tank driver well into December, fighting against Egyptian forces on the southern front. In the final week of 1948, Rutledge drove a Cromwell tank that breached Arab defences around El-Auja, contributing to the capture of that village, and later took part in the conquest of Abu Agella on 29 December.<sup>99</sup> By operating the first tanks to be used by Israeli forces, this band of deserters provided a valuable service to the war effort, effectively applying their expertise to operations, in sharp contrast with the limited contributions of some of the pro-Arab deserters. Other examples also show the effective contribution of the pro-Jewish group of deserters. John Watson and Albert Melville were both said to have fought bravely against Arab militias and the Arab Legion during the Siege of Jerusalem. Moshe Rousnak, an IDF veteran, would later comment that Albert Melville was one of the bravest soldiers.<sup>100</sup> Additionally, the contribution of John 'Paddy' Cooper to the IDF attack on the 'Iraq Suwaydan police station in November 1948 was remembered fondly by his comrades. One of them, a South African volunteer, Mike Isaacson, later commented that Cooper 'was our hero that day.'<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 620.

<sup>98</sup> Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 582.

<sup>99</sup> Morris, *1948*, 358; Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 659.

<sup>100</sup> Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 383; Sutherland, 'John Watson – Obituary'.

<sup>101</sup> Karpel, 'The Irish Rover'.

A curious aspect of the experiences of deserters during the 1948 War were those instances where Britons serving on opposite sides fought against each other. An April 1948 article by *Time* journalist Eric Gibbs reported on fighting along the Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem road:

In the Kastel fighting there were Britons on both sides. The Arab forces included five deserters from the Palestine police. In the confused close-in fighting at the end, two of these Britons heard a shout from the Jewish side: 'Come on you Arab bastards!' They recognised the man as another police deserter and shouted back: 'Bastard yourself! What are you doing over there? As the Haganah Briton went to throw a hand grenade in reply, one of the Arabised Britons killed him with his Bren gun.<sup>102</sup>

For these deserters, the former comrades they encountered on the opposing side were perceived as traitors. This sentiment is best illustrated through the example of Peter Madison. Some months after the Ben Yehuda bombing, Madison joined Arab forces in Jerusalem where he came across *Life* photographer John Phillips, to whom he tried to sell his story in the hope that the money would take him somewhere 'where there are no Jews.' Phillips declined, although he soon learnt of another objective that Madison had in Jerusalem. Madison explained: 'there's a deserter from the Suffolk Regiment who's with the Jews, and I'm out to get the bugger. His name is Albert Melville.'<sup>103</sup> With no sense of fraternity shown towards his fellow ex-servicemen, Madison's intentions were clear to Phillips, he wished to punish Melville for fighting for the Jews. When Jewish resistance surrendered on 28 May Madison had his chance. According to Dan Kurzman's account, when Melville surrendered with his IDF unit he came across British officers in the Arab Legion. The officers suggested that Melville should join them, forgiving him for fighting on the wrong side. Melville is said to have rejected them heroically, opting to be taken to prison with his comrades in the IDF.<sup>104</sup> Yet Phillips' account is less flattering to Melville. As Kurzman's retelling was second-hand and informed by IDF veterans, it is also

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<sup>102</sup> Eric Gibbs, 'Palestine: War for the Jerusalem Road', *Time Magazine*, 19 April 1948.

<sup>103</sup> John Phillips, *Free Spirit in a Troubled World: A Photo Reporter for Life, 1936-1959* (New York: Scalo, 1997), 466.

<sup>104</sup> Kurzman, *Genesis 1948*, 397-398.



likely to be less reliable. According to Phillips, when the Jewish fighters surrendered, Madison made straight for the prisoners and found Melville. Melville pleaded with Madison, 'I didn't mean to desert, really I didn't sir...I think they plan to shoot me sir and I didn't really mean to desert.' As this was being expressed to Phillips, the journalist noticed that Madison did not take his eyes off Melville and smiled as Melville made his case.<sup>105</sup> Although Melville was taken to prison in Transjordan, veterans who were imprisoned with him recall that on arrival he said his name was Avraham Cohen to avoid detection. This saved his life.<sup>106</sup>

On one occasion a British deserter fired not on his counterparts on the Arab side, but on the British military proper. In the final days of the war on 7 January 1949, four British spitfires were shot down by the IDF after setting out along the international border between Israel and Egypt for 'tactical reconnaissance.' Although it did not reach the level of military intervention, in the following days the Israeli leadership feared military action from the British.<sup>107</sup> According to a veteran of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Norman Levi, the first plane, shot down by gunfire, was due to Johnny Burrows hitting it with fire from a 50-caliber Browning. Levi remembers Burrows expressing a quiet satisfaction with his actions, despite it being a British RAF plane.<sup>108</sup> This reported case remarkably shows how far Burrows' sympathy for Israeli Independence had gone, willingly firing upon British personnel to defend his new allegiance.

#### **IV. Post-war Trajectories and Memory**

Clear differences in experiences are further evidenced in the two groups' circumstances after the conflict had ended. Major Towers Clark, a Mandate official, foresaw in March 1948 some of the problems the pro-Arab deserters would face. He wrote in his diary: 'their future is of very doubtful

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<sup>105</sup> Phillips, *Bled to the Gutter*, 249.

<sup>106</sup> Phillips, *Jerusalem: A Will To Survive*, p. 66

<sup>107</sup> Morris, *1948*, 370-371.

<sup>108</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Dad's Army'.

quality and I will have no doubt that the majority of those who will survive will live to regret their impetuousness.<sup>109</sup> This sentiment was shared by a British policeman in Palestine. In a private letter to the British consul in Damascus, which was gleaned by Haganah intelligence, he predicted that ‘if the Arabs win, then the British [deserters] will have to be bound to the Arabs for all their lives. If the Arabs lose, then the lives of English deserters would be miserable.’<sup>110</sup> Indeed, whilst many of the deserters who fought for the Jews saw their most valuable contributions during the autumn and winter of 1948-1949, for those who fought in the Arab irregulars, their exciting adventure had ended in defeat by September 1948.

On 17 September, Britain’s *Sunday Post* newspaper published an article titled ‘Homesick Deserters’, which noted how ‘homesickness has driven many deserters fighting in Palestine to give themselves up to British legations in the Near East.’ Eighteen had reportedly been sent back from the embassy in Beirut alone.<sup>111</sup> It seems likely, however, that it was the resounding defeat these deserters had experienced, rather than ‘homesickness’, which led them to want to return home. A more sombre account was reported by the Australian newspaper *The Advocate* in October. It said that fighting had lost its ‘glamour’ for these deserters and, in any case, ‘the usefulness of the Brits had eroded’ for the Arabs.<sup>112</sup>

Indeed, the combination of being defeated and then the consequences of feeling stranded and unwanted by their Arab units was observed by the British Minister in Amman, Sir Alec Kirkbride. In his memoirs, Kirkbride noted of the deserters who had hitchhiked to the British embassy in Transjordan: ‘the end of the fighting had left these people without employment or income and they wanted to get home.’ He further commented that the living conditions for these deserters ‘were the worst part of the bargain’, owing to a daily ration of Arab bread and raw onions. The consequences of defeat seem of far more significance than mere homesickness which was but one of the outcomes of being on the

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<sup>109</sup> IWM, Private Papers of Major Peter Towers-Clark, diary entry 20 March 1948, 14871.

<sup>110</sup> CZA, S25/9209, Haganah summaries, 5 May 1948.

<sup>111</sup> ‘Homesick Deserters’, *The Sunday Post*, 12 September 1948.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Palestine Loses Glamour For British Soldiers’, *The Advocate*, 2 October 1948.

losing side. Interestingly, not all of those who had made it to Kirkbride's embassy were prosecuted for desertion. Those who had deserted from the Army were arrested and sent back to Britain to face court martial.<sup>113</sup> In those cases where they were arrested, deserters from the Palestine Police, which was disbanded following the withdrawal from Palestine, seem to have been treated leniently. According to testimonies of other former policemen, these deserters were all released relatively quickly after their imprisonment back in Britain.<sup>114</sup>

Other pro-Arab deserters faced imprisonment before they returned to Britain. It took until April 1949 for seven British deserters who fought for the Arabs to be released by the Israelis, including one named John Reed. When he was released, he was transferred to the Arab Legion.<sup>115</sup> In general, the post-conflict experiences of this group of deserters was dire, even for those who left British service for love. Years later, John Joseph West, a Palestine policeman, said of one deserter who admitted 'he very much regretted it and thought it was all a dreadful mistake. It was a love affair and he got very fond of this girl and became a Muslim and joined them. But all that broke up with the general disillusionment of his lot.'<sup>116</sup> Some deserters hoped to receive Arab passports, which were promised to them when they volunteered, only to be let down.<sup>117</sup>

On the side of the pro-Jewish deserters only one was arrested by the British authorities. Captain William Spriggs decided to return to Britain soon after the war where he had served in the 82<sup>nd</sup> Battalion alongside other deserters. When he was picked up by the authorities he lied that he was 'kidnapped' by the Haganah and held prisoner for almost a year.<sup>118</sup> His court testimony alleged that he was lured out of base by Desmond Rutledge and another deserter known as 'Pearson,' who stole his armoured car and took him prisoner. This false account was easily disputed at the time by another

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<sup>113</sup> Kirkbride, *From the Wings*, 100-101.

<sup>114</sup> Kardahji, 'A Measure of Restraint', 73, 78.

<sup>115</sup> '162 Arab P.O.W.'s Cross Lines', *Palestine Post*, 11 April 1949.

<sup>116</sup> IWMSA, John Joseph West, 12367/1.

<sup>117</sup> 'Palestine Loses Glamour For British Soldiers', *The Advocate*, 2 October 1948.

<sup>118</sup> TNA, WO 71/1189, 'Spriggs, W.J. Offence: Desertion and Theft', 30 November 1949.

soldier who testified that Spriggs had deserted out of choice, a view that was supported by the appearance of an enthusiastic British deserter in Dan Kurzman's 'Genesis: 1948' who has a story very similar to that of William Spriggs. He was sentenced to four years imprisonment.<sup>119</sup>

Unlike Spriggs, the majority of this group of deserters opted to stay in Israel after the war, highlighting the choices this group had that the pro-Arab deserters did not. Several continued to use their skills from their days in British forces. When Albert Melville returned from imprisonment in Transjordan he worked in the Israeli Police Force.<sup>120</sup> Burrows and Wilkes-Chase were sent by the IDF to procure military surplus in Europe and Canada. Burrows later married a Jewish woman and settled in the northern kibbutz Kfar Blum, while Wilkes-Chase became a commissioned officer in the IDF, and was the personal bodyguard of David Ben Gurion between 1952 and 1954.<sup>121</sup> After the war ended, John Watson also chose to stay in Israel and worked in farming for four years where he met his wife, Ora.<sup>122</sup> Interviews with the friends of John 'Paddy' Cooper suggest that he was proud of his decision to desert for the rest of his life, and despite receiving notification in 1957 that he could return to Britain without having to face prosecution, he chose to remain in Israel until he died in 1969.<sup>123</sup>

These deserters saw their service rewarded with new opportunities in the nascent State of Israel in contrast to the stranded and desperate deserters on the opposing side. After several years, however, the lure of returning to Britain became too much for some of these defectors. John Watson, Johnny Burrows, Albert Melville, Kit Wilkes-Chase and another deserter known as 'Smithy' all returned to Britain and were imprisoned for desertion, usually with sentences that were reduced to less than a year. After their release, Burrows went on to serve as a policeman in Malaya while John Watson continued in the Army and served in Northern Ireland during the 1960s.<sup>124</sup> After serving his sentence,

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<sup>119</sup> TNA, WO 71/1189, 'Spriggs, W.J. Offence: Desertion and Theft', 30 November 1949.

<sup>120</sup> Phillips, *Jerusalem: A Will to Survive*, 65.

<sup>121</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Dad's Army'; 'Kit Wilkes-Chase – Obituary'.

<sup>122</sup> Sutherland, 'John Watson – Obituary'.

<sup>123</sup> Karpel, 'The Irish Rover'.

<sup>124</sup> O'Sullivan, 'Dad's Army'; Sutherland, 'John Watson – Obituary'.

Melville returned to Israel, married his girlfriend and continued his new life there.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, for the soldiers who saw desertion as an opportunity to start a new life in Israel, their aims were realised. Mike Flanagan would marry his Israeli girlfriend, Ruth, and his fellow deserter Harry Macdonald remained close, serving as best man at Flanagan's wedding.<sup>126</sup>

A number of accounts and depictions, in both Britain and Israel, have treated those who fought for the victorious IDF in a positive fashion. For instance, the film *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer* (1955), an Anglo-Israeli production directed by Thorold Dickinson, positively portrays an Irishman named James Finnegan who had served in the British police before joining the Israelis. Just like a number of real-life deserters, Finnegan has a passionate love affair with a Jewish woman.<sup>127</sup> In contrast, those who had fought for the Arabs had largely gone without mention in the media until the 2000s.

For many British Army veterans however, their attitude towards the pro-Jewish group of deserters is one of resentment, and towards the other group, it is ambivalent. From the late 1990s, one veteran, Eric Lowe, established a veterans' association and began collecting veterans' accounts of experiences in Palestine to produce a newsletter, the *Palestine Scrapbook*. One of the articles featured in the newsletter was entitled 'Did You Know Gunner Wilkes-Chase?' It criticised the deserter Kit Wilkes-Chase for joining 'the ranks of the enemy.'<sup>128</sup> Similarly, when discussing the matter of Flanagan and Macdonald stealing two Cromwell tanks upon their desertion, Lowe labels it 'treacherous privateering acts on the part of unprincipled members of Britain's army in Palestine.'<sup>129</sup>

In terms of general press coverage that the 1948 deserters received, only post-war articles relating to the group who fought in the IDF have been found, with little mention of those fighting on the side of the Arabs. In recent years both *Haaretz* and *The Times of Israel* have featured articles on John 'Paddy'

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<sup>125</sup> Phillips, *Jerusalem: A Will to Survive*, 65.

<sup>126</sup> Woolf, 'Mike Flanagan'.

<sup>127</sup> Rachel S. Harris, *Warriors, Witches, Whores: Women in Israeli Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), 1-2.

<sup>128</sup> Eric Lowe, *Palestine Remembered: An Archive of Memories of Palestine Veterans* (Berkshire: Highfield Publishing, 2014), 60.

<sup>129</sup> Lowe, *Forgotten Conscripts*, 174.

Cooper and Mike Flanagan respectively.<sup>130</sup> Both articles emphasise the political sympathy of these deserters as being the strongest motivation, and stress their bravery in the 1948 War. This group of deserters has also received positive coverage in the British press. In 2002, *The Telegraph*, featured an obituary for Kit Wilkes-Chase that commented on his motives positively, believing him to have acted correctly out of conscience, and quoting the IDF's Chief-of-Staff who stated that the deserter had served with 'moral courage.'<sup>131</sup> Similarly, an obituary for John Watson featured in *The Guardian*, comments that he 'represented what is best in the British army', again emphasising that his decision was taken because of his belief in the cause.<sup>132</sup>

Prompted by a letter from a veteran of the British counterinsurgency campaign in Palestine in the 1940s, Peter Kosminsky decided to make the series *The Promise* that was subsequently broadcast on Channel 4 in 2011.<sup>133</sup> The series features the stories of two deserters, which Kosminsky uses to support a position critical of Israel. In one of the final scenes of the drama, two British friends who both deserted, one to the Arabs and one to the Jews, come across one another during the British withdrawal from Haifa and its takeover by Jewish militias. The protagonist, Len, who deserted to the Arabs, is shown in a heroic fashion, fighting for the Arabs because of this support for their cause, even though he knows they will be defeated. The deserter who fought for the Jews is shown to have fought on the side of terrorists, and his attitude is incomprehensible to Len, and therefore to the viewer.<sup>134</sup> Kosminsky, in 2014, came out publicly to support a cultural boycott of Israel.<sup>135</sup> While he did not use

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<sup>130</sup> Karpel, 'The Irish Rover'; Marissa Newman, 'British Deserter Who Stole Tanks for Haganah Dies', *Times of Israel*, 2 February 2014, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/british-deserter-who-stole-tanks-for-haganah-dies/> [date accessed: 2/4/2016].

<sup>131</sup> 'Kit Wilkes-Chase, Obituary'.

<sup>132</sup> Sutherland, 'John Watson – Obituary'.

<sup>133</sup> Eitan Bar-Yosef, 'Promises, promises: the Mandate Period and Its Representation in British Culture after 1948', *Israel*, 24 (2016), 37-38 [Hebrew].

<sup>134</sup> *The Promise* (Channel 4, 2011).

<sup>135</sup> 'Over 100 Artists Announce a Cultural Boycott of Israel', *Guardian*, 13 February 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/13/cultural-boycott-israel-starts-tomorrow> [date accessed: 24/8/2016].

the story of the deserters to support this position, the message in his series is implicit: the fictional Len was right to support the Arabs in 1948, and it is right to be critical of Israeli policy today.

## **V. Conclusions**

It should not be surprising that Peter Kosminsky made use of British deserters in his series on the end of the British Mandate in Palestine. They are a unique case in British colonial withdrawals of personnel remaining behind to fight for local armed forces, instead of choosing to return home. That British soldiers and policemen, who had worked and lived in the same environment, facing the same enemies, fought for different sides in the 1948 War, adds a further fascinating aspect to this historical episode. British personnel became polarised by the violence of the insurgency and its consequences of restricting their movements in Palestine. This often resulted in resentment towards the Yishuv and a degree of sympathy for the Arabs. The evidence suggests that most pro-Arab deserters were extreme cases of the general attitude of British personnel. At the same time, desertion offered opportunities to pursue romance, money and adventure. For some it was spontaneous, but for others it delayed returning to a life of boredom of Britain. Importantly, for some deserters on both sides, it offered the prospect of a new life and a fresh start. It is these personal impulses which seem to make them different from others in the British security forces who held similar views, but nonetheless returned to Britain. It was the interplay between contextual factors and political and personal motivations which drove these deserters to join foreign units. For both groups it was never likely, due to their size, that their contributions would have been decisive or vital in the conflict. This was compounded by the fact that many of the deserters who fought for Arab irregular militias were fighting in poorly-trained and ineffective units.

As soldiers fighting for a foreign force without the consent of their government at home, the deserters' participation in the 1948 War can be considered transnational. Research on transnational military service has thus far focused on colonial troops, mercenaries, private contractors, foreign war

volunteers (or ‘foreign fighters’), and soldiers who had been recruited from prisoner of war camps.<sup>136</sup> To what extent can deserters be considered a new sub-category in the broader context of transnational violence? Cases of soldiers defecting from the ranks of the military force in which they served to join the enemy are not uncommon. To give but a few examples, soldiers in the US Army crossed over to the Mexican side during the US–Mexican War of 1846–1847, Confederates joined the Union army during the American Civil War, 21 Americans as well as two South Korean companies defected to the North Korean side during the Korean War, Algerian insurgents defected to the French cause during the Algerian War of Independence while French colonial troops defected in both Indochina and Algeria.<sup>137</sup>

The British deserters who fought in the war in Palestine in 1948 differ from the cases mentioned above in that they did not cross over to the enemy but rather stayed on to fight in a conflict that erupted at a time of colonial withdrawal. In terms of their motivations, they share a number of characteristics with foreign volunteers (solidarity with a community engaged in conflict or hatred toward one side in a civil war) as well as with mercenaries (particularly those soldiers who were offered substantial financial incentives for enlisting and especially for bringing armoured vehicles with them). Those soldiers who deserted and joined the conflict on either side for love bring to mind examples of soldiers of empire in the Victorian era who had ‘gone native’ during their colonial service.<sup>138</sup> Like POWs who enlist to fight for their captors, the deserters did not necessarily choose to be posted to the warzone

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<sup>136</sup> Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins, ‘Introduction: Transnational Military Service since the Eighteenth Century’, in Nir Arielli and Bruce Collins (eds), *Transnational Soldiers: Foreign Military Enlistment in the Modern Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), 1-12.

<sup>137</sup> James C. Bonner, ‘David R. Snelling: A Story of Desertion and Defection in the Civil War’, *The Georgia Review*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1956), 275-282; Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Random House, 2010), 78, 140; Ruth Ginio, *The French Army and Its African Soldiers: The Years of Decolonization* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 100-101; Martin Evans, ‘The Harkis: the experience and memory of France’s Muslim auxiliaries’, in Martin Alexander, Martin Evans and J. F. V. Keiger (eds), *The Algerian War and the French Army, 1954-62* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 125-126.

<sup>138</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, *Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), esp. 68-75.



in the first place. However, because of their diverse motivations, the British deserters do not fit comfortably into any of the established forms of transnational military service. Furthermore, unlike the overwhelming majority of the International Brigaders who fought in the Spanish Civil War but had not been to Spain before they enlisted, or the Western foreign fighters who travelled to join the present-day civil war in Syria without knowing much about the local conditions, the British deserters knew Palestine, its topography and climate. They had interacted previously with the local population to some degree, and had at least a rough idea of the relative strength of the warring sides. Hence, we can consider these deserters, whose motivation to fight was created by their prior presence in Palestine, as falling into a yet unexplored category of transnational military service.