




Castel

National Heritage Site

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Welcome to the Castel National Heritage Site



On the eve of the War of Independence, about 100,000 Jews lived in Jerusalem – almost one fifth of the Jewish population of the country. When the war began, the Arabs besieged Jerusalem. Its Jewish inhabitants were completely dependent on supplies coming from the coastal plain, because all other roads leading to the city were under total Arab control. “The fall of Jerusalem would be a death blow to the Yishuv and the Arabs understand this very well and will concentrate many forces to cut off transportation,” David Ben-Gurion wrote in his journal. This is the background for understanding the significance of the small Arab village of al-Qastel, which controlled the road from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Many on both sides fell in the fierce battles for the Castel. Its conquest by Jewish forces – so strategically essential for Jerusalem’s survival – was critical to breaking the chokehold on Jerusalem.

The Castel National Heritage Site commemorates the battles here during the War of Independence. The Israel Nature and Parks Authority has prepared the site for visitors and created an interactive trail that brings the story alive through short films and other means. The trail features stations for group activities highlighting the values set forth during combat here – comradeship, determination, leadership and trust.

The Castel

The Castel is located on the western slopes of the Jerusalem Mountains, on Mount Ma’oz, 790 m above sea level. Some identify this place with Mount Ephron, on the biblical border between Judah and Benjamin (Joshua 15:9).

The name Castel comes from the Latin word *castellum*, which means fortress. Nevertheless, a thorough archaeological survey uncovered no remains from either the Roman or Crusader periods. During the Roman period the road connecting Jerusalem and Emmaus in the Ayalon Valley passed below the Castel. The road continued in a series of hairpin turns known as the “Seven Sisters” (today in Mevaseret Tsiyon). It then went down to Motsa and up to Jerusalem via the “Roman ascent” at the edge of the present-day Har Hamenuhot cemetery.

The Castel and its Role in the War of Independence

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted to partition Mandatory Palestine. The Jewish state was allocated only 20 percent of the territory, but the Arabs were not satisfied. The day after the Partition Plan was passed, they fired on a bus taking Jews



Safety and Conduct at the Castel Heritage Site

Please follow these rules:

- Do not harm flora, fauna or inanimate objects.
- Do not climb on structures, walls and antiquities. Do not dig and do not insert your hands in openings in walls.
- Caution! There are open trenches and pits at this site! Use only marked trails and trenches!
- There are dark passages in the trenches where interpretive elements have been inserted, including flickering lights. You can take an alternative path that does not go through the trenches.
- Memorial candles may be lit only at the authorized place. Fires (campfires and barbecues) are prohibited throughout the site.
- Eating is allowed only in the picnic area. Please keep the area clean.
- Visit at your own risk.

Overnight camping (in tents) is available by prior reservation.

For reservations and more details:

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Photos: Gate, lookout, red everlasting – Itamar Grinberg
Trenches – Kotz; Map: from History of the Haganah;
Battle photos courtesy of the IDF Archive/Haganah Archive

Taxi and bus – Yitzhak Gur (Grozovsky), Palmach Information Center
Production: Adi Greenbaum
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from Netanya to Jerusalem, killing 25 passengers. Thus, with the British announcement that the Mandate would expire on May 15, 1948, the War of Independence broke out.

In the first phase of the war, from November 29, 1947 to the declaration of independence on May 14, 1948, the fighting took the form of a civil war – 1.2 million Arabs against 630,000 Jews. The Arabs focused on cutting off roads to Jewish settlements. The Jews attempted to break through with convoys of trucks and armor-plated buses (known as “sandwiches”).

By March 1948, 1,200 Jews had been killed, about half of them civilians; however, the Arabs failed to conquer even one Jewish settlement. The turmoil led to diplomatic steps. On March 19, the American ambassador to the United Nations proposed cancelling the Partition Plan and instituting an international trusteeship for Palestine. The Jews realized that they would have to change strategy. On April 3, 1948, after a large arms shipment arrived from Czechoslovakia, Jewish forces launched their first offensive in the framework of Operation Nachshon: A force of 1,500 fighters took ground on the road to Jerusalem, including the Castel, in an attempt to change the picture on this front. At the end of Operation Nachshon, the siege on Jerusalem was lifted.

The Battle for the Castel – Battlefield Log

November 29, 1947: Beginning of the War of Independence

Three outposts are established around the Castel quarry (near present-day Mevaseret Tsiyon), which had become a target: the Nachshon outpost south of the quarry; the eastern outpost and the Boaz outpost north of the quarry. The outposts stand between the Castel and the Arab bases at Tsuba, Sataf and En Karem.



Armor-plated vehicle on the road up to Jerusalem

January 21, 1948

The Arabs attack two convoys near the Castel, killing a guard. The next day, two squads from the Etsioni Brigade’s Moriah Battalion raid Abu George’s coffee house on the outskirts of the village, on the main road. The steep ascent near the coffee house slows the convoys’ progress. They have to stop to prevent their motors from overheating and that’s where danger lurks. The squads blow up the coffee house and a nearby structure. Shooting from the village kills one fighter.

January 25, 1948

A fierce battle rages between the Palmach and local Arab fighters, ending after the British army intervenes. Ten Palmach fighters are killed, while the Arabs take dozens of casualties.



April 1, 1948

The Arabs attack the Castel quarry. Etsioni and Palmach fighters take part in the battle, which goes on for two days. The Castel outposts hold out.

April 3, 1948

A Palmach force under the command of Eliyahu Sela (“Ra’anana”) arrives from Kiryat Anavim. At 3:15 A.M. the forces storm the Castel and take the village almost without opposition. At 2 P.M. the Arabs respond. A relatively well-trained force of about 100 fighters from



an army established by Abd al-Qader al-Husseini, together with hundreds of volunteers from the surrounding villages, attack the quarry outposts. The defenders of the Nachshon outpost fall back to the Castel. The next day, Moriah Battalion Company A relieves most of the Palmach fighters at the Castel.

April 5–7, 1948

Hundreds of Arabs attack without letup, but the defenders hold out despite their exhaustion. Reinforcements do not arrive. The Arab assault grows fiercer on April 6, under the command of Abd al-Qader al-Husseini, leader of the Arab forces in the Jerusalem area. On April 6, the Arabs take over the Castel quarry and its outposts. The Castel is completely surrounded. On the morning of April 7, the Arabs invade a number of houses in the village, but are pushed back.

April 8, 1948

At dawn, Abd al-Qader al-Husseini, his deputy and his adjutant are walking around among their men and by mistake end up at the Etsioni Brigade command post at the Castel. The Etsioni troops open fire and unknowingly kill al-Husseini. The other two men withdraw and disappear.

The Arabs do not know whether al-Husseini is captured or dead. Within hours more than a thousand Arab fighters set out for the Castel to liberate their revered commander, or at least to take back his body. While the Arabs were organizing, two armor-plated vehicles are brought to the Castel with food and ammunition for the Jewish fighters.

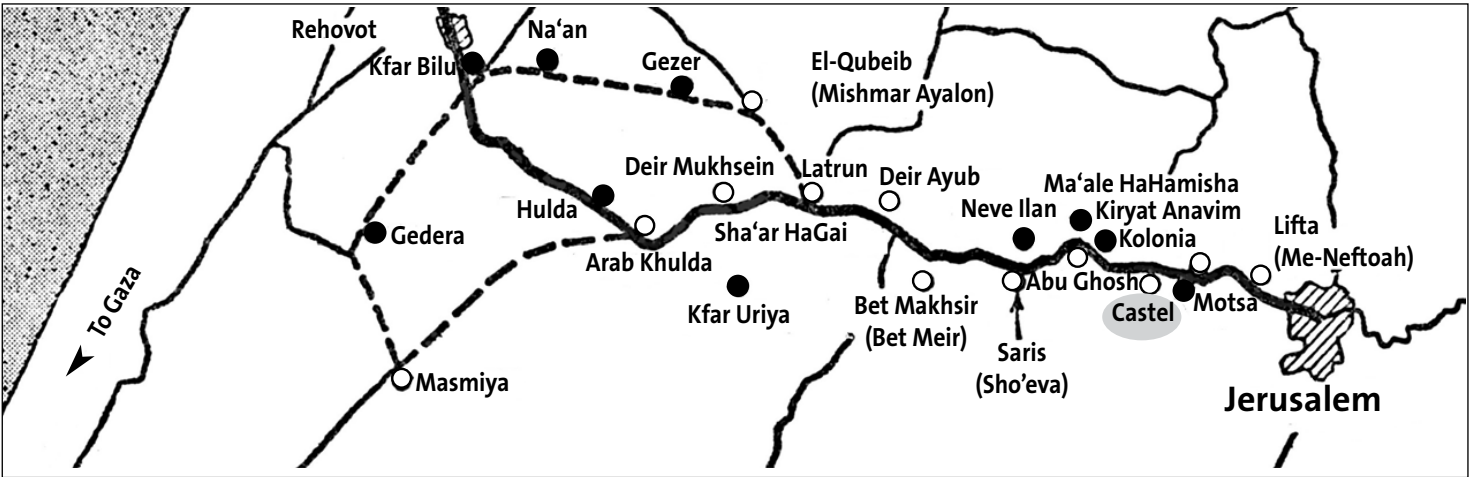


At 10 A.M. the Arabs launch an all-out assault under cover of heavy machine-gun fire. The defenders are so exhausted that some fall asleep in the midst of the battle. At 1:30 P.M., three squads of reinforcements arrive from Kiryat Anavim. Their commander, Nahum Arieli, leaves one squad to secure the main road and leads the others up the mountain. At that same time, the Arabs complete their takeover of the last Jewish position, the mukhtar’s house. All the Jewish fighters have left to do is organize the pullout. Shimon Alfasi, Arieli’s second-in-command, orders: “The privates will retreat, the commanders will stay behind to cover them.” All the Palmach fighters who remained behind to cover their comrades are killed. All the reinforcements on the mountain are killed. Among the survivors, only a few manage to reach the Arza rest home, near Motsa, and Kibbutz Kiryat Anavim.

April 9, 1948, the Castel Returns to the Palmach

The Palmach force under the command of Eliyahu Sela heads for the Castel. At 6:20 A.M., after heavy bombardment, the forces break in and find the village empty of Arab fighters. Most of them had left to attend the funeral of Abd al-Qader al-Husseini – a mass funeral such as Jerusalem had never before seen. The forces blow up most of the village houses, leaving only the mukhtar’s house on the hilltop.

Abd al-Qader al-Husseini (1907–1948), a scion of one of Jerusalem’s leading families, was a greatly admired military leader. He studied chemistry at Beirut University, took part in the Arab Revolt against the British, and in 1939 fled to Iraq to continue working against the British. Al-Husseini traveled to Nazi Germany where he gained expertise in explosives. In 1947 he returned secretly to Palestine and took command of the small army established by the Arab Higher Committee. Abd al-Qader al-Husseini is buried on the Temple Mount.



Settlements on the road to Jerusalem on the eve of the War of Independence



The Touring Route at the Castel National Heritage Site

Starting point – The trail starts at a pergola where an introductory 3-minute film is shown. This point is accessible to persons with disabilities.

To the Mukhtar’s House – From the pergola, the foot path goes up the mountain. Interactive stations along the way illustrate four battle heritage values of the Castel. Cypress trees grow at the trailhead, and in winter and spring bulb species such as the crown anemone (*Anemone coronaria*), cyclamen (*Cyclamen persicum*) and red everlasting (*Helichrysum sanguineum*) bloom; these were transplanted here after they were rescued from construction sites.

The path goes through trenches dug after the War of Independence (you can also walk outside the trenches), so the site could be used as an outpost to protect the road to Jerusalem from Jordanian attack. In those days, the ceasefire line between Israel and Jordan passed along the ridge north of the road, near Kibbutz Ma’ale HaHamisha.

The path through the trenches leads to an interactive station in a bunker and from there to a commemoration rock inscribed with the names of the fallen in the battles at and around the Castel.

The path continues to an ancient cistern, whose walls still bear signs of plaster and parts of an olive oil press. Inside, an 11-minute film is shown about the battle for the Castel. After the film, go up to the roof of the Mukhtar’s House, the highest point at the site, for a spectacular view of the Jerusalem Mountains.

Scenic Route – This path begins near a large Atlantic pistachio west of the Mukhtar’s House and leads back to the parking lot. The trail descends to the Feit Lookout – another vantage point on the Jerusalem Mountains. Along the way you’ll see wild plants typical of these mountains, such as prickly burnet (*Sarcopterium spinosum*), spiny broom (*Calicotome villosa*), shrubby Jerusalem sage (*Phlomis viscosa*) and sage-leaved rockrose (*Cistus salvifolius*). Other colorful blooms join them in season. The path descends to a rest area in the shade of a Kermes oak, and returns from there to the parking lot.

Prologue

Thirty-one fighters from the Armored Corps and 18 from the Palmach were killed in the battles for the Castel, and dozens were wounded. The conquest of the mountain ensured control of the eastern part of the road to Jerusalem. It also symbolized a strategic shift in the Jewish community’s struggle – no longer attempting to break the Arab siege by convoys, but rather taking the offensive and conquering territory to control the road to Jerusalem. The Castel was the first Arab village taken in the War of Independence.

In 1951, the immigrant transit camp of Ma’oz Tsiyon was built on the northern slopes of the Castel. Three years later, a permanent community was established next to it and became home to immigrants from Iran and Kurdistan. In 1964, Ma’oz Tsiyon was unified with Mevaseret Tsiyon, established north of the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway in 1956. The unified community has been called Mevaseret Tsiyon ever since.

