



# **The War of Attrition in the “Land of Pursuits”: The 1968-1970 War in the Jordan Valley**

*Dr. Aaron Yaffe<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

Following the 1967 War, a War of Attrition began on the eastern front. At a meeting in Damascus, on June 23, 1967, headed by Yasser Arafat, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leadership decided to continue the armed struggle against Israel by moving all organizations' headquarters into the occupied territories.

This resolution opened a new front in the Jordan Valley, followed by armed terror squads crossing the Jordan River and the Jordan Valley on their way to the eastern mountains of Samaria. The purpose of these infiltrations was to stir up the Palestinians in the West Bank into a popular rebellion or disobedience, to supply them with weapons and to prepare an effective leadership to initiate and execute terror operations in the future. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF), aware of these intentions, developed a new strategy based on two major components:

- A. Constructing land barriers of few elements, taking into account the Jordan River and the topography of the Jordan Valley.
- B. Developing a “Pursuits Strategy”, which was based on pursuing terrorists by foot, by vehicle, and by air in which operations were led by the high ranking commanders to engage terrorists face to face and liquidate them before they cross the Jordan River and attack civilians.

The IDF performed dozens of pursuit operations in which most of the terrorist were killed or captured. In addition to 140 pursuit actions, the Central Command initiated 28 operations, whose goal was to raid terrorist bases on their own ground, searching for terrorists and liquidating them before they cross the Jordan River border. Hundreds of terrorists were killed in such preemptive strikes, thus defeating the PLO and its strategy on the eastern front.

In September 1970, Jordan's King Hussein joined the war against terror organizations that had created a nearly autonomous state in parts of the Hashemite kingdom, located in the Jordan Valley and the refugee camps. These Jordanian operations took place after September 6, 1970, after terror organization hijacked five commercial aircrafts with 310 passengers on board to Zarka air strip, Jordan. The Jordanian Legion attacked and defeated the Palestinian terror organizations between September 16-17 (known as “Black September”) expelling them to Lebanon.

The following paper will present the military strategy developed by the Central Command of the IDF on the Eastern front. We will show how the Command made use of the topography to

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<sup>1</sup> **Dr. Aharon Yaffe** is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Counter Terrorism of the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya. **Dr. Yaffe** has published close to 150 articles and 3 books on Historical, Terror and Middle East issues.

build up a land barrier as well as developing a “Pursuits technique” to liquidate Palestinian terror squads crossing the Jordan River.

### **The Beginning of the Confrontation with Terror Organizations**

The PLO was founded in Kuwait in October 1959 by five young Palestinians, headed by Yasser Arafat (Abu Amar), 30; his deputy Khalil al Wazir (Abu Jihad), 24; Salah Khalaf (Abu Iyad), 24; Farouk al Kaddoumi (Abu al-Lutf), 28 and Khaled el Hassan (Abu Said), 31.

Afterwards, more young Palestinians from Qatar joined the PLO; the most notorious of whom were Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen), Abu Yussef el- Najar and Kamal Adwan, who were subsequently killed on April 9, 1973, during an Israeli raid on Beirut, code named “Spring of Youth” Operation.

The PLO was in control of the Palestinian arena and most importantly, it represented Palestinian people in the international community for 47 years. Only on March 2006, following the elections for the Palestinian Parliament, “ Hamas” turned into the major political party, following a bloody coup in Gaza Strip, and took over all government offices.

The PLO’s first military terror operation took place on January 1, 1965. An employee of Mekorot, Israel’s National Water Corporation detected a small explosive device hidden in an open canal of to the National Water Carrier of Israel. The plan was to blow up the Nehusha Water Institute near the city of Beit Shemesh. This first act marks PLO Day ever since, even though a much more horrific act was carried out six days later by a squad of six men, among them Mahmoud Hijazi. Subsequently, Hijazi was wounded, caught and sentenced to death by a military court, but was returned to Lebanon in a POW swap.

The swift and brilliant victory of the Six Day War, left Arab political and military leaders stunned. In August 1967, two months after the war, Arab leaders summoned in Khartoum, capital of Sudan, issued an extreme position known as the Khartoum Resolution, which defined the ideology of the Israeli-Arab conflict and forced it on all Arab states. The resolution formulated Three NOs, which all Arab states were compelled to follow it from now on:

1. NO peace with Israel
2. NO recognition of Israel
3. NO negotiations with Israel

The “Final Solution” of this strategy, adopted by Arab states, was and is the annihilation of the State of Israel. Recognizing their military weakness, they knew they must operate gradually. The first step would be doing away with the occupation and releasing the lands lost to Israel during the Six Day War. The final step would be the establishment of a Palestinian state on the ruins of the State of Israel. Being realistic, Arab states recognized their military inability to defeat the IDF or to force it to withdraw from the occupied territories. Nevertheless, they believed that a military escalation combined with a pan-Arab petrol boycott, sabotage of air and naval transportation and attacks on Israel embassies and Jewish targets will lead to US-Soviet pressure on Israel. It was assumed that these measures, together with United Nations resolutions, will force Israel out of the territories occupied in June 1967. The UN Security Council issued on November 22, 1967 Resolution 242, called for Israel to withdraw from certain territories (not all the territories). Therefore the resolution was considered by Israel as a favorable compromise and a milestone in international relations.

The War of Attrition in the Jordan Valley ended with a clear and decisive victory for Israel over the Palestinians, but on the Egyptian front along the Suez Canal, an escalation of hostilities was building up, following an Israel Air Force military intervention on July 20, 1970. This operation was followed by a cease fire initiated by a US-Soviet agreement signed on August 8, 1970.

The War of Attrition brought to the Middle East a new player, Palestinian terror organizations. Their advantage was an ability to operate on several fronts simultaneously on the eastern front: through the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea, the Arabah, the Beth Shean Valley and the Yarmouk outflow.

On the air front, terror organizations tried to attack air transportation to and from Israel. On the sea front, Palestinian terror organizations attacked passenger ships (such as the hijacking of the Italian ship “Achille Lauro” on October 7, 1985, and the killing of the Jewish American passenger Leon Klinghoffer) and freighters. Terrorists tried to open another front, attacking Jewish targets worldwide, including “Marks and Spencer” in London, Israeli embassies and commercial delegations.

Prestige of Palestinian terrorist organizations has risen throughout the Arab world due to the successful alternative they presented in place of the unsuccessful Arab armies in the '67 war and because they were the first power to act militarily against Israel.

In the beginning, terror organizations tried to work with Palestinians residing in Judea and Samaria, leading them to civil disobedience.

Even Yasser Arafat infiltrated the territories, in disguise, trying to organize terrorist cells. When these efforts failed, the terrorists moved their bases to Trans Jordan, close to the Israeli border.

The first PLO headquarter was in Karameh, a small refugee town east of the Allenby Bridge, the major crossing point between Israel and Jordan. “Operation Inferno”, initiated by the IDF on March 21, 1968, the combined forces of infantry, paratroopers and the air force raided the targets and roads of Karameh. Despite heavy Palestinian losses (more than 250 Palestinian terrorists and Jordanian soldiers), the operation was considered unsuccessful due to IDF heavy losses ( 28 killed), including a number of Armored Fighting Vehicles (AFV) and the fact terror organizations leaders fled from their headquarters, before the paratroopers arrived, due to an early warning (due to an IDF mistake).

Following the relative failure of the IDF in Karameh, the rising self confidence and the moral of terrorist organizations has led them to cease their collaboration with the Jordanian Army and the Hashemite regime. They relocated their headquarters from the Jordan Valley to the refugee camps near Amman and deep into Jordanian territory. Following the hijacking of five commercial airplanes with a forced landing in Zarka strip, which was against Jordan’s interest, the Jordanian Army attacked the terrorist organizations, caused those hundred of casualties and brought their operations, to a nearly complete halt.

### **The Jordan Valley Arena**

The Jordan Valley, better known as the “Land of Pursuits”, stretched from the outflow of the Yarmouk in the north to the outflow of the Jordan River into the Dead Sea in the south. The Valley divides Samaria Mountains and the mountain range of Beth El to the west and the Gilead Mountains to the east of Jordan. The Valley is part of the well-known Great Rift

Valley stretching from Turkey in the north to east Africa (Lake of Victoria) in the south, 6,000 km. long

Two major geographical landforms, easily visible, contribute to the military strategy:

1. The Jordan Plain, Kikar ha-Yarden, is a fertile region east and west of Geon ha-Yarden, stretching to the bottom of the hills.
2. The Jordan Course, Geon ha-Yarden (the Jordan River flood basin), is the bed of the river lying below Kikar ha-Yarden (the Jordan Valley), is 1.5 km wide and is divided into three parts, from north to south, with different types of flow and curvature of the river bed.

The Jordan River flows and curves in the valley of Geon ha-Yarden, several meters lower than Kikar ha-Yarden. The numerous curves of the Jordan River, called meanders, create a 240 km. long route, from the origin of the river to the Dead Sea, although the distance between these two points by air is only 70 km.

The Jordan Valley is a plain, its ground layered with erosion of soft and chalky marlstone called Lissan Marl, which is typical to the Dead Sea region. Approximately 15 - 45 meters separate the Jordan plain from the Jordan course, carved by escarpments, which form the valley. The landscape, called badland, is full of steep cliffs and hidden routes leading from the Jordan River to the terrace above it, where the Jordan Valley main road is located.

Squads of terrorists used to cross the Jordan River on handmade ferries, shallow and comfortable to operate, mostly during summer nights, during low tide, hiding behind the thick and bushy flora. Infiltrators had to climb up from Kikar ha-Yarden (the Jordan valley) to Geon ha-Yarden (the Jordan basin) within the valley courses. Infiltration routes led to several valleys, descending to the mountains of Samaria, which formed the major routes from the terrace of the Jordan Valley to the main road and back to the mountains of Samaria.

The Arab population in the Jordan Valley was concentrated in the Jericho region, due to its abundance of wells and springs, mainly in Uja and Wadi Kelt (a steady flow river goes from Jerusalem area to Jericho area). Some of the large refugee camps, including Aqbat Jaber in the south and Ein el Sultan in the north, were built close to Jericho. A short time after the Six Day War, thousands of refugees, from the 1948 War, left the camps and moved to the camps across the border in Jordan.

Many of the lands in the Jordan Valley have been defined as "Giftlik", the personal possession of the Turkish sultan. A few wealthy Palestinians living in the Palestinian cities of Nablus, Ramallah, Tubas and Tamoun own these lands as lessors. In the Samaria Desert, only a few Arabs reside, mostly nomads who raise sheep and grow grain and hay for their flock. Some of them live in the numerous caves in the region.

## **The Enemy**

The Jordanian defeat in the Six Day War and the thousands of refugees fleeing to Jordan strengthened the terror organizations and their link to the Jordanian Army. Terror organizations were, literally, in control of vast regions of the eastern Jordan Valley. They received help from local officers and from Iraqi forces who came to help Jordan during the Six Day War.

The strongest and most active of the terror organizations were:

**PLO**, Palestinian Liberation Organization, led by Yasser Arafat

**PFLP**, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, led by George Habash

**DFLP**, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, led by Naif Hawatmeh

**PFLP-GC**, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, General Command, led by Ahmed Jibril

**Al-Sa’iqa**, Vanguard for the Popular Liberation War

**PLF**, Palestine Liberation Front, led by Abu Abbas.

In addition to these organizations half a dozen small organizations were founded, as a result of inner conflicts.

### **Solidification of Israel’s Security Perception in the Jordan Valley**

On August 2, 1967, a few weeks after the Six Day War, an infiltration of a terrorist squad near Damya Bridge (Adam Bridge) forced the IDF to wake up from its post-war euphoria. The squad merged into the civilian population of the West Bank. Terror organizations set three goals for their actions in the Jordan Valley:

1. Killing or kidnapping Israeli soldiers;
2. Supplying soldiers, weapons and money to urban terrorists in the West Bank;
3. Organizing and encouraging civil disobedience among West Bank residents.

### **Protecting the Jordan Valley**

In response to the terrorist threat, the IDF adopted a passive protection strategy, constructing a land barrier to obstruct infiltration routes of terrorist squads. If infiltration is already in process, a land barrier will slow down arrival to populated areas in the West Bank Mountains.

The Obstacle along the Jordan Valley as follows:

1. A series of observation posts on the hills overlooking Geon ha-Yarden (the Jordan river flood basin), were establish to collect information about Hostile Terrorist Activity, (HTA) in the Jordan Valley region.
2. An electric fence for warning, with a mine field along the Jordan River.
3. Security Road, parallel to a road for reconnoitering and identifying concealed tracks.
4. Daily patrols for tracks, path finding by dawn, exposing concealed tracks by sunset.
5. Posting “Men Belly” and “Dagan” (special Israeli gun development) ambush at possible points of infiltrations.

The barriers forced the terrorists to cross the river in the dark or ascend the steep hills in the hot afternoon sun. This scheduling forced the terrorists to look for protection from being observed and the harsh heat, waiting for the evening to enable their infiltration to the mountains of Samaria.

The security fence was built by units of paratroopers, on active duty and on reserve, during their ongoing security service shifts at the Jordan Valley. Crossing the electric fence was possible, but at a great delay for any action. Examining the effectiveness of the fence required a test in which a unit of paratroopers was ordered to break the land barrier, while senior

commander measured time. The time it took the paratroopers to infiltrate enabled the planners to determine the number of lines of mines, fences and barbed wires needed.

The construction of the fence in the Jordan Valley ended in October 1968. Four to six rows of shoe mines were laid on the eastern side of the fence, forming a mine belt 100-120 meters wide. Crossing this belt took two to four hours, thus delaying any infiltrators to enable actions by pursuing forces.

The reconnaissance road was used by the morning patrol to identify traces of infiltrators. Pathfinders, walking on the trail by dawn, were trained to identify crossing traces despite efforts at concealment (such as using long ladders or wrapping shoes with sheepskin).

Central Command has erected 12 outposts, overlooking the line along the Jordan River for observation and gunfire. In time, night vision devices were added. A night vision device Star Light Scopes (SLS), introduced to all operational IDF units was put to use in all posts and ambushes along the infiltration routes. Night vision devices were used in "Dagan ambushes were installed on Jeep patrol (off-road vehicle) to enable effective and accurate gun firing. When infiltration incidents became more frequent, Central Command began to fortify the posts as follows: a bunker for the soldiers and connection tunnels to allow movement of soldiers under fire. The bunker was built following the fire shelling incidents at the Suez Canal. The bunker was protected by a bulletproof cover of iron nets filled with stones and a layer of sand bags (to prevent ricochets). At the end of the War of Attrition, the outposts in the Jordan Valley were not fortified like those on the Bar-Lev line on the Suez Canal. Their task was mostly for reconnaissance and warning, not to halt armor and artillery forces.

### **Active Defense**

Active Defense is the sum of all the acts initiated by the IDF to hit terrorist organizations in their headquarters, in their infiltration routes and on their way to their missions in the West Bank:

1. Artillery fire to hit infiltration bases and gatherings of terrorist squads.
2. IDF air raids against terrorist headquarters and operational organizations, including the Jordanian Legion targets.
3. Raids, backed by air strikes, of terror headquarters, terror organizations and strategic targets of the terrorists and the Jordanian Legion.
4. "Parasols" infiltrating special forces east of the Jordan River and placing ambushes for up to 36 hours, waiting for squads to cross the river.
5. The Pursuit – detecting a squad of terrorists infiltrating the border was dealt with by one force or by a combination of elite forces as follows: elite units infantry forces, on foot or riding on half tracks, backed by helicopters. The pathfinders leading the forces were an essential element in the pursuit technique. Their task was to follow the tracks and to expose concealments efforts. They also tried to foresee the routes to the mountains of the West Bank and possible hiding places the infiltrators found to avoid contact with the pursuing forces. Once the terrorists were traced, the pursuing forces encircle them and called for their surrender with loudspeakers. Lack of response or resistance led the pursuing forces to fire at the terrorists. The result of this military tactic was that most squads of infiltrating terrorists were either captured or killed. Striving for direct, face-to-face combat with the enemy was a valuable technique used by the paratroopers during the legendary retaliatory operations initiated by the IDF in

the 1950s and 1960s. This technique proved to be effective, due to the short range from the source of the region of infiltration (Jordan) to the target region (Samaria Mountains). Pursuing forces carried this valuable military heritage on their backs, as they followed the paratroopers’ footsteps, and they became a symbol for others to follow. Pursuing forces were always led by their chief commanders, who were present in many of the operations, from the unit commanders to brigadiers and to the division commanders. High ranking officers led the pursuing forces and in the process many of them were killed in action. The list of fallen officers is long and includes some of the following: Colonel Arik Regev, Lieutenant Colonel Zvika Ofer, Lieutenant Colonel Moshe Peles (nickname: Stempale), Major Hanan Samson, Major Doron Manor, Captain Gadi Manela and many more.

The death of so many high ranking officers led to a heated controversy about the role of the commander in the battlefield and the limits of “Purity of Arms”, morality in warfare. The advantages of a high ranking officer leading his soldiers were clear. He was setting a personal example for all to follow; the officer being the best soldier, the officer must be present on the battlefield, where his decision-making is most crucial. But the high percentage of fallen officers was a clear disadvantage; the price was high, in addition to the morale effect on the soldiers and the loss of knowledge and expertise.

One lesson learnt from the battles in the Jordan Valley was applied in the eastern frontier, using minimal forces while allowing civilians to continue daily routine as much as possible. Those responsible for this security perception were Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, Major General Rehavam Ze’evi (Gandhi), Jordan Valley Brigade Commander Rafael (Rafal) Eitan and his successor General Moshe Levy (Moishe va-Hezi). They are responsible for the establishment of the defense line along the eastern border. The purpose of the line was to slow down infiltrating terrorists, while providing pursuing forces indications as to the point of infiltration and the time required to reach the point, to encircle the squad and liquidate them before they reach their targets.

Central Command developed special units, which were required, in addition to fighting terror relentlessly, to inculcate into the army values such as the heritage of heroism (Moreshet Krav), excellence, creative tactics and carrying out required operations without any reservations or hesitations. Dayan promoted normalizing the relations of the Arab residents in the West Bank with the Israeli administration and economy through the “Open Bridges” perception. He put an end to martial law imposed on the residents of the West Bank and replaced it with civil administration, providing almost full civil services. The labor market of Israel opened its gates to receive thousands of Palestinian workers in construction, agriculture and other service-oriented occupations. This policy was a revolution that brought about economic prosperity to the Palestinians in the West Bank, who were envied by their brethren in the East Bank and Gaza.

The war of attrition in the “Land of Pursuits” left the IDF and the Israelis as symbol of heroism and self scarifying, period not to forget for generations to come.