

= Battles of the Kinarot Valley =

The Battles of the Kinarot Valley (Hebrew : מלחמת הערבה , מלחמת הערבה , מלחמת הערבה) , is a collective name for a series of military engagements between the Haganah and the Syrian army during the 1948 Arab ? Israeli War , fought between May 15 ? 22 , 1948 in the Kinarot Valley . It includes two main sites : the Battle of Degania ? Samakh (Tzemah) , and battles near Masada ? Sha 'ar HaGolan . The engagements were part of the battles of the Jordan Valley , which also saw fighting against Transjordan in the area of Geshar .

The battles began shortly after the Israeli declaration of independence , when Syria shelled Ein Gev on the night of May 15 ? 16 . They were the first military engagement between Israel and Syria . On May 18 , Syria attacked the Israeli forward position in Samakh (Tzemah) , and on May 20 attacked Degania Alef and occupied Masada and Sha 'ar HaGolan . The attack on Degania Alef was a failure , after which the Syrian forces attempted to capture Degania Bet . After reaching a stalemate , they retreated to their initial position in Tel al @-@ Qasr , where they remained until the end of the war .

The campaign was perceived as a decisive Israeli victory , causing reorganizations in the Syrian high command and the birth of heroic tales in Israel . However , Syria made a small territorial gain and certain actions were criticized within Israel , such as the retreat from Masada and Sha 'ar HaGolan .

= = Background = =

The first stage of the 1948 War , referred to as the 1947 ? 1948 Civil War in Mandatory Palestine , started following the ratification of UN Resolution 181 on November 29 , 1947 , which granted Israel the mandate to declare independence . This was declared on May 14 , 1948 and the next night , the armies of a number of Arab states invaded Israel and attacked Israeli positions .

The Arab states surrounding the Mandate of Palestine started to prepare themselves a few weeks before May 15 . According to the Arab plan , the Syrian army was to attack the new state from southern Lebanon and capture Safed . As such , the Syrians massed their forces in that area ; however , after they found out that Lebanon did not wish to actively participate in combat , their plans changed to an attack from the southern Golan Heights on Samakh (Tzemah) and later Tiberias . The Syrian force assembled in Qatana on May 1 . It moved on May 12 to Beirut and to Sidon on May 13 , after which it headed to Bint Jbeil . After the sudden plan change , the force moved to Nabatieh , and proceeded around the Finger of the Galilee to Banias and Quneitra , from which the eventual attack was staged .

The Syrian Army was meant to consist of two brigade @-@ sized units , but there was no time to prepare them , thus only the 1st Brigade was in a state of readiness by May 15 . It had about 2 @ , @ 000 soldiers in two infantry battalions , one armored battalion , and 4 ? 6 artillery batteries .

= = Prelude = =

According to plan , the Syrians attacked from the southern Golan Heights , just south of the Sea of Galilee through al @-@ Hama and the Yarmouk River , hitting a densely populated Jewish area of settlement . This came as a surprise to the Haganah , which expected an attack from south Lebanon and Mishmar HaYarden . The Jewish villages on the original confrontation line were Ein Gev , Masada , Sha 'ar HaGolan and both Deganias .

On Friday , May 14 , the Syrian 1st Infantry Brigade , commanded by Colonel Abdullah Wahab el @-@ Hakim , was in Southern Lebanon , positioned to attack Malkia . That day Hakim was ordered to return to Syria , move south across the Golan and enter Palestine south of the Sea of Galilee through Samakh (Tzemah) . He began to advance at 9 : 00 AM on Saturday and had only two of his battalions , where the soldiers were already exhausted .

At the onset of the invasion , the Syrian force consisted of a reinforced infantry brigade , supplemented by at least one armored battalion (including Renault R35 tanks) and a field artillery battalion . The troops moved to Kafr Harib and were spotted by Haganah reconnaissance , but

because the attack was not expected , the Israeli troops did not attack the invaders . At night between 15 and 16 May , the bulk of the Syrian forces set up camp in Tel al @-@ Qasr in the southwestern Golan . One company with armored reinforcements split up to the south to proceed to the Jewish water station on the Yarmouk riverbank .

The Haganah forces in the area consisted of several units from the Barak (2nd) Battalion of the Golani Brigade , as well as the indigenous villagers , including a reduced Guard Corps (HIM) company at the Samakh (Tzemah) police station . This force was headed by the battalion commander 's deputy , who was killed in action in the battle . On May 13 , the battalion commander declared a state of emergency in the area from May 15 until further notice . He authorized his men to seize all necessary arms from the settlements and urged them to dig in and build fortifications as fast as possible , and to mobilize all the necessary work force to do so .

= = Battles = =

On Saturday night , May 15 , the observation posts reported many vehicles with full lights moving along the Golan ridge east of the Sea of Galilee . The opening shots were fired by Syrian artillery on kibbutz Ein Gev at approximately 01 : 00 on May 16 . At dawn , Syrian aircraft attacked the Kinarot valley villages . The following day , a Syrian company which split from the main force attacked the water station with heavy weaponry , where every worker was killed except one .

An Israeli reserve unit was called in from Tiberias . It arrived after twenty minutes and took positions around the town . At that point , Samakh (Tzemah) was defended by three platoons from the Barak battalion and reinforcements from neighboring villages . They entrenched in the actual village , which had been abandoned by the residents in April 1948 , with British escort . Positions in the village included the police station in the west , the cemetery in the north , the Manshiya neighborhood in the south , and the railway station . The Syrians set up their positions in an abandoned British military base just east of the village and in an animal quarantine station to the southeast .

Two Israeli sappers were sent to mine the area of the quarantine station , but did not know that it was already under Syrian control . Their vehicle was blown up , but they managed to escape alive . On the same day , the Syrian company that attacked the water station from Tel ad @-@ Dweir proceeded towards Sha 'ar HaGolan and Masada . Its advance was halted by the village residents as well as a platoon of reinforcements armed with 20 mm cannons . The company retreated to its position and commenced artillery fire on the two kibbutzim .

This development gave the Israeli forces time to organize their defenses at Samakh (Tzemah) . During the course of May 16 , Israeli gunboats harassed the Syrian positions on the southeastern Sea of Galilee shore , trenches were dug , and roadblocks were set up . Meanwhile , Syrian aircraft made bombing runs on Masada , Sha 'ar HaGolan , Degania Bet and Afikim . The attack on Samakh (Tzemah) resumed before dawn on May 17 ? the Syrians attacked the village 's northern positions , but their armor stayed behind . The infantry thus could not advance into the concentrated Israeli fire from the village itself , despite severe ammunition shortages on the Israeli side .

Meanwhile , the defenders of Tiberias believed their town would be targeted next , and built barricades and fortifications . Ben @-@ Gurion told the cabinet that " The situation is very grave . There aren 't enough rifles . There are no heavy weapons " . Aharon Israeli , a platoon leader , commented that there was also a severe lack of experienced field commanders ? he himself was hastily promoted on May 15 , despite not having sufficient knowledge or experience . Also on May 16 , the Syrian President , Shukri al @-@ Quwatli , visited the front with his Prime Minister , Jamil Mardam , and his Defense Minister , Taha al @-@ Hashimi . He told his forces " to destroy the Zionists " .

At night , A Syrian force attempted to surround the Israelis by crossing the Jordan River to the north of the Sea of Galilee , but encountered a minefield in which a senior Syrian officer was wounded . This was spotted and reported by the Israelis at Tabgha , and the additional reprieve allowed the Kinarot Valley villages to evacuate the children , elderly and sick , as well as conduct maneuvers which feigned massive reinforcements in the Poria @-@ Alumot region . In the panic of surprise ,

many men also tried to flee the frontal villages , but blockposts were set up near Afula and Yavne 'el by the Military Police Service 's northern command , under Yosef Pressman , who personally stopped buses and allowed only the women and children to proceed to safety .

= = = Samakh (Tzemah) = = =

At about 04 : 30 on May 18 , the Syrian 1st Brigade , now commanded by Brigadier General Husni al @-@ Za 'im and consisting of about 30 vehicles , including tanks , advanced west towards Samakh (Tzemah) in two columns ? one across the coast , and another flanking from the south . A contingent was allocated further south , in order to secure the safety of the main force by flanking Sha 'ar HaGolan and Masada from the west . It entered a stalemate with a new Israeli position northwest of the two villages .

The coastal column shelled the Israeli positions and inflicted enormous damage ; the Israelis were either dug in within shallow trenches made for infantry warfare with no head cover , or in Samakh 's clay houses that were vulnerable to heavy weapons . The Israelis were eventually forced to abandon their posts and concentrate in the police station , where they brought the wounded . The deputy commander of the Golani Brigade , Tzvika Levkov , also arrived at the station , and called reinforcements from Sha 'ar HaGolan and Tiberias , which did not manage to arrive on time .

A soldier who participated in the battle reported that only 20 uninjured troops were left to defend the police station as the second Syrian column reached Samakh (Tzemah) . The only heavy weapon the defenders possessed was ineffective against Syrian armor . Fearing their forces would be completely cut off , an order was given by the Haganah to retreat and leave the wounded , Tzvika Levkov among them . The retreat was disorganized and heavy Israeli casualties were recorded as Samakh 's police station fell . Reinforcements from the Degania , commanded by Moshe Cohen , arrived but were immediately hit by the Syrians and did not significantly affect the battle . Aharon Israeli , a platoon commander in these reinforcements , wrote that it was clear as soon as they arrived that the battle was over . Cohen would not hear of a retreat initially , but when the force saw Levkov fall into a trench , they hastily withdrew .

On the same day , Syrian aircraft bombed the Israeli village Kinneret and the regional school Beit Yerah , on the southwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee . By evening , Samakh (Tzemah) had fallen and a new Israeli defensive line was set up in the Degania , facing the Syrian counterparts . At night , a Palmach company from Yiftach 's 3rd Battalion attempted to recapture Samakh 's police station . They stealthily reached the school next to the station , but the assault on the actual fort was warded off . On the morning of May 19 , a message was sent from Sha 'ar HaGolan and Masada that they were preparing for an evacuation , although when the order was given to stay put , the villages had already been abandoned , mostly to Afikim . In the morning , when the villagers carried out an order to return to their positions , local Arabs were already present at the location . The Syrian troops then captured the villages without a fight , and proceeded to loot and destroy them . Aharon Israeli wrote that an order was given not to disclose the flight of Masada and Sha 'ar HaGolan 's residents , but this became clear as fire and smoke rose from the villages , and hurt the morale of the Israelis making defensive preparations in the Degania .

The counterattack on the police station failed but delayed the Syrian attack on the Degania by twenty @-@ four hours . In the evening of May 19 , a delegation from the Degania arrived in Tel Aviv to ask for reinforcements and heavy weapons . One of its members later wrote that David Ben @-@ Gurion told them he could not spare them anything , as " The whole country is a front line " . He also wrote that Yigael Yadin , the Chief Operations Officer of the Haganah , told him that there was no alternative to letting the Arabs approach to within twenty to thirty meters of the gates of Degania and fight their tanks in close combat . Yadin prepared reinforcements , and gave an order : " No point should be abandoned . [You] must fight at each site " . He and Ben @-@ Gurion argued over where to send the Yishuv 's only battery of four pre @-@ World War I 65 mm mountain guns (nicknamed " Napoleonchikim ") , which had no proper sights . Ben @-@ Gurion wanted to send them to Jerusalem , but Yadin insisted that they be sent to the Kinarot valley , and Ben @-@ Gurion eventually agreed .

On the night of May 18 ? 19 , a platoon departed from Ein Gev by sea to Samra and raided the Syrian contingent in Tel al @-@ Qasr . The raid failed , but may have delayed the Syrian attack on Degania , thus giving its defenders twenty @-@ four hours to prepare . A second raid , by a Yiftach company , crossed the Jordan and struck the Syrian camp at the Customs House , near the main Bnot Yaakov Bridge . After a short battle , the Syrian defenders (one or two companies) fled . The Palmachniks destroyed the camp and several vehicles , including two armored cars , without losses .

= = = Degania Alef = = =

After the fall of Tzemah , the Haganah command realized the importance of the campaign in the region , and made a clear separation between the Kinarot Valley , and the Battle of Geshar fought against Transjordan and Iraq to the south . On May 18 , Moshe Dayan , who had been born in Degania , was given command of all forces in the area , after having been charged with creating a commando battalion in the 8th Brigade just a day before . A company of reinforcements from the Gadna program was allocated , along with 3 PIATs . Other reinforcements came in the form of a company from the Yiftach Brigade and another company of paramilitaries from villages in the Lower Galilee and the Jezreel Valley . The Palmach counterattack on the police station on the night of May 18 gave the Israeli forces an additional day to prepare defense and attack plans .

The Israelis called the reinforcements assuming this was the main Syrian thrust . The Syrians were not intending to carry out any further operation south of the Sea of Galilee and planned to make their main effort further north , near the Bnot Ya 'akov bridge . On May 19 , the Iraqis were about to drive west through Nablus toward Tulkarm , and asked the Syrians to make a diversion in the Degania area to protect their right flank . The Syrians complied , their main objective being to seize the bridge across the river north of Degania Alef , thus blocking any Israeli attack from Tiberias against the Iraqi line of communications .

Heavy Syrian shelling of Degania Alef started at about 04 : 00 on May 20 from the Samakh police station , by means of 75 mm cannons , and 60 and 81 mm mortars . The barrage lasted about half an hour . At 04 : 30 on May 20 , the Syrian army began its advance on the Deganias and the bridge over the Jordan River north of Degania Alef . Unlike the attack on Samakh (Tzemah) , this action saw the participation of nearly all of the Syrian forces stationed at Tel al @-@ Qasr , including infantry , armor and artillery . The Israeli defenders numbered about 70 persons (67 according to Aharon Israeli 's head count) , most of them not regular fighters , with some Haganah and Palmach members . Their orders were to fight to the death . They had support from three 20 mm guns at Beit Yerah , deployed along the road from Samakh to Degania Alef . They also had a Davidka mortar , which exploded during the battle , and a PIAT with fifteen projectiles .

At night , a Syrian expeditionary force attempted to infiltrate Degania Bet , but was caught and warded off , which caused the main Syrian force to attack Degania Alef first . At 06 : 00 , the Syrians started a frontal armored attack , consisting of 5 tanks , a number of armored vehicles and an infantry company . The Syrians pierced the Israeli defense , but their infantry was at some distance behind the tanks . The Israelis knocked out four Syrian tanks and four armored cars with 20 mm cannons , PIATs and Molotov cocktails . Meanwhile , other defenders kept small arms fire on the Syrian infantry , who stopped in citrus groves a few hundred meters from the settlements . The surviving Syrian tanks withdrew back to the Golan . At 07 : 45 , the Syrians halted their assault and dug in , still holding most of the territory between Degania Alef 's fence and Samakh 's police fort . They left behind a number of lightly damaged or otherwise inoperable tanks that the Israelis managed to repair .

= = = Degania Bet = = =

Despite the Syrian superiority in numbers and equipment , the destruction of a multitude of armored vehicles and the infantry 's failure to infiltrate Degania Alef was the likely cause for the retreat of the main Syrian force to Samakh (Tzemah) . A less @-@ organized and sparsely numbered armored

and infantry force forked off to attack Degania Bet . Eight tanks , supported by mortar fire , moved within 400 yards of the settlement defense , where they stopped to provide fire support for an infantry attack . The Syrians made two failed attempts to breach the Israeli small arms fire defense and gave up the attempt . Against this force , the Israelis had about 80 people and one PIAT . The defenses in Degania Bet were disorganized and there were not enough trenches . They also had no communication link to the command , so Moshe Dayan sent one of his company commanders to assess the situation .

While the battle was taking place , the 65 mm artillery , four Napoleonchik canons , reached the front in the middle of the day and were placed on the Poria ? Alumot ridge . It was the first Israeli artillery to be used in the war . At 13 : 20 , they began to fire at the Syrians , and about 40 rounds the latter began to retreat . The Israelis also fired into Samakh , where the Syrian officers , who had until then believed that the Israelis had nothing that could hit their headquarters , took shelter . One projectile hit the Syrian ammunition depot in the village , and others ignited fires in the dry fields . While the soldiers who operated the cannons (still lacking sights) were not proficient in handling them , an acceptable level of accuracy was achieved after practice shots into the Sea of Galilee . In all , the artillery fire took the Syrian army by complete surprise , and the latter decided to regroup and retreat to Tel al @-@ Qasr , also recalling the company at Sha 'ar HaGolan and Masada . A total of 500 shells were fired by the Israeli artillery . Syrian officers may have shot some of their fleeing soldiers .

There were two other reasons for the Syrian withdrawal . The 3rd Battalion from the Palmach 's Yiftach Brigade had been sent by boat during the previous night across the sea to Ein Gev , planning to assault and capture Kafr Harib . It was , noticed and shelled by the Syrians , but one of the companies managed to climb up the Golan . It carried out a smaller raid at dawn , bombing water carriers and threatening the Syrian 1st Brigade 's line of communications . The second reason was that they were running out of ammunition : Husni al @-@ Za 'im had been promised replenishment , and attacked Degania short of ammunition . Za 'im ordered a withdrawal when his troops ran out of ammunition . The replenishment was instead sent to the 2nd Brigade further north . The Israelis were not aware of this , and attributed the Syrian withdrawal to surprise at the Israeli artillery fire .

= = Aftermath and effects = =

On May 21 , Haganah troops returned to Samakh (Tzemah) and set up fortifications , The damaged tanks and armored cars were gathered and taken to the rear . The settlers returned that night to identify the bodies of their comrades in the fields and buried them in a common grave in Degania . At dawn on May 21 , the Golani staff reported that the enemy was repelled but that they were expecting another attack . The full report read :

Our forces repelled yesterday a heavy attack of tanks , armored vehicles and infantry that lasted about 8 hours . The attack was repelled by the brave stand of our men , who used Molotov cocktails and their hands against the tanks . 3 " mortars and heavy machinery took their toll on the enemy . Field cannons caused a panicked retreat of the enemy , who yesterday left Tzemah . This morning our forces entered Tzemah and took a large amount of booty of French ammunition and light artillery ammunition . We have captured 2 tanks and an armored vehicle of the enemy . The enemy is amassing large reinforcements . We are expecting a renewal of the attack .

On May 22 , villagers returned to Masada and Sha 'ar HaGolan , which had been largely destroyed . Expecting another attack , reinforcements from the Carmeli Brigade took up positions in the two villages . Many of the participants of the battles were sent to Tiberias to rest and recuperate , and the units that lost soldiers were reorganized .

In the wake of the fall of Gush Etzion , news of Degania 's successful stand (as well as that of Kfar Darom) provided a morale boost for other Israeli villages . The battle also influenced British opinion on the balance of power in the war . The success of the Napoleonchik field cannons prompted the Israeli high command to re @-@ use two of them in attempts to capture Latrun . The flight from Masada and Sha 'ar HaGolan , on the other hand , stirred controversy in the young state , fueled by

news of the Kfar Etzion massacre just days before , and the Palmach issued a newsletter accusing them of abandoning national assets , among other things . These accusations were subsequently repeated in media and in a play by Yigal Mossensohn , and a campaign was started by the villagers to clear their name .

The battles of the Kinarot Valley were the first and last of the major ground engagements between Israel and Syria to the south of the Sea of Galilee , although minor patrol skirmishes continued until the first ceasefire . The campaign , combined with the Battle of Gesher , was possibly the only coordinated attack between two or more Arab countries in the northern front . At the end , the Syrians held Tel al @-@ Qasr , which was part of the British Mandate of Palestine and the Jewish state according to the UN partition of 1947 . Despite the above , the offensive was considered a decisive Syrian defeat by both sides . The Syrian defense minister Ahmad al @-@ Sharabati and Chief of Staff Abdullah Atfeh blamed each other , the latter resigning and the former being dismissed by the prime minister as a result of the battle . As reasons for their defeat , they gave their low level of preparedness and the strength of the Israeli defenses , as well as their lack of coordination with the Iraqis (according to one Syrian historian , the Iraqis were supposed to assist them in the Degania) . After the battle , British observers became convinced that the Arabs were not going to win the war , and compared the battle to the Luftwaffe 's failure in the Battle of Britain in 1940 , which showed that Germany was not going to win the air war . The observers said that " A greater edge than the [Syrians] enjoyed at Degania they won 't have again " .

= = = First tank kill controversy = = =

The first Syrian tank damaged near Degania Alef 's gates , which has been preserved on the location , was the subject of a historiographic dispute when Baruch " Burke " Bar @-@ Lev , a retired IDF colonel and one of Degania 's native defenders at the time , claimed that he was the one who stopped the tank with a Molotov cocktail . However , his account was rebutted by an IDF Ordnance Corps probe , which in 1991 determined that a PIAT shot had killed the tank 's crew . Shlomo Anshel , a Haifa resident who also participated in the battle , told Haaretz in 2007 that the tank was hit by PIAT fire from a Golani soldier , and that the Molotov cocktail could not possibly have hit the crew .