



## The battle of KARAMEH (March 21, 1968): Founding defeat for Fatah

military-Earth thinking notebook

le Chef de bataillon Benoît ROSSILLON

Published on 14/07/2018

Histoire & stratégie

**A brief Israeli incursion into Jordanian territory, the battle of Karameh was undoubtedly a tactical defeat for the Jordanian forces and for Yasser Arafat's Fatah. However, the severe losses caused to the assailant turned it into a strategic victory, as it strengthened the Palestine Liberation Organization on a lasting basis.**

**The overconfidence of Israeli political and tactical leaders both helped to restore Jordan's confidence in its army and enabled the Palestinian resistance to establish itself as a key player in the Middle East conflict.**

**The media exploitation of the battle by Fatah still gives it, four decades later, a mythical dimension in the Arab world.**

### A situation of conflict

- One year after the Six Day War and the Israeli triumph

Conducted on the initiative of Israel in June 1967, the Six Day War was a huge defeat for the coalised Arab countries. Jordan The West Bank, in particular, has lost about one fifth of its territory.

In 1968, the leaders of these countries were even more inward-looking and busy rebuilding their armed forces.

The leaders of the Palestinian cause realized that the Arab nations could not liberate Palestine in their place, and that they would have to form their own armies.

As for the Israeli political and military leaders, they are in a spiral of confidence: sure of

their choices in foreign policy, they consider that the IDF is practically invincible in the sub-region.

- The Palestinian terrorist response

In 1968, the displaced Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank had long been a concern of the international community. Having fled Israel in 1948, a large proportion of them suffered occupation as a result of the Six Day War. In response to the Israeli occupation, 400,000 Palestinians are seeking refuge in Lebanon and Jordan, believing that one day they will be able to return home. They are supported in their efforts by resolution 242, adopted on 22 November 1967 by the UN Security Council, which calls for withdrawal from the occupied territories.

In January 1968, Yasser Arafat<sup>[3]</sup> The leader of Fatah, the main Palestinian resistance movement, chose Karameh, a village of about 300 households in Jordan, as his headquarters. Karameh has been home to a Palestinian refugee camp for nearly 15 years and, more importantly, it is less than 10 kilometres from Allenby Bridge, the only crossing point authorized by Israel between the West Bank and Jordan. From February 1968, incursions and clandestine actions by Palestinian fighters, mainly from Al-Assifa, the armed wing of Fatah, multiplied towards the occupied territories. This terrorism provoked Israeli reprisals that fed the spiral of violence on both sides. On 18 March 1968, an attack by Al-Assifa on a Hebrew school bus killed two children and injured many others. It was one attack too many for the government of Levi Eshkol.

- The forces involved

- IDF

Exasperated, the Israeli leaders decide on a rapid and massive response. They entrust the General Staff with the preparation of a military operation with clear goals: to destroy the Karameh camp, neutralize as many fedayeen as possible and capture the leaders of the Palestinian resistance. This operation must also make it possible to establish a bridgehead on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, in Jordanian territory, in order to intimidate King Hussein, who, according to Israel, leaves too much freedom to the Palestinians. The Israeli Defence Minister, Moshe Dayan, has given General Gonen the command of an ad hoc force, the size of which is estimated to be about a joint arms brigade of about 6,500 men and 120 tanks, supported by an 80-piece artillery battalion, an engineer battalion and two squadrons of fighter bombers. Divided into three armoured groups, this brigade was to enter Jordan by the three bridges over the Jordan River: the northern group by the Damya Bridge, the central group by the Allenby Bridge, and the southern group by the Abdallah Bridge. While a battalion of paratroopers is to be heliborne east of Karameh, a fourth, smaller armoured detachment is to conduct a diversion south of the Dead Sea to secure part of the Jordanian forces.

- Fatah

The Palestinians represent a force of about 500 men, equipped with small arms, grenades and explosives, who have been entrenched in the village for several months. These fedayeen are not all experienced fighters; only a small fringe of them are part of the terrorist commandos operating in Israel. More than half of Arafat's supporters are teenagers with little military training, but they are exalted and ready to sacrifice.

- Jordanian Forces<sup>[4]</sup>

Jordan is committed to great solidarity with the Palestinians, who in 1968 made up nearly half of its population.

The region of As-Salt is under the responsibility of General Haditha's 1st<sup>Infantry</sup> Division, with seven thousand men, eighty tanks and a hundred howitzers. Well trained, this unit is equipped with materials equivalent to those of Tsahal, except helicopters. Deployed less than 20 kilometres from the border, the 1st Infantry Division<sup>spotted</sup> the Israeli rise in power in Jericho and on the entire western bank of the Jordan River on 18 March 1968. On 20 March, the Jordanian Chief of Staff and General Haditha met Yasser Arafat and asked him, in vain, to withdraw his troops to the hills east of Karamah. Arafat, determined to prove to the international community the determination of the Palestinian resistance, immediately returned to his headquarters and put his fedayeen on alert.

### **Course of events**

- From five o'clock to noon: a shallow armoured offensive

At dawn on 21 March, the three Israeli groups were shaken without artillery preparation in order to preserve the surprise effect as much as possible. Sure of victory, Moshe Dayan, accompanied by journalists and television crews, stood on the west bank of the Jordan River, near Jericho, to observe Karamah.

The weather is foggy, and the heliborne operation to the village is delayed by about three hours. The terrain is unfavourable for offensive action, as the wide valley is muddy and movement is easily detected from the Jordanian hillsides.

At seven o'clock, the Jordanian border guards are swept away, the three bridges are conquered and the armoured units set foot on the east bank. But the Jordanian artillery surprised them by firing from the heights above Shunat and Karamah. Israeli air support was then triggered, but the planes were unable to silence the Jordanian guns, skilfully positioned on the ground and solidly defended by the flak. By decision of King Hussein, who had seen all his planes destroyed during the Six Day War, the Jordanian air force, although ready to act, did not intervene in the battle.

At 7:30 a.m., two Jordanian armoured battalions moved into the Jordan Valley and engaged the battle at Allenby and Damya bridges.

At 8.30 a.m., the Israeli parachute battalion was heliborne four hundred metres east of Karamah and immediately came under fire from the Palestinian defenders. Its advance towards the village was laborious.

- From noon to 2100 hours: a deadly urban battle

A few minutes before noon, while the armoured units were still fighting near the bridges in the north and the centre of the device, the Israeli parachute battalion entered Karamah, supported by a dozen armoured tanks and as many helicopters equipped with machine guns. Opposite them are nearly 400 Palestinians, an infantry company and four Jordanian tanks.

The Arab resistance is fierce: during the first hour of this hand-to-hand combat, several Palestinians equipped with explosive belts launch themselves against the Israeli tanks. These suicide attacks are among the first of their kind in the Middle East. Houses are searched at a very slow pace; few Arabs surrender. In the face of the fierce fighting, the Israeli authorities made the journalists leave Jericho at around 1 p.m.

At 2 p.m., the central armoured group joined the paratroopers in the now-conquered Karamah. The northern and southern groups were held back by Jordanian counter-attacks.

Shortly before 1500 hours, the Israeli troops stopped their offensive and began the bombing of the Palestinian camp and public buildings in the village. From 5 p.m. onwards, the Israeli troops began to withdraw in an orderly manner. At 2100 hours, the Joint Brigade returned to the west bank of the Jordan River.

- Casualties

It is still difficult today to find a numerical balance sheet that does not overestimate the losses of either side after 21 March. Cross-checking the sources gives the following estimate:

**IDF** has 30 killed, 70 wounded, four tanks and one plane (a Phantom fighter-bomber) lost.

For its part, **the Jordanian army counted** about 100 killed, 150 wounded, 13 tanks and two howitzers destroyed.

Arafat's **fedayeen** paid the heaviest price, with 130 dead and as many wounded, most of them taken prisoner.

### Lessons learned and media exploitation

- Israeli overconfidence

In the days that followed, and until today, Israeli leaders communicated very little about the operation. Their policy is to claim that the Palestinian terrorist camp has been razed to the ground, and thus the objective partially achieved, but they do not publicize their losses. Tactical leaders have not been given the benefit of surprise or favourable ground for the offensive. They underestimated Jordanian capabilities, particularly artillery capabilities. The balance of power was only locally favourable to them, mainly thanks to the use of aviation and helicopters.

- Restored Arab moral strength

"We are all fedayeen". Pronouncing this phrase at the funeral of the Muslim fighters, King Hussein associates his people with the Palestinian cause. Hardly hit, Jordan is nevertheless credited with the "first Arab victory against Israel" thanks to the Arab world's media, which proclaim that the country has repulsed a real invasion attempt. Israeli losses are put forward to prove to the defeated of 1967 that the IDF is not invulnerable. The frustration linked to the Six Day War, followed by this renewal of confidence that began in 1968, allowed the Arabs to regain the initiative in 1973, by launching the Yom Kippur

offensive on October 6.

- The emergence of a war leader

Yasser Arafat took part in the fighting. He left Karamah shortly after noon and retreated to the city of Salt. At 8 p.m., he himself spoke on Jordanian radio to claim victory and an "Israeli stampede". In the days that followed, he organized an official funeral in Amman for his killed fedayeen. He remains the main beneficiary of the media exploitation of the battle. His aura of warlord was born on 21 March 1968. During the decade that followed, it grew stronger and stronger. Except for his evacuation from Beirut on 30 August 1982, Arafat never came so close to capture.

The sacrifice of many fedayeen had a considerable unifying effect on the Palestinians, to the direct benefit of Fatah: at the end of 1968, its membership increased tenfold, from one thousand to more than ten thousand militants. Several Arab and Maghreb states then gave Yasser Arafat the status of head of state in exile; he thus acquired an international dimension. On the other hand, the financing of Fatah was secured in the long term: donations flowed in, and Arab countries receiving Palestinian nationals in exile forced them to pay special taxes, which financed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).<sup>151</sup>

In 1969, Yasser Arafat became president of the PLO. Shocked by his successes, he too became overconfident and attempted to overthrow King Hussein in 1970.

- Impact on international public opinion

In the international press, especially in the West, the event is most often described as a bloodbath. The asymmetrical opposition between a very well-equipped army and volunteers fighting with the force of despair generates a surge of sympathy for the Palestinian cause.

However, the repercussions vary from country to country: the United States is concerned about the Vietnam War and the response is relatively weak, as is the case in France, where the social unrest leading up to May 1968 is attracting attention.

## **Conclusion**

Compared to the twenty years of open conflict between Israel and its neighbours, the battle of Karamah is not a major episode. But its symbolic significance was considerable in the Arab world, which is why it remains the subject of diametrically opposed interpretations in the twenty-first century.

It has also been a theatre of experimentation. Certain combat techniques, hitherto unheard of in the confrontation between Israel and its neighbours, have been employed. Such is the case with suicide attacks, perpetrated by the Palestinians not in the context of terrorism but in the context of urban combat. For its part, the IDF has systematically destroyed Palestinian sanctuaries. In Karamah, Israeli engineers used explosives. Subsequently, they have continued to innovate in this field and now use armoured bulldozers, sometimes remotely operated, capable of razing multi-storey houses to the

ground.

Finally, the battle of Karameh has certain similarities with the campaign conducted in the summer of 2006 by Israel against Hezbollah in Lebanese territory. The weakest protagonist emerged considerably stronger and stronger on the regional and international scene. In 1968, as in 2006, there were three forces. In both cases, two national armies and a non-state armed organization: the IDF against Fatah and the Jordanian land forces on the one hand, and the IDF against Hezbollah and the Lebanese armed forces on the other.

1) Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq.

2) In 1946, the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan emancipated itself from Great Britain and became a member of the UN. In 1949, it took the name of Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. In 1952, Hussein acceded to the crown at the age of 17 and reigned until his death in 1999.

3) Yasser Arafat (Cairo, 1929 - Clamart, 2004). Of Palestinian origin, Arafat was a second lieutenant in the Egyptian army during the Suez campaign in 1956. Disappointed by Nasser, he became an activist and founded Fatah in Kuwait in 1958. Fatah's first military operation in Israel took place in 1964, and there were about 100 until March 1968.

4) The Jordanian armies are sometimes confused with the Arab legion. The latter no longer exists since 1956, when British officers ceased to supervise the Jordanian troops.

5) The PLO was created in May 1964 in Cairo by the Arab League, at the instigation of Egyptian President Gamal Nasser. It brings together mainly Fatah, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Belonging to the promotion of the bicentenary of the special military school of Saint-Cyr (1999-2002), Battalion Chief Benoît Rossillon joined the 31st Engineer Regiment in <sup>2003</sup>, within which he carried out several external and internal missions. Transferred to the engineering school in 2007, he commanded a training support company there, before becoming a drafting officer in the Directorate of Studies and Foresight.

---

**Title :** le Chef de bataillon Benoît ROSSILLON

**Author (s) :** le Chef de bataillon Benoît ROSSILLON

**Release date** 12/02/2021

---