



FEATURES

Putting out Jerusalem's Fires

Sami Mustaklem's Memories of Civil Defense under Jordan and Israel

Charmaine Seitz

Ottoman firefighters. Source: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Abdul Hamid Collection.

On ~~July 22,~~ 1946, Sami Mustaklem was car shopping with his wife in Jerusalem. The manager of Bartlett's Bank had a honey of a vehicle for sale and was just quoting the then-town magistrate a price when they heard a loud explosion, and debris rained down. The hapless couple raced inside the Old City walls, where they heard that the King David Hotel had been bombed; later it was learned that explosion set by the Jewish Irgun had killed 91. The next day, when Mustaklem returned to work at the town planning building just down the road, he saw bodies being lifted out of the rubble. He didn't buy that car.

But the day was marked in Mustaklem's mind as a seminal moment in the passing of the British Mandate and the beginning of his long career as the head of Jerusalem's fire department under Jordanian and then Israeli control. There weren't so many blazes in this city of stone, but the fire brigade formed one of the hubs of civil defense through conflict and wars.

First, however, there were months of uncertainty. The departure of the British Authorities meant instability and few jobs. Mustaklem's luck was to find work abroad with Aramco; he flew to the Gulf from Qalandia airport on Lebanon's Middle East Air. After four years he returned with joy to his family to work as an inspector of public works under the Jordanians. Then, in 1957, fire chief Mahmoud Shuabi passed away and Mustaklem was hired to take his place after an arduous application process and meetings with mayor Ruhi al-Khatib. He was trained in Zarka at a military school in fire safety, firefighting, the deployment of ropes as rescue lifts, and the use and care of ambulances and fire engines. The Jordanians, like governments before them, saw the civil defense brigades as a bridge to the local population.

“Greek Fire”

The history of firefighting is tied to the exercise of empire, with the Roman emperor Augustus reportedly instituting a corps of fire-fighting *vigiles* [watchmen] in 24 BC. This organization included the institution of regulations for fire prevention, and the hiring of a watchman to keep lookout. Buckets were used, passed down a line of people, to carry water to a blaze. Axes and building-toppling hooks were also employed to create fire breaks and prevent the flames from spreading.

But the Fatimids were particularly adept at both using and fighting fires. It was a major component of the modern warfare that they waged in sweeping west across Europe and into Palestine. Learning fire's power first-hand when Constantine twice waged war against them employing a mysterious concoction called “Greek fire”, the Arabs developed a reputedly weaker flammable liquid of napha, sulfur and quicklime. From ramparts and the bows of ships, bronze tubes were used to deliver the weapon. Glass was filled with the concoction – the early molotov cocktail – and hurled at the other side.

To defend against this weapon, the Crusaders developed a fire-fighting and rescue service. The Knights of St. John, as they were called, used the symbol of the Maltese Cross, which remains part of the western firefighting tradition. The lore around these knights repeated through firemen's associations today ascribes to them the “first” organized hospital and the “heroic” Crusader's battles against Suleiman the Magnificent.¹ (Interestingly, there is little archeological evidence to support the idea that the Muslim advance on Palestine was accompanied by the burning and physical destruction of cities – this must have been solely a weapon of immediate battle.)

Jean de Joinville, a thirteenth century French nobleman with the Seventh Crusade in Egypt describes the fear which accompanied the notorious Mamluk weapon.

It happened one night, whilst we were keeping night-watch over the tortoise-towers, that they brought up against us an engine called a perronel, (which they had not done before)

and filled the sling of the engine with Greek fire. When that good knight, Lord Walter of Cureil, who was with me, saw this, he spoke to us as follows: "Sirs, we are in the greatest peril that we have ever yet been in. For, if they set fire to our turrets and shelters, we are lost and burnt; and if, again, we desert our defenses which have been entrusted to us, we are disgraced; so none can deliver us from this peril save God alone. My opinion and advice therefore is: that every time they hurl the fire at us, we go down on our elbows and knees, and beseech Our Lord to save us from this danger."

So soon as they flung the first shot, we went down on our elbows and knees... Our firemen were all ready to put out the fire; and the Saracens², not being able to aim straight at them, on account of the two pent-house wings which the King had made, shot straight up into the clouds, so that the fire-darts fell right on top of them.

This was the fashion of the Greek fire: it came on as broad in front as a vinegar cask, and the tail of fire that trailed behind it was as big as a great spear; and it made such a noise as it came, that it sounded like the thunder of heaven. It looked like a dragon flying through the air. Such a bright light did it cast, that one could see all over the camp as though it were day, by reason of the great mass of fire, and the brilliance of the light that it shed.

Under the Ottomans, familiarity with fire developed into state-organized civil defense brigades, which included the *tulumbaci*, or automated water pump. There are varied reports as to whether this was a function of the sultanate, or private companies. Several Ottoman leaders rose to fame by taking leading roles in fire-fighting,³ but David Landes claims that: "In Ottoman Turkey, firefighting was in the hand of private companies, who came running when the alarm sounded. They competed with one another and negotiated price with house owners on the spot. As the negotiation proceeded, the fire burned higher and the stakes diminished. Or spread. Neighbors had an interest in contributing to the pot."⁴ A museum in Istanbul documents the history of the fire brigades, which incorporated horse-drawn water delivery carts, motorized fire engines and firemen's uniforms and tools.

The British Mandate authorities continued this tradition, incorporated with their own firefighting system. The great London fire of 1966 had resulted in insurance companies developing private fire brigades (accompanied by the same self-interested scenes as described above); these were not centralized under the government until the mid-nineteenth century. Eventually they were incorporated into the British colonial arm. The Palestine Fire Brigades were established on 10 May, 1938, twenty years after British forces occupied the land.



Jerusalem firefighters practice rope rescue before the days of modern rescue equipment. *Source: S. Mustaklem.*

Smoke-eaters

By the time Jerusalem came under Jordanian control, the local fire department was a professional fire department made up of three engines and eleven men. It wasn't a huge force for the growing city, but most of the time was spent in fire prevention. Mustaklem gave talks in schools to children about preventing and handling fires. One of the major problems that the civil defense faced was the use of kerosene heaters in homes; the department ran ads asking citizens to avoid using kerosene heaters in closed areas and to make sure that every room had a small window near the lock that could be broken in case of emergency. The only death he remembers was that of a young man who became faint from kerosene gas as he bathed. In trying to open the door, the man only locked it further and by the time the fire department arrived at the behest of his distraught mother, the man had died.

When there were fires, they were usually small blazes. Residents would call in to the firehouse by phone, and the whole neighborhood would turn out to help. "I used to appreciate this help from the people. They would all gather and put it out before we even got there," Mustaklem remembers. The Old City posed a particular problem, however, because of its narrow alleyways. One of Mustaklem's moves was to request that the municipality install more fire hydrants within the city walls. A special German-made car was used to navigate the city streets; it had wheels that turned easily and could climb stone steps. Another improvement Mustaklem extracted from the municipality was



Sami Mustaklem trains new rescue workers (1986). *Source: S. Mustaklem.*

the fire department's departure from an old two-room station in Abu Tor for a modern building located over the municipality building in Jordanian Jerusalem on the way to the Augusta Victoria hospital. The new station had a parking garage for its engines. It remains the sole fire station for the eastern half of the city today.

There wasn't much politicking to his job, says Mustaklem; nor was there a great deal of contact with the Israeli civil defense across the armistice line. One year a brush fire threatened to consume the buildings of Hebrew University, an island of Israeli control in the middle of Jordanian territory. The Israeli government put in a request with the Jordanian chief of police and Mustaklem was asked to take his men to fight the blaze from the Jordanian side. Certain there were landmines, he agreed only if the United Nations forces were to move into the area first. As they fought the blaze, Mustaklem remembers that an employee of the university approached one of the firemen and told him that he wished desperately to go to the Old City and eat falafel and hummus. He was, Mustaklem assumed, a Jewish former resident of the walled city.

One of the interesting aspects of Mustaklem's account of his work is the way he talks about being a fireman as a universalizing identity. He was retrained twice by the British in 1959 and the Americans in 1964. Early foggy London mornings were spent scaling up three-story buildings. In New York, Mustaklem endured training on Welfare Island. In one particularly difficult test, the firemen were told to wear a breathing apparatus into a smoky basement, past numerous obstacles, and find a water hose that

had to be turned on. When Mustaklem completed the challenge, his instructor praised him, “I can say one thing – you are a smoke-eater!”

At the onset of the 1967 war, Mustaklem tensely gathered his 28 firemen and municipal inspectors inside his firehouse, as gunfire broke out⁵. In the afternoon, an Israeli shell struck the building and set ablaze a fireman’s bed and clothing, but no one was hurt. That was the signal for the group to head into the basement. Still there were calls to fight fires. At two in the afternoon, a truck set out to extinguish a car hit by a shell and burning in al-Ezzeriah. Another small team was dispatched to put out a fire near Lion’s Gate; this time the firemen were shot at and they hunkered down at an impromptu station nearby (the blaze was already out when they arrived).

The Israeli advance flowed right past Mustaklem and his men near the Augusta Victoria. Hiding below, the civil defense members went without food and water for two days. One of the men suffered a heart attack under the stress of hoping they would not be discovered. The firehouse was still stocked with stacks of hay; Mustaklem worried that any spark could set it, and stores of kerosene, naphtha and benzene ablaze. Running out of options, he opened the door and called to an Israeli paratrooper, telling him he had a man inside who was dying. “We are going to conquer the Old City,” the soldier replied. “If I am alive [afterwards], I will bring an ambulance.”

Another plea for help was answered with force. This time, two soldiers pointed to a vehicle nearby and ordered Mustaklem to start it or be killed. He said he didn’t know how without the key. When Mustaklem asked for help from two of his men, the soldiers lined the Palestinians against the wall and told the fire chief that, if he didn’t start the car, the men would all be shot. Mustaklem pleaded with the soldiers, to little avail. Finally a frightened mechanic among the men in the firehouse was persuaded to go to a taxi parked across the road and start it. The paratroopers drove off.

After the Old City was taken, the first Israeli soldier returned – still alive – and escorted the men to a nearby market for their first food of two days. He also handed over their first taste of Israeli cigarettes. A medical student, the soldier examined the ailing man and then set off to find him an ambulance. Also carted off to the hospital with him were two injured Palestinian fighters who had sought refuge in the firehouse garden.

That Wednesday evening, Mustaklem and all other municipal employees were called to the city hall near Jaffa Gate. Newly-minted mayor Teddy Kollek set them to the task of collecting the dead from the city streets. They were also ordered to collect the rotting meat and perishables from local refrigerators, as there had been an electrical blackout in the city. Mustaklem himself arranged several stations where families could collect milk and bread. Under new West Jerusalem leadership, the city was reorganized for civil defense.

“Our main job is to extinguish fires and save lives, not to interfere in policy,” comments the retired fire chief today. In 1969, when an Australian tourist set ablaze the al-Aqsa Mosque, it took firefighters from Jerusalem, Ramallah and Hebron five hours to put out the fire. Of the biggest blaze of his career Mustaklem says simply, “The holy places are always preserved by the Almighty God.”

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, the Abermarle County, Virginia website, “Department of Fire Rescue: The History of the Firefighter’s Maltese Cross,” by Shirley Sheridan, <http://www.co.albemarle.va.us/departme nt.asp?department=fire&relpage=2856>, viewed 18 September 2005.

² Joinville uses “Saracens”, however it is likely here he is referring to the Mamluk army.

³ Grand Vizier Merzifonlu Kara Mustafa Pasha reported earned his nickname “Kara” when his face was scarred while leading the civil defense against a major fire; Sultan Abd-ul-Hamid I earned accolades for his role in fighting the 1782 Istanbul fire.

⁴ Landes, David S. *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1998) 520.

⁵ Account of 1967 War taken from Robert Moskin’s *Among Lions: The Battle for Jerusalem June 5-7, 1967* (1984).