

POLICEMAN  
IN  
PALESTINE

Memories of the early years

by  
Colin Imray

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## Footprints

Despite having attended a CID course, I was never very good at dealing with footprints. I found it difficult to arrive at the correct consistency for the required plaster of paris.

RGB appeared on one occasion just when I least wanted to be on view. I was in a shocking mess. Fortunately he was amused at the sight of the dishevelled constable covered by a nasty off-white outer shell.

However, footprinting did once enable me to help avert what might have been a bad miscarriage of justice. Jerusalem Rural CID was located in two or three dingy rooms within the old Turkish fortress known as the Kishli. It was built on the site of a very much older series of fortifications just within the Jaffa Gate – or the Bab al Khalil. When trade flagged for the CID amid these soul destroying surroundings, a deep gloom sometimes descended. And it was at just such a time during a particularly cold winter spell, with icy rain belting down (Jerusalem's rain, contrary to the popular impression, can be as cold as any), with most 'outstandings' tidied up, and very little to do except consider the awfulness of the world, that I sat and murmured 'How long, O God, How long?'

It was just the time to do some study. I was learning Arabic in a desultory sort of way, and here was an opportunity to put in some book work... But I wasn't, I fear, made of the right kind of stuff. Suddenly the telephone rang. It was Arab Inspector Nur-ed-din Effendi. His

English was even worse than my Arabic but we got along well enough. Nur-ed-din seemed to have taken me under his wing, and I was grateful. 'Please come with me at once to Jimsu village, and bring your footprint gear with you. I am waiting.' I picked him up and we set off. The journey to Jimşu by police tender took about an hour along some very rough tracks. Nur-ed-din Effendi sat cosily in front under cover with the driver; I was bumped about in the back, getting wetter and colder every moment from the rain which never seemed to let up. At Jimsu there was the usual coffee ceremony at the Mukhtar's house before anything could happen. Then Nur-ed-din, in the slow 'kitchen' Arabic that he used with me, related the story he had gleaned from the Mukhtar. It certainly seemed to be simple enough. A prisoner by the name of Hamed was triumphantly produced from a nearby pig-pen wherein he had been incarcerated for some hours. It was apparent that Hamed was very angry indeed. 'Regard this man's left foot', said Nur-ed-din, 'he has no little toe'. He went on: 'The Mukhtar says that Yusuf here' – he turned towards a smiling, obsequious, thoroughly unlikable individual – 'had his house broken into whilst he was away yesterday afternoon, and four of his goats are missing. And there has been fassad (dispute) between Yusuf and Hamed for a long time. But...' – here Nur-ed-din pushed his face into mine – 'there are footprints in flour lying upon the ground and leading up to where the goats were tethered, and' – Nur-ed-din's nose was now pushed Zulu fashion right alongside mine – 'those footprints show the lack of a little toe on the left foot.'

And so we proceeded to the scene of the crime, accompanied by the Mukhtar, complainant Yusuf and accused Hamed, still smelling strongly of pig-sty, and still protesting loudly.

Sure enough, there in a heavy spill-over of flour from sacks piled up in the corner, were some very clear foot-

POLICEMAN IN PALESTINE

prints going left right, left right, up to the goat corral, out of which the wooden door had been pushed off its rickety hinges. And the left footprints showed very clearly that whoever had made them lacked a little toe. Everyone looked at the sandal-less Hamed. His culpability was surely beyond dispute. Hamed was more than a little sensitive about all this. He cursed loud and long, with hands and arms moving like pistons to emphasize whatever point he was trying to make in the Arabic that I was striving to follow, but which denoted very clearly a most strenuous denial. On this occasion I found little difficulty in dealing with the prints. Half way through making my cast, I found myself looking at Hamed's left foot, and then back again to the toe-less left foot print. Somehow, Hamed's foot seemed broader and longer than the print. I drew Nur-ed-din's attention to the apparent discrepancy. But having been nurtured on Turkish 'rough' justice, he would have none of it. Could there possibly be in the Jerusalem Rural District more than one man who had a little toe missing from his left foot? With Nur-ed-din and the Mukhtar going into conference on local affairs over yet more cups of coffee, I - just in case - made Hamed run, walk, dance and jump along what remained of the flour. The result confirmed my sneaking suspicion. The prints of Hamed, there in the flesh, in no way corresponded with those imprinted in the flour. But with Nur-ed-din obdurate, there was no point in arguing. There was no doubt about what had to happen. The continually protesting Hamed was arrested and stuffed into the back of the tender with me as escort. And here at last during the return journey to Jerusalem, the rain did what nothing else had been able to do; it reduced Hamed to morose silence. The case, so far as Nur-ed-din was concerned, was 'open and shut', and he was awaiting pleurably one more commendation to add to his already long list for diligent investigation of crime.

Footprints

But there was to be a hitch. I had spent a sleepless night and next morning sought an urgent interview with the 'Super'. I told him the story. A veteran from Ireland, and an excellent 'field' policeman, he listened and said he would look into things. In the meantime I was to assemble the facts and be ready to present the rebutting footprint evidence. For me this was to be the first of a number of occasions in my career when I was to be 'pig-in-the-middle'. I didn't want to let down Nur-ed-din, but what was I to do? And then mercifully, the very next day, another one of gloom at the Kishli, with Hamed charged and awaiting justice through the courts, there came a bombshell. With a smile of triumph, in walked the Jimsu Mukhtar with a story that was to shake everyone. According to him, another toe-less left footer, one Ali al Bedawi, had been found actually driving Yusuf's four goats away into the depths of the rocky hills. And behold, here he was, all ready for the Mandate police to examine this extraordinary coincidence.

With the lordly mien of a conjuror, the Mukhtar clapped his hands, and the wretched Ali, with hands bound, was kicked into the room by two of the village special constabulary. The true story then emerged. Ali was indeed the malefactor. Having been foiled in making his get-away with the goats, he gave no trouble at all. He had in fact long coveted Yusuf's wife, and had been hanging round hoping for a favourable opportunity. But whilst engaged on his reconnaissance, he had seized the chance - in the absence of Yusuf - to 'knock off' four of his goats. He had evidently resigned himself to the prison sentence he eventually received, and in the meantime was beaming toothily at everybody. I was curious to know why it was that he seemed to be so happy.

'Sir' said Ali, 'you do not understand. For years I had thought myself to be the only little toe-less left footer in the world, and now I have found that I have gained a

brother.' But Hamed, restored to liberty and confronted with Ali, made it clear in unprintable terms that he rejected this fraternal approach.

## Abu Jildeh

For some three to four weeks, the tall, straight, silent figure, dressed in the awful black and grey striped prison uniform, walked daily for his allotted hour in the prison exercise yard.

Finally, on the appointed morning, he spoke :

'Khatrak Kulkum Mahabis.' (Goodbye all you prisoners).

Thus did Abu Jildeh, dignified at the last, bid farewell to the remaining occupants of the condemned cells in Jerusalem's Central Prison, as he walked the few yards to the trap. Saleh Armeet, his friend and fellow gangster, was to follow him that same morning.

In the Palestine of the Mandate, both police and prisons operated under the Inspector General of Police, and inevitably it occurred that individual policemen were required from time to time for spells of prison duty. Hence they might very well find themselves attending the grim business of an execution. Some took the whole ghastly business in their stride, or so it appeared to those who knew them. For others, both before and after the thing happened, it was nightmare of the worst kind.

For nearly a year Abu Jildeh and his band roamed the hills of Judæa and southern Samaria, both north and east of Jerusalem. He was alluded to sometimes by those who saw only the glamour, as 'The Arab Robin Hood'. But though in the end he died well, there was nothing during Abu Jildeh's reign in the rugged Palestinian hill country that measured up to the chivalrous courage and daring of

## POLICEMAN IN PALESTINE

the Robin Hood of fiction. The only points of resemblance perhaps lay in the swift forays upon villages, the skilfully laid ambushes of travellers and police patrols, and the silent traceless melting away into the hills after each raid. There was even, on at least one memorable occasion, the shooting-up at night of the police depot itself, on the very fringe of Jerusalem. It never did transpire what Abu Jildeh hoped to achieve by this escapade in which luckily there were no police casualties. Maybe it was just brava-do. Abu Jildeh was in fact a bandit in every sense; a cruel, callous bandit, and in the end a proved murderer. He had learned about banditry during the Turkish regime when, as a youth, he followed his father and brothers and took part in their marauding expeditions. His story was told in the Vienna Cafe during many an evening session by Assistant Superintendent of Police Abdin Bey. Abdin, an Arab who had been a policeman under the Turks, would certainly have known all about this sort of thing for his local knowledge was encyclopaedic. As a raconteur he was second to none. Thus, according to Abdin, Abu Jildeh had tried his hand at banditry up in the French mandated land of Syria, where life had been made too dangerous for him, and where his father and one of his brothers had been killed in action with the authorities. He had, therefore, set up business in the Palestinian hill country that he knew so well. He hoped no doubt that the British would be less aggressive than the French towards him and his kind. Abu Jildeh employed the usual *modus operandi* of those who have followed banditry and guerilla activity as a career. Basically he terrorised the villagers whose paths he crossed. He knew his ground thoroughly, for he was born and bred in the area. And the same applied to his second in command, Saleh Armeet, who had grown up with him. But they were probably the only locals of the entire band (apart from our friend Mohammed Doshan) which at the zenith of its power numbered some thirty to

## Abu Jildeh

forty followers. They were mostly from Syria and northern Palestine. It has been said that several of these who later were to fight British and Jews indiscriminately, gained their experience of hill-fighting under Abu Jildeh. And years later, a former officer in the Palestine Police became convinced that Abu Jildeh might well have been mixed up with the Grand Mufti himself, the redoubtable Haj Amin el Husseini. It has been said earlier that Haj Amin would leave no stone unturned in his determination to undermine the mandatory power, Britain.

The band lived of course off the unhappy villagers, who were much too frightened to 'tip off' the police. Indeed there was sound evidence of summary executions of people who refused to help the gang. In the early stages, Abu Jildeh had been just another bandit. And Palestine had always been full of bandits, although since the British came on the scene armed robberies had diminished much. However, banditry was still common enough for the older officers to regard it as part of the days work. And so when a report came in that Abu Jildeh was in the vicinity, a police party would race along the road in tenders, disembark, and then advance in extended order, hoping vaguely to catch the intruder in their net. The sole result of this kind of thing was to provoke a volley of musketry from Abu Jildeh and his band, hidden comfortably among uninviting crags and cliffs. Fortunately none of the gang seemed to be very good shots. The police would dutifully return the fire, and then climb wearily and warily towards the place where the bandits had been but no longer were. In the event, everybody usually went home, footsore, browned off, and somehow rather ashamed. I had two experiences of this sort of thing, and once a bullet struck a rock a little too close for my peace of mind. But soon things were to change. Abu Jildeh overstepped the mark with the cold-blooded murder of a mounted police patrol. Four Arab constables, each carrying a rifle and full

bandoliers, were halted suddenly at gun-point in rocky terrain. Their rifles, bandoliers and horses were taken by the gang, and they themselves put up against a rock and shot with their own rifles. Three were killed, but the fourth, left for dead, managed apparently to stagger back to where he could find help.

Abu Jildeh was to be taken very seriously from then on, and the full force of the Palestine Police was deployed against the gang.

The surviving victim later stated his belief that Abu Jildeh himself had been present and conducted the whole affair, but as no member of the police had ever seen Abu Jildeh, there remained some doubt about this. However, after his arrest the constable did very decisively pick out the bandit at a properly conducted identification parade. That was by no means the only testimony that finally sent the multi-murderer to the gallows. Indeed the evidence from a number of sources was overwhelming.

It was at about the time of the police ambush that the gang started to waylay and rob travellers on the roads between Jerusalem and Nablus, and Jerusalem and Jericho. A car ride along the Jericho road to the Dead Sea was popular at that time among residents of Jerusalem, and there came a story that a senior legal officer was forced at gunpoint to dispense his trousers to a member of the gang who liked the look of them. Money and valuables were always taken, and there was apparently a bad moment for a lady who found difficulty in taking off her ring, when the bandit threatened to cut off her finger. Indeed during Abu Jildeh's reign of terror, there was a revival of the notoriety of the Wadi Haramiyyeh (The Valley of the Robbers) on the Jericho road, dating back to biblical times. For the police it became a first priority to run the gangsters to earth. A massive operation was mounted against them under the personal direction of our deputy chief, Major Alan Saunders. Here was a very

splendid officer who had served for six years with the Indian police before World War 1. Towards the end of it all he had found himself in Palestine under Allenby, and finally joined the Palestine police.

The strategy followed was common enough – progressive denial of access to the terrain where the criminal is believed to operate. An earlier example was Kitchener's blockhouse system against De Wet's Boer War guerrillas; and much later on in Kenya the security forces used similar methods against the Mau Mau. I was learning lessons that would be useful in years to come. I found myself taking my turn at village outpost duty. This entailed establishing a series of temporary police posts in and around the area worked by the gang – thus giving protection to the villagers and denying food and shelter to the gangsters. That particular Palestinian winter was I recall a bleak one, and the rocky hill country, so dry and arid in summer, with wind and rain now driving constantly over it, provided the best possible conditions for the police operation, because the gangsters were stretched to find shelter, except in caves. For me and my British companions, however, sitting wet and cold in a village (that smelt abominably) perched high up on an exposed hill top, time seemed to stand still. The forty-eight hour tour of duty which alternated with forty eight hours rest back in the Depot, seemed a penance. However, Saunders' leadership kept us going, and we were determined to 'get' Abu Jildeh. It was essential, moreover to keep constantly on the alert. News came in that one of the posts a few miles away had been shot up by the gang, a couple of constables had been wounded, some rifles stolen, a hut burnt down, and enough food pilfered to keep the gang going for the next few days. This event put everyone on their mettle. Time was beginning to run out for Abu Jildeh. More encouraging news started to trickle in that some of the gangsters were deserting and leaving the area. A second attempted

raid on an outpost found the police well prepared; the assailants were beaten off and one of them was wounded and captured. From him there came information which showed that if pressure was maintained, the end could not be far away. For Abu Jildeh was desperate for food, and was apparently hoping to break out from his home ground and move over into Transjordan, but was hesitating because he knew that as a 'Fellahin', a dweller on the fringes of urban life, he was unlikely to be welcome amongst the Bedouin.

A couple of weeks went by, and very little was heard of our prey except that it was known he was still in the area, stealing food as and when he could, and that his followers had dwindled away. Some said only he and Saleh Armeet remained. He had hesitated too long. He could have left the area and vanished into the blue of one of the surrounding Arab countries where he might even now be living out a ripe old age. But, as the final scene of his life was to suggest, Abu Jildeh was a showman, and he would no doubt have found that obscurity was anathema to him. Anyway the delay was fatal.

The end came suddenly, though not without a final bit of drama. A firm report arrived that Abu Jildeh and Saleh Armeet were hiding in a cave. Against this possibility someone (probably prompted by Abdin Bey) had thoughtfully interned two of Abu Jildeh's relatives and kept them ready to play their reluctant part. So now, a British officer with a police party plus relatives hurried to the scene, and the cave was surrounded. The officer called for surrender, but was met by a volley of rifle fire. It was said later that he nearly had his legs blown off. I don't know, as I wasn't there. The relatives were then placed in position in the cave mouth, and, whether or not as a result of their blandishments, out came Abu Jildeh and Saleh Armeet, festooned with full police bandoliers and carrying police rifles.

The issue was inevitable and never in any doubt for either of them, and Abu Jildeh himself knew it; and from the time of his capture until the final scene he uttered barely a word. But there was obviously one thing preying on his mind and with the consent of the prison authorities a last wish was granted. Two women arrived with a parcel of clothes for him. He dressed himself in his new finery and, standing up with quiet pride, said that he would now die properly.