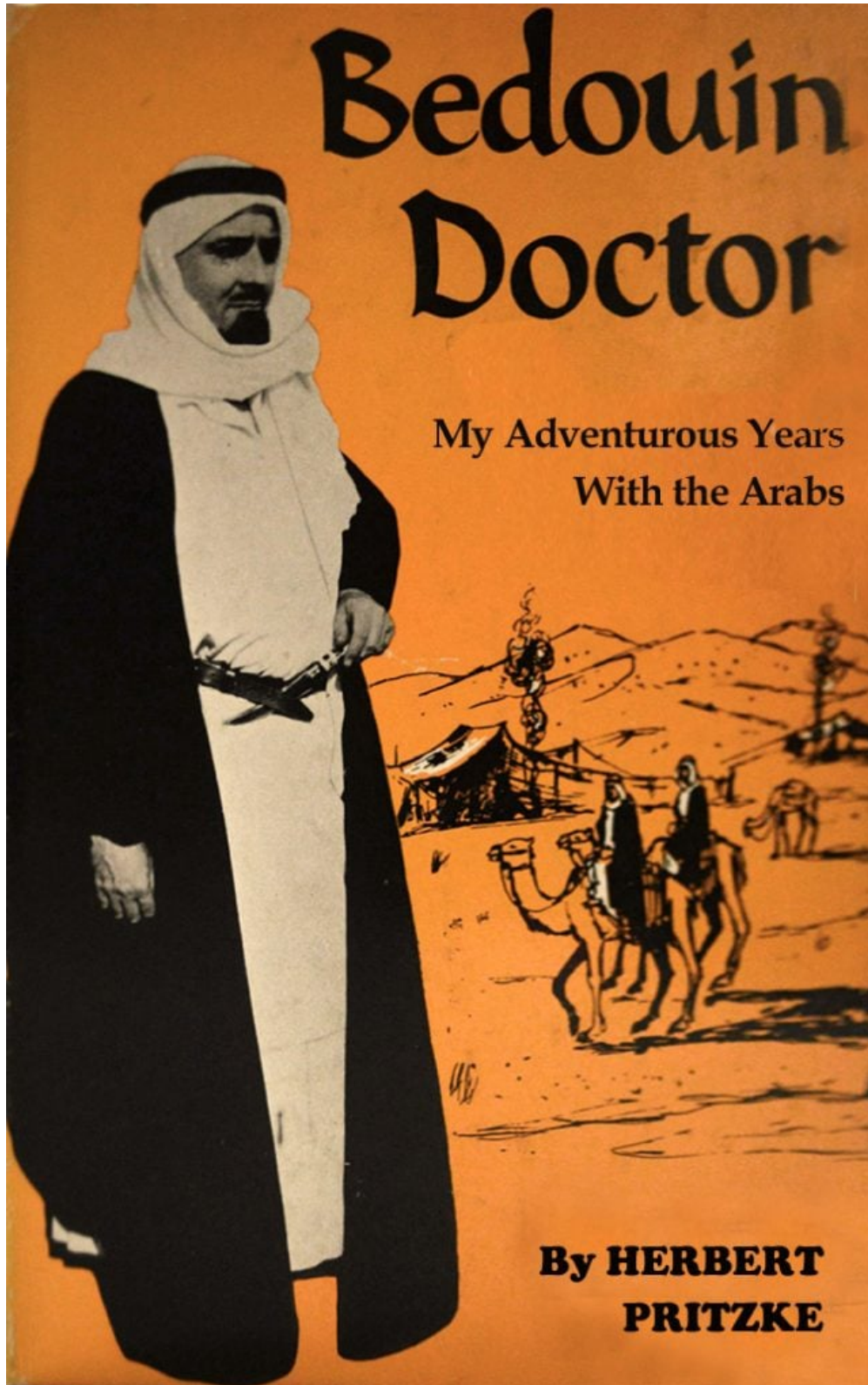


Panic: Arab Refugee Flight from Palestine 1947-48

by [Norman Berdichevsky](#) (July 2025)



The panic of the corrupt divided Palestinian Arab leadership and poor coordination of the invading Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi armies makes it easy to ascertain where the blame lies for the mass flight that took place in 1947-48. Numerous eye-witness accounts reporting the attempts at blackmail, intimidation, arson, and looting, to coerce the Palestinian Arabs to flee are available from numerous sources. Such behavior remains the norm in inter-Arab and inter-Muslim conflicts and has been even more dreadful when Muslims are involved with “*kuffars*” (non-Muslims regarded as infidels) such as the Jews, Greeks (1920-22) and Hindus (1947-48). The Arab civilian population of Haifa and Jaffa realized long before April 1948 that their lives and property were in jeopardy from the poorly disciplined, irregular, and corrupt invading irregular Arab forces as much as the prospect of a Jewish military victory.

Dr. Herbert Pritzke was an escaped German prisoner of war who served as Chief Medical Officer for the Arab forces in Jaffa. His eyewitness account, *Bedouin Doctor* (Dutton, 1957) is the objective reporting of a foreign volunteer: The author describes his years of adventures and survival in the Middle East, serving as a medical officer in Rommel's Afrika Korps. He was taken prisoner. In 1946 and managed to escape from a British P.O.W. camp near the Suez Canal. He was subsequently picked up by Bedouins who welcomed him as a member of the tribe and taught him Arabic. He shared their lifestyle and continued to practice medicine but his sojourn required participation in the Arab invasion of Palestine to prevent the emergence of a Jewish state as well as involvement in shady arms deals with the British and hashish smuggling into Sinai.

After a year, he went to Cairo where he was forced to sign on with the Moslem Brotherhood and ‘volunteer’ with the Arab ‘Liberation Army’ (ALA) in Palestine. He later escaped to Lebanon where he would eventually spend three years managing a

remote hospital in Saudi Arabia and succeeded in becoming the confidant of King Saud's loyal staff.

In his autobiography, he describes the collapse of the local Palestinian guerilla forces.

There was no discipline, no military police. no muster rolls, no list of personnel. No one ever knew who belonged to which unit or where the different units were. This incurable disorder was shamelessly exploited. Things happened as they were bound to happen under such leadership. By the end of April, the Jaffa front was completely disintegrated. The town was almost deserted. Less than a tenth of the 80,000 inhabitants remained in their homes, and even this remnant was trying by all means possible to get out of the town. Fear of their own bullying and cruel compatriots spurred them to leave home and property, not less than the imminent occupation of the town by the Jewish besiegers. Moreover, bandits, more dangerous than the occupying force, were roaming through the town singly and in groups robbing and murdering.

It was clear that the depopulated and demoralized town must soon be overrun by the Jews. We Germans, who met almost daily in my room in the hospital, found ourselves in a very precarious situation. As representatives of law and order, we could to some extent check the depredations of the bandits and looters, which did not make us popular with them. At the same time, we felt that we were hated by the embittered citizens because we could not save their town. If we managed to survive the final chaos, we could look forward to no prospect of future but captivity. The Arabs themselves no longer showed any keenness to fight for their country.

Dr. Pritzke makes no mention whatsoever regarding alleged “Jewish atrocities” at Deir Yassin but bears that from the beginning “It was a dirty, nasty little war fought at close quarters by intertwined populations” and that at the outset of the war the Arab side possessed a clear superiority in firepower.

It is fascinating that much of his description of the collapse of the Arab morale, the fear of ordinary villagers that the invading Arab forces were using intimidation to provoke them and the mass flight of refugees closely follows the diary notes of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, who wrote, *“Most of the Palestinian Arabs—the fellaheen—have so far refused to take part in the war and still do”* (Jan. 21, 1948) and a scarce two weeks later added, *“So far most of the Palestinian Arabs have refused to join the war despite the growing pressure and the plethora of Nazi coercive measures to which they are subjected, racist and religious incitement, lies and falsehoods, atrocious propaganda, appeals to their basest instincts, promises of booty, and threats and terror... the villages, in most part, have remained on the sidelines.”* (Feb. 3, 1948).

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