At midnight on 14 May 1948, the British Mandate over Palestine expired and the State of Israel was declared. The next morning the Arab armies invaded, marking the end of the civil war and the beginning of the inter-state Arab–Israeli war. The Israeli military position was not as perilous as traditional Israeli historiography would have it. Qawuqji’s Arab Liberation Army had been all but routed from the north, having suffered a series of humiliating defeats, and Jewish forces had captured key Arab centres of population there, including Haifa, Acre, Tiberias and Safad. In the two days before the termination of the Mandate, they had also taken the coastal strip in the western Galilee right up to the Lebanese border, causing the exodus of most of the civilian population from that area. The Lebanese and the Syrians were the two Arab armies that the Israelis faced in the north. To the south, on the central front, they faced the Iraqi army; in Jerusalem and the surrounding area they faced the Jordanian Arab Legion, the most formidable of the Arab armies and the one that was to inflict the heaviest losses on the Israeli forces. In the far south they faced the Egyptians.

On the northern front, the area with which this book is concerned, the Syrian and Lebanese armies, in spite of some initial success, were quickly put on the defensive by the Israeli forces. It became clear that these two Arab armies were not going to achieve their military objectives, namely, recapturing the major towns already taken by the pre-state Jewish forces. The mood of the civilian Arab population in the north, having been stirred up by the promises of the Arab governments to ‘push the Jews into the sea’, became increasingly
despondent. The refugee situation was reaching a critical level, spurred on by the IDF ‘whispering’ campaigns designed to frighten the civilian population into leaving.

During this period the links between Israel and the Druze became firmer. In the months ahead the Druze proved their usefulness, both politically and militarily, to the Israeli war effort and the question of the Druze and the growing co-operation with them became an important issue in the Israeli Foreign Office and a subject for political debate. This chapter traces those developments, looking at the final collapse of Shakib Wahab’s battalion in Shafa’amr; the extraordinary circumstances of the ensuing Israeli conquest of that town; the spread of Druze–Israeli ‘friendship’ to the Druze villages in the western Galilee and Mount Hermon and the Israelis’ continuing, tentative moves to establish, through their Druze friends, a working co-operation with Sultan al-Atrash on Jabal Druze.

The last days of the Druze battalion

The last part of the month of May witnessed the gradual disintegration of the Druze battalion in Shafa’amr. Over half of the soldiers of the battalion deserted because of the defeat at Ramat Yohanan and because of sporadic and insufficient salary payments. These soldiers sold their weapons and went back to Jabal Druze. The remaining men became increasingly unwelcome in Shafa’amr and one report relates that there were several instances of soldiers from the battalion raping women from the town. As a result of deteriorating relations between the men of the battalion and the people living in Shafa’amr the battalion headquarters was moved to Bayt Istifan, on the outskirts of the town. There was a general atmosphere of collapse and some Druze soldiers were reported to be ‘wandering aimlessly in the streets of Nazareth’, at that time still under Arab control. On 22 May Shakib Wahab and the few men remaining with him moved out of Shafa’amr, and retreated into Lebanese territory.

The defeat at Ramat Yohanan and the ensuing disintegration of the Druze battalion did much to heighten the tension between Druze and Muslims and push undecided Palestinian Druze towards the Israeli camp. Not only had the Druze been defeated but rumours of contacts between the officers of the Druze battalion and the Jews were rife amongst the Druze community and beyond. A Druze