
LETTER DATED 4 AUGUST 1948 FROM THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE
PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT OF ISRAEL TO THE ACTING SECRETARY-
GENERAL, TRANSMITTING A LETTER DATED 30 JULY 1948 FROM
THE FOREIGN MINISTER OF ISRAEL TO THE MEDIATOR,
CONCERNING PALESTINIAN ARAB REFUGEES

With reference to your letter of 3 August requesting information
on four questions relating to refugees in accordance with the decisions
of the 343rd meeting of the Security Council, I have the honor to
enclose information under (b).

The information takes the form of a letter recently addressed to the
Mediator by the Foreign Minister of Israel, which clarifies the policy
of the Provisional Government of Israel on this matter. The text of the
letter is enclosed.

(Signed) Aubrey S. Eban
Representative of the
Provisional Government of Israel

TEXT OF LETTER FROM THE FOREIGN MINISTER OF ISRAEL TO THE MEDIATOR

30 July 1948

As mentioned in the course of our interview, we are not unmindful of the plight of Arabs who, as a result of the present war, find themselves uprooted from their homes and cast adrift. Our own people suffered too much similar tribulation for us to be indifferent to their hardships. If, nevertheless, we find ourselves unable to agree to their re-admission to Israel-controlled areas, it is because of overriding considerations bearing on our immediate security, the outcome of the present war and the stability of the future peace settlement. We are convinced that any measure of repatriation undertaken on solely humanitarian grounds, disregarding military, political and economic aspects, would be falsely conceived, defeat its purpose, and result in graver complications to the United Nations than already exist.

The resolution of the Security Council of 29 May, the terms of which have been renewed by the resolution of 15 July, specifically provides that the truce should not prejudice the rights, claims and position of either party. You interpreted this as meaning that no advantage should accrue to either side at the expense of the other. There is no doubt that the return during the truce of thousands of displaced Arabs to Israel, which is still beset by enemy armies, which forms a target of violent political attack and may yet again become an object of renewed military onslaught, would in fact gravely prejudice our rights and position, and would relieve the aggressor States of a large part of the pressure exerted on them by the refugee problem, while it would on the other hand, most seriously handicap the war effort and war readiness of Israel, bringing into its territory a politically explosive and economically destitute element and saddling the Government with responsibility for all ensuing complications.

Against this background, your reference to the return of Arab refugees as one of the questions under dispute which it is the duty of both parties to settle peacefully, appears to us to miss the main point at issue. The root cause of the present conflict, of which the mass flight of Arabs is a mere corollary, is the refusal of the Arab League to accept Israel as a matter of right or an accomplished fact. As long as this intransigence persists, any attempt to tear the problem of refugees out of its context aggravates the issue by lending further encouragement to wanton aggression.

Nor do we feel that the issue is met by the argument that the present truce is indefinite and that, therefore, the security aspect of Arab

/repatriation

repatriation should not present a special problem. Once a large-scale return is authorized, it would be difficult if not impossible to keep it within bounds. Even if men of military age are formally excluded, the practical result may well be the increase of irregulars inspired by the Mufti, who knows no truce. Moreover, the Arab States themselves, in their joint communication to the Security Council, hedged the acceptance of the present truce around with several conditions, thus reserving the right to terminate the present truce whenever it suits them to resume fighting. The Arab States continue to maintain their attitude of obstinate intransigence and defiance of the Security Council and the Mediator on such basic provisions of the truce as the Jerusalem water supply and the opening of the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway. Not a day passes without a prominent Arab spokesman threatening the resumption of hostilities. Under these circumstances, the mere fact that the Security Council has ordered the truce to be unlimited is not a firm enough foundation on which the Provisional Government of Israel can build so far-reaching a measure as the re-admission en masse of Arab refugees.

The difficulty is not minimized if the return is limited to former residents of Jaffa and Haifa for whom you enter a special plea. Both cities constitute vulnerable points of peace and stability on which the well-being of Israel in the present delicate stage largely depends. Both have been centres of grave menace to Jewish security, and the recreation of a situation pregnant with potential troubles in areas such as these is the last thing any State still engaged in a struggle for existence could contemplate. Incidentally, we fail to appreciate why on purely humanitarian grounds, former residents of Jaffa and Haifa are singled out for special treatment and as more deserving than those of any other town or village.

On the economic side, the re-integration of the returning Arabs into normal life, even their mere maintenance, presents an insoluble problem. The difficulties of accommodation, employment and an ordinary livelihood are insuperable. You will admit that the international assistance you envisaged is for the time being purely hypothetical. On the other hand, the Provisional Government of Israel would resist as utterly unjust any attempt to impose on its limited, heavily strained resources any part of a financial liability for the relief and resettlement of returning Arabs. Far from being ready to shoulder responsibilities in behalf of these Arabs, whom the Jews never intended to harm and with whom they were anxious to live peacefully, the Government considers itself entitled and determined to claim compensation from the Arab States for all havoc, destruction and loss of life, property and livelihood which the criminal folly of armed intervention in Palestine has brought

The Arab mass flight from Israel and Israel-occupied territory is the direct effect of Arab aggression from outside. Justifying their invasion, the Arab Governments claimed that they responded to a call for rescue addressed to them by the Palestine Arabs. The plain fact, however, is that but for the intervention of the Arab States, there would have been an overwhelming measure of local Arab acquiescence in the establishment of the State of Israel, and by now peace and reasonable prosperity would have reigned throughout the territory to the enjoyment of Jews and Arabs alike. If the war brought in its wake a mass exodus, mostly spontaneous, resulting in great suffering, the responsibility for it rests on those who fomented and carried on the war, as well as those who aided and abetted them. The Arab Governments and the great Power which espoused their cause cannot have it both ways: do everything they can to undermine and destroy the State of Israel, and then, having failed, require Israel to take over the liability for the results of their own reckless action.

For the political, economic and security reasons stated, the Provisional Government of Israel is not in a position, as long as a state of war exists, to re-admit Arabs who fled their homes, on any substantial scale. The Palestine Arab exodus was one of the cataclysmic phenomena which, according to the experience of other countries, change the course of history. It is too early to say exactly in what measure the exodus will affect the future of Israel and the neighbouring territories. When the Arab States are ready to conclude a peace treaty with Israel, the question will come up for a constructive solution as part of the general settlement, with due regard to our counter-claim in respect to the destruction of Jewish life and property. The long-term interests of the Jewish and Arab populations, the stability of the State of Israel, and the durability of the basis of the peace between it and its neighbours, the actual position and fate of the Jewish communities in Arab countries, the responsibility of the Arab Governments for their war of aggression and the liability for reparations will all be relevant to the question whether, to what extent and under what conditions, the former Arab residents of the territory of Israel will be allowed to return. For such a comprehensive and lasting peace settlement, the Provisional Government of Israel is ever ready, but holds that it cannot in fairness be required to carry through a unilateral and piecemeal measure of peace while the other side is bent on war.

(Signed) M. Shertok

