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17th April, 1942.

Dear Gen. Auchinleck,

I was sorry that you could not see me during my recent visit to Cairo, but I need hardly say that I fully realised how preoccupied you were at the time. I am, therefore, gladly availing myself of your kind suggestion to state my views in writing.

2. The question I intended to raise is that of Jewish participation in the defence of Palestine in the event of the country being directly threatened. Before submitting concrete proposals, I feel that I ought to stress certain general considerations of fundamental character.

3. There can be little doubt that if Palestine were over-run by the Nazis nothing less than complete annihilation would be the lot of the Jews of this country. The destruction of the Jewish race is a fundamental tenet of the Nazi doctrine. The authoritative reports recently published show that the policy is being carried out with a ruthlessness which defies description. Hundreds of thousands of Jews have perished in Poland, the Balkan countries, Rumania and the invaded provinces of Russia as a result of mass executions, forced deportations and the spread of famine and disease in ghettos and concentration camps. An even swifter destruction, it must be feared, would overtake the Jews of Palestine were they to fall under Nazi sway. By destroying the Jewish National Home, Hitler would be cutting the jugular vein of the Jewish people. Moreover, he would thereby be offering a unique prize to those Arab nationalists on whose support he counts in his scheme to secure domination of the Middle East, and who would be only too willing to assist him in that work of destruction.

4. The matter obviously has a different aspect when viewed from the angle of Jewish survival in Palestine than from the standpoint of British Imperial strategy. To the British Empire the evacuation of Palestine, if it were ever to become inescapable, would mean no more than a temporary setback in a world struggle whose ultimate outcome cannot be in doubt. To the Jews of Palestine it would spell immediate extermination. In the interlude between two acts in the drama of war - the loss and reconquest of Palestine - the work of three generations of Jewish pioneers would have gone up in smoke.

5. These special circumstances invest the defence of Palestine with unparalleled gravity. The responsibility for that defence rests, of course, with the Imperial Government, but, as has been emphasised over and over again, it is of crucial importance that the Jews should be enabled to take the fullest possible part in that defence which is to them a matter of life and death. They regard that as their sacred right and believe that their contribution could be of material importance. But again, the question as to whether and to what extent they will be allowed to contribute to the country's defence is the Imperial Government's responsibility.

6. The utmost mobilisation of the Jews of Palestine would appear to be vital quite apart from the special considerations affecting the Jews as such. The British position in the Middle East, as far as the attitude of the majority of the population is concerned, can at best be described as one of unstable equilibrium. Any marked

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success of the enemy in Libya or his approach to the borders of Syria or Palestine is liable to upset that precarious balance. The morale even of the presumably loyal section of the majority of the population would then break down, while the other section would openly or secretly join hands with the enemy. Last year's events in Iraq may well be regarded as a portent. In such an emergency the Jews of Palestine would remain the only element who would be absolutely dependable if only because they stand to lose everything and would be fighting with their backs to the wall.

7. In recent authoritative comments on the causes of the Allied defeat in the Dutch East Indies, it was explained that in those vast possessions, stretching over an area as large as that from west of Ireland to the Persian Gulf, there was a white population of not more than a quarter of a million. The position in Palestine is, by comparison, infinitely more favourable. In a country the size of Wales there live today over half a million Jews. If these were effectively mobilised, their determination could turn this small country into a veritable Thermopylae.

8. It is in the light of these circumstances that the following proposals are submitted. They fall under two heads:

- (a) enlistment in the Army;
 - (b) training and organisation of civilians for "home guard" duties.
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9. As far as military service is concerned, it must be emphasised that no form of recruiting can produce so enthusiastic a response and so high a degree of military efficiency as the formation of a Jewish Fighting Force. The fact that this scheme has been turned down, chiefly on political grounds, has caused bitter disappointment and a sense of frustration among the Jews of Palestine. It is submitted that whatever qualms may formerly have been felt by the British authorities under this head, they should not count at a time when every loyal man is needed to help in staving off an enemy invasion of the Middle East. After two years of strenuous efforts in the cause of recruiting for various units of the British Army, it is our considered opinion that the most effective and speedy way of securing an all-round Jewish enlistment is the raising of a Jewish Force.

10. Pending a reconsideration of this fundamental question, for which we would plead again with the utmost force, immediate attention should be directed to the problem of what can be done to achieve maximum results within the existing framework of enlistment. The formation expressly designed for the defence of Palestine are the Palestine Buffs. At present there are nine Jewish Companies of the Palestine Buffs, the last of which is in the course of formation. A new all-round effort is now being sponsored by the Jewish Agency to speed up recruiting into the Army generally and into the Palestine Buffs in particular. Originally it was expected that the formation of the Palestine Buffs would give the Jews of Palestine a chance of joining real fighting units, but this hope does not seem to have materialised and the Palestine Buffs have lost a great deal of their initial popularity. The burden of the complaints which reach us from all companies is that their duties are purely static and their programme of training is stale and antiquated. The feeling is gaining ground among them that they are not at all meant to have a share in

real fighting if ever the necessity for it were to arise in Palestine or on its borders. Such feeling, of course, kills the spirit of the existing units and ruins the prospects of further enlistment. It is, therefore, essential that the programme of training of the Palestine Buffs should be overhauled and reformed on up-to-date lines, that the Companies should be familiarised with modern weapons and tactics, and that, as far as practicable, periods of stationary guard duties should alternate with spells of active field training and manoeuvres.

11. The present position regarding the Buffs is a kind of vicious circle. On the one hand, we are told that the Companies are tied up with static duties and cannot be spared for higher training because they are too few in number. On the other hand, we know that recruiting into the Buffs is slack just because the existing Companies are doing only static work and do not get the training of a real fighting force. I have discussed the whole problem with General McConnell and submitted to him that efforts should be made from both ends to break the circle. The Jewish Agency will do its best to speed up recruiting into the Buffs in spite of their present unpopularity. The Army, on the other hand, should take immediate steps to enhance the value of the Buffs as a real fighting force in spite of their limited numbers.

12. A reform of training alone does not, however, fully meet the issue. So long as the Buffs retain the form of disjointed companies their value for effective infantry service must of necessity be limited. It appears to us vital that the present Companies be joined into battalions and that more of such battalions be formed. We are aware that this would require the provision of additional equipment but we find it difficult to conceive of the Army not being able to supply this. We assume that, following a recent precedent, some of the existing Jewish pioneer units could be turned into infantry and that the transport sections of the battalions could be drafted from the Jewish RASC units. Taking into account the existing personnel and, above all, the fillip which the formation of battalions will give to further recruiting, we believe that at least ten battalions of about 1,000 men could be formed.

13. I would add that we have up to now supplied well over 11,000 men for direct military service. About 1,400 of these were taken prisoners in Greece, and the bulk of the remainder are serving with the RAF and in transport and other technical units which would probably not be available for infantry duties. We also assume that recruiting into transport and technical units will continue.

14. The major problem of the use of the civilian Jewish population in the country's defence remains now to be considered. It should be borne in mind that a very considerable part of men of military age are at present fully employed in agriculture and essential industries and that the shortage of manpower for works of supreme importance to the war effort is being increasingly felt. This inevitably hampers enlistment for military service but it does not follow that the great civilian reservoir, consisting of many tens of thousands, should be wasted for purposes of defence. The very location of the Jewish settlements in Palestine places them in a favourable strategic position for rendering effective assistance against an air or sea-borne invasion. The entire coastal plain from Acre to Tel Aviv and

beyond is now largely in Jewish hands. So is the valley of Jezreel through which run the oil pipeline to Mosul and the railway line from Haifa to Damascus. So are the north-eastern and north-western frontier corners of Galilee. All these vital areas are dotted with Jewish villages and townships, inhabited by a virile population which knows the country and has in the recent disturbances learned how to defend itself and fight guerilla bands.

15. A suitable framework for the training and organisation of Jewish civilians for home guard duties is actually available in the Jewish Settlement Police and its reserve of special constabulary. The formation of a proper Home Guard for Palestine on the British example might be fraught with inter-racial complications. But the Jewish Settlement Police is an organisation which has been in existence for over six years and has come to be regarded, by Arabs and by Jews alike, as an integral part of the country's security system. Its expansion to meet the requirements of the present situation and the acceleration of its training programme need not, therefore, present any political difficulty, while its elasticity and adaptability should excellently serve the needs of the moment and its past experience of direct cooperation with the Army should stand it in good stead.

16. The present active strength of the Jewish Settlement Police is only about 2,600. All these are full-time personnel, paid by the Government and armed with rifles. The number of special constables is about 15,000. These are people carrying on their normal work, mostly in agricultural settlements, who are sworn in and authorised to carry rifles in times of need. The whole force is supposed to be fully trained in the use of rifles and Lewis guns but the training of special constabulary has been rather of a haphazard nature. We understand that the Jewish Settlement Police and the special constabulary are already regarded by the authorities as potential reinforcements to the troops in case of a major emergency. Of late, fairly elaborate manoeuvres have been carried out by the Jewish Settlement Police in various centres with a view to training its personnel in combatting parachutists and protecting communications in the rear against attacks by air-borne troops. It is evident that just at a time when an invasion of Palestine may be attempted trouble must be expected to break out inside the country and that Jewish settlements will then be the first targets of attack. At such a time, a considerable part of the Jewish Settlement Police will be tied up in local defences but the stationary defence of the settlements and the combatting of parachutists and fifth columnists by mobile units would then form a single problem. If the Jewish Settlement Police is given the necessary training and substantially increased, it should then be a valuable adjunct to the military forces for fairly extensive operations.

17. Our proposals under this head are as follows:

- (a) The progressive expansion of the special constabulary up to 50,000.
- (b) The adoption of a large-scale programme of training, including special courses for N.C.O's and the successive drafting of batches of special constables into camps for periods of intensive training.
- (c) The placing of the whole organisation under military control and the appointment of an Army staff versed in modern tactics to superintend its training.

- (d) The preparation of ample reserves of rifles, machine guns, trench mortars, grenades, anti-tank guns and other weapons for distribution to the force in time of need.

18. I must apologise for having addressed you at such length at a time when you are so burdened with matters of the greatest moment. But I feel sure you will appreciate the anxiety felt by us, and the grave responsibility which devolves upon those in charge of Jewish interests in these fateful times. There are a number of points on which additional details could be supplied in an oral discussion and I need hardly say that I should be happy to proceed to Cairo for that purpose should you feel that you can now see me.

Allow me to conclude this letter by emphasising once more what the defence of Palestine means to us. No other people would lose so much if this country were overrun by the enemy. No other people would fight with such determination in its defence.

Yours sincerely,

M. Shertok

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