

British-Israel Relations: Conference on Palestine and Illegal Immigration to Palestine

(August 1, 1946)

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CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing on Thursday, 1st August, 1946, at 10 a.m. The Cabinet were informed that the Saudi Arabian and Trans Jordan Governments had accepted invitations to the proposed conference on future policy in Palestine, but that replies had not yet been received from the Syrian and Egyptian Governments.

The Prime Minister said that it was most important that the conference should meet at the earliest possible date.

The Cabinet—

(1) Invited the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the Minister of State to take all possible steps to expedite the meeting of the proposed conference on future policy in Palestine.

The Secretary of State for the Colonies recalled that at their previous meeting the Cabinet had asked him, in consultation with Sir John Shaw, the High Commissioner for Palestine, the Chiefs of Staff and the Minister of Transport, to draw up for their consideration a plan for the transshipment of illegal immigrants in Palestine waters and their removal to Cyprus. After a full discussion with Sir John Shaw, he had telegraphed to the High Commissioner, but he had not yet received the High Commissioners reply and he was, therefore, unable to lay a plan before the Cabinet. Meanwhile, another ship with 500 illegal immigrants had arrived and a further ship containing some 2,000 immigrants was believed to be approaching Palestine. He had ascertained that

Cyprus would be able to accommodate up to 8,000 or 9,000 Jews in camps; and the necessary legislative and other measures to make this possible were now being taken.

The Prime Minister said that the Lord President had sent him a report of the Cabinet's previous discussion of this matter. He was much impressed by the difficulties of the proposed operation and feared that it would lead to incidents which would seriously embarrass the Government.

The Minister of Transport agreed with the views expressed by the Prime Minister. The operation would also involve a waste of shipping.

The First Sea Lord said that it was impracticable to intercept ships with illegal immigrants on the high seas and divert them to Cyprus. Nor, looking to the condition of the ships and the desperate state of mind of the immigrants, did he regard it as feasible to divert immigrant ships from Palestinian territorial waters to Cyprus. Thus the only alternatives seemed to be either to bring the ships into harbour and then transfer the immigrants directly to other ships or to land them, place them in camps and subsequently re-embark them.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff said that, of these two alternatives, the Army would much prefer the former, *i.e.*: transshipment in harbour. The operation would undoubtedly be difficult and unpleasant and it would be well to know precisely what would be involved. If the Cabinet so desired, he would obtain a plan from the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East.

The Secretary of State for the Colonies recalled that the High Commissioner for Palestine was already preparing a plan and would no doubt be consulting the General Officer Commanding in Palestine. It would be well to ensure that the Commander-in-Chief's proposals were formulated in the light of the results of these discussions.

It was also suggested that the Commander-in-Chief might consider whether the difficulties of the operation could be reduced by removing to Cyprus only the adult males, the women and children being retained in camps in Palestine and set off against the immigration quota.

In further discussion it was suggested that, since the Cabinet had last discussed the matter, a new factor had been introduced by the announcement of the Government's long-term policy for Palestine. Under the new proposals, once the constitutional plan had been accepted, it would become possible to allow 100,000 Jews to enter the Jewish Province. Might not the Jewish Agency, who were responsible for organising illegal immigration, now be anxious, in their

own interests, to stop this traffic, if it were made clear to them that its continuance during the next few weeks might endanger or postpone the legal admission of 100,000 Jews? Would it not be desirable to put this point to the Agency? It was true that they had recently been wholly uncooperative, but it was proposed that the plan for future policy should now be discussed with them as well as with the Arabs and they might well be willing to alter their attitude in the light of the new situation.

The Secretary of State for the Colonies said that he would take this matter up with representatives of the Jewish Agency, though he had little hope of a favourable response from them. *The Minister of State* said that the Foreign Office were doing what they could to prevent illegal immigrants from leaving] European ports. He hoped that the Greek Government would take effective action and, though the French Government were doubtful about their legal powers, they had been persuaded to agree to do what they could to help. On the other hand, the Russian, Roumanian and Yugoslav Governments had not so far prove co-operative.

The Cabinet—

(2) Invited the Secretary of State for the Colonies to bring it to the notice of the Jewish Agency that the continuance of illegal immigration during the next few weeks could not fail to affect adversely the chances that the plan for the immigration of 100,000 Jews to Palestine would be implemented in the near future, and to try to enlist the Agency's help in putting a stop to illegal immigration

(3) Invited the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to ask the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, to draw up a plan for sending illegal immigrants to Cyprus.

(4) Invited the Secretary of State for the Colonies to complete the arrangements for the reception of illegal immigrants in Cyprus, and the Minister of Transport to arrange for the necessary shipping to be made available for their transfer to that country.

Sources: British Archives CAB 128/6/14

Available online at <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/UK/confpal.html>