4th February, 1948.

CABINET

PALESTINE: WITHDRAWAL OF BRITISH ADMINISTRATION

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies

The United Nations Commission have been informed, and it has been publicly announced, that it is our intention to terminate British civil administration in Palestine on 15th May, 1948. The possibility of advancing this date was recently re-examined by me in conjunction with the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Defence, and we reached the conclusion that the repercussions on the military plan of selecting an earlier date could not be accepted.

2. British civil administration is still being maintained over the whole of Palestine, and it is not the intention to close down any Department before the termination of the Mandate. In the present disturbed conditions, however, the range and effectiveness of certain departmental functions are necessarily restricted and difficulty is being encountered through the reluctance of Jewish and Arab staff to report for duty through fear of molestation by members of the other community. This latter tendency has been most noticeable in Jerusalem, although in the last two weeks improvement in the attendances of local staff has been continuous.

3. Although full responsibility is retained by the Mandatory Government, steps are being taken to devolve certain functions of government on the local inhabitants. Palestinians are being appointed to perform the duties of British administrative officers as the latter proceed on leave. Legislation is being prepared to give local authorities wider powers, e.g., of taxation, and certain essential public utilities are being handed over to them. In the field of public security local arrangements are also being made. British police have been withdrawn from the Tel-Aviv area and, except for divisional headquarters, from Nablus, Hebron, Jericho, and certain isolated police posts in northern Palestine. In the former area responsibility for internal security has been handed over to a Jewish Guard Force maintained by the Jewish Agency and in the latter districts responsibility is carried by the Arabs of the Palestine Police Force under British command. In these Arab areas the local police have been reinforced by some British troops for general security. An Arab Municipal police force has been set up in Jaffa and arrangements are in hand for establishing similar forces in 18 other Arab towns. By the end of February it is hoped to have formed in Jerusalem a Municipal police force of 600, half Jew and half Arab. A countrywide scheme for the enrolment of armed special constables to police Arab villages has been started. All these forces remain under the direction of the Inspector-General of Police and will only pass fully to local control on the termination of the Mandate.
4. The evacuation of British officials and their families has begun. Since 1st February, 51 British officials, and 12 wives and 5 children of British officials have left Palestine. 370 berths have been reserved for British officers of the Administration and their families for February and during March and April 200 will sail every fortnight from Haifa. The balance of 400 will leave Palestine in smaller contingents by vessels carrying the orange crop and by air. It is intended that all British wives and children of officials shall be out of the country one month before the termination of the Mandate.

5. The commercial activity of the country has been severely restricted. Labour difficulties have been encountered where Arabs and Jews normally work together and there is consequently some congestion in Haifa and Jaffa ports. The citrus export programme is somewhat behind schedule but prospects of completion are fair if the present rate is maintained. The export of citrus is not impeding the planned military withdrawal. Railways continue to operate but road transport is considerably restricted. Difficulty is being experienced through the shortage of oil fuel due to the temporary stoppage at the Haifa refineries. Work there was resumed on a small scale on 22nd January and if there are no further set-backs full production should be attained within three weeks.

6. There is a noticeable decline in the collection of revenue. As the assessment of the terminal liabilities of the Palestine Government proceeds, it is becoming evident that its available balances will not suffice to meet all commitments. A deficit of at least £4,000,000 is expected. This can be attributed mainly to heavy expense involved in meeting the costs of the Cyprus camps and in payment of terminal benefits to Government servants.

7. Units of the Transjordan Arab Legion in Palestine, who are to be returned to Transjordan before the termination of the civil government, are employed in static guard and escort duty and not in dealing with communal disorders. Disarmament and disbandment of the Transjordan Frontier Force has now begun at its base at Zerka in Transjordan. Transjordanians and Syrians will be discharged there and will not enter Palestine. Egyptians and Palestinians will be discharged at Samakh in Palestine. It is intended to repatriate to their countries of origin all those members of the Force who are not Palestinians.

8. Prospects of improvement in the security situation are not good. Conflict in Jerusalem has subsided and there is some hope that the situation there will not deteriorate unless some serious act of provocation is committed by one of the communities. The general situation is much complicated by the recent entry from neighbouring Arab States of large bands of trained guerrillas. A force of some 300 from Syria has established itself in the hills of Galilee and a second large band of some 700 has entered Samaria via Transjordan. This latter band is now reported to have been reinforced by a contingent of some 900 which has also entered via Transjordan. Arab governments appear both powerless and unwilling to restrict the movements of these armed bands and the nature of the
Palestine land frontiers, together with the other commitments of the security forces, makes it impossible for the Palestine Government to be certain of denying entry to such bands. The present policy of the invaders is to disperse amongst the villages on their arrival and consequently they do not present a formed body which can be driven out by our forces. Should a major engagement occur between the security forces and these armed bands within Palestine the consequences are bound to be grave.

A. C. J.

Colonial Office, S.W.1.

4th February, 1948.