ISRAEL AND MIDDLE EAST DEFENCE: DISCUSSIONS WITH THE AMERICANS

Memorandum by the Lord President of the Council

On 6th May, the Defence Committee recommended that, before undertaking further negotiations with Israel, we should hold secret discussions with the United States and try to secure their support for our policy (D. (53) 8th Meeting, Item 3).

2. The Defence Committee:

(i) Agreed that our aim should be to help Israel build up her armed strength, not only for her own defence, but also as a contribution to a settled situation in the Middle East.

(ii) Invited the Minister of State, in consultation with the Minister of Defence, to arrange for this policy to be explained to the United States Government and to seek their support in providing the arms and equipment that Israel would require.

3. The attached draft despatch, instructing H. M. Ambassador at Washington to approach the United States Government, has accordingly been prepared by the Foreign Office, in consultation with the Chiefs of Staff. Owing to vacation arrangements, the Defence Committee is not at present meeting, and I should, therefore, be glad to have the views of my colleagues in the Cabinet on this draft.

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Foreign Office, S. W. 1.

7TH AUGUST, 1953.

DRAFT DESPATCH TO H. M. AMBASSADOR AT WASHINGTON

Her Majesty's Government have for some time had under consideration how the desire of the Israel Government for close military co-operation with the West can be fitted into Allied plans for the defence of the Middle East against Soviet aggression. In response to an approach by the Israel
Government, they despatched an exploratory Military Mission to Israel in the autumn of 1952. After studying the Mission's report, Her Majesty's Government are considering how to pursue the matter with the Israel Government; but before doing so they wish to reach agreement with the United States Government about the policy to be adopted.

2. The defence of the Middle East, as far to the North and East as possible, will require facilities in Israel both in peace and in war. The extent of these facilities will depend on the outcome of our present negotiations with Egypt. But in broad terms we shall need in war the use of road and rail communications, ports and airfields in Israel, a requirement which may entail some development in peace. We shall also need facilities in peace for the storage of oil and possibly of equipment in Israel, and for the development in war of a maintenance area, including the provision of accommodation, labour and transport vehicles. Should we fail to obtain the base facilities which we require in Egypt, our requirements in Israel—both in peace and in war—will undoubtedly need further consideration.

3. We also hope that Israel's armed forces, which have already proved their fighting value, could be developed and used in such a way as to meet the needs of Allied strategy for the whole Middle East area.

4. It must be recognised, however, that any arrangements with Israel on the foregoing lines would, unless most carefully handled, run the risk of alienating the neighbouring Arab States. The co-operation of these Arab States, both in providing facilities for Allied troops and in building up their own forces, remains indispensable to any plans for the defence of the Middle East. Any arrangements with Israel must, therefore, be such as to evoke the minimum of hostility from the Arab States.

5. While there is no doubt that the Israel Government are, in principle, ready to make the contribution we hope for, they will require certain help and will have certain particular ideas and objectives of their own. They could not, without outside help, finance the extensive capital investment required for the improvement of their communications and the establishment of workshops and other facilities: and they will seek to include in the programme items which are primarily of economic and not of strategic importance. They will, naturally, wish to seize the opportunity further to improve their own armed forces and in so doing their motive will be as much to make themselves more powerful in relation to their Arab neighbours as to provide against a possible Soviet attack. Finally, they will expect to be taken into the confidence of the Allies about the latter's plans for the defence of the Middle East.

6. But the Israel Government are in no position to insist on their own point of view where that differs from the plans and wishes of the Western Powers, upon whom Israel is dependent financially and economically. Both her internal and foreign exchange budgets require outside help if they are to be balanced, and she depends on Western sources of supply for the equipment of her armed forces.

7. In subsequent discussions of military co-operation with the Israelis it will therefore be our aim to seek the Israel Government's agreement to:

(a) giving the Allies the facilities they require for the defence of the Middle East. Details of the facilities required cannot be finally defined until the outcome of the Anglo-Egyptian negotiations is known.
(b) making available formations for employment outside Israel according to plans for the defence of the Middle East and in the light of political conditions existing at the time.

8. In return we must be prepared to offer:­

(a) to examine the possibility of securing for Israel the financial help required to develop such base and other facilities as we consider necessary in preparation for war, which would not otherwise be provided;

(b) to examine sympathetically Israel's requests for the arms and equipment necessary to enable her to play her correct role;

(c) to give an assurance that Israel will be given as much information on the progress of our defence planning for the area as the other Middle East States.

9. We do not wish to dictate to the Israel Government how such resources of their own as they can make available for the development of their armed forces should be divided between their navy, army and air force. We should clearly be running our heads against a brick wall if we actively discouraged them from their aim, which was declared to the Military Mission, of a balanced force. We consider, however, that such Western help as can be given for the development of Israel's forces should in fact be concentrated mainly on the building up of her air force, for the following reasons:­

(a) the greatest deficiency in the forces available for the defence of the Middle East is in the air;

(b) Israel can provide better technical support for air forces than can any other Middle East country;

(c) in the event of war with the Soviet Union, the Arab countries might be less reluctant to see Israel's air forces operating over their territories than her land forces.

10. It is desirable that we should concert all major matters of Middle East policy with the United States Government, whom we are anxious to commit to the defence of that area, and the particular policy outlined in paragraphs 7, 8 and 9 above is in any case not one which Her Majesty's Government could afford to execute alone. We therefore wish to ascertain whether the United States Government are broadly in agreement with it.

11. Your Excellency should now, therefore, in close co-operation with the British Joint Staff Mission, approach the United States Government on the lines set forth and discover how far they are in agreement with the policy proposed; and to what extent they would be prepared to assist and support us in it. It is important that the fact of your discussions should remain a close secret, even from the Israelis.

12. I am aware that the United States Government will not easily be convinced of the necessity for this policy. They will be reluctant to see the West identified yet more closely with Israel; and they may well consider that they have already helped, and are helping, that country's finances more than
enough. To this, our answer must be that facilities and communications in Israel will be a military necessity in case of war and must be prepared beforehand; that there is no reason why any arrangement reached with Israel should become public or reach Arab ears; and that we are not suggesting fresh grants to Israel, but merely that existing and foreseeable future grants should be partly earmarked for the facilities referred to above.

13. I am sending copies of this despatch to Her Majesty's Ambassador at Tel Aviv and the Head of the B.M.E.O.