

## Foreign Relations, 1961-1963, Volume XVII, Near East

1961-1962

Released by the Office of the Historian  
Documents 293-314 (N.308)Letter From Prime Minister Ben Gurion to President Kennedy<sup>(1)</sup>

June 24, 1962.

Dear Mr. President: I was very pleased to receive your letter<sup>(2)</sup> and your suggestion that we exchange ideas concerning developments which have taken place in the Middle East and other parts of the world since our conversation of a year ago.

On many occasions during the last year I have looked back on our meeting in New York which took place on the eve of your departure to Europe. In carrying the burdens of your office, I am sure that you might derive encouragement from the knowledge that people throughout the world and certainly in Israel follow with admiration your courage and steadfastness in the pursuit of peace, human advancement and freedom.

I would express to you my deep appreciation of the opportunity that was given **to my deputy in the Ministry of Defence, Mr. Shimon Peres, to discuss with officials of your government matters of vital importance to Israel's security. Our Foreign Minister, Mrs. Golda Meir, examined these matters together with your Ambassador on the seventh of June. (3) I was happy indeed to hear from you that these matters are currently being carefully examined, and that the maintenance of Israel's integrity, independence and economic progress will continue to engage your full support.** I would express the hope that our governments will remain in close touch in the examination of the specific matters referred to.

Your letter is a renewed indication to me that on fundamental questions of crucial significance for the future of our area our governments share an identity of approach. The goal to which we seek to strive is that of lasting and permanent peace and good neighbourliness between the Arab states and Israel. In the effort to achieve this aim, it is indeed essential that doctrines of belligerence be resisted, and direct negotiations for a peaceful settlement be promoted and encouraged.

I fully share your hope that the quiescence on Israel's borders will continue. The policies of the Israel Government are consistently directed toward this purpose. We have a vital interest in the preservation of this quiescence. We are always ready to make our full contribution towards the settlement of border disputes, their prevention and elimination. It is clearly our interest not to see border incidents inflamed but rather to have them speedily brought to an end.

I agree with you that the United Nations representatives on the spot could play a helpful role by bringing their full influence to bear to prevent shooting and other violations of the Armistice Agreement, and to be instrumental in bringing the parties together to avoid incidents and prevent them from attaining major proportions. We have seen some useful and workable practices develop in relation to our borders with the Lebanon and Jordan. I fully believe that a great deal can be learnt from these experiences in relation to the Syrian border in particular. We shall always be ready to cooperate with the United Nations representatives to this end.

In the spirit of this policy we have responded to the suggestions of the United States Government to be informed of untoward incidents. We appreciate the concern for the quiet of our borders implicit in this suggestion and the good offices that the United States extend to this end.

I was gratified by your statement that Israel's water project can and should be carried out as scheduled, and I am deeply appreciative of your support of our project. You have shown by this statement a deep and sensitive understanding of one of Israel's most vital needs and interests. As you know, our two governments have been in close and continuous association on this subject for many years. Our attitude has always been clear. We do not

wish to deprive our neighbours of their rights; we plan to use our fair share of the water for the benefit of our people. Accordingly, in the absence of an agreed unified development plan, for which we are always ready and which no action on our part will prejudice, we shall conform with the pattern of withdrawals and deliveries of water on which the former United States Ambassador Eric Johnston secured the technical agreement to which you refer. I would hope that our two governments will maintain the closest contact on the matter. As in the past, we shall always be ready to place our technical experts at your disposal for detailed clarification of our plans. I fully share your hope that there is no reason why all concerned should not proceed in an atmosphere of calm and harmony to derive advantage for the benefit of their peoples from waters which are now flowing to waste.

As you might know we have to shoulder tasks which do not exist in other countries. We have to give a home to the newcomers. The figure of new immigrants exceeds at present 10,000 per month. Most of them come from backward and oppressed countries, where education was neglected for centuries.

The transformation of these immigrants who lived in the most miserable Ghetto conditions into tillers of the soil and into productive people in other fields of endeavour; the transformation of the Negev, a desolate wilderness which constitutes sixty percent of the total area of Israel, into a land of fertility and habitation; the teaching of the Hebrew language to newcomers from more than seventy countries and as many tongues; these are the tasks to which we devote our efforts and energies.

Your great and rich country achieved this in the course of several hundred years. We have to do this in the span of a short time.

Yet, above all we are confronted with a unique security problem. It is not our democratic system, or our borders and independence alone which are threatened, but our very physical existence is at stake. **What was done to six million of our brethren twenty years ago** with the participation of Palestinian Arab leaders, among them the ex-Grand Mufti and his henchmen, **could be done to the two million Jews of Israel, if, God forbid, the Israel Defence Forces are defeated.**

I am bound to say to my deep regret that such thoughts of total aggression are not absent from the minds of some of the Arab rulers of our region. The propaganda campaign which they conduct against us in Africa and in other continents does not differ much from the ill-famed and ill-fated Nazi propaganda.

For these reasons it is of utmost **importance to provide the Israel Defence Forces with sufficient deterrent strength which will prevent our neighbours from making war on us.** As long as the peace of the world is not secure everywhere we have to secure our peace through our strength.

The situation in the Middle East in general is not particularly encouraging. The principal failing of most of the countries of the area is the lack of a democratic system of government, the inability of their peoples to achieve untrammelled self-expression and the mastery over their own destinies. While most of the Arab countries proclaim day in day out their aggressive designs against Israel, we do not regard the Arab peoples as a target for hatred; to us they are men and women like ourselves, who need and ought to get all opportunities for education, health, development and social progress; and like all other sections of the human race in our time, their fate depends largely on peace, international cooperation, and mutual aid.

Unfortunately such a state of mind and affairs does not prevail in the Arab countries. In spite of the existence of the Arab League, there is no positive and constructive cooperation between them; they are united in nothing but their declared hostility to Israel. In none of them, except Lebanon, is there even a hint of democracy; they all are ruled--directly or indirectly--by the Military.

I am glad to note with deep satisfaction that two Moslem countries in the Middle East, Turkey and Iran, whose combined population exceeds by far that of our four Arab neighbours (Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon) maintain good-neighbourly relations and cooperation with Israel for the benefit of all involved.

I have confined myself on this occasion to comment mainly on the special problems which you, Mr. President, raised in your letter. I shall be glad to respond at an early opportunity to your suggestion to give an assessment of the situation in other parts of the world as we see it from our vantage point here.

In profound esteem,  
D. Ben-Gurion

/1/Source: Department of State, Central Files, 611.84A/6-2462. Secret; Personal.

Attached to a June 27 memorandum from Brubeck to Bundy that reads: "The enclosed letter from Israel Prime Minister Ben-Gurion to the President, dated June 24, 1962, was delivered to Assistant Secretary Talbot at noon on June 27. The text of the Prime Minister's letter conforms in most respects to what had been anticipated. In the second paragraph on page one, however, it lays unexpected stress on direct negotiations between the Arab States and Israel. Additionally, it includes in the final two pages a broad argument for more sympathetic United States consideration of Israel's military requirements."

/2/Document 293.

/3/In telegram 853 from Tel Aviv, June 8, Barbour reported that during a meeting on June 7, which had been initiated by Meir, Meir devoted practically the entire conversation to speaking in behalf of Israel's request for armaments, particularly the Hawk missile. (Department of State, Central Files, 784A.5/6-862)