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Miscellaneous, 1943.

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

Translation from Arabic
January 31, 1943

Conversation Between Nuri Al Said and Influential Members of the Jewish
Community of Baghdad

Report from Baghdad

About a month ago the head of the Iraq Government, Nuri Al Said, announced in his letter to the President of the Jewish community of Baghdad and to Mr. Ezra Menachem Daniel that he wished to meet with them and discuss the various important questions concerning the Jewish community of Baghdad. He asked that they appoint a committee of not less than five and not more than seven for this purpose. The responsible members of the community tried to ascertain the purpose of this invitation and what would be demanded of them. Some were under the impression that the head of the government would ask them to sign a declaration to the effect that they were not supporting the Zionist movement and had no connection whatsoever with it; others thought that they would be asked to sign a declaration that they were satisfied with the present regime and the relation of the Iraq government to the Jews.

A week ago those responsible communicated over the telephone with the head of the government that they were prepared to meet with him at any time suggested. He replied that he was busy these days and the matter not being urgent, he would suggest postponing it for some other occasion. The Jewish representatives drew the conclusion that the head of the government had decided to postpone the matter altogether. But later he again communicated with the representatives expressing the wish to meet with them on January 27th at 5:00 P.M., at the home of Mr. Ezra Menachem Daniel, and indeed the meeting took place at the specified time. The appointed representatives of the Jewish community at the historic meeting were Mr. Ezra Menachem Daniel, one of the wealthiest people in Iraq and a Kehilla representative to the Senate; Rev. Sasoon Kaduri, president of the Kehilla; Eliahu Chaim Tufick, one of the famous Jewish financiers in Baghdad; Churgi Shalom Lavy, assistant manager of the Ottoman Bank in Baghdad and a member of the Community Council; Kaduri Shocher, one of the most influential merchants in Iraq, a member of the Community Council and formerly a member of the House of Representatives in Iraq; Churgi Abraham Chaim Ukiarav, an influential merchant in Iraq (with no political status).

The representatives of the Jewish community decided to take a negative stand on the demands of the head of the Iraq government, should he make demands on them which they might later find it difficult to fulfil, or ask them to take up an anti-Zionist attitude.

This attitude on the part of the responsible Jewish leaders in Baghdad was strengthened as a result of the riots in Baghdad in June 1941. The other leaders of the community in Baghdad met with the above-mentioned representatives -- members of the Community Council and its president -- and made them swear by everything holy that they would not undertake any step or decision which would lessen their respect in the eyes of Jewry, the Zionist movement in general, and the Jewish community of Iraq in particular.

The head of the government, who was the sole Government representative at this meeting, opened his address by speaking of the Zionist movement. He said that he had known of the Zionist movement for many years. In 1909, he said, he had met in Istambul with a Zionist from Russia who came there to disseminate Zionist propaganda and from him he learned the history of Zionism from its very inception, including its aims. In addition, he had met with Dr. Weizmann several times and knew him well. The last time he met Dr. Weizmann was in 1935 in London where they discussed Arab-Jewish relations in the hope of reaching a satisfactory solution for both peoples.

X The head of the government continued that during 1937-38 when he visited Palestine, he met with the President of the Hebrew University, Dr. Judah L. Magnes, and the latter proposed to him a plan of agreement. The main feature of this plan was to establish a wholly Jewish area along the seashore between Haifa and Gaza, the remaining territory to belong to the Arabs, while assuring to the Jews civic and religious rights in this area. This plan pleased him and he promised to propagandize it.

The head of the government presented to the representatives a choice between the two plans embodied in the "White Paper and Dr. Magnes' proposal. He, himself, preferred the plan of Dr. Magnes but he did not wish to influence them by his opinion and gave them full privilege of deciding for themselves whichever plan suited them best. He continued that the Jewish community should not sit with its hands folded but that it should bestir itself in announcing its support of either of these proposals. He said that they should take a definite stand on Jewish-Arab questions in Palestine. He did, however, add that this matter demanded weighty consideration and consultation among the remaining leaders of the community. He did not want to press them for a decision and, furthermore, would not oppose their remaining neutral altogether. Thus the matter was concluded and he awaited further word.

The first reply to his remarks was Mr. Ezra Menachem Daniel who said that he did not believe that they (the representatives) could now, after the riots of 1941, take up this matter.

It seemed that the head of the government became incensed with this reply. He, himself, was stirred by the riots in June but of course there were factors about which the government of Iraq had no knowledge. Dr. Gruber had conducted an anti-Semitic campaign, spending great sums of money, thus gaining the support of Arab hot-heads. He influenced them greatly so that they were willing to abide by his every wish. All this was done in a secret manner and the various government officials knew nothing about it. These riots, of course, had been a very sad experience but they should not prevent the Jews from planning and thinking about the vital problems affecting them directly, such as, the Palestine problem which is today the concern of world Jewry.

Mr. Kaduri Shocher stated that from 1930 up to the present, neither the Zionist Executive Council nor the Iraqi Government had come to the Jews with any proposal for intervening in regard to Palestine. Why, therefore, should the head of the Iraq Government come to the Jews of Baghdad and ask them to do so now, especially as they had not anticipated that this suggestion would be put to them.

Churgi Levy added that since the Palestine problem had become a controversial subject between the Jews and the Arabs, the name "Palestine" had become anathema to him. Every time he came across the name in an article, in fact, he stopped reading it. He could not understand why the head of the government in these trying times wanted to place this "turban" (Palestine) upon the Jews of Iraq, inasmuch as they were so far removed from it.

Kaduri Shocher added that he did not believe that the Jews and Arabs could solve the Palestine problem. It was the English Government that created this problem and she alone ought to solve it. Here he pointed to the House of Commons, saying: "Why don't they, the English, find a satisfactory solution for both sides instead of bringing in the Jews of Iraq who have never intervened in this question before?"

Another Jewish representative said that the Jewish community of Iraq was not so influential that it had to evolve a final solution of this problem inasmuch as they had not participated in it since the last war and no one among them understood this problem fully.

The head of the government replied that he disagreed with him. He thought that the Jews of Iraq with a population of over 90,000 people, among whom there were wealthy merchants and capitalists, comprised a strong and powerful body and they could influence the final policy of Palestine, should they decide to intervene in this problem and support either one of the proposals. He learned from the Iraq embassy and the American newspapers that the Jews were appealing to various world institutions in order to secure Palestine as a National Home for Jewry, and they were utilizing all available means toward this end. It was therefore unbelievable that the Iraq Jews should stand aside and should not wish to voice their opinion in this matter, being located so close to Palestine. He knew, he added, that the Iraq Jews were very much attached and devoted to their country and he did not believe that should Palestine become a national home for Jews, Mr. Ezra Menachem Daniel would sell his property, business, etc., pack up his things and go to Palestine. There were in Iraq thousands of Jews like Mr. Ezra Menachem Daniel who would not wish to leave his country but would prefer to remain in Iraq to live with his Arab brothers.

X Throughout the whole conversation, the head of the government reiterated that the Magnes plan was the only one which would meet the needs of both sides. At the same time the Jewish representatives wondered how could he think it possible for them to believe that the promise of equal rights to Jews in the Arab area (according to the Magnes plan) would be fulfilled while their own rights in Iraq were disregarded, although according to the law they should be enjoying equal rights in their own country. This was their inner belief but they did not give expression to their feelings.

Before the meeting adjourned, the head of the government expressed the wish that the representatives discuss this matter fully and any decision with regard to the support of either of the plans or of remaining neutral be submitted to him through Mr. Ezra Menachem Daniel only. He repeated that they were definitely free to make their own decision.

It is to be stated that the president of the Kehilla did not say one word during the entire conversation. The reason was that he was requested by the other representatives to remain silent, firstly, because they did not have confidence in his attitude toward the Jews and, secondly, because whatever he might say would be the responsibility of the whole Kehilla.

The meeting lasted approximately three hours, during which time the head of the government spoke for two hours; it adjourned with both sides on good terms.

It is also to be stated that the Jewish representatives had not been forewarned of the topic of conversation and were unprepared for the discussion. Consequently, there was no unity in what the/representatives said, and each spoke as he saw fit. Jewish

Some of them were opposed to postponing their decision and thought that they should have given an answer immediately, namely, to remain neutral, since this would be the most suitable reply on the part of the Jews of Iraq.

Subsequently, the Jewish representatives decided to bring this matter up for discussion before a council of twenty influential people of the Jewish community of Baghdad. It is the impression that the answer will be a negative one and that the Jews of Iraq would prefer to remain neutral with reference to the Palestine problem and the future of the country which will be taken up at the peace conference. Apparently, the answer will be given orally to the head of the government through Mr. Ezra Menachem Daniel, as originally decided at the above mentioned meeting.

The above was reported by a local person who was present at the conversation with the head of the government and who also attended a meeting of the council of the Jewish community of Baghdad. This person is known as one who is neutral to all Jewish and Zionist problems.

COPY

24th February, 1943.

Dear Dr. Joseph,

We have now had a reply from the Minister of State's office on the subject of our enquiry in regard to anti-Jewish laws in Tripolitania. They inform us that the position is that unfortunately it is not possible for these laws as such to be repealed, owing to the provisions of international law regarding occupied enemy territory. As you may know, the occupying power is broadly speaking obliged to retain the laws and institutions of occupied territory in force except in so far as it is necessary to modify them in the interests of military necessity or public order.

The Chief Political Officer has, however, given instructions that no prosecutions are to be made in Tripolitania under the Italian anti-Jewish laws. The practical position is, therefore, that the laws are in abeyance. Similar action was taken in Eritrea after its occupation in 1941 and the results appear to have been satisfactory to all concerned.

We understand that you have also raised in correspondence with Sir Arthur Rucker the question whether facilities might be granted for a Jewish representative to visit Tripolitania in order to investigate the position of the Jews there. We have been asked to inform you that the matter is being examined and that a further reply will be sent to you.

Yours sincerely,

(SGD) JOHN GUTCH

Dr. Bernard Joseph,
Jewish Agency,
Jerusalem.

C O P Y

May 3, 1943.

Kibutz Affikim,
Jordan Valley,

To the Members of Affikim,

I wish to extend to the members of your group the sincere appreciation of the American Red Cross Club and the members of the U. S. Army, who have been privileged to enjoy your hospitality.

It means so much to our soldiers to have an opportunity to see the work that goes into the making of a New Palestine. They appreciate seeing your children and of learning more of the communes and cooperative settlements.

We do not want to impose on your hospitality, but will appreciate the opportunity of bringing our soldiers to visit you again.

Frank K. Tweedy
Program Director
American Red Cross

