



UNITED NATIONS PALESTINE COMMISSION
Communication Received from Advance Party concerning
Security Situation in Palestine

The following memorandum on the security situation in Palestine has been received from Colonel Roscher Lund of the Secretariat Advance Party, Jerusalem, by Air Pouch No.3 on 5 April.

PALESTINE COMMISSION ADVANCE PARTY
PRELIMINARY REPORT OF THE SECURITY SITUATION IN PALESTINE
(Memorandum by Colonel Roscher Lund)

This report is written after three weeks' stay in Palestine and after having seen conditions and talked with a number of people from the British Administration and from the Jewish Agency. The analysis below must be read with the reservation that sufficient information on a number of facts is still not available. Jewish sources have been good but we have no Arab sources at all. This may give a one-sided impression. On any of the aspects definite conclusions cannot be drawn at all and the analysis is a judgment of the situation based on the limited facts now available.

I. PRESENT SITUATION

Here in Jerusalem shooting is going on all the time with short intervals. Sometimes it is one or two shots; sometimes bursts of machine-gun and gunfire and explosion of mortar shells; sometimes the windows shake from a bigger explosion, usually a house being blown up. This goes on with short intervals mostly at night. It does not only go on here in Jerusalem but in all densely built areas where Arabs and Jews are living in their separate quarters. Battle fronts have formed between the two parts and the fighting goes on along these fronts.

The operations are on a small scale. The aim of both parties is usually to dislodge a sniper from a good position from which he can interfere with and disturb activities in the opposite territory. Sometimes it is to destroy a house with a good tactical position. On the roads fighting is going on to stop the opposition's traffic. The British police and forces usually do not interfere with this small-scale fighting. Only when occasionally fighting on a bigger scale flares up and goes on for longer time will the British troops interfere. They usually then direct gunfire into the fighting area which often stops either fighting. They recently were permitted during this sort of fighting to use up to 25 pound shells. They have not used more than two or six pounders here. If gunfire does not give results, troops move into the fighting area to break up the fighting.

Although both parties have vacated particularly exposed quarters in the troubled areas, they in general, for moral and other reasons, stick to their areas still if they are rather isolated and difficult to keep communications with. The Jews thus stick to their settlements in Galilee and in the Negev. Their problem of keeping contact with the isolated areas has been solved in different ways. The communications are kept by radio as the telephone to these settlements is cut. Air strips for landing small civil planes are prepared at all larger settlements.

Road traffic is kept up both by Arabs and Jews with armour protected buses and lorries. This armour protection of the Jews is manufactured here. An inspected bus (30 persons) had American motor and chassis and the protection was two layers of 6.8 m. welded iron plates with a layer of wood about 5 cm. in between. Also the bottom and top of the cars had protection. The armour makes the car heavy and the motors wear out rather quickly. As escort cars, special armoured cars with shooting slits for machine guns are employed. All cars have special tires making it possible to drive even if the tire is punctured by bullets. A number of convoys are protected by the British forces.

The whole traffic between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem is now going in convoys with vehicles of these types.

The isolated Jewish settlements are frequently attacked by Arab bands and Arab villages sheltering bands by Jews. The settlements have organization for self-defense and Hagana usually has reserves that can be called by the settlements. In cases of more serious attacks the British troops are brought in to drive the attackers off. No Jewish settlement has been conquered so far. The Arabs have abandoned a few villages.

At the present stage the British troops and police have completely abandoned certain areas such as the Jewish and Arab parts of Jerusalem and cities such as Jaffa and Tel Aviv. The Jewish and Arab police and forces have taken over in these areas and the arrangement has developed to the degree that if we have to move in the Jewish part of Jerusalem (we cannot move in the Arab) the British protection leaves us and Jewish police and forces take responsibility for our security. In this sort of area the two parties are completely free to prepare for the fighting they expect.

In operations in the towns, cunning and ruse is used. Both sides appear, as example, at times in stolen army vehicles and British uniforms. The Ben Yehuda Street sabotage was carried out in this way. This type of warfare creates extra suspicion and bitterness on both sides.

The attitude of the two parties towards the British is different. The Jews feel that the British are favouring the Arabs both in their general political policy and in all sorts of minor detail arrangements in Palestine. Attacks from Jewish gangs on British are, therefore, constantly going on. The Jewish terrorists, particularly the Stern Gang, have a great part of the responsibility for the bitter feeling of many British towards the Jews. I have no doubt that many smaller encroachments on a low level against the Jews are a result of a desire for revenge from personnel having seen their comrades die or suffer and has nothing to do with British policy in general on a higher level. The actions of the terrorists are in principle condemned by the higher Jewish authorities. It is, however, very doubtful whether the Jewish authorities have made any serious effort to help the British authorities to get hold of the criminals.

The feeling between British and Arabs is generally much better. British still mostly use Arabs as their servants and also for all practical services. I do not know my cases where Arabs have purposely attacked British. Exceptions occur when British have interfered in Arab-Jewish fighting or when Arabs have attacked Jewish convoys escorted by British.

The British attitude of standing between the two parties has been a very difficult one. With the great number of murderous outrages committed against them it is very much to their credit that they have not answered with retaliation against the population.

II. THE ARABS AND THEIR PREPARATIONS

Topographically the Arabs are in a favorable condition compared with the Jews. All the Arab parts of the country have long borders common with the neighboring countries. In case of attack they have considerably more territory than the Jews for manoeuvring and can, if pressed, pass over the borders to neighboring friendly countries that also are constantly helping them with supplies and reinforcements. The only Arab area that will find itself in a difficult position is the town of Jaffa, which is completely surrounded by Jewish territory. The number of Arabs available for recruiting is obviously many times the number of available Jews. The number of Arabs in Palestine alone is twice their number and in addition recruiting of volunteers is going on in all neighboring Arab countries.

The quality of the Arab troops varies considerably. Everybody seems to have respect for the courage and particularly the marksmanship of the Bedouins. These will probably mainly be used in the south. The Arab peasants seem to be organized under their local chiefs and are up to now living in their villages. They join in fighting started by bands in their own area if the British troops do not interfere. Also in the future fighting it seems to be the plan that the major part of the Palestine Arabs are going to fight only within their own districts under their local chiefs. They get their training only in short courses given in the villages by instructors sent out by the Liberation Army.

The main part of the Liberation Army is now concentrated in the triangle between three small towns, Tulkarm - Nablus - Jenin, about 60 km. north of Jerusalem. Headquarters is in a small village called Sir. The estimate from different sources of total mobile force here is between 6,000 and 11,000 men, of which about 80 per cent are volunteers from outside Palestine. A number of these volunteers seem to be adventurers whose interest probably is more along the lines of looting and destroying than the line of the supreme sacrifice, if necessary, for the Arab cause. There have been reports that some of these bands have attacked Arab villages for lack of something better. Reports from the Jews also indicate a number of escaped Nazis from Germany and the Balkans. One cannot expect militia built on the human material of Palestine Arabs and volunteers to reach any high quality. The Arabs may have courage but will probably lack ability in organizing themselves in units and technical skill in handling of complicated machinery.

The leader of the Arab troops - Fawzi Eau-kji - has at times his headquarters somewhere in the triangle. He participated in the Arab Riots of 1937-39 as leader of the Arab guerillas. He participated in the Nazi rioting in Baghdad during the war and went afterwards to Germany. He has a high reputation amongst the Arabs and is probably a well qualified leader in this particular situation.

The Arabs are at present armed with ordinary hand weapons, rifles, pistols, tommy-guns, machine guns, heavy machine guns and up to 3" mortars. Weapons mostly are of British or French make. It is also believed that they have a smaller number of 75 mm guns available.

For protection of road traffic the Arabs have, as the Jews, buses and lorries protected by armour.

Main training camp for volunteers outside Palestine is believed to be in Catania in Syria. Information on this point is insufficient.

The Arab world in general seems to be of the opinion that the fighting of the Jews will be a walkover. Their plan seems to be to separate Jewish forces in Galilee and the Negev from the coastal plain, to destroy these and then to concentrate on the coastal plain for a final blow. They count on a short energetic effort to accomplish this campaign.

III. THE JEWS AND THEIR PREPARATIONS

Topographically the Jews are unfavourably situated. Their base area is in the coastal plain from about 20 km. south of Jaffa-Tel Aviv to Acre (about 120 km. long).

The strip of land is nowhere more than 20 km. broad and the manoeuvring possibilities of fighting forces very limited.

Outside this base area are three concentrations of Jewish inhabitants. The settlements in Galilee, of which a member are old (40-50 years): the population in Jerusalem (about 100,000); and the rather new settlements in the Negev, situated in the western part west of a north-south line through Beersheba.

The general trend of the situation is placing the Jews on the defensive. It will always be difficult for them morally to abandon by free will any of their areas and with a shallow base are difficult to defend, and these three areas with very difficult lines of communication they may easily find themselves in a difficult position. One of the main difficulties is lack of suitable harbors for receiving material aid from outside. Tel Aviv is a second-class harbor with small capacity. Efforts are now being made to improve the harbor facilities in Tel Aviv. The only valuable harbor in Palestine is Haifa, which will be occupied by the British probably over the critical period for the Jews, the time immediately after May 15.

The Hagana, the main Jewish defense organization, say openly that it intends to create a force of about 35,000 soldiers. In view of the fact that countries in real distress actually can raise ten per cent of the population, this force seems rather small; the Jewish population of about 700,000 should raise 70,000 soldiers. The original restriction in forces seems to have been based on limited quantity of weapons and ammunition.

The main forces are concentrated in the coastal plain and the headquarters is in Tel Aviv, which is the main Jewish center at present. The number of Jews acquainted with firearms is about 70,000 and the planned force can be increased. Recruitment campaigns outside Palestine were originally discouraged, but this policy seems to have been changed with the idea that no harm can be done by reinforcements being available if needed.

The quality of the Jewish troops seems, in general, to be good. There are about 37,000 Jews in Palestine today, of which about 5,000 are women, who have served British forces during the war in all sorts of capacities. This is a formidable cadre to build a relatively small force and should secure a high technical standard of the Jewish militia. The technical qualifications of Jews in general are also good.

The morale quality of the Jews is good. They are, of course, fully aware of the historical responsibility the present Palestine Jews have to world Jewry. Apart from this they are fighting with their backs to the wall. If the Jews in Palestine cannot defend themselves and no international force comes to save them, they may be practically wiped out. A very small number of them can hope for escape seaward and the war as it is conducted now seems not to know even the meaning of the word quarter. This back-to-the-wall situation has forced the Jews to keep a very confident attitude in their propaganda, particularly in the home propaganda in Palestine, but outside the country.

The Jews are clever propagandists. Their press is efficient and they also have their English radio stations that also send news of interest for Arabs. This includes scandal stories of their leaders, results of fighting, and always stresses that Arab villages keeping neutral in the fighting have nothing to be frightened of but those who harbor bands will be destroyed. This propaganda seems to have had some effect.

The preparations outside Palestine are probably very extensive, especially to get into the country heavy weapons, particularly guns and tanks, that are of vital importance.

Anything regarding the plans of the Jews is not known. They are in an unfortunate position from the point of view that no geographical target will give them any decisive operative advantage. An eventual conquering of Jaffa will have only a morale effect and: probably be expensive in casualties.

IV. PROBABLE DEVELOPMENT

The decisions and actions taken by the United Nations will obviously influence the development in Palestine. Under the present circumstances enforcement of the General Assembly's partition plan would need a substantial military force and the time needed for this force to be organized and transported to Palestine is not available. There may still be time for bringing in a smaller force with a more limited task, for example, to save Jerusalem, but this will most probably not prevent serious fighting in the country outside Jerusalem after the British have terminated the Mandate.

United Nations political action may enforce a truce ordered from top political level on the two sides. Forever, as the situation is in Palestine, with weapons distributed on both sides and both sides prepared for fighting, it is probable that a truce can be reached without enforcement. A band on one or the other side will commit an outrage which will bring the fighting flaring up. The political leaders probably have insufficient grip on the situation to stop all fighting. Their influence for stopping major fighting can always be executed through control of the stream of supplies, but this measure will take some time before it has the intended effect.

The British, after terminating the Mandate on 15 May, will still have troops in Palestine for three months. These troops will not interfere in any fighting but will only keep territory necessary for their own security during the final withdrawal of their troops. The last area the British will hold under their withdrawal is obviously the Harbor of Haifa. This area has a double importance as harbor and as oil center.

All available information indicates that the British will be able to bring their troops out from Palestine according to schedule. The evacuation is well on its way, but as far as I can judge, no irrevocable step has yet been taken that cannot be reversed at short notice if necessary. All the same, it must be obvious that every day that passes will be more difficult for the British to change their plan of withdrawal. It must be recognized that any new United Nations decisions comprising all of Palestine can only be enforced by the British troops and nobody else, if the transfer of responsibility is going to be on 15 May. Any decision to this end has eventually to be taken quickly if the British shall be able to execute it. How quickly they eventually can be relieved by other troops, if the United Nations so decides, depends on how quickly a decision can be taken.

The attitude of the neighboring Arab countries to the Palestine question is well known. The big question that frequently is discussed here is whether these Arab Countries, apart from sending volunteers and material assistance to Palestine, also eventually will intervene in the fighting with their armed forces, either to promote national purposes or to assist the Palestinian Arabs if they might get into a difficult situation.

The following information is not entirely up to date, but is sufficient to give an idea of the size and importance of these forces in the Palestine situation. One must be aware of the fact that none of these countries eventually will be able to use their whole force in Palestine. The political feelings between the Arab States are not too excitable and they have, to a certain degree, to watch each other.

Lebanon has forces totalling 4-5,000 men, 12-16 guns (75 mm) 15 armored cars. Equipment approximately three-quarters French, one-quarter British. Gendarmerie 2,500 men. No air force.

Syria forces totalling 12,000 men, 12 75-mm guns, 4-6 120 mm. guns, 15 tanks, 30-35 armored cars. Small air force, but without bombers and fighters. Equipment two-thirds French, one-third British.

Trans-Jordan. Arab region with one armored brigade (about 60 armored cars with 2-6 pound guns) 2 mechanized regiments (lorry transported infantry), 15 garrison companies, 8-12 25-pound guns in three artillery groups. The legion has a number of British officers in the Headquarters and in the units. British equipment. It has at the moment considerable amounts of supplies available. It is probably the best trained and equipped unit in the Middle East. Trans-Jordan has no air force.

Iraq. Total force about 35,000 men. It has a considerable artillery, perhaps 15-20 batteries (12 guns) of 25 pounders, 3 batteries 75 mm and one group (2-3 batteries) heavier guns. A certain number of tanks (heaviest known Crusader). Equipment is British. Transport partly U.S. Air force 4 fighters (Spitfire) and 2 bomber squadrons light-medium, in all 80-100 aircraft.

Egypt. total force about 30,000. The forces have tanks (Crusaders) and artillery else medium artillery (60 pounds and 6" howitzers). According to plans they should in 1948-49 have an air force of about 120 Spitfires.

Close to the Palestinian borders (El Arah) at the moment is a force of about a brigade with some artillery and a fighter squadron.

It is difficult to have any opinion of the possibilities of whether forces from the Arab countries are going to participate in fighting in Palestine or not. The most important factor is whether the Arab Legion will participate. This unit is undoubtedly very good technically. It has been stationed in Palestine on duty for a long time and therefore knows the country very well. Apart from the Legion the question is whether heavier weapons, artillery and tanks, will be used against the Jews in the initial stages of fighting before they have opportunity to equip themselves with similar weapons.

Lebanon or Syria may participate but does not count too much in the situation.

If Trans-Jordan comes in it is serious because of the Arab Legion that is very efficient (I have even amongst British officials not found one that entirely disregards this possibility).

Iraq not probable.

Egypt not probable. May eventually use their air force, which has good pilots and reasonably good equipment, but poor mechanics. If the Egyptian Navy operates to stop Jewish imports after 15 May it may cause serious damage to the Jews.

As the situation looks at the moment the most probable development will be that the two parties in Palestine will fight the situation out to a practical partition as soon as Great Britain finishes with the Mandate. I do not think the United Nations has time to interfere in this matter except eventually on a more limited scale.

The starting date of the Arab offensive is an essential point. The British have the responsibility for order in the country up to 15 May. It is obvious that any aggressive action in an isolated part of Palestine on 14 May will not create any action from British troops. Neither an action on 13 May. What then will the date of the Arab offensive be? Probably about 10 May. The date is important because it will mean blowing up of bridges and isolation of areas which could be reached with armored convoys up to that date, and attacks on isolated Jewish communities that are not withdrawn by that date.

The Jews on their side have probably their plans for offensive. They know that no war so far in history has been won by defensive action.

The Jews will suffer heavy losses in their isolated communities that they eventually will try to hold. On the other side, the Arabs will not get these isolated settlements cheaply. The Jews will sell their lives only at high cost (no quarter).

If the time drags out the Jews will have the main advantage of it. Heavy weapons and air forces will be brought in and reinforcements of manpower also. There may even be a small navy to protect landings against eventual interference.

Most probable result of an open civil war is that if in the first period no interference from outside of troops (Arab Legion, etc) will take place the situation will, after heavy losses on both sides, and in a stalemate, but if troops of the Arab countries, to any extent worth mentioning, appear in the first stages of the fighting, the Jews may be practically exterminated in Palestine as they have been in many as of Europe in the last ten years.

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