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UNITED NATIONS PALESTINE COMMISSION

Communication Received from Advance Party  
Concerning Jerusalem in Case of Fighting

The attached memorandum from Colonel Roscher Lund was included in Air Pouch No. 4 and 5 received 12 April 1948.

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PALESTINE COMMISSION IN ADVANCE PARTY  
JERUSALEM IN CASE OF FIGHTING  
(Memorandum by Colonel Roscher Lund)  
(1 April 1948)

In connection with the preliminary report regarding the security situation in Palestine, the situation in Jerusalem, and what may eventually happen there if fighting breaks out, deserves to be mentioned separately. The situation is, in several aspects, different from elsewhere in Palestine and, particularly, are the consequences for a large part of the population, about 100,000 Jews in the City, serious in case of fighting.

These Jews are living completely surrounded by Arab country. The distance by road to the Jewish base in Tel-Aviv along the now used convoy route is about 45 km.

The Jewish population is occupying the northwestern and western part of Jerusalem. The area has a perimeter of about 15 km. There are some Jewish settlements around outside the entirely Jewish area, but these settlements are more likely to be a responsibility than any asset to the Jews in Jerusalem.

Contrary to the situation in the rest of Palestine, the percentage of the young male population in Jerusalem is relatively small. The Jewish force available to defend their part of Jerusalem will probably be less than 10,000 men. To defend the perimeter alone will probably necessitate about 6,000 men, and the available reserve for operations will not be considerable. The Arabs, apart from the population in the town, which is practically equal to the Jews, and the estimated 2,000 volunteers that have arrived from outside, can draw reinforcements from the countryside around. The Arabs also have a considerable advantage in the possession of the Old City with its formidable walls. These walls, being rather valueless in modern warfare on bigger scale, have a considerable value in fighting with few heavy weapons at disposal. The rather small Jewish colony of about 2,000 isolated inside the Old City and now supplied by the British has, of course, no fighting chance whatsoever. The difficulties that the Jews in Jerusalem will be up against in case of fighting are as follows:

An evacuation of the population is impossible because of the magnitude of the task and also for prestige reasons. The convoy situation between Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv is even now too difficult for any evacuation of old people and children on a scale worth while mentioning. To get convoys through from Tel-Aviv after 15 May will be extremely difficult. If the Jews get reinforcements from abroad to their base area, it may be possible for them to open up and hold permanently a channel between Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem, but this is a military operation that will take time. It must, therefore, be foreseen that the Jews of Jerusalem will be cut off from their base at least for a considerable time.

The Jewish part of Jerusalem usually obtain their food from the surrounding Arab countryside. This source has already been stopped some time ago and there is established a strict rationing by the Jews. Being cut off, the situation will deteriorate quickly; also, regarding all other sorts of supplies such as ammunition and other necessities during fighting. The Arabs will have no great supply difficulties.

The water question will be particularly difficult for the Jews. The main source of water for Jerusalem is Ras el Ein, about 12 km. east of Tel-Aviv and the pipeline and pumping stations from here to Jerusalem can easily be cut by the Arabs after 15 May. In the Arab part of Jerusalem the houses have, from old times, cisterns for storing rainwater. The Arabs have repaired these and the rather abundant rain this spring has filled them, so the Arabs are relatively independent of the water from outside, in any case for a considerable time.

In connection with water supply can be mentioned the risk of fires created by explosions of bombs during fighting. The risk of a fire spreading in Jerusalem is in general small because of the predominantly stone structure of the City. In the Old City and the Arab Quarter there is little risk of any fire spreading over larger parts of the town. The Jewish area, however, has three slum districts (see sketch) where a fire of any size would likely spread and destroy the whole area, particularly, when sufficient water is not available for fire-fighting.

Lack of water and lack of facilities to remove refuse (lack of petrol for transport) may easily add serious epidemics to all other miseries for the Jews of Jerusalem in case of fighting.

The Arabs recognising the difficult situation of the Jews in Jerusalem have a weapon that they will use as a pressure in the political front. Characteristic in this connection is that while the Jews are willing for a truce in Jerusalem the Arabs are not.

It is quite obvious that the exclusive possession of Jerusalem from both sides would be regarded as a most important object. The Mufti with his great influence on the Arab part of Jerusalem and surroundings would spare no effort to reach for this target.

Attacking in the built-up area of a town is, however, a very difficult task. The defender has the advantage, particularly, when bombing from air, and heavy artillery cannot be used by the attacker.

The Jews have probably little interest in any large-scale attack on the Arab part of Jerusalem, the unavoidable bloodshed kept in mind. They may probably restrict themselves to small-scale operations for gaining tactical points or as counter measures against Arab operations. They will not improve their situation by conquering parts of the Arab part of the town. They are more likely to fight for areas along the convoy road to the west to ease and improve efforts for supplying and relieving them from their difficult position.

Even if no large-scale fighting should take place in Jerusalem, the Jews will within a short time be in a very difficult position without water and with small supplies of food, a position from which it is difficult to see any way out without international intervention.

Jews here have mentioned the possibility of persuading the British to keep forces in Jerusalem up to about 15 July. These troops might still leave the country in accordance with schedule before 1 August. The forces might keep the water supply intact and, still, if they did not interfere in fighting outside their own area, have a reducing influence on fighting. They may also give time for building up of some sort of an international force.

Delay in withdrawal of the troops from Jerusalem would not change the general British plan for leaving Palestine. Delay would only affect details in the military withdrawal inside Palestine. It might, therefore be achieved through some sort of unofficial approach.

