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Letter dated 27 June 1949 addressed by Dr. Walter Eytan,  
Head of the Delegation of Israel,  
to the Principal Secretary of the Conciliation Commission

Dear Dr. Azcarate,

My Government, as the Conciliation Commission is aware, has had under careful and sympathetic consideration the memorandum (AR/8) addressed to the General Committee on 18th May by the heads of the four Arab delegations.

I am now in a position to communicate to the Commission my Government's considered attitude on the points and suggestions raised in this memorandum.

1. The assumption that Arab-owned orange groves are generally intact, and that all that is needed for their preservation is the personal care of their owners and an adequate supply of labour and technical personnel, is unfortunately unfounded. As I have previously indicated to the Commission, most of the Arab-owned orange groves have been ruined by the ravages of war. Having been abandoned by their owners, they were not, for the most part, taken over by anyone. The resulting prolonged neglect has brought them to a state of dereliction beyond any hope of recovery. My Government will doubtless give the Technical Committee on Refugees every facility for examining this situation on the spot. Severe damage has, in particular, been caused to irrigation networks, and in many cases the owners themselves sabotaged their plant before leaving. Only a small proportion of the groves has been saved and is now under cultivation; it will interest the Commission to know that Arab as well as Jewish labour is employed on this work. The position is, in brief, that no amount of personal care or fresh supply of labour would be of any avail as far as the groves for the most part are concerned, and that the cultivation of those groves which have been saved does not require the introduction of labour from outside. Apart from these specific considerations, the Commission will recall that it is my Government's policy not to favour the re-admission of Arab refugees unless it be in the context of a peace settlement. This policy applies to the owners of orange groves and to their workmen and technicians as much as it does to any other category of refugees.

2. As far as the lawful Arab residents of Palestine are concerned, their bank accounts are not frozen, but at the unrestricted disposal of their owners. The Israeli authorities also entertain applications from Arabs resident outside Israel for the disbursement of their deposits in Israeli banks to Arabs lawfully resident in Israel or to any other beneficiaries who may be designated. Each such application is considered on its merits in accordance with the generally adopted principles which are designed to ensure the bona fide use of these monies and entail no discrimination as to race or creed. As regards the question of releasing frozen deposits for payment to Arabs resident abroad, my Government desires to know whether the Governments of the Arab States would grant reciprocity. There is a considerable number of Arabs in Israel who own deposits in the banks of the neighbouring Arab States. My Government would be glad to know whether these States would be ready to allow the release and transfer of such deposits to persons in Israel if the Government of Israel agreed to release and transfer Arab deposits in Israel to persons in the Arab States. If the Arab Governments should be willing to allow this, clearing arrangements would become possible and would go a long way towards solving the currency problem. The question affects particularly those Arabs now in Israel who have deposits with the Arab Bank and the Al-Umma Bank, both of which institutions, as far as my Government is aware, transferred their funds to Egypt before the end of the mandatory regime.

3. My Government is not able to take the steps suggested under this head, since it regards the maintenance of the present legislative position and administrative practice as essential for the proper regulation of the conservation and use of the property in question.

4. My Government is unable to contemplate "the suspension of all measures of requisition and occupation of Arab houses and lands". I am to emphasize that the present position in this regard is the direct outcome of a war of aggression and its failure, and that the facts created by this course of events cannot be undone. The economic rehabilitation of the country and its pressing housing problems make the use of abandoned lands and property unavoidable, and indeed imperative. I would add that in many cases Jewish-owned property has also been requisitioned and not yet released.

5. My Government has announced its readiness to consider favourably the application of Arab breadwinners lawfully resident in Israel for the re-admission of their wives and minor children. Other compassionate cases will also be considered. I am glad to be able

to inform the Commission that administrative arrangements to ensure the implementation of this policy are at present being worked out, and that an announcement as to their exact nature will be made very shortly. The success of this operation will depend upon the willing cooperation of the neighbouring Arab States. At the same time I should point out that there can be no guarantee that the families so reunited will be reunited "in their homes", in view of the changes in the situation which may have occurred as a result of the war.

6. Freedom of worship and respect for churches and mosques are guaranteed throughout Israel. Liberty of conscience, worship and profession is assured to the members of all faiths, as is the sanctity of churches, synagogues and mosques.

7. The "repatriation of religious men needed to assure the exercise of religious worship in the churches and mosques" has already been effected in a number of cases, and my Government will always be ready to examine further such application on their individual merits with a view to satisfying essential religious needs."

8. Intact Wakf property in Israel is administered by the State in accordance with its designation. Where the beneficiary institution is in existence, the monies are allocated to its maintenance in accordance with the terms of the Wakf. The Commission will be interested to learn that in practice, where such proceeds are inadequate to ensure the maintenance of the religious institution in question, supplementary grants are made for this purpose out of the public revenue of the State. Where the institution is not in existence or exists outside Israel, the monies are paid into a frozen account which is not appropriated for any other purpose. All these transactions are controlled by the State direct, which ensures that no Wakf funds are diverted to any other end. For the present, it is not possible to give free rein to the custodians to manage Wakf property at will.

9. All Arabs resident in Israel and the refugees whose return to Israel is authorized enjoy full personal security equally with all other residents of the country. Freedom of movement is restricted only insofar as national security considerations require.

I should be much obliged if you would bring this letter to the notice of the Conciliation Commission.

Yours sincerely,

S/ Walter Eytan  
Head of the Israeli Delegation