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A.S. Eban, Note of Conversation with Abd ar-Rahman Azzam Pasha, London, 15 September 1947

After complimentary exchanges we began a discussion on the effect of the UNSCOP Report on Arab-Jewish relations. Mr Eban said that the majority report defined the correct conditions in which Arab-Jewish co-operation could be built up. These conditions were finality and equality. Once agreement had been reached on a practical compromise such as that suggested by UNSCOP, it should not be difficult to convince the Arab world that it had nothing to fear from Jewish development, and that no threat of Jewish expansion would exist.

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Mr Horowitz said that we would be prepared to offer a Jewish guarantee, and to accept the guarantees of the Arab League and the United Nations, against any encroachment by the Jews upon the boundaries of other States.

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Mr Eban suggested ways of integrating the Jewish State into processes of regional development, and Mr Horowitz added that in certain conditions we would not be averse to joining with the Arab States in a single League.

At this point Azzam Pasha reacted very strongly, saying that no Middle Eastern League based on diversity could in any way be considered. There were only two historic or cultural ideas which could unify the Arab peoples. The one was the idea of the Arab nation; the other was the idea of Islam. [...] He said that the Arabs were not afraid of our expansion. They resented our very presence as an alien organism, which had come without their consent, and which refused to be assimilated to their way of life.

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Mr Horowitz suggested that the existence of Palestine Jewry was not a fruitful subject for discussion since it was an established fact. Mr Eban added that the refusal of Palestine Jewry to become arabised could equally be taken as an established fact. Whether the Arabs liked these facts or not, they must surely be realistic enough to face them and to make them the starting point of their political thinking.

Azzam Pasha replied that he was surprised to hear us ascribing realism to the Arab peoples which, like all others peoples, were animated by strong historic emotions. "For me you may be a fact, but for them you are not a fact at all – you are a temporary phenomenon. Centuries ago, the Crusaders established them-

selves in our midst against our will, and in 200 years we ejected them. This was because we never made the mistake of accepting them as a fact.”

Mr Horowitz said that without disputing the [point?] of historic memory, a modern people must apply realistic criteria as well. In concrete terms, the existence of Palestine Jewry, and its refusal to assimilate, must be accepted as facts. Mr Eban said that though these were recent facts it did not make them less historic. Arab statesmanship had to consider, from the viewpoint of its own interests, whether more was to be gained by envisaging its relationship with the Jews in terms of harmony or in terms of conflict.

Mr Horowitz dealt in some detail with the mutual advantage that would redound to both parties from active policies of co-operation and development. Mr Eban added that the very existence of conflict seemed to be against the Arab interest. The Palestine conflict was uselessly absorbing the best energies of the Arab League, diverting it from the constructive purposes to which it might otherwise address itself.

At this point Assam Pasha nodded vigorous assent, and went over to a long digression on the Egyptian question which, he said, illustrated the predominance of historic and emotional factors in politics. [...] He apologised for the vigour of his tones, but added that out of sheer respect for us he wished to be candid, and to put out of our minds any idea that the United Nations Report had created a basis for an Arab-Jewish agreement.

“You may easily convince me that the Arabs now have an interest in allowing you to develop your State, and to live at peace with them [sic], but having convinced me of this, you will have achieved nothing, for you have nothing at all to offer which I can take back to my people tomorrow. Up to the very last moment, and beyond, they will fight to prevent you from establishing your State. In no circumstances will they agree to it.”

We asked what would happen if, nevertheless, despite Arab opposition, the State was created. Azzam Pasha said that if we took this view-point, without assuming Arab agreement, we were on a more realistic plane. “Politics were not a matter for sentimental agreements; they were resultants of contending forces. The question is whether you can bring more force for the creation of a Jewish State than we can muster to prevent it. If you want your State, however, you must come and get it. It is useless asking me for the Negev on the grounds that it is empty. You can only get your Negev by taking it. If you are yourselves strong enough to do this, or if you enlist strong partners – Britain, America, Russia, the United Nations – you may well succeed. If you cannot, then you will fail. But, in no circumstances, will you obtain Arab consent in the process.”

Mr Horowitz asked what the situation would be if the “fait accompli” was created. So much of impartial world opinion had now rejected the case for a completely Arab Palestine that this contingency could not be ruled out.

Azzam Pasha said that he could not predict future history. He had already mentioned the Crusades as an example of Arab irredentism. “On the other hand, we once had Spain, and then we lost Spain, and we have become accustomed to not having Spain. We once had Persia, and then lost Persia, and now we have become accustomed to not having Persia. Whether at any point we shall become accustomed to not having a part of Palestine, I cannot say. The



chances are against it, since 400,000 of our brethren will be unwilling citizens of your State. They will never recognise it, and they will never make peace." [...]

Mr Horowitz remarked that it was pessimistic to think of history in terms of biological predestination. Surely there was an element of choice in politics which allowed people to operate along the line of their greatest interests?

Azzam Pasha insisted that no such considerations were valid here. He could imagine the emotional forces which had driven the Zionists into their position, and he knew of the forces which lay at the root of Arab feeling. There was nothing for it but to see which of these forces would prevail and conquer. He repeated that we had no common interest which he could take back to his people. "I can no longer say that we should give the Jews their State, and then enlist them as a world force to banish imperialism from the East. Imperialism is in any case banished, and we stand in no need of Jewish aid. At one time we might have said that the Jews should be allowed to develop their State in order to contribute to movements of development and unity in a unified Arab world."

Mr Eban said that that was how we had started, and it was on this basis that we saw a mutual interest now. Azzam Pasha said that it was very probable that if Arab unity had been realised in the '20s this conception might have been accepted, but the opportunity had been missed and would not recur. Today the Jews might secure an Arab agreement by abandoning their present conceptions, and going in with the Arabs and creating Jewish autonomous units within the framework of Arab society. Eventually these units might grow and develop until something like a Zionist conception emerged. But this would mean for the present a relationship of trust, in which the present Zionist programmes, and such conceptions as the UNSCOP Majority Report, would have no place. We could either take this way, or the other way of endeavouring to enlist as much force as possible and suppress Arab resistance. We could only obtain Arab agreement by abandoning Zionism. If we did not abandon it, our only hope lay in the enlistment of predominant political power. We could not tread the second road and have Arab agreement as well.

Despite this candour and vigour of expression, the conversation was cordial in tone, and Azzam Pasha expressed his readiness, at all suitable occasions, to have private discussions of this kind.

Our Page #3 explains why the Jews couldn't leave their security to the Arab-Muslims (and most others).

With Partition in the air in Sep. 1947, this was also not the time for lesser ideas.

Source

Eban memorandum, 19 September 1947, CZA, S25/9020.

Breakdown into paragraphs differs from the original.