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Ben-Gurion, David (Prime Minister of Israel)

- 2 letters from D.H.
- 1 letter to D.H.

ראש הממשלה
THE PRIME MINISTER

Jerusalem,
4 September 1956.

Dear Mr. Hammarskjöld,

Thank you for your letter of 28 August.

Only two days ago, I had with General Burns a very full discussion of all outstanding practical questions. I am sure he will already have reported to you in detail, so that there is no need for me to go over the ground again. I will therefore confine myself here to one or two matters of principle.

First of all, may I say that we have never expected to get "various concessions" from the other party? No such idea ever entered our heads. We neither ask nor need "concessions" from any quarter. What we do ask - and what we expect from Representatives and States-Members of the United Nations - is that they respect our rights, our freedom, and our sovereign existence, as guaranteed by the Charter to all Member States. We ask no more and no less. We expected to be able to develop friendly relations with other nations, based on acceptance of the principle of equal rights and status for all peoples, and to be able thus to play our part in international co-operation. We did not expect to find ourselves boycotted by fellow-Members of the UN, or victimised by military or non-military gangs organised and operating from our neighbours' territory. Nor to find our territorial integrity and our very existence under constant threat. Is it seeking "concessions" if we ask that the

/principles

Mr. Dag Hammarskjöld,
Secretary-General,
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principles of the Charter be observed towards Israel as towards other States-Members? Have we not that right? And have the United Nations, and the States-Members, not the obligation to ensure it?

But in actual fact we are constantly threatened; our vital rights under the Charter are constantly violated; international waterways are blockaded against us; States-Members of the United Nations openly preach "death to Israel". So far I have not seen that the representatives of organs of the United Nations are giving much thought to practical means of stopping these flagrant violations of a Member-State's rights.

I repeat: we neither ask nor need "concessions"; we ask and expect faithful observance of the Armistice Agreements, and a peaceful, just, settlement of all disputes between ourselves and our neighbours, as enjoined by the Charter upon all its signatories. We have lived for eight years under constant threat of armed attack from our neighbours - all Members of the United Nations. Our basic rights under the Charter and the Armistice Agreements are constantly violated. The Security Council has made no attempt to safeguard our rights under Article 2 of the Charter. Even the Council's clear-cut decision that, in view of the Armistice Agreement between ourselves and Egypt, a state of war no longer exists between the two countries, and that we are fully entitled to free passage for our ships through the Suez Canal, - even this has been ignored with impunity by Egypt for several years past. The Council has done nothing to enforce its decision.

Now you accuse us of failure to co-operate with the United Nations.

In our talks last April, you admitted that there is a definite link between Article 1 and Articles 7 and 8 of the Israel-Egypt Armistice Agreement. Certainly we cannot blame you for Colonel Nasser's refusal to respect either the Charter, or the Armistice Agreement, or the decisions of the Council, or the Law of Nations. But we maintain our position: an agreement must be kept by both sides, or it is no agreement.

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We regard Article 1 of all Armistice Agreements as the essence of the whole - and Article 1 of all four Agreements is being constantly violated by the other contracting parties. That Article clearly defines the "principles which shall be fully observed by both parties during the Armistice, and the right of each party to security and freedom from fear of attack by the armed forces of the other shall be fully respected."

We of Israel want one thing only: to be able to live and work in peace. I know it is not in your power to ensure that for us. I have not the slightest doubt of your good-will, or of your desire to have peace here, as in all countries of the world. If you feel that we have given you cause to consider what "action to take in order to live up to" your "obligations as Secretary-General of the United Nations", you are certainly within your absolute right in doing so. But I fail to see what action is being taken in order to ensure that our small people should also benefit from the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter. I have deep faith in the principles of the United Nations, and so have my people. Are we not entitled to ask that our rights under the Charter shall be respected? That is the only "concession" we seek.

Yours very sincerely,

D. Ben-Gurion

4 September 1956

Through General Burns I have received a report on his interview with you on 3 September 1956 covering the five questions listed in my letter to you of 13 August and also the question of patrols referred to in the final section of my letter to you of 28 August. I note your consistently negative attitude.

In the light of the character of the reasons given in the specific cases, and of the consistency of the line taken, it is difficult not to conclude that your decision to refuse to accept our proposals or requests basically reflects the fact that you do not believe in the practical value of the UNTSO arrangements - which, I regret to say, you have scarcely helped to put to a fair test - and that you do not regard our present efforts as steps towards the building up of a situation where greater problems could be tackled. Nor, obviously, do you attach much weight to our judgment. But, then, what remains of your cooperation with us? I have had to note not only the negative line you have taken on observer activities etc., but likewise that during the several months I have been personally engaged in this matter, Israel has not given me one card to play.

It should not surprise you if, in this situation, I find that a basic condition for my future efforts in the region is lacking. As things now present themselves to me, I do not feel that - as Secretary-General - I could pay the renewed visit to the area, which has been planned for October, unless, from your side, I got a request to come with an indication of what contribution Israel might make to our continued efforts.

His Excellency
Mr. David Ben-Gurion
Prime Minister and Minister of Defence
Jerusalem

("As Secretary-General", because of those special duties of his in relation to the status and stature of the Organization which I, as an individual, temporarily in a position to speak with the same voice in Cairo and Jerusalem, for a time have put second - constantly asking myself for how long and to what extent that could be justified.)

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From General Burns' report it seems that you were annoyed that I had not let you know the results of my talks in Cairo. I wish in this context to draw your attention to what I wrote on this matter in my letter to you of 31 July; the relevant part is annexed in copy. I there told you all I had to say for the time being concerning the Cairo talks about the blockade. I explained that as concerns the bigger questions with which the Suez issue was linked up, I would try to find a way to transmit my views to you as soon as the water had cleared a little after the seizure of the Canal Company. It is true that so far I have not done so. The explanation is not only that we still are in a most unclear situation as concerns the general Suez problem, but also, and just as much, that what I saw during August of your reaction to my problems gave me a strong feeling that this was not the time when I could usefully explore with you wider issues which would require a quite different approach to the UN role.

An observation to General Burns that it was easier for me to report to the Security Council about Israeli interference with the freedom of movement of observers than about the failure of talks in Cairo calls for some comments. My talks concerning the blockade are, as well known, outside my mandate and, therefore, undertaken by me as a free initiative, while my proposals concerning observer arrangements are in direct implementation of a request to me from the Security Council. It should also be noted that while the blockade situation does not represent a departure from the state of affairs reported already in May, your actions in the Demilitarized Zone, and your decisions concerning the observers, do represent such developments. It is, indeed, in no way easier to report on the negotiations on local arrangements

and observers than on the blockade development; the difference between the two cases is that I am in duty bound to report concerning the first point and that in that case there is something new to report. All the same the development of my talks in Cairo will not be left out in my report on the observer questions and related problems for the reason that you have tied the two issues together on the basis of your - in my view untenable - stand on the "indivisibility" of the Armistice Agreements.

If and when freedom of navigation were to be reestablished for you through the Suez Canal, I would revert to the questions, now temporarily settled, in the light of your declaration that as soon as I have "a definite assurance from the Egyptian Government that it is ceasing to interfere with Israeli shipping" and I inform you of the fact, a situation will be established in which I have your "unconditional assurance immediately to proceed to comply with Articles VII and VIII in the manner cited above" (Letter 3 May 1956).

Encl.

12 September 1956

Dear Mr. Ben-Gurion,

I thank you for your letter of 4 September.

After having received the report from General Burns to which you refer in the beginning of your letter, I wrote you a letter on 4 September which I sent to the Israeli Mission here for transmittal to you. Hearing from Mr. Kidron that you, on your side, had just sent me a letter, I asked the Mission to wait with the transmittal of my own letter until I had received yours. I have now asked them to send my letter of 4 September on to you as your own letter of the same date does not influence what I wrote. I wish, however, to add a few words in reply to your letter of 4 September.

There is no difficulty for me to appreciate the feelings inspiring your letter. Trying to help, I have to accept working with you on the basis of your evaluation of the threat under which Israel is living, whether I share your views or not. But I may draw different practical conclusions. I consider an effective UNTSO operation helpful in an approach to the big problems, which I hope we will one day tackle successfully, and I find it a valuable basis for the breaking down of those attitudes which you fear. At the same time, I fail to see how this operation can be of any harm to you. Therefore, while keeping the line to the main underlying problems open, I press you, as with equal insistence I press the others, for co-operation with UNTSO. Here, we differ in our conclusions. However, even if I were of your opinion, I would have to press all parties for such co-operation, as it is the request now made to all the parties from the Security Council, which is in this case my master.

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His Excellency
Mr. David Ben-Gurion,
Prime Minister and Minister
of Defence of Israel,
Jerusalem,
Israel.

I am not happy with this continued negotiation by letters where the difference of the laws under which we have to act and our different evaluation of matters of, relatively speaking, lesser significance must be brought out with full clarity, partly outside their general setting. This may create - or creates at least an impression of - a widening gulf between us. However, if in face of the development of your stands, this would be the consequence of my following the straight line which must be mine, I have to accept that - with regret → in view of the essential unity of basic purpose, and - for my part - the heartfelt respect, which we so easily make the beam on which our minds meet when we can get together. It might mean, I am afraid, that a chance would have been missed, but there is a point beyond which I cannot go in order to save it.

You react against the word "concession", as you ask only that the principles of the Charter and the rules of the Armistice Agreements should be observed by the other party. You are wrong if you feel that my using the term "concession" indicates, that I feel that something has been requested from the other side which it is not their duty to do; I have asked both sides for "concessions" in the sense that I have asked them to do something which I feel that they should do - but which they do not want to do. I have had to ask you to re-establish compliance, as I have had to ask the others to do so. Your stand has been that you cannot do anything in that direction unless and until the other party has taken the first steps. We should not discuss semantics, but, in my view, a party which is itself in a state of non-compliance asking the other party for compliance, does ask for what might well be called a concession.

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I have said in my letter of 4 September that, as Secretary-General, I do not feel that I could realise my plan of coming out in October without receiving, from your side, a request to do so supported by an indication of what contribution you might make to our efforts. In the light of your letter of 4 September I should, perhaps, make my reaction more clear. Do not believe that what I say reflects any wish to avoid a most difficult but also very vital task. I am not any less keen than before on making whatever contribution I can to an improvement of a situation, the seriousness of which from your viewpoint I am able to appreciate fully. Nor should you believe that what I say is said lightheartedly or in a spirit of frustration. The reaction reflects a hard fact concerning the laws under which the Secretary-General has to work. I cannot engage the authority of the United Nations in an effort in which I do not have an indication from the parties of such attitudes as would warrant a hope that we might get somewhere. And you must, yourself, see the difficulty, not to say impossibility, for the agent of the Security Council to resume talks with you on general subjects after you have turned down everything that the Security Council has explicitly asked for. For me to disregard this would be to treat the Security Council action with less than the seriousness and respect which is its due.

Dag Hammarskjöld
Secretary-General