

The text below is a letter dated 6 November 1942 from Haifa lawyer Elias Koussa to High Commissioner Harold MacMichael explaining why few Palestinian Arabs were willing to join the Allied war effort. It is in my opinion an authentic picture of the British-Palestinian relationship, both in content and psychologically, which had pertained since 1917.

Source: The National Archives, CO 733/433/21, pp 10-23. Thanks to Tom Suarez for finding this.

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ADVOCATE

Telephone 341 P.O.B. 14

His Excellency

The High Commissioner for Palestine
Jerusalem

Haifa, 6th November 1942

Your Excellency,

I have the honour to state that on Sunday the 1st. instant, an aeroplane flew over the town of Haifa and threw printed pamphlets purporting to be an appeal from the Arab and Jewish Chambers of Commerce and from the Rotary Club of this town urging the inhabitants to enlist in His Majesty's Forces. I have read this pamphlet with interest; and my memory went back to the days of the declaration of the Great War in 1914, when the whole Arab nation was not only enthusiastic and sympathetic supporter of the British Empire, but was also an active participant in its cause. In those days the Arab rushed, whenever the opportunity afforded them a means, to join the British forces and to fight against the common enemy. Every person, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, prayed from the very depth of his heart to the Almighty Providence to lead Great Britain and its Allies in the path of victory. This was a genuine, true and sincere feeling. It was not the result of any propaganda, but the natural consequence of the respect and admiration which every individual Arab held for His Majesty's Government and for the British people as a whole. There was no need to urge the Arabs to join the Forces. They did so of their own accord and free will. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in the present world conflagration for it is evident to every observer that the enthusiasm, the sympathy, and the support which characterised the Arabs' attitude in the Great War of 1914 are manifestly absent in the present war.

2. As an Arab who has got not only the interests of his own people at heart, but who has also held the British Government and people in admiration and who, in response to this sense of respect and admiration, deserted from the Turkish Army in order to join the British Forces in the last war, and actually served with those Forces from 1915 to 1920 when he was transferred to the Government of Palestine, I venture to submit to Your Excellency this memorandum actuated by nothing save a sincere desire to see the relations between the British and Arab peoples placed on a solid foundation of mutual understanding and respect. I trust, therefore, that Your Excellency will consider the statements herein set out in the same spirit by which they are animated.

3. Your Excellency has, doubtless, noticed the failure of the Arab community of Palestine to respond cheerfully and whole-heartedly to the numerous appeals for volunteers. Apart from the spontaneous rally in the early days of the war, the appeals which have been made have not had satisfactory results. The change of attitude is remarkable. One need not enquire deeply in order to ascertain the real causes which have brought about this demeanour, especially in the case of Palestine. The all important question which every Arab individual who has read the pamphlet referred to in the first paragraph hereof, or heard of the call for Arab recruits asks himself is "why should I join? Would I be serving the cause of the Arabs of Palestine by so doing. If so, how. What will the Arabs of this country get in return for their joining the cause of the Allied Nations. Would it mean independence or, at least, self-government, or, would I be helping to defeat my own interests and existence and the interests and existence of my compatriots by such enlistment". This is the problem for which every Arab probes for the true answer. The absence of a convincing answer is principally responsible for the reluctance of the Arabs to enlist, or to make any effective contribution to the war effort. The only answer that has been received from official quarters or from the authorities responsible for the campaign to encourage recruitment among the Arabs is "if you join you will support the cause of democracy". In addition, the Arabs are reminded of the atrocities and brutalities committed by the Nazis and their Associates in the territories which they have occupied with a gentle that these acts of savagery and barbarism will be committed in Palestine if it is overcome. I respectfully submit that this answer is no sufficient, because the natural and immediate question that follows is "how will the success of the cause of the Arab inhabitants of Palestine". The Arab cause is clear and simple. It is complete independence and absolute freedom. It is, however, irreconcilable with the Jewish ambitions and aspirations. In the eyes of every Arab the question is shrouded with considerable doubts and suspicion because of the vagueness and generality of the answer and because of the irreconcilability of the natural right of the Arab inhabitants of this country to enjoy complete and unfettered independence with the Jewish endeavours to make of Palestine an independent Zionist state.

4. I ensure Your Excellency that it is useless to press the answer described above on the Arabs. They are inclined to be deaf to it. They are blind to the spectacle of an

Allied victory because they are thinking of something else. They are thinking of their own freedom, of their own independence. They entertain grave doubts as to whether such a victory will not lead, with the determined assistance of His Majesty's Government, to the political, economical and commercial domination of their country by the Jews. They are alive to the obvious fact that without such assistance the Jews can never constitute a political entity possessing an overwhelming majority entitling them to rule Palestine. This being so, it is difficult to convince them that by making adequate contribution to winning the war they will serve the cause of their people and their country. They are unable to accept the afore-mentioned answer to the question that persistently arouses their anxious consideration and unabated apprehension for it is unconvincing and chimerical. It is unconvincing because they are unable to understand why they should help democracy to seal their own doom. It is chimerical because democratic principles require that the government of every country should be from the people, by the people and for the people, while the present administration of this Arab country is from the English and Jews, by the English and Jews and for the English and Jews. Again, the elementary principles of democracy dictate that there should be no taxation without representation. In Palestine, the Arabs have no representative body to voice their desires and wishes, and taxes are imposed upon, and collected from, them and disposed of without they having the slightest shred of right to vote on the propriety of the taxes, or the manner in, or the purposes for, which they are utilised. The Palestine Government which is the creation of His Majesty's Government is, therefore, fundamentally opposed to the democratic doctrines. It is ludicrous to ask an Arab to assist democracy when the dictates of democracy are deliberately discarded by those who claim to be the champion of democracy.

5. It is, indeed, too much to ask an Arab to sacrifice his life, his property, the interests of his family and every thing that is dear to him in order to help winning the war for the British Empire when he is fully satisfied and convinced that such sacrifice will be in direct conflict with his own interests and with the interests of his Arab compatriots. The British Government has done nothing since the commencement of the present hostilities to allay the apprehensions and misgivings of the Arabs of Palestine. On the contrary, there has been a great number of speeches and utterances by prominent personalities and leading statesmen to the effect that it is the firm intention of the Allied Nations, when victory is won, to give their active support to the Zionist cause. Indeed, it is amply evident from the recent statements made by President Roosevelt, by General Smuts, and many members of Parliament and other British and American politicians as well as by Zionist leaders that a democratic victory will definitely involve the conversion of Palestine into a one hundred percent Jewish state. Palestine will be as Jewish as England is English. This is the conviction deeply rooted in the heart and mind of every Arab. The justification for this conviction is to be found in the conduct of His Majesty's Government and in the utterances of many imminent persons that "the promise of the National Home should be carried out to the letter, and the situation after the war will give

added force and opportunity to the fulfilment of that promise”, and that “the Balfour Declaration was a great act of restitution for the countless wrongs done to Jews by Christians”, and that “the British Labour Party would do all in its power to restore the authentic spirit of the Balfour Declaration, and secure for the Jewish people a well-earned place among the peoples of the world”. These are quotations taken from the press, and simple illustrations of the many declarations which go to confirm the doubt entertained by the Arabs of Palestine as to whether it will serve their own interests and the interests of their country to respond to the call for recruits. Apart from these alarming utterances and provocative declarations which give the Arabs a considerable amount of anxiety about their future, they see every day signs and indications which are enemical to their national aspirations. They see that the Zionist Organization in London and the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem are in constant consultations with His Majesty’s Government and with the Governments of the Allied Nations as well as within the Government of Palestine with a view to ensuring that nothing shall be done which may hinder the development of the National Home according to the aspirations of the Zionists. They are aware that no measure whatsoever is taken by the mandatory government before the views of those Jewish representative bodies are taken, considered, and given every sympathetic acceptance. They remark that many important government posts have been filled by Jews vested with effective authority and responsibility surpassing the highest degree, if any, of authority and responsibility hitherto given to any Palestinian Arab officer. As against these evidenced facts, the Arabs find, to their deep regret and profound consternation, that they are deprived of any political body which can represent their views before His Majesty’s Government or the Palestine Government, and that the mandatory authorities refuse to allow them to elect such a body on the flimsy pretext that it would not be safe and wise to agree to such an election having regard to the exigencies of the war. They know that even the Arab councillors in the municipal corporations do not possess that true representative character and independent will which may enable them to protect their compatriots’ interests for they have been installed in their honorary chairs by the Government of Palestine without regard to the wishes of the people whom the Government pretends that they represent, and, in certain instances, irrespective of their qualifications and suitability to perform the duties of a municipal councillor. They feel that in consequence of the action of the mandatory authorities there is no Arab representative body that can express their views, advocate their wishes, and safeguard their national aspirations, and that they are left to the combined merciful consideration of His Majesty’s Government, the Palestine Government and their avowed enemy, the Zionist Jews. It is true that there has been an appreciable amount of assurances calculated to remove the apprehensions from which the Arabs suffer, but they are hesitant to accept them as sufficient and adequate guarantee that their motherland will not be given to the Jews. Experience – dire experience – has taught them not to attach any importance to, or place any confidence on, such assurances when made in their favour. They did in the past act upon such enticing promises, but found that they were too impetuous. They are,

therefore, determined not to make the same mistake again for “the faithfull will not err twice”.

6. I assure Your Excellency that despite every discouragement, absence of faith and lack of constructive work which have characterised the British rule in this country since the establishment of the civil administration I remain a convinced adherent of friendship between the British and Arab peoples. This friendship is traditional. It was the outcome of mutual understanding, and, on the one part, in the faith in the honesty of word and sincerity of purpose of His Majesty’s Government, and, on the other part, of the loyalty and faithfulness of the Arabs. Unfortunately, the Palestine problem has given rise to a mutual sentiment of mistrust between His Majesty’s Government and the Arabs of this country. The Government is fully aware of the existence of this sentiment for it complained of it in unequivocal language in the White Paper of 1930 published in consequence of the report made by the Shaw Commission. But it has hitherto failed to take any reasonable measure to remove it. On the contrary, the administrative acts done since the Shaw Commission were of such a nature as to make it amply evident that there was no honest desire on the part of His Majesty’s Government to do any justice to the Arabs. Hence, it is not unnatural that they should refrain from giving any effective support in this world conflagration and remain wholly passive. In the very depth of their hearts the Arabs of this country would rejoice to co-operate whole-heartedly and effectively with the British Empire in this struggle for the freedom, liberty and independence of the world nations if tangible evidence be forthcoming to ensure that the result of such co-operation will not involve the actual substitution in their motherland of the Jewish people for their own. It is the fear that they will be transplanted from the soil on which they were born which stands in the path of their full participation in the war effort, and unless that fear is eliminated it is difficult to persuade them to volunteer in any force.

7. This is not all. Under Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations the Arabs of Palestine were deemed to have reached a state of development entitling them to enjoy provisionally the benefits of independence subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a mandatory until such time as they are able to stand alone. This international obligation has been discarded, and His Majesty’s Government has failed to discharge its mandatory obligations towards the Arabs. Under the Ottoman rule they enjoyed the same rights and privileges as were enjoyed by any other Turkish subject. There was no discrimination in favour of a pure Turk as against an Arab. Grand viziers, ministers, ambassadors, members of parliament, generals and other high dignitaries, civil and military, were nominated, appointed or elected from the Arab race on equal terms with the pure Turks. There was no question of preference of a Turk over an Arab, and in the eyes of the law and administrative regulations all Ottoman subjects were equal without the slightest shred of discrimination in favour of one as against the other. It is an established fact that prior to the Great War of 1914 the Arabs

in Palestine, as in all other parts of the Ottoman Empire, enjoyed full rights and privileges similar to those enjoyed by the subjects of any European state. On the conclusion of hostilities they were discovered to be minor and not fully matured to assume the responsibilities of a free nation. They were, therefore, placed under the tutelage of Great Britain. They have been under this tutelage for more than 22 years. It is painful to feel that in the eyes of His Majesty's Government the Arabs are now more minor than they were in 1919. In other words, by its own conduct and behaviour His Majesty's Government admits that it has utterly failed in the proper administration of the country according to the terms of the Covenant of the League of Nations and the Mandate, for it has not only been unable to lead the Arabs during this long period of guardianship one step forward in the path of freedom and independence but has actually dragged them backwards into the unfathomable depth of inefficiency, ignorance and minority. The Arab officers of the Government have been deprived from every vestige of authority or responsibility. They are mere puppets. From 1920 – 1929, they shouldered an appreciable degree of responsibility and exhibited every possible zeal, diligence and efficiency in the performance of their duties. But these prospects have been denied to them after a long period of loyal service and honest discharge of duty, for in innumerable instances British Junior Officers were promoted over the head of superior Arab officers in utter disregard of the rights, the qualifications, and the ability of the latter, not to mention the wide experience they acquired during their long term of employment as regards the administrative machinery, the conditions of the country, and the divergent habits, customs and traditions of its people. Those Arab officers consider themselves aggrieved by the flagrant and unjust discrimination in favour of their subordinate British Officers who do not possess the same experience, qualifications or length of service. The unfairness of the whole question becomes abundantly clear when the present number of British Officers in Government service is compared with their number from 1920 to 1929. During this period, and particularly during the term of office of the first High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel, there was a handful of English Officers in every department, the remaining posts being occupied by Palestinian Officers. Apart from the District Governor and his Assistant all the administrative officers were either Arabs or Jews. It was the policy of the Government to dispense with the services of as many English Officers as possible and appoint Palestinians in their stead. The policing of the country was in the main the duty of Arab Police Officers. A careful scrutiny of the archives of the secretariat will satisfy Your Excellency that in the early years of the Administration the country was in a deplorable state of disturbance. Heinous crimes were committed almost daily by the numerous brigands scattered throughout the country, and highway robberies were the rule and not the exception. These records will also establish that it was very dangerous for any person to be on the high ways at night. It was the Arab Police Officers, and nobody else, under the guidance of a handful of British Officers, who rounded up all these brigands, put an end to their criminal activities, ensured public security and stability throughout the country, and established complete safety on the highways. There is still a good number of these Arab Police Officers in the

Force, and I regret to say that three of those distinguished Officers are ignored, and no proper use is made of their knowledge and experience. Many junior officers were promoted over their heads. They, like many other Palestinian officers, suffer profoundly from this unjustifiable discrimination in favour of many British Officers who were subordinate to them. There has been a large number of promotions in the Palestine Police Force whereby British Constables were promoted over the head of their Arab superior officers. In many cases simple British Constables were dragged up the ladder of advancement in preference to Palestinian Inspectors, and, in certain cases, over the heads of Palestinian Assistant Superintendents of Police with the disgusting result that the subordinate officer became superior and the superior subordinate. Moreover, in other departments Britishers who were in the junior or unclassified service of the Government have been promoted to posts of considerable responsibilities and importance over the head of Palestinian Officers who were in the senior service when those Britishers were in the employment of the Government as clerks or drivers. In no part of the world, save in Palestine under the British rule, can such anomalies occur for no person with any sense of justice or fair play, or with a conscience not tainted with selfishness or perversion will approve of such a method of administering justice.

8. Another illustration of this unwarranted disregard of the interests of the inhabitants of the country in general, and of the Arab Officers of the Government in particular, may be found in the continuous action of His Majesty's Government to appoint additional British Judges and Magistrates. The first attempt to increase those appointments was made during the term of office of the late Chief Justice [1921-27], Sir Thomas Haycraft, who strongly objected to it on the ground, to quote his own words as much as possible, that "If His Majesty's Government was honest in the discharge of its obligations under the Mandate, Palestinians must be appointed whenever a vacancy occurred, or a post was created in order to render them fit to assume responsibility, and eventually become a free and independent nation". Nevertheless, the greatest part of the appointments involving lucrative salaries and emoluments not only in the law department but also in every other government department have been reserved for British Officers. The number of such officers has been augmented beyond any actual requirement of the country, and by a mere desire to absorb in the service as many English officers as possible. It is thus obvious that the treatment meted by the Government to its own Palestinian servants who are required to administer justice among the inhabitants of this country without bias, partiality or discrimination is itself biased, partial and discriminative, and is consistent with a desire to foster in the hearts of those servants a spirit of complete dissatisfaction and disappointment, and, perhaps it will not be an exaggeration to say, a spirit of hatred and antagonism, for it requires a superhuman being to countenance it with a feeling of sympathy and confidence. The augmentation of the number of British Officers did not lead to the improvement of the administrative machinery or to the better administration of justice. It is common knowledge that corruption and abuse of office have crept into the government in

alarming degree. These evils were not so prevalent. It is true that in the early days of the civil administration when the number of British Officers was scanty corruption did occur on rare occasions. The reason is very simple. The Palestinian Officers knew that they were under constant supervision of their British Superior Officers, and that any complaint made against them by any member of the public will be investigated carefully, minutely and impartially by those officers, and that they are liable to severe punishment if the evidence were sufficient to establish their guilt. At present, however, this sense of security against corruption has vanished for the Arab Officers have been deprived from every authority. And the British Officers feel secure against any such investigation if a complaint be forthcoming. There is no control over them. They do whatever they like. Their nationality is an adequate primary evidence that they are in the right, and that whatever they say is the truth. Hence, these evils are the order of the day. In view of all these circumstances, it is not unnatural that the Arab population of Palestine is not inclined to be sympathetic or helpful.

9. The remarks set out in the preceding paragraph apply with equal cogency to the appointments made in the service of the government since the outbreak of hostilities. If Your Excellency will be kind enough to go through the Palestine Gazette since that date [1936] you will remark that those appointments are almost one hundred percent either English or Jewish. The department of food control is simply swarming with such employees, and there is no important post in the offices created for the control of foodstuffs, light and heavy industries, import and export, road transport, censorship, and for the many other controls imposed under the Defence Regulations, which is occupied by a Palestinian Arab. This is not only discouraging but also the cause of considerable grievance, particularly in view of the fact that a great number of Jewish Officers have been entrusted with the actual performance of the duties relating to those controls. It is a common knowledge that an Arab Senior Officer has resigned from the Government because he was informed that he had been appointed as Controller of Prices, and the appointment was withdrawn upon the representations of the Jewish Agency, notwithstanding the fact that the officer concerned is highly capable, honest, faithful and loyal. The grievance is also accentuated by the fact that wives of British Officers of the Government receiving exorbitant salaries have been employed in government offices at high salaries to the detriment of many Palestinian Arabs who are not only fit to perform the duties allotted to these ladies, but have also a stronger claim. These and the like appointments burden the shoulders of the Palestinian population and the Arab tax-payer with a load which he cannot carry without infusing into his heart a spirit of great grudge and disappointment. The Arabs of this country feel the more disappointed and aggrieved when they compare their present condition with that of their brethren in Syria and Lebanon where the sphere of influence of the British Government is very limited, and where the inhabitants govern their own country, manage their own affairs and determine their own welfare.

10. There is a further reason why the Arabs of Palestine feel reluctant to give any active support in the war effort. It is the fact that they see with their own eyes a huge number of robust Englishmen rambling about the country enjoying the benefits and privileges of government employment, and of commercial enterprises under the auspices and protection of the Government, while they should be in uniform fighting at the front for their king and country. The Arabs feel, in the circumstances described above, that if there is any person who should fight for democracy and should sacrifice his life, his property and his family to win the war, that person is first and foremost every able-bodied Englishman, because the recent statements and declarations made by British, American and Allied statesmen make them believe that they have nothing to gain when victory is won. This is the belief which makes them shrink from any effective participation in the war, and compels them to assume an entirely indifferent and passive attitude. And it is this belief which His Majesty's Government must eliminate from their hearts and minds by persuasiveness based on irrefutable acts, and not by the demonstration of force and power or by widespread propaganda, in order to convince them to give their honest, sincere and heartfelt assistance. I assure Your Excellency that if adequate assurance be given to the Arabs that under no circumstances whatsoever will the policy set out in the White Paper of 1939 be deviated from, or altered, or amended to their prejudice or detriment, a large number of young Arabs will rush to join the colours to fight against the enemies of democracy. The number of such volunteers who will be too anxious to go to the front lines of the battlefields, and not to remain in the rear of the army, or in cities, towns and villages, will, doubtless, exceed the number of the Jewish recruits who join His Majesty's Forces unwillingly and involuntarily. It is common knowledge that in spite of the help, protection and sponsor accorded by His Majesty's Government to the Jews at large, and in spite of the effort and endeavour made by that Government to establish for the Jews in Palestine not only an asylum where they may find a peaceful refuge from the atrocities committed upon them in Christian Europe, but also a free and independent state, the greatest number of Jewish volunteers were driven to enlist by force, molestation and other devices. Contrast this fact with the simple truth that spontaneously upon the outbreak of war 5000 Arabs enlisted of their own free volition notwithstanding the many injustices done to them and to their kin by His Majesty's Government. These volunteers fraternised with the British soldiers although on the eve of the war those same British soldiers had killed many of their kinsmen and perhaps some of their relatives. Nevertheless, they enlisted. Their enlistment was actuated by that true and traditional feeling of loyalty and friendship which marked the relations between the two peoples. They believed that the policy outlined in the White Paper of 1939 will be enforced without any delay. They, therefore, forgot the bitter sentiment of animosity arising from the unfortunate disturbances that commenced in 1936, and hurried to submit their services to His Majesty's Forces to fight with them side by side, and to die for their cause. Their fellow countrymen now refuse to do so because it is abundantly clear to them that there is no desire on the part of His Majesty's Government to abide by that policy. It is hardly necessary for me to emphasize

the fact that an Arab soldier is an asset, and not a liability, to the British Army for he is brave and courageous. The past history and traditions of his race make it incumbent upon him to either to die gloriously on the battle field, or to return crowned with the laurels of victory. For him there can be no retreat or withdrawal, but death or victory.

11. Your Excellency, I write this lengthy memorandum because I feel it my duty to place the true and real sentiments of the Arab Community in this country before His Majesty's Government. I am aware that occasionally you seek the advice of some of the Arab notables on current matters of importance, but I am not aware of any person who has hitherto expressed to you in writing the true feelings of the Arab population. I do so with the sole honest and sincere desire to bring to your notice these sentiments, and venture to suggest that if Your Excellency were to follow the example of the Khalif Omar the Great and clandestinely visit the various departments and listen to the Arab inhabitants you will at once discover that I have not misrepresented the true feelings of my compatriots, nor exaggerated the true state of affairs. Your Excellency will also ascertain that the prestige not only of the Government of Palestine but also of His Majesty's Government has lost much of its weight among the Arab community.

12. I shall be grateful if Your Excellency will be kind enough to transmit a copy of this memorandum to the British Minister for the Middle East, and to the Secretary of State for the Colonies. I trust that something will be done to remove the grievance from which the Arabs of this country suffer and to eliminate the apprehension under which they labour so that they may joyfully and whole-heartedly participate in this world war.

I have the honour to be, Sir, Your Excellency's Most Obedient Servant, Elias N. Koussa

- typed for this docx. from the National Archives document by Blake Alcott, 15.3.2019