

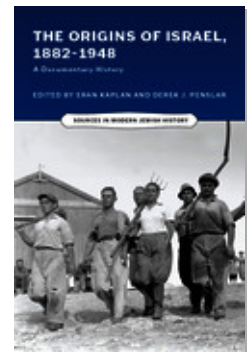


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On the Partition of Palestine (1937)

DAVID BEN-GURION

This letter, written by Ben-Gurion from London to his adolescent son, Amos, has acquired a good deal of notoriety in Middle Eastern historiography. It has been cited as evidence that Ben-Gurion consciously planned the expulsion of the Palestinians a decade before Israel's War of Independence. The letter is published in full here for the first time.

The factual background to this letter was the Peel Commission's recommendation in July 1937 that Palestine be partitioned into Jewish and Arab states. The Peel Commission also recommended that where possible Arabs were to be moved from the Jewish to the Arab state and vice versa. In fact, the population transfer would be almost entirely unilateral, with more than 200,000 Arabs being moved versus just over 1,000 Jews.

The proposal divided the Zionist leadership. Some accepted it; others rejected partition in any form; and still others were willing to accept partition in principle but were discontent with the amount of territory allotted to the Jewish state. Ben-Gurion cautiously adopted the first position, arguing to his party's executive committee that a Jewish state within the biblical Land of Israel was not a final goal and that some day the state would include Transjordan and southern Lebanon.¹ The third position prevailed at the World Zionist Congress that met in Geneva in August. Amos took the second, fully oppositional position. At the time, Amos belonged to a Zionist youth movement, Ha-Mahanot Ha-Olim (the Ascending Camps), which was affiliated with Ha-Kibbutz ha-Me'uhad (United Kibbutz movement), whose leader, Yizhak Tabenkin, believed that

Source: Ben-Gurion Archive (correspondence), Sede Boker, October 5, 1937. (Many thanks to Motti Golani for this document.) Translated by Marganit Weinberger-Rotman.

socialist values and territorial maximalism were mutually reinforcing (see document 37). A minuscule Jewish state, it was feared, would lack the resources and the security to develop a stable socialist economy and society. Moreover, unlike Ben-Gurion, many Zionists on the left as well as right of the social spectrum were unwilling to make even a pragmatic concession to the Jews' historic claim to the entire Land of Israel.

Ben-Gurion wrote a prodigious number of letters and diary entries, which he usually viewed as a form of self-documentation for dissemination and eventual publication (as was, in fact, often the case). Thus this letter could be seen not as a private exchange of ideas between father and son so much as a political statement, or an attempt to convince not only Amos, but many others, of the viability of partition, particularly in terms of the quantity of land that would be available for Zionist settlement. According to this interpretation, Ben-Gurion's territorial maximalism would have been purely rhetorical. Whether or not this is true, in years to come Ben-Gurion tried to conceal his earlier support for taking territory east of the Jordan River, and this letter was deleted from the 1968 Hebrew edition of Ben-Gurion's correspondence.² Similarly ambiguous was the intent of—and intended audience for—Ben-Gurion's musings in this letter on the possibility of forcibly transferring Arabs from Palestine in the case of partition.



Dear Amos,

I was not mad at you; I was only very sad not to have received an answer from you. I cannot accept your excuse that you had no time. I know you are busy at school, in the field and at home, and I am pleased that you are studying, but one can always find a free hour when there's need. Not only on Saturdays, but during the week, too.

Similarly, your excuse that I wander from country to country is not convincing. You can write to me in London. Here, they always know where I am, and they forward my mail regularly.

As for the question of my membership in the Executive Committee,³ I will explain it to you when we meet in person, if I find you still in Tel Aviv on my return. I will only comment briefly on the split between logic and feeling when it comes to matters of state. Politics is not a matter of sentiment. The only consideration is what's good and beneficial for us. Which road will lead us to our goal. Which policy will strengthen us, and which will be a detriment.

I have feelings too, or I would not have been able to endure this difficult work for dozens of years. And my feelings are not hurt by the idea of establishing a Jewish state, however small. It goes without saying that I do not favor the partition of the land, but the land to be divided is not in our hands; it is in the hands of the British and the Arabs. We hold only a small fraction of it, less than

what is offered for the Jewish state. If I were an Arab, my feelings would be seriously hurt. But the fact is, in the partition plan, we receive more than what we own, though less, much less, than what we deserve and want. But the question is whether we would get more without partition? If the status quo remains, will our “feelings” be satisfied? What we want is not to keep the country one and whole, but that the one and whole country will be Jewish. I have no use for a Greater Palestine that is Arab.

For us, the status quo is poison; we need a change in the situation. How will this change come about? How can we establish our own state?

The crucial question is whether the establishment of a Jewish state would help or prevent turning this country into a Jewish country?

My assumption is—and this is why I am an ardent supporter of establishing a state even if it involves a partition now—that a Jewish state on part of the land is not a final status; it is just the beginning. When we purchase a thousand or ten thousand dunams, we rejoice and our feelings are not hurt because we did not purchase the entire land. The purchase is important not only in itself; it also helps us go from strength to strength and this empowerment helps lead us to purchasing the entire country. Establishing a state, even a partial one, maximizes our forces, and it will contribute to our historical effort to redeem the entire country.

We will admit as many Jewish immigrants as we can. We firmly believe that we can bring more than two million here. We’ll establish a multifaceted economy: agricultural, industrial, commercial, naval, etc. We’ll build sophisticated armed forces, an excellent military—I am sure our army will be among the best in the world—and then we’ll be able to settle in the other parts of the country, either through mutual agreement with our Arab neighbors or through other means.

We mustn’t lose sight of some basic facts that enable us to settle in Palestine; it is not the British Mandate, nor the Balfour Declaration—these are corollaries, not causes, temporary, ephemeral events. They could just as well not happen. Were it not for the First World War or the way it ended, the mandate and the declaration would not have occurred. But there are fundamental historical facts that are immutable as long as Zionism is not fully realized. These are:

1. The afflictions in the Diaspora, which impel Jews to immigrate to Palestine.
2. The fact that the land is largely uninhabited. There is great potential for settlement in areas that the Arabs don’t need and are not capable of settling (because they do not need them). There is no problem of Arab immigration, there is no Arab

Diaspora and the Arabs are not persecuted. They have a country, a vast country of their own.⁴

3. Jewish talent and inventiveness (a result of reason No. 1), the Jews' ability to make the desert bloom, create industry, build an economy, develop culture, conquer the air and the sea using science and pioneering efforts.

These basic facts will be greatly helped by the existence of a Jewish state in part of Palestine, just as the Zionist movement is helped by every conquest, small and large, every new school, factory, boat, etc.

If we have a state, we'll be able to populate the land, outnumber the Arabs, and accelerate building and expansion. The more our forces grow, the sooner the Arabs will realize that they cannot and should not oppose us. They will rather take advantage, both politically and materially, of the Jewish presence.

I am not a dreamer and I do not like wars. I have always believed—even before the option of a state materialized—that when we are strong and numerous in the country, the Arabs will realize how beneficial an alliance with us can be; if they let us settle in all parts of Palestine, they can benefit from our help. The Arabs have many countries, sparsely populated, undeveloped and unprotected. Without France, Syria could not withstand Turkey for one day. The same applies to Iraq and the new state. They all need the protection of France and Britain. But such protection implies subjugation and dependence. The Jews could be equal allies, true friends, not conquerors and tyrants.

Let's assume that the Negev is not included in the Jewish state. It will remain a barren desert because the Arabs do not need it and are incapable of developing it. They have plenty of other deserts, and they lack the manpower, the money and the initiative. It is quite possible that in exchange for financial, military, organizational, and scientific aid they will allow us to develop and build the Negev. But then again, maybe not. Nations don't always act according to reason and in their best interest. Just as you maintain that there is a dichotomy between reason and feelings, perhaps the Arabs will be motivated by counter-productive nationalistic sentiments and will tell us: "None of your honey, none of your sting, we'd rather the Negev stayed barren and desolate than have Jews settle in it." Then we'll have to speak to them in another language. And we will have that "language" which without a state could not exist. We should not accept that large uninhabited areas, which can accommodate thousands of Jews, would remain empty; we should not accept that Jews wouldn't be able to return to their homeland because Arabs choose not to allow either nation to settle there. We will have to expel the Arabs and take their place. Our national aspirations are based on the assumption—proven right since the start of our

settlement here—that there is enough room for both the Arabs and ourselves in Palestine, and if we need to resort to force—not in order to dispossess the Arabs of the Negev and Transjordan, but in order to guarantee our right to settle there—then we will have the power to do so.

It is quite possible in that case that we'll have to deal not only with the Palestinian Arabs but with the neighboring countries which will rush to help them against us, but we will be more powerful, not only because we are better organized and better equipped, but because our forces will be greater in both quantity and quality. We have a reservoir of troops in the Diaspora. Our younger generation now living in Poland, Romania, America and elsewhere will rush to join us if and when this conflict flares up—and I hope it never does. The Jewish state will not depend only on the Jews living within its borders, but on the entire Jewish people all over the world, on the millions who want and must live in Palestine. There are no millions of Arabs who want or must settle in Palestine. Of course, adventurers and Arab gangs from Syria and Iraq may come in, but they are no match for the hundreds of thousands of Jewish youths for whom the Land of Israel is not just a matter of “feelings” but also a question of personal and national life.

This is why I attach so much importance to reclaiming land from the sea, to building a Jewish port and a Jewish navy. The sea is the bridge between the Jews in Palestine and the millions in the Diaspora. We must prepare conditions that will allow our ships and our sailors to bring in thousands of youths, so we can train them—even while they are still living abroad—for any possible task in Palestine.

I am confident that establishing a Jewish state, even in part of the country, will allow us to accomplish that. If we build our own state, we will rule the sea, and much will be achieved.

This is why there is no split in my heart between reason and feeling. Both tell me: build a Jewish state now, even if it is not in the entire territory; the rest will come later—it must come!

When are you going back to Kedouri?⁵

Write to me.

Show this letter to your mother and to your sisters.

Best,
Dad

NOTES

1. Nadav G. Shelef, *Evolving Nationalism: Homeland, Identity, and Religion in Israel, 1925–2005* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010), 30.

2. Ibid., 38.
3. Of the Jewish Agency.
4. Ben-Gurion's acceptance of Pan-Arab doctrine of a single, united, Arab nation well served Zionist purposes as it denied Palestinian Arabs a national identity and national rights.
5. An agricultural school in the Lower Galilee.