

112 East 19th St., N.Y. 3

NR E
SYRIA

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FOR YOUR INFORMATION ONLY

January 6, 1958

*THOMAS, NORMAN

Rt. Hon. Salah El-Bitar
Foreign Minister
Damascus
Syria

Dear Comrade Bitar:

I am writing to you not as Foreign Minister of Syria, but as one Socialist to another, and as one individual concerned with general human welfare to another.

I would again like to thank you for the generous hospitality which you extended to Dr. Peretz and myself. We both very much appreciated the extent to which you were of help to us during our recent visit to your country. With your assistance, we felt that we acquired a much better picture of the realities of political life in Syria, and of the many difficulties which face you, your party, and your country. This understanding has been most important in helping us to understand aspects of many problems which troubled us such as Syria's relations with the United States, the Soviet Union, internal political stability, and the status of minorities.

In the latter connection, we have heard from reliable sources, further rather disconcerting news since our return to the United States. This particularly concerns the Jewish population of Kamishly which you remember we discussed with you and Comrade Aflaq during our recent visit. Let me emphasize that our information is not from Zionist sources, for if it were so, we would appropriately evaluate it. At the time we discussed this question, you and Mr. Aflaq made clear to us your own positions which we respect and understand. Let me say that we realize how complicated is the nature of this question because of its involvement in the Arab-Israel problem and in your country's internal security. Unfortunately, like the Arab refugees, and the Arab minority in Israel, Jewish populations in the Middle East are often the helpless victims of the clash between Arab nationalism and Zionism. Although we both understand these things very well, this does not detract from our interest in securing justice for the Arab refugees, the Arab minority in Israel, and Jews in Arab countries.

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All too often all of these questions are exploited for selfish political reasons, and it is forgotten that human beings who are in no way responsible for higher political decisions are made to suffer for matters in which they may not only have no responsibility, but perhaps, even no concern.

In our travels through the Arab countries, we were impressed with the generally good condition of Jewish populations, especially in Lebanon and in Iraq, and until recently in Egypt. In the latter country, we were convinced that President Nasser was interested in normalizing the situation of the country's Jewish population. Only in Syria did we find that at present does there still seem to be great difficulty for the Jewish population, especially those in Kamishly.

When we discussed the question of the Kamishly Jews with you there seemed to be some question about their numbers. According to the information which was made available to us there seem to be over a thousand Jews in the town of Kamishly and in the villages nearby. It seems that they are living in very poor conditions - much more so than non-Jews in the same area - and that they are subject to special police or military controls and pressures to which non-Jews are not subjected. It also seems that those families who want to leave the area or the country may do so only after paying quite a large sum of money - an amount which in view of the impoverished condition of the community, makes their departure almost impossible. Other measures to which Syrian Jews seem to be subjected - measures to which other Syrians are not subjected - are that they cannot buy or sell property, nor may they use their bank accounts which are impounded.

Might there not be some possibility of facilitating the departure from Syria of those Jews who wish to leave the country in the same manner in which Jews who desire to leave Egypt are permitted to leave? As you no doubt know, the present policy of the Egyptian government is to permit those Jews who desire to leave the country to do so. When we discussed this question with President Nasser, he emphasized that those Jews who desired to leave were free to do so, and as is evident from the large exodus from Egypt, no obstacles have been placed in the way of those Jews who want to leave. The situation in Egypt also seems to be improving since the measures taken by the Egyptian government at the time of the Israeli attack. Since then, property of Jews which was sequestered has been returned and there are no prohibitions on Jewish travel either within the country, or in and out of Egypt.

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Of course, we realize that you are not a free agent in determining the fate of the Jewish minority in Syria, and that if there were a socialist policy for minorities, it would be quite different from the one now existing. I also realize that all too often it is far more difficult to implement a wise or humanitarian policy in office, than when out of office. This is most evident in the attitude of our socialist comrades who have achieved government office in France, Great Britain, and Israel. Perhaps because I myself have never been in public office it is far easier for me to call attention to the slips of my socialist comrades who have acquired office. As you know, I have not hesitated to do so, especially in matters such as those like Algeria and other colonial areas where it seems to me that Socialist leaders often have forgotten the ideals which led them to espouse originally broad humanitarian principles looking toward a better life for all men, and not just that small segment of society in which they may happen to hold office.

In full realization of the limitations which might prevent you from taking any action with regard to this matter, I again appeal to you as a fellow socialist to take what action is within your capabilities in ameliorating some of the conditions which at present limit the freedom of Syrian Jews. It is because of my first-hand knowledge of your sincerity and courage that I feel free to approach you directly on this matter, knowing that such an appeal will not lessen but only strengthen those ties of mutual esteem which our brief acquaintance has produced. I hope you will keep me informed of any developments in this question, and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely yours,

s/ Norman Thomas
Norman Thomas

NTS

P.S. I am sending a copy of this letter to you through Jibran and one or two other channels to ensure that it reaches you personally.

N.T.

cc: LME
M. Weill
J. Slawson
Marshall
Stroock

RECORDS
DIVISION
JAN 20 1958

Syria
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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WASHINGTON

January 15, 1958

Dear Don:

Many thanks for your letter of January 9 with which you enclosed a letter from Norman Thomas to the Syrian Foreign Minister. We are forwarding this letter to Bob Strong for delivery to Bitar,

I am delighted that you will be in Washington the end of this month. I will keep myself free all of Friday morning and will be very pleased to see you at any time. Bill Rountree will be out of the country during that period and I am not sure whether I can arrange for you to see anyone else in his place. I will see what I can do and will let you know when you arrive.

With best regards,

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'E. Waggoner', written in a cursive style.

Edward L. Waggoner

Dr. Don Peretz,
325 West 108th Street,
New York 25, N. Y.

OCT 2 1958

Norman Thomas

1958
NEW YORK

original to FCO
Syria
Jude
cc Engel
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October 1, 1958

Irving Engel, President
American Jewish Committee
386 Fourth Avenue
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Engel:

I seem to remember that I told you I would let you know if I ever heard anything, directly or indirectly, as a result of my letters to Nasser about the Syrian Jews. A while back I received a letter from our friend, Don Peretz, who may have written more of the same to you. But I will quote a paragraph that interested me.

"You might be interested in the following about the Syrian Jews. It seems to indicate that your letter to Nasser might have done some good. At any rate the leader of the community there was visited by an Egyptian official after the union and told not to worry but that things would be all right. Since then they have unfrozen the accounts of Syrian Jews still in the country, and they are now permitted to leave, but must leave all their belongings behind them. According to our friends here, not many have left yet."

I should have written sooner but am convalescing from an illness which has kept me out of much activity.

Sincerely yours,

Norman Thomas

NormanThomas

NT:S