

Jerusalem, July 8, 1982

Dear Mr. President,

I thank you for your oral message which Ambassador Lewis delivered to me yesterday evening at 8.30 p.m., Israel time.

Ambassador Lewis was kind enough to leave with me a copy of this important communication, enabling me this morning, after some nocturnal reflection, to answer it in detail.

Mr. President, there are a number of positive passages in your message which give me profound satisfaction; there are others which call for clarification; and there are some which left me deeply and unreservedly hurt.

There has never been an Israeli "ultimatum." On the contrary, the decision of our Cabinet was of the most positive character. A day before yesterday we lost five or six men killed by PLO terrorists. A sniper cut down a young valiant captain of our Army. An APC sustained a direct hit burying four or five of our men. Because of the circumstances I do not know until this very moment the exact number of fatalities nor the identities of the dead. This is the reason why all the facts have not yet been published. We have to inform the bereaved families first otherwise were we to make public the information of five or six anonymous dead tens of thousands of families would suffer the agonies of sleepless nights.

During the week we learnt definitely that all our prisoners of war, save one, a pilot, were murdered by their PLO captors. We still have not officially published this fact which would enrage our army and our people, witness to a horrible atrocity perpetrated against prisoners whilst we treat humanely all the thousands of PLO members captured by our army, in addition, of course, to the Syrian POW's, officers and men. Again, the reason for non-publication is that we must first identify each one of the victims.

President Ronald Reagan
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Our commanding officers, who lead their troops into battle with the famous command: "Follow me," demanded reaction to all these killings and murders. Yet, despite the provocations, the Cabinet unanimously decided to withhold our fire and to give Ambassador Habib a time of quiet to fulfil his mission. I informed the Charge d'Affaires, Mr. Brown, that we will withhold fire for the next twenty-four hours and that we shall react (only) if attacked. Thus, if we are not attacked again by the enemy the quiet may go on in order to enable Mr. Habib to continue his efforts.

In other words, Mr. President, not only has there not been any "ultimatum"; the decision taken was an exceptional one to ease the task of Mr. Habib for a number of days.

Last week I was informed that Ambassador Habib made the following declaration: "If until the end of this (current) week I do not reach an agreement I (Habib) will state publicly that the PLO only tried to mislead and deceive me."

May I say that this is, perhaps, a kind of "self-ultimatum." We made no such declaration. Now, Ambassador Habib claims that because of complications on the front he lost two or three days. I hereby inform you that he will have those days at his disposal beyond the end of this week.

With regard to the Galerie Simaan crossing, Mr. David Kimche, the Director General of our Foreign Office, who yesterday held a "good talk" with Ambassador Habib, informs me that it is open and is in no way controlled by Israeli forces. I must stress, Mr. President, that this was the situation prevailing before I received your oral message from which I feel here bound to quote: "Friends and allies should not deal with each other through ultimatums," (even if they do not include a date).

Mr. President, all your requests were fulfilled as far as the conditions of siege were concerned. In principle, may I say that all nations at war practise siege or blockade as conditions warrant.

The famous British blockade against Germany during World War I caused millions of civilians to lack food for years on end. Such a blockade was considered absolutely legitimate. Is it that laws applying to other nations be inapplicable to the little nation of Israel?

Mr. President, we do not ask for "unconditional surrender," of the so-called PLO in Beirut. Nazi Germany is and will always be to me, as Churchill said, "the embodiment of all evil in mankind." However, by 1944, I personally had my doubts about the wisdom of the unconditional surrender demand, one which might have prolonged the war and its agony and the extermination of my people.

We suggested that the PLO terrorists do not surrender to us but that they lay down their weapons and surrender them to the Lebanese army. We proposed that we do not enter Western Beirut but that the Lebanese army do so. (Now, in the wake of your historic decision, perhaps they will enter together with a multi-national force). I also took the initiative to proclaim publicly, from the rostrum of our Parliament, that the terrorists be allowed to take their personal weapons, their "kalatchnikof's," with them.

Is all that unconditional surrender?

We do continue to oppose, Mr. President, the leaving in Beirut or in Lebanon several hundreds of terrorists to be "included" in the Lebanese army which they could well destroy from within. Equally, we object to a so-called PLO political office in Beirut which, in no time, will turn into a center of unstoppable gun-running with the direct or indirect assistance of the Soviet Union.

You were kind enough to inform me that, "the United States does not welcome or encourage those points ... " Such being the case why, instead of nine points which include the above two, does not Ambassador Habib present seven points to which we gave our full agreement?

Mr. President, I appreciate deeply your efforts and contribution to solve the problem of Lebanon and assure security for our people and country. But may I respectfully say that we, too, made an effort to secure the peace of Galilee and of all Israel and, by our indispensable operation, rendered certain not-unimportant services to the free world.

Yours respectfully and sincerely,

Menachem Begin