

at last set



Tunisia

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

4 March 1980

Dear Paul,

Call by M. Habib Bourguiba

M. Habib Bourguiba called on the Prime Minister, as arranged, yesterday afternoon. He was accompanied by the Tunisian Ambassador. Mr Moberly was also present. The meeting was almost entirely taken up with an account of the incident at Gafsa and of the Tunisian Government's reaction thereto. M. Bourguiba left with me a copy of the note from which he spoke and I enclose a copy. Since he spoke from it virtually verbatim, I will keep this account of his remarks relatively brief.

M. Bourguiba began by describing the attack at Gafsa. He said it had been carried out by 48 Tunisians who had gone to Libya illegally in recent years. The plan had been for the group to trigger off trouble in Gafsa and then to call for rescue by Libyan forces. It was a remake of Kabul. It had failed because the populace had failed to react as Colonel Qadhafi had expected. M. Bourguiba said that the rapid reaction of the French Government and, later, of the American Government had been helpful. He contrasted this with the failure of HMG either to do anything or to express public concern. (The Prime Minister said she was grateful to M. Bourguiba for raising the point about Britain's lack of reaction so frankly. She undertook to enquire as to why we had made no statement).

The consequence of the Libyan failure had been that Colonel Qadhafi had become even madder than he had been previously. He was running amuck. One example of this had been his statement that he was willing to wage war against France in order to help his Tunisian brothers against the French invasion.

Colonel Qadhafi was being supported in his hostility to Tunisia by George Habash and, in a more modulated manner by Algeria.

Tunisia had sought to react to the Libyan attack by activity in the OAU, which last month had implicitly condemned Libyan action; in the Arab League, the reaction of whose Foreign Ministers at their recent meeting had been disappointing; and through M. Bourguiba's own mission, which was intended to keep Tunisia's friends and the Non-Aligned Movement informed about what had happened.

/As regards

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As regards the future, it was clear that Tunisia had to take preventative measures. Faced with a hostile neighbour on one side and an equivocal one on the other Tunisia needed to "buy some clothes" to cover her nakedness. M. Bourguiba drew some comfort from the fact that Tunisians of all shades of opinion had rallied round the Government in the face of aggression. To maintain this unity, however, it would be necessary to secure the success of Tunisia's programme of economic development. The Tunisian Government were therefore looking for bilateral assistance from France and other countries who believed in the need to preserve the only show window in that part of the world for the Western approach to the problems of post-colonial development. If the Government in Tunis were toppled, many others, e.g. in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula would follow. Bilateral assistance could take the form of military and intelligence assistance, economic aid and joint ventures and promotion of investment. Multilateral action might also be possible. A "post-Kabul" club had been formed to assist Pakistan. Could not a similar "pre-Kabul" club be formed to assist Tunisia? If the United Kingdom were to associate itself with such an idea, it would help other Governments to overcome their inhibitions about joining.

The Prime Minister expressed her gratitude to M. Bourguiba for the clarity with which he had presented his case. She undertook to look into the points he had made. I am sending under separate cover a dossier about the Gafsa incident which M. Bourguiba left with me.

Yours ever

Michael Alexander

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