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10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Principal Private Secretary*

15 October 1981

*Dear Brian,*

Sinai Multinational Force

The Prime Minister met the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary this afternoon in the Imperial Hotel, Blackpool, to discuss his minute of 15 October about the Sinai Multinational Force.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said he had discussed a possible European contribution to the Multinational Force with his fellow Foreign Ministers of the Ten when they had met in London earlier in the week. In private conversation M. Cheysson had said that he wanted to make it clear that France would not contribute to the Force alone: if she was to participate, it must be as part of a European contribution. Signor Colombo had said much the same. Herr Genscher had said subsequently that the Community must act in concert over the Force, since to do otherwise would both bring about an end to the Venice initiative and would put each member country in difficulties with Egypt, the moderate Arab countries and the United States. There had been general agreement among the Foreign Ministers that the Ten must stand together on this matter. M. Cheysson had then made it plain that France now positively wanted to see a European contribution. He felt that the situation in the Middle East following the assassination of President Sadat was now very grave and that in these circumstances the Europeans should contribute to the Multinational Force. He believed that unless there was such a contribution, there was a danger that the Israelis would not return Sinai to Egypt.

Lord Carrington went on to say that Mr. Haig had spoken to him in Strasbourg yesterday. He had been in touch again with both the Egyptians and the Israelis and the latter were now saying that if an adequate Multinational Force was not assembled, they would not hand back Sinai. Because of the right-wing pressures on them, the Israeli Government were looking for an excuse not to complete the return of Sinai. He had told Mr. Haig that, as the Prime Minister had promised President Reagan in their telephone conversation on Monday of this week, the European Community was now considering the question of a European contribution. Mr. Haig had now telephoned a second time. He had been in touch with the Saudis, and they were now saying that, in the wake of President Sadat's assassination, they wanted the Europeans to participate in the Multinational Force.

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The United Kingdom had in effect been pushed into a corner. We were now in a position where the French and the Italians were ready to make a contribution, provided Britain did so too; and no doubt M. Mitterrand, who would be visiting Washington later this week, would make this plain. If we were now the sole cause of the absence of a European contribution to the Force, the Americans would blame us. We were accordingly consulting the French and the Italians about a statement which would allow us to contribute non-combatant troops and which would safeguard our position, so far as possible, with the moderate Arab countries. He regretted that we had been forced into this corner in this way but he saw no alternative but to proceed as he was proposing.

The Prime Minister said that she too found the position we were now in thoroughly disagreeable. She did not really believe that Israel would refuse to withdraw from Sinai just because the Europeans had declined to contribute to a Multinational Force: their need to preserve their relationship with the United States would make it impossible for them to take such a line. Her fear was that if we made a British contribution to the Force and the autonomy talks subsequently failed to get anywhere - as they almost certainly would - the moderate Arab countries would vent their frustration with Israel on Britain rather than on the Americans, and this would mean a loss of trade and of jobs in this country. There was also a risk that the Multinational Force might be caught in the middle of renewed fighting between Israel and Egypt. For all these reasons it was essential that the text now under discussion with the French and Italians should make it clear that we retained the right to withdraw the British contribution to the Multinational Force at any time. On this basis she agreed, reluctantly, that we should try to reach agreement with the French and Italians and subsequently with the Americans and the Israelis on a European contribution.

I am sending a copy of this letter to David Wright (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely,

Shirley Williams.

Brian Fall, Esq.,  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

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