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CABINET
DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

SALE OF TANKS TO JORDAN

MEMORANDUM BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND
COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

1. The Defence Secretary has set out the procurement and employment case for the sale of 274 Shir 1 tanks to Jordan. He touches on the strategic implications, which I agree are not decisive in this case; my colleagues will also wish to take account of the political implications of the sale of main, potentially offensive, weapons systems in the Middle East.

Political merits of the sale to Jordan

2. No-one could realistically argue that King Hussein, whose Armed Forces are relatively small and weak, would seek renewed war with Israel. But he needs the means to defend his country not only against Israel but also against his more radical Arab neighbours (Jordanian armour repelled a Syrian/Palestinian attack in 1970). There is a tradition of friendship between Britain and Jordan: we were formerly main suppliers to the Jordan Armed Forces and just under half their main tank force is still British (twenty year old Centurions). We still supply much subsidiary equipment and training. If we refused to supply, there would be a serious crisis in our relations with Jordan. King Hussein has hinted that he might turn for his tanks to the Soviet Union: this is partly a bargaining point, but there may be no alternatives (French tanks are unsuitable, the FRG is very restrictive on arms sales to the area: the US might for the present at least find it politically difficult to supply for political reasons and would prefer us to do so).

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3. Against this, Jordan has been involved in war against Israel in 1948, 1967 and (on the Syrian front) in 1973. Jordan would be unlikely to stand aside in another conflict. The tanks would greatly strengthen its armoured force. King Hussein, though he certainly wants a negotiated settlement, is opposed to the Israel/Egypt peace treaty. The tanks he wants would be paid for with Baghdad summit money as part of the Arab world's organisation of a common front against the Israel/Egypt treaty, and the sale could be represented as the reward of opposition to the Egypt/Israel treaty. We would certainly face a storm of Israeli criticism, even though the Israelis might prefer to see Jordan supplied by us rather than the Soviet Union.

4. In addition, if we agreed to supply Jordan we could face other bids for tanks and other main armament:

- (a) Israel has reason to expect that we should not refuse them sophisticated weapons sold to the Arab confrontation states. We refused them Chieftain in 1970 - a decision which caused a major row. In the present case the Israelis would probably have difficulty in deciding whether to give priority to stopping the sale to Jordan or to securing Chobham armour and tank fire control systems for themselves. But although they have recently bid for weapons and related equipment, notably the RB 199 engine developed for the Tornado aircraft, the Israelis probably regard us as an unreliable supplier, because of our embargo on spares and ammunition during the Yom Kippur War. On balance they would probably settle for preventing the sale to Jordan; one means to this end might be to ask for the Shir 1 themselves. If we agreed, our interests throughout the Arab world could be jeopardised.
- (b) In 1978 Egypt asked for 200 Chieftains. We said they

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could have the Vickers MBT but that they would have to wait a few years before Chieftains would be available. We cannot say this after the Iranian cancellations. Nor would it be easy to explain supplying Hussein, who opposes the present peace negotiation which we support, but not Sadat, who has taken the great gamble on peace. If Egypt could not afford tanks now, it is because of Arab opposition to Sadat's peace initiative; we are already being asked by the US to help him economically.

(c) Syria has also asked for Chieftain or Shir 1 and could pay. We could use the "traditional supplier" argument to explain sales to Jordan but not to Syria. But the latter would conclude that we are not seriously interested in improving relations or helping them diversify from their present dependence on the Soviet Union for arms supplies and diplomatic support.

Conclusion

5. In recent years, successive governments have pursued a cautious policy over the supply of main armament to the likely belligerent parties, citing as justification the need to maintain the strategic balance. Partly because of this reluctance to sell, partly because the Arabs and Israelis have generally turned elsewhere, we no longer supply main armament to the front-line states. We should, therefore, largely escape the danger of being drawn into a conflict, as we were in 1973, through having to take decisions, perhaps while fighting continues, over the supply of spares, ammunition etc. to both sides (though Israel and Jordan still have Centurion tanks).

6. On the other hand the sale of tanks to Jordan alone could be defended (even though it would present us with some difficult

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dilemmas in another war). We should have to say that it was exceptional and that, in principle, we would not sell main weapons systems to the confrontation states or Egypt. The grounds we should give for such a refusal are not very sound, since both Egypt and Israel are much more clearly committed to "peace" than is Jordan and have reason to expect at least parity of treatment, Jordan may still be accepted in Parliament and in this country as a special case justifying this exceptional treatment.

7. If a decision on these lines is taken it will be essential that we stick to it. We need not commit ourselves now for or against the subsequent supply of the remainder of the 600 tanks King Hussein might eventually want. But we should get the worst of all worlds if we agreed now to sell to Jordan and subsequently backed out, or if we let the sale to Jordan create a precedent for Israeli, Egyptian or Syria matching bids.

Recommendations

8. I agree with the Secretary of State for Defence's recommendation, subject to a decision by the Committee that:

- i. this sale to Jordan should be exceptional
- ii. the Committee's approval should be sought for the supply of any additional tanks to Jordan.