

DAMSCUS TL  
GRS#110

SECRET

TELELETTER

FROM I T M LUCAS DAMASCUS

087/1 8 MAY 1984

FOLLOWING FOR C W LONG ESQ, NENAD, FCO

DEFENCE SALES TO SYRIA

SUMMARY

1. PROBING THE DEFENCE MINISTER'S THINKING ON HIS DEFENCE EQUIPMENT PACKAGE GAVE ME NO CONFIDENCE THAT THIS IS A CONSIDERED AND SERIOUS SYRIAN REQUEST. BUT WE SHOULD KEEP THE DOOR OPEN.

DETAIL

2. AS FORESHADOWED IN YOUR TELNO 119 I WAS DULY SUMMONED TO SEE GENERAL TCLASS ON 5 MAY. MY DEFENCE ATTACHE ACCOMPANIED ME AND INTERPRETERS WERE USED.

3. TCLASS BEGAN BY SAYING THAT HE WANTED CLOSER CO-OPERATION WITH BRITAIN IN THE DEFENCE FIELD, PARTICULARLY IN THE PROVISION OF EQUIPMENT, AND ASKING WHETHER IT WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA FOR US TO SEND A TEAM TO DAMASCUS TO DISCUSS THE POSSIBILITIES.

4. I SAID THAT WE WISHED TO PROMOTE CLOSER ANGLO/SYRIAN RELATIONS, BUT I THOUGHT MY GOVERNMENT WOULD WANT TO HAVE MORE SPECIFIC INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT THE SYRIANS HAD IN MIND BEFORE THEY DECIDED ON ANY FURTHER STEPS OVER DEFENCE PROCUREMENT. I WAS OF COURSE AWARE THAT GENERAL TCLASS HAD SUBMITTED AN AMBITIOUS SHOPPING LIST TO MR HESELTINE. SOME OF THE ITEMS INVOLVED HAD ALREADY BEEN THE SUBJECT OF LENGTHY NEGOTIATIONS, WITHOUT FIRM SYRIAN ORDERS BEING PLACED. THERE WAS ALSO THE CASE OF THE ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENT FOR GIANT VIPER, THE DEADLINE FOR WHICH (30 APRIL) HAD PASSED WITHOUT ANY SYRIAN RESPONSE TO OUR OFFER. IF THERE WERE FINANCIAL OR OTHER PROBLEMS ABOUT THESE COMPARATIVELY SMALL ITEMS, HOW COULD I PERSUADE MY GOVERNMENT THAT THE SYRIANS MEANT BUSINESS ON THE LARGER DEAL?

Received in NENAD  
on 11/5

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Why not by tel?  
CP 11/5

5. TCLASS REPLIED THAT THERE WOULD BE NO PROBLEM ABOUT THE GIANT ORDER. ON THE BROADER ISSUE, HE WANTED MY OPINION ON WHETHER WE COULD MATCH THE CZECH ARRANGEMENTS, OR WHAT HE CLAIMED THE FRENCH HAD OFFERED THE EGYPTIANS, NAMELY PAYMENT OF 15% DOWN AND THE REST IN INSTALMENTS. THIS WAS THE CRUCIAL POINT. I SAID THAT THIS WAS THE KIND OF DETAIL WHICH COULD BE DISCUSSED ONLY WHEN WE HAD A CLEARER IDEA OF WHETHER THE SYRIAN APPROACH WAS IN THE NATURE OF A PRELIMINARY ENQUIRY OR A SERIOUS INTENTION. I PUT A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FINANCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SYRIANS OF THE PROPOSED DEAL.

6. TCLASS SAID THAT THE LIBYANS WOULD PAY - THE SYRIANS WERE NOT INVOLVED IN BRITAIN'S CURRENT QUARREL WITH LIBYA. I COMMENTED THAT NEVERTHELESS THIS HAD OCCURRED AFTER GEN TCLASS HAD WRITTEN TO MR HESELTINE: WAS HE STILL CONFIDENT THAT THE LIBYANS WOULD BE PREPARED TO PUT THIS AMOUNT OF BUSINESS IN BRITAIN'S WAY? TCLASS ANSWERED THAT HE HAD INTENDED TO VISIT TRIOLI IN THE NEXT DAY OR TWO TO PURSUE THIS QUESTION, BUT THAT THE 'CURRENT SITUATION' HAD OBLIGED HIM TO POSTPONE THIS PLAN. 11

7. AS REGARDS THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS, THERE HAD BEEN NO PROBLEM WITH THE SOVIETS WHEN THE SYRIANS BOUGHT 30 GAZELLE HELICOPTERS FROM THE FRENCH, SO THAT NEED NOT BE A CONSIDERATION.

8. I ASKED ABOUT THE TIME-SCALE HE ENVISAGED FOR THE SUPPLY OF THE EQUIPMENT HE HAD REQUESTED. HE REPLIED 'THREE YEARS'. I REPEATED THE QUESTION TO MAKE SURE HE UNDERSTOOD TO WHAT PERIOD I WAS REFERRING, AND HE GAVE THE SAME ANSWER. I MADE CLEAR THAT THIS SOUNDED A TALL ORDER. TCLASS ADDED THAT HE KNEW ABOUT TANKS AND WAS SURE THAT THE NEW GENERATION OF CHIEFTAIN WAS THE BEST AVAILABLE. BUT HE WAS LESS INFORMED ON AIRCRAFT: WAS THE JAGUAR (ABOUT WHICH HE QUOTED THE WRONG FIGURE COMPARED WITH THAT IN HIS LETTER TO THE DEFENCE SECRETARY) BETTER THAN THE AMERICAN F15? I REPLIED THAT THE JAGUAR WAS THE BEST AIRCRAFT OF ITS KIND IN THE WORLD SEMI CLN BUT, WITH RESPECT, THE FACT THAT HE HAD PUT THE QUESTION RAISED SOME DOUBT IN MY MIND ABOUT THE SERIOUSNESS OF HIS SHOPPING LIST.

9. IN ANSWER TO A DIRECT QUESTION, TCLASS CONFIRMED THAT THE CONTACTS (UNNAMED) WHO HAD BEEN DEALING WITH MY DEFENCE ATTACHE AND CERTAIN BRITISH FIRMS HAD HIS FULL AUTHORITY.

CONCLUSIONS

10. BOTH THE MANNER AND THE SUBSTANCE OF THIS CONVERSATION SERVED ONLY TO CONFIRM THE DOUBT EXPRESSED IN MY TELNO 189. TCLASS GAVE US NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT HIS REQUEST TO MR HESELTINE WOULD BE FOLLOWED UP WITH ANY MORE VIGOUR THAN THE CONCRETE OFFERS I MENTIONED. HIS WHOLE APPROACH WAS VAGUE AND UNBUSINESSLIKE. HIS CONFIDENT REFERENCES TO THE LIBYANS AND THE RUSSIANS SEEMED TO ME LUDICROUSLY NAIVE. I AM LEFT WITH THE IMPRESSION THAT HIS LETTER TO MR HESELTINE WAS A PUT-UP JOB, PROBABLY INSPIRED BY ONE OF THE MIDDLEMEN INVOLVED SEMI CLN THAT TCLASS IS WELL-BRIEFED ON THE QUALITY OF OUR TANKS BUT ON NOTHING ELSE SEMI CLN AND THAT HE CERTAINLY HAS NO SPECIFIC MANDATE FROM THE GOVERNMENT OR THE PARTY FOR HIS DETAILED SHOPPING LIST.

11. NEVERTHELESS WE CANNOT AFFORD EITHER POLITICALLY OR COMMERCIALY TO DISMISS IT OUT OF HAND. A DOWNRIGHT REFUSAL TO CONSIDER THE MATTER FURTHER WOULD BE INTERPRETED BY TCLASS, AND NO DOUBT CONVEYED TO HIS COLLEAGUES, AS A SLAP IN THE FACE. IN SPITE OF ALL THE DISCOURAGING FACTORS TO WHICH I HAVE ALLUDED, THERE MAY YET BE SOME BUSINESS FOR US IN ALL THIS. I WAS THEREFORE CAREFUL TO EMPHASISE THAT MY QUESTIONS WERE NOT DESIGNED TO PLACE DIFFICULTIES IN THE WAY, THAT I WOULD FAITHFULLY TRANSMIT WHAT HE AD TOLD ME AND THAT, WHILE I COULD OBVIOUSLY MAKE NO COMMITMENT, BOTH I AND MY DA STOOD READY TO HELP IN ANY WAY WE COULD.

12. I BELIEVE THAT THE BEST METHOD OF KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN WOULD NOW BE FOR THE DEFENCE SECRETARY, BY WAY OF REPLY TO TCLASS' LETTER OF 16 MARCH, TO INVITE HIM OR A REPRESENTATIVE TO THE BAE IN JUNE (ON WHICH, DESPITE CONSTANT REMINDERS FROM HERE, WE STILL HAVE NO REPLY FROM MOD EVEN ON THE PRINCIPLE OF SYRIA BEING INVITED), AND TO SUGGEST THAT FURTHER TALKS BE HELD IN THE MARGINS OF SUCH A VISIT IN ORDER TO CLARIFY SOME OF THE POINTS RAISED IN MY CONVERSATION WITH HIM. TCLASS MAY WELL BE UNABLE TO ACCEPT SEMI CLN BUT AT LEAST THE BALL WOULD BE BACK IN HIS COURT.

CCN PARA 10 LINE 8 WA LETTER MR HEL///// HESELTINE

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MIDDLE EAST: Am Sales P13

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