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Record of a Conversation between the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the Lebanon at 1000 hours on Friday, 10 December, 1982, at No.10 Downing Street

Present:

Prime Minister

Dr. Elie Salem

Sir John Leahy

The Lebanese Ambassador

Mr. Coles

Private Secretary

Dr. Salem opened the conversation by handing to the Prime Minister a letter from the President of the Lebanon, a copy of which is annexed to this record. He said that he wanted to talk frankly to the Prime Minister. President Gemayel and he himself much admired the Prime Minister's strong support of fundamental principles, and were particularly appreciative of the stand on the Falkland Islands. Lebanon admired her Government and the way she handled political issues.

For the first time in the history of Lebanon, the country had a strong leader who worked 20 hours a day. Lebanon had always been a democracy. But in the past it had suffered from weak Governments, and freedom had been allowed to develop into anarchy. The country had been destroyed by the Palestinians and the Israelis. Now there was a determination to build a strong Lebanon. Democratic traditions would be preserved. The Army would be strengthened from 30,000 to 60,000, and the internal security forces doubled as well. The Government would govern. It would not negotiate with outlaws and criminals.

But at present one third of the country was under the control of Israel, and nearly two thirds was under Syrian control. The immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops was imperative. The longer the Israelis stayed, the more they exploited sectarian differences.

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Meanwhile, Syria had brought Iranian troops into the Lebanon. The latter were changing the character of the city of Baalbek. So the withdrawal of foreign forces was the highest priority for the Lebanese. They could not wait for six months - that would be too late. He urged the Prime Minister to work together with President Reagan to restore democracy in the Lebanon before circumstances made that impossible. If the Israelis started establishing settlements in South Lebanon, the country would be finished.

It was above all political support which was needed. A contribution by Britain to the Multinational Force would be very helpful. He was not asking for a large contribution. Several hundred men or even 100 would be useful, and they need stay only for a limited period.

The Prime Minister said that we were already very severely stretched. We had our NATO commitments and garrisons in the Falklands, Belize, Gibraltar, Cyprus and Hong Kong. British military personnel were also serving in various ways in the Gulf, Zimbabwe, Diego Garcia and Sinai. Our troops were much in demand because of their high professional standards. Our resources were more stretched than those of any other country apart from the United States.

She was also worried about the possibility of becoming involved in an unpredictable situation. Quite apart from the complications created by the presence in the Lebanon of Syrian and Israeli troops and the PLO, the country faced disturbing underlying problems. We had experience in Northern Ireland of divisions created by religious differences. We fully supported the Lebanon's demand for the withdrawal of foreign troops, but that would take time and would need a very skilled negotiation. If withdrawal was complete in six months, this would be an outstanding success.



We certainly could not take on an indefinite obligation. What was the Multinational Force doing at present?

Dr. Salem said that they were providing support for the Lebanese Army. Sir John Leahy commented that, if the force was expanded, the idea was that it would extend beyond Beirut, and fill gaps left by the departing Syrian and Israeli forces.

Dr. Salem said that what he wanted was a gesture of political support as much as a military contribution. Pressure had been put upon him in the Arab world not to visit Britain. But he was as much opposed to terrorism as we were. Lebanon would never again be a base for the PLO. The 7,000 PLO forces in the North would have to leave. His country was the most stable society in the Middle East. Before the present troubles, the only serious disturbances had been those of 1958. Dr. Makkawi said that from 1943-1975 Lebanon had been stable. Recent problems had been inspired by outside forces. In the areas where the Multinational Force was currently deployed, there was no shooting. The only trouble occurred in the area under foreign occupation.

Dr. Salem asked that Britain should commit itself to a contribution for three months. For if foreign troops were still in Lebanon in six months time, there would be an extremely dangerous situation. The Israelis were arming both Muslims and Christians to fight against each other. They were playing with fire. Lebanon must be given back to the Lebanese. The Prime Minister said that she completely agreed. She was well aware of the Israeli practice of creating facts, and was totally opposed to Israel's settlement policy.

Dr. Salem said that he could agree now that whatever happened in three months time any British personnel with the Multinational Force could be withdrawn. But it was essential for a democracy of



Britain's stature to be involved in supporting Lebanese democracy. If the West could save Lebanon there would be an excellent opportunity to solve the Arab/Israel problem. If it did not, the world would have another Middle Eastern problem on its hands. The Lebanese crisis could then become the cause of a major regional war.

The Prime Minister asked whether the problems caused by the arming of separate factions in the Lebanon were being solved. Dr. Salem said that all the militias except one had handed in their arms, and the single force which still retained them had promised to hand them over as soon as the PLO left the Lebanon.

Lebanon wanted the opportunity to roll back Soviet influence in the Middle East. The liberal, democratic trend must be given a base in the Lebanon. Otherwise, the area would have to choose between the two alternatives of the Soviet Union and Khomeini. He had to disagree with the Prime Minister's description of Lebanon as a shaky society. His country was quite different from Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister said that she had not used the word "shaky". She had referred to deep undercurrents in Lebanese society.

As regards the Multinational Force, she could give no undertaking today. If we decided to make a contribution, it would be symbolic, small, and for a limited period. But Dr. Salem could be assured that Lebanon had our political support. Dr. Salem expressed his gratitude for this statement.

The conversation ended at 1050.

A.S.C.

10 December, 1982.