

CONFIDENTIAL

Mufar



Prime Minister

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

Some of this has been  
overtaken by our discussions  
today but it is worth  
reading as background to our  
discussion of the Middle East  
tomorrow.

8 September, 1983

Dear John,

A.J.C. 8/9

unfaxed to  
Chequers on  
8/9

Lebanon: Multinational Force

There have been a number of developments in Lebanon since my letter to you of 30 August. It is in our view still too early to judge the outcome of the present fighting in the Shouf and therefore to take new decisions on the future of our contingent with the Multinational Force. But the Prime Minister may nevertheless find helpful an interim assessment. I understand that she would like to discuss this on Friday afternoon at Chequers as part of the discussions on the Middle East.

As expected, Israel's partial withdrawal of her forces from the Shouf mountains on 3-4 September has been followed by fierce fighting between the Druze (Muslim) and Christian militias in the area. At present the Druze seem to be gaining the upper hand in the fighting. If they succeed in expelling the Christian militias from what they consider to be Druze territory, they may be more willing to enter negotiations for a political agreement; but only if the Syrians allow them to do so. Meanwhile the fighting has been fuelled by unconfirmed reports of massacres of both Christian and Druze civilians. The Lebanese Army, still pre-occupied with reinforcing their authority in West Beirut, have so far made only limited efforts to move into areas vacated by Israel. But they have succeeded in occupying and holding the key Khalde junction south of Beirut airport, despite Druze resistance. There is no sign yet of the Army disintegrating on confessional lines, as some had predicted, though reports of active collusion between the Army and Christian militias, if confirmed, will strain the loyalties of Muslim soldiers. But its ability to move much further outside Beirut in the absence of a political agreement is very doubtful.

On the political side the Lebanese Government continues to pursue negotiations for a political solution with US and Saudi help. Mr McFarlane returned to Beirut on 5 September and visited Damascus on 6 September. He is returning to Beirut to brief President Gemayel today, having (according to the Americans) made some progress in Damascus towards securing an agreement acceptable to the Syrians. The main elements would be a ceasefire and early meetings between Gemayel and other confessional leaders in Lebanon, probably on neutral ground. But with President Gemayel constrained by the demands of his own Christian faction and with heavy Syrian pressure on the Druze apparently aimed at bringing down the Gemayel Government

/and



and forcing the abrogation of the Israel/Lebanon Agreement, the chances of success may not be as good as the Americans hope. We will be discussing with the Americans ways in which we and other MNF contributors might be able to support their efforts, perhaps by démarches to President Gemayel urging him to be flexible, and to moderate Arabs to encourage their support for President Gemayel in the face of Syrian calls for an Arab boycott of Lebanon, as well as conceivably further approaches to the Syrians.

Elements of the Multinational Force have again come under fire in the last few days. The US contingent have lost three killed and five wounded and have responded with fire against Druze artillery. The Italian HQ was hit on 4 September, causing one minor casualty. A similar attack on the French HQ resulted in at least three dead on 6 September. The French responded by threatening airstrikes on Druze positions and speaking very firmly to the Syrians. This threat seems to have been effective for the moment. It remains difficult to be sure how far these incidents are deliberate. Of the various contingents, the Americans are most likely to be a deliberate target, because of extreme Syrian hostility to them and their presence in Lebanon.

Although BRITFORLEB has had to restrict its patrolling, it is clear that its presence, like that of the other MNF contingents, continues to be of great importance to the Lebanese Government as evidence of Western support. Sir Geoffrey Howe believes that our contingent is still performing a useful political role, even if its exact role and mandate on the ground is increasingly difficult to define. You may have seen the recent US assessment (Washington telnos 2480 and 2487: / copies enclosed) that there is no practical alternative to maintaining the MNF in its present role of helping the Lebanese Government protect Beirut, broaden the base of its political support and resume the process of expanding central government control over the country. There is no sign that either the French or the Italians, both of whom have of course far larger contingents than us, and have suffered losses, are thinking seriously of withdrawal at the moment.

Clearly we will have to reconsider the position if for example the Lebanese Government or Army start to act in an unacceptable, sectarian way and lose all prospect of support from the Muslim population, or if the presence of the MNF obviously becomes part of the problem rather than an aid to the problem's eventual solution. Despite the apparently slightly easier situation overnight, the position could deteriorate quickly, particularly if the Lebanese government/army begins to disintegrate. It would be clearly unacceptable for the MNF to be left stranded in a civil war, with no government left to support. But we have not reached that stage yet.



Another possibility which is beginning to be canvassed, eg by the Italians and in New York by the Lebanese, is the possibility of a large UN peacekeeping force to replace the MNF. It is too soon to judge how far this idea will run. Much will depend on the Soviet attitude (they might like to see the MNF, in particular the Americans out). We would be likely to be asked to provide a contingent to a UN force. But in any case a UN force could not realistically go in without a ceasefire and political agreement made. And negotiations on its establishment would inevitably take a good deal of time.

Neither we nor MOD are attracted by the tentative American ideas for wider military action to signal support for the Lebanese Government (para 2 of Washington telno 2487), though there may be some public or Parliamentary pressure to provide the means to retaliate if our contingent comes under attack. President Reagan decided on 7 September that no expansion in the role or size of the US contingent was required at present. Meanwhile, as you know, the Ministry of Defence have various contingency plans for the emergency evacuation for BRITFORLEB if need be. If evacuation proves necessary Sir Geoffrey Howe considers that we should do all we can to act in concert with other MNF contributors. A unilateral withdrawal would undo much of the good BRITFORLEB has achieved (not least with the Americans).

We are in close and constant touch with the other MNF contributors, in Washington and Beirut, as well as through our Embassies in Paris and Rome. But the time has clearly come to move this dialogue onto a higher level. Depending on discussion at Chequers one possibility is a message from Sir Geoffrey Howe to the foreign Ministers of other MNF contributors expressing concern about the MNF's lack of mandate, the need to clarify its present and future role, and to be ready to identify the circumstances in which the MNF would have no further purpose and should be withdrawn. The feasibility and desirability of a UN force in the greater Beirut area might also be raised.

The staff at our Embassy in Beirut are so far safe. The Embassy are advising British subjects who have no overriding reason for remaining in Lebanon to leave the country temporarily and a small number of non-essential staff have today been removed out of Beirut to Cyprus, with some officers who are near the end of their tours and some dependents returning to London.

I am copying this to Richard Mottram (MOD) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

PS: Since signing this we have heard that the Americans have called a meeting of MNF contributors in Madrid this afternoon to take stock (we will be represented by Sir J Bullard). We will report on its outcome. (J E Holmes) Private Secretary

*Yours ever*  
J. G. Holmes

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8 SEP 1985

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