

SUBJECT

CC Master
of

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

9 September 1983

Dear Brian,

LEBANON

At the beginning of this afternoon's meeting at Chequers to consider our strategy in the Middle East, there was some discussion of the current situation in the Lebanon and the position of the British contingent in the Multi National Force. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Mr. Luce, Mr. Pattie, Mr. Stanley, the Chief of the Defence Staff and officials were present.

The Prime Minister stated that the Rules of Engagement for the Buccaneers which had been sent to Cyprus to provide support for the British contingent had just been approved in a smaller meeting. It was now necessary to consider broader questions relating to the future and purpose of the MNF. It was desirable that any change in policy on the MNF should be agreed by all the contributing countries. But we had an obligation to consider the circumstances in which we would judge that it was wise to withdraw the Force.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary gave an account of the latest situation in the Lebanon, based on recent telegrams. France and Italy were content to keep their contingents in the Lebanon in support of the Lebanese Government. The United States were strongly opposed to withdrawal of the Force, though they appeared to agree that it could not take over the role of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Mr. MacFarlane, the US negotiator now in the area, had told our representative in Beirut, together with representatives of the other contributors, that he would recommend to President Reagan that the latter should identify Syria as the main obstacle to progress and support this statement with a clear warning to the Syrians that they might encounter American action if they persisted in their present policy. Another American source had asked us whether it would be possible to position HMS Invincible off the Lebanese coast. It appeared that a number of ideas were current in Washington but it was not at all clear how much support they had in the higher reaches of the Administration. In particular, Sir Oliver Wright had reported that he would expect the US Administration to be very

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cautious in their attitude to any recommendations made by Mr. MacFarlane, as described above. We needed to give Sir Oliver and other British representatives clear instructions on our attitude to the current situation.

The Prime Minister said that we should make it plain that we were not prepared to despatch HMS Invincible to the area. Nor were we prepared to increase the British contingent as the Italians had suggested. Similarly, we could not agree to an extension of the mandate of the MNF whose function at present was to support the Lebanese Government in the area of Greater Beirut. The proposed recommendations of Mr. MacFarlane were alarming and it was to be hoped that they would not be accepted by the US Administration. If necessary, we should have to make our position plain. We should also attempt to check any US tendency to regard Syrian actions as inspired by the Soviet Union.

If the credibility of the Lebanese Government collapsed and the Lebanese Armed Forces were not able to carry out their role, the conditions for the maintenance of the MNF would have disappeared. The present situation was very dangerous and we had to note that there was now a significant increase in the American forces off Beirut. It was desirable to begin discussing with the other contributors the circumstances under which it might become necessary to bring the role of the MNF to an end.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that there was some danger of causing difficulty in our relations with the Arab countries if it became known that we were suggesting the departure of the MNF. The Prime Minister observed that this danger could be averted by putting the proposition in the positive rather than in the negative sense, i.e. that so long as the Lebanese Government and its Armed Forces remained credible, the MNF should continue to carry out its functions. But it was clearly necessary, particularly given the apparent attitude of the other contributors, that we should begin to inject the thought that there were circumstances in which the Force should leave the Lebanon.

The Chief of the Defence Staff said that we had never expected the British contingent to perform a military role. It had deliberately been kept small and everything possible was being done to give it the protection which it might need. But there was the wider concern that the MNF might get sucked into the current fighting. Given the Soviet involvement in Syria and the American military build-up, the ingredients of a serious situation were present.

The Prime Minister concluded the meeting by asking the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to send an up-to-date statement of our attitude to HM Ambassador in Washington and other representatives who needed to be aware of it. She also asked Sir Geoffrey Howe to consider sending a message to Mr. Shultz explaining our current thinking.

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I am copying this letter to Richard Mottram (Ministry of Defence) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever

John Colles.

Brian Fall, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.