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PS/TO, NO. 10, DOWNING STREET.

FM WASHINGTON 171645Z SEP 83
TO IMMEDIATE FCO

TELEGRAM NUMBER 2651 OF 17 SEPTEMBER

INFO PARIS, ROME, UKMIS NEW YORK, BEIRUT, MODUK, DAMASCUS, TEL AVIV,
BRITFORLEB AND JEDDA

LEBANON: REAGAN'S DILEMMA.

SUMMARY

1. THE DANGER OF BEING SUCKED INTO THE MIDDLE EAST QUAGMIRE IS NOT THE ONLY SLIPPERY SLOPE FACING THE PRESIDENT. THERE IS ALSO THE DANGER OF BEING OUT-FACED BY THE SYRIANS AND UNDERCUT BY CONGRESS WHICH LEAD TO THE EQUALLY SLIPPERY SLOPE AND EQUALLY UNACCEPTABLE RESULT OF A MAJOR DEFEAT FOR HIS FOREIGN POLICY WITH ALL THAT THAT ENTAILS FOR HIS FUTURE. IN FACT THE AREA OF MANOEUVRE BEING TRODDEN BY MCFARLANE IS ABOUT THE ONLY BIT OF REASONABLY FIRM GROUND IN SIGHT.
2. THE INCREASING SHAMBLES IN THE LEBANON WILL FACE PRESIDENT REAGAN WITH SOME DIFFICULT DECISIONS OVER COMING WEEKS. IN THE CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES SINCE THE US MARINES WENT IN A YEAR AGO, IT IS OUT OF THE QUESTION FOR THEM TO WITHDRAW. BUT THE RISKS OF STAYING ON ARE HIGH.
3. IF THE LATEST INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS ARE CORRECT, THE MOST LIKELY EVENTUAL OUTCOME SEEMS TO BE SOME SORT OF PARCELLING UP OF THE LEBANON, FOLLOWING AN UNEASY CEASE FIRE, WITH THE EAST DOMINATED BY SYRIA, THE SOUTH BY ISRAEL, AND WITH A LEBANESE COALITION GOVERNMENT OF SOME SORT, UNDER GEMAYEL OR POSSIBLY SOMEONE ELSE, EXERCISING AT BEST PARTIAL CONTROL FROM BEIRUT. THIS WOULD BE A LONG WAY FROM THE STATED OBJECTIVE OF US FOREIGN POLICY, WHICH IS THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A STRONG CENTRAL GOVERNMENT IN THE LEBANON UNDER AMIN GEMAYEL.
4. IN PRACTICE IT MIGHT NOT BE ALL THAT DIFFERENT FROM THE KIND OF GOVERNMENT THE LEBANON HAS HAD SINCE THE DEPARTURE OF THE FRENCH. IF IT LED TO A MORE OR LESS STABLE BALANCE WITHIN THE COUNTRY, AND BETWEEN SYRIA AND ISRAEL, THIS KIND OF DEVELOPMENT WOULD BE SWALLOWED BY THE AMERICANS AS A PIS ALLER.
5. BUT IT IS OPTIMISTIC TO THINK THAT SUCH A SETTLEMENT COULD BE ARRIVED AT QUICKLY, OR THAT IT COULD RESULT IN A SECURE AND TIDY LEBANON. THIS LEAVES OPEN THE QUESTION OF THE FUTURE ROLE FOR THE MULTINATIONAL FORCE, BOTH PENDING A CEASE-FIRE AND AFTERWARDS. WOULD ASAD SETTLE FOR A LEBANESE GOVERNMENT OF THE KIND THAT WOULD ASK THE PRESENT MNF TO STAY? IN WHICH CASE, FOR HOW LONG AND ON WHAT TERMS? OR MAY DISCUSSION AT THE UN EVENTUALLY LEAD TO SOME KIND OF INTERNATIONAL MECHANISM, WHETHER A FORCE OR OBSERVERS, WHICH COULD ULTIMATELY REPLACE THE MNF? FROM YESTERDAY'S INFORMAL CONSULTATIONS IN NEW YORK (UKMIS TELEGRAM NO 841) IT DOES NOT MUCH LOOK LIKE IT. OR WOULD PART OF SYRIA'S PRICE FOR ALLOWING A CEASE FIRE AND A SETTLEMENT BE A THE UNCEREMONIOUS DEPARTURE OF THE MNF? IN WHICH CASE, COULD THE AMERICANS ACCEPTED THAT?

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6. THE IMMEDIATE DANGER THAT FACES THE AMERICANS IS OF GETTING DRAWN OR PROVOKED, INTO DIRECT CONFLICT WITH A MUSLIM FORCE. PERHAPS THE THREAT OF AMERICAN AIR AND NAVAL INVOLVEMENT (NOT TO MENTION THE APPEARANCE OF THE BUCCANEERS) HAS BEEN ENOUGH TO GIVE EVERYONE CONCERNED PAUSE. GRANTED, THE AMERICANS THINK THERE IS SOME EVIDENCE THAT THE IRANIAN TROOPS IN LEBANON HAVE HAD A SHOT AT PROVOKING THEM INTO COUNTER-ACTION. BUT THEY ARE NOT UNDER SYRIA'S CONTROL. THE AMERICANS BELIEVE THAT THE DRUZE ARE BEING CAREFUL. THE SYRIANS ARE ALSO BEING CAREFUL TO AVOID EXPOSING THEMSELVES DIRECTLY. THERE IS CERTAINLY NO SIGN THAT THE RUSSIANS, DESPITE THEIR PREDICTABLY OBSTRUCTIVE TACTICS IN NEW YORK, ARE TRYING TO STIR THINGS UP ACTIVELY: ON THE CONTRARY, THE AMERICANS THINK THEY MAY BE URGING CAUTION ON ASAD, BEARING IN MIND THE AWKWARD CHOICES THAT WOULD FACE THEM ON THE GROUND IN THE EVENT OF A SYRIAN/US SHOOT-OUT. SO FOR THE MOMENT THE POSITION MAY BE HELD.

7. NEVERTHELESS, THERE ARE MANY WAYS IN WHICH THE AMERICANS COULD BE RAPIDLY SUCKED INTO MORE DIRECT INVOLVEMENT. IF THAT SHOULD HAPPEN, THE REACTION OF CONGRESS WOULD BE UNCERTAIN. I THINK IT UNLIKELY THAT WHATEVER THE OUTCOME OF THE DEBATE ON THE WAR POWERS ACT (MY TELEGRAM NO 2644) CONGRESS WOULD TRY TO PULL THE US MARINES OUT AT ONCE. THEY CAN SEE THE CONSEQUENCES OF THAT AS WELL AS ANYONE ELSE. BUT IF CASUALTIES BEGAN TO MOUNT, THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT PUBLIC PRESSURE WOULD MOUNT WITH THEM TO PUT A STOP TO AMERICAN BOYS BEING KILLED AGAIN IN SOMEONE ELSE'S CIVIL WAR. WITHDRAWAL IN THOSE CIRCUMSTANCES WOULD BE A DISASTER FOR US FOREIGN POLICY AND FOR THE PRESIDENT. THERE WOULD BE A SEVERE LOSS OF CONFIDENCE AMONG AMERICANS ALLIES IN THE REGION AND OUTSIDE. ASAD WOULD HAVE WON AND WOULD BE IN THE ASCENDANT AMONG ARAB LEADERS. THE PLO WOULD NO DOUBT CREEP BACK UNDER HIS SKIRTS. THERE WOULD BE UGLY CHARGES AND COUNTER CHARGES BETWEEN TEL AVIV AND WASHINGTON ABOUT WHOSE FAULT IT HAD ALL BEEN. AND THE ISRAELIS WOULD NO DOUBT BE MORE EDGY THAN EVER FACING A RENEWED THREAT TO THEIR SECURITY IN THE NORTH AND HAVING LOST 518 LIVES IN THE LEBANON FOR NOTHING. THE SCENE WOULD BE SET FOR A FRESH OUTBREAK OF TROUBLE BEFORE VERY LONG.

8. THE PROSPECTS MUST THEREFORE LOOK PRETTY GLOOMY TO THE PRESIDENT. WITH GEMAYEL'S AUTHORITY STEADILY SLIPPING AWAY, ASAD SEEMS TO HOLD A DISCONCERTINGLY LARGE PROPORTION OF THE CARDS. HIS FIRST STATED OBJECTIVE WAS TO SECURE THE ANNULMENT OF THE ISRAELI/LEBANESE AGREEMENT. THIS HAS IN PRACTICE ALREADY BEEN ACHIEVED. HIS NEXT AIM IS NO DOUBT TO CLIP GEMAYEL'S WINGS SO AS TO BRING HIM UNDER SYRIAN CONTROL OR EVEN PERHAPS TO REPLACE HIM WITH A MORE ACCEPTABLE ALTERNATIVE. THE AMERICANS THEMSELVES ARE NOT SURE WHAT ASAD'S ULTIMATE OBJECTIVE IS HE MAY STILL BE PLAYING FOR THE WHOLE OF LEBANON. HE MAY SETTLE FOR LESS. ONE THING IS CERTAIN: HE MUST BE WATCHING THE DEBATE IN WASHINGTON ON THE WAR POWERS ACT WITH FACINATION TO SEE HOW HAMSTRUNG HIS AMERICAN ADVERSARY IS GOING TO BE. THERE IS CERTAINLY NO LOGICAL REASON WHY HE SHOULD FEEL THE TIME HAS COME YET TO MAKE ULTIMATE CONCESSIONS. /9.

CONFIDENTIAL

9. THE AMERICANS TOO ARE BEGINNING TO THINK PRIVATELY ABOUT POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES TO GEMAYEL. THERE IS NO HINT OF THIS IN PUBLIC AND THE PRESIDENT IS STILL FIRMLY COMMITTED TO HIM. BUT AMIN GEMAYEL WAS NO ONE'S FIRST CHOICE: HE EMERGED AS A RESULT OF HIS BROTHER'S ASSASSINATION. AN IF HE HAS NOT BEEN ABLE TO FIND A WAY OF HOLDING THE RING BETWEEN LEBANON'S WARRING FACTIONS IN THE AFTERMATH OF ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL THERE MAY COME A TIME FOR SOMEONE ELSE TO HAVE A TRY. THE AMERICANS WOULD BE UNLIKELY TO SMILE ON ANY CANDIDATE THAT ASAD MIGHT FAVOUR. BUT IT IS CONCEIVABLE THAT A COMPROMISE MIGHT BE FOUND IN THE CONTEXT OF A POLITICAL DEAL IN WHICH, LEBANESE STYLE, THERE WILL BE VICTORS AND NO VANGUISHED. BEYOND THAT THE AMERICANS HAVE BEEN IMPRESSED BY THE PERFORMANCE OF THE LEBANESE ARMED FORCES OVER THE PAST YEAR. THEY HAVE FOUGHT WELL AND MAINTAINED THEIR COHESION DESPITE THEIR MIXED CONFESSIONAL MAKEUP. THERE HAS LATELY BEEN A GLINT IN ONE OR TWO EYES IN WASHINGTON

ABOUT THE PROS AND CONS OF A LEBANESE PRESIDENT DRAWN FROM A MILITARY BACKGROUND.

10. SO NONE OF THE OPTIONS FACING THE PRESIDENT IS PLEASANT. NOR IS THE PICTURE CLEAR ENOUGH TO ENABLE HIM TO DECIDE ON ANY PARTICULAR COURSE, OTHER THAN TO HANG ON AND HOPE. THIS IS TANTAMOUNT TO MUDDLING THROUGH AND IT SITS ILL WITH THE AMERICAN TERMPERAMENT. THE PRESIDENT WILL BE LOOKING BEFORE LONG FOR AN OBJECTIVE IN THE LEBANON THAT CAN BE SPELT OUT TO CONGRESS AND ULTIMATELY ACHIEVED. WITHOUT THIS, HE MUST FEAR THAT HAVING COME INTO OFFICE ON THE PROMISE OF RESTORING AMERICA'S GREATNESS, HE WILL HAVE LITTLE TO SHOW FOR ALL HIS EFFORTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST BUT HUMILIATION AND DEFEAT. IT WILL NOT HELP HIM MUCH IN THE EYES OF AMERICAN VOTERS THAT THE FAULT FOR THIS LAY MORE WITH BEGIN THAN HIMSELF.

WRIGHT

MIDDLE EAST

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