

RECORD OF A MEETING HELD AT 1445 HOURS ON MONDAY 12 DECEMBER AT
10 DOWNING STREET

Present: The Prime Minister
Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary
Secretary of State for Defence

Mr. Luce
Chief of the Defence Staff
Mr. Coles

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The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that his meeting with the Foreign Ministers of the other countries participating in the Multi-National Force which had been held in Brussels last week had lasted for only one hour. The impression had been that the Americans had deliberately arranged things so that discussion could not be satisfactorily pursued. He had seen the French Foreign Minister later that day who had told him of the French intention to send a senior official to the Lebanon to invite President Gemayel to request France to reduce the size of its contingent in various ways. Cheysson had appeared to wish to involve other participants in concerted moves to persuade President Gemayel in this direction. The French wished to have the best of both worlds - to appear to be remaining in the Force while in fact reducing the exposure of their contingent to the maximum extent. At that point, Cheysson had not spoken to Secretary Shultz, but had said that he intended to do so.

Recent United States' actions, including the announcement of the Strategic Cooperation Agreement with Israel, had changed Arab perceptions of the role of the MNF. Mr. Rumsfeld had recently said that he had found some Arabs rather disturbed by the new US posture but believed that this situation was manageable. Reports from Egypt and Jordan suggested that this was far too optimistic. American actions had made it much more difficult for President Gemayel to further the reconciliation process. That process had to involve the Syrians but the American attitude towards Syria made Syrian cooperation much less likely.

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Views within the US Government appeared to be divided. Mr. Shultz was taking a hard line in defending the agreement between Lebanon and Israel. We had explained to Shultz that we had some experience of peace-keeping roles and knew that they involved unpleasant events. Shultz said that the US Government had decided that the American contingent must "lean forward" more. The Americans thought that by cutting the Syrians down to size they were making it easier to persuade the Syrians to cooperate. The Prime Minister asked whether there was any substance in that view. It was easier for the Syrians to yield to the Americans than to the Israelis. Mr. Luce said that lost lives were not very important to Syria. The Syrian Foreign Minister had described Andropov and President Regan as his two best friends; American action had rallied Arab support for Syria.

The Prime Minister said that if we had lost 250 troops, we would be likely to have conducted aircraft reconnaissance missions as the Americans had done - and if they had been attacked, we would have attacked back. Without such measures, the MNF could probably not be maintained. The Defence Secretary said that he agreed with this analysis but the American action had been linked in Arab eyes with the new US/Israeli agreement which was greatly resented in the Arab world.

The Prime Minister said that if it was clear that the US and Israel were concerting their actions, we might have to re-think our position in order to maintain our relations with the Arab world. Her impression from her talk with the French President was that France would not withdraw its contingent. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that Italy was looking for any pretext to withdraw. He believed that France would reduce its contingent. Britain should not lead the pack but there was great anxiety owing to the change in the American position. One interesting question was what the preferred election posture of the United States would be. Would the Administration wish to proclaim that it had brought the boys back home - or rather that it had taught the Syrians a lesson and given them a bloody nose?

/The Defence Secretary

The Defence Secretary said that the position of the British troops was very dangerous. There was a no-go area between them and the American contingent. If anything went wrong, our political exposure was very high.

All the options for deployment of the Force had been looked at once again. The local Commander's view was that our troops should stay where they were. But if anything did happen to our contingent, it would be hard to justify their continuing role. Public opinion was not yet aware of the information revealed by private contacts among the participating countries. There was no agreement among the participants as to the aims of the Force. The Geneva talks had been adjourned. Even the local security talks had failed to take place yesterday. So the original purpose of promoting stability while Israeli and Syrian forces withdrew from the Lebanon was increasingly difficult to sustain. All the contributing countries, perhaps even including the Americans, were looking for ways out.

The Prime Minister asked what the options were. The Defence Secretary said that the MNF situation was now essentially a political one. It should be treated on a political basis and we should insist that the four contributing countries pursue their discussion to the point where the issues were resolved. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that he had more than once urged this kind of discussion but the French had been reluctant to participate. The Prime Minister commented that this was an unsatisfactory situation. The MNF contributors must clarify their thinking and reach conclusions by Christmas. Mr. Luce said that in his view regular meetings between the four should be a pre-condition for our staying in the Lebanon. The Prime Minister asked the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to contact Mr. Shultz and urge that the four meet as soon as possible.

With regard to the forthcoming visit of President Gemayel, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that our general aim

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should be to make plain to him the extent to which he must go to promote reconciliation. The Prime Minister said that we would need to add that unless there was clear progress, we could not see a role for the MNF and we believed that other contributors felt the same. We should also ask Gemayel how far he felt inhibited by the American attitude towards Syria.

The Defence Secretary said that he believed that there was a sense in which the MNF was now a harmful feature. Although there was major tension between Syria and Israel, the presence of the MNF, which was increasingly drawing the fire of the local population, meant that they were not faced with the direct threat of a major deterioration in the situation.

Mr. Luce said that he had recently asked Walid Jumblatt what the effect of MNF withdrawal would be. The reply had been "tremendous bloodshed".

The Chief of the Defence Staff said that from his contacts with his opposite numbers in the contributing countries, he believed that the French wished to reduce their contingent from 2,000 to 1,200, keeping some of the latter on board ship.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary asked whether we should pursue with the Lebanese President the line adopted by M. Cheysson - i.e. should we persuade Gemayel to ask us to reduce our contingent? The Prime Minister thought that this approach had little merit. The President would not make such a request. We should also avoid saying that we would remove our contingent when the reconciliation process was complete. For this would in turn remove the incentive to complete that process and would also preclude us from pulling out if the threat to the Force markedly increased. Every time we addressed these issues, we were faced with the serious implications of unilateral withdrawal. The effect on our relations with the United States could be particularly serious. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that it was possible to mount a respectable argument that if the MNF were properly conducted, it would still have a worth-while contribution

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to make. But the American attitude and style made this very much more difficult. It was unlikely that we would change the American posture - and therefore the other three contributors might have to consider withdrawing their contingents. It was essential to tell Mr. Shultz that our pre-condition for remaining in the Lebanon was agreement on the framework for the MNF. The Chief of the Defence Staff commented that, although the situation in the Lebanon was very difficult, the military task which our contingent was being asked to perform was not unreasonable so long as there was a possibility of President Gemayel making progress.

The Defence Secretary said that it would be possible to move our contingent on to HMS FEARLESS. But there would then be a formidable problem of getting them back to their base. The Chief of the Defence Staff said that the local Commander had authority to put part of the Garrison into FEARLESS overnight. This had been tried and was practicable. The option could be repeated during the visit of President Gemayel to London. But the local Commander might well feel safer from a military point of view in his present position. In response to a question from the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary said that alternative sites for the present Headquarters had been considered but rejected. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary asked whether we could consider abandoning our contingent's patrolling function and putting the surplus men on board FEARLESS. The Defence Secretary pointed out that if the remainder of the contingent was then attacked, we should be blamed for reducing its defences. The Chief of the Defence Staff said that the functions of guarding the security talks and of patrolling tended to go together. The practice of patrolling was welcomed by the local population. The Defence Secretary said that if British lives were lost, this would be associated with the current state of UK/US relations. The Prime Minister said that she accepted that point but did this mean that we were to move out without consulting the United States? The Defence Secretary said that that was not his view. The Prime Minister commented that this reinforced the need for an early

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meeting of the four. The Defence Secretary said that we had to do everything to promote momentum towards peace. The Prime Minister said that that implied the resurrection of the reconciliation process. The Syrians were needed in this. So they should not be alienated.

The Chief of the Defence Staff stated that at a recent meeting with his US opposite number the latter had made it plain that the American contingent did not wish to go to war with Syria but it would defend itself vigorously and if intelligence of new threats was obtained, there would be retribution. It was not proposed to increase the numbers of the US force but Saceur was to investigate how its security could be improved by placing some or all of the force on board ship. Later in the conversation there had been a reference to partial withdrawal.

Returning to the need for an early meeting of the contributors, the Prime Minister said that she hoped a paper could be prepared to serve as a basis for discussion. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that he was anxious to avoid the impression of a UK initiative. He believed that the best time for a meeting of the four would be after Gemayel's visit to London.

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The local Commander might consider thinning out the troops during the period 13 to 15 December. But if all the contingent were removed, the task of getting them back in would be very difficult. He recalled that it was the view of the local Commander that his troops should stay where they were. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that this was also the advice of HM Ambassador in Beirut. In response to a

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question from the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary confirmed that the local Commander had discretion how best to protect his troops and this included using the option of moving a number of them to HMS FEARLESS. The Vice-Chief of the General Staff would be visiting Beirut later today to discuss the latest situation with the Commanding Officer.

The Defence Secretary said that there was a difficulty with the argument that we could not lead a retreat. This implied that if we lost twenty soldiers we should have to reinforce the contingent. Politically, it was doubtful whether we could do that. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that it was possible that if Britain, France and Italy put pressure on the United States, the latter might be persuaded to adopt a better posture.

Reverting to the specific threat to the British contingent, the Prime Minister said that she thought it would be reasonable to minimise the danger by removing to HMS FEARLESS as many of our contingent as possible. The Chief of the Defence Staff and the Defence Secretary pointed out, however, that we needed to retain sufficient troops both to guard the Headquarters and to guard the local security talks. It was agreed that, since the local Commander had complete discretion to make arrangements (short of pulling out the force entirely), it should be left to the Vice-Chief of the General Staff and the Commanding Officer to consider the matter and provide further advice tomorrow if they so wished. The Prime Minister asked that General Glover should be informed of the Government's great concern about the safety of the British contingent.

At this point in the meeting an unconfirmed report was received that Lebanese local radion had broadcast information to the effect that three British soldiers had been captured by Shi'a troops. Following investigation, it emerged that three soldiers in a Land Rover had strayed into a no-go area, and had been stopped; but, when it was learnt that they were not Americans, they had been released and were now back at the Headquarters of the British contingent.

The meeting ended at 1615.

12 December 1983

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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

12 December 1983

Dear Peter,

MULTI-NATIONAL FORCE: BRITISH CONTINGENT

The Prime Minister held a meeting here this afternoon to consider the position relating to the British contingent in the MNF in the Lebanon. I enclose a copy of the record of the meeting.

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

Yours ever

John Gals.

Peter Ricketts, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.