

Background note from the Foreign Office on the Middle East for the WEU Ministerial Meeting in Luxembourg on 6–7 February 1969

Caption: In anticipation of the 361st meeting of the Council of Western European Union (WEU) at ministerial level, which is due to take place on 6 and 7 February 1969 in Luxembourg City, the British Foreign Office drafts a background note for the British delegation that will be taking part in the meeting. The note focuses on the situation in the Middle East and outlines the United Kingdom's position on the various points that will be raised in Luxembourg. The document also emphasises that the British authorities are keen to hold a WEU meeting in London on the question of the Middle East and notes that it may be better to mention this topic to the representatives of the other delegations individually after the meeting in Luxembourg.

Source: The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Foreign Office, Eastern Department and successors: Registered Files (E and NE Series). MIDDLE EAST. Discussions. Western European Union (WEU) ministerial meeting. 01/01/1969-31/12/1969, FCO 17/727 (Former Reference Dep: NE 2/29).

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Western European Union Ministerial Meeting

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Luxembourg: 6 - 7 February 1969

MIDDLE EAST



Talking Points

General

We have felt for some time that, in the absence of a political settlement, the situation in the Middle East would inevitably deteriorate. Recent developments (notably the incident at the Athens airport on 26 December, the Israeli raid on the airport at Beirut on 28 December and the public execution of fourteen people, including nine Jews, accused of being spies in Baghdad on 27 January) have only served to reinforce this belief. If a settlement is not achieved, the situation will get worse; and we fear that, sooner or later, there will be a new war between Israel and the Arab states. If such a war should break out, I would not care to predict the consequences. The Middle East differs from most other areas of the world in being a region where the commitments of the powers remain imprecise.

2. Against this general background, we believe that the need to make progress towards a political settlement is an urgent one. It is this belief which has governed the way in which we have responded to proposals recently made to us by the Soviet Government and the French Government. I should like to go into a certain amount of detail about the proposals made to us by the Soviet Government, partly because a good deal

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about them has already appeared in the press and partly because I should find it hard to explain the terms of our own reply without doing so.

Soviet Proposals of 2 January

3. On 2 January the Soviet Ambassador gave me copies of two communications: an oral communication on the situation in the Middle East, and outline proposals for a settlement incorporating a five stage timetable.

4. The oral communication sought to show that Israel alone had been responsible for impeding progress towards a political settlement. It also implied that we had supported Israel in "certain political and territorial claims" and that we believed that "pressure should be brought to bear on the Arab countries alone". It expressed the hope that we would be ready to warn Israel about "the most serious consequences" to which her "present course" could lead.

5. The outline proposals dealt with most of the matters of procedure and substance which have been in dispute between Israel and the Arab states. In general, they represented an advance on earlier Soviet views, for example in recognising the need for a lasting peace, the role to be played by Dr. Jarring in promoting agreement among the parties, and the need for the terms of a complete package to be agreed before any action was taken to put these terms into effect.

6. I conveyed our reply to the two Soviet communications to
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the Soviet Chargé d'Affaires on 23 January. I told the Chargé d'Affaires that there were a number of aspects of the situation on which our two governments seemed to agree, notably on the urgency and importance of achieving a settlement, and on the importance of working within the framework of the Security Council Resolution of November 1967. Our reply welcomed a number of constructive features in the second of the two Soviet communications and went on to ask for clarification on five other points. Our people in London have given your Embassies there details about the points on which we sought clarification. The Russians have told us that they regard our reply as a serious document showing a constructive approach to the problem.

7. We gave copies of our reply to the French and American Governments, to U Thant and to Dr. Jarring; but we decided not to give copies to anyone else. This was partly because we wished to reduce the risk of the text of our reply leaking to the press, in the Middle East or elsewhere. We also wish to get the idea accepted that these exchanges will have to be less formal and less public if they are to help in the search for a settlement.

French Proposal of 16 January

8. On 16 January, as you know, the French Government proposed to those concerned that the representatives on the Security Council, the United States, Soviet Union, France and United Kingdom should meet in New York at the end of January to "discuss means by which their Governments might contribute to the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the

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Middle East".

9. We have now informed the French Government that we are basically sympathetic to the idea of a meeting of the four permanent members of the Security Council. We have said that, in our view, it is important that such a meeting should be seen clearly to be in the context of the United Nations effort and as a contribution to the work of Dr. Jarring. We have also said that the whole question of such a meeting including the important matter of timing, is a matter for discussion with the other Governments concerned, as well as with U Thant and Dr. Jarring.

10. I should like to emphasise that in our view such a meeting could quite properly be held in a United Nations setting. The participants would all be permanent members of the Security Council, the body which was responsible for determining the principles of a settlement and for formulating Dr. Jarring's mandate.

The Future

11. I cannot predict how matters may develop. Much will depend upon the policies adopted by the new Administration in Washington. Much will depend, too, on what Dr. Jarring is able to achieve during the round of talks with the parties on which he is about to embark. But I think that two things are clear. One is that we must do what we can to help Dr. Jarring make a success of his mission. The other is that we must adhere to the principle of promoting agreement among the parties. It

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will however most likely be necessary for some impetus to be given from outside, and I hope that all of you will be prepared to help in this.

The Mediterranean

12. NATO is concerned at the presence of Soviet ships in the Mediterranean and the Soviet Union's pretensions to be a Mediterranean power. NATO Ministers unanimously agreed last November that "the expansion of Soviet activity in the Mediterranean including the increased presence of Soviet naval units, requires vigilance to safeguard allied security".

13. The establishment last November of a NATO Maritime Air Force Command in the Mediterranean and the approval by NATO Defence Ministers in January, 1969, of the concept of an "on call" naval force in the Mediterranean show that the Alliance is taking steps to meet the situation while avoiding provocation. We hope there can be frequent NATO exercises and naval visits in the area.

14. Care should be taken not to exaggerate the effect of the Soviet presence which is small compared with NATO capability in the area. We must, however, keep closely in touch about the political implications.

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BACKGROUND

The Middle East is among the subjects to be discussed at Luxembourg, at the suggestion of the Italians. Consideration was given to a meeting between the Secretary of State and WEU Ambassadors prior to the Luxembourg meeting in order to explain our reactions to the French and Soviet proposals. It was decided to defer, but not drop, the idea of a special meeting. There is no evidence that any of the WEU Members will wish to take a critical position on our reaction either to the French or the Russian proposals, but the Italians in particular will wish to ensure that their views on the Middle East are fully taken into account, and both they and the Germans are likely to wish to ensure that any discussion or action by the Four Powers is solely on the basis of their permanent membership of the Security Council.

2. If the Secretary of State raises the possibility of a subsequent special meeting in London of WEU Ambassadors to discuss the Middle East it can be expected that the proposal will receive a somewhat chilly reception from the French who have already been informed in general terms of our ideas for a special meeting and who are likely to interpret it - in part at least - as a stratagem in our European policies.

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3. On 2 January, the Soviet Ambassador left with the Secretary of State two communications on the Middle East. The first, having expressed the concern of the Soviet Government about the situation in the Middle East, sought to show that Israel alone had been responsible for impeding progress towards a political settlement. It expressed the hope that we would be ready to warn Israel about "the most serious consequences" to which her "present course" could lead.

4. The outline proposals dealt with most of the matters of procedure and substance which have been in dispute between Israel and the Arab States. In general, they represented an advance on earlier Soviet views, for example in respect of the role to be played by Dr. Jarring in promoting agreement among the parties and of the need for the terms of a complete package to be agreed before any action was taken to put these terms into effect.

We have not shown the texts of the oral communication or of the outline proposals to the representatives of any governments other than the United States Government; neither have we given copies of our reply to anyone except the U.S. and French Governments, Dr. Jarring and U Thant. We have however given a fairly full description of the Soviet proposals to some governments, including those WEU members who have sought information. We are

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giving a similar description of our reply to the UAR, Israel and some others.

5. Our reply rejects the Soviet thesis that Israel alone has been responsible for impeding the progress towards the achievement of a settlement, welcomes certain constructive features in the Soviet proposals, and asks a number of questions about passages in the proposals which are obscure or ambiguous. Though the Soviet proposals have certain constructive features, they do not unlock the door to rapid progress. They speak of the achievement of agreement by means of contact through Dr. Jarring, but do not explain how the progress of achieving agreement would begin. Further consultations, probably involving members of the Security Council as well as Dr. Jarring and the parties themselves, will still be necessary.

6. On 16 January, the French Ambassador conveyed a formal proposal by his Government that the representatives on the Security Council of the United States, the Soviet Union, France and the United Kingdom, should meet in New York at the end of January to "discuss means by which their Governments might contribute to the establishment of a just and lasting peace in the Middle East". We have indicated to French officials in London for bilateral
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talks on the Middle East, that our reaction is on the lines of talking point No.3.

7. There are about thirty Soviet ships in the Mediterranean including auxiliary vessels at present. There is nothing new about the Soviet build-up. The highest level of Soviet naval activity in the area was reached last summer and it is now much less. Such activity is not thought to be designed at present to assist military moves against the Alliance, although one rôle is clearly to shadow the strike force of the U.S. Sixth Fleet. NATO's principal concern at present is for the political implications.

Near Eastern Department,
Foreign & Commonwealth Office.

31 January, 1969.

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ADDENDUM

to Background on Middle East (Brief No.3)
for Western European Union Ministerial Meeting

The Secretary of State will wish to consider when it will be appropriate to mention to his Western European colleagues his proposal for a special meeting in London of W.E.U. Ambassadors to discuss the Middle East. It may not prove appropriate to mention this across the table and it may be more convenient to say something to the representatives individually after the meeting.

The timing of a meeting in London will of course depend to some extent on when, following President Nixon's recent review of United States Government's Middle East policy, the Americans tell us what has been decided. Ideally the meeting should be quite soon after the Secretary of State returns to London.

Near Eastern Department,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

3 February, 1969.

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