

Extract from minutes of the 63rd meeting of the WEU Council (31 October 1956)


Caption: On 31 October 1956, after Israel’s military intervention in Egypt during the Suez Crisis, the Council of Western European Union (WEU) meets in London to analyse the situation in the Middle East. Given the present circumstances, Lord Samuel Hood, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom, and his French counterpart Francis Huré outline their temporary joint action to bring hostilities to an end as soon as possible in the Suez Canal region and reaffirm the determination of the United Kingdom and France to restore peace in the Middle East. The two countries deplore the decision by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser to reject the French–British proposal for a ceasefire in the region.

Source: Council of the Western European Union. Extract from minutes of the 63rd meeting of WEU Council, 31 October 1956. VII. Other business. CR (56) 29. p 3. Archives nationales de Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council’s Archives. 1954-1987. Subjects dealt with by various WEU organs. Year: 1956. File 421.00. Volume 1/1.

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EXTRACT FROM MINUTES OF THE 63rd MEETING
OF THE WEU COUNCIL, 31 OCTOBER 1956

CR (56) 29

VII. OTHER BUSINESS

4. Middle East situation

Lord HOOD said that he would like to make a statement on the situation in the Middle East.

Members of the Council were, of course, fully conversant with recent developments and with the / fact that the British

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and French Governments had decided that they ought to take certain action, in view of the gravity of the situation in the Middle East. On 30th October, a communication had been handed to the Egyptian and Israeli Governments calling upon them to stop hostilities; this proposal had been accepted by the Israeli Government but rejected by the Egyptian authorities. Contrary to the impression given in certain newspapers, no military action had yet been taken by the British and French Governments.

Lord HOOD wished to stress three points in particular:

- a) the view of his Government, which was acting in complete agreement with the French Government, was that the two Powers were entirely within their rights in taking action in that situation. The United Nations Charter did not oblige countries to do nothing until the Security Council had decided what action was to be taken. On the contrary, Article 51 clearly stated that nothing in the provisions of the Charter detracted from the natural right to take individual or collective defensive action if a member of the United Nations were the victim of armed aggression, until the Security Council had taken the necessary steps to ensure international peace and security.

The fact that, in 1950, the French, United States and British Governments had joined in a tripartite declaration, indicated that they did conceive the necessity of taking action, before any decision was taken by the United Nations.

- b) whilst it might appear that Israel was the technical aggressor, the United Kingdom Government considered that the Israeli action had only been undertaken as a result of Very severe provocation. Egypt had really brought this action upon herself; she had insisted that she was still at war with Israel; she had defied the decisions of the Security Council concerning the passage through the Suez Canal of ships bound for Israel; she had openly threatened Israel, both by proclaiming that that State must be destroyed and by aggressive action during the last few days.
- c) the immediate aim of the British and French Governments was to bring hostilities to an end; this should be achieved by the steps they had taken. At the same time, they believed that their action was necessary in order to safeguard the free passage of shipping through the Canal and to protect their own nationals.

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The two Governments considered that there was a real hope of achieving a lasting settlement. If there were once more effective control of the Canal, the bordering countries would quickly realise the impossibility of continuing on the provisional basis which had applied for the last ten years; it might, therefore, be possible to find some lasting and fully satisfactory solution.

Lord HOOD added that he was speaking entirely for his own Government and that he had not been able to consult beforehand with his French colleague.

M. HURE following by saying that the joint action taken by France and the United Kingdom was in no way motivated by selfish interests. The aim was to restore peace in a part of the world which was the scene of unrest, particularly harmful both to the European community and to the world as a whole.

He laid particular stress on the following two points:

- in all justice, the military action taken by Israel must not be artificially isolated from its political context. The contempt shown by Colonel Nasser for undertakings given by his own country, the territorial ambitions cynically expressed by the Cairo Authorities, the continuous threats against Israel and the inability of the United Nations to enforce respect for right and justice had combined to create a general situation in which military action undertaken in self-defence could not be stigmatised as Israeli aggression;

- furthermore, it had always been the policy of France and Britain to maintain peace in the Middle East. Peace in that part of the world could not be effectively guaranteed by recourse to the normal procedure of the United Nations. In accordance with the spirit of the Charter, the two Powers felt it their duty to act quickly to protect the Canal, to separate the belligerents and to restore peace. France and the United Kingdom had several times stressed this aspect of their action, pointing out that it was purely temporary and would be halted as soon as the situation allowed.

Mr. STIKKER thanked Lord Hood and M. Huré for their statements, which he would communicate to his Government forthwith.

Mr. von HERWARTH also expressed his thanks and hoped that the two Governments would find it possible to keep the Council informed of all further developments.

M. ZOPPI noted that these statements of the French and British view were in line with his Government's frequently expressed wish that such problems should be discussed in the Council of W.E.U.

All other delegations joined in thanking the British and French representatives.