

Minutes of the 58th meeting of the WEU Council (10 September 1956)


Caption: On 4 September 1956, the Council of Western European Union (WEU) meets for a special session on the development of the Suez Crisis. British representative Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick outlines the reasons that led his government, in close consultation with the French Government, to convene this meeting, emphasising the strong spirit of alliance within WEU. Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick justifies the urgency of the intervention in the Suez Canal area, maintaining that a refusal to act would result in the total removal of any Western influence on the ‘Arabian continent’. The French Ambassador to London, Jean Chauvel, reaffirms his government’s conclusions, which are completely identical in all respects to those of the British Government on the settlement of the current crisis. He outlines the considerations on which the French Government has based its approach and stresses the fact that the two countries are taking the matter extremely seriously.

Source: Council of the Western European Union. Minutes of the 58th meeting of the Council of Western European Union held at the 10.30 a.m. on Tuesday, 4th September 1956. 10.09.1956. CR (56) 24. Copy No. 91. 6 p. 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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WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION

W.E.U. SECRET

Original French

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10th September 1956

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W.E.U. 1st MARCH 1989

MINUTES OF THE 58TH MEETING
OF THE COUNCIL OF WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION
HELD AT 10.30 a.m. ON TUESDAY, 4th SEPTEMBER 1956

Present:

BELGIUM

S.E. le Marquis du
PARC LOCMARIA

Ambassadeur Extraordinaire
et Plénipotentiaire

M. E. CHAMPENOIS

Conseiller d'Ambassade

Melle. E. DEVER

Premier Secrétaire

FRANCE

S.E. M. J. CHAUVEL

Ambassadeur Extraordinaire
et Plénipotentiaire

M. F. HURE

Conseiller d'Ambassade

GERMANY

Dr. J.F. RITTER

Embassy Counsellor

Dr. U. SAHM

First Secretary

ITALY

S.E. M. V. ZOPPI

Ambassadeur Extraordinaire
et Plénipotentiaire

M. M. PROFILI

Premier Secrétaire

LUXEMBOURG

S.E. M. A. CLASEN

Ambassadeur Extraordinaire
et Plénipotentiaire

M. C. DUMONT

Conseiller d'Ambassade

NETHERLANDS

Mr. A.H. HASSELMAN

Chargé d'Affaires a.i.

Jhr. J.L.R. HUYDECOPER

First Secretary

UNITED KINGDOM

Sir Ivone KIRKPATRICK
G.C.M.G., K.C.B

Permanent Under-Secretary
of State, Foreign Office

Mr. J.C.W. BUSHELL

Foreign Office

SECRETARIAT
GENERAL

M. L. GOFFIN

Secrétaire Général

Mr. H. von ETZDORF

Deputy Secretary-General

M. S. FREY

Legal Adviser

M. Y.P. BENOIST

Head of General Affairs
Section

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M. Louis GOFFIN, Secretary-General, took the Chair.

I. SUEZ CANAL

The CHAIRMAN recalled that this was a special meeting, convened at the suggestion of the United Kingdom delegation and requested Sir IVONE KIRKPATRICK to open the discussion.

Sir IVONE KIRKPATRICK began by summarising the reasons for the United Kingdom suggestion that the present meeting be held. His Government's proposal for a meeting of the NATO Council to inform them of the progress of events in the Suez dispute was a reflection of the common view that NATO should be a political, as well as a military, alliance. The suggestion for a similar W.E.U. Council meeting was, in its turn, a reflection of the feeling that such a meeting would be in keeping with the spirit of the W.E.U. alliance; this alliance was a closer association than NATO, with a greater political background, and such a meeting would provide opportunities for discussion that might be of a more intimate and frank character than in the larger forum of NATO. His Government, therefore, in consultation with the French Government, had put forward this suggestion.

Recalling that all W.E.U. Governments, with the exception of Belgium and Luxembourg, had been represented at the London Conference, which had been fully reported, Sir Ivone did not think it useful to say more about it.

As regards the work of the Committee of Five, the reports so far available covered only the initial phase, that is Mr. Menzies' statement of the case to the Egyptian Government; no more could therefore be said on this point at present.

Sir Ivone thought, however, that it might be useful to explain how his Government saw the whole problem basically.

It would be a mistake to see the action of the Egyptian Government as an isolated event. In this connection, it was useful to recall the Russian blockade of Berlin. This blockade was, of course, a vital question because of the great importance attached to the maintenance of the Western position in Berlin, but it was doubtful whether this consideration alone would have motivated the taking of risks and extreme measures that were eventually adopted to defeat the blockade. The essential consideration was the conviction that the Russian blockade was the first step in a long-term scheme, the aim of which was to expel the West completely from Germany. This scheme was given no chance to unfold, owing to the energetic action taken by the Western Powers against its first gambit.

The present situation in the Middle East was similar. The seizure of the Canal Company was the first step in a policy of expelling Western influence completely from the Arabian continent. If we did not react, the consequence would be that successful defiance of the West would so raise the prestige of

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Colonel Nasser in the Arab world as to enable him to embark on further appropriations of banks, businesses, oil refineries, etc. This would further raise his prestige, young officers' revolutions would be started in other Arab countries, which would appeal to Egypt; Egypt would send liberating forces, all the legal forms would be observed; but one day an Egyptian dictator would have his hand on all the Middle East oil.

It might be wondered whether the other Arab countries would be prepared to accept this seizure of the oil. But if Colonel Nasser could say that he had successfully defied 18 nations, including the United States; that he had expropriated all Western assets; that, if the Arab countries would trust him, he would, by temporarily withholding oil from the West, hold it to ransom, then the Arab States would be unlikely to resist the temptation to trust him.

The situation was one of great peril and unless the West were prepared to see it as such, they would be at the mercy of an Egyptian dictator.

The United Kingdom Government wished, of course, that Mr. Menzies' mission should be successful. But if it were not, the next step would have to be considered.

Sir Ivone stated that when the Russian leaders had visited the United Kingdom in April, they had been informed, with the present contingency in mind, that if the day came when the Government was faced with either strangulation or war, they would have to choose war. This had been reported to a number of friendly powers and had, it seemed, been generally approved. But now the contingency had actually arisen, and the Western Powers might be faced with the alternative of strangulation or war; for his part, he could only say that he thought his Government would not choose strangulation.

M. CHAUVEL said that as his Government's views were completely identical with those of the British Government, he had nothing to add to Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick's appraisal of the situation. He would confine himself to a statement of the considerations on which his Government based their attitude. Without giving a full list, these could be summarised as follows, in ascending order of importance:

- the nationalisation of a company founded by French enterprise and with a large proportion of its capital held by numerous French families;
- the collapse of guarantees ensuring freedom of navigation through the Canal;
- on the evidence of the appeals to racial and religious fanaticism contained in the Cairo Government's statements, the Egyptian dictator's action could be regarded as constituting a threat to Western interests in the Middle East, and in particular to Western oil interests;

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- the damage thereby caused to international confidence and, more particularly, the consequent effect on the machinery for assisting under-developed countries;

- Colonel Nasser's declared intention to become leader of an Arab world, stretching from the Persian Gulf to the West African seaboard, from which the West would be totally excluded.

French : Here France's special interests in North Africa were fused with the
amend. general interests of the West.

These were the main reasons why the French Government, like the British Government, were treating this as an extremely serious matter and were not prepared to accept some sort of compromise. As Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick had said, it was essential not merely to obtain institutional guarantees solving the particular problem of the Canal but also to ensure that the Egyptian dictator should not get his own way against international interests and the accepted code of behaviour.

The Marquis du PARC thanked the United Kingdom and French
Belg. : representatives for their statements which he had followed with great
amend. : interest and a full understanding of their position.

As M. SPAAK was to make a statement in London that afternoon giving the Belgian Government's views on the matter under consideration, the Belgian Ambassador would make no further comment at that stage.

M. ZOPPI thanked his colleagues for their statements on a situation with which he was already acquainted as he had been present at Lancaster House. He would like to raise a procedural matter,
Ital. : which he regarded as important. To what authority would Mr. Menzies
amend. report on his return from Cairo?

Before leaving, Mr. Menzies had said that, after the meetings, a report would be submitted to the "Chairman of the Conference".

But was the Conference still in being? Would it not be
Ital. : preferable to avoid any reference to the Conference so that Russia,
amend. with its declared views, would not have to be invited to a further meeting? Could not Mr. Menzies and his colleagues simply report to the 18?

Ital. :
amend. :

Sir IVONE KIRKPATRICK thanked the Italian delegate for raising this point, which he felt could be settled by the Five when they returned.

Dr. RITTER thanked Sir Ivone and M. Chauvel for their statements and said that his Government were fully aware that the blockade of Berlin was the first step in a Russian move to bolshevise the whole of Germany.

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If the Western Powers had not acted immediately, Berlin would have been absorbed into the area under Soviet influence.

German : In the light of this example, the Federal Government
amend. : hoped that the Western Powers would present a united front to the
serious situation now existing.

German : Commenting on the remarks of the Italian representative,
amend. : Dr. RITTER expressed his conviction that Mr. Menzies would report
in an appropriate manner; he felt sure that Mr. Menzies would
report to the 18, since he had already said that it would be point-
less to report to a non-existent conference.

Mr. HASSELMAN joined in the thanks to the United Kingdom and French representatives.

In expressing his appreciation of the United Kingdom and French statements, M. CLASEN emphasised Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick's point that W.E.U. was a closer association than NATO and that understanding of the position would be closer as a result.

The CHAIRMAN thanked the United Kingdom and French representatives on behalf of the Council for their statements on a problem of common interest.

This might be the first of similar valuable consultations.

II. OTHER BUSINESS

1) Press communiqué after the meeting

As Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick was not in favour,

- The COUNCIL decided not to issue a press communiqué after the meeting.

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