

Memorandum by George Brown on the current situation in the Middle East (13 September 1967)

Caption: On 13 September 1967, George Brown, British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, issues a memorandum on the current situation in the Middle East. The document gives an overview of the Arab/Israel dispute, focusing on the question of Jerusalem, the Arab refugee problem and the recent diplomatic efforts for a settlement of the crisis.

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COPY NO. 6513th September, 1967CABINETMIDDLE EAST: CURRENT SITUATIONMemorandum by the Secretary of State for
Foreign AffairsArab/Israel

During August the parties to the dispute and the other powers principally involved were taking stock. The Israel position has if anything hardened. The Israel Government insist that they will accept a change in the present situation only in the context of a peace settlement negotiated directly with their Arab neighbours. On the other side, however, there is evidence that for the time being at any rate, President Nasser has put his weight behind the "moderate" Arab governments and that he might like to mend some fences with the West. Although the Arabs maintain their formal position of total non-recognition of Israel, the "moderates" appear at least tacitly to accept that Israel is here to stay.

United Nations Aspects

2. We have learned this week that the Americans do not expect the Russians to reply to their approach about a draft Security Council resolution on the lines they agreed with Mr. Gromyko in July, before Mr. Gromyko reaches New York next week. But from informal exchanges (which seem to be borne out by Lord Caradon's contacts in New York) their impression is that the reply is likely to be rather negative, probably mainly as a result of the response the Russians have had from the Arab States. They may now back the unacceptable Tito proposals, at least as a starting position.

3. Talks are to be held in London tomorrow, Thursday, with Mr. Eugene Rostow of the State Department. Thereafter, we shall have to consider whether, as Lord Caradon now thinks, we should encourage the non-permanent members of the Council to take the initiative.

Yugoslav Proposal

4. President Tito has approached us and others with proposals for a settlement on the basis of -

- (a) as a starting point, Israeli withdrawal from territories occupied since 4th June;
- (b) a Four-Power or Security Council guarantee of the security and 4th June borders of all the states in the area;

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- (c) freedom of navigation through the Straits of Tiran pending a decision of the International Court;
- (d) a subsequent effort to tackle the refugee and Suez Canal problems.

These proposals are objectionable to us in that they drop the direct connection which we regard as essential between Israeli withdrawal and the ending of belligerency by the Arabs, and postpone a solution of the Canal problem. Furthermore, the Israel Government has rejected them as a basis for discussion. The degree of co-ordination of Yugoslav and Soviet views is not clear.

The Arab Refugees

5. Despite strong representations from us, from the Americans, from U Thant and from the International Red Cross, the Israelis refused, apart from minor concessions, to extend the 31st August deadline for the return to the West Bank of those Arabs who fled across the Jordan during and after the hostilities. By the time those who are covered by the Israel concessions have returned, approximately 20,000 refugees will have been re-admitted, but more than 100,000 who asked to return will have been kept out. Israel's rejection of applications for return to the Jerusalem area and to the Jericho camps may signify that they are thinking in terms of a long stay on the West Bank and wish to limit their own refugee commitment there. Mr. Gussing, who is looking into the refugee problem on behalf of the United Nations Secretary-General, is expected to report in the near future. His report may give some pointer as to what form an international contribution to settlement of the refugee problem should take. The Israel Government's Commission on refugees is also expected to report soon and there have been indications in the Press that the Israel line in UN discussion on refugees might be "more accommodating".

Jerusalem

6. The report of Mr. Thalmann, whom the Secretary-General appointed to look into the situation in Jerusalem, confirms that the Israelis have ignore the United Nations resolutions and have maintained measures which in effect have incorporated the formerly Jordanian part of the City into Israel. They have shown no willingness to go back on their public stand that the question of Jerusalem is not negotiable. Mr. Thalmann's report indicates that although the Arabs in Jerusalem would be prepared to co-operate with a military occupation regime they are opposed to civilian incorporation into the Israel State. They regard this as a violation of international law which prohibits an occupying power from changing the legal and administrative structure in an occupied territory.

7. Although the Israelis have shown anxiety about the possibility that the United Nations might call for sanctions against them on the question of Jerusalem, their latest communication to the United Nations Secretary-General evades the issue of compliance with the two General Assembly Resolutions calling on Israel to rescind the measures of 28th June. It indicates readiness to negotiate only on an "appropriate expression of the special interest of the three great religions in Jerusalem" and suggests that this is the only basis of international interest in the City's status.

Suez Canal

8. So far the Egyptians have given no sign that they would be willing to take any action that would detract from the "political, practical and psychological effects" of the principle that there will be no clearance of any part of the Canal in advance of an Israeli withdrawal. There have been indications that they would be satisfied with less than a full withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, but even in that event the re-opening of the Canal would not extend to the shipping of Israel. The Israelis for their part are likely to hold rigidly to the line that they will not withdraw until the Egyptians abandon their claim to belligerency and open the Canal at least to their trade. Although many countries, for example India, have expressed grave concern at the Canal's closure, none of them has shewn willingness to try to bring substantial pressure to bear on the Egyptians (or the Israelis) independently of action at the United Nations or by the United States and USSR.

9. In these circumstances it would be unwise to count on an early opening of the Canal. The most hopeful course of action lies probably in the encouragement of a comprehensive Resolution in the Security Council on the lines of the Gromyko draft.

United Kingdom/United Arab Republic Relations

10. Apart from the general indication following the Khartoum Summit that President Nasser might wish to mend some fences with the West, there has been a particular move towards Britain in the shape of an article by the Editor of Al-Ahram in the London Sunday Times on 11th September. He wrote that it was time for a genuine dialogue to begin, as between equals, between the United Arab Republic and the United Kingdom.

11. The United Arab Republic authorities have also announced their intention to resume the payment of pensions to former British servants of the Egyptian Government, and on 4th September they notified BOAC of the restoration of its staging rights in Cairo.

Oil

12. As a result of the resolutions adopted at the Khartoum Summit conference most of the Arab oil producing states have lifted the embargo on exports to the United Kingdom, the United States and West Germany. Algeria has not yet announced the raising of the embargo but has informed the companies concerned that the export of liquefied natural gas to the United Kingdom may be resumed. Syria, across whose territory the Iraq Petroleum Company's pipelines from Northern Iraq pass and where one of the IPC's terminals is situated, has not yet agreed that exports to the United Kingdom, United States and West Germany may be resumed. Nor have exports from Tapline (the pipeline from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon) been restarted; the delay is due to a dispute between Aramco and the Saudi Government over the level of posted prices at the Mediterranean.

13. Meanwhile the Kuwait Government are already pressing the Kuwait Oil Company (50 per cent BP, 50 per cent Gulf Oil Corporation) for a rapid increase in production, and, hence, in revenue in order to enable them to meet their new financial commitments arising out of the Khartoum Summit. Iran, too, is pressing the companies to ensure that there is no sudden drop in the increase in exports (which resulted from the Arab oil embargoes) and that the present exceptionally high level of offtake should be taken as the base-line in deciding future increases.

14. The lifting of the Arab oil embargo has had very little effect on the United Kingdom except insofar as there is now once again a greater variety of sources on which we can draw. In balance of payments terms the overall position of BP and Shell is affected very little. The Suez Canal remains closed and the transport crisis, which is the largest item in the effect on our balance of payments, is still acute.

G. B.

Foreign Office, S. W. 1.

13th September, 1967

