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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

6 March 1984

VISIT OF FIELD MARSHAL ABU GHAZALA

The Egyptian Defence Minister called on the Prime Minister today.

The discussion was largely of a general nature. The Field Marshal twice told the Prime Minister that he hoped she would visit Egypt.

In discussion of the situation in the Lebanon, the Prime Minister said that she believed that the Israelis had made a fundamental error in embarking on their military venture in that country. They had trapped themselves there and military expenditure was playing havoc with the Israeli economy.

On the Iran/Iraq war, the Field Marshal said that he believed that Iraq was sufficiently strong to resist Iran - and if it succeeded in defeating the imminent offensive, Khomeini might begin to change his tune. But if Iraq was lost to a Shia regime, the consequences would be very serious.

He dwelt at length on the concept of Khomeini as the absent Imam. For him to assume this mantle, three predictions had to be fulfilled - the fall of the Shah, the fall of Saddam Hussein and the capture of Karbala. Were these predictions to come to pass, Khomeini would be regarded by Shia all over the world as their leader and they would be obliged to obey him to the letter. The consequences for Arab countries with substantial Shia communities, such as Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, the Yemen, Syria and Lebanon would be dire. Thus all had an interest in supporting Iraq and its regime.

He did not believe the Iranian charge that we had supplied Iraq with chemical weapons. Moreover, he was sure that Iraq had not used any. Had they done so, the casualties would have been very much greater.

He was much enjoying his present visit to Britain and was being very well looked after by the Defence Secretary. He had suggested to Mr. Heseltine that Britain and Egypt should co-operate in military production to meet the needs of the Middle Eastern market. Soviet equipment still dominated the area.

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There were 20,000 Soviet tracked vehicles in the Middle East as opposed to 9,000 from the West. All this Russian equipment could in time be replaced with Western equipment.

He was very concerned about the Soviet presence in the Middle East and Africa. The 69,000 Cuban soldiers in Africa were a "rapid deployment force already deployed". The Russians controlled the Straits of Aden through their positions in South Yemen and Ethiopia. We needed to combine to defeat this threat.

The Prime Minister said that the Field Marshal's ideas on co-operation in the production of military equipment were interesting and she was sure that the Defence Secretary would follow them up.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Peter Ricketts (Foreign and Commonwealth Office).

A. J. COLES

Richard Mottram, Esq.,
Ministry of Defence.

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