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FM PARIS

TO IMMEDIATE FCO

TELNO 1203<sup>9</sup>

OF 131824Z NOVEMBER 86

**FRANCE AND THE MIDDLE EAST.**

## SUMMARY

1. EVENTS SINCE THE HINDAWI VERDICT, THE TWO MINISTERIAL MEETINGS ON 27 OCTOBER AND 10 NOVEMBER, CHIRAC'S INTERVIEW WITH THE WASHINGTON TIMES AND THE RELEASE OF TWO FRENCH HOSTAGES YESTERDAY, HAVE ALL PUT FRANCE'S POLICY UNDER RENEWED SCRUTINY. IN PREPARING FOR THE FRANCO-BRITISH SUMMIT IN PARIS ON 21 NOVEMBER YOU MAY WISH TO CONSIDER RENEWING THE DIALOGUE WITH FRANCE ON THE MIDDLE EAST.

## DETAIL

2. EVEN BEFORE THE RECENT ACCELERATION OF EVENTS, ATTACKS ON FRENCH TROOPS IN UNIFORM TOGETHER WITH HOSTAGE TAKINGS AND A FRESH WAVE OF TERRORIST BOMBS IN PARIS DURING SEPTEMBER HAD BEEN LEADING FRENCH COMMENTATORS TO QUESTION WHETHER FRANCE HAD ANY COHERENT POLICY FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND IF SO WHETHER IT NOW NEEDED RETHINKING. THE MAIN BURDEN OF CRITICISM IS THAT FOR WELL OVER A DECADE FRENCH POLICY HAS CONSISTED OF LARGELY AD HOC DECISIONS WHICH LACKED ANY UNDERLYING SENSE OF DIRECTION AND HAVE OFTEN OVERESTIMATED FRANCE'S RESOURCES. A FAILURE TO IDENTIFY FRANCE'S REAL FRIENDS AND THEREFORE BY IMPLICATION HER REAL ADVERSARIES, AN OUTDATED ATTACHMENT TO NOTIONS NOSTALGICALLY IDENTIFIED WITH DE GAULLE BUT WHICH FAILED TO TAKE ACCOUNT OF THE PROFOUND CHANGES IN THE REGION SINCE HIS DAY, AND A TRADITIONALLY MISPLACED CONVICTION IN DIPLOMATIC ARABESQUES AND SLEIGHT OF HAND HAVE ALL HELPED TO OBSCURE HOW MUCH FRANCE HAS IN FACT LOST GROUND IN WHAT HAS BECOME A REGION OF VULNERABILITY RATHER THAN OPPORTUNITY. SUCH AT ANY RATE IS THE CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION.

3. UNTIL CHIRAC'S WASHINGTON TIMES INTERVIEW (THE FULL ENGLISH TEXT OF WHICH WAS CARRIED BY THE WASHINGTON TIMES ON 10 NOVEMBER AND REPAYS CLOSE READING), NO REAL ATTEMPT HAD BEEN MADE BY THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT TO ANSWER THESE CRITICISMS. INDEED IT IS AN ELOQUENT COMMENT ON THE FRENCH METHOD THAT CHIRAC'S RESPONSE SHOULD EVENTUALLY EMERGE VIA DISCLOSURES IN A MOONIE NEWSPAPER RATHER THAN WHAT WOULD SEEM TO US THE MORE STRAIGHTFORWARD COURSE OF TAKING THE CASE TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE. IT IS TRUE THAT RAYMOND, IN PRESENTING THE FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTRY'S BUDGET TO THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ON 24 OCTOBER, DEVOTED SEVERAL PAGES OF HIS SPEECH TO THE MIDDLE EAST, AND THAT MOST OF THE MAIN THEMES TAKEN UP LATER BY CHIRAC ARE PALELY REFLECTED THERE. BUT RAYMOND'S ESSAY WENT LARGELY UNREMARKED. BY CONTRAST THE DIRECTNESS AND BITE OF CHIRAC'S

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/INTERVIEW



INTERVIEW WITH BORCHGRAVE, LEAVING ASIDE FOR A MOMENT HIS DISOBLIGING FLIGHTS OF FANCY ABOUT THE HINDAWI CASE ITSELF, HAS STRUCK POLITICAL CIRCLES IN PARIS AND HAS BEEN ACKNOWLEDGED FROM BOTH RIGHT AND LEFT AS OFFERING SUFFICIENT ELEMENTS OF AN APPARENTLY COHERENT POLICY TO DESERVE TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY.

4. ACCORDING TO CHIRAC, FRENCH OBJECTIVES IN THE MIDDLE EAST ARE PRIMARILY TO RESTORE INDEPENDENCE TO LEBANON, IN A WAY THAT SAFEGUARDS THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY WHILE MAINTAINING A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THAT COUNTRY AND SYRIA: TO CONTRIBUTE TO ENDING THE ARAB/ISRAEL DISPUTE BY TACKLING THE UNDERLYING CAUSES; AND TO SUPPORT MODERATE ARAB STATES, PARTICULARLY AGAINST THE THREAT OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM WHICH OTHERWISE THREATENS TO ENGULF THE REGION AND TO ENDANGER WESTERN INTERESTS AS A WHOLE. IN CHIRAC'S VIEW WESTERN ACTION TO ISOLATE STATES LIKE LIBYA OR SYRIA MERELY FUELS AND SOLIDIFIES ANTI-WESTERN PUBLIC OPINION THROUGHOUT THE ARAB WORLD THEREBY UNDERMINING THESE OBJECTIVES, PARTICULARLY WHEN THE UNITED STATES HAS NEITHER THE CAPABILITY NOR THE WILL TO FOLLOW THROUGH EFFECTIVELY AGAINST EITHER QADHAFI OR ASAD. SYRIA IS THE UNAVOIDABLE POINT OF REFERENCE FOR ANY SUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT TO DEAL WITH MAJOR PROBLEMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST, PARTICULARLY LEBANON WHERE FRANCE HAS BEEN PRESENT FOR SEVEN CENTURIES. IT IS THEREFORE SHORT-SIGHTED MACHISMO TO CUT LINKS WITH SYRIA OVER INDIVIDUAL TERRORIST INCIDENTS WHOSE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE IS ECLIPSED BY THE WESTERN INTERESTS AT STAKE IN THE REGION. FRANCE IS ALSO ALMOST ALONE IN RECOGNISING THAT THESE INTERESTS REQUIRE THE UNAMBIGUOUS SUPPORT OF IRAQ AS THE LAST REGIONAL BASTION AGAINST SHIITE FUNDAMENTALISM (AS OPPOSED TO WHAT IS DEPICTED AS US/BRITISH/ISRAELI SUPPORT FOR IRAN), AS WELL AS A WILLINGNESS TO CONTINUE A FULL DIALOGUE WITH SYRIA WHICH INTER ALIA SEEKS TO CONTAIN TERRORISM BY A CAREFUL BLEND OF STICK AND CARROT.

5. THERE IS OF COURSE A GOOD DEAL OF SPECIAL PLEADING IN ALL THIS, AS ONE WOULD EXPECT. THERE ARE ALSO MAJOR INCONSISTENCIES. FOR EXAMPLE, CRITICISING AMERICAN AND BRITISH POLICY TO IRAN WHILE PROMOTING FRANCO-IRANIAN NORMALISATION WITH A VIEW TO FREEING FRENCH HOSTAGES: OR THREATENING TO DEAL TOUGHLY WITH ANY SYRIAN TERRORISM CONDUCTED ON FRENCH SOIL, WHILE TURNING A BLIND EYE TO IT ELSEWHERE IN EUROPE. BUT THE CENTRAL THESIS THAT MODERATE ARAB STATES SUCH AS EGYPT, JORDAN, SAUDI ARABIA AND THE GULF STATES ARE BEST HELPED IN THE LONG RUN BY ENGAGING ALL AVAILABLE DIPLOMATIC TOOLS WITH MAVERICK STATES LIKE SYRIA AND LIBYA RATHER THAN SEEKING TO ISOLATE AND PUNISH THEM IS AT LEAST WORTH ANALYSIS. IT IS PERHAPS ALSO WORTH EXAMINING WHETHER FRANCE (AS A MEDITERRANEAN POWER WITH A VERY LARGE ARAB COMMUNITY) HAS A PARTICULAR INSIGHT INTO THE THREAT OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM TO THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN, OR WHETHER THIS IS RHETORICAL HYPERBOLE DESIGNED TO COVER THE FACT THAT FRANCE IS VULNERABLE NOT ONLY BY REASON OF HOSTAGES, BOMBS AND HER UNFIDEL CONTINGENT, BUT ALSO BECAUSE OF 23 BILLION FRANCS OF DEBTS UNPAID BY IRAQ.

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6. IT WOULD BE A CONTRIBUTION TO THE PROCESS OF EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY FORMULATION IF SUCH CENTRAL ISSUES COULD BE EXPLORED IN GREATER DEPTH AS PART OF THE ANGLO-FRENCH DIALOGUE. AS SOME OF CHIRAC'S REMARKS HAVE REMINDED US, ANGLO/FRENCH HISTORIC RIVALRIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST ARE HARD. BUT THE EFFORT SHOULD BE WORTH MAKING. IF YOU AND THE PRIME MINISTER WERE TO USE THE SUMMIT ON 21 NOVEMBER INTER ALIA TO REMIND CHIRAC OF THE TRUE BENCHMARKS OF BRITISH POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THAT WE SEE A CONTINUING ACTIVE ROLE THERE BY HMG AS COMPLEMENTARY TO THE FRENCH PRESENCE, WHICH WE BROADLY WELCOME, THIS WOULD BE A REASSURING START, WHICH I WOULD EXPECT YOUR FRENCH INTERLOCUTORS TO WELCOME. CHIRAC WOULD NOT WISH TO BASE ANY DISCUSSION DIRECTLY ON HIS WASHINGTON TIMES INTERVIEW, ABOUT WHICH HE HAS GOOD CAUSE TO FEEL EMBARRASSED. BUT THE KEY QUESTIONS OF HOW TO DEAL WITH TERRORISM AND HOSTAGE-TAKING, HOW BEST TO SUPPORT THE MODERATE STATES AND COUNTER THE THREAT OF FUNDAMENTALISM ETC COULD BE RAISED WITHOUT DIRECT REFERENCE TO THE INTERVIEW.

7. MY LETTER OF 13 NOVEMBER TO RATFORD ABOUT CHIRAC AND COHABITATION IS ALSO RELEVANT.

FRETWELL

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MIDDLE EAST  
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DEFENCE D  
POD

PS  
PS/MR RENTON  
PS/PUS  
MR FERGUSSON  
MR DEREK THOMAS  
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