CABINET

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W.1, on Tuesday, 23rd May, 1967, at 2.30 p.m.

Present:
The Right Hon. Harold Wilson, M.P., Prime Minister
The Right Hon. George Brown, M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs
The Right Hon. James Callaghan, M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer
The Right Hon. Herbert Bovten, M.P., Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs
The Right Hon. Roy Jenkins, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department
The Right Hon. Patrick Gordon Walker, M.P., Minister without Portfolio
The Right Hon. Anthony Crosland, M.P., Secretary of State for Education and Science
The Right Hon. The Earl of Longford, Lord Privy Seal
The Right Hon. Fred Peart, M.P., Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
The Right Hon. Cledwyn Hughes, M.P., Secretary of State for Wales

The following were also present:
The Right Hon. George Thomson, M.P., Minister of State for Foreign Affairs
The Right Hon. Sir Elwyn Jones, Q.C., M.P., Attorney-General

SECRETariat:
Sir Burke Trend
Mr. P. Rogers
Mr. L. Errington
Subject:
MIDDLE EAST
The Foreign Secretary said that the present critical situation in the Middle East had developed from retaliatory action undertaken by Israel in Jordan because of terrorist attacks from both Jordan and Syria. In consequence Jordan, Syria, Israel and the United Arab Republic (UAR) had in turn felt obliged to adopt increasingly belligerent attitudes and the present position was that the UAR had mobilised some 60,000 men, together with a considerable armoured force and substantial air support along the Sinai frontier. In addition, the Palestine Liberation Army of two divisions was mobilised in the Gaza Strip. These forces were considerably greater and better trained than were the Egyptian forces in 1956, which had been deprived of air support by our own bombing attacks. The Israeli forces, on the other hand, were much smaller and there were indications that Israel had been caught unprepared. The Secretary-General of the United Nations had given way precipitately to pressure from the UAR to withdraw the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) and, in addition to moving up to the Gaza and Sinai frontiers, the Egyptian Forces had reoccupied the batteries at Sharm-el-Sheik controlling the Tiran Straits. They were thus in a position to close the Gulf of Aqaba and had been moving warships into that area and were reported to be laying mines. They were likely to stop ships flying the Israeli flag from entering the Gulf of Aqaba and to stop other ships if they were carrying strategic supplies to Israel.

Israel had repeatedly made it clear that she would regard the closing of the Gulf of Aqaba as a casus belli, since access to the port of Eilat was vital to her economy—according to a recent assessment some 15 per cent of her import trade by weight passed through this port in 1965, some 90 per cent of her oil imports and some 40 per cent of her exports of phosphates. Although Israel's position in relation to the UAR was considerably weaker than it had been in 1956, and great damage was likely to be done to her towns by air attack in the event of war, there was a grave risk that Israel would be tempted to launch a preventive war since her relative strength was likely to decline, especially if access to the port of Eilat were cut off. The immediate problem was to find means of dissuading Israel from taking this step and thereafter of bringing the situation under control.

The United States were committed to intervene to prevent the destruction of Israel and wished to reactivate the Tripartite Declaration of 1950 which guaranteed existing frontiers in this part of the Middle East. This proposal was not, however, acceptable to us, since it would involve a commitment to military action to maintain the frontiers, not only of Israel, but also of the UAR and reactivation would be harmful to our relations with the Arab States generally. The French Government, as the third party to the Declaration, took a similar view. The Soviet Foreign Minister (Mr. Gromyko) had recently visited Cairo and, while there was no information about the purpose of his visit, it might be assumed that the Soviet Government...
were concerned to support Syrian interests in order to reassert their position in the Middle East. In the circumstances he had proposed in the first place to call a meeting of the Security Council to consider the threat to peace in the Middle East and to pass a resolution calling for the Tiran Straits to be kept open. It was now clear, however, that there was likely to be insufficient support to enable such a meeting to be called before the Secretary-General returned in two days' time from his visit to Cairo; and thereafter it was likely that the Soviet representative would prolong the discussion and eventually veto the resolution. It was unlikely that Israel would feel able to await the outcome of a meeting of the Security Council, and he therefore sought the authority of the Cabinet to join with the United States Government and such other maritime countries as could be enlisted in support in announcing an intention to establish a naval force, whether under the auspices of the United Nations or not, to keep the Gulf of Aqaba open to shipping of all nations, or to reopen it. It was very desirable that such a declaration should be made without delay although no effective force could be assembled immediately. The United States had two ships which could be brought to the Gulf in a few days, but it would be necessary for ships of the Sixth United States Fleet to pass through the Suez Canal together with supporting British vessels from Malta. It would not, therefore, be possible to prevent the Gulf of Aqaba being closed, but the assurance that it would be reopened offered the best chance of dissuading Israel from launching a preventive war. The declared purpose of the operation would be to assert maritime rights, not to assist Israel, and would be unlikely to have any serious effect on our relations with the Arab States generally.

In discussion, it was pointed out that the proposed naval force would necessarily have to be drawn largely from United States and British ships at present in the Mediterranean, and it was questioned whether the Egyptian Government would permit them to pass the Suez Canal once the intention of reopening the Gulf of Aqaba had been announced. It was suggested further that, before any decision could be reached, detailed consideration should be given with the United States Government to the practicability of the proposed operation if the Egyptian Government should offer resistance to it and to the risks involved, including the risk of being drawn into military action against the UAR. Alternative means of opening the Straits should also be explored. It would be relevant to know the extent to which other countries would participate and what the likely effect would be on our position and interests in the Middle East. It was urged that no commitment should be made until these issues had been explored, and it was questioned whether an immediate statement of intent was essential in order to avoid precipitate action by the Israeli Government.

In further discussion it was argued that it would be inconsistent with our interests in the Middle East to incur the risks inherent in any commitment to the use of force to reopen the Straits. In addition to its effect on our relations with the Arab States and on our difficulties in South Arabia in particular, such action might have grave financial
consequences. Even although we should no doubt seek to avoid the appearance of taking the lead, there was a risk, in view of the firm United States commitments to Israel and of the predominant part which the United States must necessarily play in any operation, of our being drawn into their wider commitment, the full extent of which should first be ascertained. It was questioned whether, if the United States had already given firm assurances to Israel and if Israel were reluctant to take the offensive, any further assurance on our part would have any significant effect on the Israeli attitude.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that the United States' commitment was an undertaking to prevent the destruction of Israel. It did not however cover her economic strangulation through the closing of the Gulf of Aqaba and would therefore not operate to deter Israel from embarking on a preventive war if she judged that this offered less risk than submission to economic blockade. Reassurance over the Gulf of Aqaba was more likely to be effective in restraining her, but it would have to be given without delay. Further, while it was possible to regard the Tripartite Declaration as having been superseded, Israel had agreed to withdraw from the Tiran Straits in 1957 on assurances, to which we were party, that the Straits would be occupied by the UNEF and we were committed by a statement made by the then Prime Minister, Mr. Macmillan, of 14th May, 1963, and subsequently endorsed by the present Prime Minister on 16th December, 1964, and 13th April, 1965, in relation to the freedom of passage through the Gulf of Aqaba. If we did not honour these assurances, and if Israel were to launch a preventive war and reoccupy the Sinai peninsula, she clearly would not agree to withdraw on any subsequent assurances, particularly as there would be a consequent risk of intervention by the Soviet Union on behalf of the UAR. Furthermore our relations with the United States were passing through a critical stage and would be very severely strained, with adverse consequences for our financial position, if we refused to play any part with them in the Middle East situation. Since we could neither stand aside nor accept the implications of the Tripartite Declaration and since there was little prospect of early action by the United Nations, the course which offered least risk and the best prospect of restraining Israel, was to give an assurance in concert with other maritime countries of intention to make effective the freedom of passage through the Tiran Straits in the terms of the 1957 declaration. Such an assurance need not indicate a particular course of action, but urgent consideration should be given in conjunction with the United States Government and the other maritime powers concerned with the issue to devising a workable plan and to assessing its implications. It seemed doubtful whether the Egyptian Government would resist action to keep the Straits open if convinced of the United States' determination to do so.

The Prime Minister, summing up the discussion, said that the Cabinet agreed that we should base ourselves on the assurance given to Israel by the main maritime powers in 1957 that they would support and assert the freedom of passage in the Straits of Tiran. On that
occasion we had said that we would assert this right on behalf of all British shipping and were prepared to join with others to secure general recognition of these rights; and it was in this spirit that we should act now. The Foreign Secretary, in his forthcoming visit to Moscow, should inform the Soviet Government accordingly, and should tell them that the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (Mr. Thomson) would be visiting Washington at the same time in order to seek to promote action, in collaboration with other maritime countries concerned with access to the Gulf of Aqaba, in accordance with the declaration. The Minister of State, who should be accompanied by defence advisers, should endeavour to ascertain the position of the United States Government in relation to the Tripartite Declaration of 1950 and to persuade them that in view of Mr. Macmillan's statement of 14th May, 1963, and of his (the Prime Minister's) own statements of 16th December, 1964, and 13th April, 1965, we could only base future action on the declaration of 1957. He should make it clear that it was our intention to make that declaration effective, provided that any measures for this purpose were sufficiently international in character and that an acceptable military plan for this purpose could be devised. The precise scope and nature of this plan would, of course, have to be ad referendum to the Cabinet, who would be concerned to be satisfied that it was militarily realistic. They would also wish to consider whether it implied an unacceptable risk of escalation.

The Cabinet—

Invited the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs to be guided by the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion on their visits to Moscow and Washington.

Cabinet Office, S.W.1,
24th May, 1967.