

Middle East arms ban the best posture for Britain

House of Commons

SIR ALEC DOUGLAS-HOME, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Kinross and West Perthshire, C), in a statement on the Middle East, said:

The whole House will share the Government's profound anxiety and disquiet that the long dispute between the Arab countries and Israel should once more have flared into a further round of bitter warfare. The fighting which began on October 6 is still continuing and there have been many hard battles and a high rate of casualties.

The Government especially deplore the loss of innocent civilian life which has occurred and we call upon all the governments engaged in the war to do everything within their power to avoid civilian casualties.

I regret to have to inform the House that one British citizen, Mrs Burak, is believed to have died in the bombing of Damascus. We know of no other British casualties. HM ambassador of the small British community there to leave on October 12.

Our ambassadors in the other countries involved in the conflict are in close touch with the British communities. We have not so far thought it necessary to advise further evacuation. But we have advised all British subjects to keep clear of the war zone.

Inconsistent

When the hostilities broke out, HM Government called for an immediate ceasefire, and suspended all shipments of arms to the battlefield. We did this because we considered it inconsistent to call for an immediate end to the fighting and yet to continue to send arms to the conflict. This seems to me to be the best posture from which to make an effective contribution to a constructive settlement.

As regards the effect of the embargo we have supplied a limited number of arms to both sides in recent years. Whereas in 1967 an embargo would have discriminated against Israel, it is now even-handed.

I would like to add here that British military facilities overseas have not been and are not being used for the transit of military supplies to the battlefield.

We also sought to bring the Security Council into action at once but neither side was willing to contemplate a ceasefire, except on terms totally unacceptable to the other. The Security Council has met several times but has been unable to find a consensus on any action.

HM Government have therefore been engaged in consultation with other governments with the twin objectives of bringing about an end to the fighting and ensuring that urgent steps are at last taken to implement in full Security Council Resolution 242.

The nine countries of the European Community joined in issuing an appeal to this effect on October 13. Resolution 242 still offers the best chance of a settlement because to it and it alone both Arabs and Israelis subscribe.

Three years ago at Harrogate I put forward our suggestions about how Resolution 242 might be put into effect. I outlined how a permanent settlement of the boundary question might be reached which could satisfy both

the demand of the Arab states for Israeli withdrawal and the equally legitimate demand of Israel, which we all support, for recognition within secure boundaries.

Clearly no settlement can be imposed. But unless the future is merely to be a repetition of the futile and dangerous confrontation of the past a new effort at conciliation must be made.

I feel that the ingredients of a settlement will have to include action by the Secretary General of the United Nations, the introduction of an international force first to police a ceasefire and then to guarantee the terms of a settlement. It will be necessary, too, I believe, to establish demilitarized zones.

The success of any initiative must depend on the state of the battle. Timing will therefore be all important. We are ready to play our part in the making of the peace and the keeping of it, so vital is it to the whole world that peace should be re-established in the area.

We will do our best to turn what appears to be a disaster now into an opportunity for securing a permanent settlement in the Middle East. I will of course keep the House regularly informed of developments.

Technical delay

MR CALLAGHAN (Cardiff, South-East, Lab)—The major criticism being made of the Government is about the arms embargo and whether it is even-handed. The Government say their intention is that it should be, but will the Foreign Secretary reconsider the supply of ammunition basically for the Centurion tanks?

Is it not the case that the Israelis had a shipment ready to go which was delayed purely on the technical grounds that yet another consignment would be ready within a few days and the battle started between these two? If that is so, should not the Government, if they wished to be even-handed, allow this kind of ammunition, and maybe spare parts also, to go to Israel in order to preserve the neutral position they say they intend to take up?

On the ingredients of a settlement, I agree with those of the Foreign Secretary has put forward. Is it not also necessary that they should include direct negotiations between the Israelis and the Arabs, and that there will have to be a settlement as a result of discussions between Israel and representatives of the Palestinian Arabs who are refugees if we are to get a permanent settlement in the Middle East.

Does not the conflict show that boundaries are perhaps less important than confidence and trust. That is the only way together with international boundaries, in which we shall get a settlement.

We will support the Foreign Secretary if he continues to use the United Nations. However unpromising the Security Council may appear at the moment, in an attempt to get a settlement. We are also happy if he continues direct discussions with other countries in order to make sure, if possible, that a ceasefire takes place.

I hope the Foreign Secretary will tell us more in the debate about the attitude of the United States and the Soviet Union in the matter of the supply of arms. (Cheers.) Although, as I understand their position, both seem reluctant to be dragged in; if this escalates it is the most serious

danger of world conflict that has existed for years.

On oil, I hope the Foreign Secretary will make clear to anyone using this threat that we are unlikely to be intimidated by threats that a dislocation of our oil supplies is going to cause us to change a policy we believe to be right.

It would be monstrous. If we were to pay such a price now we would merely find that the price would escalate on a second occasion. If this suggestion is ever put forward, I hope the Foreign Secretary will deal with it summarily, despite the dislocation it will cause.

SIR A. DOUGLAS-HOME—The arms embargo is causing me a lot of anxiety. I have gone into it with meticulous care. It is even-handed. I can fairly describe it as even-handed. There were items, for example, for which both Israel and Egypt had already paid, but they had not been shipped. The difference was made between those on the sea and those that had not left these shores. That seemed to us the only line we could draw.

It is a difficult subject. I am not giving away any secret when I say that we supply tanks to Jordan as well as to Israel. Does it make sense when arms are broken out to go on supplying both countries so that the war will escalate?

I will keep this matter under review as the war proceeds. The embargo provides us with the best posture for a peace-making effort. That is what matters—that the war should be stopped. There should be a ceasefire and we should get down to negotiations about a settlement.

The weakness in the situation all the time has been no direct discussions between Israel and Egypt, except under the chairmanship of Dr Jarring, but they broke down. They may get back to direct talks, but they will not be able to come to an agreement without assistance. Therefore we must stand by to give assistance.

In the case of the Soviet Union and the United States, there is a massive airlift on both sides.

On oil, I hope there will be no threats of the kind Mr Callaghan suggested might be made. There have been no threats so far. I hope they will not be made and endorse what he said about them.

MR WALTERS (Westbury, C)—While the timing of the United Nations intervention must be crucial it is a manifest British and western interest at the present time not to allow Arab countries to feel they only have the Soviet Union to turn to for either military or political help.

SIR A. DOUGLAS-HOME—This was one of the reasons why we have taken so much trouble in recent years to get closer to Egypt and other Arab countries and we have succeeded in doing this by not taking sides—to assure them there is some alternative to total reliance on the Soviet Union.

MR THORPE (North Devon, L)—For any lasting settlement we must at least establish the facts. Does the Foreign Secretary's information confirm that of the United Nations observers that this was a war which was unleashed by two Arab states against the state of Israel?

If that be the case does it not underscore the Foreign Secretary's point that any settlement must insofar as it is possible—which will secure her against further

When our salesmen sold arms to Israel for self defence, was it made clear if they ever had to use these weapons they would be denied the spare parts to make them effective.

Since we are talking about even-handed shipments to the battlefield is it not a fact that we are currently training helicopter pilots for Egypt and that we are about to send tanks to Dubai, which has not disclaimed an interest in the war, and that we will continue with shipments, albeit in the future, of aircraft to Saudi Arabia?

What sort of neutrality is that?

British interest

SIR A. DOUGLAS-HOME—We are training certain Egyptian helicopter pilots. They are already qualified air pilots and they are being trained to use a new helicopter which nobody need be afraid they will use that new helicopter in the war because that new helicopter would not be exported under the embargo. The question is, when do the pilots return to Egypt, now or in six or seven weeks' time after their course is completed?

As for the tanks for Dubai, I must invite Mr Thorpe to remember that there is another problem—the security of the Gulf—in which a vital British interest is concerned. (Conservative cheers.)

They are sent to be integrated into the defence forces of the United Arab Emirates to deal with light reconnaissance tanks which are light arms. They would not have any significance in the battle even if they were to go there.

Arabs aggression? I take the same view as Lord George-Brown that there is no profit in denouncing aggression. What we have to do is to try and get a ceasefire and settlement.

It is well known that in 1971 President Sadat said they no longer observed the ceasefire. They gave notice of this. This is a take account.

On whether we will be able to ensure her frontiers which will be universally accepted, Israel must have an independent life. We are all in support of that.

Why do we sell arms to Israel, or Jordan, or, for that matter, Egypt?

The idea was a moderate rearmament, to try to give these countries sufficient security and resort to attacks one upon the other. You may say that that policy has failed, but it was the object of the policy.

MR MAYHEW (Woolwich, East, Lab)—The Jordanians, unlike the Israelis, are wholly dependent on Britain for arms supplies, including Centurions. Since they have entered the war, the Arab nation is rapidly coming round to join the Israelis in opposition to the British arms embargo.

The Foreign Secretary should resist pressure from the Arabs and Israelis to abandon this embargo so he can maintain the position we had in 1967 of being able to find some honourable way of reaching a ceasefire and peaceful settlement.

SIR A. DOUGLAS-HOME—This is right. Mr Mayhew has expressed what I tried to say. Despite all the difficulties and

emotion this policy is right. It would not be right in the present circumstances to send spare parts and ammunition to Jordan and Israel to reinforce their tank arms.

Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union are going to be in a position to take a peace initiative.

All the countries of Western Europe are observing the embargo or are putting it on. This may give the Europeans the chance not only to initiate a peace settlement, but to take part in a peace-keeping exercise.

SIR JOHN RODGERS (Sevenoaks, C)—Was it made clear to the Israelis when they bought arms that the contracts would be suspended if hostilities broke out? If this is British policy throughout the world, nobody is ever going to buy British arms again.

SIR A. DOUGLAS-HOME—This was not made plain to the Israelis or Jordanians. But this is a situation in which to get peace of any kind it does not help for Britain to supply arms to both sides.

MR GORST (Hendon, North, C)—For this country to creep off the pages of history into a frightened neutrality will do no good either for our reputation for honesty or honourable dealing.

SIR A. DOUGLAS-HOME—I cannot accept that the policy of this or the previous Government could be described truly as a frightening neutrality.

MR HAROLD WILSON (Huyton, Lab)—The Foreign Secretary has said that in this situation it is extremely difficult to know whether any particular course is right or wrong, in that spirit will he look again at the question of the arms embargo?

This must mean one side has its hands tied by the immobilization of tanks it bought for its own defence, by the failure to send ammunition for guns and tanks supplied by this country.

When he refers to the 1967 embargo—and nothing he has said about that would I in any way want to contradict—this was announced by the then Government on the basis that we were trying to give a lead and we would have to end that embargo if that lead was not followed. It was not followed and we ended the embargo.

There is a difference on this occasion namely that even before the embargo certain countries in North Africa, for example, Libya, Algeria, and others, before the Russians came into the picture, made clear not only were they going to supply arms and not honour any embargo, but that they had started supplying them.

SIR A. DOUGLAS-HOME—The arms embargo as applied in 1967 was one the government of the day was willing to continue had other people—the Soviet Union—responded.

At that time if the embargo had continued, I think the Israelis would have been penalized. Now, as in the last few years, the supplies have been fairly equal to Egypt, Jordan and Israel. I do not think that one side would come off better than another if we were to resume arms. I have looked at this with the greatest care. I do not think that Israel would be penalized as against the Rabs, or vice-versa.

I will keep this under review. But at present I am pretty sure it is right to stay where we are.