

Prime Minister

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CONFIDENTIAL

FM FCO 271626Z JUN 79

TO IMMEDIATE TOKYO (FOR DELEGATION)

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TELEGRAM NUMBER 295 OF 37 JUNE

AND TO BEIRUT DAMASCUS TEL AVIV PRIORITY AMMAN WASHINGTON

SYRIAN/ISRAELI CLASH

21 6 73

1. YOU WILL HAVE SEEN REPORTS THAT ISRAELI AIRCRAFT SHOT DOWN 5 SYRIAN MIGS OVER SOUTH LEBANON THIS MORNING.
2. THE INCIDENT HAPPENED DURING ISRAELI AIR ATTACKS ON PALESTINIAN POSITIONS IN THE AREA OF TYRE AND SIDON. IT FOLLOWS AN INCREASE IN RECENT WEEKS IN DEFENSIVE AIR PATROLLING OVER LEBANON BY SYRIAN AIRCRAFT, ALTHOUGH THEY HAVE HITHERTO AVOIDED CLOSE CONTACT WITH ISRAELI AIRCRAFT. IF THE INCIDENT INDEED HAPPENED OVER TYRE AND SIDON THIS WOULD PUT IT SOUTH OF THE SO-CALLED RED LINE BEYOND WHICH SYRIAN GROUND FORCES HAVE BEEN WARNED NOT TO ADVANCE BY THE ISRAELIS. IT WOULD BE UNUSUAL FOR SYRIAN AIRCRAFT TO PATROL THIS FAR SOUTH.
3. THE INCIDENT FOLLOWS WARNINGS BY THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT THAT ISRAELI ATTACKS AGAINST PALESTINIAN POSITIONS COULD NOT CONTINUE WITH IMPUNITY. THE SYRIANS MAY HAVE FELT OBLIGED TO SHOW THE PALESTINIANS AND LEBANESE THAT THESE WERE NOT EMPTY THREATS. NONTHELESS IT SEEMS STRANGE THAT THE SYRIANS WOULD EITHER ATTACK OR

DELIBERATELY PROVOKE THE ISRAELIS AT THIS JUNCTURE, PARTICULARLY
WHEN THERE IS SERIOUS INTERNAL TROUBLE IN SYRIA. OUR PRELIMINARY
VIEW IS THAT ISRAELIS WOULD NOT WANT OPEN HOSTILITIES WITH SYRIA²⁷ 71
BUT JUDGED THE MOMENT OPPORTUNE TO WARN THE SYRIANS OFF ANY ATTEMPT
TO INTERFERE WITH ISRAEL'S CONTINUED OPERATIONS IN SOUTH LEBANON.
THEY MAY ALSO HAVE CONSIDERED THAT A SHARP BLOW WOULD BE A SETBACK
TO ASSAD, WHOSE POSITION THEY PROBABLY BELIEVE TO HAVE BEEN WEAKENED
BY RECENT EVENTS. WE WOULD EXPECT THE SYRIANS TO REACT BY A
POLITICAL MOVE, IE RECOURSE TO THE SECURITY COUNCIL RATHER THAN
MILITARILY. THEY MUST BE WELL AWARE THAT THEY ARE NO POSITION TO
FIGHT A WAR AGAINST ISRAEL.

4. NEWS DEPARTMENT HAVE BEEN INSTRUCTED TO SAY, IF ASKED, THAT
WE ARE CONCERNED BY THE DANGERS OF THIS INCIDENT AND APPEAL TO
BOTH SIDES TO EXERCISE RESTRAINT.

CARRINGTON

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John W. Carrington