

Withdrawal/Redaction Sheet

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15. Memcon	Re: Meeting with President Ben Ali of Tunisia (4 pp.)	11/14/89	(b)(1)	C

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RESTRICTION CODES

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- P-1 National Security Classified Information [(a)(1) of the PRA]
- P-2 Relating to the appointment to Federal office [(a)(2) of the PRA]
- P-3 Release would violate a Federal statute [(a)(3) of the PRA]
- P-4 Release would disclose trade secrets or confidential commercial or financial information [(a)(4) of the PRA]
- P-5 Release would disclose confidential advice between the President and his advisors, or between such advisors [(a)(5) of the PRA]
- P-6 Release would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy [(a)(6) of the PRA]

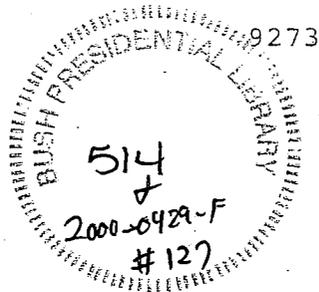
- (b)(1) National security classified information [(b)(1) of the FOIA]
- (b)(2) Release would disclose internal personnel rules and practices of an agency [(b)(2) of the FOIA]
- (b)(3) Release would violate a Federal statute [(b)(3) of the FOIA]
- (b)(4) Release would disclose trade secrets or confidential or financial information [(b)(4) of the FOIA]
- (b)(6) Release would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy [(b)(6) of the FOIA]
- (b)(7) Release would disclose information compiled for law enforcement purposes [(b)(7) of the FOIA]
- (b)(8) Release would disclose information concerning the regulation of financial institutions [(b)(8) of the FOIA]
- (b)(9) Release would disclose geological or geophysical information

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with President Ben Ali of Tunisia (U)

PARTICIPANTS: The President
The Vice President
James A. Baker, Secretary of State
John H. Sununu, Chief of Staff
Brent Scowcroft, Assistant to the President
for National Security Affairs
Robert M. Gates, Assistant to the President and
Deputy for National Security Affairs
John Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for Near
Eastern and South Asian Affairs (NEA)
Robert H. Pelletreau, Jr., U.S. Ambassador
to Tunisia
C. David Welch, Director, Near East and South
Asian Affairs, NSC, Notetaker
Shuckran Kamal, Interpreter

President Ben Ali
Abdelhamid Escheikh, Foreign Minister
Moncer Rouissi, Minister of Social Affairs
Abdelaziz Hamzaoui, Tunisian Ambassador
to the U.S.
Oussama Romdhani, Interpreter

DATE, TIME November 14, 1989, 11:05 - 11:37 a.m. EST
AND PLACE: The Oval Office

The President: I'm very glad that you are able to visit here for this brief amount of time, before we offer you more extended hospitality next year. (U)

President Ben Ali: I am very happy to be here. It is an honor for me and for the people of Tunisia. Mr. President, you know Tunisia as it was before the changes of November 7, 1987. Without going into the details, you know the situation, as it was with the leadership of President Bourguiba, because you were there for visits. There was a constitutional change, confirmed by the people in elections on April 2, 1989. The former President is fine and he is being taken care of. (C)

The President: How is his health? I know he is old and his faculties have slipped somewhat, but has he slipped further? (U)

President Ben Ali: He is an old man -- over 90 years old. He has no physical ailments, he just suffers from old age. (U)

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The President: Well, let me just say that the way that you handled the transition earned great respect. We know that Bourguiba was the patriarch and was close to his people. The way you have handled this has been just great. (C)

President Ben Ali: The United States and Tunisia have been friends for a long time. The friendship was good before the changes of November 1987, before our constitutional reforms, before we restored human rights and democracy, and before we undertook economic reforms. After all of these changes, we are now better friends. (C)

The President: If you don't mind, I thought I would quickly make a couple of points that are on my mind. First, our close military cooperation is a good thing. We appreciate it. Second, we hope to offer you a more generous welcome here for a State Visit on May 15 (1990), if that is agreeable to you. Third, I realize that your economic and political reforms are not easy decisions. Because of the drought that has affected Tunisia, we are ready to provide \$11.9 million in feed grain, which we hope will be helpful. (C)

The President: My fourth point relates to one of your neighbors. I don't want to seem inflexible, but I just do not trust him (Libyan President Qadhafi). Your response to Qadhafi is your own business; say for instance in the Maghreb Union. You also have economic connections. Our good friend President Mubarak has waxed eloquently on the potential for changing Qadhafi, but I told him to watch his wallet -- that's an American expression meaning be careful. Qadhafi is still involved in terror and radicalism. You will handle him as you will, and I know you have experience; my word is only one of caution. (C)

The President: Last, the PLO. We appreciate your hosting of the U.S.-PLO dialogue. We believe it can be a moderating influence. Jim Baker is killing himself trying to put together a dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians to get things moving forward. We want the PLO to OK this even if the original formula does not satisfy them in all ways. (C)

President Ben Ali: Allow me to start with bilateral matters, then address the other questions. Bilateral relations are excellent. We appreciate all your assistance in the past. With regard to military cooperation, we hope it continues and improves. We hope for defensive weapons, deterrent weapons that we have asked for, especially Stingers. Second, there is a deficit in feed grains for the next ten years because of the drought of the last two years. Third, there is democracy. There can be no democracy without government, and no government without democracy. That is why we are proceeding with economic reforms. We want to encourage U.S. investment in Tunisia, with new loans to open our economy. We still hold to the same principles and values; so, stability in Tunisia should encourage investors. The

final point is debt. Our debt burden is very heavy, especially to the United States. The debts are largely because of Qadhafi and the military expenditures we had to undertake to defend ourselves. This affects economic development. If there is not the possibility of deferring or forgiving debts, then perhaps doing so in return for defending the environment might be possible. (C)

Ambassador Hamzaoui: Forgive me, but what is meant here is a debt swap for environmental projects. (C)

The President: What we call environmental set-asides... (C)

President Ben Ali: Regarding Qadhafi, he has caused problems for us. He has an unusual personality. We had to arm ourselves after the 1980 incident. Qadhafi has a capability and resources, and he has access to terrorists. We have had to take precautions. We are a peaceful tourist country, no threat to anyone. Our position is that we don't believe Qadhafi will ever change. (C)

The President: You're right. Everyone seems to go through thinking that he can be moved to change. About the Stinger missiles -- I know we have a commitment to sell you Stinger missiles. As we have said, as soon as the environment is right in Congress, we will begin consultations for moving ahead with that commitment. But what I need to know from you before we proceed is whether you think that the threat is still there. Once I know from you what you want to do, then we could begin consultations with an intent to proceed to the sale, but I will need to reserve the final decision on timing in consultation with you, after our informal soundings with Congress. I just wanted to tell you that there may be more controversy here than we want -- your wonderful country could well get injected into that controversy. This is not a reason not to go forward, we stand by our word -- but just to let you know. We reserve the right to decide the timing. I just don't want Tunisia thrust into a political controversy in Congress. We need a "yes" from you to proceed, then we will start consultations and we will consult with you each step of the way. I know our friends in the Arab world say that it isn't right that these things should be so controversial -- and I won't argue that. Your "peaceful tourist country" could be dragged into a political controversy. (C)

Secretary Baker: The mood in Congress is to severely restrict if not eliminate Stingers to countries in the region. There has been a vigorous debate over the buy-back of Stingers provided to one country in the region. I know that Undersecretary Bartholomew and Assistant Secretary Armitage have talked to you about the timing of any consultations and notification of Congress, pending resolution of this other debate. We know we have a commitment. We just do not think that the timing is good and we hate to see a friend like Tunisia involved in what will be a very nasty debate. (C)

The President: We don't need an answer on this now. You consult with your advisers and let us know. Congress is concerned about the proliferation of Stingers. (C)

President Ben Ali: To conclude about Qadhafi, I have received a message from him to relay to you -- which I am now doing without anything on my part -- with his wishes for a normal relationship with the United States. (C)

The President: You believe that? I can see you aren't sure. Well, I think there are some signs of moderation, but there are other signs that he is still encouraging international terror. I know this from the best intelligence there is. He continues to do things. I admit that our friend President Mubarak is rather convincing about Qadhafi's turn to being more moderate, but he simply continues to do certain things. There must be demonstrable evidence that he has ceased to export terror and to harbor terrorists. (C)

President Ben Ali: [REDACTED] are trying to coexist and at the same time be cautious. (C)

We (b)(1)

The President: Let me inject a word of support for the Taif process and the new President of Lebanon. You have my respect for what you have done for Lebanon and we would welcome any support you can give President Moawad. We want to return Lebanon to the safe oasis it used to be. (C)

President Ben Ali: We supported the Taif process. Aoun is now isolated. We support Moawad and I sent him congratulations. I thank you very much for your hospitality -- I know you are very busy. I would be happy to return for a visit in May. Perhaps you can visit Tunisia at the time of your trip to Malta. (C)

The President: Well, that's very kind of you to ask. I think we'll be heading back this way after Malta, but one day I would love to return to Tunisia. If it would not be any imposition or any problem -- believe me, I don't want to raise a difficulty -- I would appreciate it if you could pay my respects to Bourguiba. He may remember me. (C)

The meeting concluded at 11:37 a.m.