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SECRETARY OF STATE

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14 May 2001

Dear Prime Minister,

IRAQ

Summary

Proposed strategy offers best prospect of retaining maximum control over Iraqi revenues, impeding Baghdad's ability to threaten its neighbours, and regaining international support. But need to be realistic about chances of speedy implementation. Difficulties of winning Russian and French support, and that of front line states, very real. Pan-Whitehall – as well as joint UK/US – involvement in planning and implementing information effort required. Exhaustive reviews of no fly zones have produced no alternative that meets our policy objectives at lower risk. Patrolling rates must reflect military judgement on minimising risk to aircrew. Danger of mixed messages being received in Washington; and of encouraging others to hold the package hostage on this issue.

Background

I am grateful to Robin Cook for copying me his minute of 4<sup>th</sup> May on Iraq. I broadly support the strategy Robin sets out, which echoes that in John Sawers' letter to Sherard Cowper Coles of 7<sup>th</sup> March.

The Rt Hon Tony Blair MP

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I agree that the key to success will lie in implementing the new measures to clamp down on oil smuggling, reduce sanctions breaking and tighten up on dual use goods. On both, as Robin points out, we are heavily dependent on the attitudes of the front line states. There are limited grounds for optimism that they will do what they say. We have limited leverage over Syria.

Washington is little better placed. King Abdullah has made it clear that he will not accept Jordan being singled out. In all three cases, only significant financial compensation is likely to have an impact; but I have seen little evidence to support the notion that the likely vast sums required will be made available, whether from Riyadh or anywhere else. Even with regional buy in, a more robust border controls regime would not amount to a fire-wall: given the impossibility of inspecting every cargo and the number of routes into Iraq we must expect some prohibited goods to continue to get through.

Nor would I wish to underplay the difficulties of bringing the French and Russians on board. Neither are likely to be driven by our imperative to secure international consensus in time for inclusion in the oil for food roll over resolution on 4 June. They have already signalled that they regard this an artificial deadline; and we know that they are unhappy with elements of the package. We can assume that Moscow and Paris will seek to prolong discussions. In doing so they are likely to resurrect proposals of their own aimed at renegotiating unacceptably the terms of UNSCR 1284. We may need to accept that we are in for a long haul.

Leaving these points to one side, I wholeheartedly agree with Robin that there will be a need for a concerted UK/US information campaign to support the roll out of the new policy. My visit to the region last week, confirmed the impression that Iraq's position in the wake of the Arab Summit is weaker in the Arab world. The themes articulated by Robin will help to keep the coalition on

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the high moral ground; and so will the proposed Contract with Iraq. But Baghdad's sophisticated propaganda machine is well-versed in turning the tables; and the Israeli response to the intifada in the Occupied Territories (and perceived Western tolerance of it) will continue to ensure that regional opinion favours brother Arabs. This implies the need for a longer-term, more comprehensive influencing campaign, aimed at Arab publics as well as leaders. This will certainly need to be co-ordinated with the US. But it will also require us to up our game nationally, if not domestically. It will be important to ensure that our efforts are properly integrated, and make best use of all the resources that are available.

Finally, I understand Robin's frustration with the no fly zones. Military commanders are already charged with conducting the mission we have laid upon them with minimum profile and risk. We have made progress over the past two years in bearing down on patrolling rates, reducing responses to Iraqi threats, and making increased use of UAVs for tactical reconnaissance. But I do not think that looking yet again at patrolling, with a view to reducing or even ending it, would be productive. The arguments for maintaining the no fly zones are based on the assessed continued humanitarian requirement, the importance of the southern zone for the defence of Kuwait, and the desire to avoid handing Saddam a victory which might undermine containment. These remain powerful. While I accept that our view is not universally shared, it remains that the zones continue to be legally justified. We have asked officials to identify a better (and less risky) means of achieving our objectives. Despite exhaustive scrutiny, they have not found one: their consistent advice is that regular patrols are required both to achieve the task and in order effectively – and safely – to monitor the threat. Decisions about patrolling rates must remain the preserve of the military commander, who must balance risk against exposure to the threat.

I was surprised by Robin's suggestion that the Administration now regards the operation of 16<sup>th</sup> February as a mistake. From our contacts with the Pentagon,

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it is clear that they have taken on board the need to consider the presentational aspects rather more carefully. But this in no way detracts from the assessed need to conduct such operations in order to reduce the risk to aircrew. More generally, my understanding is that, whatever the rumours circulated in the US press, our assessment of the importance of the zones and the military advice that regular patrols are required to enforce them safely, is shared in Washington. Although some in the US may see limited scope for marginal adjustments in flying rates, there is no consensus yet. We should judge any proposals against the need to ensure that we do nothing that might increase the risk to aircrew. In the meantime, we should try to ensure that we adopt a consistent line with US interlocutors. The risk of the Administration picking up mixed messages about our commitment to continued military co-operation in this area is very real. It is potentially very damaging, specifically in terms of our ability to influence thinking on future US targeting proposals, which may give rise to real concerns. And it would be unhelpful if other P5 members felt in any way encouraged to introduce the future of the zones into the package, thereby slowing progress still further.

I am copying this to Robin Cook and Sir Richard Wilson.

*Mr Moffat*  
*(Private Secretary)*  
*Approved by me Defence Secretary*  
*and signed in his absence*

**GEOFFREY HOON**

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