

SECRET UK EYES ONLY
PERSONAL
DECLASSIFIED



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
OLD WAR OFFICE BUILDING
WHITEHALL LONDON SW1A 2EU

Telephone 020
Fax: 020
E-mail:

SECRETARY OF STATE

MO 6/17/15H

2 August 2001

136830/01

Dear Michael,

IRAQ: RO4

Summary

UK and US military commanders share assessment that the threat to coalition aircraft in the southern no fly zone has increased substantially. Washington concerned about the political and presentational implications of launching high profile military action at present; desire to consider a response within the context of wider policy debate on Iraq will also push decision-making to the right. The Defence Secretary is convinced that urgent action is required to reduce the risk to our aircrew to manageable levels. As a first step, he judges it essential to persuade the US that coalition commanders must be allowed to make robust and regular use of the agreed con-ops. But he does not rule out the need, perhaps in the near future, for a more substantial operation (including against targets north of the 33rd parallel).

Detail

Whilst coalition aircraft have continued to come under regular attack by the Iraqi air defences, the military assessment was until very recently that the overall risk remained manageable. Events over recent weeks have, however brought this into question, with July seeing an alarming increase in the number of occasions on which coalition aircraft have narrowly avoided being shot down (ten separate incidents in the south alone, compared to eleven in the previous four months combined). You will have seen media reports of SAMs being fired at US U2 and E2C reconnaissance aircraft,

Michael Tatham Esq
10 Downing Street

SECRET UK EYES ONLY
PERSONAL
DECLASSIFIED

WR 127/009/01		
15 AUG 2001		
INDEX	PA	Action Taken

SECRET UK EYES ONLY
PERSONAL
DECLASSIFIED

In addition, RAF Tornado GR4s have been bracketed by accurate AAA fire at least twice. These incidents have led US and UK military commanders urgently to review the risk. They have concluded that it has increased, and that action is urgently required if we are to reduce it to levels capable of being managed in the medium term.

The increased risk reflects in great measure the success of Iraqi efforts to improve their integrated air defence system (in particular by making greater reliance on assets located outside the no fly zones).

impedes our ability
enhances

to understand the threat. It

This

the ability of the Iraqis to threaten coalition aircrew, even with unguided AAA and SAMs. So just as we are becoming less aware of the threat posed by the Iraqi air defences, their ability to kill our people is increasing.

Coalition restraint over the past three months – illustrated by a substantial reduction in the volume of bombing under the delegated concept of operations – is also relevant. To a degree this reflects US concerns, in the wake of February's operation, to keep matters low key. It is also a factor of an unresolved tension within the Administration between Powell and those (including Rumsfeld) who favour using actions in the no fly zones to hit Saddam harder. The result has been to reduce the day to day extent to which the coalition has been damping down the threat.

Against this background, US and UK military planners have been working up proposals aimed at reducing the threat to a manageable level. This work has focused on proposals for an operation aimed at degrading Iraqi ability both to gather information about coalition activity in the no fly zones and thence to make use of it to threaten our aircrew. The US have been thinking in terms of an attack on some 30 targets, 18 located north of the 33rd parallel. The bulk would be attacked with TLAM missiles, with the remainder being attacked in parallel by manned aircraft using stand off weapons. No aircraft would fly north of the 33rd parallel. The US had held a carrier group, due to depart on roulement this week, in the Gulf in order to participate in the operation, which they were considering conducting next week.

It has become apparent this afternoon that concerns about the wider implications of such an operation are likely to delay decisions on the way ahead, at least for the next two weeks. US thinking appears to be constrained by concerns about the reaction of moderate Arab governments (

), already under domestic pressure because of developments in Israel and Palestine. They are also clearly alive to the likely propaganda benefit that

SECRET UK EYES ONLY
PERSONAL
DECLASSIFIED

SECRET UK EYES ONLY
PERSONAL
DECLASSIFIED

Saddam would seek to derive from an attack on targets close to Baghdad, and the predictable response of Paris and Moscow. In addition, it is clear that the debate on how to respond to the current operational problem has broadened into a wider one about the direction of future US policy in the zones, with the advocates of hitting Saddam harder using this as an opportunity to move the argument in that direction.

The Defence Secretary is convinced of the need, in the face of the substantially increased threat, to take action to reduce the risk to the Service personnel conducting this task. Whilst he understands the political and presentational arguments for delay, his preference would have been for a substantial operation designed to achieve this (indeed, he has asked for the views of the Attorney General on a UK-prepared plan to attack 21 targets). He accepts the military advice that only by conducting such an operation, including against targets north of the 33rd parallel, can we expect to reduce the threat substantially in the medium term. But he accepts that, just as in the US, time will be required to afford collective consideration of such a proposal. He believes that this is an issue to which we will need to return in the future.

In the meantime, he is clear that the status quo is not an option, and that a robust return to the existing agreed concept of operations is essential in order to enable the coalition to manage the enhanced risk in the immediate term. Officials are making clear the importance that we attach to this; and the Defence Secretary will speak to Rumsfeld if required to reinforce the point.

I am copying this letter to Simon McDonald (FCO), Paul Berman (LSLO) and Richard Abel (Cabinet Office).

*Yours aye,
Nicky*

(N P MOFFAT)
Private Secretary

SECRET UK EYES ONLY
PERSONAL
DECLASSIFIED