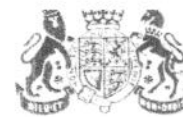


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Foreign & Commonwealth
Office

London SW1A 2AH

3 August 2001

1851

Dear Mr. Chavel,

Iraq: R04

Summary

Agree the need to return to use of existing concept of operations to minimise risk to our aircrews. Concerns about the implications for our wider interests of more substantial operations involving targets outside the NFZs. Need to examine wider policy aspects before embarking on such a course.

Detail

I have seen Nicky Moffat's 2 August letter to you about the risk to coalition aircrews in the southern NFZ. I have consulted the Foreign Secretary.

We agree that allied aircrews must be protected if the NFZs are to be maintained. We understand that there has been a steady increase in the threat to our aircraft. Military commanders should use their delegated authority to take action within the NFZs to minimise the risk to allied aircrews. I understand that the US CJCS is now issuing instructions to this effect.

Nicky's letter noted that the Defence Secretary does not rule out the need in the near future for a more substantial operation. The Foreign Secretary is concerned that we do not initiate a major attack, or one north of the southern NFZ, without considering carefully the implications for our wider interests. Following his intervention with Colin Powell, the US Administration now appear to take the same view.

With events in Palestine, tension in the region is running high. Gulf leaders are under intense pressure. A more substantial operation (including targets north of the 33rd parallel) would bring into stark relief arguments about double standards and inflame Arab public opinion. We might face attacks on UK and US Embassies, and other interests in the region. We owe a duty of care to our staff and to British citizens in the region, as well as to our aircrews.

Politically, a major operation north of the southern NFZ would play straight into Saddam's hands by providing good CNN copy of Baghdad under attack. UK domestic and international reaction following the February attack was hostile. Saddam

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has shown that he is more than willing to absorb the temporary setbacks to his military capability in exchange for wider political gains. Experience tells him that following each major attack his international position improves and his hopes of breaking out of containment increases. It was only his own overplaying of his hand at the Amman Summit in March that prevented his scoring a major diplomatic coup following the 16 February RO4.

Our regional allies would not wish to be associated with an operation on the scale being considered. Kuwait is keen to keep operations in the NFZs as low-key as possible. They find operations originating from their bases an embarrassment, more so now that Israel/Arab relations have worsened. Saudi Arabia imposed new constraints on coalition aircraft following the February operation. A further high-profile action could lead them to review their commitment to hosting our aircraft. It would be essential to consult both in advance.

Such an operation could also prove fatal to our current Iraq policy. Iraq has expended considerable effort with Russia to block our revised sanctions policy. Saddam is clearly worried that the Russians will not continue to block it. But, however we tried to present it, a major operation would be interpreted as a get-tough policy by the US in frustration at the failure to get our revised sanctions approach agreed. France (and the rest of the EU) would find it more difficult to continue to support our sanctions proposals, Russia easier to continue blocking them. The collapse of our current policy, which has been carefully considered and agreed in Whitehall and with the US, would leave us in a policy vacuum in which we would risk getting sucked into adopting a more militaristic posture.

The Foreign Secretary is anxious that we consider thoroughly the wider policy implications before we embark on a major operation, particularly one involving targets outside the NFZs. Should the Defence Secretary's concern be borne out that action within the delegated authorities inside the NFZs will prove inadequate to reduce the risk to Allied aircrews to an acceptable level, we accept we would have to address whether to mount a substantial operation. However, in doing so, the balance of advantage to maintaining the NFZs would require the most careful consideration.

I am copying this letter to Nicky Moffat (MOD), Paul Berman (LSLO) and Richard Abel (Cabinet Office).

Yours aye,

(Mark Sedwill)
Private Secretary

Michael Tatham Esq
10 Downing Street

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