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IMMEDIATE

PRIME MINISTER

From: David Manning
Date: 22 September 2002

S 255/02

cc: Jonathan Powell
Matthew Rycroft

IRAQ: POSSIBLE UK MILITARY CONTRIBUTION

MOD's latest thinking is set out in the letter attached. They are asking for your agreement on several issues.

The first is to tell a key US military planning conference later this week that we are ready to offer the option 2 package that you and Geoff discussed (Special Forces, Maritime, Air, and a possible Marines add-on in the south.) I think you should authorise this. ✓

They also want to tell the planning conference that we might offer a major land contribution to a joint US-UK force in the north (a UK divisional HQ and armoured brigade). They would make it clear that much more work needs to be done before we knew whether we could take this on. ✓

† The possibility that the military could make a land contribution in the north is a surprise. Until recently we were being told that covering the firemen's strike (Operation Fresco) would make this impossible. Now, suddenly, it isn't. The (militarily mouth-watering) prospect of being given tactical leadership of the campaign in the north, with the US Third Cavalry Regiment coming under UK command, may have something to do with this volte face.

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I think you should register extreme caution at this stage. You need a fully worked-up proposal before giving the MOD any expectation that you might back this. There are lots of difficult questions to be answered: how is it that we can suddenly do this when we thought we couldn't? How confident can we be that the Turkish angle will be sorted out and that access and supply will be assured? Can we sustain the numbers (apparently 28,000); and if so for how long? Are we clear what sort of Iraqi forces we shall confront etc etc?

On condition that MOD impress on their US counterparts that we are only in the very early stages of exploring the possibility, and that there has as yet been no discussion at political level, much less any decision, I think you should give them the go ahead. But they must say, as the letter proposes, that CENTCOM will indeed need to produce a parallel plan without a UK contribution since the latter may well not be forthcoming.

If you do agree to this, it follows that you should also agree that MOD may replace key units already allocated to Operation Fresco that would be needed if we undertook the northern operation. MOD need a decision by 25 September. Geoff recommends that, if we do this, you should announce it to the House on Tuesday, despite the speculation that will follow. I think it probably would be best to come clean. The movements of these units would become clear very shortly after the debate and would fuel speculation anyway. Do you agree?

I should let MOD know your decisions tomorrow, Monday.


DAVID MANNING

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