



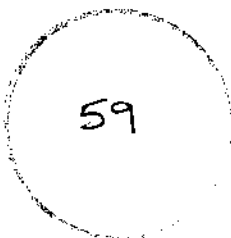
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MO 6/17/15H

8 January 2003

Dear David

Alpin 1/17/

IRAQ: UK LAND CONTRIBUTION

In view of difficulties with Turkey, US military planners have offered an alternative role for a UK ground force in the South. Further advice will follow next week. In the meantime, the Defence Secretary is authorising measures to keep options open, including a further swap-around of units assigned for Operation FRESCO; this will unavoidably lead to further speculation.

Turkey

As you know (Peter Watkins' letter of 7 January), the Turks , but not for US ground forces. The US are becoming increasingly pessimistic about the prospects of resolving this. But even if they can do so, they now judge that time is too short from a practical perspective to deploy both a US division and a UK division through Turkey rapidly enough on their current assumptions about timescales. Inevitably, the US priority is to keep alive the possibility of deploying their own division through Turkey in order best to maintain the strategic benefit of a Northern axis.

Southern UK Role

US military planners have therefore been considering what role a UK ground force could play in the South, and have made a proposal. In essence, they are offering to make space in Kuwait for the deployment of HQ 1 UK Armoured Division with 7 Armoured Brigade and 16 Air Assault Brigade, and to facilitate this and provide

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logistic support. They have proposed a role for this force, including our Amphibious Task Group (ATG) based on 3 Commando Brigade, from the beginning of ground operations in Southern Iraq. Although the details will evolve, it may be helpful, since decisions are likely to be needed rapidly next week, to describe the current thinking.

In outline, and subject to further development, the proposed role (which depends on the availability in sequence of all elements of the package) is that:

- During initial US ground operations, (which if ordered could be as early as 3 March) the ATG, with tactical control of a US Marine Expeditionary Unit, would conduct the Um Qasr/AI Faw operation as already planned (our letter of 12 December).
- Approximately ten days later, HQ 1 Armoured Division with 16 Air Assault Brigade would relieve US forces in an area south of Basrah and the Euphrates including the Ramallah oilfields, enabling the US to press further north. 16 Air Assault Brigade might also be able to conduct early seizure operations.
- Whilst US forces conduct decisive ground operations to isolate Baghdad, HQ 1 Armoured Division with 7 Armoured Brigade could protect the right flank of the US 1st Marine Expeditionary Force as it advances north. This would include securing Basrah International Airport and fixing Iraqi forces in the city.
- The final UK Divisional Area of Responsibility, including for aftermath operations, would be an area bounded by the Iraq/Kuwait border in the south, Jalibah airfield in the west, the Euphrates in the north, and the Shatt al Arab waterway in the east – a largely Shia area of some 1600 km².

We need to consider this proposal carefully, and will provide further advice next week. On a first reading, there are a number of attractions. This would be a high-profile role for UK ground forces at the beginning of any campaign, in an area in which the threat (barring WMD use) is likely to be limited. When combined with the US offer of logistic support (which we understand applies regardless of whether they are able to deploy ground forces through Turkey), this has the potential to allow a significant reduction in the overall number of reservists we might require. Our initial assessment suggests that we could achieve deployment within current US timelines, and sustain such a force in theatre potentially for some time, allowing political flexibility over timing. The proposed UK role should enable US forces to reach further, faster, whilst providing a coherent transition to aftermath operations – an area of acknowledged UK expertise - in territory captured early in the campaign. It would demonstrate at the very beginning of ground operations that this was a coalition, rather than a US-only, campaign. And of course it would remove the Turkish uncertainty as far as UK ground forces are concerned, although we will continue to plan for some of our air effort to be based in the North, as previously envisaged, and will seek Turkish agreement for these assets. Strategically it would be helpful to preserve ambiguity about Turkish intentions, at least in Iraqi eyes.

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On the other hand, there may be some disadvantages. The proposed UK role would be crucial to the US plan in the South. Whilst this would give us a significant voice in decision-making, it would also increase the military impact on the US of any eventual UK decision not to participate in an operation: clearly, this would place us in a very awkward position if the US seemed likely to want to proceed in circumstances with which we were not content. Wider questions about the overall US plan still need to be answered, particularly as long as their ability to achieve the necessary strategic effects in the North remains uncertain. And we need to look further at the detail of what is proposed, before reaching a firm view on its military and political merits.

Preparatory Steps

However, in the meantime, the Defence Secretary believes that we should take the necessary steps to keep the option open:

- The deployment by sea of some enabling (rather than combat) equipment for ground and air forces from around 16/17 January. This activity falls within the statements on preparedness already made to Parliament.
- We also need to plan on deploying elements of the Divisional, Brigade and other Headquarters to provide an initial operating capability in Kuwait by the end of January, in order to participate in the US mission rehearsal, Exercise LUCKY WARRIOR. This will need to be announced in Parliament and could be included in the Statement which we will need to make within the next two weeks on land force deployment.

FRESCO

More immediately visible will be a further swap-around of units for FRESCO firefighting duties. If we are to keep open the option of including 16 Air Assault Brigade in a UK land force, we need to release its units from FRESCO commitments. The Army and RAF can provide sufficient replacement crews between them, requiring a further training package beginning next week and the call out of some 240 additional RAF reservists to enable some regular RAF personnel to be switched from Iraq to FRESCO. If FRESCO continues beyond the end of January and into the spring, there will inevitably be knock-on effects, particularly for the Army. Over time this could include the extension of operational tours for some units in the Balkans and Northern Ireland. Although this would clearly not be ideal, the Chief of the General Staff judges that the impact is acceptable and will be understood by soldiers, in the context of enabling the Army to play an important operational role.

In order to keep military options open whilst preserving FRESCO capability, the Defence Secretary is therefore authorising the necessary measures. This is bound to leak very quickly, and we propose to contact journalists informally to put it in context. It can be presented as a necessary step to keep options open as planning evolves, without implying any fixed decisions on force packages for Iraq, and without implying any particular assumption about the duration of FRESCO; indeed as an Operation, it is normal to route the units allocated.

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I am copying this to Alastair Campbell (No.10), Simon McDonald (FCO) and to Desmond Bowen (Cabinet Office).

Yours,

Mashyn

M J WILLIAMS
Private Secretary

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