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PRIME MINISTER

cc: Jonathan Powell
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THE IRAQ WAR: TEN DAYS IN

For what they are worth, here are my thoughts.

As you said at Camp David, much has been achieved. We need to keep our nerve. But we also need to accept that the war is not working out as advertised, and adjust accordingly.

Saddam is apparently still in place; and the Iraqis are fighting effectively. This is not the war the military expected. We need a strategy for dealing with the Feddayeen phenomenon. CDS says Franks will take these units out one by one. But how does he intend to identify them (in civilian clothes and operating from SUVs)? What will he do when they melt back into the population in built up areas? We are also short of men,

We now have thousands of troops still on their way through the Red Sea.

The risks as I see them

Franks will launch his delayed, and much hyped, Army Group offensive later this week. But what sort of offensive will it be if the Iraqis refuse the roles allocated to them by the Cent Com war-gamers? Will pulverising attacks be possible on

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the Medina and Baghdad divisions if they avoid fighting in massed units in the open, instead concentrating in heavily populated, built up areas?

Franks' focus remains Baghdad. Whatever the outcome of the imminent offensive, he seems determined to deliver the prize to Bush and Rumsfeld within 4-6 weeks. But how easily will Baghdad fall? How will Franks cope with Feddayeen and Republican Guards ready to fight street by street and welcoming civilian casualties? The plan to divide Baghdad into forty or fifty sectors and clear them out one by one could turn into a nightmare and give Saddam his Stalingrad. I think you should demand an early review of this strategy. I think it risks losing us the war rather than winning it.

The Military Priorities

All this makes me think we should:

- ask the military for a detailed account of how they will now adapt the campaign to the Iraqi guerilla war of hit and run;
- ask for a detailed analysis of Franks' planned big offensive, including a clear picture of where the Iraqi forces are and how we expect them to fight. How severe will the collateral damage be if the Medina and Baghdad divisions are in urban areas?
- put plans for Baghdad on hold, while we focus on Basra. We should reject the argument that if Baghdad falls so will Basra but that the reverse does not apply. Even on Franks' most optimistic

assumptions, Baghdad is unlikely to fall quickly. But Basra might. Success there would send shock waves through the Iraqi system that could destabilise the regime. This could in turn give us a much better chance of taking Baghdad with minimum loss of life. The question is whether it now makes sense for the Americans to move forces to Basra rather than for us to withdraw our armour from the city and send it north.

The Political Strategy

Things may be better than I think. Saddam may suddenly fall or be assassinated. Basra may suddenly surrender

. But the "denouement" that Condi talked to me about yesterday still feels a long way off. We are at a critical moment: we need a "Mazar-e-Sharif" turning point. We need to ensure that the military campaign is the means of winning the political argument. Our best chance is to concentrate on taking Basra in the next few days and weeks, and on pacifying the Shia south. With the oil wells working and humanitarian relief in place, we will be able to show that we have liberated an area and that life is steadily improving. People will then lose their fear and speak out. This will help transform the media coverage.

While we concentrate on Basra, we should also get more forces into the north as quickly as possible. , as well as complicate Saddam's calculations.

Between these southern and northern millstones, we should patiently work against Saddam in central Iraq. We should move to surround Baghdad, but not move to assault it unless we are very confident that it is ready to fall. Otherwise the military cost will be heavy and the loss of life will be great. Success at this price could well be politically unsustainable.



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