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PERMANENT SECRETARY

31 March 2003

Secretary of State

IRAQ

1. Some personal thoughts about handling the wider pol/mil issues of the campaign:
 - a. The UN Context. While the PM has made it clear that he wants less activism from the FCO/MOD on working for a further Resolution, it may not be prudent simply to kick these issues down the road. It is not just a matter of legitimising phases III-V or of being able to build the wider coalition we need, of manpower and resources, vital though these are. It is also, I suspect, an important dimension of the 'hearts and minds' exercise within Iraq (if one does not subscribe to the theory that the Iraqi people are insufficiently sophisticated to perceive the difference between UN-acknowledged activity and US/UK unilateralism). There is also a regional dimension, in heading off the risk that regional opinion could coalesce around a 'stop the war' position (see below). I raised the concern with the FCO on Friday (Ehrman and Oakden) and was reassured to learn that David Manning had in fact authorised the FCO to engage in low key discussions with Security Council members, including France and Russia, provided there was no attempt at text production at this stage. I am sure this is right. While we do not need a row with the US on this issue right now, or another rebuff from Chirac underlining legality questions the need to provide a UN perspective for the future is linked not only to the future phases, but, I suspect, to some more immediate objectives of separating the Iraqi people from the regime.
 - b. US/UK relations. In addition to the UN angle we need to take some care to avoid a situation where the US is focussed on Baghdad and the UK regards the 'exemplar' of Basra as its own contribution. I found David Johnson's note of 30 March instructive in this respect where he reminds us of what US overall strategy is and that "entry into Basra is a decision for the coalition land Commander, and is not Commander 1 UK Div's call". We tend, perhaps because of the way we get our twice daily briefings from PJHQ, to assume that this is a UK lead. We should not exclude the time or circumstances where it becomes more important to regard Basra as an objective in its own right. (Could it be that the US decision to change tactics for

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dealing with the Iraqi divisions in the North should alter our view on a Basra 'shock'?) And I recognise the politics of the issue, particularly if uprisings and humanitarian issues loom larger. But it is a dimension which you might wish to cover with Rumsfeld to ensure that we do not create a perception of drifting apart on the Baghdad/Basra priorities.

c. Arab/Iranian attitudes. We heard today from PJHQ that the regime may be trying to play the 'Shia Card' by portraying their defence around Najaf and Karbala as protectors of the Shia holy places against the infidel as well as the Sunni hero. I know that Shia/Sunni attitudes throughout the Middle East are not as simplistic or credulous as that. But it does underline the point that the regime is working hard to unite regional Muslim opinion against external aggression.

This may be an FCO point, but it underscores the importance of maintaining a close dialogue with the neighbouring countries to avoid a situation where a powerful group issue an ultimatum, via the UN or otherwise for hostilities to cease pending a conference. Some further Red-Teaming is called for.

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