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To see you & the UNSC on 16/5 for use
of force against Iraq. An important element
from a Permanent Member of the UNSC.

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SUBJECT: IRAQ: QUAI'S VIEWS

SUMMARY

1. Quai do not expect much movement from Iraq at meeting with Annan. Keen to raise France's dialogue with Iraq a notch to persuade them to agree to return of inspectors. Insist that Iraq must make clear its readiness to accept inspectors before talks can start on clarification of SCR 1284. Less convinced than before that US military action is inevitable. Don't see authority in an SCR as essential for military action, so long as the Security Council issues a statement that Iraq is in breach, and warns of the consequences. French views on Kurds and Shias and the day after. Suspect that, to save face, Saddam will seek a less intrusive regime (although this is unlikely to wash with the Americans).

DETAIL

2. Chaplin (Director, MENA) and Archer (Head, NENAD) visited Paris on 27 May for talks with the Quai on Iraq and the MEPP (reported separately). On Iraq, they saw De la Messuziere (Director, MENA), Barety (Head, MED) and Chibaeff (Head, UND - who deputised for Felix-Paganon, currently in China).

ANNAN'S MEETING WITH THE IRAQIS

3. Invited to comment on Iraqi strategy, Messuziere spoke about the Iraqi charm offensive, aimed simultaneously at other Arab countries and at the UN, which he agreed had been spurred largely

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by the hawkish rhetoric coming out of Washington. He was not optimistic about prospects for Annan's third meeting with the Iraqis in Vienna. It should be described as a dialogue, not a negotiation. The Iraqis would keep talking, but in his view we should not expect movement on return of the inspectors for some time.

4. Chibaeff said that Baghdad had to make clear its acceptance of the return of inspectors before there could be any discussion of clarification of SCR 1284. This was France's firm position.

FRANCE'S RELATIONS WITH IRAQ

Messuziere said that since 1998 France's dialogue with Iraq had become less substantial. The Head of France's Interests Section in Baghdad seldom saw Tariq Aziz. His contact was largely limited to the Iraqi MFA. The French were looking at how their dialogue might be raised to a higher level, to ram the message home on return of inspectors.

POSSIBILITY OF US MILITARY ACTION

6. Messuziere and Chaplin discussed over lunch the various options open to the US, from discreet encouragement of a coup d'etat to full-scale ground offensive. Messuziere's view was that military action was no longer inevitable. (Comment: he appeared influenced by the latest US media reports (TUR), plus the views of his son-in-law, the Liberation correspondent in Washington.)

7. On timing, Messuziere's view was that the Americans had originally looked towards May for a military operation, and then towards the mid-term elections, but now - largely because of Afghanistan and other priorities in the fight against terrorism - they no longer had a time horizon. Bush did not need a military victory over Saddam to get re-elected. Chaplin noted that the US had also had pretty stark messages from the region, including CPA, Mubarak and King Abdullah, about the folly of embarking on military action against Iraq while emotions remained so high over Palestine.

UN AUTHORITY FOR MILITARY ACTION

8. Chibaeff said past precedent demonstrated that formal

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authorisation by the UN was not an absolute requirement for military action. What would be indispensable, as a minimum, would be a statement by the Security Council (not necessarily in the form of an SCR) that Iraq was in breach of its obligations, and a warning making clear to Iraq what the consequences of continued violation would be. The Qual had given this advice to Chirac for his meeting with Bush.

THE DAY AFTER

9. Messuziere thought Cheney's visit to the region had been useful as a reality check with moderate Arab leaders. The US still had no answer to the question of what would happen the day after. The Administration was working on the Chalabi option, although US opinion was divided. France's recent contacts suggested that the Kurds and the Shias were ready to come in behind the Americans but not to go out ahead of them. That was the big difference with Afghanistan.

10. Messuziere expanded on the internal situation in Iraq. Saddam was preparing his (second) son for power. The new generation was worse than the old. Saddam knew that he had no problems on the internal front. Ordinary Iraqis would not move, for fear of repression. But their greatest fear was of what would come after Saddam, with or without US intervention. The Shias were in a majority, but there was no question of the leadership being anything other than Sunni. It was far from clear that the Republican Guard would be able to keep control if there were a change of regime.

CLARIFICATION OF SCR 1284

11. Chaplin said that the best way to avoid military action was to make a reality of SCR 1284. After adoption of the Goods Review List, the carrot of sanctions suspension was less enticing for Iraq (although there might be some additional elements on offer, such as investments, service contracts and flights). A continuing threat of US action after 11 September was needed to influence Iraqi behaviour, whatever some might think of the consequences of carrying out the threat. To make progress on SCR 1284, the role of countries with links to Baghdad would also be crucial. Chibaeff agreed, adding that if the fear of US intervention receded, there would be no co-operation at all from the Iraqis, which in turn would strengthen the hand of hawks in Washington.

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12. Messuziere was sceptical that Iraq would agree to an inspection regime similar to UNSCOM. Saddam was a bedouin. Honour and the avoidance of humiliation formed part of his code. He might accept monitoring and verification, to save face. Chaplin said we would follow Blix on the procedures he thought necessary for UNMOVIC to do its job. But it was hard to see the US agreeing to a regime less intrusive than the last one.

IRAQ'S WMD

13. Messuziere asked what evidence we had on Iraqi WMD. Chaplin said that there was no doubt the Iraqis were making an active attempt to rebuild their WMD programme. There were also areas of uncertainty dating back to the time of the UNSCOM inspections.

COMMENT

14. Messuziere, by his own admission, is not the most objective French voice on Iraq, having headed up France's Interests Section in Baghdad (1997-1999). (Felix-Paganon, UN Director, is the more influential Quai policy-maker on Iraq.) But even aiming off for this, Messuziere's pessimism was striking. He concluded with a personal view that we would be in exactly the same position on Iraq in five years' time - and that this would represent the least bad option, given the regional instability that would ensue from any military action. The French (both Quai and Elysee) continue to see the return of inspectors as the best way to avoid military action, and will want to maintain P5 unity as the means to deliver it.

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