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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

19 June 1981

Dear Mr. Naras and Mr. Benjumi,

Thank you for your letter of 11 June in which you take issue with my statement in the House of Commons condemning the Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor.

I cannot accept that this attack was an essential pre-emptive act of self-defence by Israel. You argue first that Iraq has been in a state of war with Israel since 1948 and that Israel's action was not therefore a breach of international law. But the fact is that the Israeli action was clearly contrary to the prohibition in the UN Charter on the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of another state. Iraq has not engaged in active hostilities with Israel for some years. When there has been no armed conflict between the two countries for so long, an unprovoked attack of this kind has in our view no justification under international law. Your argument would logically justify an unprovoked Iraqi attack on an Israeli reactor which, as I said in the House of Commons, I would equally have condemned.

You say that there is no doubt whatsoever that the Iraqi reactor would shortly have had the capacity to make atomic weapons. I can only point out again, as I did in the House of Commons, that Iraq is a signatory of the

/ Non-Proliferation Treaty,

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Non-Proliferation Treaty, that the installations in question are subject to international safeguards, that they were regularly inspected (the last occasion being as recently as January) and no breaches of these safeguards were detected. We do not believe that Iraq had the capacity to manufacture fissile material for nuclear weapons, nor that she could have developed a capability for doing so without detection, as the French Government has made clear.

Finally you give a quotation from an Iraqi state-owned newspaper on 4 October 1980. The paper in question was Al-Jumhuriyah. As is now acknowledged in Israel, there was no such quotation. There was an editorial which referred to the raid on the Iraqi reaction on 27 September and which questioned whether Iran or Israel would benefit from the attack. It argued that the reactors could not be a threat to Iran and continued 'The Zionist entity is the one that fears the reactor... that entity has warned that... it will try to destroy the Iraqi nuclear reactor by any means available to it especially since the reactor constitutes a grave danger for Israel. That is what Begin and the Zionist circles have said'. The interpretation of Iraq's aims is clearly attributed to Israel and it cannot stand as a statement of the Iraqi Government's intentions. Meanwhile President Hussein himself has consistently stated that Iraq's nuclear programme was peaceful not military. He does not appear to have made any statement of the kind attributed to him in the Israeli Government's statement of 8 June.

I recognise of course that Israel has legitimate concerns about her security and that the Israeli Government faces very difficult decisions in ensuring the country's protection. I have made my views on this plain many times. Nor has Iraq so far played a constructive role in the Middle East peace process. There is no doubting her potential hostility to Israel.

/ But none of this

But none of this justifies the unprovoked use of force.

The system of international law and international safeguards has been established precisely to avoid the situation which Israel feared and action such as Israel took on 7 June. If that system breaks down - and it will be at risk if flagrant violations of it are not forthrightly condemned - the security of all countries, not only Israel would be at risk. I am particularly concerned that the action taken against Iraq has further set back the chances of progress towards a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East, which I believe is the only basis for Israel's security in the long term.

By the time this letter reaches you, you will have read reports of the Security Council debate and the voting on the resolution.

Yours sincerely  
Raymond Shabari

Dr. Abraham Marcus and Mr. Malvyn Benjamin