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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE

Consequences of an Escalation of Iran/Iraq War

1. Thank you for your letter of 23 November, assessing the more likely calls on our resources in the event of an escalation in the Gulf war and outlining our own ability to respond, albeit at the expense of other tasks. This analysis and the more detailed work being undertaken by the Chiefs of Staff are a most useful preparation for the decisions on contingency planning which we may need to make at any time, and for our continuing discussions with the Americans.

2. You asked for an up-to-date assessment of the Gulf States' own perception of the Iranian threat. The following comments are based on reports by our Embassies in Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Doha, Jedda and Kuwait and on Richard Luce's meeting with the Omanis on 29 November.

Kuwait considered it would be in Iran's interest to exercise continued restraint. Iran's capacity to retaliate was in any case limited. Closure of the Straits of Hormuz would damage Iran more than the Gulf States. But Iran remained unpredictable and there was a danger that the Iraqis would continue to see how far they could go in escalating the war without provoking Iranian reaction. If Kuwait became the target of hit-and-run Iranian attacks, there would be little the West could do to counter them.

/Oman

S E C R E T





Oman The Omanis believe that Iran is in earnest about its declared intention to disrupt shipping in the Straits of Hormuz if its own oil exports are cut off. Mining, or the threatened use of shore-based artillery or missiles were seen as more likely than a naval blockade. Elsewhere, the Iraq-Turkey pipeline was a more likely target than installations in the Gulf States.

The UAE Recent contacts between the UAE and Iran suggested that Iranians would concentrate any retaliation against Iraq, rather than on targets further afield. Kuwait, because of its logistical and financial support to Iraq, was more at risk than the UAE.

Qatar The Amir considered Iran to be an irrational force which could attack at any time. He shared the Iraqi view that widening the conflict could lead to a solution. The main direct threat to the Gulf States would be a punitive air strike or interference with shipping.

Bahrain shared the Qatari view that Iran's actions could be highly irrational. Discussion of the Iranian threat at the recent Gulf Summit had been unfocused.

Saudi Arabia The Saudis refused to speculate in detail on the nature of the Iranian threat, but considered a blockade of the Straits would be more likely than attack on individual Gulf States. The main Saudi concern appeared to be a wish to avoid giving any unequivocal assurance that facilities to support Western military intervention would be forthcoming before the crisis was upon them.

3. You will see that there was no unity of view among the Gulf States about the likely threat from Iran, and even those

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countries which had clearly thought most about it, such as Kuwait and Oman, had reached different conclusions. The only common points appear to be that:

- (a) despite the indications of greater realism in recent Iranian official statements, it cannot be assumed that their reaction to a successful Iraqi attack on their oil export capability will be a rational one;
- (b) the Gulf States believe that any action to clear the Straits of Hormuz must be an international responsibility: by which they mean a Western responsibility, with as much international support as possible;
- (c) the Gulf States remain reluctant to be seen engaging in contingency planning with the US, ourselves or other Western countries before a crisis occurs.

I shall be writing further on the question of how to carry forward our own contingency planning in the near future.

4. I am sending copies of this minute to the Prime Minister, the Secretaries of State for Trade and Industry, Energy and Transport, and Sir Robert Armstrong.

(GEOFFREY HOWE)

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