

Ref: B06926

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PRIME MINISTER

c Sir Robert Armstrong

Consequences of an Escalation of the Iran-Iraq War
(OD(EM)(83) 4)

Flag A

BACKGROUND

Flag B
Flag C

Having seen the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary's minute of 25 October to the Defence Secretary and Mr Heseltine's reply of 23 November, you asked that OD should discuss before Christmas the possibility of an escalation of the Iran-Iraq war and the extent to which we should contemplate military involvement by the United Kingdom should Western military action be thought necessary.

2. The meeting has been arranged as an OD(EM), with the addition of the Secretary of State for Energy and the Chief of the Defence Staff. The Lord President of the Council may be unable to be present since he is chairing a meeting of the Home Affairs Committee at 4 pm.

3. There is a joint paper before the Sub-Committee by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Defence Secretary. It begins with an assessment of possible military action by Iraq and Iran and goes on to judge that British interests in the Gulf are sufficiently important for the United Kingdom to be prepared to consider responding to requests from the Gulf States for military assistance. Diplomatic action would also be required; and the draft of a possible Security Council resolution has already been prepared (at Annex B to the paper).

4. Military possibilities are then discussed. The paper concludes that the best approach to a Western military intervention would be one based on the closest possible consultation with other participating allies but with

responsibilities for helping particular countries or for particular military requirements allocated on a national basis. In other words, there should be no multinational force under a single command (which in the circumstances would mean American command). The two Secretaries of State recommend detailed follow-up discussions with the United States at the military level to develop a more thorough appreciation of each other's military capabilities for operations in the area.

5. The military forces which the United Kingdom might make available are mentioned at paragraph 6 and in more detail at Annex C. It should be noted that, were the Gulf to be mined, it would take 42 days to get a mine counter-measures force into the area unless advance precautionary action were taken: in particular it would be necessary to hire a support ship from trade.

6. An intelligence assesement on the Gulf war was circulated in the Joint Intelligence Committee Weekly Survey of Intelligence on 16 December. The reports from American sources of a likely immediate use of the Iraqi Super Etandard aircraft armed with Exocet missiles against the Iranian oil terminal at Kharg Island seem to have been an exaggeration.

HANDLING

7. You will wish to invite the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to introduce the paper and to give his assessment of the likelihood of the Gulf war escalating in the near future. Points to be established in the subsequent discussion are -

- a. Does the Sub-Committee accept that the principles set out in paragraph 5 of the paper should be those which apply to any British action; in particular that military action should take place only at the request of one or more Gulf States?

- b. Does the Sub-Committee agree that we should not take part in a fully integrated force under a single command, but should co-ordinate our action in full consultation with other Western countries?
- c. Should any action be taken now to increase the level of readiness of British forces?
- d. Does the Sub-Committee agree that the Armilla patrol should normally remain within 5 days' steaming time of the Gulf area?
- e. If there are signs of impending Iranian naval action against third parties, should we then increase the readiness of our mine counter-measures force by hiring a support ship from trade and possibly by pre-positioning the ships initially at Gibraltar or later at Cyprus?
- f. Is there any form of military action which we would wish to rule out completely, such as the use of ground forces? There is no sign that the Iran-Iraq war is likely to be over soon: indeed the Americans appear to be determined not to let the weaker country, Iraq, lose it. Therefore we have to face the possibility that any military force sent to the Gulf might have to remain for a considerable period. You will wish to ask the Defence Secretary and the Chief of the Defence Staff for their views on the possible consequences for our military commitments elsewhere.
- g. Where will the costs of any military assistance fall? The normal rules would appear to require the Ministry of Defence to bear the costs; but this will need to be confirmed.

CONCLUSION

8. Subject to the discussion, the Sub-Committee might be invited to -

1. Endorse the conclusions set out in paragraph 10 of OD(EM)(83) 4.
2. Rule out, in principle, the provision of ground forces, confining help to naval, maritime or air defence forces, and then only at the request of one or more of the Gulf States.
3. Agree that any immediate decisions needed over the holiday period should be taken by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Defence Secretary jointly, consulting you before any overt action to deploy forces to the area or increase their readiness were taken.

David Goodall

20 December 1983

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