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TO PRIORITY FCO

TELEGRAM NUMBER 617 OF 23 FEBRUARY

INFO PRIORITY UKMIS NEW YORK, PARIS, TEHRAN, BAGHDAD, AMMAN,
DAMASCUS, GULF POSTS

BAGHDAD TELNO 98 TO YOU: IRAQ/IRAN

Read in full.
[Signature]

SUMMARY

1. U S ASSESSMENT THAT MAJOR IRANIAN OFFENSIVE YET TO COME. SUCCESS UNLIKELY BUT COULD PROVOKE IRAQI ESCALATION. BOTH SIDES HAVE REASONS TO SEEK AN EARLY RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT. NEED TO KEEP THE UN INITIATIVE ALIVE. CLOSE US/UK POLITICAL AND MILITARY CONSULTATION TO CONTINUE: NEXT ROUND OF MILITARY TALKS TO BE ACCELERATED. U S NOT KEEN TO ENGAGE THE RUSSIANS AT PRESENT.

DETAIL

2. THE U S ASSESSMENT GIVEN TO LEAHY ON 22 FEBRUARY WAS THAT THE IRANIANS HAD YET TO LAUNCH THEIR MAJOR OFFENSIVE. THIS MIGHT FOLLOW IN A WEEK OR SO: MEANWHILE, FURTHER PROBING ATTACKS WERE LIKELY. HISTORY SUGGESTED THAT THE IRANIANS WOULD NOT BREAK THROUGH. THEY WERE STILL PLAGUED BY COMMAND AND CONTROL PROBLEMS. BUT IF THEY MADE SIGNIFICANT GAINS THE IRAQIS WOULD PROBABLY HAVE NO COMPUNCTION ABOUT ESCALATING THE AIR WAR. THEY HAD ALREADY CLAIMED THAT THE IRANIANS HAD RESUMED ATTACKS ON CIVILIAN TARGETS AND THEY HAD NOW PUBLICLY THREATENED THE USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS.

3. BOTH SIDES HAD STRATEGIC REASONS FOR SEEKING AN EARLY RESOLUTION TO THE CONFLICT. THE IRANIANS, WITH LITTLE MORE THAN MECHANISED INFANTRY, SAW THEIR ENEMIES IMPROVING THEIR EQUIPMENT AND COMING TO TERMS WITH THEIR ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES. THE TIME WAS THUS RIGHT FOR A MAJOR PUSH, RATHER THAN CONTINUED ATTRITION, MOST PROBABLY ON THE CENTRAL FRONT. THE BAGHDAD-BASRA ROAD, ONLY 35KM AWAY AT ITS MOST ACCESSIBLE POINT, WAS A POSSIBLE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE. BUT THE IRANIANS HAD NEVER BEFORE ACHIEVED SUCH PENETRATION AND AN OBVIOUS FAILURE COULD BACKFIRE. THE IRAQIS FOR THEIR PART WERE GROWING INCREASINGLY WAR-WEARY, ALTHOUGH THEIR MILITARY CAPABILITIES WERE IMPROVING. THE AMERICANS, WHO CONSIDERED THE IRANIANS UNLIKELY TO TRY TO CLOSE THE STRAITS UNLESS THEIR OIL EXPORTS WERE CUT OFF, CONTINUED TO URGE RESTRAINT ON BAGHDAD. THE IRAQIS HAD INDICATED THAT THEY WOULD ACT ACCORDINGLY AS LONG AS THERE WAS SOME SIGN OF MOVEMENT TOWARDS A SOLUTION.

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4. IN THE U S VIEW THIS UNDERScoreD THE NEED TO KEEP THE UN INITIATIVE ALIVE. THEY WONDERED WHETHER DIFFERENT TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE PROPOSED VISIT TO EACH COUNTRY MIGHT OFFER A WAY FORWARD. IT WAS AGREED THAT THE U S AND UK SHOULD CONTINUE TO ENCOURAGE THE IRAQIS TO BE FLEXIBLE. THE AFTERMATH OF THE IRANIAN OFFENSIVE, IF IT CAME, MIGHT PROVIDE THE BEST OPPORTUNITY FOR A CEASEFIRE. MEANWHILE, THE AMERICANS WOULD PRESS FOR RESTRAINT, ENCOURAGE FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR IRAQ FROM THE GULF AND HELP WITH THE PROPOSED PIPELINE ACROSS JORDAN. THEY HAD TALKED TO THE ISRAELIS AT SEVERAL LEVELS ABOUT THE SECURITY OF SUCH A PIPELINE AND HAD RECEIVED AS GOOD AN ANSWER AS COULD BE EXPECTED: (SEE ALSO PARAGRAPH 6 OF MY TELNO 618): VISIBLE U S INVOLVEMENT WOULD ALSO BE IMPORTANT. LEAHY ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE AMERICANS WERE NOT GOING TO SEE THE IRAQIS GO UNDER BUT OBSERVED THAT THERE COULD BE A FINE LINE BETWEEN OFFERING THEM COMFORT AND GIVING THEM ACTUAL ENCOURAGEMENT.

5. LEAHY STRESSED TO BOTH PLACKE (DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY NEAR EASTERN AFFAIRS) AND HOWE (DIRECTOR, POL-MIL) OUR INTEREST IN CONTINUED CLOSE CONSULTATION IN THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY FIELDS. THE AMERICANS AGREED IT WOULD BE IMPORTANT TO KEEP IN TOUCH AS THE SITUATION DEVELOPED. THERE WAS NOTHING TO SUBSTANTIATE PRESS REPORTS OF JOINT US/UK NAVAL EXERCISES, BUT SUCH SUGGESTIONS COULD BE DISTURBING TO THE IRANIANS. (KEMP (NSC), MURPHY (ASSISTANT SECRETARY) AND RAPHEL (DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY) ALL DENIED KNOWLEDGE OF ANY SIGNIFICANT MOVES BY THE U S FLEET TOWARDS THE GULF OF OMAN). LEAHY EMPHASISED THE NEED TO KEEP PURSUING THE DIPLOMATIC TRACK EVEN IF MILITARY ACTION BECAME INEVITABLE AND TO SEND THE RIGHT SIGNALS. HOWE CONCURRED, BUT COMMENTED THAT EG SHIP MOVEMENTS COULD ALSO SEND POLITICAL SIGNALS. IF MILITARY ACTION HAD TO BE TAKEN, SPEED AND PRECISION WOULD BE ESSENTIAL. THERE WAS ROOM FOR MORE COORDINATION AND MORE CONTINGENCY PLANNING. LEAHY AGREED THAT THE NEXT ROUND OF MILITARY TALKS SHOULD TAKE PLACE AT THE EARLIEST OPPORTUNITY.

6. LEAHY ASKED WHETHER THE AMERICANS HAD GIVEN THOUGHT TO HOW THEY MIGHT AVOID MISUNDERSTANDINGS WITH THE RUSSIANS IN THE REGION. PLACKE SAID THAT THE SUBJECT HAD BEEN TOUCHED ON IN MOSCOW ABOUT SIX WEEKS AGO. IN BROAD TERMS, THE RUSSIANS SEEMED TO SEE THEIR INTERESTS IN LARGELY THE SAME LIGHT: MUCH WOULD DEPEND ON SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES. THE AMERICANS DID NOT WANT SUBSTANTIVE DISCUSSIONS AT THIS STAGE: THESE MIGHT GIVE THE RUSSIANS DIPLOMATIC LEVERAGE IN THE AREA. BUT IF THE SITUATION AROSE THEY WOULD QUOTE TRY VERY HARD UNQUOTE TO AVOID ANY MISUNDERSTANDINGS.

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THERE WAS NOTHING REPEAT NOTHING IN ANY OF THESE DISCUSSIONS TO SUGGEST THAT THE AMERICANS WERE IN A MOOD TO CONTEMPLATE PRECIPITATE ACTION IN THE GULF TO COMPENSATE FOR THE FAILURE OF U S POLICY IN THE LEBANON. RATHER THE REVERSE. THERE WAS, ON THE CONTRARY, SOME DEGREE OF OPTIMISM THAT THE STRATEGIC SHIFT DESCRIBED IN PARAGRAPH 3 MIGHT CREATE CONDITIONS IN WHICH A NEW MOVE TOWARDS A SETTLEMENT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE. IF THIS OPPORTUNITY WERE MISSED, THE FEELING WAS THAT IT WOULD NOT BE LIKELY TO RECUR FOR A LONG TIME.

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