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From the Private Secretary

Subject cc RASTEN

20 October 1990

Dear Stephen,

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH MR. YEVGENY PRIMAKOV.

The Prime Minister had a talk at Chequers this afternoon, lasting some one and three quarter hours, with Mr. Yevgeny Primakov, who came as a Special Emissary from President Gorbachev to discuss the Gulf crisis. Mr. Primakov was accompanied by the Soviet Ambassador, Mr Markariam (Adviser), and Mr. Shilov (Interpreter).

Mr. Primakov said that he had been instructed by President Gorbachev to brief the Prime Minister fully on his meetings in Baghdad. By way of background, he had known Saddam Hussain and Tariq Aziz for some twenty years and was able to speak frankly to them. The immediate purpose of his visit was to try to resolve the issue of Soviet citizens in Iraq. But he had also, of course, devoted a great deal of time to Kuwait. He had remained entirely loyal to the position set out in the United Nations Security Council resolutions. He had insisted on Iraq's total and complete withdrawal from Kuwait and a return to the pre-2 August position. He had explained to Saddam Hussain that the Kuwait crisis was a laboratory for testing the new world order; and no country would let Iraq get away with its aggression.

Primakov continued that it was obvious that Saddam Hussain was afraid of a military strike against Iraq and wanted to avoid it. But paradoxically he was not prepared to withdraw because of the military threat. One had to take account of his mentality. He had developed a sort of messianic self-esteem, and seemed to believe that almost supernatural powers were vested in him. But he was not crazy. Primakov had left Saddam Hussain in no doubt that military confrontation was inevitable if he did not withdraw, and it would be very different from the war with Iran. Then he had enjoyed superiority: this time his opponents would. Then he had some international support: this time he would have none (although we should not underestimate the support he did actually have among the Arab masses).

Primakov said it was clear that Saddam Hussain's advisers were too afraid of him to give him the true picture. He seemed to have a sort of Masada complex like the Israelis. He was

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convinced that the Americans and the Israelis had been out to get rid of him even before 2 August, because they thought Iraq was getting too powerful. He had even presented Primakov with a tape alleged to be of a telephone conversation between King Fahd and the Amir of Qatar discussing plans for his assassination. He was convinced that the Americans and Israelis were out to finish him whether he withdrew from Kuwait or not. Primakov's impression was that Saddam Hussain would not leave under the barrel of a gun. His room for manoeuvre had narrowed drastically when he gave up all the fruits of the war with Iran. He did not seem to fear death, but talked calmly of devastating several countries when the conflict came. The truth was he could do a lot of harm. Primakov concluded that, faced with the dilemma of withdraw or be attacked, Saddam Hussain would not withdraw.

Primakov continued that he had tried to find out whether there was anything which might induce Saddam Hussain to withdraw. Had his 12 August speech saying he would withdraw in return for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli problem been serious? It had been very difficult to get any sort of clear picture. But he had come away with the impression that, if we could establish some "flexible linkage" with the Arab-Israeli problem, this might help Saddam Hussain save face. There could be no question, of course, of a direct linkage. But there might just be some scope for manoeuvre here. It was significant that Tariq Aziz had told him privately that he was very unhappy with the trend of Iraqi policy, and was clearly ready to work for a solution.

Primakov said that the conclusion he drew was that we should continue to keep the military threat hanging over Saddam Hussain's head. There must be no backing down on this. We should also continue with sanctions, indeed strengthen them. But it was necessary to add a political ingredient: not something which Saddam Hussain could present as a gain, but a gesture which would allow him to withdraw, while enabling each side to give its own interpretation of the circumstances of withdrawal. In effect we would be putting Saddam Hussain in a position to say he was withdrawing in the interest of the Arab nation. Thereafter, and only thereafter, the international community could propose the start of a process of settling the Arab-Israeli problem. He acknowledged that there was a very thin line here. We could not offer a package deal. But President Bush had said that resolution of the Gulf conflict should be an impulse towards resolution of other conflicts, and it was on this that he was trying to build.

The Prime Minister said it was perfectly absurd of Saddam Hussain to suggest that he had been under threat or under pressure. He had started two wars, caused hundreds of thousands of casualties, attacked his fellow Muslims, used chemical weapons on his own people, developed biological weapons, sought to obtain nuclear weapons, and wasted Iraq's oil wealth on attempted conquest. He was the last person to have anything to complain about. He was a dictator pure and simple. He was only popular with the Arab masses because he had built up a big army in order eventually to attack Israel. The first task was to know your enemy: not to listen to what he said, but to look at what he had done.

The Prime Minister continued that it would be absolutely wrong to make deals with a man like that. There was no room at all to negotiate with him. The only thing which would persuade him to leave Kuwait was the total and indisputable knowledge that he would lose. Even if he did withdraw without a conflict, we would still have to deal with the problem of his chemical and biological weapons, and incipient nuclear capability. That would mean keeping on sanctions and building a regional security system to isolate him. But there should be no doubt that, if necessary, we would use the military option. The choice was Saddam Husain's: he could avoid it by withdrawing immediately. The Prime Minister added that we all had a duty to return with renewed strength to try to resolve the Arab-Israel problem. But that duty existed independent of Saddam Hussain's invasion of Kuwait: indeed Iraq's action had set it back.

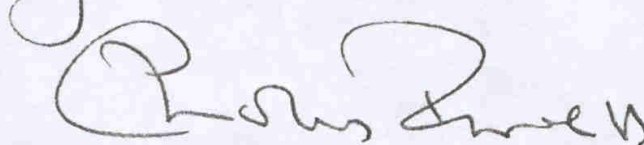
Mr. Primakov said he agreed with much of what the Prime Minister said. The question was how to get Saddam Hussain to withdraw without paying an exorbitant price. The Prime Minister said that we should pay no price at all. Mr. Primakov assumed the Prime Minister agreed it would be better to avoid military action if possible. He had talked to Prince Bandar in Washington, who had told him that the Saudis appreciated Soviet pressure on Saddam Hussain to withdraw without a war. The Prime Minister said with emphasis that it was not for us to save Saddam Hussain's face. Mr. Primakov said that, if we decided that the military option was the only way to get him out of Kuwait, that was that. But surely it was worth trying to see if there was something which could be discussed. He was not proposing we should give Saddam Hussain anything. It was just a question of manoeuvring. What did the Prime Minister think the next step might be? The Prime Minister said she saw no need for us to initiate any action, only to continue to tighten the noose. Ambassador Zamyatin intervened to say that the Soviet mission had been to find out how to persuade Saddam Hussain to withdraw. The Prime Minister said that her point was clearly not getting across. We must not appease Saddam Hussain. We must not pay a price. And we must not offer him blandishments. He must withdraw or military action would follow. Mr. Primakov agreed that we must not award him anything: he was only suggesting that we try some political skills. If we failed, we would at least be able to show that we had tried. The Prime Minister said that we had tried for 11 weeks. Either he heeded us or we would use the military option. Mr. Primakov asked how much time Saddam Hussain had before the military option was used. The Prime Minister said the element of surprise would be crucial. What mattered was to leave Saddam Hussain in no doubt that he faced total military defeat unless he withdrew very soon. We should not do or say anything which implied there was a third way.

We subsequently had some discussion of the political situation in the Soviet Union. Mr. Primakov described it as indeed very serious and predicted a hard winter. But he was completely confident that Mr. Gorbachev would get through: he was a very strong man. He seemed about to repeat President Gorbachev's request for a soft loan, but the Prime Minister saw it coming and did not give him an opportunity to get the words

out.

Incidentally, Chequers is clearly regarded as a place of pilgrimage for Mr. Gorbachev's admirers, following his visit in 1984. Mr. Primakov looked round reverently and commented: "this is where it all began".

I am copying this letter to Simon Webb (Ministry of Defence), John Neilson (Department of Energy), and Sonia Phippard (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely,


(C. D. POWELL)

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office