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of Sir [unclear] 9A



Prime Minister, Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

A.S.C. 1/11

11 November, 1983

Dear John,

Lebanon: US Retaliation

We have been doing further work against the possibility of a US retaliation for the bomb attack of 23 October and its likely consequences. We will take the opportunity to underline our concern once again when the new United States envoy to the Middle East, Mr Donald Rumsfeld, passes through London tomorrow morning, and will warn him that any action which damages the national reconciliation talks would make it difficult for us to justify maintaining our participation in the MNF. Moreover we are bound to take very seriously the risk of counter-retaliation, by terrorists who are not afraid to die in the attempt, extending to elements of the MNF other than the French or the Americans.

All the indications are that the US Government's political intention to retaliate is firm. They consider that they have identified the culprits, or are close to doing so. But they have so far been unable to define a satisfactory military option (if they had done so they would already have carried it out). It is not very likely that they will succeed in finding a better option now, so retaliation will in effect depend on the President's being willing to authorise a riskier course when he returns to the US on 15 November. Meanwhile the arguments against retaliation start to build up: the passage of time, the relatively successful start to reconciliation talks in Geneva, the diversion of US and world attention to Grenada (though the effect of that may now be fading).

We have had some reassurances from the Americans about their immediate intentions. President Reagan told the Prime Minister that he will keep her informed before undertaking any new initiatives. Eagleburger at the State Department, having checked back to make certain of the position, has told us that we may assume that there will be no retaliation until the President and Shultz are back on 15 November. He has also ruled out any joint operation with the Israelis, or the use of the Israelis as a US agent. But Under-Secretary Burt left us in little doubt today that retaliation will take place. He also acknowledged that while we would certainly be 'notified', the degree of consultation might well be less than we would like.

The incident on 10 November when a US aircraft overflying Syrian-occupied Lebanon was fired on from the ground, presumably by a Syrian unit (and the continuing US overflights today (11 November)) suggest that an incident could occur over the weekend, or early next week before the President's return to

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/ Washington. I therefore enclose a short paper on how we might react. It is not of course possible to envisage all the circumstances in which the US might take retaliatory action, so the alternatives will need to be refined further as the picture becomes clearer.

Sir Geoffrey Howe has not yet seen this letter or its enclosure. I shall be showing him a copy in parallel.

I am copying this letter to Richard Mottram (MOD).

Yours ever,

Peter Ricketts

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US Retaliation in Lebanon

1. Given that the United States have not so far found a satisfactory military option, but that their will to do so continues strong, the list of things from which they could choose (most of which have disadvantages) is a long one. Assuming that we can accept as firm Eagleburger's assurance that there will be no collusive US-Israeli action (though the Israelis could mount a parallel 'cleaning-up' operation by land or air without informing the US of it beforehand), the Americans seem to have three broad options (all in Lebanon):
 - (a) A 'surgical' air strike against the extremist Shia faction, Islamic Amal, and/or against the pro-Iranian Lebanese Hizballahis, probably in their village hideouts south-west of Baalbek in the Beqa'a.
 - (b) A surgical air strike against the same targets, accompanied by strikes against Syrian gun positions or other installations
 - (c) A combination of air strikes with a commando operation going in by land or helicopter immediately afterwards.
2. The risk must exist that such operations, instead of being 'surgical', could become messy, ie involving civilian casualties and/or other Lebanese or Palestinian elements. These will create greater difficulties for non-US MNF contributors because of the additional publicity problem and the strong emotions that will be stirred throughout the world.
3. In the immediate aftermath of any US strike we should avoid being the first to volunteer comment. There will be a need for a pause to establish as accurately as possibly the degree of damage done; the number of casualties, and whether they include women or children. It should be clear almost immediately whether and if so how soon the Israelis or Syrians are going to become involved in taking action of their own. In any case we should compare notes urgently with our European MNF colleagues in Paris and Rome to see how they view the situation; and in particular whether they have plans for an early pull-out (unlikely).
4. As soon as the dust has settled, Ministers will then have to consider the following range of options:
 - (a) BRITFORLEB to stand fast, having redoubled security precautions etc
 - (b) Embassy to be further reduced in strength, and guard increased (a US Marine Corps responsibility at present)
 - (c) Redeployment as an interim measure of BRITFORLEB to Cyprus, accompanied by a statement that we would be ready to return to Beirut if certain conditions were



fulfilled (eg if there still seemed a chance for the reconciliation process).

- (d) Withdrawal from the MNF on the grounds that the reconciliation process has been blocked without any prospect of early revival.

5. Against this background, and since it is impossible to predict how successfully the US can mount a surgical operation, it is difficult at this stage to suggest the precise line that HMG should take with parliament and the press. The following are some suggested elements, but we should, if time allows, compare notes with European MNF partners before 'going public':

- (a) We have much sympathy, as we have repeatedly said, for the US losses as a result of the barbarous attack of 23 October.
- (b) While we accept the US right to self-defence, there is a duty on the part of all concerned in Lebanon not to contribute to the spiral of violence, and to exercise maximum restraint.
- (c) We have grave reservations about the effects of this latest action both for the prospects for peace and for Lebanese national reconciliation.
- (d) [If asked if we were consulted in advance]. No, but we had forewarning of the strike.
- (e) [If US action spills over and causes casualties, complications with other parties]. We greatly regret the bloodshed caused and call urgently on [the other parties] to show restraint. The position in Lebanon is exceptionally dangerous, and the whole effort to bring peace to Lebanon and make reconciliation and reconstruction possible will be at risk if the escalation of violence continued. The cycle must be broken.
- (f) [If asked about the future of the British MNF contingent]. We are consulting urgently with our European MNF partners. We shall take no hasty action, but we shall ensure that British servicemen are not exposed to unjustifiable risks.
- (g) Clearly the future of the MNF as a whole must now be reassessed, given the increased dangers of counter-retaliation against all elements of the force.



6. In addition to the considerations outlined above, we shall need to consider the likely impact on Anglo-US relations of whatever we do or say after a US retaliatory strike. Thus, it may be advisable in view of the strains already introduced by the Grenada action to adopt slightly less condemnatory language than would otherwise be justified. Only if, despite what we have been told, there is evidence of US-Israeli collusion (direct or indirect) in or after the strike should we be particularly outspoken.

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

11 November, 1983

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