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THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

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May 17, 1984

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INFORMATION

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: ROBERT C. MCFARLANE *rcm*

SUBJECT: Follow-up to the National Security Planning Group (NPSG) Meeting, May 17, 1984: Escalation in the Gulf War

We need to decide whether to issue a statement supportive of Saudi concerns about recent Iranian escalation. Alternatively, you could respond with a letter to King Fahd reaffirming our earlier offers of assistance in defending the freedom of navigation to and through the Gulf and cooperating with Saudi Arabia to defend against hostile threats to the Kingdom.

During a meeting this morning with Secretary Shultz, Prince Bandar delivered a message from King Fahd which included a decision by the Saudi Arabian Government (SAG) to respond forcibly against future Iranian attacks. He also requested that the U.S. issue a statement expressing concern over recent Iranian attacks and continued support for Saudi Arabia. The request for a statement is premised on the belief that such a declaration by the U.S. would help deter future aggression from Iran. Prince Bandar also informed us that the SAG may request an acceleration of certain weapons and munitions and other assistance such as additional tankers and AWACs aircraft.

As Secretary Shultz explained to Prince Bandar, you and other Administration officials have already made statements along the lines suggested by the Saudis, although not explicitly directed at Iranian escalation. Moreover, it is not at all clear that more rhetoric, however strident, will deter the Iranians from further attacks on shipping. As George explained to Bandar, actions may be more important than statements at this point. The consensus is that we should issue a more modest statement through the Department of State spokesman recognizing the strong position taken by all the Gulf Cooperation Council Foreign Ministers to present the Iranians with a united front in the event of further aggression. There is also a consensus that the reassurances sought by the Saudis should be conveyed in a letter from you to King Fahd.

BY RWJ
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cc Vice President

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The letter, which we expect to have for you tomorrow morning, will reaffirm our determination to defend freedom of navigation in the Gulf and assist in defending Saudi Arabia, with several important conditions. One is the prior need for active diplomacy by all who share our objectives to dampen the cycle of violence and escalation in the Gulf. We will point out to King Fahd that we are already actively engaged in this effort. Secondly, the Saudis must be reminded that we simply cannot mount a credible deterrent or an effective defense unless the Saudis request our assistance and provide access for the forces we will need to do the job. You made these points in an earlier letter to the King, but they bear repeating.

As to Saudi requests for direct assistance in the form of additional tankers and AWACs aircraft, the consensus is that we should respond positively to serious requests. There are several critical considerations in this regard. We need to keep in mind that our current tanker and AWACs presence in Saudi Arabia (and our warships in the Gulf) represent a certain exposure to Iranian attack. As GEN Kelley explained, the Saudis should be capable of providing defenses for the assets we presently have in the Kingdom.

If we increase that exposure, however, and if the situation continues to deteriorate, we will want to ensure that there are adequate U.S. assets to defend our forces in the region and to expeditiously respond to the threats we have said we were prepared to defend against. Under present circumstances, we could make an incremental change in our posture (e.g., an additional AWACs and 1-2 tankers) and still rely on Saudi tactical air to provide protection. If the situation worsens or if the Saudis request a significant augmentation of AWACs, we should insist on a coincident TACAIR deployment to reduce our exposure to Iranian reprisals.

A second point of concern, in this regard, is War Powers considerations. At present, our assets are in Saudi Arabia to train the Royal Saudi Air Force. If we augment our normal posture in response to increasing hostilities, we will need to consult with the Congress as we undertake additional deployments.

In sum, the Saudis seem to be asking us to reaffirm our commitments and demonstrate our concern about recent events. We agree we should do that, but we need to stress again to the Saudis the need for politically justifiable and militarily effective measures in response to continued Iranian aggression. This will be the thrust of your letter to King Fahd.

Prepared by:
Philip A. Dur

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