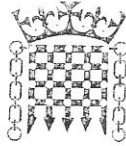


Richard Burden MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

Westminster Office tel: 020 7219 2318

Rt Hon Tony Blair MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London
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12th September 2002

Dear Tony,

Congratulations on your speech to the TUC. You certainly made some very powerful points about Iraq and other issues. I do, however, still have major reservations about the path we may be taking. I will try to explain some of these below.

In addition, though, I would like to thank you for positively responding to requests for a recall of Parliament to discuss Iraq.

The issue of possible military action against Iraq is dominating public debate, nationally and internationally. So I think it is only right that Britain's elected representatives should also have the opportunity to debate these matters collectively.

It will also be important for MPs to hear your impressions of the present state of affairs, including your discussions with President Bush, and to consider the details of the dossier concerning Saddam Hussein's intentions.

On the Iraq issue itself, I should stress that I am not somebody who would be opposed to action, come what may. I think there are circumstances in which military action against Saddam's regime could be justified. However, the evidence has to be clear, the UN should be involved and the action needs to be legitimate under international law. I am sorry to say that I don't believe any of those conditions have yet been sufficiently demonstrated.

Also, it is not enough for military action to be justified. It also has to be effective. For that to be the case, I think that the motives of states taking action would need to win the confidence of the peoples of the Middle East. I have little doubt that, in the narrow and short-term military sense, the USA and Britain could inflict a defeat on Saddam, even without the participation of any broader coalition. But the longer-term consequences of such action - which is currently regarded as illegitimate in that part of the world - could be very dangerous indeed.

Labour Member of Parliament for Birmingham Northfield
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As you know, I visit the Middle East regularly and there really is a widespread and genuine belief amongst Arab peoples that the US in particular, and to a lesser extent Britain, are guilty of double standards in international affairs. They rightly see us insisting that persistent breaches of UN resolutions by Iraq should not only be condemned without qualification, but that Iraq should be forced to comply, if necessary using military action to force "regime change."

But they do not see such resolution by us to ensure compliance with international law elsewhere – especially in the case of actions by Israel.

The people of Israel have legitimate security concerns that the international community rightly acknowledges. Indeed security for the State of Israel is one of the twin pillars of virtually all the UN resolutions that have been passed on the conflict in that part of the world. But the other pillar is that other peoples in the region - including the Palestinians - have equal rights to statehood and security.

Yet Israel remains in illegal occupation of the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza, as well as Syrian territory in the Golan Heights. Its actions against Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and Gaza regularly breach the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and the Sharon government is continuing to expand Israeli settlements – again in direct breach of Israel's obligations under international law. The fact Israel faces an ongoing terrorist threat does not justify these actions either morally or legally. Indeed, they probably make the threat of terrorism against Israelis even more serious. And as the world rightly demands to know about attempts by Saddam to acquire weapons of mass destruction, at least one brave Jewish Israeli has been in prison for years for finding out about Israel's own nuclear programme.

I do not say these things to somehow claim that Israel is a similar kind of regime to Saddam's Iraq. It is not. Despite having a questionable internal human rights record, Israel remains a democracy and that is a huge difference. Neither am I suggesting that the threat of a tyrant like Saddam can be excused or ignored because Israel also breaches international law. But is it surprising that a Palestinian living in poverty in Gaza, barred from visiting relatives in the next town and whose home has been destroyed by an Israeli F16 fighter plane, perhaps with components made in the UK, may wonder how the international community can adopt such a high moral tone on Iraq?

And of course Saddam, who is no true friend of the Palestinians, will do everything he can to enlist the support of somebody like this (and the millions of others worldwide who see double standards in the attitudes of Western Governments) to deflect attention from his own crimes over the years. He will pose as somebody prepared to stand up to Israel and its allies and he may again launch some kind of military attack on Israel for good measure. Al-Qaeda, who are friends of neither Saddam or the Palestinians, are likely to use the crisis to do what they can to achieve the same. And would not a hawk like Sharon, see an opportunity to stir the pot from the opposite side to "justify" further attacks on the Palestinians and strengthen the occupation? Remember that Israel has launched pre-emptive strikes against Iraq in the past and the potential for a military figure such as Sharon to get involved again is very great. The danger of such a spiral to the whole world is clear.

The international community has a legitimate interest in assessing and meeting any external threats posed by Saddam's regime. Ultimately though "regime change" is a matter for the Iraqi people themselves. We need to consider how best to help the people of Iraq to reclaim their country from a tyrant like Saddam.

That must involve building an effective dialogue with them. With the dangers of speaking out inside Iraq and the Iraqi opposition so fragmented that is not an easy thing to do. I know that contact is already maintained between the British and US Governments and Iraqi opposition groups and you will know that there is no consensus among them about how to rid their country of Saddam. But there is no convenient military shortcut. Saddam has already skilfully manipulated the imposition of sanctions to bolster his position internally and wrongly to blame the West for his people's suffering. Ill thought out military action could easily just make things worse.

Putting all this together, I think it is important that we all seriously consider the dossier of evidence that you are going to make available about Saddam's acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. And, via the UN, maximum efforts should be made to secure the return of the weapons inspectors. Only in the light of those things will we be able to judge whether, under the auspices of the UN, military action may become necessary.

In the aftermath of September eleventh last year, you rightly placed a great deal of emphasis on building a broad international coalition rather than embarking on hasty military campaign. You have again emphasised the importance of forging an international consensus over Iraq. My view is, however, that such a coalition is not only preferable but essential if we are to be effective in meeting any threat posed by Saddam and his acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. A new and serious initiative by the international community to promote a settlement on the Israel/Palestine issue on the basis of UN resolutions and international law is equally vital now. Later may be too late.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard Burden". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Richard Burden MP

Birmingham Northfield

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