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## OPTIONS FOR FUTURE UK FORCE POSTURE IN IRAQ

Paper by the Secretary of State for Defence

### Issue

1. We will need to reach decisions later this year on likely future UK force structure and disposition in Iraq into 2006. This paper sets out some of the key contextual considerations; identifies areas of uncertainty; sets out what we know of US planning and possible expectations on the UK contribution; and assesses the potential impact on UK decision-making.

### Campaign Context

2. Decisions on Coalition and, within that, UK force levels will be governed by four factors, all of which are subject to a greater or lesser degree of uncertainty:

- **Internal Iraqi pressure for force posture changes.** This includes the recognition that MNF-I troops, by their very presence, act as a catalyst for elements of the insurgency; that local consent for MNF-I presence is finite – perhaps only a further twelve months; and that some leading Iraqis believe that they must now start to take control of their own destiny.
- **Successful progress in the political process and extension/renewal of UNSCR 1546.** Any delay in that process is likely to impact on the overall pace of MNF-I transition. The nature

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of MNF-I mandate following the expiry of UNSCR 1546 will also impact on these plans.

- **The continued development of capable Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).** The ability of the ISF to assume responsibility for internal security remains key to the MNF-I exit strategy.
- **The security situation.** The key emerging risk to the security situation is the degree to which violence in Iraq becomes sectarian in nature.

3. None of these, however, undermine the MNF-I broad security strategy of:

- a. working with the Iraqis to contain and constrain the insurgency;
- b. assisting and encouraging the development of Iraqi security forces and structures which can progressively assume responsibility for all aspects of security including dealing with the insurgency; and thereby;
- c. enabling MNF-I force reductions and eventual withdrawal.

In broad terms this is on track, though there are major weaknesses in Iraqi security capabilities – notably higher command and control, the police service and intelligence – which have yet to be fully resolved.

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**US Position**

4. US pol/mil thinking, is still evolving. But there is a strong US military desire for significant force reductions to bring relief to overall US commitment levels. Emerging US plans assume that 14 out of 18 provinces could be handed over to Iraqi control by early 2006, allowing a reduction in overall MNF-I troop numbers from 176K down to 66K. There is, however a debate between Pentagon/CENTCOM who favour a relatively bold reduction in force numbers, and MNF-I whose approach is more cautious. The next MNF-I review of campaign progress, due in late June, may help clarify thinking and provide an agreed framework for the way ahead.

5. Against that background, we have as yet received no specific US requests for potential changes in UK force posture. But our assessment is that they may approach us on one or more of the following.

- **Option 1** The UK should pursue early and bold transition to Iraq Self Reliance in MND(SE).
- **Option 2** An expansion of UK geographical responsibility to include all part of MND(CS). Potentially this might be for just the provinces of An Najaf and Karbala; but it could extend to include Wasit, South Babil and Qadisiyah (See map attached).
- **Option 3** UK provision of a Battle Group as a residual in-Theatre reserve for use in the south with potential deployments further afield.

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We need to consider how HMG might respond to each or all of these propositions. Early indications are that the US military in theatre are contemplating asking us to take on provinces in MND(CS) – i.e. a version of Option 2.

**UK policy considerations**

6. The current, Ministerially endorsed, policy position is that the UK should not:

- a. agree to any changes to the UK area of responsibility.
- b. agree to any significant deployments outside MND(SE).
- c. agree to any significant increase in the roughly 8,500 UK service personnel currently deployed in Iraq.

7. Looking further ahead we have a clear UK military aspiration to hand over to Iraqi control in Al Muthanna and Maysan provinces in October 2005 and in the other two MND(SE) provinces (Dhi Qar and Basra) in April 2006. This in turn should lead to a reduction in the overall level of UK commitment in Iraq to around 3000 personnel (i.e. small scale) by mid 2006. This should lead to an estimated halving of the costs which fall to the reserve (around £1bn per annum currently), though it is not clear exactly when this reduction might manifest itself: it would not be before around the end of 2006.

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8. None of this as yet, however, represents a Ministerially endorsed plan. There is a good deal more military analysis to do, which is under way. We will also need to consider handling of other MND(SE) allies.

The Australian position, which is heavily influenced by the Japanese presence, may also be uncertain. I aim to bring another paper to DOP(I) covering all these issues in late Summer.

#### **Argument**

9. As things stand I see no reason to change the basic policy position set out in paragraph 6 above. Certainly there is no indication that agreeing to any request for an increase in UK military liability (i.e. Options 2 and 3 in para 5) would have a fundamental impact on the overall campaign. And the political and military commitment downsides are clear. We should therefore resist any proposals to expand our area of responsibility to all or part of MND(CS). This would amount to a rejection of US request along the lines of Option 2 in para 5 above. We should in the meantime develop our plans for handover to Iraqi provincial control in MND(SE) set out in paragraph 7 above, subject to further advice to DOP(I) from me on the detailed plan for achieving this in late Summer. This would satisfy a US approach along the lines of Option 1 in para 5.

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10. The slightly trickier area is in relation to Option 3 in para 5. We would not in the short to medium term want to agree to a liability to operate outside MND(SE). But if we have succeeded in drawing down to a small scale presence in Iraq by mid 2006, it may be militarily sensible for this to have a more flexible role than being confined to a specific geographical area. We should therefore rule out Option 3 in the short to medium term, but keep the possibility open once we reach a small-scale deployment level, hopefully in mid 2006.

### **Recommendations**

11. DOP(I) Ministers should:

- a. note the campaign context set out in para 2 and the uncertainties associated with it.
- b. note the possible nature of any US requests to the UK to modify its force posture in Iraq as set out in para 5.
- c. note that I will bring further more specific proposals to DOP(I) for the future UK force posture in Iraq including plans for handover to Iraqi control and subsequent UK military drawdown.
- d. agree that our broad policy on the nature and size of the UK presence in Iraq should remain as set out in para 6, on the basis of the argument set out in paras 9 and 10, subject to keeping open the option

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of agreeing to a more flexibly deployable small scale UK military presence from mid 2006 (para 8).

e. agree that UK representatives at the June MNF-I review (see para 4) should turn down any proposal to expand the UK area of responsibility.

**JOHN REID**

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