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CDS VISIT TO IRAQ 24-26 SEP 06

1. As you know, I visited Iraq earlier this week, and was able to discuss a number of issues with our own people and key Iraqis in Basrah and Baghdad. My office will report the details separately, but I wanted to give you an early feel for some of my conclusions.

Will Op SALAMANCA Work?

2. As briefed to you, SALAMANCA was a good plan. As eventually agreed by Maliki, it still is on the face of it. But even though we have political agreement to launch SALAMANCA, we do not have agreement to tackle the hard issues (such as militias). This is subject to further debate post-Ramadan. And Hamadi has been given overall authority for the operation –

I have said all along that success in Basrah depends upon strong political leadership and engagement: I see no sign of this emerging. So I am not wildly optimistic that SALAMANCA will put us on the road to PIC in Basrah.

What Will We Get Out of Op SALAMANCA?

3. Nevertheless, I do see a prospect for taking at least one significant step forward. The proposals for cleaning up individual police stations and culling/retraining the force are good. But they will achieve nothing long-term if we allow continued intimidation of those police who want to do a moderately respectable job. So we must deal with the killers in the Serious Crimes Unit – I regard this as vital ground. I pushed this point very hard while I was in Baghdad, as we may have to exert some pressure on Maliki if he is to live up to his rhetoric in this regard.

What About the Militias?

4. But that will still leave the key issue of militias unresolved – perhaps. I went over this in some detail during my meeting with Maliki, and he left me with a real teaser. He said that he was talking to people in Basrah; that he couldn't tell

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me all the details, but that he hoped to have something positive to announce on militias before long. Does this mean anything? Nobody I discussed it with (including HMA) was able to say. But I was left with the clear view that Maliki at least believes he can cut (and is in the process of cutting) a deal that will address militias. If so, well and good, although it is a pity that we cannot synchronise our military activities with his efforts. Of course it may all come to nothing. And when I asked Maliki how he intended to deal with the inevitable irreconcilables, he replied that he knew who they would be: Ba'athists and Al Qaida! So not a strong sense of a non-sectarian approach.

Where Do We Go After Op SALAMANCA?

5. As you know, we have been giving some thought to the UK force lay down in Basrah post-SALAMANCA. Were the operation to succeed, we would be well on the road to PIC, and consolidation at Basrah Air Station to meet our overwatch, mentoring and other long-term tasks. But what if SALAMANCA does not succeed? Returning to the status quo ante does not at the moment look like a sensible choice. What else is there? Well, we could adopt the Maysan approach, remove our tethered goats from Basrah City and force the issue for the Iraqis. So from a force structure perspective the aftermath of SALAMANCA might look pretty much the same, succeed or fail. I rehearsed this argument with all my UK and US interlocutors (including the Consul General in Basrah, HMA, Gen Casey and Gen Chiarelli), and got no push-back – they all saw it as a sensible proposition. The key decision point would probably be in the spring, perhaps connected with the provincial elections (although these may slip). In any event, having prepared the ground we will now do some more detailed thinking on this issue.


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