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From: Iraq Policy Unit
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cc: PS/PUS
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Private Secretary

SUBJECT: BASRA: SECURITY OF BRITISH EMBASSY OFFICE SITUATION

ISSUE

1. 4 April rocket attacks have raised the prospect of an increased risk to staff in the British Embassy Office in Basra. We do not know how long this increased risk will last for. Irrespective of those risks, security conditions around Basra make it impossible for some staff to carry out their duties. How should we respond?

TIMING

2. Immediate.

PREFERRED OPTIONS

3. I recommend that:

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- Staff listed at Flag A take extended leave or are moved out of the Basra Palace Compound (BPC) and redeployed to Basra Airport compound or the provinces, as recommended by the Consul General. As far as FCO / DFID staff, this is very similar to the action we took in September 2005 when the PUS and Foreign Secretary agreed to staff taking extended leave following increased risks to Basra. 5 FCO staff will be affected.
 - The aim should remain firmly to return to full staffing. We should review the situation in 2 weeks' time. A return of staff will depend upon a change in the political landscape following formation of a new government. It will also need to draw on further intelligence about the threat and take it into account the UK military's ability to counter it.
4. The Consul-General Basra, SMD, HR and DFID agree. DfID are advising their Ministers in similar terms and intend to reduce their complement of staff to 2 x DfID (down by 1) staff and 3 consultants in Basra, plus one consultant in each of the provinces of Maysan and Dhi Qar - a total of 7 which they say is the minimum necessary for them to oversee their programmes in Southern Iraq.

ARGUMENT AND BACKGROUND

Current Security Situation

5. Basra egram 9731/06 (Flag B) reported the attacks on the Basra Palace Compound (BPC) on 4 April. There were four separate attacks on the same target over a period of 2 hrs 15 minutes during daylight to dusk hours. The PUS-designate, Peter Ricketts, as well as the Consul General were caught in the open twice as missiles fell. It was the fifth attack in the last week. One of our buildings (which will become the PRT HQ) was hit and the shrapnel from the direct hit is likely to have killed or seriously injured members of our Gurkha guardforce had they been in the room at the time (Flag C.)
6. Our initial assessment is that, because of the timing and sustained period of the attack, it represents either increased capability on behalf of the extremists behind it, or at least greater audacity and confidence by them to mount a sustained attack. But we do not yet have the information / intelligence to prove that. Equally, they may also have taken advantage of the QBP (held on 4 April) and the presence of Iraqi tribal leaders and sheikhs to send a message.
7. We continue to be aware that the BPC remains under close observation by extremist Shi'i groups and their supporters, with all road moves in and out of the compound noted. In

addition, the numbers of improvised roadside explosive devices (IEDs) deployed are higher than at any time in the last six months, acting as a further constraint on road moves within Basra. For the first time since his arrival, James Tansley (Consul General) is being advised by local contacts to avoid travelling, even in the comparatively safe streets of southern Basra.

8. There is also a political context to the attacks. Since September 2005, HMG has had an off-on-off again relationship with the Basra Provincial Council and the Governor of Basra. These boycotts were called in response to UK military detainee operations, but a recent hardening of attitudes is almost certainly a response to political developments at a national level, in particular Shia discontent at perceived US interference in the political process and other coalition actions. We could see a further hardening of attitudes, in particular from the Office of Muqtada Al-Sadr, should Ibraahim Ja'afari be removed as the UIA's nomination for Prime Minister.

Risk versus Return

9. The attack has raised pertinent questions about the ability of the Iraqi Security Forces, and the UK military to provide adequate protection. For the Iraqi Security Forces, in particular the Iraqi Police Service, it is clear that they are unable or unwilling to do anything significant to counter the threat. PJHQ have agreed to follow up with local UK Commanders to see whether they are able to step up their operations though UK military forces deployed extensively on 4 April following the attacks. James Tansley has discussed the issue separately with Brigadier Marriott (acting GOC of MND(SE)). Marriott believes it should be possible to take further measures to counter the threat to Basra Palace, through a more detailed analysis of the attacks, combined with increased patrolling of possible launch sites. (A similar approach has been adopted to help counter the threat to the HQ of the Basra Battle Group at the Shatt al Arab hotel). We will press the MOD / PJHQ to take this forward urgently.
10. In parallel with these attacks, security conditions generally in Basra City have made it impossible for some staff to continue working effectively (the key criterion for their presence). We have, therefore, reviewed staffing levels in the British Embassy Office. DFID have done the same for their teams. Given this, it is debatable whether the benefits of retaining them are commensurate with the risks faced. I therefore recommend temporary withdrawal of the staff identified at Flag A from the British Embassy Office Compound. This is not – and should not be seen as – a significant draw down of the UK civilian effort in Basra. The total number of FCO staff affected would be 5. This would mean returning to the UK for a temporary period, or if already on leave, delaying their return. HR would maintain contact with the FCO staff concerned.

11. The drawdown will also mean some contracted staff being redeployed to minimise their presence on the Basra Palace Compound site. This primarily affects the administration office for the contracted police advisors who will move to accommodation at the UK military camp at Basra Airport (our Senior Police Adviser is consulting MND(SE) on the practical arrangements). In terms of who remains, the Consul General and the Head of DfID in Basra have selected their staff based on their ability to carry out their work in the present circumstances. They will be housed in the small, purpose built, single storey accommodation units, rather than the Red Sea Containers. The purpose built units have been designed and constructed to reduce the impact and the associated effects of such attacks as shown at Flag C and represent the best level of protection available in the area.
12. The intention is that the draw down will be temporary and be reviewed in two weeks or after significant developments that might occur in the interim, notably the formation of a new Government in Baghdad. In drawing down staff, we accept a reduction in outputs. This should not have an impact on current work on transition planning for Maysan and Muthanna which is well advanced. But reducing the numbers of staff will have an impact on establishing the UK led PRT in Basra if no decision is taken to allow staff to return to Basra before 1 May. James Tansley has discussed this with his US counterpart, who is reasonably relaxed. But we can expect some adverse comment if the PRT is not up and running by 15 May.
13. James Tansley has discussed our thinking with both his Danish and US counterparts, whose offices are also located in BPC. While agreeing with our assessment of the security situation, neither currently has plans to draw down their staff.

PRESS LINES

14. It is possible that news of any drawdown would leak. The following press lines have been agreed with the Press Office and the Consul General:
 - We regularly review security conditions. In the light of recent attacks on Coalition interests in the southern part of Iraq, the FCO has decided to reduce temporarily the number of staff serving at our Consulate General in Basra. These reductions have been co-ordinated with regular deployment patterns of staff, who's numbers fluctuate anyway as a result of R&R breaks.
 - These reductions will not significantly affect our ability to pursue projects in Basra and the surrounding provinces.

If raised:

- How many staff have you withdrawn and for how long?
- 5 FCO members of staff will be withdrawn on a temporary basis. They will return as soon as we judge the security situation justifies it.
- Is this due to the actions of the UK military who have recently carried out a number of arrests in southern Iraq?
- No. This decision takes into account wider security problems in southern Iraq.

Iraq Directorate

Basra Submission 7 4 06