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Foreign Policy Adviser to the Prime Minister,
and Head of the Defence and Overseas Secretariat

25 October 2004

Dear Neil

IRAQ: MNF PRESENCE IN IRAQ IN 2005: PHASED DRAW DOWN

Thank you for your note of 22 October, enclosing your paper on this subject.

The paper sets out clearly the political case for advancing our public position on this issue. But I have two questions, which I think it would be useful to address before we take the paper any further:

- (i) The paper does not go into much detail on military options for 2005/2006. However, the MOD have told me that quite a bit of planning has been undertaken, in MNF-I, in Washington and indeed by the UK military. I think the paper could do with a little more on this, including a more detailed and realistic assessment of growing Iraqi capability during 2005. I gather that the latest view is that the Iraqi security forces will be unable to act independently of the MNF in any genuine combat situation much before the middle of 2005.
- (ii) The paper concludes that we "should avoid specifying an end-date for MNF withdrawal". But I'm not sure where that leaves us. Are you saying that you are happy with our present line; or do you want to change it? At present we make clear that we will stay until the job is done; relate our dispositions to the development of Iraqi capability; and indeed have given a general timeline.

For example the Prime Minister said in May: "The important thing is, we've got to remain there until the job is done – although I hope and anticipate that in a year's time there will be a very substantial reduction in troops from where we are now. But it all depends on getting the Iraqi security forces themselves with the capability to do the work."

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My understanding is that MOD thinking is that we should not draw down during 2005, but – subject to the criterion concerning Iraqi capability – aim to do so in early 2006. If we do not say something like this, related of course to the Petraeus plan, I'm not clear whether you would have advanced our public position at all.

I am copying this letter to the recipients of yours.

*Yours
Nigel*

NIGEL SHEINWALD

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