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**IRAQ: THE CONTEXT FOR AN EXPANSION OF MILITARY FORCES**

Ministers are due to meet on 15 June to consider the possible expansion of UK military forces in Iraq. I attach a paper Cabinet Office have prepared, drawing on contributions from departments, to provide further background for that discussion.

2. I am copying this letter, and the paper, to PS/ODPM, PS/MOD, PS/DFID, PS/Treasury, PS/"C", John Scarlett, Desmond Bowen, David Quarrey and George Fergusson.

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## IRAQ: THE CONTEXT FOR AN EXPANSION OF MILITARY FORCES

This paper reviews the arguments for and against three scenarios:

- no expansion at all;
- the deployment of the ARRC with a brigade on stand-by at high-readiness.
- the deployment of ARRC and the concurrent deployment of a brigade.

The paper seeks to assist Ministers in making the key judgement on military expansion: which course of action, is likely to bolster the chances of success in Iraq set against the risks and costs to the UK and its armed forces. Beyond success in Iraq for its own sake, there is also the wider importance of the Coalition, and more particularly the US, leaving Iraq in due time with its reputation intact and a continued willingness to engage internationally in case of need.

The paper also seeks to reflect the changes that have taken place in Iraq since the US first asked us to consider expansion and the Defence Secretary's advice of 25 May. In recent weeks, the formation of the IIG, and the adoption of UNSCR 1546 have been real steps forward in the political process. With the transition of power to a fully sovereign Iraqi government approaching, the focus of the international community, and the IIG, is on the Iraqiisation of security tasks, albeit with a realisation that Coalition support will be needed for the foreseeable future. In the South, the security picture has also changed: the Spanish, and Latin American, contingents have been replaced by US troops; the US have, at least for the moment, successfully reorganised their command and control arrangements and adopted more effective tactics on the ground; and the crisis we faced in Fallujah and Najaf has stabilised for the moment. But significant problems remain. The arrangements in Fallujah and Najaf are fragile, and may be storing up trouble for other areas by shifting rather than solving the problem of insurgency. Equally, although US commanders have shown increasing sensitivity to the Shia holy sites, their

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rules of engagement are different to our own and may give rise to an aggressive response if there is a flare-up. We also expect further efforts by Al Qaida associated terrorists to destabilise the transition. In summary, the situation has seen improvement, but remains underlyingly volatile.

The US appeal for our help came in the midst of the Al Sadr and Fallujah crises. The Administration, particularly the military, reportedly remain committed to the request and are optimistic we will respond positively. However, they have been careful to give us time to consider the request and have not sought to pressurise us. This suggest an Administration which sees a positive UK response as desirable, but not critical.

### **No expansion**

#### ***Advantages:***

- Reduces risk of domestic/international perception that a sovereign Iraqi government and moves to "Iraqiisation" are tokenistic;
- Avoids UK military liability for a wider area, and command responsibility for US and other untried multinational forces;
- Enables us to concentrate our development effort in MND(SE), the area we know best, while the US would continue to give MND(CS) priority for its Supplemental resources;
- Current MOD plans not affected, and serious over-stretch of the Army avoided (deployments, training, degree of operational redundancy for unforeseen events, and longer-term impact on retention).

#### ***Disadvantages:***

- failure to respond to a US request for assistance at a time when the US military is over-stretched;
- security in the MND(CS), notably the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala would remain under the control of the US. While their approach has recently improved, they may still be prone to misjudgements and heavy-handedness;

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- With no increase in our level of military deployment, we can not expect increased influence on US military decisions at the strategic level.

**Deployment of the ARRC with a brigade held on high-readiness**

***Advantages:***

- We would gain credit with the US;
- Our commitment may buy us a stronger voice in strategic discussions in Baghdad – both because we have increased our military commitment and because the ARRC will lead MNF action in the South (this effect will be enhanced if the ARRC reports direct to Commander MNF(I)). This could be important for overall success in Iraq, in that we know that UK interventions have, in some instances in the past, reined back the US and thus achieved a more nuanced approach;
- The presence of the ARRC, even in a national capacity, may encourage further troop contributions, particularly NATO partners, and may ensure existing contributors do not pull out;
- The ARRC is an extremely capable HQ, which would bring coherence to the approach to security across the South. This would mean that the majority Shia areas, with the exception of parts of Baghdad, would come under a single command. This would make it easier to engage with the Shia political/religious leadership both politically and in terms of delivering security across the South as a whole;
- Having the brigade in hand to reinforce where necessary would give welcome flexibility if the situation on the ground changed. However, set against these potential gains is CDS' assessment that there is no overwhelming military operational requirement for such UK reinforcement.

***Disadvantages:***

- Although an ARRC deployment should win us greater influence with the US on strategic decisions, past experience shows, in practice, they are unwilling/unable to share decision-making beyond a certain point;
- Control over the Shia south does not mean control of the Shia. Even though deployment of the ARRC is likely to improve security, help maintain

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consent and deliver successful elections in the Shia South, this must be offset against the wider national developments that will continue to be outside our control;

- The ARRC will continue to be dependent in MND(CS) on delivery by US troops in Najaf and Qadisiyah and the Poles/other Eastern Europeans in the rest of the sector. This will limit the difference we can make on the ground and the degree to which the local population perceive that things have changed;
- A revised US command and control system has just been bedded down. An ARRC deployment would mean some upheaval in these arrangements;
- The Armed Forces are already overstretched. In the short-term, the cost will be to our ability to deploy to other areas (e.g. Afghanistan). In the medium-term, we will lose some capacity to response to emerging crises (e.g. ESDP battlegroup missions or UN requirements). In the long-term, reduced tour intervals and a reduction in training will inevitably reduce the preparedness of the Army as well as its ability to retain and recruit. This latter point is also likely to be picked up by the press at the point of any announcement;
- An announcement to extend deployment close to the announcement of the 2004 Spending Review outcome for the MOD, and plans for restructuring measures for the Armed Forces is likely to attract domestic criticism;
- There will be resentment among some NATO members, notably the French, that we are withdrawing the ARRC from NATO use. Deployment of the ARRC to Iraq will also preclude a deployment to Afghanistan. We have, thus far, supported the principle that NATO should focus on Afghanistan and, while an ARRC deployment would not be directly contradictory as we have retained the right to deploy it as we see fit, it is not entirely within that spirit.
- From a development perspective, the US may feel under less pressure to provide assistance on the ground. We, by contrast, will be under greater pressure to provide resources, which outside QIPS, may be difficult to deliver because of the security situation.

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**Deploying a brigade concurrently with the ARRC*****Advantages (largely in addition to those for ARRC deployment alone):***

- Providing a Brigade as well as the ARRC would be a very robust response to the US request for assistance. This should gain us additional credit with the US;
- The ARRC would be commanding British forces in the majority of its area of operations. We would expect this to act as a multiplier on the effectiveness of the ARRC;
- The local population, and IIG, may welcome the replacement of US forces by British forces – our reputation in MND(SE) is good. This may help us deliver security, consent and successful elections to the Shia areas, but it will still not change the wider national political context.

***Disadvantages (largely in addition to those for ARRC deployment alone):***

- Deploying the brigade would exacerbate disadvantages seen in the deployment of the ARRC alone: on impact of the Armed Forces; on the political message in relation to the transition to Iraqi control; and on the risk of reduced US commitment to providing development assistance in MND(CS).
- We would effectively double our troop numbers in Iraq (approximate figures are that we currently have 9000 troops, the ARRC only option would add up to 2700, and the ARRC plus brigade would add up to 6,800). This will be presentationally difficult domestically and in Iraq, especially given our public emphasis on Iraqiisation;
- The military risks in MND(CS) are greater than in MND(SE) because the areas involved are more volatile. Also by increasing our presence, we increase our exposure. A deployment increases the likelihood of fatalities and casualties. It also increases, if that is possible, our political exposure.

**Cabinet Office****11 June 2004**