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HMA Baghdad

IRAQ IN 2008 – AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE TAKEN

INTRODUCTION

1. A visitor to Iraq today would certainly find it in much better condition than it was a year ago. The viciously destabilizing sectarian conflict which characterized 2006 and the first half of 2007 is largely absent. AQ(I) has been driven from most of Anbar and Baghdad, and is gradually being driven into the North. The Sadrists are maintaining their 'freeze' and are riven with internal conflict. And the ISF are rapidly increasing in number and capability. But the visitor would be bound to remark that significant sections of the country remained insecure and that, while the trend might be positive and welcome, violence remained at an unacceptably high level. We do not yet have 'irreversible momentum'.
2. Our visitor would also find a government and political class at odds with itself and increasingly with its population. Dissatisfaction at provincial level with the politicians in Baghdad is general. Our visitor would quickly see, as many Iraqis do themselves, that at the heart of this lies the progress of the reform agenda that will have to underpin national reconciliation. Despite this, compromise continues to elude the main players. The Sunni and Sadrists, amongst others, remain outside the tent, unwilling to cooperate with the Government, but unable to oppose constructively it either. Meanwhile, despite some good instincts, PM Maliki frustrates the Coalition and the Iraqi parties in almost equal measure by his inability to reach out as a unifying leader. As a result, while essential legislation is just about moving, the pace of progress is glacial. Only doubt on the viability of alternatives and reluctance to face the process of replacement inhibit general agreement on the need for change.
3. If our visitor were an economist he might welcome, on the one hand, the successful rearrangement of the Stand By Agreement with the IMF, the strengthening currency, reducing level of inflation and increasing government revenue, and, on the other, on the many visible signs of low level economic activity as markets return and

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traffic increases. But he or she would also inevitably comment, especially if writing a report for a potential investor, on the limited power and fuel supply, lack of banking facilities, absence of external investment and high level of unemployment.

4. -- If the visitor were a journalist, once he had finished congratulating himself on the balance of his piece (shortly to be removed by his sub-editor), he would no doubt ask how the Coalition aimed to support the Government of Iraq in making further progress in 2008, and in turning a fragile improvement into sustainable success.

#### COALITION CAMPAIGN THEMES FOR 08

5. The answers are exhaustively set out in the MNF(I) Campaign Plan revised and reissued earlier this month and in MNC(I)'s Operations Order 08-01. Together these direct what the Coalition is trying to achieve and how it intends to get there in the first six months of 2008, looking further only in outline. I will not attempt to précis them here, but as the UK looks forward into 2008, it is worth considering the main themes of the Coalition effort.

6. As General Petraeus regularly cautions, the campaign is inherently dynamic in nature. I do not think, therefore, there is much to be gained from looking out too far beyond six months. Petraeus himself is quite clear that he will not make detailed recommendations beyond the end of 2008 when he reports in March, with 2009 the subject of a further report in perhaps September. He is equally clear that he will request what he needs for the campaign, and let others judge whether the resources required can be made available. Given that he has been told that into the distance the US Army could sustain 13 brigades, and the US Marine Corps a further two (at a one year on 2 years off ratio), we should not, therefore, automatically assume that the glide path will immediately continue downwards past July and 15 brigades. Generals Petraeus and Odierno are clear that any draw-down should be conditions-based, and it increasing looks as if their judgements will be supported.

7. The Pursuit of AQ(I). AQ(I) has been badly damaged by its active rejection by the bulk of the Sunni population and some impressive COIN operations by conventional and special forces. They can currently operate effectively only in areas where there are inadequate security forces and where the population feel threatened, whether by JAM around Baghdad or the Kurds in Ninewah in the North. Future operations will aim to reestablish security and to protect the population in these areas, in conjunction with improvements to governance and essential services. The long term success of these actions will depend on the associated political actions to take forward political reconciliation with the Sunnis (including the future of the CLC programme) and to limit Kurdish pressure in Ninewah. It should also mean Provincial elections, at least in Anbar and in Ninewah where there is a need to empower politically the Sunnis, and to show them that there is a better way to resist Kurdish domination than by supporting AQ(I).

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8. The Reshaping of JAM/OMS. The future of JAM/OMS remains one of the largest jokers in the pack. Al Sadr's leadership is inadequate and recognised as such. The movement he nominally leads is splitting. He himself, as well as some key leaders, appear to wish to return the movement to its political and social roots. Over time we will see whether they are going to evolve together into a cohesive nationalist movement providing a voice to the Shia poor and dispossessed. Or whether, as their horizons widen and the economy improves, the 'street politicians' who have previously seen OMS as an appropriate vehicle for their ambitions begin to develop more independent thinking. Even the Special Groups appear increasingly independent of al Sadr and even of their Iranian sponsors, in doing so making themselves vulnerable to Coalition and Government action. The Coalition, and the Government, will continue to support the freeze, emphasize that we have no quarrel with either OMS or those members of JAM who respect it, but go after those, whether inside or outside the Special Groups, who continue to conduct criminal actions. Wherever it is possible the aim will be to encourage participation in the political process (by 'carrot' and by 'stick'), thereby isolating the 'irreconcilables'. Again Provincial elections may be of use here (especially for the South), although concern from Crocker, Petraeus and others about the Sadrists abusing power (as they did when they ran the Transport and Health Ministries) is likely to mean that the argument for such elections helping to bind them into a political course is unlikely to get traction easily.

9. Binding in the Neighbours. The Coalition will wish to reinforce the reduction in the flow of foreign fighters through Syria and to encourage continued Iranian pressure on al Sadr to maintain the freeze. In addition it will wish to reduce the training and equipment support the Iranians continue to provide against the day they wish to see renewed attacks on the Coalition, to get the Saudis and the Gulf States to reopen their embassies in Baghdad and begin to reinvest, and to lever the Turks and KRG towards resolution of the PKK issue. Success in some or all of these will greatly aid the campaign. The converse is also true. All are subject to other linkages. It will be important for capitals to gauge carefully the effect on Iraq when considering overall policy.

10. Opening up the Economy and Increasing Employment. Iraq in 2008 has the largest investment budget in its history at some \$19 Billion, but needs also to encourage the private sector if it is to rebuild its infrastructure and rapidly develop its economy in a way which encourages employment and reduces the economic basis of much of the insurgency. The immediate concern for MNF will be to transition the tens of thousands of CLCs (and others like them) into jobs which will help undermine the economic motivation to take up arms against the Iraqi Government or MNF. Private investment will be the key to this, and action to promote it will be a top priority. But Coalition support to training and vocational education initiatives and to the capacity of the central and provincial Governments to spend their money and to deliver services will also be key. The most important prize in the next six months will be the Hydrocarbons Law, which should guarantee the future prosperity of the country, by but time is precious and if we are going to maintain the security

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momentum of this year, we will need short-term 'kick-start' initiatives too. This will not be text-book developmental economics, but it could help buy the time needed to avoid a return to bitter sectarian conflict.

11. More Effective Governance. Ultimately it will be politics that delivers the route to sustained national stability and security. January should give a good indication of how things will go. Assuming Maliki's health holds: if the Council of Representative can pass the Justice and Accountability Law and the Budget promptly, he can appoint some halfway competent ministers into his cabinet (including enough from either Tawafuq or the Awakening to bind the Sunnis into the political process), and then make progress on Provincial Powers, Provincial Elections and Hydrocarbons legislation then we are on track. If not, the Iraqis may lose patience with him faster than we do.

12. The Development of Future Bilateral Security Relationships. UNSCR 1790 is billed as the last Chapter VII SCR. As the relative strengths of the ISF and Coalition force changes, and if security continues to improve, the Iraqis desire to make their own decisions and to be given the time and space to do so will increase. How this will play into the nature of the long term security arrangements they are prepared to sign up to will depend on how well the inevitable frictions are handled. At present the cooler heads amongst them seem clear that such a relationship with the US will be essential, not least to allow the rebuilding of the Iraqi economy under US military protection. The extent to which those pragmatists are allowed (both by the Prime Minister and perceived public opinion) to guide the negotiations will determine how difficult a process that becomes.

#### UK ISSUES FOR 08

13. If the themes above represent the Iraqi context, there seem to me to be four principal issues for us to engage with as we enter 2008. The first is extraneous: where does our military contribution in Iraq sit within the wider strategic relationship with the US? I fully appreciate that there are wider factors at play, but it may nevertheless be helpful to make the obvious points that the US military main effort (with 15 brigades deployed here, even in July 2008, against two in Afghanistan) unquestionably remains Iraq, that this will still be the case in 2009, and that General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker consistently express their wish for us to remain.

14. The second concerns the role, size and duration of our national effort in Basrah. I phrase this deliberately. Our military effort from Basrah should be focused on support to the ISF. Our national effort should be focused on political and economic development in the area. But of course the two are inextricably related; the more political and economic progress in Basrah can be achieved the less security will be an issue (and the faster we may be able to draw down militarily). This will need national effort and needs to be properly resourced: departmental funding issues should not be allowed to get in the way. What is more, the 'pay-off' will depend on how quickly we can act and how responsive we can be to the opportunities that

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present themselves. In the long run Basra should be a success, but without Coalition support (which Petraeus and Crocker clearly believe should be British led) we risk it going backwards in the short to medium term. Our willingness to help actively support the positive momentum engendered by the transfer to Provincial Iraqi Control, will determine the extent to which we can legitimately claim the enterprise as a whole to have been a success (and expect to take any credit for it).

15. The two remaining issues fall-out both from the progress that we have made and US thinking on their future posture. Their bilateral discussions with the Iraqis will bring into sharper relief the fact that while we are firmly embedded within the MNF structures, we have our own separate, though very largely complementary, bilateral position to consider.

16. The third issue therefore relates to the extent that we wish to support the ISF more broadly in the future. Previous work has identified the Iraqi Navy, MOD and officer training as areas to which we might contribute. The first two are not time critical. Officer training is currently assisted by the NATO Training Mission which withdraws its full time presence from the IMAR and Joint Staff College in July 2008. Given the potentially significant role that the Armed Forces will play as a relatively secular and well-disciplined force at the centre of Iraqi society, we have a real interest in helping develop their future senior leaders. We therefore need to scope the requirement promptly if we are to be ready (if we decide to go ahead) for the start of future courses in September 2008.

17. Finally we need to engage with the US as they study the restructuring of MNF(I), MNC(I) and MNSTC(I) – both in terms of HQs and basing. General Petraeus is clear that this work will take time to mature. While serious fighting goes on he is clear on the continued requirement for a Corps HQ to control operations and a strategic level HQ to deal upwards and outwards. He has also made clear that he will take all the people we can give him and that he does not regard the size of the UK staff contribution as linked to the size of MND(SE). Nevertheless we might need to take a hard view on the type of posts which give us most value – both in terms of our relations with the US and with the Iraqis. Meanwhile as the wider force transitions, we will need to consider how they see our role in Basrah fitting into their longer term force lay-down plans.

## CONCLUSION

18. To say that the next six months in Iraq will be critical is a truism. What is clear is that the Iraqis, and their allies, have been given a chance to move decisively in the right direction, which if squandered is likely to be reproduced.

W R Rollo  
Lt Gen  
SBMR-I

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