



SECRETARY OF STATE

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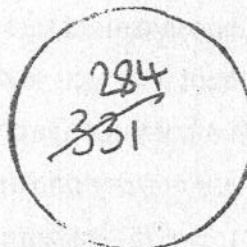
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**NEXT STEPS ON FORCE LEVELS IN IRAQ**

**Summary: Using my visit next week to confirm our plans are appropriate in scope and timing; address US concerns; ISF development and equipping and reconciliation initiatives. Re-posturing consists of three elements – consolidation by closing Shaibah; handover of Basra City bases to the Iraqi Army; and increased police and Iraqi Army support through training and mentoring. Reserve force is maintained in the event of being required by Government of Iraq. An early February, pre-Recess, announcement of a planned drawdown of troops in May is vital.**

Ahead of tomorrow's meeting I thought it would be helpful to set out what we will need to confirm in theatre, including through my imminent visit, so that you can be in a position to make a statement on Iraq before the February recess. I have scheduled a meeting with Casey and Khalilzad to bottom out their reported concerns. My visit to Basra will give me the chance to see for myself the progress being made, including on ISF build up, and confirm that our plans for re-posturing are appropriate in terms of scope and timing. I

The Rt Hon Tony Blair MP  
Prime Minister

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intend to look hard at the effects of SINBAD in Basra itself so I can support an assessment with first hand experience.

Inevitably the visit will give a concentrated media focus on re-posturing and drawdown. The post-SINBAD assessment has begun. There is growing expectation of an early statement from you and it will be essential that colleagues approach this with a common understanding of the reasons behind our decisions to alter our military posture on the road to Provincial Iraqi Control of Security (PIC). The tri-Departmental work currently underway on measuring progress along the road to PIC will be crucial.

Reposturing – or the 'transfer of battle space', as the US military call it - reflects the growing capability of the ISF to take on a greater role ahead of a formal announcement of PIC. It is happening across Iraq. For example, just last week the Corps agreed that IA 2DIV would take the lead in Mosul, Iraq's third largest city, in Ninawa Province. Similarly the handover of bases follows a well worn path in which over 50 US bases across Iraq have already been transferred to the Iraqis.

Of course Basra is different to, say Mosul: it is bigger (2.6 million to Mosul's 1.7 million), and its role as Iraq's second city and the capital of the South makes it more symbolic – not just to the Iraqis but to the Coalition. We must get this right. Casey and Khalilzad have recently expressed concerns both about the optics of a relocation of the US Regional Office from Basra Palace and the risk of leaving Basra in hock to Iranian backed elements. The fact is that the level of violence remains relatively low – half that in Mosul, and a fraction of that in Baghdad and most violence is directed against the coalition. Once that is excluded, the level of violence is very low compared with many areas in Iraq. It is significant that there are few if any attacks on civil projects sponsored by the coalition when they are carried out by Iraqis.

While acknowledging serious US concerns we must take the opportunity to build momentum towards Iraqi control. This is the very argument the US deployed when granting PIC to An Najaf province, home to Muqtada al-Sadr's

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stronghold and HQ. We need to respond to the Iraqis' growing appetite to assume security control, and we need to be sure we are not asking our forces to remain longer than is necessary.

There is no question of us leaving a vacuum in the city, as the IA and IPS are already doing patrols and we will remain present in the Provincial Joint Co-ordination Centre and military transition teams. Early evidence from the final stages of OP SINBAD, where the IA are in some areas not just in the lead but doing it by themselves, is that inevitably they enjoy a greater level of consent than we do – but also that they are doing a decent job. They are far from the finished article but after re-posturing our shift towards mentoring and support will ensure they continue to develop.

The clear military advice, as CDS has confirmed, is that re-posturing and the associated drawdown will not adversely affect our capacity to provide support to the Iraqi Security Forces, including underwriting it by providing a battlegroup size reserve force. We must recognise that after reposturing re-intervention would not be straight-forward but this is a nettle that must be grasped at some stage.

I share your view that in advance of any announcements on drawdown we need to have carefully considered the implications both for security in Basra based on the conditions there and any knock on effect of the impending Baghdad initiative. But I can assure you that the military advice, as outlined by CDS, is based on precisely this kind of careful consideration.

I also share your view that we need to do our best to make sure our allies are clear about our plans. The details of our plans and the implications for our partners have been extensively explored by both the FCO and across military lines with the countries involved. Indeed this is a two way conversation. Like us, the Australians, Danes, and Romanians have made their plans for 2007.

So while there are inevitable risks and uncertainties I am confident we are doing our best to manage them. And we must also acknowledge that there

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are risks too on the other side, in delaying our final decisions and our announcements. Inevitably, the broad outline of our preparations for re-posturing are already well known not just throughout the forces but also in the media, and there is an expectation of early announcements. If this situation persists too long without being clarified, we will begin to face problems – including our ability to tailor training for Iraq or Afghanistan and to make the necessary announcements in that area. I was pressed on this again in the House on Monday.

There is also the risk that if we delay too long, because we are overly risk-averse about the possibility of sending conflicting signals about what the Coalition is trying to achieve in Iraq as a whole, there is a risk that we will inadvertently be sending a wrong and damaging signal on Basra in particular – suggesting that OP SINBAD has not worked, or that we are not making progress against our plans, when in fact we are. Moreover there is a risk that we will appear indecisive at the very time that we are starting to face questions about announcements on troop levels and equipment in Afghanistan.

These factors explain why I strongly believe we should make our final decisions, and announce them, as soon as possible, certainly prior to say 8th February. This should include the planned drawdown in May. As you know I will be coming back to the Defence debate on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, where I will be ideally placed to back up any announcement or alternatively a known date close to this would allow me to set the scene.

What would we be announcing? First, the closing of the Shaibah Base, 20km from Basra. This is a consolidation exercise which will allow us to reduce the numbers of troops engaged on force protection. Second, the handover of Basra city bases to the Iraqi Army. Third, a drawdown of forces reflecting this consolidation and re-posturing – a reduction in the order of 2000-2500 troops by the time of the next roulement in May, leaving overall levels just below 5000.

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We would also announce that our current planning assumptions have us continuing at the resulting 4500-5000 level until at least the end of 2007. This should reassure the US and other coalition partners of our continuing commitment. Indeed we expect the Americans themselves to have announced a significant drawdown around the turn of the year. But more importantly it is a prudent planning assumption and will not constrain our decisions on Afghanistan.

We should explain what these 4500-5000 personnel will be doing, having handed over security lead to the Iraqis, and reduced the need for force protection. The answer is that as well as holding a battlegroup in reserve in case the security situation deteriorates, Security Sector Reform will once again be the main focus – reflected in an increase in our commitment to military and police training teams. In relation to the Police in particular – an area where I know the Americans have concerns – we have as CDS explained done a considerable amount to clean up the police in Basra, but making it stick now depends mainly on the Iraqi MOI and Emergency Security Committee acting on outstanding arrest warrants. The GOC and the Ambassador intend to ensure Interior Minister Boulani visits Basra. If they have not succeeded by the time of my visit I will press him to go south with me for the day.

Finally, given the importance right now of the Iraqis being able to assume the lead, we should take the opportunity to deal with the public demands which PM Maliki made last week on equipment – repeating in public what he has said to us in private. In fact, the position in IA 10 DIV is relatively good, but the Iraqis continue to look for symbols of force to over-face the militia. We have managed to bring forward the deployment of some 240 HUMVEE vehicles – 140 are now in place – and we are expecting some heavy calibre arms over the next month. On my visit I will again press Defence Minister Qadr to spend his capital budget wisely and quickly including for 10DIV.

The planning has been done, the plans remain sound, and – as always subject to material changes in the conditions on the ground – the course is

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set. The challenge now is to see this through, and win the argument with our allies and with the public. This will never be a risk-free business. I understand the importance of combining our close knowledge of the security needs in Basra with its place in the wider strategic picture across Iraq. I strongly believe that we are already in a position to bring these things together in a way which gives clarity and purpose to our position, and I believe we can take our allies with us.

I am copying this letter to the Foreign Secretary, Secretary of State for Department for International Development, CDS, Sir Nigel Sheinwald and Margaret Aldred.



Des Browne

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