

NSID(OD)(08)6

IRAQ

Issue

Our continuing role in Basra in 2008/2009, and the timelines and considerations for taking decisions on force level options.

Attachments

- (1) Short Term Strategy
- (2) Defence Secretary's draft statement to Parliament
- (3) International Development Secretary letter on economic progress

Recommendations

Do Ministers agree that:

- i) the Defence Secretary should make an announcement to Parliament on 1 April, that in the light of events in Basra we will stay at **current force levels** (4,100 in southern Iraq) until the situation becomes clearer, while retaining the option to reduce further before the Summer if conditions on the ground allow;
  - ii) although the current situation in Basra may have implications for our **longer term military commitment** in Basra, we should not rush to a decision until a clearer assessment of these events can be made.
- Ministers are therefore invited to take a view today whether the options set out in paragraph 4(a) – (c) in the attached Short Term Strategy paper are appropriate. A decision can then be taken when events are clearer, and after the Prime Minister's visit to Washington. The timing of that decision will depend on when we judge best to inform the US, but for Option 1 this would be sometime between May to November;

- iii) we should consider how best to sensitise **US interlocutors** to the possibility of a more rapid UK military withdrawal than they would wish for, while recognising the need to maintain our long term close relationship with the US;
- iv) if we assume that we will have a military presence in 2009, we should insert ourselves into US negotiations with the Iraqis to secure adequate **legal cover** post-UNSCR;
- v) notwithstanding a military draw down we should continue with areas of **political and economic engagement**, where we could continue to add value in order to maintain our reputation and **relations with the Government of Iraq**, as well as with the US.

#### Background

2. ISF operation in Basra. On Sunday 23 March, Prime Minister Maliki unexpectedly ordered an Iraqi-led operation into Basra to crack down on JAM militias, without consulting the US or UK. Iraqi operations continued with very little UK visibility, reportedly at Maliki's request. On Sunday 30 March, Muqtada al Sadr called on JAM to cease fighting, and suggested a political compromise might be possible. Although these events are likely to play out over a number of weeks, the current assessment is that some kind of uneasy compromise will emerge, which allows Maliki to retain his position, albeit weakened, with Sadrists and other politicians seeking to exploit that weakness. We should therefore wait for a clearer assessment of what this means for our longer term military mission in the south, and not make any decisions about our options today.

3. Spring force levels. We have a commitment to make a statement on Spring force levels before the Easter recess. Given the events over the last week, a decision and announcement to reduce to 3,350 troops in the Spring would not be appropriate. The Defence Secretary plans to announce to Parliament on 1 April that we will retain current force levels at around 4,100 until the situation becomes clearer. If conditions allow, we have until late April to announce troop reductions in the May roulement.

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4. Longer term military commitment and US handling. Maintaining good relations with the US, against the backdrop of the US presidential election, is a key factor in deciding how long to stay in the south. We need to start considering how best to sensitise the US to the idea that UK forces may withdraw earlier than they would wish for, how this US might respond, and how we will handle that. A decision on the options set out in paragraph 4 of the short term strategy should not take place until after the Prime Minister's visit to Washington, but Ministers are invited to consider today whether these are the right options. If Ministers do decide in due course to choose Option 1, that decision could be taken between May and November, depending on when we judge is the optimal time to inform the US. These decisions will need to be taken against the backdrop of our wider and longer term relationship with the US.
5. Longer term legal considerations. Should we wish to sustain a military commitment in Iraq into 2009, we will need adequate legal cover. This will require our early involvement in the ongoing US-Iraq negotiations, so that we can take a view on whether to lock into that agreement, or negotiate separate legal cover.
6. Political role. Continuing our political engagement, as set out in paragraph 5(a)-(b), will be important in order to repair and maintain relations with the Government of Iraq. This engagement should continue in Baghdad regardless of our decisions on Basra. However, we will need to accept that any early military withdrawal from Basra would have an impact on our political influence.
7. Economic role. DfID and Michael Wareing continue to implement the Prime Minister's economic initiatives in Basra, as set out in the International Development Secretary's attached letter. Their ability to continue to do so may be affected by the events playing out in Basra, and there is also a sense that the UK military's presence at the COB may become an impediment to the economic development of the airport.

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We should therefore continue to assist with Iraq's economic development, but recognise that our contribution in Basra may reduce depending on the development of these events, and on future military force level decisions.

Cabinet Office

31 March 2008

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