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VISIT TO BASRA

On the way to Afghanistan last week, I visited Basra briefly, and realised a personal ambition by having a cup of tea downtown. I was able to do this because of a remarkable transformation in the security situation. I found our troops enthused about their new role, working alongside the resurgent Iraqi Security Forces. The Iraqis too were in buoyant mood, with their new commanders clearly focused on maintaining popular consent in order to keep the militias at bay. Everyone I spoke to sensed a real prospect now to leave behind us in Basra a positive legacy. As one officer put it to me, we are now in a similar position to 2003, but with the benefit this time of a security environment which has a predominantly Iraqi face. If we are to avoid the same pitfalls this time round, rapid investment is needed in Joint Security Stations for the Iraqi Army and Police in Basra, and in eye-catching short-term regeneration initiatives and medium-term employment schemes. This needn't be UK money – the Government of Iraq is revelling in the hike in oil prices and should themselves be spending on these priorities – but perhaps we should consider across government, as we approach the final stages of Op TELIC, what value we would put upon some flagship projects that we can point to as part of a positive UK legacy in southern Iraq.

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My discussions with Lt Gen Cooper and Maj Gen White-Spunner have helped to crystallise my thoughts about our transition strategy. The work we have done on force levels in theatre has confirmed that we cannot go much below our current levels of 4,100 and still perform a useful mentoring and training role without the substitution of US troops in some of our current tasks. This is something that we are not at the moment pressing the US to do, pending your conversation with the President, so a gradual drawdown of troops such as we envisaged last October currently is off the table. However, MND(SE) are confident that, if the improvements in the security environment are sustained, 14 Division will be sufficiently robust by the end of 2008 to allow us, should we choose to do so, to declare an end to Op TELIC and move to a longer-term relationship along the lines of that which I described in my letter to you after my last visit in March, which would require troops numbered in the hundreds rather than thousands. This would fit well with the timing of Provincial Elections, now expected to take place in November or December, as well as with the expected expiry – although this appears increasingly to hang in the balance - of UNSCR 1790 at the end of this year, about which you know my concerns.

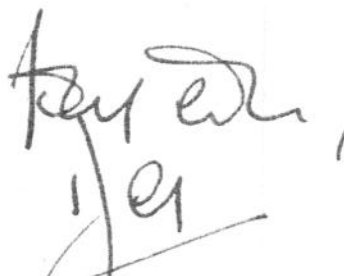
An important new further factor is that it is now clear that by October this year, the US will have three times our combat power in MND(SE) as they move a divisional HQ southwards to occupy Tallil, following the departure of the Australians, Czechs and Poles. Such a shift will itself need careful public handling on our part. However, this new operating structure and southward-looking focus will be conducive to facilitating our departure – and almost certainly is intended by the US to mitigate its consequences. Against that background, I was strongly advised that, from the military perspective, we should give them as much notice as possible of our future intentions, to avoid any perception that we are 'cutting and running'. Handling the US political relationship, as well as our long-term interests in Iraq, will clearly need careful consideration, but my view is that all of this points towards a clear indication of our future intent in your statement to Parliament ahead of the summer recess.

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I will now liaise with David Miliband, Douglas Alexander and others to ensure we have a common view on this, and we all then need to work as a matter of urgency on the narrative that will put in context our withdrawal of combat troops, and explain what we have achieved since 2003. While we should continue to emphasise that our withdrawal will be conditions-based, and timescales in practice will be affected by other factors such as Provincial Elections, we should confine ourselves to metrics associated with training 14 Division and the commercialisation of Basra airport. However, it will be necessary to explain what we have done to improve life for the ordinary Basrawi. While my visit to the city showed that some reconstruction *is* taking place, it is clear that because of the constraints of the security situation, our Provincial Reconstruction Team has very limited visibility of progress on the ground. It will be important in July for us to be able to give a convincing narrative of our achievements over the past five years, and the team may need some reinforcement to ensure that we present their undoubted hard work as positively as possible – and deliver the flagship projects discussed above. It will clearly be important too for the Basra Development Commission to have generated some tangible momentum ahead of your statement, allowing us to point towards an encouraging economic future for Basra.

I am copying this letter to Alistair Darling, David Miliband, Douglas Alexander, 'C', Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Christopher Prentice, Simon McDonald and Sir Gus O'Donnell.


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