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10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA



THE PRIME MINISTER

11 August 2008

Dear Prime Minister Maliki

It was good to see you on 19 July and to have the opportunity to see recent progress in Iraq. The UK remains firmly committed to helping. I attach a copy of the report I made to Parliament after my visit, which describes the progress being made and your personal role in that progress.

We discussed our shared desire for a broadly based, long-term bilateral relationship between Iraq and the UK. I look forward to further discussions on this.

As I explained, we do not want to retain British combat troops inside Iraq once their current tasks have been completed, particularly the training and mentoring of the 14<sup>th</sup> Division of the Iraqi Army in Basra. Significant progress has already been made. We expect that, subject to conditions on the ground, during 2009 we will be able to end the training, and start to reduce the number of British troops in southern Iraq as we move to a fundamentally different mission.

As we discussed, completing that training will require a firm legal basis for the presence of UK defence personnel inside Iraq beyond the end of 2008, following the anticipated expiry of the current United Nations Security Council mandate. I look forward to early negotiations between our officials over the summer, with a view to reaching agreement in October. I have asked my officials to prepare a draft framework to initiate these discussions.

You expressed concern when we met over the detention of Iraqi citizens by UK forces in Basra. I fully understand your position. At present the UK is holding only two criminal detainees. They are on remand, prior to their transfer to the Iraqi criminal justice system for trial, for their alleged involvement in the murders of two British servicemen in Iraq. UK forces use sparingly their power to intern (under the United

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Nations Security Council mandate). Only nine individuals have been interned in Basra this year. I can confirm that the UK is not at present holding any security internees.

Since the transfer of security responsibility for Basra Province to Iraqi control in December last year, the role of UK forces has been to provide support to operations and activity led by the Iraqi Security Forces. Iraqi and British commanders in Basra are working closely together to ensure the very best cooperation and coordination in order to defeat those who would do harm to the Iraqi security personnel and civilians and to coalition forces. Only very occasionally is there a need for UK forces to undertake an independent operation, in order to protect the lives of our personnel.

I hope we can speak on a regular basis to resolve any issues that may arise, and that you are able to visit London later this year.

With best wishes  
Qatar

His Excellency Mr Nuri al-Maliki

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## Iraq statement

Mr Speaker, with permission and following my visit last weekend to Baghdad and Basra I would like to update the House on the latest developments in Iraq.

Let me start by paying tribute to the British servicemen and women who have served there with distinction since March 2003 - and in particular to pay tribute to those who have given their lives in service of their country. I know the whole House will join with me in honouring the memory of the fallen and saluting the courage of all our military and our civilian personnel.

As I set out in my October statement, our objective is the creation of an independent, prosperous, democratic Iraq which is free of terrorist violence, secure within its borders and a stable presence in the region ----- something that is firmly in Britain's interests, and in the interests of the world as a whole.

To achieve this we have sought with America and our other allies to support the Iraqi Government as they take on greater responsibility for their security and for safeguarding their new democracy - challenging those, whether terrorists, insurgents or militia, who threaten their citizens and undermine the rule of law. We have also sought to foster democratic and accountable government and support national reconciliation, giving all of Iraq's communities a genuine say in the future of their country.

And we have worked to help the Iraqis build their economy and give their people an economic stake in the future.

In the last year this has led us to pursue the strategy of 'overwatch' - moving from combat to the training and mentoring of the Iraqi forces and the Iraqi police, encouraging the development of local government, and working with the Iraqis on a Basra economic development strategy.

And in recent months conditions in Basra have shown a marked improvement. Incidents of indirect fire against British troops in the Basra air station have fallen from 200 a month at their peak last summer to an average of less than five a month since April this year. As the All-Party House of Commons Defence Committee says in its report today, the security situation in Basra has been 'transformed'.

And as General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker confirmed to me at the weekend, thanks to operations by Iraqi and Coalition security forces - strongly welcomed by ordinary Iraqis - violent incidents right across Iraq are at their lowest level since 2004. Sunni groups have now joined the Iraqi and American Forces in driving Al Qa'eda from areas where it had been able to terrorize the population; and Iraqi troops, with British and American support, have had success against the illegal Shi'a militias -- giving the Government of Iraq more control of the country.

Of course, this progress - often fragile - cannot be taken for granted. Millions of Iraqis are still refugees - either inside Iraq or in other countries. And the two car bombs detonated at the gates of an Iraqi Army recruitment centre on 15 July remind us that there are groups still determined to inflict violence.

But the most important development is that the improvements we have seen have been increasingly Iraqi-led. Security responsibility for 10 of 18 provinces has now transferred to Iraqi control, including all four provinces in Britain's area of operations. The Iraqi Security Forces are now taking the lead in maintaining security and confronting all those who perpetrate violence - including acting decisively against Shi'a militia in Basra, Sadr City and Al Amara. And they have been supported by local people from across Iraq's communities - Sunni, Shi'a and Kurd.

Britain has already helped train over 20,000 Iraqi Army troops. But I want to pay credit to Prime Minister Maliki, his Government and the Iraqi security forces who have shown bravery and leadership in tackling the terrorists and militias threatening the stability of their country.

Mr Speaker, the improved security situation has provided a platform for further, essential progress on reconciliation. And we have not only seen increased co-operation between Sunni communities and the Iraqi government in areas like Anbar and Mosul - and the return of the Tawafuq Sunni party to the Government - but the passage of key legislation which is helping to embed democracy, including the Accountability and Justice Law, the Provincial Powers Law, and the 2008 budget.

The next stage will be Provincial Elections --- reinforcing the political progress being made at the national level. And our message to the leaders of all Iraq's

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3

communities and parties - right across the country - is that they must continue to make the right long term decisions to achieve a sustainable peace.

It is also important that, as we move forward, we see Iraq's neighbours playing a constructive and responsible role in Iraq's future. In particular, Syria should clamp down on the movement of foreign fighters; and Iran must stop the provision of arms and training to those who attack the democratically-elected government of Iraq, the Coalition forces in Iraq at that government's request, and the Iraqi people.

Mr Speaker, we will also continue to focus on helping the Iraqi Government rebuild their economy and ensuring the Iraqi people have a stake in their future.

British-led projects in southern Iraq have already helped deliver enough electricity to supply 800,000 people and water supply for over a million people -- with this year another 120,000 people due to get power and 250,000 gain access to direct supplies of water. Our funding has helped the UN and World Bank repair and re-equip 1000 healthcare centres and over 5000 schools, and train nearly 150,000 teachers. With British training and equipment - including upgrades to air traffic control systems, lighting and fire-fighting capability - Iraqi personnel are now regularly handling over 20 civil flights a week at Basra International Airport. And British mentoring and support has helped the Basra Provincial Council gain access to \$400 million dollars in central government funds for 2008 -- money which - in line with their increasing ability to take the lead themselves - the Council are now spending to further improve infrastructure and provide essential public services such as power, water, health and education.

Last week the Basra Development Commission agreed an outline Economic Strategy for Basra that sets out plans to encourage private sector and foreign investment. And Britain is supporting the new Basra Investment Promotion Agency - which I met at the weekend - and the Basra Development Fund which will provide loans to small and start-up businesses -- key drivers of economic growth and job creation. I am grateful for the work of Michael Wareing, a leading British businessman, who co-chairs the Basra Development Commission.

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4

Mr Speaker, nine months ago, I set out the key elements of our strategy for handing over security in Basra to the Iraqis and set out the stages for completing the tasks we have set ourselves.

We completed the initial phase on target, handing over Basra to Provincial Iraqi Control in December.

This allowed us to reduce troop numbers in southern Iraq from 5,500 in September to 4,500.

After the Iraqi Government launched Operation Charge of the Knights to enforce the rule of law in Basra - as my Rt Hon Friend the Defence Secretary explained to the House in April - the military advice was that we should pause the further planned reduction so that British troops, together with US forces, could support the Iraqis in this crucial operation.

Since then we have responded to changing needs and embedded over 800 UK personnel within the Iraqi command structure - at Divisional, Brigade and Battalion level. And the focus of the 4,100 UK forces still in southern Iraq is now on completing the task of training and mentoring the 14th Division of the Iraqi Army in Basra --- and it is right that as we do so we continue for the next few months to provide support at these levels. Other remaining military tasks - agreed with the Government of Iraq and in close consultation with our US allies - include finalizing the preparation of Basra airport for transfer to Iraqi control; and continuing to develop the capacity of the Iraqi Navy and Marines so they can protect Iraq's oil platforms, territorial waters and Umm Qasr port --- all critical to Iraq's economic future.

It is now right to complete the tasks we have set ourselves.

We expect the Basra Development Commission to publish their detailed economic development plan in the autumn.

We hope local government elections will take place by the end of 2008.

Subject to security conditions on the ground, our military commanders believe that the Iraqis will be able to take over development of Basra Airport by the end of this year.

They also expect the first stage of the general training and mentoring of the combat troops of the 14<sup>th</sup> division in Basra to be complete around the turn of the year.

And as the focus shifts from training combat troops, we will then move forward to the specific task of mentoring headquarters and specialist staffs - and our military commanders expect the 14<sup>th</sup> Division in Basra to be fully trained during the first months of next year.

Mr Speaker, as we complete these tasks - and as progress continues across these different areas - we will continue to reduce the number of British troops in Iraq.

Of course, future decisions will be based - as I have always said - on advice of our military commanders on the ground. But I can tell the House today that just as last year we moved from combat to 'overwatch', we would expect a further fundamental change of mission in the first months of 2009 as we make the transition to a long term bilateral partnership with Iraq, similar to the normal relationships which our military forces have with other important countries in the region.

The Defence Secretary and our military commanders will now work with the Iraqi Government to formulate agreement on the details of such a partnership - including the necessary legal basis - and he will report to the House in the Autumn.

So Mr Speaker, I believe it is right that having successfully trained and mentored large numbers of the Iraqi forces - and having successfully worked with the Iraqis on a new economic development strategy - we complete the key tasks we have agreed with the Iraqi Government:

- training the 14<sup>th</sup> Division of the Iraqi army in Basra;
- preparing Basra airport for transfer to Iraqi control;
- pushing forward economic development;
- providing the necessary support for provincial elections;
- honouring our obligations to the Iraqi people;

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6

- and at all times ensuring the safety of our armed forces whose professionalism and dedication have brought us to this stage and whose service to our country I once again commend to the House.

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