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Date: 3 May 2007

S 48/07

PRIME MINISTER

cc: Jonathan Powell
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IRAQ

I saw CDS privately on 2 May, and asked him – in the light of the high April casualty figures and recent comments eg. by General Shaw – whether he saw continuing military utility in our mission in Iraq.

Here are the main points of what he said:

- We were getting “close to the end”, but Jock thought that our presence would continue to be militarily useful at least until PIC and the closure of Basra Palace. Jock hopes that we will be able to keep to the present timetable – PIC in July and BP closure in August.
- At that stage we would come down from 5,500 to around 4,700.
- Jock saw the military utility resting on: the continuing need to train the Iraqi 10th Division (he did not talk about the Police, and I think the MOD now regard them as a busted flush), anti-JAM operations and capacity to re-intervene.
- Thereafter Jock thought that there would be at least a couple of months when we could re-intervene effectively and continue to run anti-JAM operations.

once we vacate the Palace. We would also lose our broader situational awareness.

- The autumn would therefore be the decisive period. That of course coincided with the key moment in the US trajectory. Petraeus would return in September for consultations with the Administration and Congress.

- We should use the autumn period to consult the Americans. At present they continued to have a more negative view of events in Basra than ourselves,

In addition Basra was, at least for now, not really on the US radar screen as they were so preoccupied with Baghdad.

- If by late autumn the UK capacity to re-intervene and conduct STRIKE operations had - as expected - degraded, there would be a residual training/mentoring role, but that did not warrant maintaining the force in its present shape. Jock therefore saw a choice, from around the turn of the year, between (a) a very rapid scaling down from 4,700 to around 500 (essentially a small military training team) in one go and (b) taking it in stages, with a reduction of a single battalion (taking the total to around 4,000) in the first instance and then a more gradual tapering. Jock strongly favoured the first option, as once you begin this sort of process, our forces become vulnerable and it is best to get on with things as fast as possible.

- Jock saw no current utility in our border-monitoring role in Maysan. They were neither stopping incoming arms, nor acting as a deterrent. This was marshland with no clear border. But Jock did not want to make an early move on this, given US sensitivities in relation to Iran. He prefers to wrap this up in decisions on the whole UK presence later in the year.

Comment

This will obviously need to be debated and tweaked a good deal, but I found the overall thesis persuasive. It would be virtually impossible for UK Ministers to ask the Army to stay in significant numbers in Basra if the advice from the Chiefs is that there is no militarily useful mission to conduct - the risks are just too high. Indeed, Jock made clear the continuing risk of a damaging hit, taking large numbers of lives, to the Basra Air Station, although great effort has been put into defensive measures recently.

The key issue remains the likely US reaction to this plan. I suspect that they will want Basra PIC to be delayed from July to the autumn. But it seems likely that the White House will have to accept some sort of 2008 drawdown plan in the autumn. So I don't see Jock's idea of a fairly rapid Basra drawdown in 2008 as unmanageable in US terms, although it would require very careful handling.

You will need to chair a meeting of DOP in June which would finally confirm the closing of Basra Palace in August (which would need to be announced in July); discuss the timing of PIC; and could look ahead in general terms to the rest of the year. But it would be too early in June to make any firm judgments, still less any decisions, about our longer term intentions. This needs to await consultations with the US and a review of the situation on the ground in the autumn.

The one point in Jock's presentation I did not follow was his desire to keep the Maysan bordering mission going at least until the end of this year. I think this may well be untenable if there are continued casualties.

Are you content with this general approach?

I would of course be happy to discuss, and you will have a chance to discuss with CDS at your private meeting on 4 May, or at the next Iraq meeting on 22 May.

Nigel Sheinwald

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I entirely understand it in military terms, but in terms of what happens in Basra, it will be very hard to present as anything other than a total withdrawal. This can work if Basra's politics are sorted in the meantime but otherwise it will be very dangerous for the stability of Iraq, & the U.S. will, rightly, be v. concerned.