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Simon McDonald
Director Iraq
FCO

Dear Simon

BASRA PALACE: RESPONSE TO INCREASED IDF THREAT

SUMMARY

The number of Indirect Fire (IDF) attacks against Basra Palace has been high and steady since October but January is set to be a record month. Attacks since 15 January have been more accurate. 82mm mortars are now being used against the Palace. I have spoken to staff at a Town Hall meeting to brief them on recent developments and reiterate the volunteer nature of this post. UK military have plans for further Counter-IDF operations but the level of IDF is unlikely to diminish in the short term. Serious attack against a KBR local employee. I recommend that we begin to thin out numbers at Basra Palace as part of the process of relocating CG operations to COB and consider allowing some long-standing KBR local employees to overnight in Basra Palace.

DETAIL

IDF

1. We have reviewed our posture at Basra Palace in the light of the recent increase in IDF attacks and particularly the increase in accurate IDF attacks against the British Embassy compound (BEOB) since mid-January. Figures:

	Attacks on BP	Projectiles	Impacts in BEOB
September	16	47	0
October	32	137	4
November	34	122	2
December	32	128	1
1-21 January	33	124	11

2. The number of IDF attacks at the COB doubled in December (from 8 in November to 16) and looks set to reach a similar level in January. This is equivalent to the number of attacks we were receiving at Basra Palace in September.

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3. The following trends are significant:
 - we have had more impacts in the BEOB compound this month than in the previous four months together.
 - in January, rockets have hit and damaged our sports pitch, the roof of Building 5, the bar, the Hesco barriers protecting Lakeside accommodation and one of our sangar towers.
 - more attacks have been during daylight hours
 - heavier 82 mm mortars have been used for the first time against BP on 18 January.
 - some attacks have been complex. There was one day of six attacks using 107 mm rockets, 60mm mortar, 82 mm mortar, RPG and perhaps small arms fire
 - 240 mm rockets have been used for the first time against the COB (four rounds since 25 December)
 - evidence that rockets and mortar bombs used in recent attacks are of more recent vintage
4. With the increasing number of IDF hits in our compound, it feels a lot closer to home. The rocket which hit the bar spread shrapnel and masonry over the main walkway between our living accommodation and the Consulate building at a time of day when it would normally be in use. Fortunately no one was outside. We go to great lengths to minimise our exposure by keeping staff indoors under hard cover and requiring staff to wear body armour whenever they are outside. But there is always a slight risk of a staff member being caught in the wrong place at the wrong time during the brief period when they are moving between buildings (although this risk will also apply at the COB). The view from my OSM and PSO is that we are beginning to push our luck.
5. The UK military are seized of the importance of the issue, not least because General Casey reminds them of it regularly – as do I and the Head of the US REO. MND(SE) continue to mount Counter-IDF patrols, using aviation assets where available. CO Basra Battle Group South has briefed me on his planned counter-IDF operations: they will start doing more daylight patrols to try to prevent daylight attacks when staff are more likely to be moving around outside. I am confident that MND(SE) are doing everything they can with the assets they currently have. With more assets, particularly in the form of UAVs and other surveillance capability, they could do more.
6. But the IDF threat will not go away. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Iranians or their proxies pay the IDF teams \$1000 per rocket for a rocket or mortar attack on MNF, provided the launch is caught on video. It pays to be an IDF team member. We must expect the IDF threat against Basra Palace to remain high and probably to increase as long as the Iranians are acting as paymasters. The risks are relatively low, much lower than taking on MNF patrols directly. More firing points are now being used. IDF teams simply stop traffic in the middle of the day and launch IDF attacks quite openly. The attacks are likely to become more effective as the teams become more proficient and gain access to new and more powerful weapons.
7. The current surge in attacks against all MNF sites (not just Basra Palace) since mid-December may be linked to the heightened tempo of MNF strike operations (which will be maintained) and media reports of our plans to leave the city before too long, incentivising JAM and the Iranian-controlled cells to step up the bombardment so that they can claim the credit for

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driving us out. US operations against Iran, and the general atmospherics between the West and Iran, are a factor. The Iranians have the capacity to react through proxies in Basra and we are confident that this helps to explain the greater sophistication and professionalism of some attacks. The heat is likely to be turned up further against Basra Palace and the COB once we start to see more systematic targeting of Iranian proxies.

Other Threats

8. The IDF attacks should also be seen against the background of the wider pattern of attacks on Coalition targets. JAM recently mounted a complex and sophisticated ambush against an MNF river patrol (using a daisy chain of IEDs and small arms fire from both sides of the river). Small arms attacks against MNF bases in Basra are frequent. There is some evidence that RPGs and other Direct Fire attacks against the Palace are becoming more frequent and more sophisticated. Re-supply convoys to Basra Palace have started to be attacked as a regular basis. On 21 January an IED, believed to be a shaped charge, inflicted casualties on troops travelling in a Warrior, killing one soldier and causing serious casualties: if the preliminary assessment is correct, we will have to review our use of Warrior to transport CivPol and IPAs to the Warren and other police stations. We have temporarily suspended road moves by Warrior until the implications of this attack are clearer.
9. The threat of intimidation against Iraqi staff and contractors is high and may be rising. On 20 January, one of KBR's local staff was abducted and tortured. I attach Dave Crocker's report. It makes horrific reading. The intent was to convey to any Iraqis working for us that the militias can find them and will make them pay for working for the Consulate.

Relocation of the Consulate

10. We are preparing to move out of the Palace and to the COB. I will not rehearse the practical and security challenges. You saw at first hand the conditions in which staff will live and work. It will take time to harden accommodation and communal areas at COB: in the interim, we will have to balance carefully the risks posed by the increasing IDF threat at the COB against the need to deploy PRT and CivPol in support of preparations for PIC. Our aim is to have the bulk of the re-configured Consulate operating from COB by March. Any measures we take with regard to the Palace in response to current threats here will therefore have only a temporary impact on the Consulate's work.

Action taken

(a) Town Hall Meeting

11. On 21 January I held a Town Hall meeting to update staff on the threat and to assure them that their security was our (and your) paramount concern. We were looking closely at ways in which we could mitigate the threat, but they could take some comfort from the fact that:
 - Our buildings had been proven to stop rockets
 - On our compound, we were never very far from hard cover

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- Unlike our military colleagues who suffered casualties last week (when they were aught outside preparing their vehicles to go out on an operation), we spend virtually all our time indoors
 - UK military were attaching a high priority to counter-IDF operations.
12. I underlined that Basra was a volunteer Post. The FCO would not want anyone to stay in Basra if they had misgivings about their personal situation here. If that was the case, Dominic or I would be happy to talk to them. They could also contact the Employee Assistance programme or H&W advisers in London. Help was available and we would make sure that anybody who did wish to go home did so as quickly as possible.
13. Staff still seem to be in good heart. Since your meeting with them, staff are clear that the move to COB is happening. While some are concerned about the increasing IDF threat at the COB, lack of hard cover and greater distances, which increase the chance of being caught in the open, all accept that the Palace is becoming a more dangerous place to be. Morale is in reasonable shape, considering the restrictions on our life. We have organised volleyball and circuit training under hard cover. Staff are re-assured that we regard their safety as our paramount concern.

(b) Local staff

14. In response to the attack on KBR's employee, we have briefed all local staff on the threat to them. We underlined that we would understand if any felt that the threat to them now was too great to allow them to continue to work at the Consulate. Their personal safety had to come first. We have contingency plans for working without any Iraqi staff (doable, but at the margins- we could do little to repair damage to eg generators or water tanks). They, however, have suggested that the risks to them could be mitigated effectively if they were allowed to stay at the Consulate a few nights at a time. This would reduce the number of times they were exposed to the journey into the Palace (which is heavily surveilled by the militias).
15. We have resisted this option in the past. The threat of an LE staff member sabotaging equipment, working out ways to circumvent our security or providing intelligence to the militias was too high. But I think we should revisit this issue for a small group of locally employed staff who have been with us for some years. We will discuss with _____ when he visits later this week.

(c) Headcount reduction: move to COB

16. Plans are already in hand to co-locate at the COB. In the light of the increased IDF threat and the current suspension of Warrior moves outside the compound (which may or may not be temporary), I have instructed Team Leaders to:
- review their staffing requirements at Basra Palace between now and end February
 - propose a structure which makes full use of normal rotations but also reduces headcount to the bare minimum necessary to carry out their Team's work

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- review staffing requirements at COB between now and end February with the aim of moving Teams' work to COB, but rotating people in and out of the COB for short, focused visits.
17. The aim is to have moved the Consulate's centre of gravity decisively to COB by early March.¹ In terms of the impact on specific personnel, in the next day or two we will send IPU a muster list showing how we would aim to use planned R and R and end of tours to manage a transition to COB over the next six weeks. For incoming staff, I would expect:
- incoming Head of Chancery to deploy to COB (from 5 February)
 - Rob Tinline, DCG designate, to deploy initially to BP but to re-locate swiftly thereafter to COB
 - Richard Jones, CG designate, to deploy to COB in early March, from which time the operational side of BEOB will be based wholly at COB.
18. We will have a clearer idea of potential pinch points (particularly on the police and prisons side) when Teams have completed their reviews, when (visiting the Palace on 24 January) has completed his security review and Shaun has been able to construct a full COB accommodation plan through until the end of March.
19. I would welcome your and Dominic's views on these options. Since we are up against tight deadlines and since, as we know from the last drawdown, continuing uncertainty is damaging to morale, I have told Team Leaders that they should work on the basis of this approach and deploy their staff accordingly. I recognise that there may be some HR issues to iron out over allowances etc, but I hope that, by managing this process through R and R and end of tours, we can avoid undue turbulence.

Yours ever,

Rosalind

Rosalind Marsden
Consul-General, Basra

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