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36335/07

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Action Routine		
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Info Routine		
FCO Distribution	eDL IRAQ/KUWAIT	
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Military Info Rtn		
Subject	NOSEC: BASRA: BRITISH FORCES HAND OVER THEIR FINAL BASE IN BASRA CITY:Id=7503603	
Summary	The handover of Basra Palace means that there are no longer any British or coalition troops based in Basra city. The move out of the Palace has gone quietly. British forces are now concentrated at the Air Station on the outskirts of the city. What now follows will be an important test of Iraqi security capability.	

BASRA E-GRAM (SENT VIA BAGHDAD)

DETAIL

1. We started 2007 with four British bases in Basra city, one of which (Basra Palace) also housed the Consulate General. Mr Blair announced to Parliament in February that we would be handing them over to the Iraqi security forces in the course of the year. Doing so has been one of the British military's principal efforts over the past six months. The Old State Building and Shatt Al Arab Hotel were handed

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over without incident in the spring. At the same time, the Consulate moved to the Air Station outside the city (e-gram 17758/07). Over the last week, British troops completed their move, vacating the final two sites: within the Police Headquarters and at Basra Palace.

2. They left the Provincial Joint Co-ordination Centre within the police headquarters early on 26 August. Their departure went without incident. But later that morning, a group of some 50-100 officers from within the larger headquarters complex forced their way past the handful of guards, flew a green Islamic flag from the roof, made off with air conditioning units and did some damage to equipment and furnishing. The local security chief, General Mohan, responded rapidly, deploying two Iraqi Army companies and gaining control of the situation. Since then the situation has been calm.

3. That left Basra Palace. Originally comprising private houses and a public park, it was requisitioned by Saddam. It has been the major Coalition base in Basra city for some time. It has considerable symbolic importance and has received heavy mortar fire for much of the last year (which has dropped off in the last two weeks). On the evening of 2 September, the military handed Basra Palace over to the Iraqi authorities. All British troops have now safely returned to the Air Station. The only incident so far has been a roadside bomb, which inflicted two minor injuries. Basra Palace is now in the hands of the Government of Iraq and under the protection of the Palace Protection Force with back up from the Iraqi Army's 10th Division.

4. The Palace Protection Force is a new force raised by the Prime Minister's Office specifically for the task. General Mohan has supported them with Iraqi Army troops. He has given visited the site regularly and shows every determination to ensure that there is no looting. What happens over the next few hours and days will be an important signal of his and his forces' ability to impose their will in Basra.

5. There will be a small ceremony on 5 September attended by a representative from the Prime Minister's Office and the Minister for National Security. A handover document will be signed by the US Director of the Regional Office and by Richard Jones, on behalf of HMG and the Republic of Italy.

6. There remain over 5,000 British soldiers (along with the Consulate and the US Regional Embassy Office) based at the Air Station on the outskirts of the city. They will continue to operate in Basra Province and, if required, in Basra city. Iraqi security forces have been taking increased responsibility for security in the city; this is another step towards them assuming full control.

Sign Off

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Attachments

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