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## IRAQ: BASRA PALACE SITE

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The threat to our civilian staff operating from the Basra Palace Compound (BPC) has risen steadily over the last year, progressively constraining our operations. Since the Foreign Secretary's September visit, indirect fire (IDF) has become more accurate & sustained, killing an American civilian on the adjacent US compound. **We are now at the point where, without effective military action to reduce the IDF threat, our operations from BPC face an unacceptable level of risk.**
2. We need to respond. We have four broad options:
  - a) **Continue to run all our civilian operations from BPC**, while pressing for greater military effort to reduce the IDF threat, and drawing up contingency plans for a move to BAS if this effort failed to deliver results soon;
  - b) **Start a phased reduction in staff at BPC now**, with those least critical to Op SINBAD/Better Basra moving first, either to BAS or out of theatre. Others would follow as soon as we could create facilities at BAS for them. A minimal core staff, life support and guard force would be left at BPC;
  - c) **Withdraw our entire civilian operation from BPC now**, moving only a very small number to BAS, and taking the bulk out of theatre - despite the impact on SINBAD/Better Basra and relations with Iraqis & Allies;
  - d) **Withdraw our civilian presence from Southern Iraq altogether.**
3. Until now, we have recommended that we maintain our civilian operations at BPC, despite the deteriorating security situation. We have recently launched a major, integrated military and civilian effort in Basra - Op SINBAD/Better Basra - which is designed to produce sustainable change in the city and to achieve transition to Iraqi lead security responsibility. The civilian component is critical to the success of this effort.
4. But in the last month the security threat has become so acute that, **unless current trends can be reversed, in particular by effective action to reduce IDF**, the risks to our civilian staff in BPC can no longer be justified. We could suffer a catastrophic incident, as the US has, at any time. The US has just decided to scale back their BPC operation to a minimum.
5. **We therefore recommend Option (b).** This will further constrain our work, with some negative impact on SINBAD/Better Basra. It will pose major logistical challenges. Creating the necessary infrastructure at BAS for those we wish to keep in theatre will take some time and money.

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6. But it will help reduce our staff's exposure, without completely abandoning the BPC - which in public terms, and our relations with Coalition allies, would be very damaging. By phasing the draw down of police advisers in particular, we can largely preserve their critical contribution to SINBAD for the moment.
7. We will need in any event to review our civilian presence in southern Iraq early in the New Year, in the light of progress with SINBAD/Better Basra. In creating the capacity to transfer a number of civilian staff to BAS now, we should make provision for the possibility that we could decide at that point to transfer our entire remaining staff to BAS. That way, we could effect any such transfer immediately, if that were the decision we took.

## DETAIL

### The threat

8. The threat to our civilian operations in Basra has grown significantly in the course of 2006. UK-based staff operating from our current site at the BPC face 3 main types of threat:

- **Indirect Fire**

The attached charts illustrate the growth in rocket and mortar attacks against the BPC, particularly in the last 4 months. October has been the worst ever month, with 24 IDF attacks to date, consisting of 104 projectiles. There have been a number of impacts in the Consulate General compound and many more in the US compound.

In response, we have progressively sought to minimise the exposure of staff to the IDF risk. After the death of a US contractor in a strike on his unhardened accommodation on 22 September, we moved the last of our staff remaining in such accommodation (contracted Gurkha guards) into hardened accommodation. There is very little more that we could now do to further reduce this risk.

The main munitions used are 107mm rockets and 60mm mortars. We have seen that our hardened buildings can stop a 107mm rocket. The hardened pods should stop 60mm mortars. But larger 81mm mortars have recently been used against another MND(SE) target in Basra. Were these to be used against BPC, we could not be confident that our hardened pods would hold out.

The pattern of attacks in the last 4 months suggests that we should expect significant IDF attacks to continue, and probably continue to intensify, throughout Operation Sinbad. MND(SE) is working to counter IDF activity.

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The recently agreed addition of 5 (US) attack helicopters could make a significant difference to their ability to find and destroy the IDF teams. But despite requests to the US military, MND(SE) still lack the critical UAV capability, which could transform their effectiveness in doing this. Alternative options are being explored.

- **Attacks on staff when outside the compound.**

The primary threat remains Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). To mitigate against this threat, staff travel on high-risk routes in Warrior vehicles and sometimes on lower-risk routes in armoured CRG cars with appropriate electronic counter measure equipment. But Explosively Formed Projectile IEDs are capable of penetrating our armoured vehicles. On 1 September an EFP attack on a Consulate convoy in Dhi Qar led to one of our contracted security guards losing his leg.

To this must now be added the threat of direct Fire against convoys. On 16 October a CRG operative was injured by an RPG fired at his vehicle while escorting PRT staff to a meeting. It appears that the increased presence of MNF vehicles and troops in the city has provoked the militias into more Direct Fire attacks, taking advantage of the targets offered.

The mission has since further restricted moves outside the compound, and insisted staff travel by Warrior armoured vehicles. Road moves to the border have been suspended over the next six weeks as the change of Brigades will probably lead to an increased IED threat on that route.

- **Attacks on helicopters.**

Given the threat to road moves, all civilian staff travel in and out of the compound by military helicopter. Since 6 May shooting down of a Lynx (cause yet to be conclusively determined, but widely assumed to be a SAM), helicopters have flown to BPC under cover of darkness and have taken a range of other measures to reduce risk.

However recent intelligence reporting has suggested that the Iranians may have supplied more capable SAMs to extremist groups determined to attack us. If clear evidence emerged of a qualitatively greater threat to the helicopter bridge, this would have major implications for our operations. **We could not work from the BPC without this service.**

#### **Local staff**

In addition, our **Iraqi staff** have this year suffered a growing campaign of intimidation at the hands of extremists. One of them was murdered and another seriously injured in an attack this summer. We have subsequently

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replaced all but one of them with third-country nationals, at significant cost, placing a further strain on the limited accommodation and life support on site.

#### **Risk & Context**

9. In view of the political importance Ministers attach to delivering our objectives, we have always recognised that we are accepting a higher risk in deploying civilian staff in Iraq (as in Afghanistan) than the FCO would normally accept elsewhere.
10. In making judgements about what constitutes an acceptable level of risk to our staff and those for whom we have a duty of care, we have carefully considered the level of the threat against the importance of our objectives, and the ability of our staff to deliver them.
11. The current context for our operations in Basra is that the UK has just launched the most ambitious and integrated effort yet attempted – in the form of Operation Sinbad and the related Better Basra Plan. The goal of this effort – which is due to run until Feb/March 2007 - is to effect significant, sustainable positive change in Basra – helping bring the province to the point where it is possible to hand lead responsibility for security to the Iraqis at some point next Spring.
12. These efforts demand the full engagement of the whole range of UK players in theatre – military, Consulate, PRT, DFID, Police & Prisons teams & others. They have got off to a good start. But it is widely recognised that the most challenging phases of Op SINBAD will not begin until later this year, when we will need to secure PM Maliki's clear endorsement for operations in more sensitive areas.
13. Reducing or withdrawing the current civilian components of our effort before the end of Operation SINBAD will inevitably reduce the chances of achieving success. But – assuming our hand is not forced before then – we will in any event need to take a hard look at the future of our civilian presence in Basra when these operations are drawing to a conclusion. We shall need to judge whether Operation SINBAD and Better Basra have created greater consent and a better security environment in the city, such as to justify the risk and costs of retaining a large civilian effort, whether in BPC or elsewhere in the province.

#### **Alternatives to BPC**

14. There is only one alternative site in Basra province for our civilian operations: the Basra Air Station, where MND(SE) HQ is located. Currently our Chief Police Adviser is based there, with a number of other Police Advisors and DFID staff following earlier drawdowns from the BPC. We

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have a small amount of poor, unhardened accommodation, mainly used for staff transiting to or from BPC. BAS has no properly hardened accommodation (only reinforced Red Sea Containers).

15. It could take months, even at an accelerated pace, to create sufficient office space and hardened accommodation to enable us to operate even a reduced civilian operation effectively from BAS. MND(SE)'s support for such a move would be critical.
16. It should be borne in mind that, if, as MND(SE) consolidate their presence, the BAS is left as the only significant remaining Coalition site in and around Basra, it will inevitably attract a greater number of attacks. It already suffers from regular IDF fire, though at a lower rate than BPC and over a much bigger area.

#### **Impact of moving**

17. Publicly, a wholesale move to BAS would signal a loss of confidence in our efforts in Basra and a retreat to a military camp. Local militias would hail it as a victory and could benefit in provincial elections due next Spring.
  18. Could individual parts of our civilian presence operate effectively from the airport?
- **Political** Meaningful political engagement would be even harder than at present. Iraqis would be hard put to distinguish between our civilian and military efforts. But the Governor and other key players have been prepared to meet us at BAS in the past. Travel to meetings in central Basra would have to be in Warrior convoy to get past the IED threat.
  - **Press** Similarly, the Iraqi media would see a CG at BAS as a junior partner of the much larger military media operation. Individual journalists would, however, find it easier to come and visit us in BAS.
  - **DFID**. DFID's programmes will complete by March 2007, with the DFID office due to reduce to a single Development Adviser. This work could be done at BAS, in the framework of a functioning CG team.
  - **Police**. Our Chief Police Adviser is already based at BAS. So are a small number of Police Advisers working on the Internal Affairs project. Some of those currently working at BPC could usefully be transferred to this work. But for the majority, the key current task is support to SINBAD work in Basra city, for which they need to be based at BPC or other MND(SE) sites in the city. Our flagship TIPS projects is based at the Provincial Joint Co-ordination Centre, which is much easier to access from BPC than BAS.

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- **Prisons.** The focus of HM Prison Service work after March will be mentoring for the Iraqi Corrections Service (ICS) leadership, capacity building in Al-Mina and Al-Maqil prisons and supervising the construction of the new Basra Central prison. ICS contacts prefer to visit their HMPS mentors at BP. Unannounced visits to Iraqi prisons are more easily made from BP than from BAS.
- **PRT.** The PRT could work from BAS, provided that the right facilities were available: sufficient office space to allow the team to be co-located as a whole. In Kirkuk and Erbil the PRT/RRT will be operating out of US and Korean army camps respectively. Contacts in the Governance and Reconstruction sectors would be willing to meet in BAS. For Rule of Law, however, the impact would be negative. But if the security environment in Basra and levels of consent were so poor that we needed to move to BAS, we would need to think hard about whether the PRT could have enough real impact to justify the costs and risks of maintaining it at its current size.

### **Proposed Way Forward**

19. To deliver a short-term reduction in staff at BPC without seriously undermining Op SINBAD/Better Basra, **we propose setting in train the following main changes now**, moving as quickly as is practicable:
  - a) All **FCO** staff other than a core of Consul General, Deputy CG, Arab media spokesman, Management Officer, Overseas Security Manager & Technical Works Supervisor would relocate to BAS;
  - b) The **DFID** team at BPC would reduce to one;
  - c) The entire **PRT** would be transferred to BAS. This will be a major logistical undertaking and will take time to effect;
  - d) The **Police** team would reduce in the next month by around 14 officers. 3 of these officers would relocate to BAS. The rest would leave theatre. This would retain just enough officers in the city to provide essential support to Op SINBAD. We would need to review their deployment critically again in a month in the light of the security threat and impact they were making;
  - e) The **Prisons** team would leave theatre, pending progress on the Basra Central Prison project;
  - f) The 25-strong **Control Risks** close protection team would be reduced, since all road moves will now be in Warriors;
  - g) The 10-strong **KBR life support** team would be reduced;

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20. Excluding the perimeter guard force (see below), this will mean a **reduction in the civilian headcount at BPC from 104 to around 35.** Some 35 staff would relocate to BAS.
21. The 92-strong Kroll **perimeter guard force will have to remain.** As long as we have any civilian presence in BPC, the requirement to protect the perimeter of our part of the compound will remain. If we decided to abandon our part of the BPC altogether, the UK military would probably wish to occupy it and would need to replace the Kroll perimeter guard detachment. (Currently Kroll, the UK military, US contractors and a Romanian company guard the various parts of the BPC outer perimeter.)

#### **Media & Coalition handling**

22. Press lines would need to be worked up if Ministers chose any of options (b) to (d) to explain that this is not a withdrawal, but a reduction.
23. The BPC also hosts the US, UN, Danish Office as well as the UK and some Romanian military. We have kept them up to speed on our evolving thinking, and will need to co-ordinate closely with them on any decisions we take.

Iraq Policy Unit  
FCO

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