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United Kingdom Delegation
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Organisation
OTAN / NATO

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10 April 2006

Dominic Asquith
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FCO

Tel:
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Dear Dominic,

VISIT TO BAGHDAD AND BASRA

1. I spent a fascinating three days in Basra and Baghdad from 5-7 April. This gave me time to talk to a wide range of UK-based and local staff and to experience for myself the rigours of travelling within the country as well as the risks staff are facing in Basra. Thanks to you and the Security team for briefings beforehand.
2. My overriding impression is of highly committed and motivated staff, well led and managed, doing important work with great enthusiasm and adaptability. I am most grateful to William Patey and Robert Gibson, and to James Tansley and and their teams, for my programmes. I also had a valuable chance to talk to, and thank, staff at the Embassy in Kuwait who are doing an essential job of supporting the Iraq operation.
3. I am conscious of the risk of presenting myself as an instant expert. But a short visit like this provides vivid insights, and for what they are worth, the following were my conclusions, first on the two missions individually, and then on some common issues.

Baghdad

4. Self-evidently, the Embassy is centrally engaged in delivering one of the top-most international priorities for the Government. I saw for myself the way in which William and his political team, with John Sawers, are playing a pivotal role with the Americans in bringing the various Iraqi leaders to find a solution on a national unity government. The Embassy are also doing a wide range of important work in other fields, particularly building capacity in the Iraqi Government. There was a real buzz, with everyone conscious that the Embassy was performing a vital role on an issue high on Ministers' minds, demonstrated by the constant flow of senior visitors.

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5. Security is of course a major preoccupation. But the threat from indirect fire seems for the moment to be lower than in Basra, and the capacity for staff to move around inside the Green Zone avoids too much claustrophobia. The arrangement with the RAF for guaranteed helicopter hours seems to work reasonably well, although there are some serviceability problems with the helicopters.

Basra

6. I was full of admiration for the resilience of the team, who are operating in increasingly difficult circumstances. The boycott by the local authorities has significantly reduced their access to local political leaders. James and his staff find it difficult to get access to helicopters to move around the region (eg they have not been into Maysan or Muthanna for some time). There is a worrying rise of sectarian killings in Basra, and as you know there is very little scope for road movement outside the Palace compound.

7. Not surprisingly, people are feeling pretty beleaguered. Their main complaint is the difficulty of getting in and out. It often takes two or even three days for staff to get to/from Kuwait, given the frequent delays or cancellations in the helicopter flights to Basra airport, and then the uncertainties of the RAF surf flights up to Baghdad and then out to Kuwait. This is intensely frustrating as well as inefficient, and is leading some staff to consider not taking their breather breaks because of the hassle.

8. The other worry is the increasing security threat. I happened to be there on the night of the QBP, which (perhaps no coincidence) saw the most accurate and sustained indirect fire against the compound for some time. Staff responded with great calm and good humour, and the CRG teams were highly professional. Nonetheless, the evening's pyrotechnics showed the vulnerability of the compound.

9. I have seen submission recommending a temporary drawdown of staff, and I support that. You might want to consider asking Robin Lamb on his arrival to take a fresh look at medium-term staffing, given the reduced contacts with the local authorities; very limited opportunities to move around the South given shortage of helicopters; and increased security threat (which could increase further if the UK are seen to be instrumental in replacing Jaaferi as Prime Minister).

10. I also think that we should take up with the MOD at a high level the issue of providing helicopter lift between the Palace compound, the airport and Kuwait. The Basra team perceive that the service has reduced recently given other operational pressures on MOD assets in the theatre. I don't think that the present levels of inefficiency and frustration for staff are sustainable. It must be in the MOD's interests to ensure the viability of the Palace Compound, given the need for an overall campaign plan in the South. Perhaps we should look again at contracting for a specified number of helicopter hours per month (as in Baghdad). Failing that, I wonder whether there might be a commercial solution, ie asking

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CRG and other companies to provide helicopters fitted with full DAS protection, based in Kuwait? A regular shuttle service would transform the efficiency of the Basra operation and deal with the main problem for staff there.

Personnel Issues

11. I found morale high among the UK staff I met in Baghdad and Basra. The quality of life on both compounds has clearly increased a lot as a result of the recent construction works. Both Posts seemed to me well managed. The medical and catering arrangements are good. Many staff pressed for more flexibility in the timing of breather breaks, and in the current rule that maximum tour length should be 2 x 6 months. Several staff are keen to stay longer, particularly in Baghdad where the living conditions are a bit easier. There would be operational advantages in this, particularly in the case of Arabic-speaking staff, given the difficulty of replacing them and the advantage of some continuity. This would of course have to be on the basis that staff were keen to stay longer, and were coping well with the stress. I had confidence in the judgement of the Frontier Medical staff on the spot, who as you know keep a close eye on the well-being of all staff. William Patey's view, which I share, is that things have moved on in Baghdad to the point where there is some scope for flexibility here.

12. Local staff are of course preoccupied by the threat to themselves and their families, while being proud of working for the Embassy/British Office. Several were keen to have some form of widows and orphans pension/insurance policy in case the worst happened.

13. On the issue of charging for food, my instinct is that the financial benefit would not be worth the administrative hassle, and the possible divisiveness if different rules applied to different categories of staff. On the other hand, I hope we are charging full economic cost to OGDs for the provision of accommodation and administration for their people in Baghdad and Basra.

14. It is striking that almost all the staff I met were thoroughly enjoying their jobs, and finding them rewarding and stimulating. I urged them to get this message out to their peers to encourage recruits in the future. I know you are marketing actively, and I will try to help when putting an account of my trip onto FCONet. There may be other things we can do as well, eg having an edition of News and Views edited by the staff in Baghdad and Basra, bringing out the improvement in life support as well as the satisfactions of the job.

Other Issues

15. I visited the old Embassy site in Baghdad. It is clearly going to be some time before we could imagine making use of it again. Having now invested heavily in the current site in the Green Zone, there may be some advantages in using the old site as a card to secure long-term use of our present site?

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16. More generally, on management, after a period of heavy capital investment and a big build-up of staff, there is probably scope now to start squeezing down on running costs, eg for the security contracts. I know that the management team in Baghdad have this in mind.

16. All in all, a really worthwhile trip, which has enabled me to understand much better the operating environment and the issues facing us for the future. The quality of work being done, and the level of staff morale, is a tribute to the leadership of the Posts and in the FCO. Well done.

Yours ever,

Peter

Peter Ricketts

cc: Michael Jay
FCO Board Members (excl Non-Execs)
Andrew Noble, FCO
Nigel Casey, FCO
William Patey, Baghdad
James Tansley, Basra
Stuart Laing, Kuwait

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