

From: Tom Fletcher  
Sent: 13 June 2008 11:21  
To: [REDACTED]  
Cc: Duty Clerks  
Subject: IRAQ TROOP NUMBERS [UNCLASSIFIED] [Non-Record]

**Gordon**

**We asked Simon to have another go at the Iraq numbers. Latest from him is below.**

**Tom**

- 1. Reducing UK troops to 2,000 by end 2008 is feasible, if the US assumes UK roles. But military advice is that leaving before we complete key tasks would damage the morale and reputation of the UK armed forces. I therefore recommend you decide that UK forces complete training 14 Div, and then prepare to leave Basra. We could start this before the end of 2008. We should agree this policy with Bush, and then McCain and Obama, and set it out in July.**

#### **OPTIONS FOR REDUCING TO 2,000**

- 2. The military advice says we need most of the current 4,100 troops to complete our tasks (we can cut 200 engineers in October). To reduce to 2,000 or fewer in late 2008 would require handing over key tasks to the US. We could get the US to provide enablers and force protection at the COB, reducing UK troops to 2,000 (Option A); or to take over training 14 Division and the Quick Reaction Force, allowing us to reduce to 1,840 (B).**
- 3. These options are realistic, but have downsides. First, Option B would see UK troops reduced to a low value-added supporting role of limited benefit (conversely the US would find Option A thankless). Second, the US military would resent taking on 'British tasks' when stretched itself. Third, the US**

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would assume command and responsibility for British troops in Basra.

4. More importantly, withdrawing before completing key tasks is likely to be presented as an admission of failure by many in the US military and Iraq. That will influence the British media and political debate. US frustration could damage long term military co-operation. Such a departure could seriously damage armed force morale. CDS strongly opposes this approach, particularly Option B.

#### **CONDITIONS BASED APPROACH**

5. Getting 14 Division ready for independent operations is the critical task. It is not yet certain when we can complete this, but the military advice is around the turn of the year. That would allow us to hand Basra over to full and sustainable Government of Iraq control, requiring minimal US backfilling (the US is planning to move south a divisional HQ that could cover all south Iraq).
6. Completing 14 Div training could make the difference to whether we can end our six-year engagement in Iraq as success or failure. We could offer progress on security, politics (provincial elections) and economics (Michael Wareing's work and progress on Basra's port and airport). We could also present UK success in Basra as part of national security improvement (violence in Iraq is the lowest since 2004; the US believes Al Qaeda effectiveness is down 85%).
7. That would still allow us to leave Basra in the first half of 2009. We would need two months planning our move with the US, and four months dismantling the COB. The next troop rotation, TELIC 14, ending in May 09, would be the last. The MoD is looking at long term military tasks inside Iraq (primarily officer and naval training), requiring several hundred troops. It is unlikely that this package will include Special Forces in Baghdad because the necessary legal framework will probably

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lapse at the end of 2008.

- 8. I believe Des Browne, David Miliband and Douglas Alexander, and CDS, would support this approach.**

#### **US HANDLING: BUSH AND CANDIDATES**

- 9. Bush and Petraeus understand that we want to withdraw troops. But, as Hadley told me, Bush wants UK action to be conditions based. During the US election, he will be sensitive to the UK doing or saying anything implying the Iraq 'mission' was not succeeding. McCain would feel the same.**
- 10. I recommend that you confirm our policy with Bush on 16 June. You could say:**
- The UK will continue to contribute air and maritime forces to the Coalition, and help train the Iraqi Armed Forces, as part of our enduring commitment to Iraq;**
  - In Basra, I am committed to staying to train 14 Division;**
  - Our military expect to declare them ready between Dec-Feb ;**
  - We may be ready to move during your Presidency;**
  - I will not make new announcements that could affect the US election;**
  - But I need to make a statement in July explaining how we will resume the trajectory I set in October 07. We will discuss this further with you, but it would involve a transition to our new posture in mid-2009.**
  - Any UK combat role will require new legal arrangements at the end of 2008.**
- 11. I recommend that you tell McCain and Obama of our intentions during the summer. That would embed expectations of UK policy and reduce the risk they ask us to stay. To reduce the risks of leaks, this should be a personal message to them alone; either direct from you or delivered by me.**

**12.      Elements of the July statement could be:**

- **Last October, I said that, depending on the situation on the ground and military advice, we would reduce UK troop numbers in Iraq from spring 08;**
- **As planned, we then reduced troop numbers from 5,000 at the end of 2007;**
- **As the Defence Secretary said in April, after Charge of the Knights and military advice, we decided to pause the drawdown and maintain troop levels at 4,100;**
- **This operation, with US-UK help, is a real success, producing a better security situation in Basra.**
- **This, and our providing more protective equipment, has improved security for our troops. One serviceman has been killed in action in Basra since October;**
- **Our key remaining military task is intensified training of 14 Division;**
- **When our military advises this task is complete, there will be no need for British forces to remain in Iraq in significant numbers [i.e., no more than 1000];**
- **But our role in the Coalition will endure, particularly in continuing training of the Iraqi army and navy;**
- **We are supporting our security work with new economic initiatives to build support for peace.**

**13.      We should decide whether you, Des Browne or David Miliband make the statement. I recommend you visit Iraq afterwards, to highlight UK economic and security achievements.**