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7 March 2007

Min(AF)

Min(DES)

Copy to:

CDS

PUS

CJO

IRAQ – FORCE PROTECTION RISKS – INDIRECT FIRE

Personal Memo from SofS

I have seen the recent submission which sets out the state of play on force protection in Iraq. This note summarises my views on one aspect of that, protection from indirect fire (IDF), to give you a clear idea of the urgent steps I believe we need to take.

1. Background

IDF is an issue we have all been aware of, and striving to address, for some months now. I recall raising it after my visit to theatre last August; I know ministerial colleagues and Chiefs have done the same at regular intervals.

I note that significant improvements have been made, including additional protection for accommodation, the deployment of sense and warn systems, which are already saving lives; and active pursuit of IDF teams using ISTAR, 105mm guns, and ground troops, which has resulted in significant detentions and weapon finds.

But I note also, with real concern, the new estimate of the likelihood of a successful indirect fire attack on the Combined Operating Base (COB), and the consequences. I have also seen CDS' visit report, in which he raises not just the direct risk to life and limb, but also the enormous psychological pressures which IDF adds to an already difficult job.

IDF must be one of our very highest priorities. I am not convinced that our current plans are ambitious or decisive enough.

2. Strategic Direction

To do more, I am aware that people need some guidance within which to work, particularly in relation to timescales and force levels. I suggest we agree on the following assumptions:

- current plans for force levels and posture will hold for the next 6 months
- for the period 6-12 months from now we will be at 4,500 in COB only
- for the period 12-24 months from now we will be at 3,000 in COB only

I would welcome rapid agreement from all parties on this. Once agreed I am content we programme on this basis, including finance, accepting that it is a

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planning assumption for the purposes of this exercise alone. It would also make sense to programme the work to give options to refine our plans to more accurate numbers as our long term planning develops.

Also, while it is right that we are focusing on Iraq, we should be aware that base protection may become increasingly significant in Afghanistan. We should make sure we apply any lessons from this review to Afghanistan also – I would welcome separate advice on this.

3. Hardened accommodation

Hardened accommodation for communal areas must be a priority. I need convincing that it takes 16-20 months to provide this. I know the constraints but there must be shorter-term improvements we can deliver which we can put in place in 3-6 months, preferably sooner. If necessary we should consider using our own people to construct this.

Ministers and Chiefs should get urgent further advice on this, with options for different timings and costs. The view from theatre on alternative measures which could rapidly reduce the risk of large scale losses will be particularly useful. This should be worked through quickly – disregarding bureaucracy and standard assumptions about financial constraints. [MinDES]

In the light of this, and in parallel to starting work, we should then review the wider plan including accommodation blocks for the period 6-24 months based on the timetable in 2. [MinAF and MinDES]

4. Interdiction – C-RAM / Phalanx

The C-RAM/Phalanx capability is a major step in the right direction. I understand that we should be able to deploy this by May, sourcing US guns if necessary. We must do everything in our power, including Ministerial intervention with the US, to meet this timescale. I would welcome advice on whether we should pursue it for Basra Palace as well as the COB. We should also proceed in parallel with our plans to adapt our own guns on the September timescale.

Given that all of us – Ministers, Chiefs, those in theatre – believe this is clearly the right direction to be taking, we must be robust in introducing this. The US have a good body of evidence and experience with this capability which we should use to short-cut any tendency towards bureaucracy.

5. Air Assets

I share CDS's and CJO's view that we should not stint on making these vital assets available to theatre. It is good news that we expect to have significant capacity available from March-April. I need to be clear whether this is enough [MinAF]. If not, what needs to be done [MinDES]? I would also welcome an update on options for deploying armed UAVs – an area which I know CDS has raised. [MinDES]

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Next Steps

I suggest we try to get the best answers we can to the above questions by this time next week, and then meet to discuss. In the interim, should other opportunities emerge that will also help, particularly in the short term, I would be keen to hear them.

SofS

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