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From the Private Secretary

31 January 2007

Dear Irfan,

IRAQ: MEETING WITH OFFICIALS

The Prime Minister met Lt-Gen Nick Houghton and senior officials from FCO and SIS for an update on Iraq today.

The Prime Minister stressed that we would need absolute clarity on the position in Basra before taking a firm decision on, and announcing, a redeployment. Nick Houghton noted the As they changed the mission and embarked on a new strategic direction in Baghdad in particular, they were becoming more cautious about transition elsewhere in Iraq. We had to make clear to the US that we were not proposing to abandon bases in Basra – rather, they would transition to Iraqi control, with UK training teams embedded with them. Our approach to mentoring in Basra was different to that being developed by the US for other areas of Iraq, in part because the context was different. The US were primarily embedding with Shia forces operating in hostile Sunni areas, whereas we would be working with Shia forces in Shia areas. We, not they, drew the fire of local militias. So much of our mentoring would take place at headquarters level (given deficiencies in leadership) and at bases.

The Prime Minister said he understood this, but was concerned about Iraqi ability actually to run the city and ensure security after reposturing and then PIC. Would our plans ensure that militia could not act with impunity? Nick Houghton noted that we would retain a reintervention capability, and that it was important to allow 10 Division to act independently, rather than having them rely on us. He accepted that there was risk involved in this, but the balance of risk argued for giving 10 Division greater responsibility. We would continue to carry out focused strikes on key targets, such as JAM leaders, and the political environment for this in Basra was becoming ever more permissive. Nonetheless, there was still considerable work to be done on improving 10 Division's leadership (for which plans were in hand); and on the more difficult issue of filling equipment gaps,

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where it was difficult to take bilateral action specific to 10 Division, given the prioritisation system in place via MNSTC-I.

Simon McDonald (FCO) and 'C' both noted the credible reports of widespread intimidation of the Basrawi population, the presence of several militias, and the evident deficiencies of the Iraqi police. Together, these suggested that there would continue to be violence following re-posturing, but that this would be intra-Shia, and focused on gaining political dominance. The Prime Minister agreed that this was a risk, and would be a feature of the situation in Basra whatever our own posture. It was essential that our plans resulted in a 10 Division that was able to defeat JAM whenever it encountered them in an open fight. This would be the only way to instil wider confidence in the security situation, and open the way to economic development.

Nigel Sheinwald said that we would have to be able to provide credible answers on different key points: equipment for 10 Division; a concept of operations for embedding that was closer to the US position than current ideas; reassurance of a continuing ability to act against JAM; and a commitment from Iraqi politicians in Baghdad to help secure the right political conditions in Basra. The Prime Minister agreed, noting that explicit buy-in from Maliki to our plans would be essential.

Summing up, the Prime Minister said that it would be premature to make an announcement on redeployment before we had a clear plan that answered the key points raised in discussion, and which had secured US and Iraqi agreement. We should nonetheless continue to plan on the basis that we would redeploy, in order to ensure that a prudent redeployment was not delayed.

I am copying this letter to Sir Gus O'Donnell, Sir Richard Mottram, Margaret Aldred and Tim Dowse (Cabinet Office), PS / C, (MOD), Lt-Gen Nick Houghton (PJHQ), Howard Taylor (DFID), (HMT), Sir David Manning (Washington), Dominic Asquith and Lt-General Graeme Lamb (Baghdad), Ros Marsden and Major-General Jonathan Shaw (Basra).

Yours,



NICK BANNER

Irfan Siddiq, FCO