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DOP(07)3

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MINISTERIAL COMMITTEE ON DEFENCE AND OVERSEAS POLICY

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IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN: BALANCING MILITARY EFFORT IN 2007

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Paper by Officials

The attached paper is circulated for discussion at the meeting on **WEDNESDAY 14 FEBRUARY 2007** at 3.00 pm in the Cabinet Room, 10 Downing Street.

Signed

SIR GUS O'DONNELL  
SIR NIGEL SHEINWALD  
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Cabinet Office  
13 February 2007

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IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN: BALANCING MILITARY EFFORT IN 2007

A paper by Ministry of Defence Officials

Summary

We need to consider our decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan together and take a view on where limited UK military resource can have most strategic impact in 2007. Against that background DOP is invited to:

- a. note that the UK can only sustain the enduring operational deployment of eight battle groups. Even at this level we are operating at the maximum level of land commitment leaving no capacity for anything other than small scale emergency deployments, little capacity for recuperation and perpetuating breach of harmony guidelines and defence planning assumptions. On current plans even partial relief is unlikely much before mid-2008 and is uncertain even then.
- b. note the military judgement that commitment of additional UK resource in Afghanistan is likely to have more military impact than continuing commitment in Iraq at roughly existing levels and that therefore it would be desirable to have four battle groups deployed in Iraq and four in Afghanistan in the second half of 2007 (compared with six and two respectively today).
- c. note that DOP decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan need to take into account these factors and other matters including US/UK and NATO/coalition relations and wider regional issues in the Gulf and South Asia : . This includes the decision on how we respond to NATO's request for further forces in Afghanistan (which is the subject of a separate paper).
- d. agree that we should continue to reduce towards four battle groups in MND(SE) but that in light of the practical challenges of handing over Basra Palace we should be prepared to maintain a fifth battle group there until the end of Aug 07. Officials should be invited to do further work in identifying options for further drawdown in Iraq.
- e. agree that we should develop a handling plan which:
  - i) meets Iraqi aspirations and concerns
  - ii) explains the linkage between both issues to the domestic audience.
  - iii) keeps the US onside on both Iraq and Afghanistan, and prepare them for our withdrawal from Basra Palace by the end of Aug 07.

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### Introduction

1. We are engaged in two medium scale operations, in two theatres of strategic importance to us and to our chief ally. The forces are finite and we need to allocate these resources in a way which responds to our strategic priorities and to an extent which is sustainable over the medium term. This requires important judgements about the overall strategic picture; and where British forces can best make a positive difference.
2. Against that background this paper assesses the prospective balance of military effort between the Iraq and Afghanistan theatres between now and the end of 2007 based on:
  - a. an assessment of where UK military effort is likely to have most impact in securing national and international objectives.
  - b. limits on the availability of military assets, particularly land manoeuvre forces (we are only able to sustain eight deployed battle groups on operations on an enduring basis by the routine use of reserves, breaking harmony guidelines and reducing time for training).
  - c. the implications of the decisions DOP need to take for our medium term military commitments, our ability to respond to other crises and relations with our key allies.

It then sets out a recommended handling plan.

### Iraq

3. Ministers have agreed that post Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) in Maysan and Basra, UK force levels in MND(SE) should consist of four battle groups, plus support. They have further agreed that we should move to that force level prior to PIC in a process of re-posturing to maintain and where possible enhance military effort while reducing reliance on fixed city centre bases, provided that security and political considerations allow. The key tasks of this force were set out in DOP(7)2 and can be summarised as:

- a. mentoring and training the Iraqi Army, Police and Border Enforcement forces through a combination of embedded training teams and leadership training.
- b. countering militant JAM and Iranian proxies including the suppression of the IDF threat.
- c. post PIC, retaining an in-theatre capacity to re-intervene at the request of the Iraqi authorities and, where necessary, to carry out coalition rear area tasks.

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4. UK military commanders are confident that conditions both pre and post PIC, coupled with the capability of the Iraqi Security Forces (mentored and monitored by Military Training Teams), should mean that the force level of four battle groups will be sufficient for these tasks and that we should plan on remaining at around this level for the remainder of 2007 and into 2008 (though further reductions, should conditions allow, are not ruled out). The process of reposturing in Basra is however militarily complex. We have to manage a coalition within a coalition which is in a state of strategic flux and effect a relief in place, in contact with the enemy, being relieved by an indigenous force of variable quality. We also have to deal with corrupt and inept officials in circumstances of huge friction and possible Iranian hostility.

5. As detailed military planning has proceeded in theatre to deliver this some uncertainty has arisen about the right and deliverable pace and nature of the glide path to get to the new force posture. Our original plans envisaged the closure of all our remaining bases in Basra City, along with Shaiba Logistics Base, and drawdown to four battle groups by May 2007. This has the advantage of a decisive move to the 2007 steady state ambition. It would remove a particularly vulnerable segment of our military and civilian presence from sites (Basra Palace, Shaat al Arab Hotel and Old State Building) which have been the subject of persistent and heavy IDF attack. And it would free up sufficient resources to allow the full range of reinforcement options for Afghanistan to be considered. On the other hand, a number of recent developments may lead us to reconsider some details. In particular we have reassessed the impact that the closure of Basra Palace will have on our situational awareness in Basra and ability to strike rogue JAM and Iranian proxies. More immediately, it has become apparent that practical considerations will prevent us from handing over Basra Palace until at least July.

6. Retaining Basra Palace until the end of Aug 07 would therefore allow a more measured approach to re-posturing in MND(SE) reducing risk to our forces whilst maximising the engagement we are able to undertake with the ISF. More specifically, it will:

a.

b. retain a presence within the city to monitor the effects of the closure of other bases such as the Shat-al Arab Hotel and Old State Building.

c. allow a company sized quick reaction force to be available for action within the city, particularly in support of operations against militant JAM and Iranian proxies.

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Further details on this and on how other tasks (including training and mentoring the Iraqi Security Forces) would be carried out, are set out in Annex A.

7. A delay in leaving Basra Palace would also go with the grain of US military thinking in Baghdad which, in the last two months, has shifted from the promotion of accelerated transition to concentrating on improving security, centred primarily on the new Baghdad and Anbar security plans.

8. Iraqi views are in a state of flux. Maliki is now more cautious about too rapid a run-down in MND(SE) while Rubaie has been pressing us hard to withdraw. Locally there has been some improvement in consent following Operation Sinbad. On the other hand violence continues overwhelmingly to be directed at the MNF.

9. It would require a battle group sized formation to secure Basra Palace for longer than originally planned taking the total force to five battle groups. It may be possible to reduce our force level to four battle groups if coalition partners (Denmark, Romania and Australia) can be persuaded to adjust their current taskings, but we have yet to gauge their reaction and a positive response cannot, at this point, be guaranteed. The current position of the            is discouraging. In the event we decided to retain Basra Palace, the safe planning assumption should be that we would need up to five battle groups.

10. **On the other hand, all the time we retain a battle group to secure the Basra Palace site, it will not be possible to provide the second of the two battle groups that SACEUR has requested from the UK for ISAF in Southern Afghanistan.**

#### Southern Afghanistan

11. The case for the UK to provide two battle groups in response to SACEUR's force generation request for ISAF was set out in DOP(O7)1. In short, the military advice is that provision of these forces to enhance security in Helmand and provide a reserve capacity in RC(South) is what is needed to help ISAF make strategic progress in southern Afghanistan within the bounds of acceptable military risk – the alternative is simply to consolidate our current position with little margin against            assessment that overall level of attack will increase in 2007. These proposals fit with SACEUR's finalised force generation request to the UK to provide a manoeuvre battalion and a border battalion for RC(South).

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12. There are clearly issues of prioritisation, affordability and burden-sharing within NATO and elsewhere to be resolved. But the inescapable fact is that if we retain five battle groups in Iraq it will only be possible to sustain three in Afghanistan which means that we could only offer one battle group in response to NATO's force generation request. Given lead times to achieve full operating capability, an illustrative three month delay from May 2007 in getting down to four battle groups in Iraq would mean that we would not be able to deploy a second battle group into Afghanistan in time to have significant effect during 2007.

#### Strategic Assessment

13. The first question DOP has to address is whether the commitment of scarce military resource (in essence a single battle group) is best committed in these circumstances to Iraq or southern Afghanistan. As set out above, the case for retaining the battle group in Iraq for the Basra Palace task is twofold: practical constraints on how quickly we can hand over to the Iraqi Army in good order; and considerations of tactical risk reduction coupled with a need to take account of US military unease and scepticism about too rapid a run-down. It also has to be seen against our overall strategic objective for Iraq:

*A democratic, stable, united and law abiding Iraq, within its present borders, co-operating with the international community, posing no threat to its neighbours or to international security, abiding by all its international obligations and providing effective, representative and inclusive government for all its people.*

At the centre of US nervousness is concern about a loss of situational awareness and a broader worry that too rapid a withdrawal from Basra might undermine the prospects for stability in Iraq's second city. On the other hand, we should be realistic about the impact of temporarily retaining a single battle group in Basra Palace can have on the likelihood or otherwise of this happening. The actions of the Iraqi political and security authorities are a far more significant factor in securing Basra's future.

14. In Afghanistan we are engaged in supporting a stabilisation mission aimed at securing stable national and provincial government, accountable and effective security forces within a functioning rule of law structure and a flourishing licit economy. Following ISAF's first nine months in charge of the South, the widening of the central government's rule, countering the Taliban and the establishment of development zones are work in progress. The challenge posed by the Taliban is substantial and growing and must be overcome in order to achieve the outcome we seek. There is a period opening in which it is vital to demonstrate conclusively that the Taliban will not be the future government of the South of Afghanistan and in that respect maintaining momentum is vital. Our force as part of ISAF will need to demonstrate in 2007 that significant progress is being made on securing development zones, deterring and defeating the Taliban and building Afghan capacity. Failure to maintain that momentum risks undermining the reach and legitimacy of the Afghan government and encouraging the reversion of



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Afghanistan to a space dominated by Islamic extremists with consequences for international terrorism and stability in the region, most notably in the border areas of Pakistan.

15. It is not possible to state conclusively that one campaign is more strategically significant than the other, though Ministers agreed in January 2006 that Iraq was our top overseas security priority. But in strictly military terms the most impact (and the best chance of making progress in Afghanistan) would be achieved by devoting more resources in Afghanistan. The strategic military advice is that this outweighs the tactical advantages of retaining Basra Palace. Three other factors also need to be taken into account however. The first is the implications for the US/UK security relationship. The US understands our dilemma, but the strong indications are that for them, Iraq looms larger in political and strategic terms at least in the short term. Second, Iraq is one of the areas in which UK policy on Iran is being played out. Third, the effectiveness of our effort in Afghanistan is crucially dependent on NATO as a whole delivering. Here this picture is mixed, with 2006 on balance being successful for ISAF, but with signs of weakening resolve and divisions among NATO's member states.

16. Having taken all these factors into account our conclusion is that the overriding factor is the emerging impracticality of handing over Basra Palace in May. A delay until the end of Aug 07 looks inevitable, which has the advantage of allowing us to maintain better situational awareness of Basra City and assuage US concerns to some extent (see paras 6 and 7 above). But we should take advantage of this delay to prepare the US for withdrawal from the Palace by the end of the Summer.

17. The second issue for DOP is to reach a view on how we should respond to SACEUR's request for additional forces for ISAF. The detailed analysis including issues of prioritisation, cost and burden-sharing, is set out in a separate paper but the decision needs to be set in the context of our ability to sustain our current level of military commitment. The Armed Forces have been operating for several years at a higher level of deployment than is assumed in the Defence Planning Assumptions which were last set out publicly in the December 2003 Defence White Paper. These Defence Planning Assumptions determine the deployable strength of the Armed Forces and the detailed capabilities that are generated and kept ready for operations to deliver the required military effect. We assume that as a norm we should be able to mount an enduring Medium Scale peace support operation simultaneously with an enduring Small Scale peace support operation and a one-off Small Scale intervention operation. In practice, at least since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 we have been operating in excess of our assumptions, and since last spring we have been undertaking two enduring intensive Medium Scale operations, as well as maintaining smaller commitments elsewhere.

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18. Since not all capabilities are required for these two enduring operations, the Armed Forces are not uniformly stretched, but some capabilities are very stretched, notably deployable ground troops and enablers such as air transport, medical, intelligence and surveillance. The "harmony" guidelines which set standards for frequency of deployment both for individuals and for units and the gaps between operational tours are being breached increasingly seriously and the measures of readiness for future deployment are deteriorating. This degree of stretch cannot be sustained indefinitely, and it is already the case that it will take some years to recover the trained capability necessary to enable us to meet all but the smallest and least demanding future requirements. The longer we continue to operate at this level the worse these trends will become, and the longer the recovery time.

19. We are, though, planning to withdraw from Banja Luka in March 2007 as part of EU reposturing in Bosnia. This reduces the Army's overall deployment constraints by one battalion, thereby easing the pressure slightly.

20. Against that background, the military judgement is that we could sustain the deployment of 8 battle groups between Iraq and Afghanistan (the current split being 6:2) through 2007, but not for much longer, and that it would not be feasible in 2007 to exceed 8 in total. This means that for as long as we retain 6, or even 5, battle groups in Iraq it will not be possible to contribute from UK resources the additional two battle groups for ISAF it is CDS's strong advice we should provide. And in any case we need to recognise the long-term consequences for our Armed Forces of sustaining the maximum levels of commitment this paper recommends that we should consider – they are beyond the levels we are funded and structured to deploy on an enduring basis.

21. Realistically we cannot expect any increased land commitment to ISAF in Afghanistan to reduce much before 2009 at the earliest. In these circumstances the only scope for easing the presence would be to reduce further in Iraq in 2008. It is too early to reach judgements or decisions on whether and how this would be possible, but factors that will need to be taken into account include:

- a. US plans for 2008.
- b. a probable change in the legal basis for our presence in Iraq once the current UNSCR expires at the end of 2007.
- c. the continuing necessity or otherwise to retain re-intervention forces inside Iraq.
- d. our longer term vision of the bilateral military relationship with Iraq.

Officials should be invited to do further work on these issues and provide advice to DOP by no later than end April 2007.

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Handling

22. Our approach with the US government on Iraq should remain as set out in the core script in DOP(07)2 but ensuring that we secure maximum political benefit from our decision on Basra Palace including greater support for appropriate economic support for the Iraqi government. We should also be prepared to make explicit the force generation linkage between Iraq and Afghanistan and be prepared to share the thinking set out in this paper on where the strategic balance lies in terms of where the UK – with very limited military resources – can make most impact in areas of joint concern to both governments and the wider international community. With that in mind, our continued commitment to Basra Palace should not extend beyond Aug 07.

23. With the Iraqi government, we need to get the message across that our approach in MND(SE) is consistent with their aspirations to take responsibility for their own affairs, while retaining an ability to help build Iraqi capacity and provide a security back up to the ISF. We will also need a handling strategy in relation to our decision on Afghanistan which both explains to and secures credit from NATO and the Afghan government.

24. Finally, we will need to ensure that UK domestic opinion fully understands the rationale behind these decisions.

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ANNEX A

**ADVANTAGES OF THE TEMPORARY RETENTION OF BASRA PALACE AND UK APPROACH TO MITTS**

1. The work to re-posture our forces out of Basra city continues. However, in the light of the significant practical challenges of handing over 3 major sites, as well as the military advantages of maintaining an extended but temporary presence at Basra Palace, we should be prepared to maintain a 5<sup>th</sup> Battle Group in theatre until August 07. This would see us reducing from the present figure of around 7200 personnel deployed, to 5200 in May and then the already published figure of 4500 in August when the Basra Palace site is handed over ( a saving of approximately £126m when we draw down to 5200 personnel in May and a further £96m from August).

**Basra Palace Retention**

2. Practical considerations. We are currently involved in the business of re-posturing from 3 major bases in Basra city. This is a complex process offering significant logistic challenges, all which need to be agreed with various Iraqi interlocutors. Disengagement by the Provincial Council and delay in coalition agreement has also taken its toll on the handover process. The pace of transfer of security responsibility to the Iraqi Army has to be sensibly based on both their capacity to accept it and managing the security risk of coalition forces re-posturing out of the city too rapidly. The need to handover in good order is key to the information operation - we cannot afford scenes reminiscent of Camp Abu Naji in Maysan.

3. Tactical advantages.

the Palace site allows us to maintain better situational awareness in the city as the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) move towards an ability to effectively underwrite security themselves. Also, by providing a suitably secure base from which to mount offensive operations from within the city, Basra Palace reduces the military risks associated with essential targeted strike and detention tasks and future possible Countering Iranian Influence (CII) operations.

**Military Transition & Training Teams (MITTs)**

4. Central to our re-posturing plans is the release of manpower and capacity to provide more effective and better focused training for the IPS, Iraqi Army and Department of Border Enforcement (DBE) along with their respective headquarters. This will involve an increased concentration on the weakest elements, in particular leadership and collective training. The former through bespoke mentoring and monitoring and the latter by 'out of line' training at the purpose built facilities (e.g. the Divisional Training Centre

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at Shaiba Logistics Base and Joint Leadership Academy to be opened at Basra Air Station). This approach reflects the current capability, needs and firm wishes of the Iraqis and strikes the right balance between capacity building and discouraging dependency.

5. Current plans are that, following re-posturing, up to 6 UK military sub units and 3 battle group headquarters will be available for training the Iraqi Security Forces. This includes:

- a. one company devoted to training the Iraqi Army at the Divisional Training Centre;
- b. one company to provide a 'flying' MiTT to monitor and mentor the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> brigade of 10 Division that operate in Basra and in the neighbouring provinces;
- c. one company to support the FCO-led Police Training Teams, based at the PJCC in Basra City;
- d. up to two companies to provide training and assistance to the DBE in border related operations;
- e. a company based at Basra Palace (while this site is retained) available to periodically conduct training of the Iraqi Army.

6. In addition, smaller MiTTs will remain embedded with HQ 10 (IA) Division at their headquarters, Camp Graham on the south-western outskirts of Basra, and provide specialist leadership and staff training at the new Joint Leadership Academy.

7. The process by which the Iraqi Army takes ownership of the Basra city sites will also be of significant benefit to them. Although not formally part of the MiTT plan, the staged 'relief in place' of our forces effectively generates a gradually reducing MiTT which will increase Iraqi confidence and prepare them for their growing responsibilities within the city.

8. For 10 (IA) Division units deploying to Baghdad, we propose deploying a small number of UK personnel to interface with the US liaison teams. These UK teams will provide continuity and moral support for the Iraqi leadership, ensure accurate reporting of performance and as well as valuable training feedback. Current plans envisage 4-man teams, comprising officers and senior non-commissioned officers, travelling with each of the two Iraqi 10 Division battalions, earmarked for the Baghdad Security Plan, to a forward operating base near Baghdad where they will be incorporated into a US MiTT. Although the tasks for the 10 Division battalions have not been confirmed, it is our intention for the UK teams to stay with the Iraqi battalions in Baghdad provided the US can supply the appropriate level of force protection required.

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