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SECRETARY OF STATE

MSU 4/5/2G

29 August 2008

Dear Tom,

IRAQ: TRANSITION PLANNING FOR 2009

I am writing to update you on emerging US proposals for military transition in southern Iraq in 2009, and how we plan to respond.

Military-to-military discussions in theatre following the Prime Minister's statement on Iraq to Parliament of 22 July suggest that the US military has become reconciled to the departure of UK ground troops from Basra by the end of May 2009 and is working to generate the forces they believe are needed as replacements in that timescale. The US plans to base a Divisional headquarters for southern Iraq and a Brigade at the Contingency Operating Base (COB) in Basra, both to be fully operational around the end of May. We are looking to use senior UK military visits in early September to confirm these emerging proposals with senior US commanders, including General Petraeus, and to provide UK and US planners with some key assumptions as the basis for coordinating plans with the US in more detail.

The Defence Secretary has agreed that planning on the basis of the US proposals represents a very good opportunity both to meet the Prime Minister's intent of moving to a fundamental change of mission in the first half of 2009 and to maintain our strategic relationship with the US. We are fortunate that US plans fit in with our deployment cycle. An end-May transition would enable us successfully to complete our remaining military tasks with 14 (Iraqi Army) Division in Basra and at the Basra Airport by the end of March, and then to transfer responsibilities to the US so as to conduct an orderly withdrawal of the UK Brigade around its scheduled end of tour date of 31 May 2009. By falling in with US plans, we will be able to argue that it hasn't broken the PM's political agreement with President Bush if they become public before the US elections. Having an agreed timetable for transition in place (and being implemented) when the new US President takes office would also have the advantage of

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making it more difficult for him to seek to keep UK troops on the ground in southern Iraq into 2010.

We will look to make reductions in force levels before the end of May, but current military advice is that we should not expect significant reductions before we are able to relinquish core functions to the US Brigade.

The presentational aspects of transition will need careful handling. Command and control arrangements in MND South East will also evolve during the transition and under current US plans, the UK Brigade would operate under US command for a period before it is withdrawn. Given the increasing risk of leaks as that preparations for transition become evident, we and colleagues from other Departments will develop a detailed handling strategy in September, following the forthcoming military-to-military discussions.

In parallel with transition planning, we are working with the US and Government of Iraq to develop options for our future military presence in Iraq after the withdrawal of the UK Brigade from Basra. We are also conducting contingency planning in the event that UK forces are obliged to withdraw from Iraq before the end of May, in particular if we are unable to agree a suitable legal basis for their presence after 2008 with the Government of Iraq.

I am copying this letter to Steven Hickey (FCO), Matt Baugh (DfID), Matt Cavanagh, Simon McDonald and Margaret Aldred.

EDWARD FERGUSON
Private Secretary

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