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From: Tom Fletcher
Sent: 02 May 2008 19:02
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: Duty Clerks
Subject: IRAQ TROOP NUMBERS - NOTE FROM SIMON

GORDON

NOTE FROM SIMON, AS REQUESTED. MATT IS ALSO DOING SOME WORK TO SEE WHETHER THE NUMBERS CAN BE PUSHED ANY FURTHER.

TOM

SUMMARY: UK force levels in Southern Iraq will remain at around 4,100 for the next 6 months. Once our principal task - the readiness of 14 Div - is achieved in early 2009, we will be able rapidly to reduce our force levels. An announcement in Parliament might be made in July 2008 setting out our broad approach. I would like to discuss this approach with Hadley in late May.

FORCE LEVELS AND TASKS: CJO and Gen Petraeus have now agreed the overall shape and responsibilities of MND(SE) over the next 6 months. The UK force of 4,100 will retain 2* command, enhance the training and mentoring of 14 Div, and provide naval training, force enablers (engineers, medics, logistics etc) and force protection. The US force of around 1,000 will enhance the HQ, train and mentor residual elements of 10 Div, take on border security and police reform, and provide additional enablers (helicopters, UAVs etc). We may be able to reduce our force slightly during the 6 months, depending on the progress of tasks and conditions on the ground. However, given that many of our troops are engaged in more than one task, it would be difficult to withdraw a significant or distinct group.

A UK military team is now in theatre carrying out further detailed work on these tasks, and the scope for using a Private Military and

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Security Company (PMSC) or Iraqi troops. We may be able to replace some of our troops engaged in airport security with a PMSC. This would require a change in policy, and may only make an impact of 200 - 300 personnel. We could seek funding for such a PMSC from the Iraqi government, but Ryan Crocker told me yesterday that the Iraqis, despite their \$70bn oil windfall, would find this politically difficult. Alternatively, we may be able to start handing over some tasks, such as outer perimeter security, to the Iraqis themselves.

The UK's key task is to get 14 Div to full operational capability. Given that our force levels for the next 6 months are greater than we had originally planned, MOD estimate that the main task will be complete in January 2009, a few months earlier than expected. We'll need to think about how we assess 14 Div's readiness; we do not want to leave this solely to the US; they may be tempted to use that responsibility to delay us. The secondary task is to prepare the airport for handover to the Iraqis. We aim to do that in November/December 2008, once we assess that they are capable of completing civilian certification by themselves - a process which will take them two more years.

TIMETABLE: We should therefore be in a position to begin drawing down our forces from January 2009. Having done more detailed work on the figures, MOD are advising that 3,500 is the critical mass of troops, below which they cannot provide sufficient force protection for themselves. They do not want to hand tasks piecemeal to the US before achieving key objectives, (i) because this would look like the UK admitting it couldn't get the key tasks done, and (ii) because the US have made clear they don't have the capacity to take on extra tasks before the end of the year. We should therefore aim for a rapid drawdown of combat forces in southern Iraq from 4,100 to a much smaller niche contribution over the first 6 months of 2009. One positive consequence of the US presence in Basra is that our handover to US forces in 2009 should be more seamless than previously expected.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Parliament will expect a further

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announcement on Iraq before summer recess on 22 July, and the Defence Secretary has already stated his intention to do so. That statement should set out in broad terms what we have achieved so far in Iraq, our remaining tasks, expectations, and next steps, emphasising that this continues to be a conditions-based approach and without going into specific timescales or numbers.

US HANDLING: As part of the process of sensitising the US to this approach, I propose that I discuss it in general terms with Steve Hadley during my next visit to Washington, provisionally scheduled for 21 May. This would prepare the ground for your conversation with President Bush on 16 June.

SIMON McDONALD