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Letter should be  
dated 12 May 2008

*John Gordon*  
**IRAQ**

I very much welcome David Miliband's thoughtful letter of 29 April. As we discussed with General Petraeus, Maliki's intervention has, fortuitously, created the platform for transition we were hoping for from General Mohan's operations later in the year.

Exploiting this opportunity has three main elements. In the short term we must:

- help ensure that the still fragile situation on the ground in Basra continues to improve;
- finalise with the Americans the division of military effort in MND(SE) for the next six months – this is well in hand;
- agree a narrative of what has happened and why, and get it into circulation quickly – not only here but in the US, where our reputation is undoubtedly tarnished. This work is already in hand in the Iraq Information Strategy Group.

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The medium term is more complicated. On the military side, I am being advised that it will be difficult to fulfil the commitments we have agreed with the US in MND(SE), especially to mentoring 14 Division, and make significant force level reductions between May and November this year. I agree in principle with David that transferring 2-star command to the US sooner rather than later should be our aim but it will be hard for them to find another headquarters, and we can expect significant push back when we raise the issue. Our discussions so far with General Petraeus will have engendered a US assumption that we have agreed to retain command of MND(SE) at least for the next six months. I am also a little concerned about the list of goals in paragraph 5 of David's letter. However desirable, they go beyond the time-limited criteria we have been using thus far – standing up 14 Division, transferring the airport and supporting provincial elections – and could draw us into the sort of open-ended commitment we are all keen to avoid. Furthermore, they assume a degree of economic progress for which I have as yet seen little evidence, notwithstanding Michael Wareing's energy and enthusiasm.

The key question implied by David is whether we intend to leave Basra this year, by mid 2009 or by the end of next year. We have prepared Washington for a significant further troop reduction after their elections but not, explicitly, for withdrawal. 14 Division should be operational in the early spring, perhaps even earlier and the airport will have been transferred by the end of 2008, while provincial elections are due this autumn. Given that an orderly pull out would take up to six months to plan and implement, and we are committed not to do anything to affect the US elections, we have the opportunity to be out by May 2009 at the latest if we are prepared to inform the President elect of our decision in November. Alternatively, we could negotiate an exit with the new Administration and, as David suggests, be out at the end of 2009. Both risk compromising our relations with the incoming President but the former runs less chance of our being entangled in longer term commitments, especially by a McCain Administration.

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I do not advocate taking a decision quickly and our options need to be prepared carefully by officials. One issue not raised by David about which I remain concerned is the legal status of our forces in Iraq following the lapse of UNSCR Chapter VII cover. It would, however, enable us to focus clearly on the factors for 2009 if we were able now to confirm that we are not thinking in terms of transition in 2008. To do so would simplify military planning, allow us to concentrate on meeting our objectives in Basra, ease our relations with the US and remove the risk of being accused of misleading domestic audiences without prejudging when and how we make the transition in 2009.

To take all of this thinking forward, I suggest that NSID should commission the Iraq Strategy Group to produce a refined set of options for us to consider next month, together with a draft Parliamentary statement announcing our strategy through to November and giving an indication of our trajectory thereafter.

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the Secretary of State for International Development, the Chancellor, 'C', Nigel Sheinwald (Washington) and Christopher Prentice (Baghdad).



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