

1 (11.37 am)

2 GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON and VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE

3 THE CHAIRMAN: Welcome. Opening then this second session of

4 the day, the objectives of this session are really

5 twofold: first, to understand events in Baghdad

6 from October 2005 to March 2006, but, second, to

7 understand how military strategy for Iraq was being

8 developed and executed from March 2006 through to about

9 mid-2007. Our witnesses for this session are

10 General Sir Nicholas Houghton and

11 Vice Admiral Charles Style. General Houghton held the

12 posts of senior British military representative Iraq,

13 from October 2005 until March 2006, I think --

14 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: That's right.

15 THE CHAIRMAN: -- and then you returned to the

16 United Kingdom as Chief of Joint Operations at PJHQ.

17 Admiral Style, you held the post of DCDS Commitments

18 from March 2006 to June 2007.

19 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: January 2006 to ...

20 THE CHAIRMAN: January 2006, I beg your pardon. Thank you.

21 I think we have about an hour and a half. We recognise,

22 as I have said before, that witnesses are giving

23 evidence based on their recollection of events, and we

24 are, of course, checking what we hear against the papers

25 to which we have access.

1 I remind all witnesses that they will later be asked  
2 to sign a transcript of the evidence to the effect that  
3 the evidence they have given is truthful, fair and  
4 accurate. With that conventional opening, can I turn to  
5 the questioning to Sir Roderic Lyne?

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Good morning. I wonder if I can just put  
7 the first question to you and ask if you can give us  
8 a general description of the situation that you found  
9 when you arrived in Baghdad in October 2005?

10 You arrived there after they had held the  
11 constitutional referendum in the period of time between  
12 that and the elections coming up, a time when insurgency  
13 had clearly not been contained, and I think it would be  
14 interesting to hear more about your assessment of the  
15 levels of violence that we were facing, and when perhaps  
16 Iraqi consent to the occupation two years in and more  
17 was beginning to weaken and the coalition were beginning  
18 to -- they were beginning to tire of the coalition's  
19 presence. Can you give us a broad description?

20 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: I got there in early October  
21 just before the referendum, which was on the 15<sup>th</sup>.  
22 In many ways I think that the October 15th referendum  
23 and the December 15 election, despite the background of  
24 the security situation, did generate an atmosphere of  
25 some optimism, both within Iraq but perhaps more

1 internationally. There was, as it were, distinct  
2 momentum on the political track. Therefore, although  
3 there was a background of significant violence, I would  
4 moderate that in terms of the atmospherics of  
5 the time, certainly in the period up to Christmas 2005,  
6 about the degree of optimism that the future might hold.

7 But you are quite right that in statistical terms  
8 and in reality, the levels of violence were very high.  
9 Not so much in the south, where I think that -- and  
10 I know you have already had some sort of evidence of  
11 this -- that the nature of the security  
12 dynamics was more an intra-Shia one with, if you like,  
13 the MNF, Multi-National Forces UK, down there being its  
14 occasional targets. But the scale of both the Sunni  
15 insurgency and the Al-Qaeda fomenting of both that  
16 insurgency and the potential for intersectorian strife  
17 was considerable. Not, I don't think, to the levels it  
18 subsequently became, and we might -- perhaps a  
19 subsequent question is post-Golden Mosque bombing, post  
20 the delay in settling a government and, into 2006, did  
21 it get worse?

22 In comparative terms, I sense that the violence was  
23 not as bad in that period because, as I say, although  
24 there was a significant statistical and reality of  
25 violence in respect of the Sunni insurgency,

1 particularly in Al Anbar, particularly in places around  
2 Mosul, Tal Afar, in northern Iraq, and particularly in  
3 Baghdad itself, that was all accompanied by a general  
4 feeling of optimism about what the future might deliver.

5 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So there was momentum on the political  
6 track. What was the campaign plan on the military track  
7 at this time, when you arrived? We will want to go into  
8 2006 violence in a minute.

9 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: Again, I think that -- and it is  
10 somehow difficult-- (I sort of re-read some of my own  
11 stuff prior to the session) to understand  
12 quite why we were so relatively upbeat in terms of the  
13 delivery of the strategy of the time. But the fact that  
14 the political track was moving ahead and, the fact that the  
15 nature of the violence, if I can say, was starting to be  
16 better understood in respect of its component parts.  
17 What do I mean about that? It was quite clear that  
18 there was an identifiable Sunni insurgency. It was  
19 fragmented, it was made up of many parts, but one could  
20 put some sort of an intelligence model on it that could  
21 identify that bit of it which might be biddable to  
22 political accommodation.

23 There was another, as it were, completely rejectionist  
24 element to that Sunni insurgency, ex-Ba'athists, those  
25 sort of things, which had started to gel with Al-Qaeda.

1 And there was then Al-Qaeda itself, which was  
2 quite clearly atavistic in its way of operating,  
3 nihilistic, and itself was no friend to the potential  
4 future of Iraq because it had its own political agenda  
5 vis a vis Caliphates and those sorts of things.

6 So there was, if you like, within that particular  
7 element of the conflict, the ability to start to see how  
8 one could drive a wedge between the biddable elements of  
9 the Sunni insurgency and that bit of an atavistic,  
10 nihilistic organisation which could only be removed in  
11 a kinetic way.

12 Then there was -- and in many respects, one, from  
13 a military perspective, one could see how those two elements  
14 of the security dynamic could be dealt with. But then  
15 there was a third element and this was actually the  
16 general one, if you like -- in many respects, it is the  
17 one that is still playing out -- the most decisive  
18 element of the security dynamic, which was the  
19 competition both between and within the confessional  
20 groupings of Iraq for the future wealth and political  
21 power of the country. In different parts of the country  
22 this played out in different ways and in southern Iraq  
23 it was very much an intra-Shia struggle with varying  
24 degrees of mendacity behind it, Iranian mendacity behind  
25 it. In other parts, it had the potential for

1 significant Shia/Sunni violence, ultimately the  
2 potential for civil war if it wasn't handled properly.

3 But having explained the sort of variable geometry  
4 of the security dynamics, there was the sense -- and  
5 George Casey's -- my immediate boss -- as the Commanding  
6 General, his strapline for the time was AQ out, Sunnis  
7 in, Iraqis in the lead. That was, if you like, the  
8 strapline of the approach being developed at the end of  
9 2005 to how we would go through 2006.

10 The business that you could apply, without going  
11 into the detail, by and large special force capability  
12 to eradicate AQI; start to develop political outreach  
13 for Sunni reconciliation and accommodation and then  
14 deal primarily through political means with the  
15 resolution of, as it were, the fight for political and  
16 economic spoils, through the empowerment of the Iraqis.  
17 The view at the back end of 2005 was that this would be  
18 done by accelerating the process of Iraqi transition, of  
19 which, clearly, the military dimension was the  
20 rapid generation of Iraqi security forces and the  
21 conditional transfer of security responsibility to the  
22 Iraqis.

23 So just seen in the context of the back end of 2005,  
24 there was both a maturing concept of operations in how  
25 relative success could be achieved in a relatively short

1           timeframe, in terms of the defeat of AQI, the  
2           reconciliation of an insurgency and the handover to  
3           Iraq, a new -- the prospect of the first government  
4           elected by full suffrage elections. That's  
5           why I say that in terms of the strategy, we were --  
6           buoyant is too strong a word, but within the context of  
7           the time, 2006 looked a year of significant promise.

8   SIR RODERIC LYNE: If we take the third of your components,  
9           the struggle for power between different sectarian  
10          groups and within groups, obviously the constitution was  
11          a step in the direction of the empowerment you talk  
12          about, but did it not also enshrine sectarian  
13          differences and did it not therefore become part of the  
14          problem?

15   GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: The degree to which the  
16          constitution enshrined sectarian difficulties, I would  
17          have to re-research that. The sense was that the  
18          government that would be seated as a result of  
19          the December elections would be one -- the aspiration  
20          was that it would be a big tent government of national  
21          reconciliation. That was the aspiration. In many ways,  
22          the political aspiration for such a government is what  
23          caused such a devil a length of time in getting the  
24          thing settled and, if you like, if one -- one of the  
25          factors, I think, in the relative optimism at the back

1 end of 2005, starting to erode into 2005, was that that  
2 sense of political momentum was lost.

3 It was lost because it took, I think, until  
4 early May before the Maliki government was eventually  
5 seated, and in that time, as it were, the politics of  
6 hope and that momentum had started to change into  
7 violence on the streets.

8 So rather than have a political outlet for people's  
9 aspirations, it transformed into a more violent outlet,  
10 and one of the catalysts for that, listening to what  
11 Ambassador Patey said, was in fact the 22 February  
12 bombing of the Golden Mosque. Not that in the immediate  
13 aftermath of that, the nature of the tit for tat  
14 violence was very significant, but that was, as it were,  
15 an attack, assessed by AQI, on what, as it were, was  
16 the totemic representation of the Shia brand of Islam,  
17 that it drew the potential battlelines for a descent  
18 into civil war.

19 Therefore, it is remarkable to think how it could  
20 happen in such a short space of time, but recapping, as  
21 it were, my own reports back to London, in  
22 the December/January phase, I could talk about relative  
23 optimism about the future, about an acceleration of  
24 transition to Iraqi security control, George Casey  
25 returned from Washington with his plans for

1 conditions-based transition endorsed in Washington, and  
2 yet, by the time that I was, in early March, writing, as  
3 it were, my final report home, as it were, end of tour  
4 report, the possibility at least of a descent into civil  
5 war was very real.

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Can I just come back on this question of  
7 the transition to Iraqi security control, because we  
8 have heard from a lot of earlier witnesses that some  
9 very unrealistic targets were set, some indeed endorsed  
10 at headquarters level in London, for the speed of that  
11 transition, for the number of soldiers and policemen,  
12 particularly police, that could be trained within  
13 a given period and that there was a fundamental lack of  
14 understanding of the problem within the Iraqi police  
15 force much more so than in building up the Iraqi  
16 security forces.

17 Did you feel that these new plans that you talk  
18 about were realistically based? How bad was the problem  
19 in the police -- we heard a bit about it from  
20 Sir William Patey -- at the time that you were there?

21 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: A bit of a sort of split answer  
22 on this. I think that, in terms of the status of the  
23 Iraqi army, there was sufficient objective evidence to  
24 suggest that they could, at a localised level, take  
25 security control. And that actually was the modalities

1 of the way it was meant to play out, that in the initial  
2 stages it would be a handover to the Iraqi army, not the  
3 Iraqi police, but the Iraqi police had to be at  
4 a certain level as well.

5 So there was pretty good confidence about the Iraqi  
6 army. Other elements of what we called transition  
7 conditionality related to local C2 arrangements, the  
8 quality of local governance, but clearly police was one  
9 of them, and police was recognised as the weaker link,  
10 significantly. In fact, recalling another strapline,  
11 2006 was announced to be the "Year of the police". So  
12 again, in the plans that were accompanying -- Margaret  
13 is smiling; she probably remembers this -- at the back  
14 end of 2005, in order to ensure that the police caught  
15 up with the conditionality within the sort of timelines  
16 we were anticipating for transition, there was to be  
17 a significantly increased resourcing of police training  
18 and police mentoring and police generation and police  
19 reform, to try to ensure that they made the  
20 conditionality benchmark.

21 Now then, the degree to which some of this was far  
22 too optimistically based, I think, with retrospect one  
23 could make that judgment, but at the time there were  
24 other attendant factors, of which -- a sense that time  
25 itself was a finite commodity and therefore that we

1 needed to be getting on with this transition. There was  
2 a sense that, once the new government was seated, there  
3 were already strong indications of burgeoning Iraqi  
4 sovereignty and they would want to start taking control  
5 of things.

6 There was also a sense that, in terms of what our  
7 declared end states were, these were end states that  
8 were not deliverable by coalition forces; they could  
9 only be delivered by the Iraqis themselves, and  
10 therefore the need to transition, to have a sort of --  
11 forgive me, a sense that, if anything, we should lean into the  
12 risk of transition, rather than run the risk of staying  
13 too long, was seen to be the right way of going about  
14 this. So risk -- you know, risk within  
15 tolerances -- should be the thing that informed our  
16 approach to transition.

17 SIR RODERIC LYNE: It is a question of where those  
18 tolerances lie. You heard Sir William Patey talk about  
19 the objective of trying to leave behind what he called  
20 at least a semblance of law and order and also talking  
21 about the way that criminal elements had infiltrated the  
22 police: You need the police for law and order but the  
23 police actually, to a large extent, in certain places  
24 such as Basra, were part of the problem rather than part  
25 of the solution to law and order.

1 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: It is quite difficult to  
2 compartmentalise the aspiration and the optimism of late  
3 2005, but you are quite right that the realities of the  
4 true state of the police were more dawning realities, as  
5 we moved into 2006, where some of the -- you know, the  
6 problems about death squads, torture dens, the degree of  
7 militia infiltration of police, both nationally and  
8 locally in Basra, became more evident, and I think that  
9 probably it was the policing issue that lay on the  
10 critical path to most of the conditionality for  
11 effective transition.

12 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But we had been there two and a half  
13 years. If it was only a dawning problem, we would have  
14 been a bit slow to pick up on this?

15 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: In retrospect, it is probably  
16 easy to say that. At the time it didn't feel like that.  
17 Because of the way in which, as it were, the transfer  
18 was going to go -- it was going to be a military to  
19 military transfer of responsibility -- the police was  
20 always playing catch-up. 2006 was to be the year of the  
21 police, so it is not as if we were not aware of the fact  
22 that this was the critical problem.

23 But I think that the degree of the problem, just  
24 recalling another sense of the time, is that we could  
25 pour significant resource into, as it were, training the

1 police and in the quantity of their generation but we  
2 never had the ability to command their loyalty at  
3 a local level or a national level.

4 This is where you probably get into the dark  
5 business of the degree to which police loyalties were  
6 affected by political loyalties, links to criminality  
7 and corruption, and I don't think that we had a full  
8 understanding of that at the back end of 2005. That was  
9 more revealed to us incrementally, as 2006 ensued.

10 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Just before we turn the page to 2006, one  
11 other opening question: how far did you feel that the  
12 situation you saw on the ground was well understood in  
13 Whitehall, and indeed more widely, by public opinion in  
14 the United Kingdom? Was it being accurately reported?

15 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: I would have to say that, in  
16 terms of more widely within the United Kingdom, I don't  
17 think even to this day the complexity has remotely been  
18 transferred into the psyche of the United Kingdom.  
19 Forgive me, a diversion, but listening to William Patey  
20 attempt to give you a flavour of the Shia  
21 militia groupings within just Basra, I mean, seven tours  
22 and 25 years into Northern Ireland I could still lose  
23 track of IRA, Real IRA, Provisional IRA, Continuity IRA,  
24 UVF, UDA and all that, and these were people that I had  
25 had multiple exposures to, multiple tours, and they

1 spoke the same language. To try to think that we  
2 understood the complicity of what lay within the  
3 branding of JAM, Jaysh Al Mahdi, was to wholly  
4 underestimate the complexity of it. The thought that on  
5 the streets of the UK people understood the sorts of  
6 different dynamics of the security situation, which I  
7 actually quite simplified in terms of AQI, Sunni  
8 insurgency, you know, decisive business about battle for  
9 power, there was Iranian mendacity, there was the  
10 Kurdish dimension, the whole thing was overlaid with  
11 criminality. The whole complexity of this thing; I think  
12 politicians were exposed to it when they visited, it  
13 would be lost on the streets of the UK.

14 So I think the business of the complexity of it  
15 certainly wasn't properly understood, and, therefore,  
16 the pace at which things could be delivered and really,  
17 dare I say it, the sophistication of our understanding  
18 of what might go wrong.

19 THE CHAIRMAN: Just an interjection, running the numbers in  
20 my head between the Northern Ireland population of  
21 1.5 million, the population of Iraq is 15/20 times that.  
22 So the complexity also has a multiplier?

23 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: Yes.

24 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Can I pick up on this? You have  
25 described sort of relative optimism at the end of 2005,

1 and almost a sense of imagined linear progression that  
2 you have a way of handling the insurgency, you move  
3 forward with various forms of political processes that  
4 pull people together. You hand over to the Iraqi  
5 security forces, eventually we all leave.

6 What was the impact of the event you have also  
7 alluded to, the bombings of the mosques, the delay in  
8 establishing a new government, on not only the general  
9 optimism, but on our strategic calculations, and  
10 Admiral Style may want to come in on this as well.

11 Was there a rethink going through, say,  
12 April/May 2006 on where this was all leading us and  
13 whether we should look again at what we were doing?

14 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: I think that there was still  
15 a degree, if you like, of legacy optimism and momentum  
16 within the UK camp, if I can put us on the ground, PJHQ  
17 reporting back -- and of course, as March turned  
18 into March, I became PJHQ rather than SBMRI. But  
19 actually, for, I would say, most of 2006 was still  
20 mirrored by, you know, the US approach, this idea of  
21 leaning into an accelerated transition, that very much  
22 was still the working level assumptions within both the  
23 US deployed military, within CentCom, within the voices  
24 we were hearing back from Washington.

25 Of course, we need to at some stage start to play

1 in the two other themes that helped, as it were,  
2 solidify us in our intent. One quite clearly was the  
3 commitment to Afghanistan, and, therefore, the evident  
4 tensions in wishing to be out of one place so that we  
5 could rebalance into another.

6 But there was also -- and it is probably a bit off  
7 my field to say it, but I think that there had been --  
8 I think there was within the UK society and within UK  
9 politics at the time a sense that one of the metrics of  
10 success was the reduction in UK force numbers and,  
11 therefore, there was significant pressure to deliver on  
12 that metric, and the way to deliver on that was to stick  
13 with what was the current plan of leaning into  
14 a controlled, albeit risk-based process of transition  
15 and try to accelerate that transition where possible  
16 Again, within the wider context of the sense that  
17 ultimately -- particularly this was the circumstance in  
18 the south of Iraq, that ultimately it would be for the  
19 Iraqis to come to deliver themselves the sort of end  
20 state we were looking for.

21 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: I very much agree with  
22 Nick Houghton that the approach to transition remained  
23 pretty consistent over the period that we are talking  
24 about. We are focusing at the beginning of 2006. The  
25 Americans were continuing to press ahead with transition

1 in the part of Iraq that they controlled, and there was  
2 a will to get on with that, and the relatively easy --  
3 relatively easy transition processes for us in the  
4 south, which were Muthanna and Dhi Qar, went ahead not  
5 exactly to the timing as planned, but, the conditions  
6 having been established, much as we expected them to.

7 There was a timescale rather than a concept  
8 difference between the south and the Baghdad-driven  
9 imperative in the sense that progressively over that  
10 period into the middle of 2006 and onwards, we felt that  
11 we were getting to a point where we in that region, with  
12 the amount of resources that we had available, which  
13 were significantly limited, we were getting to the point  
14 that we had done all that we could possibly do -- and  
15 I am particularly thinking about Basra now; the other  
16 three areas were, as I said, progressing along their  
17 complicated but relatively easier line. And looking  
18 ahead a little bit more.

19 By the time we came to Operation Sinbad, which was  
20 the sweep through, as you know, of Basra, the best and  
21 large-ish scale operation which integrated all the  
22 efforts in terms of military but also development,  
23 reconstruction, financial contributions and the rest of  
24 it, the feeling was that there was nowhere else to go to  
25 make this any better without significant extra resources

1       which were most certainly not available, and, therefore,  
2       my impression, I must admit, particularly on the  
3       south, because that's where we had to manage our tasks  
4       against our resources, was that the will towards  
5       transition had to continue and that there was no reason  
6       to be knocked off that. The only point I would add  
7       about the sense of optimism against pessimism was that  
8       it varied by the week.

9           I also went back through all my records of various  
10       discussions and one day our three-star in Baghdad was  
11       feeling it was all going pretty well. The next  
12       conversation, a week later, it wasn't. It wasn't easy,  
13       as it were, to have a consistent sense over a swathe of  
14       time about optimism and pessimism. That sense changed  
15       almost by the day.

16   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We will talk a bit more about  
17       Operation Sinbad later on. In a sense, is this two  
18       different reasons for moving troops? There is an  
19       optimistic reason and there is a pessimistic reason.

20           The optimistic reason is that we have achieved our  
21       objectives or are in the process of achieving our  
22       objectives, the pessimistic reason is there is not an  
23       awful lot more that we can do here and it may start to  
24       get significantly unpleasant for us and maybe we are not  
25       helping matters by hanging around.

1           Are you describing a sort of shift of two different  
2 types of arguments coming together here? In one sense  
3 we are holding the ring, the other sense we are caught  
4 in the middle?

5 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: I mean, again we are looking  
6 some way ahead from early 2006, but, looking at the  
7 period in the round, there were a number of factors here.  
8 It certainly is true that we felt that we were getting  
9 to the point where we could do no more. It was  
10 a conditions-based process, but the factors were fairly  
11 rough and ready. It was also starting to be said -- and  
12 I'm particularly focusing on Basra, because, as I say,  
13 difficult though they were at the time, the other three  
14 provinces were relatively easy to deal with -- that we  
15 were becoming part of the problem rather than part of  
16 the solution, and though I was out of it from the summer  
17 of 2007, my sense is that maybe some of the evidence  
18 would suggest that was probably the case.

19           There was a strong will from within the Ministry of  
20 Defence to maintain the momentum of transition because  
21 we were getting to the conditions, because of the  
22 problem about having achieved what we probably were ever  
23 likely to be able to achieve, and certainly because there  
24 was a factor of the need to resource a rapidly growing  
25 aspiration for forces in Afghanistan. So it was

1 a mixture of factors, is how I would describe it.

2 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: But you are right, we

3 probably -- on the -- sort of the dilemma that informed

4 the calculus of how we should then sequence our

5 operations and I'm sure that where we got to was that

6 the back end of 2006 and the Operation Sinbad, which, if

7 you like, was the equivalent of the -- it was

8 a mini-surge, was the last best operation we could

9 generate to try to bring security to the streets of

10 Basra, do a bit of sort of exemplar modelling to the

11 Iraqi army but trying to put them in the lead of it.

12 In the latter stages of Sinbad, it became important

13 that they were seen to be in the lead of it. And there

14 were instantaneous follow-ups on two tracks, if

15 you like, of police reform, with police reform teams

16 going into areas of Basra as they were cleared and made

17 more stable by Iraqi army back-filling, and also at the

18 same time (the Americans referred to it as

19 "SWET", which I think is sewerage, water, electronics

20 and trash) a clean-up exercise, and that would be

21 our last best effort, including the deployment of

22 certainly elements of the theatre reserve battalion which

23 we held in Cyprus, to give Richard Shirreff commanding at

24 the time the best assets. He would probably, and with

25 some justification for a deployed commander, have said

1 he could have done with more, he could probably make the  
2 thing go quicker with greater simultaneity and all that,  
3 but nevertheless, there was an element of a surge, in  
4 terms of reinforcement, to have that one last push.  
5 After which, and being planned concurrently with it, was  
6 the switch to Operation Zenith, which was the  
7 determination to reposture -- but not the determination,  
8 the plan, within a determined strategy, to reposture the  
9 UK troops out of Basra and, as it were, then to adopt  
10 a different posture in the way we supported Iraqi  
11 security forces within Basra.

12 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We have been covering quite a long  
13 period in all of this. Can you just give us a sense of  
14 the chronology that takes us from the relative optimism  
15 about late 2005, the shock of the events of early 2006?  
16 At what point are we starting to think in terms of  
17 Sinbad and then Zenith in terms of formulating this in  
18 sort of the last throw of the dice, as it were?

19 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: I know what you mean. The  
20 optimism which I reflected early on in what I was saying  
21 until 2005, lived on well into 2006. Even though there  
22 was frustration about the seating of the Maliki  
23 government, even though there was, you know, some really  
24 serious concerns about the potential for civil war in  
25 the aftermath of the Samarra bombing and what that led

1 to, nevertheless the sense was of leading into  
2 accelerating transition. Indeed the MNF Corps  
3 order to which the Brits were obeying was one of getting  
4 out of the cities. That was the American instruction of  
5 the year: to get out of the cities so that the Iraqis  
6 could be the face of the security in their own cities  
7 and there was a nine-city plan.

8 The idea for the final sort of Sinbad push was one  
9 that had probably its intellectual origins actually with  
10 Richard Shirreff before he deployed, but, in the  
11 knowledge of his reconnaissances, what he felt could be  
12 achieved, what he sensed was right, -- and  
13 that was absolutely cleared by myself, (CJO PJHQ)  
14 cleared with the American authorities, it was helped  
15 with some amount of American facilitation in terms of  
16 money and quick works and all that. That -- Sinbad was,  
17 I think, due to launch in September 2006 and to run  
18 through into the New Year.

19 It was a little bit late in starting because there  
20 was a desire to better brand it as an Iraqi-led  
21 operation rather than a UK-led operation. That took  
22 a bit of time out of it, but our desire for the  
23 reposturing, Operation Zenith, which then started, from  
24 memory, around February 2007, was in planning  
25 through the back end of 2006. So there was, you know,

1 from mid-2006 on, this sense of sequencing a final, not  
2 roll of the dice, but sort of effort to do what we could  
3 within the context of UK forces being in significant  
4 numbers in downtown Basra before then moving to this  
5 new posture where  
6 we got out of Basra and then we were more in what we  
7 termed at the time transitioning to a military support  
8 position rather than one where we were in the operating  
9 vanguard of security in downtown Basra.

10 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I'm going to hand over to  
11 Sir Roderic in a moment on those sort of issues. It is  
12 very helpful to have the chronology set out in front of  
13 us.

14 Lastly, as we are just focusing on the middle of  
15 2006, how much are the resource questions starting to  
16 impinge upon your planning, the limits on what we could  
17 reasonably do as we are taking on this bigger commitment  
18 in Afghanistan?

19 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: Would you like me to start on  
20 this? From the military point of view, we had a set of  
21 expectations and assumptions given according to our  
22 defence allocation of resources, and, therefore, the  
23 scale of effort that we might be expected to undertake.  
24 It was quite uncontentious. It was a well-known fact.  
25 It was contentious in the sense that it was a big

1 decision to be taking -- before my time, but to take on  
2 the Afghanistan job was going to substantially breach  
3 the assumptions and, therefore, towards --

4 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Sorry, which assumptions?

5 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: The assumptions of the scale of  
6 undertaking that we in routine circumstances militarily  
7 would be able to undertake and sustain.

8 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: I think it would be helpful if you  
9 set out clearly what this was.

10 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: Like all these things, they are  
11 a little complicated, but in very broad order terms the  
12 outcome of our Strategic Defence Review of ten-odd years  
13 ago was that we should be able to undertake one enduring  
14 military operation, one temporary six-month-ish -- that  
15 is a medium, a so-called medium scale of operation, one  
16 six-month length of medium-scale operation and then  
17 maybe one or two small-scale temporary operations as  
18 well.

19 The point was that the effect of going to  
20 Afghanistan at the scale which rapidly became a fact was  
21 that this had started to amount to a coincidental --  
22 enduring two medium-scale operations. We eventually  
23 started to use the language of being able -- this  
24 really, I think, only started in trying to explain the  
25 realities of this in Whitehall -- around about the turn

1 of the year 2007, the language of being able to at any  
2 one time deploy eight battle groups. The question was  
3 how we were going to divide up the effort.

4 Clearly, it started with almost nothing in  
5 Afghanistan. The appetite for more effort in  
6 Afghanistan ramped up, and so, around about the turn of  
7 the year, part of the discussion was that from  
8 a position where we were getting to four and four  
9 between the two theatres, we needed to change the  
10 balance to six and two -- six Afghanistan, two in Iraq.

11 It is just worth mentioning that in reckoning on  
12 that as what mainly the army could endure, we were  
13 already substantially breaking harmony regulations or  
14 expectations and some of those sort of factors.

15 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So we were getting quite seriously  
16 overstretched potentially?

17 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: We were militarily  
18 significantly stretched as a result of balancing these  
19 two things. I think, can I just add though -- you asked  
20 the question generally on resources. When we were  
21 trying to make the best of the Better Basra plan and  
22 then Sinbad and all the rest of it, we did within  
23 Whitehall attempt, and with some success, to get additional  
24 money from across different agencies and departments to  
25 support that effort.

1           It was, in the big scheme of things, a small amount  
2           of money and it was certainly the case that in Sinbad --  
3           I'm now talking the money to achieve civil effect  
4           without which Sinbad would have been nothing. The  
5           military part was to set conditions in each of the  
6           phases, but the delivery of some sort of lasting effect  
7           was going to be the civil effort. The amount of money  
8           available to do that from the UK side was small, it was  
9           enormous from the United States side and that's what  
10          really carried it.

11        SIR RODERIC LYNE: I would like to come back to that,  
12          because that's very interesting, but I think it would be  
13          useful just to set the context for this discussion of  
14          Afghanistan and the impact on Iraq in the middle of  
15          2006, which essentially is, in personal terms, that you,  
16          General Houghton, had returned to London in March 2006  
17          to become the Chief of Joint Operations and at about the  
18          same time Admiral Style had taken over as  
19          DCDS Commitments.

20                I think it would be helpful if you could just both  
21                of you describe how these two posts interacted with each  
22                other and with the rest of Whitehall, and in particular,  
23                given what we have heard from other witnesses earlier,  
24                tell us whether by this period of mid-2006 there was  
25                a smoothly running machine, handling Iraq in Whitehall

1 on a joined-up coherent basis which others have told us  
2 was not the case in earlier periods.

3 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: In the relative respect  
4 of our jobs, Charles's job as the DCDS Commitments, if  
5 you like, is the senior operations officer to the CDS  
6 and is responsible in many respects for the  
7 cross-Whitehall synchronisation and coherence of the  
8 military element of strategy in a cross-government  
9 context.

10 He, on behalf of CDS, or CDS himself, gives to me,  
11 as the CJO, the military dimension of that national  
12 strategy. I request back of town the resources to do  
13 the job, I've some leniency in the ways in which those  
14 resources are applied. So if you like, Charles's end is  
15 Ministry of Defence and work in Whitehall and  
16 international capitals, mine is working with countries  
17 with my appropriate opposite number as a CJO -- in  
18 respect of America this would actually be CentCom, but  
19 other nations had an equivalent officer to me -- and me  
20 working into theatre to do the detailed management of  
21 the UK component of the operations.

22 So within Iraq all UK troops committed to Iraq stand  
23 fast, the SF element, were under my operational command  
24 and a similar context in Afghanistan.

25 Perhaps I will turn to Charles, if he wants to, from

1 his perspective, comment on how he felt the Whitehall  
2 machinery of the Iraq piece was working.

3 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: Just to complete this aspect of  
4 it, which was the relationship between the CJO and  
5 myself, it was an extremely open, easy and effective  
6 one. There was some overlap. There was always meant to  
7 be a little bit of overlap between what the DCDS(C) was  
8 covering and the CJO was covering, we agreed on day one,  
9 when we found ourselves working together, that where we  
10 came across those, we would talk about them, and that  
11 relationship worked fine and it is exactly as Nick has  
12 described it.

13 Yes, I was the military representative of the  
14 Ministry of Defence around the various Whitehall  
15 groupings, of which, I suppose, the main weekly events  
16 were the -- or fortnightly events were the Iraq strategy  
17 groups.

18 These were extraordinarily difficult times. I just  
19 need to preface by saying this, in that we had two major  
20 operations running at the time. So there were always  
21 tensions. I say that in order to say that it would be  
22 quite extraordinary if there were not. We had different  
23 points of view, there were interdepartmental  
24 differences. The purpose of these sessions was to try  
25 to resolve them. I regarded a large part of my time --

1 my job to be about maintaining my links with the other  
2 departments and agencies as well as international  
3 interlocutors, especially the Americans. So I was in  
4 touch with the main, as I say, departments and agencies  
5 weekly or several times a week, apart from the meetings.

6 I think, if I had a comment about whether the system  
7 worked well or not, it would be that, again, for reasons  
8 I understand, we were sucked very often into the  
9 immediate and the short-term and the detailed, as  
10 opposed to the heads-up, look up and out, long-term  
11 strategic direction or motion. I think that came from  
12 the relentless glare of the media, which raised stories  
13 which required reaction. It arose from the natural  
14 interest from Number 10 in seeing evidence of progress,  
15 and so there was, as others have described, a tremendous  
16 appetite for detailed understanding, which was always  
17 likely to be incomplete because it was a messy  
18 complicated picture on the ground.

19 What I think we missed -- all of that had to be  
20 done, but what I think we missed while we were heads  
21 down, handling not always strategic issues in my  
22 opinion, was some area where the business could look up  
23 and out, more strategic, more long-term.

24 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Do you mean it was being micromanaged?

25 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: There wasn't so much a question

1 of exactly micromanagement but there was an awful lot of  
2 inquisitive concern and interest in a great deal of  
3 detail in terms, as William Patey, I think, said, in  
4 terms of attempting to understand exactly what was going  
5 on almost minute by minute.

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Who is this by? Who is driving this  
7 machine?

8 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: The Chairman of the strategy  
9 group was normally Nigel Sheinwald.

10 SIR RODERIC LYNE: At ministerial level, was the  
11 Prime Minister taking direct charge of this throughout  
12 the time you were there?

13 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: The Prime Minister I think  
14 occasionally chaired what were then called the DOP  
15 meetings, which were the ministerial level, regular  
16 discussions about these businesses. Otherwise, they  
17 were chaired by other ministers, the Foreign Secretary,  
18 sometimes the Defence Secretary. I sometimes attended  
19 those meetings purely to provide a military update, be  
20 ready to provide military advice if it was required.  
21 They were quite short meetings dealing with weighty and  
22 major issues.

23 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But who was the lead minister, who was  
24 resolving the inevitable differences of opinion that you  
25 have described between departments?

1 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: I don't think we ever quite got  
2 to the situation that was established for Afghanistan,  
3 where, in the case of Afghanistan, our own Secretary of  
4 State was given a ministerial leading role and there was  
5 much more a sense of a unified ministerial direction  
6 from quite early on.

7 As I recall it, there was no equivalent arrangement  
8 other, of course, than by the Prime Minister himself in  
9 the case of Iraq.

10 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So you are not quite clear who was  
11 consistently in the lead at ministerial level; sometimes  
12 the Prime Minister, sometimes somebody else?

13 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: It depended to an extent on  
14 what the current significant issue was. I mean, if we  
15 were having a tremendous debate and concern about the  
16 nature of transition and the level to which it would be  
17 safe to go or advisable to go, the likely pace of  
18 transition to Iraqi control and suchlike, there was  
19 a strong likelihood that the Secretary of State  
20 for Defence would have been playing a significant role,  
21 and likewise, I did not have a sense, other than in the  
22 person of Prime Minister himself, that there was any  
23 unified ministerial lead overall.

24 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Did you both feel at this stage that the  
25 government had a clear and achievable strategy for Iraq

1           that took account of the fact that there was now an  
2           Iraqi Government in the lead?

3   VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE:  On my side -- I think --

4           I think that the strategy remained as I may have implied  
5           earlier on, relatively consistent across my  
6           period, January 2006 to August 2007 -- or June  
7           or July 2007, in the sense that, from the military point  
8           of view, we had a clear purpose to get to the point  
9           where the conditions were met in the four provinces, to  
10          achieve transition.  So I sensed that our part of this  
11          was fairly clear and we, in the Ministry of Defence  
12          side -- and I always thought this was absolutely correct  
13          myself -- needed to press on with transition for some of  
14          the reasons that we have already discussed.

15          On the broader part, I think there was a fairly  
16          consistent sense of achieving progress in the various  
17          lines of development and -- especially supporting and  
18          advancing Iraqi capabilities.  But inevitably, the sense  
19          of the discussions over these periods was dependent on  
20          events at the time and, as I indicated earlier on, the  
21          mood, the sense of priorities, almost month by month  
22          tended to react to the events that were causing us  
23          trouble on the ground within Iraq.

24   SIR RODERIC LYNE:  Nick, to add to that, I would like to  
25          turn to those priorities.  You made some very

1 interesting remarks about the impact of Afghanistan  
2 earlier when you said that there was a problem needing  
3 to divide eight battle groups, and this came out, if  
4 I understood you rightly, in the direction of wanting  
5 six in Afghanistan and two in Iraq.

6 Now, why was it decided that the priority should lie  
7 in that direction? Who and what drove that decision and  
8 what was the impact of that decision on our ability to  
9 achieve our objectives in Iraq?

10 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: I think everybody with a stake  
11 in this, this complicated situation, where two major  
12 operations were running, clearly had a part in this, in  
13 that no decisions of this kind were taken without  
14 a considerable discussion in the Cabinet Committee  
15 meetings, finally in the Cabinet and in the strategy  
16 groups and in the production of papers in which  
17 obviously everybody had a stake and had the opportunity  
18 to comment.

19 So I mean, it was fundamentally, ultimately,  
20 a government decision with a process that led us to  
21 these judgments. From the Ministry of Defence point of  
22 view, I think you have heard from others, and I would  
23 agree, that the military sense was that, as time  
24 progressed, and for the reasons I have already touched  
25 on in terms of having done what we were likely to be

1       able to do, given the current level of resources that we  
2       were ever likely to be able to achieve in Iraq, and,  
3       therefore, staying on without very good reason in  
4       significant numbers was no longer the right thing to do.

5               There was, meanwhile, a growing sense that in  
6       Afghanistan, we had to get a grip, grab the  
7       initiative, and a recognition that the initial force  
8       levels that we had gone there with were inadequate to  
9       even to a limited extent to gain the initiative in Helmand.  
10       So it certainly became a military view that we needed to  
11       progress with transition in Iraq and shift resource to  
12       Afghanistan.

13   SIR RODERIC LYNE:   Had Iraq become an unpopular war within  
14       the Ministry of Defence by then?   Had people had enough  
15       of it?

16   GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:   I think that perhaps that was an  
17       attendant theme, not necessarily the driving criterion,  
18       to make the sort of the switch out of one and into the  
19       other.   I would echo -- I mean, one of the very good  
20       reasons for separating out, as it were, the CJO from the  
21       Commitments staff in London is that I can therefore  
22       operate at one remove from this sort of whirring  
23       strategic decision-making that goes on.

24   SIR RODERIC LYNE:   But you are the poor guy who has to  
25       decide where to send the helicopters.

1 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: Indeed, and I, as it were,  
2 therefore could submit my advice based purely on what  
3 I perceived to be -- Without sort of embarking on  
4 a lecture on strategic coherence, there's  
5 strategy in the sense of what the policy objectives were  
6 but the military strategy is all about maintaining  
7 a coherent balancing of ends, ways and means.

8 Now, within Iraq there had been -- William hinted at  
9 it, using euphemistic phrases -- some policy compromise  
10 of our ambition in Iraq, but from the perspective of CJO  
11 I could see that within those relatively compromised  
12 ends as to what the Basra legacy might look like, we had  
13 both the means and the ways to deliver those compromised  
14 ends. You know, Basra was not going to look, perhaps,  
15 what once it might have looked like, and if there were  
16 some stresses and strains in delivering the strategy in  
17 Iraq they were more to do with what was the quality of  
18 the legacy, what were the reputational issues of,  
19 frankly, the British armed forces, what was the legacy  
20 issue in respect of our reputation with the Americans?  
21 But those were more issues of reputation and self-worth  
22 than they were of delivery of a strategy. I felt in Iraq,  
23 we could deliver the strategy, with risk, with the means  
24 that were available, but it became relatively quickly  
25 evident that within Afghanistan we were not militarily

1 in a position of strategic coherence. We did not have  
2 the means to deliver on objectives, and, therefore, the  
3 requirement to rebalance, to make us strategically  
4 balanced in Afghanistan. This to me shone  
5 through with absolute shining clarity from this process  
6 that Charles describes - "Nicholas, getting out of  
7 Iraq with reputation intact, with a defensible legacy,  
8 using that sort of force level". and the iterations of  
9 force levels played out during -- It was quite clear to  
10 me, because the imperative coming out of the military  
11 strategic demands of my superior headquarters, was to  
12 rebalance in order to gain strategic coherence in  
13 Afghanistan.

14 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Were the military saying to the  
15 Prime Minister, "Prime Minister, we have got to make  
16 this shift for the reasons you have just described", or  
17 was the Prime Minister and the Cabinet saying to the  
18 military, "Our priorities are (a) and (b). We need to  
19 achieve such and such in Iraq and such and such in  
20 Afghanistan"? Did this come bottom-up or top down and  
21 did the Prime Minister understand fully, did you explain  
22 to him clearly what was meant by some policy compromise?

23 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: My sense of this is that within  
24 a very broad kind of assessment of our strategies in the  
25 two places, that this was a bottom-up process, about the

1           impetus to do this and with the balance of military  
2           effort.

3       GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:  Yes, I -- because I'm at one  
4           step removed -- and the charter of the PJHQ is to give  
5           politically informed military advice, not politically  
6           dodgy or undermined or anything.  So I was aware of  
7           a sense of the politics of this, but had to properly  
8           maintain what I considered proper military advice as to  
9           where the balance of our forces should shift, as I saw  
10          it, in respect of the demands of the two operational  
11          theatres.

12                 It was -- at risk of repeating myself, I could see  
13           a way that we could get to a satisfactory conclusion in  
14           Iraq, leaning into risk, reducing force numbers.  There  
15           was a beneficial dimension to a risk-informed strategy  
16           but the patent requirement to increase the force  
17           levels -- and in Afghanistan was very evident.  One  
18           could slightly run down the rabbit hole of just force  
19           numbers itself.

20                 In many ways -- William couldn't give you  
21           a perfectly good answer -- I don't think that troop  
22           numbers per se were the critical issues in terms of  
23           enabling effective military strategy in both theatres.  
24           It was the strategic and operational enablement of them  
25           through what are rare breed capabilities, strategic

1 lift, ISTAR, aviation, attack helicopters. It was in  
2 those areas where we had -- I would dearly have loved to  
3 have given Richard Shirreff some attack helicopters.  
4 I couldn't. The ones we had -- and it is in those areas  
5 of critical --

6 SIR RODERIC LYNE: Richard Shirreff, just for clarity, being  
7 at this stage the commander of the southern region?

8 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: Sorry. Richard was the  
9 commander of Sinbad, and Richard would have dearly liked  
10 to have been able --

11 SIR RODERIC LYNE: To have more helicopters?

12 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: Correct.

13 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But you had sent them to Afghanistan?

14 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: Yes.

15 SIR RODERIC LYNE: That's part of the policy compromise.  
16 Before I hand over, I would like to be very clear about  
17 the sorts of compromises that we had to end up making in  
18 Basra.

19 We were in a situation in which we are in charge in  
20 that region. There had been lots of reviews of policy  
21 over the year -- well throughout 2006. We had the Basra  
22 security plan, the Better Basra plan and so on. This  
23 was taking place against a background in which security  
24 in Basra was deteriorating and the timelines and the  
25 conditionality that we had set for transition was

1 actually going further away from us, we weren't actually  
2 keeping them on track, and yet you, as the professional  
3 military advisers, were having to say to the government,  
4 "We need to shift the resources to Afghanistan, the need  
5 is greater there. Therefore, we have got to make some  
6 substantial compromises in what we can achieve in Basra  
7 and the quality of the legacy that we leave there".

8 What were those compromises? What was the sort of  
9 extent to which we had to fall below the objectives that  
10 had previously been set for the MND South East?

11 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: If I start from my point of  
12 view in the Ministry of Defence. I think others have  
13 said, if you go back to the original overarching  
14 strategic objectives we had from, I don't know, five  
15 years ago, it was a pretty substantial aspiration and  
16 others have explained, I think, that our realistic sense  
17 of what was going to be achievable got considerably  
18 reduced in real terms over time.

19 That said, Sinbad was a very considerable success.  
20 Yes, in some senses conditions were deteriorating in  
21 Basra, and again it depends on exactly which little bit  
22 of time that you are thinking about in making that  
23 comment. But amongst the things that were achieved out  
24 of Sinbad were a new level of  
25 cooperation between our own forces and the Iraqi army,

1 better Iraqi army and police cooperation, both the  
2 police and the army effectiveness -- Iraqi army  
3 effectiveness were improved, extra equipment was brought  
4 in. There was better -- there was improving support  
5 from the Council and most of the authority within Basra  
6 because they approved of what was being done. Consent  
7 temporarily improved, it had all the time been generally  
8 reducing, and the murder rate went down. By the end, as  
9 Nick has said, the Iraqis were in the lead to an extent  
10 they had not been before.

11 So to imply that as it were, we were in a position  
12 where a mess was getting worse and worse and we were  
13 leaving it in a dire state, bearing in mind that I drop  
14 off awareness of this in June or July 2007, would be  
15 a misrepresentation.

16 SIR RODERIC LYNE: But you said earlier we had got to  
17 a situation where we couldn't do much about it. You  
18 said that a couple of times.

19 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: Absolutely, and not only that  
20 but I very much had the view by the first quarter of  
21 2007 that we were starting to become part of the  
22 focus -- the target, the cause of much of the violence  
23 that was going on in the city.

24 SIR RODERIC LYNE: So we then withdraw to Basra Airport and  
25 we hang around there for a couple of more years unable

1 to do very much, but not able either decently to hand  
2 over in conditions that we regarded as acceptable?

3 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: Perhaps if I take the story up,  
4 because what he is feeding into is very much, as it  
5 were, the maturing understanding of what residual  
6 utility UK forces could be down in Basra.

7 If I go back to when I was talking about the  
8 modelling of the security dynamics: it was becoming very  
9 evident at this time where there were these phrases  
10 being bandied about that we were becoming part of the  
11 problem, not part of the solution and all the rest of  
12 it, that the nature of the violence in Basra was  
13 primarily violence targeted against MNF, Multi-National  
14 Forces, and particularly MNF in the company of Iraqi  
15 security forces. Because our very presence there was  
16 acting as a corrupting influence on Shia loyalties, and  
17 the judgment was emerging that, in actual fact, if  
18 Multi-National Forces came out of Basra, the nature of  
19 the residual violence, because it was intra-Shia, would  
20 be self-limiting violence, would move towards  
21 mutual political accommodation, to the alienation of residual  
22 Persian influences. It took some time, as it were, to  
23 explore this intellectual model. Was that the nature of  
24 the dynamics? During the turn of 2006/2007 and into  
25 2007, this very much became, as it were, a more mature

1 understanding of the nature of what our residual  
2 assistance could be to the residual security and political  
3 problem in Basra, which had to be resolved by the Shia  
4 polity itself.

5 But there were still things --  
6 the red top presentation of this as retreat to the  
7 COB -- there were still entirely useful things that we  
8 could be doing from there. One, which we had to do  
9 because we signed up with the US to do it, was to  
10 continue to do some level of border surveillance and  
11 border protection vis a vis Iranian mendacity and the  
12 import of EFPs and that sort of thing. Of course we  
13 continued to do the training of the Iraqi army, 10 and  
14 14 Divisions and their higher level mentoring and  
15 building up the C2 mechanisms.

16 One of the things that Mohan, who was sent down  
17 there as Prime Minister Maliki's security supremo, said  
18 to us is, "I'm not convinced at what stage I will be  
19 able to move against residual militia pressure with the  
20 ISF, and I know that I need the residual psychological  
21 presence of a significant UK force to hand in order to  
22 give me my moral authority and actual authority over  
23 those militias".

24 Now, the idea that a force in a contingency  
25 operating base is giving a psychological ascendancy to

1 an Iraqi general against militias may well be lost on  
2 the odd private soldier and the odd red top reporter,  
3 but that's not to say that within those who, dare I say,  
4 had thought this through and knew what we were doing  
5 against the strategy of extraction, Iraqi-isation, but  
6 residual presence to do these very important tasks --  
7 that's notwithstanding some of the other tasks of  
8 maintaining coalition cohesion with the Americans and  
9 all that. This was not, as many people have  
10 characterised it in superficial history, some retreat to  
11 a contingency operating base to hang around for a couple  
12 of years.

13 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: Can I come in on that? It was  
14 a difficult time nonetheless.

15 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: Absolutely.

16 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We have heard about the police  
17 station incident of December 2006, which more or less  
18 meant that we couldn't get into deal with the Basra  
19 police. It was just out of bounds for us. So it is one  
20 significant area where we are going backwards at that  
21 time. We have got, I think it is fair to say, that in  
22 the first half of 2007, our casualties are higher than  
23 they have been for some time, which is again another  
24 indication of the overstretch.

25 So is there a sense at this time that we are under

1 unusual pressures, that mentally, ministers', officials'  
2 minds are moving to Afghanistan and away from Iraq and  
3 somehow we are left trying to cope in an increasingly  
4 difficult situation?

5 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: There is inevitably a sense of  
6 that because that was one of the senses that was being  
7 played out in the media, and all I'm trying to do here  
8 is differentiate between the reality as I saw it as  
9 a military commander and what perhaps the media were  
10 presenting.

11 That first period of 2007 -- it was very evident  
12 that we were part of the problem. We were the  
13 recipients of the majority of the security incidents  
14 because, as I was saying, our very presence with ISF  
15 distorted the loyalties of many of the Shia militias,  
16 but the idea that we were driven out is not right. This  
17 was also a time where the rate of our strike operations  
18 against militias, special groups, quad forces, was  
19 probably at an all-time high and there was an element  
20 that we were repositioning on our terms.

21 So again, the popularist view that we were being  
22 bombed out was not right. We were repositioning on our  
23 terms, our levels of strike operations were high, we  
24 were doing it within a maturing intellectual clarity  
25 that that was the right thing to be doing --

1 but with an understanding of residual tasks which we had  
2 to deliver in circumstances where ultimately the  
3 resolution of downtown security would be an Iraqi one--

4 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: While this is going on, the  
5 Americans are adopting a completely different strategy  
6 to us. They are not accepting that they are part of the  
7 problem. They are saying that we are going to be part  
8 of the solution --

9 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: That's why you have got to go  
10 back to an understanding of the variable geometry of the  
11 security dynamics. The Americans were not facing an  
12 intra-Shia struggle for political and economic power.  
13 That is what we faced. That, to our estimation, was  
14 something that was going to be self-reconciling,  
15 self-limiting. They were still opposed by the residual  
16 elements of a significant insurgency that was being --  
17 to which AQI was a catalyst, there were still residual  
18 death -- Shia death squads in Baghdad and the nature of  
19 the security dynamics that they faced in Baghdad and the  
20 north was wholly different.

21 -- It is quite a difficult act to  
22 pull off, that, when you are faced by different security  
23 dynamics, and with different national  
24 pressures in respect of rebalancing forces, how can you  
25 generate, as it were, a common narrative of how this is

1 going? The simple fact is you can't, because it is  
2 outside the attention span of most people to take all  
3 this in.

4 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: Sir Lawrence, could I add just  
5 briefly to that? The first point is that the rate of  
6 casualties in Basra over this period given what  
7 post-Sinbad with the resources available we could hope  
8 further to do was one of the exact reasons why I for one  
9 felt that we needed to reposture, to enable us to do  
10 what we needed to do more of, which was the mentoring  
11 and training and one or two specific military tasks.

12 I think as well, it is a little unrealistic to say  
13 that we were on a completely different strategy to the  
14 Americans, as has been said, I think, throughout, even  
15 through the difficult time, even through the period when  
16 there was a sense of considerable uncertainty about US  
17 strategy while they were making up their minds about the  
18 surge, the overall intention to progress towards  
19 transition and Iraqi control, where you could, remained  
20 the consistent theme.

21 The reason that we had an unfortunate period when  
22 presentationally it looked very much at odds, was that  
23 the timescale by which this was marching along in Basra,  
24 which was post-Sinbad - we had done what the Americans  
25 were doing at a later time - the appearance was given

1           that we were doing opposing things. We weren't. It was  
2           just a matter of sequencing and timescale is the point  
3           I'm trying to make.

4   SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: But there is an interesting shift  
5           here from the end of 2005 -- and much of the evidence we  
6           hear has been a description of Baghdad, as being  
7           a hotbed of insurgency, of civil strife, internecine  
8           quarrels and so on, and a relatively manageable  
9           situation in Basra.

10           Somehow, over the course of 2006, Basra starts to  
11           appear an extremely non-permissive environment, if you  
12           like, for our troops and culminates with the police  
13           station incident. So something has gone wrong over this  
14           period. What's your main explanation as to why, having  
15           been in the position where we could look almost smugly  
16           back at Baghdad and say that our bit was quite  
17           manageable, we are now in this position where we seem to  
18           have a more unmanageable problem?

19   VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: Could I make one point on this,  
20           which is that in all military operations, as everybody  
21           knows, consent is a declining thing. We were foreign  
22           military people on the soil of another country and they  
23           wanted us gone. Consent following the Sinbad was simply  
24           going to inexorably head in the wrong direction, since  
25           we did not have the resources to do substantial hearts

1 and minds activity from within our own UK pot of  
2 capability, as it were. So this was a sort of  
3 inevitable thing to an extent.

4 I mean, my own take on it -- and I accept now that  
5 I'm talking about after my period, but obviously  
6 I watched what happened -- my own take on it was that  
7 although it was a concerning and difficult time as we  
8 made that withdrawal, or step back, I should say, from  
9 bases within the city of Basra, and the Americans were  
10 concerned about it for a period, my sense is that  
11 actually our judgment that that was the right thing to  
12 do has been borne out by subsequent events, because we  
13 were then able, with the forces that we had, to focus on  
14 more training and mentoring and much of the heat went  
15 out of a level of violence which, exactly as Nick has  
16 described, was becoming largely focused on us.

17 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: We are running out of time  
18 obviously. I think there are a lot of issues that we  
19 would still like to discuss with you, but let me just  
20 wrap this up for over this period. The situation that  
21 you have just described is one where we couldn't surge.  
22 The Americans had an option to surge, we no longer had  
23 that option?

24 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: Yes.

25 SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN: So essentially we had very little

1 choice in the matter. It may well have worked out quite  
2 well and the judgment may turn out to have been the  
3 correct one, but basically we had to take it because  
4 there was nothing else that we could really do?

5 VICE ADMIRAL CHARLES STYLE: I said all along -- each time  
6 this has come up I said, "given the resources that we  
7 had available".

8 GEN SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON: Going back to strategic  
9 options. If you have to have a coherence of ends, ways  
10 and means, given the fact that we have limited means,  
11 that was the best strategy for us to adopt. But it  
12 wasn't the strategy of hope, it was a strategy of  
13 conviction that we could do this and it would make sense  
14 to do it.

15 THE CHAIRMAN: Well, it is coming up to 1 o'clock. This has  
16 been an important session. They are all important, but  
17 this has been a particularly significant one. Among  
18 other things, you have given a helpful outline analysis  
19 of a situation of extreme shifting complexity which we,  
20 the Inquiry, need to get a full understanding of. It  
21 has brought out some issues, too, and I think we will  
22 need to reflect on these, and we may well need to take  
23 it further on on another occasion later in the year. Which  
24 said, thank you both very much indeed. That was a very  
25 useful morning, as indeed was the earlier session with

1 William Patey. With that, I will close off this  
2 morning's session.

3 We shall resume again at 2 o'clock with  
4 Simon MacDonald. Thank you all very much.

5 (1.00 pm)

6 (The short adjournment)

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