

SECTION 9.5

JUNE 2006 TO 27 JUNE 2007

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Introduction

1. This Section covers the year leading up to Mr Blair's departure from No.10 in June 2007, and addresses:

- the development of the Basra Security Plan (including Operation SINBAD) and the Better Basra Plan;
- UK planning for withdrawal from Iraq and reinforcement in Afghanistan, and the beginning of transition to Provincial Iraqi Control in the South;
- UK responses to the new US strategy of surging forces into Baghdad and their impact on US/UK relations; and
- the genesis of negotiations with Jaysh al-Mahdi in Basra.

2. This Section does not address:

- the UK contribution to the reconstruction of Iraq and reform of its security sector, covered in Sections 10 and 12 respectively.

3. The Inquiry's conclusions in relation to the events described in this Section can be read in Section 9.8.

June 2006

4. On 1 June, Major General John Cooper, General Officer Commanding Multi-National Division (South-East) (GOC MND(SE)) presented his proposals for the Basra Security Plan to General George Casey, Commander Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF-I).¹

5. Maj Gen Cooper wrote that the plan:

“... will bring together a number of programmes and include a diplomatic focus from Baghdad .. a MOI [Ministry of the Interior] judicial review/inquiry and support for ... search and arrest operations”.²

6. On 2 June, a Cabinet Office official sent Mr Blair an update following his visit to Iraq on 22 May (described in Section 9.4).³

7. In relation to Gen Casey's plan to address security in Baghdad, it said:

“Our initial assessment of the proposals is positive, with the necessary political and military elements woven in.”

8. On Basra, the update said:

“The Consul General, Military, DFID ... in Basra have made joint proposals on delivering a step-change in engagement across all lines of operation. We need

¹ Minute Cooper, 8 June 2006, 'GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 8 June 2006'.

² Minute Cooper, 1 June 2006, 'GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 1 June 2006'.

³ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 2 June 2006, 'Iraq: Follow-up to Your Visit'.

to clarify some of Maliki's proposals during his visit earlier this week (the exact role of the five man committee he has appointed, and what the Basra Security plan Casey will offer to Maliki will look like), but the overall impact was very positive and gives us the central government buy-in that we need. It also gives us the basis for a more confident approach on political outreach to Sadr, combined with a harder line on the Mahdi Army."

9. In a video conference with President Bush on 6 June, Mr Blair said that he thought that the new government had about three months to show that it could make a difference.⁴ He suggested that the lack of experience of delivering plans within the government meant that the US and UK should "shepherd" implementation very closely.

10. On 6 June, Mr Blair had a private meeting with Mr Des Browne, the Defence Secretary, on Iraq and Afghanistan.⁵

11. Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Mr Blair's Foreign Policy Adviser, reported after the meeting that Mr Blair had asked Mr Browne to focus on the situation in Basra in order to:

"... make sure that the political and military strategies were aligned and proceeding together. This required micro-management. We had been slow to grip the situation there, but now needed: to get on top of the gaps in equipment and training for the Iraqi forces; a plan for getting Iraqi forces on to the streets; and a new political dispensation given the interest now being shown by Iraqi national figures."

12. Mr Browne agreed to take on that role, and also to continue to co-ordinate media activity on Iraq, which Mr Blair said needed to be reinvigorated. Mr Blair said that he intended to use the next meeting of the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee's Sub-Committee on Iraq (DOP(I)) to "divvy up Ministerial responsibility for different parts of the Iraq strategy".

The death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi

On 7 June, the leader of Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I), Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was killed by US forces in an airstrike on a house 8km north of Baquba.⁶

Mr Blair relayed reports of his death at the Cabinet meeting the following day.⁷

Briefing supplied to Mr Blair's Private Secretary suggested that the UK "played a leading part in highlighting significant contacts around Zarqawi".⁸

⁴ Letter Banner to Hayes, 6 June 2006, 'Prime Minister's VTC with President Bush, 16 May[sic]: Middle East issues'.

⁵ [Minute Sheinwald to Banner, 8 June 2006, 'Iraq and Afghanistan'](#).

⁶ *BBC News*, 8 June 2006, *Zarqawi killed in Iraq air raid*.

⁷ Cabinet Conclusions, 8 June 2006.

⁸ Letter to Banner, 8 June 2006, 'Death of Zarqawi: [...]'

An initial assessment of the impact of al-Zarqawi's death made shortly after he was killed said that it would bolster the image of the Iraqi Government and have a short term disruptive effect on AQ-I.⁹ But his death was also likely to enhance his iconic status and inspire other extremists.

In a telephone conversation with Prime Minister Maliki on 8 June, Mr Blair described the operation as "a very important moment for Iraq".¹⁰

Over the weeks that followed, AQ-I suffered further losses with the capture of several other senior leaders.¹¹

Documents and IT equipment found after the 7 June airstrike provided key information about AQ-I.¹² Mr Mowaffak al-Rubaie, Iraq's National Security Adviser, was reported to have told a news conference in Baghdad "now we have the upper hand".

General Stanley McChrystal, the US officer who led the operation against al-Zarqawi, wrote in his memoir:

"His death was more than symbolically important. It was a trite reaction among some to point out that there were thousands of men ready to replace Zarqawi – or any leader we removed. It was of course true that the organisation regained a leader ... And yet there were not, in fact, thousands of 'Zarqawis'. He was a peculiar leader. His mix of charisma, brutality, and clear-eyed persistence was never matched by al-Masri or al-Masri's successor."¹³

13. On 8 June, Prime Minister Maliki appointed the final members of his Cabinet: the Ministers for the Interior, Security and Defence.¹⁴ Each had been subject to approval by majority vote in the Council of Representatives. Other ministers had been appointed on 20 May (see Section 9.4).

14. Mr William Patey, the British Ambassador to Iraq, reported that "it is of course good news that the Government has been finalised but the outcome is far from our ideal", with some appointments unlikely to command the broad support for which the UK would have wished.

15. Mr Donald Rumsfeld, the US Defense Secretary, observed that it was "fitting that the completion of the new Iraqi government coincided with his [al-Zarqawi's] death".¹⁵

16. The new government broadly reflected the ethno-sectarian balance of Iraq.¹⁶ It included four women. They were appointed to the Ministries for Housing and

⁹ Minute Dowse to Banner, 8 June 2006, 'Impact of Zarqawi's death'.

¹⁰ Letter Banner to Siddiq, 8 June 2006, 'Iraq: Maliki'.

¹¹ [JIC Assessment, 19 July 2006, 'Iraq: Insurgency, Sectarianism and Violence'](#).

¹² *BBC News*, 15 June 2006, *Al-Qaeda 'coming to end in Iraq'*.

¹³ McChrystal S. *My Share of the Task*. Portfolio/Penguin, 2013.

¹⁴ eGram 22963/06 Baghdad to FCO London, 8 June 2006, 'Iraq: Ministers of Interior, Defence and National Security Appointed'.

¹⁵ DoD News Briefing with Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen Casey from the Pentagon, 22 June 2006.

¹⁶ eGram 19337/06 22 May 2006, 'Iraq: The New Government'.

Construction, the Environment, Women’s Affairs and Human Rights.¹⁷ Six ministers were considered to be Sadrists.

Table 1: Key Cabinet Ministers in the first Maliki government¹⁸

Post	Name	Party
Prime Minister	Mr Nuri al-Maliki	Dawa (Shia)
Deputy PM	Dr Barham Salih	PUK (Kurdish)
Deputy PM	Mr Salam Zaubai	IAF (Sunni)
Defence Minister	Lt Gen Abdul Qadir Obeidi	(Sunni)
Interior Minister	Mr Jawad Bulani	(Shia)
National Security Minister	Mr Shirwan Wail	(Shia)
Oil Minister	Mr Hussain al-Shahristani	(Shia)
Foreign Minister	Mr Hoshiyar Zebari	KDP (Kurdish)
Justice Minister	Mr Hashim al-Shebli	(Sunni)

17. Mr Dominic Asquith, who succeeded Mr Patey as British Ambassador to Iraq in August 2006, told the Inquiry that the delay in agreeing the composition of the Cabinet had a significant impact on Prime Minister Maliki’s performance as a leader.¹⁹ In Mr Asquith’s view, Mr Maliki had never felt confident that he commanded “the loyalty even of those within his own Shia Alliance” and “was always concerned about the risk that other political leaders were about to undermine him”.

18. In mid-June, Prime Minister Maliki formally launched the Baghdad Security Plan.²⁰ Its key elements included:

- achieving broad political engagement, with Prime Minister Maliki and the Minister of the Interior closely involved;
- communication with the local population, including directly by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), to build trust;
- initial operations and checkpoints to demonstrate an integrated Multi-National Force (MNF), Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police Service approach to security, in which Iraqis were seen to be taking the lead;
- increased patrols throughout Baghdad to develop early warning and intelligence, and 24-hour continuous patrolling to deter violence;
- targeted and intelligence-led offensive operations to neutralise insurgents; and

¹⁷ *Associated Press*, 20 May 2006, *List of Iraqi Cabinet Ministers*.

¹⁸ *BBC News*, 22 May 2006, *Who’s who in Iraq’s new cabinet*.

¹⁹ Public hearing, 4 December 2009, page 38.

²⁰ *BBC News*, 14 June 2006, *Iraq implements new security plan*.

- protection for the Iraqi Council of Representatives to ensure the uninterrupted functioning of the Government of Iraq.²¹

19. On 15 June, the UN Security Council reviewed the mandate of the MNF in Iraq and the arrangements for the Development Fund for Iraq, as required by resolution 1546 (2004).²²

20. Mr Hoshiyar Zebari, the Iraqi Foreign Minister, told the Security Council that “contrary to media portrayal, a civil war was not taking place in Iraq” and that the continued presence of the MNF was “critical to attaining the goal of self-sufficiency in defending Iraq and securing peace”.²³

21. Ms Angela Kane, Assistant UN Secretary-General for Political Affairs, said:

“While it may be understandable that, due to their transitory character, previous Governments were unable to take some of the hard decisions required to address the urgent needs of the Iraqi people, the establishment of a constitutionally-elected Government for a full four-year term offers new hope.”

22. The UK Permanent Mission to the UN in New York reported that:

“The meeting achieved our key aim – a straightforward review with the Council agreeing on the need for the MNF presence to continue. At the same time, we may also have made some progress achieving a more positive UN line on the international compact ...”²⁴

23. Cabinet Office officials provided a paper on delivering a step-change in Basra for the meeting of DOP(I) on 15 June.²⁵ The paper stated that:

- An announcement on transition to Iraqi control in Muthanna and Maysan provinces was expected shortly.
- Progress in developing the ISF was “**growing but variable**”, with the police lagging significantly behind the army, including in MND(SE) where the militia links of the police were a “**significant cause for concern**”. The MNF plan, which the MOD was reported as judging to be “**robust**”, anticipated MNF retaining substantial forces in Iraq until 2007 to support the ISF (see Section 12.1).

²¹ [Paper Cabinet Office, 13 June 2006, 'Follow-up to the Prime Minister's visit, including delivering a step-change in Basra'](#).

²² eGram 24620/06 UKMis New York to FCO London, 16 June 2006, 'Iraq: Review of the Multinational Force/DFI/UNAMI Mandates'.

²³ UN Security Council, '5463rd meeting, 15 June 2006' (SC/8751).

²⁴ eGram 24620/06 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 16 June 2006, 'Iraq: Review of the Multinational Force/DFI/UNAMI'.

²⁵ [Paper Cabinet Office, 13 June 2006, 'Follow-up to the Prime Minister's Visit, Including Delivering a Step-Change in Basra'](#).

- The UK was continuing outreach efforts with both Sunni and Shia groups, “**seeking to draw in as many potential strands of opinion as possible** to reduce the military task in tackling the hard core insurgency” and trying to persuade the US to deliver a “**dividend**” for those who enter the political process.
- The UK (primarily DFID) was providing support to a number of governmental structures, but this effort was “**dwarfed by a very large ... often overambitious US programme**” (see Section 10.2).

24. On Basra, the paper reported that officials had been undertaking a “major review of policy” in MND(SE), following concern (shared by the US) that Basra was not on track to meet the proposed transition timelines; that the ability of UK personnel to operate effectively in MND(SE) was seriously constrained by the deteriorating security situation; and that the UK had not done enough to ensure that its legacy in Basra would be a strong contribution to delivering stability and increasing prosperity (see Section 9.4).

25. The work to address those issues was split into four strands:

- political engagement with the Iraqi Government in Baghdad, with local politicians in MND(SE) and with Muqtada al-Sadr; plus efforts by the PRT to support provincial councils’ capacity to deliver quick wins;
- a revised Basra Security Plan, including plans to increase the capacity of the police (through increased mentoring, and the reform of the specialist crime units – see Section 12.1) and improved intelligence on the situation in Basra;
- strengthening the rule of law and governance structures, including securing funding for improved criminal justice facilities (including from US and EU sources); and
- further economic development and reconstruction, in particular through helping Basra to access central government resources and a variety of both short-term and longer-term local environmental and infrastructure projects (see Section 10.2).

26. An annex to the paper described the key elements of the Basra Security Plan. Its purpose was defined as:

“... to remove the immunity and impunity that Governor of Basra’s patronage provides to assassination squads, target the rogue Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) leadership, and target and reform corrupt police agencies.”

27. The objective of the operation was:

“Civil Authority successfully restored, an increasingly capable ISF in the lead and continuing to prosecute operations through a combination of reassurance, deterrence and attrition of insurgents, leading to Provincial Iraqi Control.”

28. At their meeting on 15 June, members of DOP(I) agreed that Mr Browne should take the lead in pulling together a strategy for Basra, with the support of the Cabinet Office and assistance from other departments.²⁶ Mr Benn would monitor developments on the electricity and power supply and Dr Kim Howells, FCO Minister of State for the Middle East, would put forward proposals for supporting accelerated development of the southern oil field.

29. In discussion, a member of DOP(I) suggested that the Cabinet Office paper risked being too optimistic on security prospects, in the light of recent Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) Assessments.

30. The JIC had assessed in May that a strong Sunni insurgency would persist beyond 2006.²⁷ More recently, it had judged that the ISF would need MNF support beyond 2007 (see Section 12.1).²⁸

31. On Sunday 18 June, the Iraqi Ministerial Committee on National Security (MCNS) endorsed the Basra Security Plan and recommended:

- expanding the Basra Security Committee (established by Prime Minister Maliki at the end of May) to include a number of Basrawis;
- appointing a new overall security co-ordinator for Basra; and
- that the Iraqi Ministries of the Interior and Defence should increase the forces available for Basra, even if this was to the detriment of policing and military operations elsewhere.²⁹

32. The Committee also considered whether the Basra Chief of Police and the Commander of the Iraqi Army's 10th Division should be removed from post but had concluded they should remain for the time being.

33. On 16 June, the JIC considered the impact that involvement in Iraq was having on the threat to the UK from international terrorism. It judged that:

“Al Qaida still regards the US as its main enemy and prime target ... In the West, the UK is still Al Qaida's next most important target. But in the UK Al Qaida's intent is combined with capability ... The relationship between the UK and Pakistan has given Al Qaida access and capability ... the majority of identified Islamist extremists in the UK are British South Asians ... Western European nations characterise the threat they face as dominated by North African Islamist extremists. Many are inspired by Al Qaida ... The conflict in Iraq has energised Islamist extremists, even in countries ... that opposed the war and have no military presence there. Iraq has also motivated **Kurdish Islamist extremists** ...”³⁰

²⁶ Minutes, 15 June 2006, DOP(I) meeting.

²⁷ [JIC Assessment, 10 May 2006, 'How is the Sunni Insurgency Evolving?'](#)

²⁸ [JIC Assessment, 9 June 2006, 'The Iraqi Security Forces: Fit for Duty?'](#)

²⁹ Minute Cullen to MA/CJO, 22 June 2006, 'MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 22 June 2006'.

³⁰ JIC Assessment, 16 June 2006, 'Al Qaida in the West: Focused on the UK?'

34. Prime Minister Maliki announced on 18 June that Muthanna would transfer to Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) on 13 July.³¹ There was a lot of work still to be done, including to negotiate the series of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) that would govern MND(SE)'s future support for the Iraqi Security Forces post-transition.³²

35. Three such MOUs were required, between:

- the MNF-I and the Iraqi Government;
- the Iraqi Government and the Governor of Muthanna; and
- the Governor of Muthanna and MND(SE) – this one, in particular, needed to be in place before transition could occur.

36. A key provision in each MOU was definition of the circumstances in which the MNF would re-engage in a province post-PIC.

37. On 21 June the British Embassy Baghdad reported on the first week of the Baghdad Security Plan.³³ There were early signs that the plan was having a practical effect, with a fall in attacks followed by a spike in Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) which again tailed off. It was “not yet clear whether the violence would continue to drop or would settle at a new lower plateau”.

38. Mr Browne visited Iraq from 18 to 22 June, travelling to both Baghdad and Basra and meeting senior Iraqi figures including Prime Minister Maliki and Defence Minister Qadir.³⁴ The purpose of his visit was:

“... to drive the implementation of the new security plan for Basra – to get assurances from key figures in the National Government that they will take ownership of the plan, and to build working relationships with them so we can keep that plan on track.”

39. Mr Browne wrote to Mr Blair whilst in transit to Basra to tell him that the Ministerial Committee on National Security had approved the Basra Security Plan and that Prime Minister Maliki had announced that Muthanna would transition to PIC early. Mr Browne “was able to follow it up with an extensive round of British, Iraqi and world media”.

40. The letter also sounded a note of caution, observing that “we should keep things in perspective, and in particular not expect any immediate troop reductions”. Mr Browne identified a parallel with Afghanistan, based on:

“... a tension between, on the one hand, our growing conviction that reconstruction and better governance must be delivered alongside improved security, rather than

³¹ Minutes, 6 July 2006, DOP(I) meeting.

³² Minute Cullen to MA/CJO, 22 June 2006, ‘MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 22 June 2006’.

³³ eGram 25679/06 Baghdad to FCO London, 21 June 2006, ‘Baghdad Security Plan: First Week Assessment’.

³⁴ Letter Browne to Prime Minister, 22 June 2006, ‘Update on Visit to Iraq’.

coming a few months down the track, and on the other, the difficulties our FCO and DFID representatives face in getting out on to the ground to do this.”

41. On 22 June, Gen Casey commented in a press conference that he was confident that the Iranians, through their covert special operations forces, were providing weapons, IED technology and training to Shia extremist groups in Iraq.³⁵

42. On 25 June, Prime Minister Maliki announced his plan for national reconciliation.³⁶ The 28-point plan included:

- the formation of a National Council for Reconciliation, and a National Dialogue Plan, linked to sub committees at regional and local levels, bringing together political, religious and tribal leaders;
- concerted action against terrorism – including a requirement that all those involved in government must overtly reject terrorism – and mechanisms to prevent the abuse of human rights;
- a review of the de-Ba’athification Commission (see Section 11.1), and compensation for those who had lost their jobs after the fall of the Saddam regime;
- an amnesty for detainees not involved in terrorism or war crimes;
- compensation for the victims of terrorism, for the victims of Saddam Hussein’s regime and for displaced persons (including a commitment to return them to their homes);
- improving public services, including the security forces, enabling them to be ready to take over responsibility for security from the MNF;
- tackling the militias;
- reasserting the authority of elected Iraqi institutions over decisions on Iraq’s sovereignty and the presence of the MNF in Iraq (including negotiations with the MNF to prevent human and civil rights violations during military operations); and
- a nation-wide development programme to tackle unemployment and poverty.

43. On 28 June, Maj Gen Cooper reported that the US military were not supportive of deciding in July when Maysan would transition to PIC.³⁷

44. Maj Gen Cooper also reported that the current Shia government was “highly unlikely to re-commit non-Iraqi forces into any Shia Province after PIC except in the most dire circumstances”.³⁸

³⁵ US Department of Defense News Transcript, 22 June 2006, *DoD News Briefing with Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen Casey from the Pentagon*.

³⁶ *BBC News*, 25 June 2006, *Main points of Iraq’s peace plan*.

³⁷ Minute Cooper, 28 June 2006, ‘GOC MND (SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 28 June 2006’.

³⁸ Minute Cooper, 28 June 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 28 June 2006’.

45. A difference between UK and US opinion on Maysan was discussed at the Iraq Strategy Group on 30 June.³⁹ The record of the meeting said:

“We needed to look again at how we presented our arguments – including the scope for reminding the US of Maliki’s statement that Maysan would transition soon. Nick highlighted the risk that if Dhi Qar went ahead of Maysan there would be a requirement for additional UK forces. The meeting agreed that this was not acceptable, and that we would need to push the US hard in the next few weeks to recognise this and the force of our arguments over Maysan and the Iranian border.”

46. Vice Admiral Charles Style, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Commitments), told the Iraq Strategy Group that appointing the new Basra security chief was “critical to seeing a real difference” but even once that had happened “it would still take 6-9 months to see a significant change in the security situation”.⁴⁰

July 2006

47. On 4 July, Mr Browne wrote to Mr Blair to say that he intended to agree with DOP(I) a range of projects to support a Better Basra Plan, costing £30.7m for the remainder of the financial year, “a relatively small sum given the strategic importance of Basra”.⁴¹

48. The projects would deliver:

- a “new unit to clean up the Basra police from within”;
- on the spot mentoring of the Basra police and the regional prison managers;
- a new unit to fast-track corruption, organised and major crime cases through Basra’s courts;
- more training for judges; and
- witness protection arrangements.

49. Overall, the aim of the programme was to “increase the capacity of the Iraqis to deal with those detained by the Iraqi Security Forces and so avoid the legacy of long-term detention of large numbers”. This work was intended to be combined with “energetic implementation of the Basra Security Plan”. The projects on police reform and reconstruction are considered in Sections 12.1 and 10.2.

³⁹ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 30 June 2006, ‘Iraq Strategy Group’.

⁴⁰ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 30 June 2006, ‘Iraq Strategy Group’.

⁴¹ [Letter Browne to Prime Minister, 4 July 2006 attaching Annex A ‘Background on Additional Basra Work’.](#)

50. On 4 July, Mr Blair told the House of Commons Liaison Committee that UK troops would remain in Iraq:

“As long as the Government there wishes them to be there. I suspect over the next 18 months there will obviously be opportunities to draw down significant numbers of British troops because the capacity of the Iraqi forces will build up.”⁴²

51. When asked about Basra, Mr Blair agreed that some groups:

“... may use the presence of British forces as the excuse [for violence] but that [driving British forces out] is not really their aim. Their aim is to get political and security control of Basra so that they can run Basra rather than have the democratic government run it.”⁴³

52. On 6 July, DOP(I) discussed Mr Browne’s letter to Mr Blair and agreed his proposals in principle.⁴⁴

53. Mrs Margaret Beckett, who had been appointed as Foreign Secretary in May, and Mr Hilary Benn, the International Development Secretary, said that their Iraq budgets were fully committed, but were asked to look again at reprioritising their spending to fund the Better Basra projects.

54. In a phone call with President Bush on 7 July Mr Blair said that the key issue for the Iraqi Government was to work out how to deal with militias: the ISF did not know how to do so.⁴⁵ His view was that the Iraqi Government urgently needed to show they were making a difference on security, in Basra as well as in Baghdad.

55. Maj Gen Cooper reported on 7 July that he had discussed an alternative approach to transition to PIC in Maysan with Gen Casey and General Peter Chiarelli, Commander Multi-National Corps – Iraq (MNC-I).⁴⁶

56. Maj Gen Cooper considered that it was necessary to re-posture UK forces in Maysan, in light of the possibility of having to cover Dhi Qar province once Italian troops had been withdrawn. Maj Gen Cooper believed that re-posturing prior to PIC would, in his view, allow UK forces to “deliver greater effect along the border” and would “send a signal that we were serious about handing back responsibility for security”.

57. In his weekly report on 9 July, Lieutenant General Robert Fry, Senior British Military Representative-Iraq (SBMR-I), described the difference in approach between the US

⁴² House of Commons Liaison Committee, Session 2005-06, Minutes of Evidence 4 July 2006, HC 709-iii, Q419.

⁴³ House of Commons Liaison Committee, Session 2005-06, Minutes of Evidence 4 July 2006, HC 709-iii, Q421-422.

⁴⁴ Minutes, 6 July 2006, DOP(I) meeting.

⁴⁵ Letter Banner to Hayes, 10 July 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s phone call with President Bush, 7 July: Iraq, Afghanistan and MEPP’.

⁴⁶ Minute Cooper, 7 July 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 7 July 2006’.

and UK in assessing the readiness of provinces for PIC.⁴⁷ He observed that the US process was:

“... subject to exhaustive measurement, in contrast to the rather more judgemental criteria we rely upon ... it is what the Americans would regard as the absence of empirical rigour which causes some divergence over the readiness of MND(SE) provinces, particularly Maysan, to transition.

“In successive monthly assessments, MND(SE) has marked Maysan green across all four transitional criteria. A separate Corps-level process has not shared this judgement in the areas of threat assessment and governance, citing an increasing complexity in attacks, cross-border penetration and the JAM sympathies of the provincial governor. As a result, Chiarelli has not felt able to recommend Maysan for PIC; a view shared by Casey, who has reached his own independent judgment and is not simply supporting his subordinate commander. In answer to the supplementary UK question – if not now, then when – both would reply that an equal rhetorical case could be made for some of the intractably difficult areas under US control and vacating the battlespace is not an appropriate response to an increasing cross-border threat. The danger in all this is that, unless we change the terms of engagement, we risk a dialogue of the deaf and a loss of confidence in the integrity of our reporting.”

58. Lt Gen Fry considered that the proposal to re-posture in Maysan before transition to PIC would “allow considerable savings in force levels” and would remove the need to sequence the transition arrangements in Maysan and Dhi Qar around UK force levels. He reported that Gen Casey was “willing to let the proposal run so long as two criteria are satisfied: we retain a handle on JAM intentions, and we create a persistent flank guard effect against the Iranian border”.

59. Mr Blair’s Private Secretary wrote to Mr Browne’s Private Secretary on 10 July to report that the Prime Minister was “very concerned at the recent attack statistics”, particularly the “widely reported sectarian killings” in Baghdad.⁴⁸

60. Mr Blair judged that “overcoming the evident lack of engagement against the militias by the Iraqi government and security forces is a major strategic task”. As well as continuing to press the Iraqi Government to take action, it was important for the UK to “have a clearer view of what action is required, to complement and make up for the shortcomings of the current Baghdad and Basra security plans”.

61. In addition, Mr Blair was concerned that the evidence demonstrated that the Iraqi Security Forces were not as capable as had previously been assessed.

⁴⁷ Minute Fry to PSO/CDS, 9 July 2006, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (217): 9 July 2006’.

⁴⁸ Letter Banner to McNeil, 10 July 2006, ‘Iraq: Security’.

62. Mr Blair's Private Secretary asked for immediate advice from Lt Gen Fry on what action Prime Minister Maliki needed to take, and more detailed advice later that week on how to address the shortcomings of the ISF.

63. Mr Browne's Private Secretary replied the following day, attaching advice from Lt Gen Fry.⁴⁹ He advised that Mr Blair should press Prime Minister Maliki to:

- re-emphasise the theme of national unity;
- carry out "vigorous internal reform" of the Ministry of Interior and sack those engaged in militia activity;
- agree a plan to engage the militia politically and militarily;
- re-vamp the Baghdad Security Plan to create "a localised effect by concentrating force in a specific area" which could then be expanded; and
- tell Muqtada al-Sadr that he must choose between politics and "populist adventurism".

64. Lt Gen Fry advised that in Basra the structure needed to oversee the Security Plan must be established and allowed to act independently, with broad political guidance, to "prevent the over-centralisation of powers" which was open to abuse.

65. By the time Major General Richard Shirreff took over as GOC MND(SE) in mid-July, there had not yet been agreement on the implementation arrangements of the Basra Security Plan.⁵⁰ In particular no overall Iraqi security co-ordinator had been appointed. The Provincial Council, however, had voted to replace the Basra Chief of Police.

66. Lieutenant General Sir Richard Shirreff told the Inquiry that his objective had been to achieve PIC in the four provinces within MND(SE).⁵¹ In order to achieve this, his "overriding preoccupation was to establish security". He explained that, when he arrived there was "effectively no security at all", with movement significantly constrained and "a significant lack of troops on the ground". He continued:

"The result of all that was what I call a cycle of insecurity. No security meant no reconstruction and development. It meant a loss of consent, the militia filled the gap and, effectively, the militia controlled the city. So my objective was to re-establish security in Basra."

67. Lt Gen Shirreff told the Inquiry that his sense had been that the overriding theme in the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ) was accelerated transition and "the gravity of the [security] situation was not fully appreciated".⁵² He concluded that "the focus was to exit rather than achieving adequate success".

⁴⁹ Letter McNeil to Banner, 11 July 2006, 'Iraq: Security' attaching Minute Fry to MA/Secretary of State [MOD], 11 July 2006, 'Iraq: Security'.

⁵⁰ Minute Cooper, 13 July 2006, 'GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 13 July 2006'.

⁵¹ Public hearing, 11 January 2010, pages 2-4.

⁵² Public hearing, 11 January 2010, pages 10-11.

68. On 13 July, at the request of the FCO, the JIC assessed Iran’s involvement and intentions in Iraq.⁵³ The JIC judged:

“Iran has multiple objectives in Iraq and a number of instruments to pursue them. It wants an Iraq that is unified and stable, led by a Shia government which is friendly to Iran and open to Iranian political and commercial influence. It also wants the Multinational Forces (MNF) to leave, and to make life as difficult as possible for them in the meantime, even if this increases instability.”

69. The Assessment stated:

“The Iranian leadership is encouraging stability through its support for reconstruction (it has negotiated a \$1 billion credit line for reconstruction activities) and for the political process ... But at the same time they are increasing instability through support for Shia militias.”

70. The JIC judged that support to militias meant:

“Iran continues to provide military technology and training to Iraqi Shia who it knows will attack the MNF: it does not need to give them specific direction.”

71. Sir John Scarlett, Chairman of the JIC between September 2001 and July 2004, told the Inquiry that the JIC’s assessments of Iran’s involvement in Iraq became “significantly tougher” from September 2004 onwards, “reaching a sort of high point in the summer and autumn of 2006”.⁵⁴

72. Mr Tim Dowse, Chief of the Assessments Staff between November 2003 and May 2009, told the Inquiry that the JIC had “spent a lot of time, from really the very beginning, trying to fathom out what the Iranians were up to”.⁵⁵ He added, “I think we started this whole period with a reluctance to see an Iranian hand.”

73. Mr Dowse did not agree with Mr Blair’s suggestion that Iran was deliberately trying to destabilise Iraq. He told the Inquiry:

“I don’t think we saw evidence that the Iranians regarded Shia-led Iraq as a rival for support in the Shia world.”

74. Mr Dowse reminded the Inquiry that the Iranians had made quite a significant constructive contribution to reconstructing Iraq and were very concerned about the security of their pilgrims travelling to Iraq: “But at the same time they absolutely did not want to have a western military presence there. So ... they saw no contradiction particularly with supporting the JAM.”

⁵³ JIC Assessment, 13 July 2006, ‘Iran: Intentions in Iraq’.

⁵⁴ Private hearing, 10 June 2010, pages 45-46.

⁵⁵ Private hearing, 14 June 2010, pages 60-64.

75. On 13 July, Mrs Beckett told Cabinet that responsibility for security in the province of Muthanna had been handed from British to Iraqi forces that day.⁵⁶

76. Maj Gen Cooper reported that Prime Minister Maliki attended the transfer ceremony, at which he and the Governor had signed an MOU.⁵⁷ Once signed:

“We [UK forces] are now in Operational Overwatch in Muthanna. We will begin the long term monitoring and mentoring of the ISF, continue leadership engagement and maintain situational awareness. I have agreed that we will now have a period of a full week when we will participate in no activities in order to allow the physical reality of PIC to be registered in the province ...”

77. Maj Gen Cooper’s negotiations with the Governor of Muthanna on the MOU had continued right up to the point of transfer, but the Governor’s concerns had eventually been resolved satisfactorily.

78. Shortly after the Muthanna transfer, Lt Gen Fry reported on:

“An interesting week in which a strategic design for coalition disengagement has begun to emerge at the same time as decisions on the tactical reinforcement of the US presence in Baghdad have been made in response to a deteriorating security situation. The casual observer could be forgiven for being confused ...”⁵⁸

79. In a meeting with President Bush in the margins of a G8 summit in St Petersburg on 16 July, Mr Blair said that US plans to surge troops into Baghdad were “important” and described the recent spate of sectarian killings as “horrific”.⁵⁹ It was also important, in his view, for Prime Minister Maliki to empower the ISF to tackle militias.

80. The question of whether Iraq was experiencing, or heading towards, civil war had been widely discussed since the departure of the Coalition Provisional Authority in June 2004.

81. Lt Gen Fry addressed the issue in his 16 July weekly report:

“Is this civil war? Technically no: the institutions of the state are still intact, violence is localised and there are more displaced people in New Orleans than Iraq.⁶⁰ But a 98 percent increase in civilian casualties in the last three months tells its own story ... A general condition exists which is less than civil war, but a localised condition exists in Baghdad, Diyala and parts of Salah ad Din where state institutions have only marginal effect, elements of the security apparatus are complicit in acts of sectarian violence and complex combat operations are taking

⁵⁶ Cabinet Conclusions, 13 July 2006.

⁵⁷ Minute Cooper, 13 July 2006, ‘GOC MND (SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 13 July 2006’.

⁵⁸ Minute Fry to Stirrup, 16 July 2006, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (218): 16 July 2006’.

⁵⁹ Letter Phillipson to Hayes, 16 July 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s meeting with President Bush, St Petersburg, 16 July 2006: Middle East, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Guantanamo’.

⁶⁰ In August 2005, New Orleans had been hit by Hurricane Katrina.

place. Military semantics still offers a refuge, but we must expect the civil war theme to be a running feature of the editorial pages.”⁶¹

82. In Lt Gen Fry’s view, the coalition faced some big decisions about how to address the problems it faced, namely:

- an entrenched Sunni insurgency, with greater links to AQ; and
- increasing sectarian violence which might be partly prompted by Shia extremists seeking to exacerbate Sunni alienation in order to avoid the Shia having to share power.

83. Lt Gen Fry reached two conclusions:

- The point might have been reached where the Global War On Terror and the Iraq campaign were in conflict, as the campaign against AQ-I was indirectly helping achieve Shia political ambitions by further alienating the Sunni community and fuelling their disaffection with the political process.
- There was a need to “rapidly equalise the campaign effect in both communities by deliberate offensive action against the Shia ‘death squads’”.

84. Mr Blair annotated these conclusions – “quite right”.⁶²

85. On 19 July, at the request of the MOD, the JIC examined changes in the nature of violence in Iraq.⁶³

86. The JIC’s first Key Judgement was:

“I. The security situation is growing in complexity. In addition to insurgents, local struggles for political and economic power, sectarian extremists and criminals are all exploiting declining security. Spiralling sectarian violence is the most immediate threat to Iraq’s progress. Deteriorating security is outpacing the government’s ability to respond: violence is at the highest sustained level since April 2003. Most is still in the Sunni heartlands and Baghdad, but it is also increasing in pockets elsewhere (including Basra).”

87. The JIC also judged:

“II. A virulent Sunni Arab nationalist insurgency continues. The Multi-National Forces (MNF) continue to bear the brunt of their attacks. A minority of Sunni insurgents is engaged in talks with the coalition and the Iraqi government, but the commitment of the majority of insurgents to a violent campaign is largely undiminished. Intensifying sectarian violence is strengthening the unwillingness of many to give up their

⁶¹ Minute Fry to PSO/CDS, 16 July 2006, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (218): 16 July 2006’.

⁶² Manuscript comment Blair, on Minute Fry to PSO/CDS, Hybrid, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (218): 16 July 2006’.

⁶³ [JIC Assessment, 19 July 2006, ‘Iraq: Insurgency, Sectarianism and Violence’.](#)

arms. In many cases distinctions between Sunni Arab nationalists and jihadists are now blurred.”

88. The JIC assessed that AQ-I remained the largest single insurgent network. But the impact of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s death had been short-lived. His successor, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, was expected to continue al-Zarqawi’s strategy and tactics:

“... including his campaign of attacks on the Shia to foment a civil war which is starting to get results.”

89. Mr Browne described the Shia violence in southern Iraq to the Inquiry as “a competition for influence and resources” that the UK was clear would need to be resolved by a combination of Iraqi politics and the Iraqi security forces.⁶⁴

90. Mr Browne told the Inquiry that he had invested considerable time drawing the attention of the Iraqi Government to the need to address the problems in the South. Prime Minister Maliki had given an undertaking that he would deal with the situation and deploy the necessary resources but “his machinery of government was not always capable of delivering that, and he had the additional problem ... that the Provincial Council in Basra, at the time ... did not function properly on occasions”.

91. On 20 July, Mr Patey sent a valedictory telegram.⁶⁵ It opened with the summary “Strategic failure in Iraq a distinct possibility but not inevitable.”

92. Mr Patey continued:

“The prospect of a low intensity civil war and de facto division of Iraq is probably more likely at this stage than a successful and sustained transition to a stable democracy ...

“Since the transfer of sovereignty in 2004 we have made considerable progress in developing the political process ... But the process itself has also exposed the sectarian divisions in the country ...

“The current levels of violence are as high as they have ever been and the increasingly bold and sectarian nature of the violence is the most troubling aspect. There is little doubt (and this analysis is shared by most Iraqis) that the precipitate departure of coalition forces from Iraq would lead to open civil war ...”

93. Looking ahead, Mr Patey wrote:

“But the position is not hopeless ... Our strategy must be to get the Iraqis to increasingly take the lead and responsibility. This will produce some uncomfortable moments but in the long run is the only solution ... It should be possible to ensure

⁶⁴ Public hearing, 25 January 2010, pages 11, 13 and 16.

⁶⁵ [eGram 31514/06 Baghdad to FCO London, 20 July 2006, ‘Iraq: Valedictory’.](#)

that the Iraqi Government has a near monopoly of force by the time the coalition withdraws the bulk of our forces ...

“We will through our continued presence over the next few years need to provide the Iraqis with the necessary breathing space to build up their capabilities ... We will need to be careful to avoid the impression that we are ready to take on Shia militias in order to restore Sunni dominance ...

“If we are to avoid a descent into civil war and anarchy then preventing the Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM) from developing into a state within a state, as Hizballah has done in Lebanon, will be a priority ... Our efforts must be in support of a clear Iraqi Government strategy and we should avoid getting into a position where we are seen to be confronting the militias alone.”

94. Mr Patey concluded:

“This is a 5-10 year project and it will be messy and difficult ... The consequences of failure are very high indeed. We need to get the balance right about assuring our friends that we will not abandon them and a credible exit strategy. Too much talk of an early exit could weaken our position.”

95. Commenting on Mr Patey’s telegram, Lt Gen Fry observed:

“I would place the betting on national break-up or democratic transition at closer to evens, but William captures the all to play for atmosphere of the moment.”⁶⁶

96. In Lt Gen Fry’s opinion, although “in technical terms” there was not a civil war, he increasingly suspected that “what is being fought in the Baghdad – Baqubah corridor is a civil war in cameo, with implications which extend well beyond the immediate battlefield ... The battle for Baghdad therefore becomes the battle for Iraq, and maybe more.”

97. In his first weekly report on 21 July, Maj Gen Shirreff assessed: “I cannot see how, given the level of attacks against coalition forces, we can claim that Maysan is green ... in my view it is at best yellow.”⁶⁷ He judged:

“The only way we will get to green is by removing the problem, which means extracting ourselves as quickly as possible from Camp Abu Naji which acts as nothing more than a tethered goat for attacks out of al-Amara. I do not intend to occupy Camp Sparrowhawk, an idea whose time has passed and another tethered goat in the making. I will retain a presence in Maysan but, instead, focus on the key issues: disruption and interdiction on the border, while, at the same time, continuing the SSR [Security Sector Reform] effort to get the Province to green.”

⁶⁶ Minute Fry to PSO/CDS, 23 July 2006, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (219): 23 July 2006’.

⁶⁷ Minute Shirreff, 21 July 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 21 July 2006’.

98. Maj Gen Shirreff also set out his initial reflections on the situation facing him. He wrote:

“The issue in Basra is the lack of security and until we establish this there can be no PIC. We can only generate freedom of movement by mounting specific operations, often up to company level, and we are effectively fixed by the lack of concentrated force. The lack of security means that we cannot conduct the SSR needed to transform the police, nor apply the economic inducements needed to isolate the militants from the majority of militiamen who are only there because the militia can pay them. Thus the enemy, militant JAM and the death squads linked to the Basra police ... are able to operate with relative impunity ...

“In my view, the only way we will achieve mission success is by winning the battle for Basra and defeating militant JAM and the death squads (whether by capturing, or, if necessary, by killing them in accordance with our ROE [Rules of Engagement]). But we must be clever about it. A blunt, solely kinetic approach risks getting sucked into a series of running tactical battles against JAM that will get us nowhere. We must isolate militant JAM from mainstream JAM and build the intelligence picture in order to target them and the death squads connected to the police in Basra. The key to this is energetic and sustained effort along the governance and economic lines of operation, both of which remain inadequate ... (the comprehensive approach did not exist). Progress on these lines is essential to create and maintain tolerance for our operations in Basra. It will also underwrite success on the security line of operation. There has been plenty of planning but we need to make things happen.”

99. Maj Gen Shirreff reported that he had had some preliminary encouraging discussions about his proposed approach with Major General Latif, the commander of the Iraqi Army’s 10th Division, based in Basra. However, it would be fundamental to ensure that, behind any operation, there was political will in Baghdad. Maj Gen Shirreff undertook to work closely with Mr Patey and the MNF commanders in Baghdad “to ensure that we carry Maliki with us”.

100. Prime Minister Maliki visited London on 24 July, before travelling on to the US.⁶⁸

101. A telegram from Mr Patey reported:

“He [Maliki] told me that he would focus during his visit on security and the economy, as well as cementing long-term bilateral relations. He said he needed Iraqi forces that can take on the terrorists.”

102. Prime Minister Maliki visited No.10 for a bilateral meeting with Mr Blair followed by wider talks.⁶⁹ He told Mr Blair that he was “trying hard to find a way forward with the

⁶⁸ eGram 31442/06 Baghdad to FCO London, 19 July 2006, ‘Iraq: Maliki’s Visit to UK: Scene-Setter’.

⁶⁹ Letter Phillipson to Siddiq, 25 July 2006, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Meeting with Maliki, 24 July’.

Sadrists and the Sunni insurgents”. Mr Blair “urged him to set out a plan that made clear what they needed to do, and by when”.

103. On Baghdad:

“... Maliki said he was considering a one month amnesty for the militia elements. After that there would be no compromise, and he would give the ISF clear authority to deal with those who continued to defy the Government. The Prime Minister welcomed this – action had to be taken against the death squads, and a clear political signal given to the ISF that they should go after them with all necessary means.”

104. Prime Minister Maliki said that he was committed to dealing with Basra’s problems:

“The committee he had established to take forward the security plan was reporting directly to him, and he denied that it was sectarian in its approach. He emphasises the importance of strengthening the ISF so that arrests were made by Iraqi, not British, forces. But he also commented that the police force was hopelessly corrupt.”

105. Mr Blair discussed Iraq briefly with President Bush on 26 July, and exchanged reports on their recent meetings with Prime Minister Maliki, who had visited both London and Washington that week.⁷⁰ Mr Blair said he had made it clear to Prime Minister Maliki that he must tackle the death squads operating in Baghdad.

106. On 26 July, the JIC considered how the Sadrist militia, Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), was likely to react to pressure.⁷¹

107. The JIC’s Key Judgements were:

“I. Jaysh al-Mahdi is not a monolithic or disciplined organisation. Some elements are responsible for the worst Shia sectarian atrocities. Limited and targeted detention operations against the perpetrators are militarily achievable and would be locally disruptive. They would have a temporary impact on the overall scale of sectarian violence.

“II. Any perception that a wider assault on JAM had begun would be likely to provoke fierce resistance. Muqtada al-Sadr’s reaction even to further limited arrests is unpredictable ... If he felt personally threatened he might order a return to large-scale violence.

“III. Al-Sadr’s reponse might be constrained if robust action was led by the Iraqi Government and security forces (ISF). But even limited detentions will need unequivocal public support from Prime Minister Maliki, key government ministers and other senior Shia figures. Maliki’s commitment to achieving the necessary

⁷⁰ Letter Phillipson to Hayes, 26 July 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s Phone Call with President Bush, 26 July: Iraq, Middle East’.

⁷¹ [JIC Assessment, 26 July 2006, ‘Iraq: How will Jaysh al-Mahdi React to Pressure?’](#)

backing is uncertain. The willingness and ability of the ISF to take on the JAM is also in doubt.”

108. The JIC assessed that the strength of JAM was uncertain. MNF estimates placed it at 10,000 active supporters plus 20,000 sympathisers who could be mobilised rapidly. Capabilities varied.

109. On 27 July, the Iraq Policy Unit (IPU) responded to Mr Patey’s valedictory telegram:

“We agree that, in the face of the challenges you describe, our best course is to hold our nerve and stick broadly to our current strategy. We should resist the argument that the right response to the current difficulties is to plan to prolong our military presence. To do so would only entrench the dependency culture we are working to wean Iraq off, and rob us of an acceptable exit strategy.”⁷²

110. On 27 July, the Iraq Strategy Group (ISG) reflected on reporting from Baghdad, and its implications for the existing strategy.⁷³ The Group agreed that, although success or failure in Baghdad would be critical to overall campaign success in Iraq and was therefore the coalition’s highest priority, the “best way for the UK to contribute to the wider military campaign was to continue to focus our limited resources on MND(SE), in particular, on Basra”.

111. But in Basra:

“The extent to which ... the Iraqi Government would allow us to be robust was a concern.”

112. The ISG agreed that the UK should:

“... press the Iraqis and US to maintain momentum of security transition ... More broadly, we should firmly resist any US suggestion ... that the current problems meant that we should put more resources into Iraq, and plan to stay longer. Sending this message risked perpetuating the current Iraqi dependency culture, and robbing us of any perspective⁷⁴ of military withdrawal in an acceptable timeframe. We recognised, however, that the success of this strategy would depend entirely on the readiness of the Iraqi security forces to take over the job. We would need to make a critical judgement on this in the autumn.”

113. Mr Martin Dinham, DFID Director, Europe, Middle East and the Americas, proposed that the UK should focus its future support to Iraq on central government – in particular on budgetary management and critical economic reform – as the security situation

⁷² eGram 32790/06 FCO London to Baghdad, 27 July 2006, ‘Iraq: Reply to your Valedictory’.

⁷³ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 27 July 2006, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 27 July’.

⁷⁴ The Inquiry believes that this is a drafting error and should read ‘prospect’.

meant that undertaking major new infrastructure projects had become impossible. The ISG agreed that this was:

“... an entirely sound approach, but noted the large gap between what we planned to offer and Iraqi expectations. This would need careful management.”

114. Mr Blair’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs told Mr Blair on 27 July that the US would be deploying an additional 3,500 troops to Baghdad, to help deal with the deteriorating security situation.⁷⁵ An additional 4,500 Iraqi troops would also be deployed. The Private Secretary observed: “We face a similar battle in Basra, of course.”

115. Mr Blair visited Washington on 28 July for talks with President Bush.⁷⁶

116. In discussion, Mr Blair said that he had given a very strong message to the Iraqi Government on the need to deal with militias. He welcomed a planned US strategy for engagement with the Shia community and observed that it was an “obvious problem” that Sunni outreach would give rise to problems with the Shia.

117. On 30 July, Gen Casey gave approval for the UK’s re-posturing plans in Maysan.⁷⁷

Iran’s enrichment programme

In his State of the Union speech of January 2002, President Bush had described Iran as one member of the “axis of evil”.⁷⁸

In June 2003, inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) concluded that Iran had failed to meet obligations under the Agreement between Iran and the IAEA for the Application of Safeguards in connection with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1974.⁷⁹

After several suspensions of enrichment-related activities and unsuccessful negotiations for a permanent solution, in April 2006 Iran announced that it had enriched uranium for the first time.⁸⁰

On 31 July, resolution 1696 (2006) was adopted by the Security Council, the first of five over the 2006-2008 period.⁸¹ It imposed sanctions on Iran because of its continuing enrichment programme and failure to co-operate fully with the IAEA.

⁷⁵ Minute Phillipson to Prime Minister, 27 July 2006, ‘Visit to Washington, 28 July’.

⁷⁶ Letter Phillipson to Hayes, 28 July 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s talks with President Bush, 28 July: Middle East issues and Afghanistan’.

⁷⁷ Minute Shirreff, 3 August 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 3 August 2006’.

⁷⁸ *The Washington Post*, 29 January 2002, *Text of President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address*.

⁷⁹ IAEA, 6 June 2003, *Implementation of the NPT safeguards agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (GOV/2003/40)9.

⁸⁰ Arms Control Association, January 2016, *Timeline of Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran*.

⁸¹ UN Security Council Resolution 1696 (2006).

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118. At a meeting of the Chiefs of Staff on 2 August, Lieutenant General Nicholas Houghton, Chief of Joint Operations, asked Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, Chief of the Defence Staff, for direction on two particular issues:

- the extent to which US capabilities could be used in MND(SE) in order to provide surge capacity for Operation SALAMANCA (the name of the operation to implement the military elements of the Basra Security Plan); and
- the possibility of deployment of UK forces outside MND(SE), specifically a deployment to Multi-National Division (Centre-South) to support the US who were “taking risk in CS to deliver the Baghdad Security Plan”.⁸²

119. ACM Stirrup directed that it was acceptable for the UK to make use of US enablers, such as aviation in MND(SE) but that, in general, commitments in MND(SE) were to be met by existing MND(SE) personnel (including contractors) and any shortfalls were to be identified and considered appropriately.

120. ACM Stirrup also directed that the deployment of UK troops to MND(CS):

“... crossed a clear policy ‘red line’ and seemed counter-intuitive, given that consideration was also being given to obtaining US forces for MND(SE). The UK needed to draw down its force levels as soon as practicable, both in MND(SE) and elsewhere.”

121. On 4 August, a Current Intelligence Group (CIG) considered the potential threat to UK forces in Iraq in the context of the Israel/Lebanon crisis, and judged that:

“... Shia frustration with Multinational Forces (MNF) has increased significantly since the first part of the year. This is likely to be manifested in violent demonstrations against MNF. Against this background, any anti-MNF attacks prompted by perceived US or UK support for Israel’s actions in Lebanon will be difficult to distinguish from the wider existing threat ...”⁸³

The 2006 Lebanon War

The 2006 Lebanon War began with the deaths of eight Israeli soldiers, and the abduction of a further two, in a cross-border Hizballah ambush.⁸⁴ This led to Israeli attacks, using air strikes and artillery, against a range of targets in Lebanon.

In response, Hizballah fired rockets into northern Israel. There was also heavy fighting in southern Lebanon following an Israeli invasion.

⁸² Minutes, 2 August 2006, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

⁸³ CIG Assessment, 4 August 2006, ‘Israel/Lebanon Crisis: Threat to UK forces in Iraq and Afghanistan’.

⁸⁴ *BBC News*, 6 May 2008, *2006: Lebanon War*.

On 11 August, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 1701 which provided a basis for ending the conflict.⁸⁵

The BBC put the numbers killed during the conflict at:

- 1,109 Lebanese civilians and 28 soldiers; and
- 43 Israeli civilians and 116 soldiers.⁸⁶

An unknown number of Hizballah fighters (estimated to be between 250 and 530) were also killed.

In a press conference with President Bush on 28 July, Mr Blair blamed Hizballah for provoking the crisis.⁸⁷

In his memoir, Mr Blair described the war as part of the “wider struggle between the strain of religious extremism in Islam and the rest of us”.⁸⁸ For that reason, he said, “If I had condemned Israel, it would have been more than dishonest; it would have undermined the world view I had come to hold passionately.”

122. On 6 August, Lt Gen Fry suggested that Israeli military action in Lebanon was having an impact in Iraq:

“... particularly in terms of a collective Shia identity and the hardening of confessional boundaries ... What is clear, though, is that moderation is a difficult position to defend in an increasingly febrile atmosphere ... If the US can be labelled with a vicarious responsibility for Israeli action, the position of the radical Shia will be strengthened, with clear implications for both tolerance of a coalition presence and the process of reconciliation.”⁸⁹

123. Lt Gen Fry also suggested that the security situation might be improving – or at least giving the superficial appearance of improvement, with the further implementation of the Baghdad Security Plan “but it is a crisis deferred rather than defused and it has the potential to return again after Ramadan in a more virulent form”.

124. Maj Gen Shirreff advised the Governor of Maysan of the UK’s re-posturing plans on 9 August.⁹⁰

125. The Governor was:

“... genuinely surprised, but understood the opportunities it offers. He is clear that it is not a withdrawal and that I will retain a presence with a particular focus on the Border.”

⁸⁵ UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006).

⁸⁶ *BBC News*, 31 August 2006, *Middle East Crisis: Facts and Figures*.

⁸⁷ The White House, 28 July 2006, *President Bush and Prime Minister Blair of the United Kingdom Participate in Press Availability*.

⁸⁸ Blair T. *A Journey*. Hutchinson, 2010.

⁸⁹ Minute Fry to PSO/CDS, 6 August 2006, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (221): 6 August 2006’.

⁹⁰ Minute Shirreff, 10 August 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 10 August 2006’.

126. Maj Gen Shirreff also reported on 10 August that Maj Gen Hamadi had been appointed as the security co-ordinator for Basra and had been given appropriate authority over the ISF. Maj Gen Shirreff considered that there were “two key prerequisites” to success for Op SALAMANCA:

- delivering “a number of niche capabilities”, about which he had submitted his preliminary analysis to PJHQ; and
- getting Iraqi policing and military buy-in, which, in his view, was likely to be the more difficult.

127. Maj Gen Shirreff wrote:

“Fundamental to my concept is the variable application (depending on the district of the City) of J3 (operations – kinetic if necessary), J7 (SSR) and J9 (the integration of short, medium and long term projects) to ensure that the people of Basra perceive that the situation is getting better; very much the comprehensive approach. My aim is to colour Basra green by district in order to get PIC.”

The House of Commons Defence Committee’s Report

The House of Commons Select Committee on Defence published a report on 10 August that focused on issues raised with Committee members by Service Personnel when they visited Iraq in June 2006.⁹¹ The principal areas of concern were the security situation in MND(SE) and the continuing need for the deployment of UK Armed Forces; shortcomings in the provision and suitability of equipment (see Section 14.1); and the hardships and inconveniences endured by troops (see Section 16.1).

The Committee recognised that the security situation in MND(SE) was more benign than elsewhere in Iraq. Transition to PIC in Muthanna was a positive step although the key test would be achieving the same in Basra, where there were “significant obstacles”. It expressed concern at the recent increase in violence in the South East due to local political struggles for power; and about the differing assessments that it had been given about the extent to which IEDs were being smuggled into Iraq from Iran.

The Committee observed that Security Sector Reform (see Section 12.1) would be crucial to drawdown and to the eventual withdrawal of UK troops from Iraq. There remained serious challenges, especially with the Iraqi police. It also considered that the future stability of Iraq would depend on reconstruction of the economy and suggested that the Government should consider whether there should be an injection of additional funding to assist the Basra Provincial Reconstruction Team.

The Government’s response, issued in October 2006, emphasised that the role of MNF, including UK, troops was to “hold the security ring” pending the development of ISF

⁹¹ Thirteenth Report from the House of Commons Defence Committee, Session 2005-2006, *UK Operations in Iraq*, HC1241.

capability.⁹² It endorsed the Committee's opinion that the Iraqi Government in Baghdad should maintain its interest in Basra and the wider region.

On border security the Government response advised that the Government of Iraq had recently pressed the Iranian Government to cut any links with armed groups operating in Iraq and to do more to improve border security and fight terrorism. UK forces were training the Iraqi Department of Border Enforcement in Maysan province, which was providing a visible presence on known smuggling routes. The UK was encouraging Iraqi responsibility for maritime security, including deterrence and disruption of piracy, smuggling and terrorist activity. Iraqi forces were supported in this role by a significant coalition presence, and were increasingly operating in collaboration with their Kuwaiti partners.

128. On 23 August, Maj Gen Shirreff reported that:

“... the redeployment of the Maysan Battlegroup is now complete and CAN [Camp Abu Naji], the focus of so much fighting over the last three years, is now closed and handed over to the IA [Iraqi Army]. This has been a demanding and well-executed operation and considerable credit is due to those involved. The final convoy returns to SLB [Shaiba Logistics Base] on the evening of 24 August.”⁹³

129. Maj Gen Shirreff reported that he had briefed Maj Gen Hamadi on Op SALAMANCA, emphasising that “we are implementing the Basra Security plan as agreed by Prime Minister Maliki rather than anything new or different”. Maj Gen Hamadi had “bought in” to the plan.

130. Lt Gen Shirreff told the Inquiry that he also had to get the approval of the Iraqi authorities in Baghdad, which he described as “a very lengthy, rather tortuous process”.⁹⁴ Once this approval was obtained, Gen Casey offered the UK a battalion from his Corps operational reserve.⁹⁵

131. Lt Gen Shirreff told the Inquiry that “the idea of American troops on the streets of Basra did not go down particularly well in London”, and no US troops were involved. The US did, however, provide some surveillance assets, and significant amounts of funding – by the end of the operation US\$80m had been spent.

⁹² Twelfth Special Report from the House of Commons Defence Committee, Session 2005-2006, *UK Operations in Iraq: Government Response to the Committee's Thirteenth Report of Session 2005-06*, HC 1603.

⁹³ Minute Shirreff, 23 August 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 23 August 2006’.

⁹⁴ Public hearing, 11 January 2010, page 17.

⁹⁵ Public hearing, 11 January 2010, page 16.

132. On 23 August, at the request of the Iraq Senior Officials Group, the JIC looked specifically at the threat posed by militias in Iraq, their popular support and the prospects for disarmament, de-mobilisation and reintegration.⁹⁶ It judged:

“Violence in Iraq is part of a vicious cycle: deteriorating security has led to a proliferation of militias, in turn fuelling further violence. The threat from these armed groups is multi-dimensional. The scale is difficult to judge ... Many are sectarian based ... and are competing with the Iraqi state’s security forces to provide security and protection for their own communities ... Some elements are engaged in violent attacks against their political and sectarian opponents and coalition forces; others are also involved in criminality ... Weapons are readily available.

“Most Iraqi political parties across the sectarian spectrum maintain a militia of some sort. Some, including the Kurdish Peshmerga, pose no immediate military threat to the Multinational Forces (MNF) or Iraqi internal stability ... But elements of Muqtada al-Sadr’s Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) are driving sectarian violence and attacking the MNF. In some cases, the distinction between the militias and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) is blurred.”

133. The Assessment included a table listing the size of the main militias in Iraq. The JIC judged that the largest group was the Kurdish Peshmerga with 80,000 – 90,000 members, followed by the Badr Corps with 10,000 – 13,000 members and JAM with 10,000 members.

134. The JIC assessed:

“Iraqi political commitment for more vigorous action – against JAM in particular – is uncertain ... We judge Maliki is ... unable to confront the militias, fearing a violent backlash that would threaten the break-up of the Shia political coalition (the UIA). We continue to judge that any perception among JAM that a widespread assault against them had begun, particularly if fronted by the MNF, would provoke fierce resistance. It would also increase Shia hostility to the coalition: the inability of the MNF and ISF to protect them against Sunni extremists has meant that many Shia regard JAM as their defenders, particularly in mixed areas.”

135. On 24 August, advice on Op SALAMANCA, including a request for approval of a temporary uplift of 360 troops, was sent to Mr Browne.⁹⁷

136. The advice explained that the operation:

- Is a plan to improve Basra through operations, high impact reconstruction and SSR commencing in mid-September and lasting for up to six months;

⁹⁶ [JIC Assessment, 23 August 2006, ‘Iraq: The Problem with Militias’.](#)

⁹⁷ Minute Burke-Davies to APS/Secretary of State [MOD], 24 August 2006, ‘Iraq: Op SALAMANCA’.

- Is intended to be closely co-ordinated with developmental effort (Better Basra) and assist the implementation of the Iraqi Basra Security Plan, will have a strong and visible Iraqi face and requires strong Iraqi political support;
- Assumes no presence of high-visibility US assets, though may seek assistance with intelligence gathering;
- Requires an uplift in personnel for up to four months ...”

137. The advice gave a broad outline of the plan:

“The city is divided into segments characterised by the level of consent for MNF and ISF. Taking each segment in turn a security pulse is applied for up to 48 hours, which may include increased patrolling by ISF and MNF, car bans and curfews, and may be accompanied by surgical detention operations against key targets. The follow on activity focuses on SSR of the IPS and DBE [Department of Border Enforcement], and localised reconstruction using Iraqi contractors and lasts for about 30 days, during which security is provided by an IA [Iraqi Army] framework operation ...

“A key ingredient in the operation will be PM Maliki’s support for operations against rogue elements of the JAM. To this end, Secretary of State is requested to discuss this point with Maliki during his visit, highlighting the need for his concurrence and active support, despite the potential local backlash.”

138. Mr Browne deferred his decision on the uplift of troops until after he had been updated during his visit to Iraq.⁹⁸

139. Mr Browne visited Baghdad from 27 to 29 August and then travelled to Basra.⁹⁹ In Baghdad, “interlocutors detected an improvement in Basra security and the role of MND(SE) in achieving this”. The British Embassy Baghdad observed “the note of optimism, albeit cautious ... was striking. It reflects the early successes of the BdSP [Baghdad Security Plan] and a sense that the plan mapped out is achievable.”

140. Mr Browne met the Defence and Interior Ministers and Prime Minister Maliki, who “expressed delight” when talked through the projects MND(SE) was about to launch and confirmed that Maj Gen Hamadi reported directly to him and was not subordinate to the Governor of Basra.

141. Lt Gen Fry’s tour as SBMR-I concluded at the end of August.¹⁰⁰ His end of tour report made clear the challenges and risks that lay ahead and reflected on progress made since 2003:

“Hubris and nemesis in the early part of the US campaign, but they now have a firm grip on COIN [counter-insurgency] operations under Casey’s leadership. MND(SE) in good shape though complications may arise as UK forces reduce and concentrate

⁹⁸ Letter Beadle to Burke-Davies, 5 September 2006, ‘Iraq: Op Salamanca’.

⁹⁹ eGram 37962/06 Baghdad to FCO London, 31 August 2006, ‘Iraq: Visit by Defence Minister’.

¹⁰⁰ [Minute Fry to PSO/CDS, 28 August 2006, ‘SBMR-I End of Tour Report’.](#)

on Basra, probably in mid-2007. The immature ISF is being pushed into the lead when it may not be ready; we are playing for high stakes if it fails. The Maliki government is less than a band of brothers, but it's what we've got and it deserves our support. Violence reached a crescendo in July before decisive US intervention; the level of sectarian ambition may be changing as the Shia are tempted to think they can win. Casey regards the battle for Baghdad as the battle for Iraq and identifies the period to the end of the year as decisive."

142. Of the situation in MND(SE), Lt Gen Fry observed that, PIC in Maysan and the reduction of troop levels in Basra by mid-2007:

"... may mark the beginning of the most difficult phase of the campaign as we will be required to maintain operational overwatch across a large area, for which we will have little tactical feel, for an unspecified period and against an uncertain political backdrop. At the same time, we will have to deliver a recalcitrant Basra Province to PIC with a limited force confronting, potentially, a series of concurrent liabilities within the extended AOR [Area of Responsibility]."

143. Lt Gen Fry considered that a key political priority was for Prime Minister Maliki to begin taking forward legislation to resolve the issues that were set aside in the drafting of the Constitution.

144. Those issues were "the most divisive in Iraqi politics and have the capacity to bring about sectarian political confrontation; with that comes the risk of another round of inter-confessional violence". There was a "very ambitious timetable" for resolving them before a referendum in the spring due to "an American ambition to test the capacity of immature Iraqi institutions by pushing them aggressively forward".

145. In an addendum to his main post-tour report, Lt Gen Fry reported that "Sunni engagement is back on", something he attributed to the success of the Baghdad Security Plan, and that there were plans to develop "JAM engagement" as part of the final stages of that Plan.¹⁰¹

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146. On 1 September, Mr Browne's Private Secretary wrote to Mr Blair's Private Secretary that Mr Browne had approved the additional troops requested for Op SALAMANCA because he had "judged that the likely impact of a short term extension of an increased troop presence is offset by the need for momentum for the projects that will make a visible impact in the city".¹⁰²

147. As Parliament was not sitting, Mr Browne intended to write to Opposition spokesmen directly with a copy of his statement on the uplift in numbers.

¹⁰¹ Minute Fry to PSO/CDS, 3 September 2006, 'SBMR-I: Addendum to End of Tour Report'.

¹⁰² Letter Beadle to Banner, 1 September 2006, 'Iraq: troop levels in support of Op. SALAMANCA'.

148. Mr Browne’s statement was published when Parliament returned on 11 September. It confirmed an uplift of 360 personnel and went on to say:

“This is a critical period for the Iraqi people and their Government. There is an opportunity to improve significantly the security situation in Basra City – building on, and reinforcing, recent progress in Baghdad. Improved security in Basra will create the conditions for the important civil development work being led by the UK’s Provincial Reconstruction Team. Therefore I have agreed that the deployment of troops from the Theatre Reserve Battalion, while strictly time limited, should on this occasion be brought forward and extended by a short period. In addition, I have also authorised the deployment of Royal Engineers to assist with reconstruction and countering the threat from improvised explosive devices, a Royal Marine boat troop to assist in tightening security on the Shatt Al Arab waterway, and a troop of Royal Military Police to augment our training of the Iraqi Police.

“We ask our servicemen and women to discharge difficult and dangerous tasks. But over the next few months, through security operations and civil development projects, we have a key opportunity to make improvements to the lives of the people of Basra and lay the foundations for the departure, once the conditions are right, of coalition forces from front line roles in Iraq.”¹⁰³

149. Lt Gen Fry’s successor, Lieutenant General Graeme Lamb, took up post as SBMR-I in early September. He had previously served as the first GOC MND(SE) in 2003 (see Section 9.2).

150. In his first weekly report, Lt Gen Lamb said Iraq was “damaged not broken” and he was “cautiously optimistic”.¹⁰⁴ He considered it necessary to recalibrate UK expectations:

“The [Iraqi] Government is woefully immature in governance (albeit a UK Government would be in a pretty challenging position to achieve the same results that the coalition is demanding from Maliki) but the individuals are sophisticated manipulators of people, ideas, facts and are ultimately this country’s future ...

“The Baghdad Security Plan (BSP) appears to remain on track, albeit early days yet ... Too soon to elaborate but two early observations on the military piece:

- a. **Sadr City.** The timing of the entry to Sadr City has yet to be finalised, but the sense is that without it the BSP falls short of a meaningful conclusion ... rogue elements of the Sadr movement (not necessarily Sadr himself) are in my view a ‘clear and present danger’ to this nation and reconciliation.
- b. **Non-security Elements.** Co-ordination of the Iraqi ministries to deliver the non-security elements that need to follow seamlessly from the MNC-I activity is occasional, and on face value lacklustre. The work of my predecessors has

¹⁰³ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 11 September 2006, column 111WS.

¹⁰⁴ [Minute Lamb to CDS, 10 September 2006, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report \(226\) 10 Sep 06’.](#)

taken this almost unmanageable problem forward in leaps and bounds, but there is still some considerable way to go, and progress will not be eloquent, nor I sense Western in its final form ...”

151. Lt Gen Lamb concluded his note:

“Final impression – more successful than we might imagine, more complex than we can imagine, and an outcome likely to be more Iraqi than we have imagined.”

152. On 12 September, Mr Browne wrote to Mrs Beckett with a report of his visit to Iraq.¹⁰⁵ He considered that Op SALAMANCA “should create an opportunity for other government departments to deliver on the medium-term and capacity-building initiatives ... we must make sure there is the closest possible linkage between establishing enduring security with an Iraqi face and delivering benefit to the Basrawis”.

153. On the same day, Mr Asquith wrote to Mr John Sawers, FCO Director General Political, with his first impressions.¹⁰⁶ Circulation of his letter was deliberately limited within the FCO, but it was sent to Mr Martin Howard, MOD Director General Operational Policy, and Sir Nigel Sheinwald.

154. Mr Asquith described the political challenges facing the Iraqi Government:

“For a government of national unity, most of its members are in opposition. Rumours of an alternative government (of national salvation) or a military-led coup circulate ...

“For the Shia religious parties, CPA’s apportionment of representation on sectarian lines encouraged them to lay hold to a preponderance of power which the UIA [United Iraqi Alliance] are seeking to convert into a monopoly over key decisions on security and the economy ...”

155. Mr Asquith considered that part of the challenge was that:

“Maliki’s true intentions [are] an enigma even to those in his government: sectarian going through the motions of reconciliation, or genuine power sharer constrained by Shia supremacists? It is still reasonable to give him the benefit of the doubt that he is the latter ...”

156. The “heart of the problem”, in Mr Asquith’s opinion, was:

“If facing us down on the nuclear agenda is Iran’s top priority and ensuring at least a non-hostile government in Baghdad is sufficient for them, they will advance their nuclear objective and achieve their sufficiency in Iraq by manipulating their assets here against MNF and stoking the ambitions or sectarian prejudices of those in the UIA [United Iraqi Alliance] ...

¹⁰⁵ Letter Browne to Beckett, 12 September 2006, ‘Secretary of State for Defence Iraq Visit’.

¹⁰⁶ [Letter Asquith to Sawers, 12 September 2006, ‘Iraq: First Impressions’](#).

“From our side, it may be impossible to compromise sufficiently on the nuclear negotiations in a way that creates for the Iranians an incentive not to obstruct our objectives in Iraq. Preventing them acquiring a nuclear capability may be viewed as a higher priority than securing a reasonably stable, democratic and united Iraq. If so, how do we alter the dynamics inside Iraq in a way that limits Iran’s ability to manipulate the circumstances to its advantage?”

157. Mr Asquith considered that achieving success would require a combination of:

- building Prime Minister Maliki’s confidence and credibility by ensuring the success of the Baghdad and Basra Security Plans and persuading political leaders to lend him their support;
- persuading Prime Minister Maliki that the Shia militias were undermining his authority and persuading him to take or support action against them;
- reintegrating Iraq into its Arab political and cultural context via the International Compact (see Section 10.2); and
- persuading political parties to amend the electoral law to permit only registered parties and individuals to stand for election, leaving the formation of alliances to post-election negotiations.

158. Mr Asquith concluded:

“Not a single one of the above is entirely in our gift ... On all these we and our military colleagues continue to work on practical outcomes with the Iraqis. Basra being smaller in scope may prove easier to manage ... We can still succeed over the next six months, but no one pretends it will be anything but a damn close run thing if we do.”

159. On 12 September, members of DOP(I) were asked to consider out of committee a paper which proposed an “information strategy in support of UK policy in Iraq”.¹⁰⁷

160. The paper had been prepared by the newly-created Iraq Information Strategy Group (IISG), chaired by Mr Howard. It described UK objectives, which included that all UK and overseas audiences should “understand that the UK mission is a coherent cross government effort and not just a military operation” and “view us as a force for good”. In particular, the UK public would be told that “a stable, democratic and free Iraq is in the UK’s and world’s long term interests”.

161. On 13 September, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs told him that Op SALAMANCA would begin in the next few days.¹⁰⁸ Its purpose was “to achieve transition in Basra by establishing security”. The keys to success were believed to

¹⁰⁷ Paper MOD, 12 September 2006, ‘An Information Strategy for Iraq’.

¹⁰⁸ Minute Phillipson to Prime Minister, 13 September 2006, ‘VTC with President Bush, 1445 13 September 2006’.

be “Iraqi leadership and presentation”, improvements in services and dealing with corruption in the IPS.

162. On 14 September, the UN Security Council met to hear quarterly reports on Iraq.¹⁰⁹ Mr Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, UN Special Representative for Iraq, commended Prime Minister Maliki’s initiative in relation to the National Reconciliation Plan, which merited “the widest possible support” from the international community.

163. In Mr Qazi’s view, Iraq was at an important crossroads “and the challenges facing the people had never appeared more daunting”. If current discord prevailed there was a danger of the breakdown of the Iraqi state and, potentially, civil war. It was crucial that the international community provided Iraq with the assistance it needed.

164. Ambassador John Bolton, US Permanent Representative to the UN, told the Security Council there had been “significant successes in the development of legitimate political, economic and governmental institutions in Iraq” but “the sustained level of ethno-sectarian violence was one of the most significant threats to security and stability in Iraq”. He said that Iraq’s neighbours shared some responsibility for this:

“Syria should prevent financial and material support, particularly arms, from entering Iraq. Iran should stop providing munitions and other support to extremist groups ...”

165. At Mr Blair’s request, when DOP met on 14 September discussion focused on Basra and Op SALAMANCA.¹¹⁰

166. ACM Stirrup said that Op SALAMANCA was a good plan. Its objectives were increasing Iraqi political grip on the issue, by having a visible Iraqi face on the plan, and increasing the confidence and competence of the ISF. Follow-on development work would need to take place rapidly, and other government departments would need to help drive delivery.

167. Mr Browne observed that the success of the operation was not entirely within the UK’s control. In determining how UK forces were to confront JAM, it would be important to avoid Prime Minister Maliki feeling obliged to condemn UK actions against the Shia. It would also be vital to separate the extreme and moderate elements of the Badr corps and the Sadrists. Encouraging Prime Minister Maliki to do a deal with Muqtada al-Sadr would be helpful.

168. Mrs Beckett commented that, despite being in the majority and in government, the Shia still felt as if they were in Opposition. Although she shared Mr Browne’s high hopes for Op SALAMANCA, she observed that the Baghdad Security Plan had led to an increase in attacks and casualties. She highlighted the increasing vulnerability of the UK’s civilian staff in Basra, whose efforts were being increasingly hampered by the security situation.

¹⁰⁹ UN Security Council ‘5523rd meeting 14 September 2006’ (SC/8829).

¹¹⁰ Minutes, 15 September 2006, DOP meeting.

169. Although not mentioned in the Cabinet Office record, C (Sir John Scarlett) noted that Mr Blair supported contact with Badr, and that Mr Blair had been in favour for some time of opening up channels to whomever was possible on the Shia side, including Muqtada al-Sadr.¹¹¹

170. C noted that the official record should make it clear that authority had now been given for “Badr and indeed whoever else” to be contacted.

171. When the Iraq Strategy Group discussed Op SALAMANCA the following day, they were reminded that Prime Minister Maliki had yet to endorse the plan and agreed that it could not proceed without his approval.¹¹²

172. Sir Nigel Sheinwald briefed the Group on “the Prime Minister’s strong view that we should encourage Maliki to reach a political accommodation with Sadr ... All channels for improving contact with Sadr and Sistani should be explored.”

173. Maj Gen Shirreff reported on 15 September that he had invested considerable effort in the previous week gaining support for Op SALAMANCA locally.¹¹³ He reported that Maj Gen Hamadi had been “thoroughly briefed” and “appears to have taken ownership of it, showing a clear understanding of what is involved”.

174. The chairman of the Provincial Oversight Committee had reservations about the plan, particularly the involvement of MNF troops. Maj Gen Shirreff noted that this “underline[d] the careful path we have to tread to maintain consent”.

175. Maj Gen Shirreff outlined the reasons for Op SALAMANCA, which he described as “the operation that will determine whether we will achieve PIC in Basra”:

“Doing nothing is not an option and will not achieve PIC in 2007, let alone early 2007 because of the lack of security. Quite simply, the security situation in Basra is bad and likely to get worse. During disengagement a vacuum was created which the militant militias and the death squads filled and which MNF force and activity levels have been unable to counter. The number of killings in Basra increased ... any progress made in developing the police force was reversed and attacks on MNF continued. Though there has been some progress ... [it] is too slow and too fragile. Crucially, the police are still incapable of providing even the most basic level of security; rather they are a major cause of insecurity ...

“Next, we must counter the perception among Basrawis that MNF has not done, and is not doing, anything to improve their quality of life, which is resulting in diminishing levels of consent ...

¹¹¹ Minute C, 18 September 2006, ‘DOP: Meeting of 14 September 2006’.

¹¹² Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 18 September 2006, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 15 September 2006’.

¹¹³ Minute Shirreff, 15 September 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 15 September 2006’.

“Op SALAMANCA will, through decisive action, demonstrate that MNF is improving the lot of Basrawis. Preliminary operations in Maysan and reinforcement of the TRB [Theatre Reserve Battalion] have allowed me to concentrate my force so that I will be able to lock down the City, district by district, to achieve security. This will also enable me to surge in quick, high impact CMO [Civil Military Operations] projects that will visibly improve quality of life ... Meanwhile a concerted and sustained effort by Police Training Teams will turn those police stations capable of improvement into police stations that are capable of providing basic security in their local areas. My aim is to cull the unredeemable and rehabilitate the ‘just about’ salvageable. Employment projects will provide jobs for a significant portion of the population giving them an alternative to joining the militia.”

176. Maj Gen Shirreff commented that he would have preferred not to begin Op SALAMANCA before Ramadan but had taken advice from local clerics and from the MNF command in Baghdad, neither of whom considered this was a problem. He observed that he was “also mindful that the Theatre Reserve is available for a limited period of time and long-term pressures are likely to lead to a reduction in the forces in Iraq”.

177. Maj Gen Shirreff concluded that:

“In short I do not have the luxury of being able to wait for perfect timing.

“We should not, under any circumstances, assume that Op SALAMANCA will be risk free. We must be prepared to fight if necessary, with all the grim consequences we are sadly familiar with ...

“To summarise, if UK is to achieve mission success in SE Iraq, we must have the resolve to see Op SALAMANCA through to its conclusion, as, of course, must Iraqi politicians.”

178. Maj Gen Shirreff also reported that “Dhi Qar is looking good for PIC” and that “morale here is hugely boosted by the Australian decision to take on overwatch in Dhi Qar after the Italian redeployment. Good on all who made it possible!”¹¹⁴

179. On 20 September, the JIC assessed the capabilities and intentions of Al Qaida.¹¹⁵ The JIC confirmed its judgement that the UK remained Al Qaida’s second priority target after the US:

“The conflict in Iraq has increased the threat from international terrorism. It is a key motivator for Islamist extremists around the world, reinforcing the determination of terrorists who were already committed to attacking the West, and motivating others who were not ...

¹¹⁴ Minute Shirreff, 15 September 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) Southern Iraq Update – 15 September 2006’.

¹¹⁵ JIC Assessment, 20 September 2006, ‘Al Qaida: Capabilities and Intentions’.

“Iraq ... [is] also creating a new supply of battle-hardened jihadists. The relationship and capabilities being developed there will add resilience to the Al Qaida campaign; those who survive will supply the next generation of leaders.”

180. The transition to PIC in Dhi Qar province took place on 21 September, in a ceremony attended by Prime Minister Maliki as well as representatives of both the Italian and Romanian governments, reflecting previous responsibilities in the province.¹¹⁶

181. Lt Gen Lamb observed that Prime Minister Maliki’s comment that the Government will be the official bearers of weapons, with no one else empowered to do so legally, made during the ceremony, was an indication that he was prepared at least to make “encouraging noises about the militias”.¹¹⁷

182. On 21 September, Maj Gen Shireff reported that during a weekend meeting:

“... Maliki told Casey that the political situation in Basra needs to be dealt with quietly and that the security situation in Basra was not bad enough to warrant an operation that would upset the political balance.”¹¹⁸

183. Op SALAMANCA had been renamed Operation SINBAD and was subject to “refinement”. It remained “an operation that has a pulse of focussed security in the form of patrols to protect engineers followed by a pause¹¹⁹ of ISF activity, police training and reconstruction”. Detention operations would be avoided. The sequence of pulses would start in a different area of the city.

184. Maj Gen Shirreff concluded his report:

“Op SALAMANCA has forced a choice. If Gol [the Government of Iraq] no longer has the will (or backbone) for the Basra Security Plan they signed up to in June, one option is certainly to work within this political constraint. The SALAMANCA planning will not be wasted. We can start many of the high impact projects through Iraqi contractors and the PTTs [Police Training Teams] can conduct a degree of cull/rehab in police stations ... But be under no illusions: SALAMANCA ‘lite’ will not deliver the security conditions for PIC. The full implication of Gol not wanting to rock the boat, deciding that security in Basra is ‘good enough’ and trying to impose constraints on MNF freedom of manoeuvre in the City will be de facto, unconditional PIC. This will leave Basra in the hands of the militant militia and death squads, with the ISF unable to impose, let alone maintain, the rule of law. Unable to draw down completely until the US effectively declare game over, we could find ourselves laagered up in Basra Air Station and effectively fixed outside a city in hostile hands. In my view, this does not constitute ‘good enough’, either in endstate or in reputation terms for the UK Armed Forces.

¹¹⁶ Minute Shirreff, 21 September 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 21 September 2006’.

¹¹⁷ Minute Lamb to CDS, 24 September 2006, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (228) 24 Sep 06’.

¹¹⁸ Minute Shirreff, 21 September 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 21 September 2006’.

¹¹⁹ The Inquiry believes this is a typing error and should read ‘pulse’ rather than ‘pause’.

“The alternative is that we shape the political context to give us the best chance of achieving genuine mission success. If we believe we want to be able to sign off in SE Iraq with heads held high and job done (i.e. good enough), and I certainly do, then we need to use every means possible to tell the Iraqis that, for the coalition, a conditions based PIC in Basra is non-negotiable ...

“We probably have but one chance left ...”¹²⁰

185. ACM Stirrup visited Iraq from 24 to 26 September, and wrote to Mr Browne the day after his return to give him “an early feel for some of my conclusions”.¹²¹ He said:

“As briefed to you, SALAMANCA was a good plan. As eventually agreed by Maliki it still is on the face of it. But even though we have political agreement to launch SALAMANCA, we do not have agreement to tackle the hard issues (such as militias) ... I have said all along that success in Basra depends on strong political leadership and engagement: I see no sign of this emerging. So I am not wildly optimistic that SALAMANCA will put us on the road to PIC in Basra.”

186. ACM Stirrup considered that “the proposals for cleaning up individual police stations and culling/retraining the force are good” but would have no long-term impact unless the “killers” in the Serious Crimes Unit were dealt with. The “key issue” of militias remained unresolved, but ACM Stirrup reported his sense that Prime Minister Maliki believed he could agree a deal that would address the problem.

187. ACM Stirrup went on to consider the UK position in Basra after Op SALAMANCA. If the operation was a success, “we would be well on the road to PIC, and consolidation at Basra Air Station to meet our overwatch, mentoring and other long-term tasks”.

188. If Op SALAMANCA was not a success:

“Returning to the status quo ante does not at the moment look like a sensible choice. What else is there? Well, we could adopt the Maysan approach, remove our tethered goats from Basra City and force the issue for the Iraqis. So from a force structure perspective the aftermath of SALAMANCA might look pretty much the same, succeed or fail.”

189. There had been “no push-back” on that proposition from the US and UK officials and officers ACM Stirrup had discussed it with whilst in Iraq; the “key decision point” would be in the spring and ACM Stirrup promised “some more detailed thinking on this issue”.

190. At the request of the Iraq Senior Officials Group, the JIC assessed the security situation in southern Iraq on 27 September, the eve of the start of Op SINBAD.¹²²

¹²⁰ Minute Shirreff, 21 September 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 21 September 2006’.

¹²¹ [Minute CDS to SofS \[MOD\], 27 September 2006, ‘CDS visit to Iraq 24-26 Sep 06’.](#)

¹²² [JIC Assessment, 27 September 2006, ‘Iraq: The Security Situation in the South’.](#)

191. The JIC's Key Judgements were:

"I. The security situation in Multi-National Division (South-East) (MND(SE)) has deteriorated, although attacks account for only around 3 percent of the national total: much lower than in Baghdad and Sunni areas of central and northern Iraq.

"II. Shia militias, particularly militant elements of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), are the most potent threat. Their violence remains mainly directed against the Multi-National Forces (MNF), but a range of Shia militias and criminal gangs has also been involved in a campaign of violence and intimidation against Sunnis. As the declining MNF presence reduces the number of coalition targets elsewhere across the South, some Shia extremists will concentrate their efforts against MNF consolidating in Basra. Intra-Shia violence will also increase.

"III. The threat from Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents and jihadists remains low across the South. Their capabilities are limited and most attacks target to Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) or the Shia. Nevertheless, occasional large-scale attacks, including suicide bombings, will continue.

...

"V. The willingness and ability of the Iraq Army in the South to tackle Shia militias is doubtful. Some army personnel retain loyalties to JAM and Badr militias. We do not know the scale of this problem, although it is less severe than in the police. In Basra the police are plagued by corruption, poor leadership and the entrenched influence of Shia militias.

"VI. The ability of the coalition to influence events is decreasing as transition proceeds. Stability in the South will be affected by external events: sustained MNF action against JAM in Baghdad could lead to sympathetic violence in the south. Maliki has been persuaded to endorse short-term coalition action in Basra, more limited in scope than originally planned. But it remains uncertain whether the Iraqi authorities have the necessary will or capacity to maintain progress over the long term."

192. The JIC considered that Iran wanted "to speed MNF withdrawal from the South" and therefore wanted "to make life as difficult as possible for coalition forces so long as they remain". To that end, Iran was "prepared to risk some increased instability" in Iraq. The JIC confirmed its earlier judgement that "the Iranians are providing more training and better weaponry to some Shia extremists attacking the MNF".

193. The JIC assessed that "considerable numbers of militant JAM groups in the region receive either financial support, weapons or training from Iran" and there was one report that suggested there had been a recent increase in support from Hizballah to Shia militants.

194. Reflecting on the prospects for provincial transfer and stability, the JIC assessed that:

“Competition for economic and political control among Iraqi political factions, in most cases backed by militias, is likely to intensify. The political dynamics in the south reflect tensions among the Shia parties in central government ... Parties are vying for control and creating a patchwork of influence in local government structures, many of which are resistant to instruction from Baghdad. Militias and locally raised ISF are increasingly competing to be seen as the legitimate providers of security and are being used as such by political groups. Major constitutional issues, such as federalism, remain undecided and will form the backdrop to the anticipated spring 2007 provincial elections, when we anticipate increased intra-Shia violence.”

195. The JIC judged that it would prove more challenging to achieve the same level of stability in Maysan as had been achieved in Muthanna and Dhi Qar:

“But we judge it is the extent of stability and economic recovery in Basra – the second city of Iraq – which will shape and define the nature of transition across the South. Declining security is undermining the prospects for Basra next year. We judge that action to improve security, address corruption within the police, tackle the Shia extremists, deliver civil reconstruction projects and kick-start longer-term economic growth are essential if Basra is to match coalition expectations for successful transition ... It remains uncertain whether the Iraqi authorities have the necessary will or capacity to maintain progress over the long term.”

196. On 28 September, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs told him that Prime Minister Maliki was unwilling to sanction aggressive action against Shia militias in Baghdad and that this was “of a piece with his opposition to the original Op SALAMANCA”.¹²³ Op SINBAD was now happening in less sensitive areas of Basra, focusing on “cleaning up the Basra police, and quick impact reconstruction work in cleared areas of the city”.

197. Maj Gen Shirreff reported on 28 September that Op SINBAD had at last begun, after a “tortuous” round of final negotiations with Iraqi politicians.¹²⁴ He observed that MND(SE) “remain[s] on very thin ice politically” but the initial operations had gone exceptionally well:

“What made a particular impact was the very evident Iraqi face on the operation, both in the form of Iraqi sappers working alongside British sappers and Iraqi Army security patrols on the streets alongside MNF.”

198. Despite the good news, Maj Gen Shirreff also reported that there had been an increase in the number of attacks – the figures for Explosively Formed Projectile (EFP)

¹²³ Minute Phillipson to Prime Minister, 28 September 2006, ‘Secure call with President Bush, 1215 29 September 2006’.

¹²⁴ Minute Shirreff, 28 September 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 28 September 2006’.

attacks, indirect fire attacks and effective attacks were all at the highest level for six months.

199. In a phone conversation with President Bush on 29 September Mr Blair said that the US and UK should be clear in public messages that developments in Iraq were a direct result of “our opponents’ strategy” not policy failures.¹²⁵ In Iraq it was AQ and Iran who were driving the violence: “If we succeeded in our aims, this would be a blow to them.”

October 2006

200. On 5 October, at the request of the FCO, the JIC assessed the performance of the Iraqi Government, its level of popular support and its prospects over the year ahead.¹²⁶

201. The JIC judged that after five months in office:

“... the faction-based Iraqi Government is proving ineffective ... Co-ordination between and within Government Ministries is poor. None of this looks likely to improve in the near future. Meanwhile, sectarian and insurgent violence is at a record high, and fuel, water and electricity shortages persist across much of the country.”

202. The JIC assessed that Prime Minister Maliki’s approach to security was “governed by the critical need to maintain Shia support”. He wanted a political solution to disbanding militia groups and was “deeply sceptical of Multi-National Force (MNF) proposals for tough military action against Shia groups”.

203. The JIC recorded “little success so far” on the national reconciliation plan, and assessed that:

“Against a backdrop of worsening security, Sunni Government Ministers are feeling increasingly marginalised and unable to exert influence, while some leading Shia and Kurdish political figures are questioning the Sunnis’ commitment to ending violence. Mutual distrust is growing.”

204. Security was judged to be the greatest challenge facing the Iraqi Government, with the restoration of order in Baghdad a key issue:

“In the medium term, politically divisive issues such as federalism, the review of the Constitution and the future of Kirkuk, have the potential to capsize the Government; they can be managed or deferred at most for 12-18 months.”

¹²⁵ Letter Banner to Hayes, 29 September 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s Secure Call with President Bush, 29 September: Middle East Issues’.

¹²⁶ [JIC Assessment, 5 October 2006, ‘Al-Maliki’s Government: Interim Progress Report’.](#)

205. On 12 October, DOP(I) received a paper by officials on the medium-term prospects for Iraq, which they said had reached a “critical juncture”. It reiterated that the UK’s goal for Iraq was:

“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.”¹²⁷

206. Officials argued that the UK’s goal was “unlikely to be achieved”. Officials considered that the best outcome that was likely to be achievable was:

“... an Iraq which can govern and sustain itself nationally and provincially, and where sectarian and other violence is contained short of the point where it would overwhelm Iraq’s institutions and precipitate chaos and/or civil war.”

207. The authors suggested that achieving such an outcome lay “primarily in the hands of the Iraqi Government” and that the ability of the UK to influence its behaviour and decisions would continue to decline. The coalition’s current strategy of “direct support combined with building Iraqi capacity” remained the only credible way to influence the outcome. But they judged that, despite the coalition’s best efforts, it was possible that Iraq’s institutions could be overwhelmed and Iraq would be threatened with fragmentation.

208. The ability of the Iraqi people to assume full responsibility for security and sustain any success would be one crucial test. The officials recommended that:

“... whilst we should continue the process of withdrawing forces as we progressively handover security responsibility to the Iraqi Government, we should (assuming continued Iraqi Government consent) plan on a continuing UK military commitment focused on SE Iraq for 2007 and at least part of 2008. Under current agreed coalition plans this would involve a substantial combat force (unlikely to be less than 4500 strong) capable of re-intervention if required by the Iraqi Government, and able to carry out a number of tasks on a routine basis. If at some point in 2007 or 2008 we were to decide not to retain an in-theatre capability to allow us to re-intervene (on the assumption that the Iraqi government would be unlikely to request it) and fulfil other agreed tasks, force levels could be reduced further to closer to 3,000. It should be noted, however, that these tasks are part of the UK’s agreed commitments to the MNF-I, and taking risk on any one of them could have serious ramifications for our relations with the US.”

¹²⁷ [Paper officials, 10 October 2006, ‘Iraq: Medium Term Prospects and Implications’.](#)

209. The paper was touched on only very briefly when DOP(I) met on 12 October, as Mr Browne indicated he would like more time to discuss and agree it formally at a later date.¹²⁸

210. On 12 October, the *Daily Mail* published an interview with General Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the General Staff.¹²⁹ He criticised the UK Government's strategy for Iraq and called for the immediate withdrawal of UK forces from MND(SE):

“The hope that we might have been able to get out of Iraq in 12, 18, 24 months after the initial start in 2003 has proved fallacious. Now hostile elements have got a hold it has made our life much more difficult in Baghdad and in Basra ... [We should] get ourselves out some time soon because our presence exacerbates the security problems. We are in a Muslim country and Muslims' views of foreigners in their country are quite clear. 'As a foreigner, you can be welcomed by being invited into a country, but we weren't invited, certainly by those in Iraq at the time. Let's face it, the military campaign we fought in 2003 effectively kicked the door in. That is a fact.'”

211. Gen Dannatt contrasted the situation in Iraq with the UK presence in Afghanistan, which he argued was different because it was at the invitation of President Karzai's government:

“There is a clear distinction between our status and position in Iraq and in Afghanistan, which is why I have much more optimism that we can get it right in Afghanistan.”

212. Gen Dannatt had previously talked of the Army “running hot”, under the strain of fighting in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

213. Mr Blair, Gen Dannatt and Mr Jonathan Powell, Mr Blair's Chief of Staff, all refer to this interview, and its impact, in their memoirs. Mr Blair commented simply that he “wasn't best pleased” on hearing the news.¹³⁰

214. Mr Powell recalled:

“General Dannatt's attack on the deployment of British forces in Iraq caught us completely unawares in 2006. Tony and I were engaged in delicate Northern Ireland negotiations in St Andrews ... We thought for a moment about sacking him but concluded that that would just make him into a martyr. His comments certainly didn't help our troops in Basra; Muqtada al-Sadr's JAM militia leaders celebrated, claiming that his comments proved that their efforts were working and that they should redouble their attacks on British forces. We immediately received complaints from

¹²⁸ Minutes, 12 October 2006, DOP(I) meeting.

¹²⁹ *Daily Mail*, 12 October 2006, *A very honest General*.

¹³⁰ Blair T. *A Journey*. Hutchinson, 2010.

the NATO Secretary General, the Americans, Australians and other countries with forces serving in Iraq.”¹³¹

215. Gen Dannatt explained in his memoir that the interview had been part of a concerted effort to get the general public in the UK to understand “why we were in Afghanistan”.¹³² He continued:

“Whatever were the merits of our contribution to the intervention in Iraq, I have always been firmly of the view that Afghanistan was much more important to the United Kingdom ... I saw my task as being to ensure that sufficient priority was placed on achieving overall success in Iraq and Afghanistan ...

“Of course, Iraq was an extremely important issue in its own right, but as far as I was concerned it sat within the overall strategic context of Afghanistan, the huge pressure on our forces, and the wider security and moral issues that all this posed.”

216. Gen Dannatt argued that the UK’s strategy for Iraq already was withdrawal, because that was the essence of Gen Casey’s plan for transition. He wrote:

“I was *reinforcing* Government policy for a phased withdrawal from Iraq, not criticising it ...

“I was, after all, simply trying to generate support for the Army, as it did what the Government was requiring of it, and at the same time to tell the nation of the importance that I attached to eventual success in Afghanistan.”

217. On 18 October, Mr Browne wrote to Mrs Beckett to ask the FCO to set out (with DFID) a view of the UK’s medium to long term foreign policy interests in Iraq.¹³³ He wrote that it would be difficult to reach a view on force posture in the absence of that information.

218. Mr Browne wrote that he intended to visit Iraq again to “get my own sense of what is achievable by the current Government”. Before the end of the year there would need to be:

“... a UK/US assessment on whether the current Iraqi Government realistically can hope to deliver on security ... It appears unlikely that the coalition will be told to leave but ... there may be pressure for a timetable as part of Maliki’s negotiations on reconciliation.”

219. Mr Browne added:

“I am keen to explore a scenario that has a more ambitious drawdown plan linked to political developments and PM Maliki’s reconciliation initiatives ... [These] may

¹³¹ Powell J. *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World*. The Bodley Head, 2010.

¹³² Dannatt R. *Leading from the Front*. Bantam Press, 2010.

¹³³ [Letter Browne to Beckett, 18 October 2006, ‘DOP\(I\) 20 Oct: Medium Term Paper’](#).

produce a formal balance of power that relies on sectarian divide (possibly partition) backed by the threat of a descent into civil war. Hardly the basis for long-term stability and well short of a liberal democracy. Such a scenario does not have to assume an unacceptable level of Iranian influence over Iraqi politics but it does assume some.”

220. Mr Browne concluded:

“... we should acknowledge that in all the scenarios we can envisage, these decisions and the transition process will become increasingly political – and we may have to be prepared to accept a larger degree of risk.”

221. In conversation on 19 October, Mr Blair told President Bush that the initial signs from Op SINBAD were positive, in part because the ISF carrying out the operation were “more compatible with the environment there”.¹³⁴ He suggested that the US and UK should challenge Prime Minister Maliki’s judgement that action against Shia militias should be delayed.

222. Briefing for the conversation by Mr Blair’s Private Secretary contained a downbeat assessment of developments in Baghdad.¹³⁵ Although violence was reducing as the MNF moved into an area, it then began to creep back in and finally rise rapidly when the MNF handed over to the ISF. Often this took violence to a similar or higher level than before. Levels of attacks across the city as a whole had risen, and the majority of areas had experienced an increase in the number of bodies being found.

223. Members of DOP(I) discussed the paper on medium term prospects at their meeting on 20 October.¹³⁶ Mr Blair was not present, and so the meeting was chaired by Mr Browne.

224. Mr Browne began by saying that the existing goal would be difficult to achieve, but Ministers had to be certain that there was not more the UK could do before accepting anything less. Mrs Beckett agreed that the new Iraqi Government was not delivering as well as had been hoped. The long term objectives would be affected by the acceptability of the coalition presence, which appeared to be declining faster than had been envisaged.

225. In discussion, a member of DOP(I) said that most DFID projects in the South were likely to be completed by spring 2007 and that no new projects could be started under current security circumstances. US policy was uncertain; current US force levels were viewed as unsustainable. The proposed level of UK forces (4,500) was predicated on

¹³⁴ Letter Banner to Hayes, 19 October 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 19 October: Middle East issues’.

¹³⁵ Minute Phillipson to Prime Minister, 19 October 2006, ‘VTC with President Bush – 1505, 19 October 2006’.

¹³⁶ Minutes (revised), 20 October 2006, DOP(I) meeting.

keeping UK forces inside Basra city; Ministers should consider what operational purpose would be served by their presence.

226. DOP(I) agreed that:

- The UK should keep the existing policy goal, but recognise that the best outcome achievable might fall short of it.
- A progressive reduction of UK forces to 4,500 in 2007, in concert with US and other allies, was possible, with more ambitious reductions being considered at the end of November.
- The FCO would lead on urgent work on the security of staff in Basra.

227. On 20 October, Sir David Manning, British Ambassador to the US, reported that Iraq was dominating debate in advance of the mid-term elections:

“The recent upsurge in violence, the failure of the Baghdad security plan and the greatly increased US casualty figures – ten killed on 18 October alone – have increased the concern.”¹³⁷

228. There was increasing speculation in Washington that, against the backdrop of probable Republican electoral losses, the violence in Iraq and the unpopularity of the war would force the Administration to change its strategy, including by abandoning its open-ended commitment.

229. Senior members of the Administration were sticking to “no change”, but according to the Embassy, a policy shift could not be ruled out. The Iraq Study Group – “a bipartisan group set up by Bush earlier this year and co-chaired by Jim Baker and Lee Hamilton” – and its forthcoming report offered “the most obvious vehicle for change”.

230. In a meeting with Sir Nigel Sheinwald and Sir David Manning on 23 October, Mr Stephen Hadley, the US National Security Advisor, “accepted that the Baghdad Security Plan was not succeeding”.¹³⁸ He observed that:

“The Iraqi Army had not deployed as expected, and the Iraqi Police could not hold the ground cleared by US and Iraqi troops. The basic problem appeared to be that the Iraqi Government had not bought into the Plan.”

231. The US was considering how best to address the problem, which was likely to involve an increase in Iraqi Army numbers and potentially supplying more equipment.

232. Sir Nigel remarked that there was “a sense of stasis” in Iraq policy, which made it a good moment to reflect on strategy. He said that Mr Blair would not want to see

¹³⁷ eGram 46668/06 Washington to FCO London, 20 October 2006, ‘Iraq: Change of Strategy?’

¹³⁸ Letter Banner to Siddiq, 25 October 2006, ‘US/Middle East’.

a change in the basic goal and direction, but “we would have to be realistic about what we could hope to achieve in the short and medium term”. Success would:

“... depend to a great extent on the Iraqi Government providing us with conditions that allowed us to operate, including through effective action by Maliki to deal with elements of JAM and Badr”.

233. At a meeting of DOP on 26 October, the medium term prospects paper was discussed again alongside an update from Mr Browne on security developments in Iraq.¹³⁹

234. ACM Stirrup advised that, militarily, the security operations in Basra “could not be going better, although there had been an increase in the number of indirect fire attacks on the Basra Palace compound”. The main concern of Basrawis was whether the success of the operation could be sustained, which “would require engagement and funds from the Government in Baghdad”.

235. Mr Blair commented on the support from Iran for Shia militias, which had serious implications for the MNF and the region. There was a risk that UK troop withdrawals would convince the Iranians that their strategy was working.

236. DOP agreed the analysis and recommendations contained in the medium term prospects paper, subject to further work already commissioned, and agreed the UK’s planning assumption should be for a reduction of UK force levels to around 4,500 in 2007. Officials should be asked to develop a “strategy for handling Iran”.

237. Mr Blair also mentioned the work of the Iraq Study Group and told DOP:

“We needed to develop ideas of our own to help shape the US approach.”

238. At a meeting of the Iraq Strategy Group on 27 October, Mr Sawers reported that discussion of Iran’s involvement in Iraq “had concluded that the problem could not be solved in Iraq ... a wider strategy for handling Iran, co-ordinating the response to Iran’s regional influence, was required”.¹⁴⁰

239. At the same meeting of the Iraq Strategy Group Mr Simon McDonald, FCO Director Iraq, reported that the security situation in Basra had deteriorated to the point where Mrs Beckett had decided that it would be necessary to withdraw the majority of civilian staff from Basra Palace. Mr Benn agreed with that view.

240. Sir Nigel Sheinwald confirmed that Mr Blair would be content to accept Mrs Beckett’s judgement on the matter. Ms Margaret Aldred, Deputy Head of the Overseas and Defence Secretariat, suggested that further work would be needed to

¹³⁹ Minutes, 26 October 2006, DOP meeting.

¹⁴⁰ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 30 October 2006, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 27 October’.

clarify plans for UN staff, the impact on the Better Basra programme and the implications for funding.

241. Vice Admiral Charles Style, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Commitments), raised concerns on behalf of Maj Gen Shirreff, who considered that the withdrawal of civilian staff would send the wrong message.

242. Updating Mr Blair on the plan later in the day, his Private Secretary wrote that “this move is likely to be seen as a victory by those attacking us”.¹⁴¹

243. Dr Rosalind Marsden, the British Consul General in Basra; and four FCO civilian staff were to remain in Basra Palace, while the other staff were relocated to Basra Air Station.

244. The update also described a growing public perception that the US and Prime Minister Maliki were “drifting apart”, fuelled by contrasting public statements about the time needed to re-establish order in Iraq.

245. Responding to the update, Mr Blair wrote “we need to review the political strategy to underpin the right analysis of what is happening. I will do a note.”¹⁴²

246. On 29 October, Mr Blair produced a paper entitled ‘Iraq Plan’ which set out nine points requiring “active central management with weekly meeting for me and key advisers”.¹⁴³ They were:

- “Improve Maliki’s governing capability”.
- encourage a political process to draw in Sadrists and Sunni Arabs, including by providing a conditional timeline for withdrawal if necessary;
- “Rectify any weaknesses in training, equipment, pay and capacity of the Iraqi Army”.
- “... pay off the worst aspects of the police, slim them down and change the command and control”.
- commission an analysis of “Shia feeling”;
- expose the involvement of Iran in Iraq;
- pass a new Security Council resolution – “not just about the rollover but puts Iraq in a fresh context”;
- persuade the Iraq Study Group to adopt a “whole Middle East strategy”; and
- after the US mid-term elections, argue for the adoption of such a strategy.

¹⁴¹ Minute Banner to Blair, 27 October 2006, ‘Iraq Update, 27 October’.

¹⁴² Manuscript comment Blair on Minute Banner to Blair, 27 October 2006, ‘Iraq Update, 27 October’.

¹⁴³ Paper Blair, 29 October 2006, ‘Iraq Plan’.

247. On 30 October, the BBC reported that senior military commanders were “infuriated” by the withdrawal of civilian staff, claiming that it gave weight to the argument that the insurgents were winning.¹⁴⁴

248. Around the end of October, Sir David Manning suggested that a small team should “start – very privately – considering the implications of a withdrawal from Iraq”, including the consequences for Iraq, the Iranian reaction and the power balance in the region.¹⁴⁵

November 2006

249. In a video conference with President Bush on 2 November Mr Blair said that the key issues on Iraq were:

- whether Prime Minister Maliki had effective strategies for Sunni and Kurdish outreach;
- identifying and filling gaps in the Iraqi Army’s capability;
- identifying shortfalls in “governance capability”, for example effective public spending; and
- ensuring that discussion of renewing the Security Council resolution was “handled sufficiently carefully”.¹⁴⁶

250. Mr Blair also raised concerns about whether Prime Minister Maliki was supported by a structure that allowed him to make and implement decisions, in particular in controlling the army.

251. The weekly update was sent by Maj Gen Shirreff’s Chief of Staff on 2 November, who noted that the withdrawal of FCO staff was one of the events that had dominated the preceding week.¹⁴⁷ He reported that the withdrawal had come as a surprise to MND(SE) and was expected to have an adverse impact because:

- The reduction in police advisers would mean that it would be possible to staff the Police Transition Teams but not to train the specialist police teams that would take over from the Specialist Crime Unit.
- The loss of prison advisers came just before a planned move of prisoners out of the Jameat facility into a new facility.
- There would be disruption to long-term reconstruction work as a result of the “haste with which the PRT has been evacuated”.

252. Mr Blair and Mr Hadley met for two hours on 4 November.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ *BBC News*, 30 October 2006, *Basra consulate staff relocated*.

¹⁴⁵ Letter Gould to Crompton, 1 November 2006, ‘Iran and Iraq’.

¹⁴⁶ Letter Banner to Hayes, 2 November 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 2 November: Middle East issues’.

¹⁴⁷ Minute Everard, 2 November 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 2 November 2006’.

¹⁴⁸ Letter Sheinwald to Hayes, 6 November 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s meeting with US National Security Adviser, 4 November’.

253. Mr Blair suggested that “a sense of urgency” was needed in US and UK strategy for Iraq, which should include:

- a major political agreement;
- a security plan; and
- a plan to increase the capability of the Iraqi Government.

254. Mr Hadley explained that the US hoped that the forthcoming Baker/Hamilton Report would be a vehicle for producing a new plan for Iraq with cross-party support in the US.

255. Lt Gen Lamb expressed his views about the withdrawal of civilian staff in his weekly report of 5 November:

“... while I understand but do not necessarily agree with the reasons for the relocation of the PRT, and the way the draw down of FCO staff in Basra took place, the interpretation up here was that the case, haste and timing was unhelpful. US cries of non-consultation (not strictly true) and its impact on key issues that materially affect the wider coalition ... a number of those who were actually capable of making the material difference, such as in capacity building, are no longer present. US comments such as ‘I see the Brits are doing their own thing again’ from both the military and Embassy do count in a coalition where our currency for making change is often our opinion ... 168 days ago, it may have mattered less but the moment we gained a Shia Prime Minister, the profile of our ‘independence’ down south changed inexorably. Our actions now have a direct relationship with those in Baghdad, as does our ... [plan for military force levels] within the emerging coalition campaign. Our performance was hardly a ‘comprehensive approach’ and was, I felt, rather un-British.”¹⁴⁹

256. Maj Gen Lamb’s report also reflected concerns from the US military in Iraq that the mid-term elections would create an additional overhead in responding to an increased number of questions and enquiries. He also offered a view on how reasonable governance objectives in Iraq might be defined, as:

“... supplying the Iraqis with the capability to deliver what constitutes a *progressive* (slowly at first), *Islamic* (a given) *nation* (ideally but co-federation could work) is where the governance goal posts probably lie.”

257. On 5 November, Mr Blair wrote a note which said:

“The next few months are critical for foreign policy. Iraq in particular.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Minute Lamb to CDS, 5 November 2006, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (234) 5 Nov 06’.

¹⁵⁰ [Note Blair, 5 November 2006, ‘Note’](#).

258. In the note Mr Blair said that the first basic element of the approach on Iraq would be a new Iraq compact, ratified by a Security Council resolution, in which:

- “• Iraqis come together to support a non-sectarian future;
- MAS [Muqtada al-Sadr] dissociates himself from JAM and Maliki agrees to go after JAM;
- there is better Iraqi governance and especially in the disbursement of money;
- the Iraqis re-affirm our presence whilst they need it.”

259. The second element of the approach would be:

“We make explicit a broader Middle East strategy in which we put Iraq in the context of a changing, modernising Middle East where everywhere, including Palestine and Lebanon, we are trying to solve outstanding issues.”

US mid-term elections

In the US mid-term elections on 7 November, President Bush’s Republican Party lost control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives to the Democratic Party.¹⁵¹

The new Speaker of the House of Representatives asked President Bush “to work together to find a solution to the war in Iraq”.

The following day, as widely anticipated, President Bush announced that Secretary Rumsfeld would be stepping down, and that Mr Robert Gates would replace him as Defense Secretary.¹⁵²

260. Mr Blair discussed Iraq policy with ACM Stirrup, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Mr Sawers, SIS2, Mr Jonathan Powell and other No.10 officials on 7 November.¹⁵³

261. Mr Blair identified a strategy with four key elements:

- “– agreement on a ‘national compact’ which produced a settlement of the key issues acceptable to all groups in Iraq, and the basis for non-sectarian government;
- improvement in the functioning of Iraqi institutions, particularly disbursement capability;
- capability gaps in the security forces, the army in particular, had to be identified and filled; and
- regional actors had to be brought in to offer effective support to the Iraqi government.”

¹⁵¹ *BBC News*, 9 November 2006, *How will the Democrats wield power?*

¹⁵² eGram 49754/06 Washington to Various, 8 November 2006, ‘Rumsfeld: Changing The Guard’.

¹⁵³ [Letter Banner to Siddiq, 8 November 2006, ‘Iraq’](#).

262. Mr Blair added that the best source of leverage over Prime Minister Maliki was his desire for the UK not to leave “precipitately”. He concluded that “we should therefore offer him a timetable, conditional on his securing an acceptable political compact, to which Muqtada al-Sadr had signed up”.

263. ACM Stirrup updated the meeting on “the continued good progress in Operation SINBAD” and noted that:

“... once it had concluded, we would have done as much as we judged militarily possible in Basra. He noted, however, that it did not deal with the fundamental problem of militias. The Prime Minister queried whether it could therefore be effective. CDS [ACM Stirrup] suggested that the militia problem would have to be dealt with politically.”

264. On 9 November, Sir Nigel Sheinwald sent a Note from Mr Blair to President Bush via Mr Hadley.¹⁵⁴

265. The Note began:

“Our foreign policy is so joined, we both face the same issues. So a Democrat victory is seen here as a ‘thumping’ for me as well as you!”

266. Mr Blair continued:

“... my worry is: waiting for Baker’s group to come up with a strategy. We should lead the consensus not simply follow it. Our danger is either being seen for political reasons, to ‘cave in’, which we will never do; or have to be told the answer because we can’t think of it. Actually our strategy is already evolving. Before Baker reports we should spell out that evolution.”

267. Mr Blair explained that strategy for Iraq should include:

- a political compact to be published by the Iraqis, committing to non-sectarian government and ruling out partition of the country, with support from both Sunnis and Muqtada al-Sadr;
- a plan for better governance;
- accelerating the plan to complete the formation of the army and police; and
- a conditional timescale for withdrawal, focused on Iraqi capability and “making no concessions on democracy”.

¹⁵⁴ Letter Sheinwald to Hadley, 9 November 2006, ‘Iraq and the Middle East’ attaching Note Blair, 9 November 2006, ‘Note’.

268. In addition, Mr Blair argued that a “whole Middle East” strategy was needed which would frame the debate on Iraq in terms of the whole region and expose the hostile intent of Iran. Mr Blair wrote:

“The huge benefit in Iraq, of such a strategy, is that it gives us more than what is happening day to day in Iraq to talk about. That is our problem: it is all events, ghastly and bloody, unconnected to the underlying strategic cause.”

269. President Bush and Mr Blair spoke by video conference the next day joined by Vice President Dick Cheney, Mr Hadley, Mr Jonathan Powell and Sir Nigel Sheinwald.¹⁵⁵

270. Mr Blair set out his view that the UK and US should focus on supporting Prime Minister Maliki to achieve a national political compact, accelerate assistance to the ISF, improve the Iraqi Government’s ability to “deliver resources” and bring regional assistance to bear more effectively.

271. Mr Blair suggested that Prime Minister Maliki should set out his political and security plans in a way that demonstrated he was in the lead, ideally before the Iraq Study Group reported, and in such a way that allowed the US and UK to respond positively.

272. On 13 November, Mr Blair discussed Iraq with ACM Stirrup, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Mr McDonald, C, Ms Aldred and officials from No.10.¹⁵⁶

273. Mr Blair told those present that “the major challenge was ensuring that Maliki had an effective government apparatus around him, underpinned by capable security forces”.

274. ACM Stirrup said that “the US had given a lot of thought to the latter point” and had “a coherent plan” to train the ISF.

275. Mr Blair commissioned Sir Nigel Sheinwald to co-ordinate a plan, drawing on departmental expertise, which would “set out the detail underpinning the Prime Minister’s four point strategy for Iraq, together with a clear sense of who would be responsible for operationalising each element”. Mr Blair recognised that it would need Iraqi, US and wider international support.

276. That evening, Mr Blair spoke at the annual Lord Mayor’s banquet in London’s Guildhall.¹⁵⁷ He described the growing pressure from terrorism in Iraq and said:

“Just as the situation is evolving, so our strategy should evolve to meet it.

“Inside Iraq we should empower the Iraqi leadership that wants to take responsibility – that knows that they, not us, must lead and win the fight against terrorism.

¹⁵⁵ Letter Banner to Hayes, 10 November 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 10 November: Middle East’.

¹⁵⁶ [Letter Banner to Siddiq, 14 November 2006, ‘Iraq’.](#)

¹⁵⁷ Prime Minister’s Guildhall speech, 13 November 2006.

To do this effectively, they need our support, politically, in their economy and for their armed forces.

- First, we need a strong political compact in Iraq led by the Iraqi Government to bring all parties together, with clear commitments to non-sectarian government and to democracy;
- Second, we need to build Iraqi governing capability, especially in the disbursement of money for reconstruction and rebuilding of the economy;
- Third, we must plug any gaps in training, equipment and command and control in the Iraqi Army and help the new Interior Minister root out sectarianism in the police, which in turn will allow us, within the timeframe set down by General Casey, to transition to Iraqi control.”

277. Mr Blair went on to explain that “a major part of the answer to Iraq lies not in Iraq itself but outside it”, creating a need for a “whole Middle East” strategy which would “start with Israel/Palestine”, make progress on Lebanon and “unite all moderate Arab and Moslem voices behind a push for peace”.

278. On 14 November Mr Blair, accompanied by Sir Nigel Sheinwald, spoke by video link to the Iraq Study Group for an hour.¹⁵⁸

279. In preparation, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary provided a briefing pack and a letter from Mr Sawers, written from Baghdad, reflecting on the three days he had spent in Iraq.¹⁵⁹

280. Mr Sawers reported that Prime Minister Maliki was “anxious to assume more responsibility for security as soon as possible” but was more resistant to the need for a “broad base of political support for his government”. Mr Sawers described “areas of progress”, specifically “on the economy, on a new oil law, and on building up the Army” and said that “the prospects don’t look as bleak as they are portrayed in the Western media”.

281. Mr Sawers wrote that progress had been made on a new Security Council resolution, with the terms of a letter to the Security Council requesting rollover of the previous resolution agreed between the US and Iraqi Governments.

282. Finally, Mr Sawers recommended that Mr Blair stress to the Iraq Study Group “the importance to Maliki of securing the earliest possible transition of security responsibilities” and that he “warn starkly against partition of Iraq”.

283. Mr Blair’s Private Secretary reported to the FCO that during his session with the Iraq Study Group Mr Blair advocated a new plan that “set out the way forward for Iraq” agreed by the coalition, UN and Iraqi Government.¹⁶⁰ The key elements would be

¹⁵⁸ Letter Banner to Siddiq, 14 November 2006, ‘Iraq Study Group’.

¹⁵⁹ Letter Sawers to Prime Minister, 13 November 2006, ‘Iraq’.

¹⁶⁰ Letter Banner to Siddiq, 14 November 2006, ‘Iraq Study Group’.

support for better governance, especially in disbursing funds, support for “rooting out sectarianism” and equipping the Iraqi Army.

284. Asked about UK troop levels, Mr Blair said that:

“... UK policy was to stay until the job was done, which meant drawing down as the ISF were prepared to take over. Once Operation SINBAD was complete, it was clear that the Iraqis wanted us to assume a support role. So if the Operation went to plan, we would be able to reduce our own force levels somewhat over the next six to nine months. He stressed that he was strongly opposed, though, to any unconditional withdrawal.”

285. After a long discussion about regional issues, members of the Iraq Study Group asked Mr Blair what he would like to see in their final report. His Private Secretary reported that he replied:

“It would be helpful if the ISG endorsed a plan that was essentially an evolution of our current strategy. If it did the Prime Minister would be happy to give it his full support.”

286. On 15 November, at the request of the Iraq Senior Officials Group, the JIC examined “the scale, scope and nature of violence in Iraq” and the “will and effectiveness of the Iraqi Government to respond and the implications of failure”.¹⁶¹

287. The JIC judged that:

“I. Most ordinary Iraqis, other than Kurds, retain a sense of Iraqi nationhood. But their concepts of the future Iraq are increasingly defined in terms of their own sectarian interests, whether Shia or Sunni. It is unclear how long support for a unitary state will last in the face of rising Sunni/Shia violence. All the current trends are heading in the wrong direction.

“II. Violence continues to escalate. The strength of the Sunni Arab nationalist insurgents is undiminished. Their violence is complemented by a resilient jihadist campaign. Attacks on the coalition by Shia extremists have also increased. But sectarian attacks, mostly in Baghdad, now account for the bulk of the violence and casualties. Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) is in the vanguard, believing their strategy of fomenting civil war is working. Elements of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) are the primary force behind Shia sectarian violence.

“III. The Iraqi Government’s response to deteriorating security remains ineffective. Many Shia politicians blame all violence on ‘Ba’athists’. There has been no progress on national reconciliation ... So long as Sunni alienation is reinforced, Iraqi and coalition efforts to engage elements of the Sunni insurgency are unlikely to make progress and Sunni participation in government will be fragile.”

¹⁶¹ [JIC Assessment, 15 November 2006, ‘Iraq: Risk of Deepening Sectarian Division’.](#)

288. Although Prime Minister Maliki was increasingly keen to accelerate the transfer of responsibility for security to Iraqi control, the JIC judged that the ISF would be likely to need MNF support for some time:

“Without it they will be unable to cope in Baghdad and the Sunni heartlands, risking worsening violence and further weakening of government authority.”

289. On 16 November, Major General Simon Mayall, Deputy Commanding General MNC-I, sent an update to Lt Gen Houghton.¹⁶² Maj Gen Mayall described a “Transition Bridging Strategy” that was gaining momentum with senior US commanders. The strategy was based on an assumption that “the Security Line of Operation is indispensable to mission success, but it cannot, and never was intended to deliver the Endstate on its own”. The strategy entailed increasing the size of training teams embedded with the Iraq Army prior to handing over an area to Iraqi control. Maj Gen Mayall assessed:

“... what this model offers us, and the Gol, is the opportunity to transition with the Iraqis, and thereby set much better conditions, in due course, to transition to the Iraqis. This concept and model, however, is critically depending upon substantial support from the other Lines of Operation.”

290. At the meeting of DOP(I) on 16 November Mr Sawers, following his recent visit to Iraq, expressed serious concern at the rise of Shia militias but added that the biggest security concern was still the Sunni insurgency and fear of elements of the former regime.¹⁶³ He reported that Prime Minister Maliki was frustrated that he was not in control of the security apparatus.

291. In discussion, it was suggested that Prime Minister Maliki was constrained by his agreement with Muqtada al-Sadr and that it was important to recognise that any Iraqi leader would need to reach such political accommodations in order to function.

292. The meeting was told that the text of the international compact had been agreed but there had been little substantive progress and that Mr Blair considered that developments in Iraq, the US and the UK were reaching a critical stage. He wanted a “comprehensive co-ordinated forward plan for the coming weeks” covering political, economic, governance and security strands. Mrs Beckett said that departments would “work quickly” to produce this.

293. Mr Browne reported that planning was taking place in the US to speed up the transition process and that this was consistent with the UK’s Medium Term Plan. He still expected that it would be possible to achieve PIC in Maysan by the end of 2006 and in Basra in spring 2007.

¹⁶² [Minute Mayall to CJO, 16 November 2006, ‘MNC-I Update – 16 Nov 06’](#).

¹⁶³ Minutes, 16 November 2006, DOP(I) meeting.

294. In discussion, it was suggested that what could be achieved in Basra by March 2007 would “probably not be enough to achieve PIC” and so the challenge would be to “work out how we could complete the process from outside Basra after we had transitioned”.

295. VAdm Style provided an update on Op SINBAD, which he considered had been a “considerable success”, although progress on reforming the Iraqi police remained weak and attack levels against coalition forces remained high. Mrs Beckett and Sir Suma Chakrabarti, DFID Permanent Secretary, reported that the impact of the withdrawal of civilian staff from Basra Palace on Better Basra and on DFID’s programmes had been “marginal”.

296. Mrs Beckett summed up that officials should develop some clear and agreed forward planning on the future of the civilian and military presence in Basra.

297. VAdm Style told the Inquiry:

“SINBAD was a very considerable success. Yes, in some senses conditions were deteriorating in Basra, and again it depends on exactly which little bit of time that you are thinking about ... But amongst the things that were achieved out of SINBAD were a new level of co-operation between our own forces and the Iraqi Army, better Iraqi Army and police co-operation, both the police and the army effectiveness – Iraqi Army effectiveness were improved, extra equipment was brought in. There was better – there was improving support from the Council and most of the authority within Basra because they approved of what was being done. Consent temporarily improved, it had all the time been generally reducing, and the murder rate went down. By the end ... the Iraqis were in the lead to an extent they had not been before.”¹⁶⁴

298. On 17 November, Mr Jonathan Powell sent a minute to Mr Blair with his thoughts on Iraq.¹⁶⁵ He wrote that there was “a new fluidity in Iraq after months of stasis” which offered an opportunity to change strategy on Iraq and to change the way Iraq was seen in the West.

299. Mr Powell suggested that there was a need to “be more imaginative” to get out of the “bunker mentality” in which both politicians and civil servants found themselves and “change our way of working to take advantage of the opportunity”. Part of the answer would be the new “Forward Plan”, which would focus discussion.

300. Mr Powell also recommended that the list of attendees at the “weekly meetings” needed to change, commenting “I think we need a general as well as CDS” and that Mr Blair should have fortnightly video conferences with UK personnel in Iraq and with the US.

¹⁶⁴ Public hearing, 5 January 2010, page 39.

¹⁶⁵ [Minute Powell to Prime Minister, 17 November 2006, 'Iraq'](#).

301. A media plan that would change attitudes in the UK and US was needed. Mr Powell advised Mr Blair to strengthen his relationship with Prime Minister Maliki, keeping in more regular and relaxed contact.

302. Mr Powell concluded his minute:

“But there is also a bigger question ... If this were a domestic problem we would use the whole team to strategise about it. Maybe you should try a discussion in that format to see if we could find a better way of communicating what we are trying to do. It may be that we think about Iraq in too technocratic and in an insufficiently political way.”

303. Mr Blair commented: “I agree. I should see Maliki in December and maybe do weekly video cons ... We also need some good news balance. And the key is to revitalise the Compact plan.”¹⁶⁶

304. Following a discussion in the Iraq Strategy Group, a draft of the Forward Plan was sent to Mr Blair’s Private Secretary by Mr McDonald on 24 November.¹⁶⁷ It was sent in parallel to the FCO, the MOD and to SIS.

305. In his covering note, Mr McDonald set out the assumptions which underpinned the Plan. They included diminishing UK influence over “events” in Iraq and that the Iraqi Government increasingly saw the coalition as the main obstacle to establishing its authority. As a consequence responsibility would be handed over ahead of a rigorous assessment that they were capable of undertaking the task.

306. The draft plan also assumed that there would not be a fundamental change of US policy as a result of the Iraq Study Group’s report.

307. The plan included proposed actions under three headings:

- Political accommodation. The UK should help bring about a political compact based on a declaration of fundamental principles, the establishment of a Peace Commission and a Reconciliation/Rehabilitation Commission and agreement to a date for Provincial Elections in 2007.
- Governance and economic development. The UK should urge Prime Minister Maliki to build greater Iraqi capability by establishing an Economic Task Force equivalent to the Ministerial Committee on National Security, securing agreement on the Hydrocarbons Law;¹⁶⁸ pushing for a “full and effective multilateral presence in Iraq”; and securing early deals on oil revenue sharing and fiscal federalism.

¹⁶⁶ Manuscript comment Blair on [Minute Powell to Prime Minister, 17 November 2006, ‘Iraq’](#).

¹⁶⁷ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 27 November 2006, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 24 November’; [Minute McDonald to Banner, 24 November 2006, ‘Iraq Forward Plan’ attaching Draft Paper, \[undated\], ‘Iraq: Forward Plan’](#).

¹⁶⁸ The Hydrocarbons Law is addressed in Section 10.3.

- Security. The plan assumed that the revised US plan was likely to see a move by coalition forces out of urban areas into consolidated bases on the outskirts of urban areas and accelerated transition to Iraqi control based on “a more pragmatic and subjective Iraq-led approach” to assessing suitability for PIC to replace the “current mechanistic and convoluted assessment process”. The plan said: “This may mean that the conditions for transfer are relaxed thus accelerating the process of transition. The risk is that a less rigorous process may increase the chances of subsequent under performance by the Iraqis. In practice, it places an increasing emphasis on the capability of the Iraqi Security Forces rather than the security situation on the ground, closely supported by efforts on the governance and economic front. We may, however, face a degree of pushback in the detailed execution of our plan from the US, despite prior agreement in principle.”

308. Responding to Mr McDonald, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary reported that he had described the Forward Plan as “an excellent piece of work”.¹⁶⁹ The Private Secretary asked for the Plan to be finalised and implemented; the section on reforming key Ministries needed more detail and there was nothing yet on strategic communications. The Plan itself would require a high-profile launch.

309. On 25 November, Mr Blair mentioned the draft Forward Plan to President Bush during a telephone conversation and offered to send him a copy.¹⁷⁰ They discussed whether 100,000 more troops, as proposed by some in the US, would not work and the importance of demonstrating that the coalition was taking the initiative in the next phase.

310. Mr Blair commented on the differences between the situation in Baghdad and in Basra, where Op SINBAD appeared to have gone well. He suggested that it should be possible for Basra to be controlled by the Iraqis, “with our support”.

311. No.10 sent the White House a copy of the Forward Plan later that day, stressing that it remained “work in progress”.¹⁷¹

312. On 29 November, VAdm Style told the Chiefs of Staff that the Forward Plan had received Mr Blair’s approval over the weekend.¹⁷² He also described “the need for caution regarding supportive statements about ‘accelerated transition’ by US military interlocutors”.

313. Lt Gen Houghton updated the Chiefs of Staff on efforts to counter the threat of indirect fire in Basra. In discussion, the Chiefs of Staff noted “the potential opportunity afforded by planned force withdrawals from Basra ... to leverage local deals to reduce the IDF threat”.

¹⁶⁹ [Letter Banner to McDonald, 27 November 2006, ‘Iraq: Forward Plan’.](#)

¹⁷⁰ Letter Banner to Hayes, 25 November 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 25 November’.

¹⁷¹ Letter Sheinwald to Hadley, 25 November 2006, untitled, attaching Note Blair, 27 November 2006, ‘Iraq Forward Plan and Paper, undated, ‘Iraq: Forward Plan’.

¹⁷² Minutes, 29 November 2006, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

314. At the end of November 2006, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 1723 (2006).¹⁷³ At the formal request of Prime Minister Maliki, this extended the legal basis for the presence and activities of the MNF in Iraq, and arrangements for putting oil receipts into the Development Fund of Iraq, until December 2007.

315. President Bush wrote in his memoir that the US Administration had reviewed its strategy for Iraq during the second half of 2006.¹⁷⁴ It had focused on three options:

- to accelerate the existing strategy of training Iraqi forces while withdrawing US forces;
- to pull US troops back from Baghdad until the sectarian violence burnt out; or
- to deploy additional US troops to conduct a full-scale counter-insurgency campaign in Baghdad.

316. Before deciding on the third option President Bush sought assurances from Prime Minister Maliki that he would commit more Iraqi forces, not interfere in joint military operations, confront Shia militias, and as security improved make progress on political reconciliation. President Bush's memoir records that Prime Minister Maliki gave those assurances at a meeting on 29 November.

317. On 30 November, Maj Gen Shireff commented that indirect fire, while "extremely unpleasant and, at times fatal" was "not a showstopper" but rather a "tactical nuisance".¹⁷⁵ It had, however, "had a strategic effect by forcing the very public drawdown of the FCO and handed an IO [Information Operations] victory to the enemy on a plate". He explained that it was necessary to reduce the levels of indirect fire "to avoid the charge that we have been bombed out of the City".

318. Maj Gen Shirreff explained that there was "more we could and should do" but he was hampered from doing so because he did not have the equipment.

December 2006

319. On 6 December, the JIC examined the level of control that different actors, in particular Muqtada al-Sadr, had over elements of JAM.¹⁷⁶

320. The JIC's Key Judgements included:

"1. Muqtada al Sadr controls the large majority of Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM). Most 'mainstream' JAM members are not routinely involved in violence against the Multi-National Forces (MNF). JAM militants are attacking the MNF and the Sunni population: most claim allegiance to Sadr and accept broad direction from him, but launch attacks for a variety of local reasons, frequently ignoring his orders.

¹⁷³ UN Security Council, '5574th Meeting 28 November 2006' (SC/8879).

¹⁷⁴ Bush GW. *Decision Points*. Virgin Books, 2010.

¹⁷⁵ Minute Shirreff, 30 November 2006, 'GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 30 November 2006'.

¹⁷⁶ [JIC Assessment, 6 December 2006, 'Iraq: Who Controls Jaysh al Mahdi?'](#)

“II. No one person or group controls all JAM activity and activities of other Shia militias and individuals are often wrongly attributed to it. The apparently contradictory actions of some JAM members are a result of increasing fractures within the movement, particularly over the use of violence.

“III. Sadr has to balance his political ambitions with those of his militant followers. He could easily increase levels of violence ... though this is unlikely at present. He would have more difficulty reining in violence by his militant followers against the MNF ... He remains liable to change tack at short notice.

“IV. In some areas such as Basra ‘secret cells’ with little loyalty to Sadr are responsible for a significant proportion of the anti-MNF violence carried out in the name of JAM ...

“V. Some ‘secret cells’ are receiving funding, training and supplies from Lebanese Hizballah and the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force. Despite accepting Iranian help Sadr remains an Iraqi nationalist: he suspects Iranian motives and resents their influence. The Iranians for their part find Sadr a frustrating partner. But Iran still views Sadr as an important player in the future Iraq.”

321. The JIC assessed that JAM members joined for differing reasons. For some the attraction was the power and prestige that came with bearing arms and belonging to a militia. But in a climate of increasing violence, JAM membership also offered safety in numbers and the likelihood of retribution if attacked. Others joined JAM out of a sense of religious duty; some to attack Sunnis and the MNF, and a small minority used JAM as a cover for solely criminal activity:

“We judge that this variety of motivating factors is partly responsible for the divisions within JAM. JAM labels such as ‘mainstream’, ‘militant’ and ‘secret cell’ are a valuable analytical aid, but membership is fluid and individuals would not perceive themselves in this way ...

“MNF estimates that there are around 10,000 active supporters with varying degrees of paramilitary training and a further 20,000 sympathisers who could be mobilised rapidly ... many members of JAM have joined the Iraqi Security Forces, particularly the police. Tribal loyalties remain important ...”

322. The Iraq Study Group published its report on 6 December.¹⁷⁷ Although it stressed that there was “no magic formula” to guarantee success, it offered 79 recommendations to improve US policy in Iraq. In particular, it recommended:

- changing the primary mission of US forces in Iraq to one of supporting the Iraqi army, to enable the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq by the first quarter of 2008;

¹⁷⁷ Transcript, 6 December 2006, ‘Iraq Study Group Press Conference’.

- calling for prompt action by the Government of Iraq to achieve key milestones (including progress on the Constitutional review, de-Ba'athification, oil revenue-sharing, provincial elections and Kirkuk) particularly on reconciliation, security and governance, and proposing a reduction in US assistance if substantial progress was not made;
- launching a New Diplomatic Offensive, including the creation of an "Iraq International Support Group", including Iraq, all the States bordering Iraq (including Iran and Syria), the key regional States, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, and the EU); and
- beginning an urgent review of the Constitution in the interests of national reconciliation, with the assistance of the UN.¹⁷⁸

323. Sir David Manning wrote to the FCO in London on the day of the report's publication with an account of a briefing by Mr Baker. Sir David assessed that:

"At first blush, it contains much which we should welcome, both on the internal situation in Iraq, and on the centrality of other regional issues, including MEPP and engaging Syria and Iran ... the ISG report means that there are now powerful voices in Washington advocating change."

324. Mrs Beckett publicly welcomed the report as:

"... a substantial and complex piece of work, to which of course the Prime Minister and senior [British] officials have contributed. From those discussions, [we] get the impression that their thinking was broadly in line with our own but obviously we need to read and digest their formal recommendations."¹⁷⁹

325. Sir John Sawers told the Inquiry that the recommendations had reflected a concern that there was a limit to what could be achieved in Iraq and that it would be better to focus on "working more closely with the likes of Iran and Syria and about finding a basis to withdraw US forces sooner rather than later".¹⁸⁰

326. In preparation for the 7 December meeting of DOP(I), officials prepared a paper on military plans for Southern Iraq in 2007, and another paper on the UK's objectives and presence in Basra.

327. The military plan for southern Iraq proposed the withdrawal of most UK troops from bases in Basra city to Basra Air Station at the end of Op SINBAD which effectively marked the "graduation exercise for the Iraqi Army in Southern Iraq".¹⁸¹ From there, UK forces would perform a "Military Assistance Mission". That would lead to a reduction in

¹⁷⁸ eGram 54298/06 Washington to Various, 6 December 2006, 'Publication of the Report on the Iraq Study Group, 6 December'.

¹⁷⁹ *BBC News*, 6 December 2006, *In quotes: Reaction to Iraq Panel report*.

¹⁸⁰ Public hearing, 16 December 2009, page 97.

¹⁸¹ [Paper MOD officials, 5 December 2006, 'UK Military Plans for Southern Iraq in 2007, a briefing paper for DOP-I by Officials'](#).

troop numbers from 7,100 to 4,500 in May 2007, and possible further reductions later in the year.

328. The paper acknowledged that, in presentational terms, it would be “extremely important to portray our plans as directly linked to supporting the Iraq Government and provincial transfer decisions are Iraqi led”.

329. The Basra paper was written by the FCO and considered the civilian implications of the military plan and the “heightened security threat”.¹⁸² FCO officials recommended aiming for Provincial Iraqi Control in Basra at some point between March and June 2007. Activity required to achieve that would be led from Basra Air Station as “there is no prospect of our being able to recommend to Ministers a return to full staffing at Basra Palace in the near future”. Although that meant limited numbers of staff and “tougher” conditions, the FCO observed that “there will be significant advantages in co-location with the military – making possible a more cohesive approach”.

330. At its meeting on 7 December, DOP(I) agreed the overall intent of both the civilian and military plans, and agreed that progress on the Forward Plan should be considered at its next meeting.¹⁸³ In discussion, the point was made that:

“It would be important to get the optics right. We should not be seen to be driven out by IDF [indirect fire], and it should be possible to suppress indirect fire for a limited period to enable this to occur.”

331. On 7 December, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary spoke to a contact in the US National Security Council to learn about US views on UK proposals for Basra and transition in the South.¹⁸⁴ The Private Secretary reported to Sir Nigel Sheinwald that they had generated “a lot of discomfort” amongst the US military.

332. Mr Blair discussed the Iraq Study Group report “at length” with President Bush over a private breakfast at the White House on 7 December.¹⁸⁵ The Inquiry has not seen a record of that discussion.

333. A record by Mr Blair’s Private Secretary of the formal talks that followed indicates that Mr Blair said that the mission remained the same, but the strategy needed adjustment. Three things were needed:

- to set out the terms of support for the Iraqi Government, which should do more on reconstruction, security and economic capacity building;
- more support for Iraq from the region; and
- a whole Middle East strategy.

¹⁸² [Paper FCO officials, 1 December 2006, ‘Basra: Objectives and Presence in 2007’](#).

¹⁸³ Minutes, 7 December 2006, DOP(I) meeting.

¹⁸⁴ Minute Banner to Sheinwald, 7 December 2006, ‘Iraq – NSC Views’.

¹⁸⁵ Letter Phillipson to Hayes, 8 December 2006, ‘Prime Minister’s Talks with President Bush, 7 December: Middle East Issues and Afghanistan’.

334. No mention of a surge of US troops was recorded in the discussion.

335. After the press conference that followed the talks, Mr Blair and President Bush discussed next steps on Iraq, including a comprehensive plan covering reconstruction, capacity building, outreach and the role of international community, to be agreed with Prime Minister Maliki.

336. On 11 December, the Security Council considered quarterly reports on Iraq by the UN Secretary-General and the MNF-I.¹⁸⁶ Mr Qazi said that the UN Secretary-General's report provided "a sober and urgent warning that Iraq stands on the brink of civil war and chaos". Political transition achievements had not translated into improved security or human rights. Peace initiatives had had no impact on the violence. Violence seemed out of control, provoking widespread concern for Iraq's future.

337. The UN recognised that progress could only be made in the context of active regional and international co-operation. The International Compact needed a viable security and political environment in which to succeed. While efforts were under way to build up the Iraqi Security Forces, self-sufficiency would take years. Mr Qazi concluded with a warning that, if security deteriorated further, a major humanitarian and refugee catastrophe might ensue.

338. The UK Mission to the United Nations in New York reported to the FCO that it had been:

"A noticeably downbeat presentation from Qazi, echoing the conclusions in SG [Secretary-General] Annan's report. In their interventions, most Security Council members (coalition partners excepted) picked up on those aspects of the report dealing with 'civil war' ... and 'regional contact group/international conference' ... predicting imminent arrival of the former and professing commitment to support the latter. Much store was also set by Maliki's National Reconciliation Plan and the constitutional review mechanism. But rhetoric and lengthy interventions aside, none appeared to offer new ideas, preferring instead to await any policy cue from Washington."

339. On 12 December, Mr Hadley told Sir Nigel Sheinwald that the US Administration could accept the need to support Iraqi initiative and ownership, President Bush was also considering a US "bridge force" to help stem the violence in the first part of 2007 as "one last major effort to get reconciliation off the ground".¹⁸⁷ No decision had yet been taken.

¹⁸⁶ eGram 55037/06 UKMIS New York to FCO London, 12 December 2006, 'Iraq: Security Council Debate'.

¹⁸⁷ Letter Sheinwald to Hayes, 13 December 2006, 'Conversation with US National Security Adviser, 12 December'.

340. On 14 December, at the request of the Iraq Senior Officials Group, the JIC assessed the situation in “The Kurdish North”. It judged:

“... few Kurds subscribe to a sense of Iraqi nationhood. But Kurdish leaders accept that the political and economic conditions for an independent Kurdish State are lacking at present. The Kurds will bide their time (possibly for several years) while taking what incremental steps they can to achieve de facto independence ...

“The Kurdish north is the most stable region in Iraq ... Stability will be maintained after transition to Iraqi (Kurdish) control, now likely in January. There is greater violence in more mixed areas on the periphery of the KRG such as Kirkuk, Tal Afar, Sinjar and Mosul.”¹⁸⁸

341. The JIC continued:

“We judge that the Kurds’ very strong bargaining position within the national government means they are well placed to secure many of their key objectives. They will resist any changes to the Iraqi constitution which threaten the autonomy of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the position of the Peshmerga as a regional guard force, or the KRG’s ability to control regional oil resources and revenues.”

342. The JIC judged that the city of Kirkuk would continue to be “a deeply emotive issue” since:

“Most Kurds regard the city as inherently Kurdish and an essential asset for an independent Kurdistan ... But Kurdish plans will be opposed. The Turkomen still claim Kirkuk as their cultural capital. There are also sizeable Arab Sunni, Arab Shia, Assyrian and Christian communities: most want a special status for Kirkuk as a federal region under some form of power sharing arrangement ...

“Violence has been increasing; since June there have been several suicide attacks ... Ethnic and sectarian fighting has also escalated. The bulk of the violence can be attributed to Sunni nationalist insurgents and jihadists, but elements of Jaysh al-Mahdi and SCIRI’s Badr Organisation have also been implicated ... continued efforts to oust mostly Arab residents risk serious violence, both in the city and in other mixed areas.”

343. On 17 December, Mr Blair visited Baghdad and Basra, accompanied by Mr Jonathan Powell, Sir Nigel Sheinwald and Mr Asquith.¹⁸⁹

344. Mr Blair had a bilateral discussion with Prime Minister Maliki, who had been very negative about Muqtada al-Sadr and consequently focused on building ISF capability “to allow him to deal with the militias”. In relation to the South “he welcomed the progress

¹⁸⁸ [JIC Assessment, 14 December 2006, ‘Iraq: The Kurdish North’.](#)

¹⁸⁹ Letter Banner to Siddiq, 18 December 2006, ‘Visit to Iraq’.

of Operation SINBAD, and hoped that UK forces would remain in enough strength to play a support role to Iraqi forces”.

345. Over lunch, President Talabani told Mr Blair that the Iraqi Army was developing, but needed better logistics and was lacking arms and ammunition. He also observed that “military success could only come through harnessing the support of local people”.

346. On 19 December, Sir David Manning wrote to Mr Sawers, and sent copies to Mr Peter Hayes (Mrs Beckett’s Principal Private Secretary), Mr Peter Ricketts (FCO Permanent Under Secretary), Sir Nigel Sheinwald and Mr Jonathan Powell.¹⁹⁰

347. Sir David reported signs that President Bush would reject the majority of recommendations in the Iraq Study Group report and “dig in rather than exploit the opening that the ISG report provides”. He wrote:

“... the signs point to him [President Bush] adopting a contentious policy of surging additional troops into Baghdad. The argument appears to be that this will help restore order to the capital, and give Maliki the breathing space he needs to go after Sadr and other militias. This may have a certain intellectual plausibility, but there are few in Washington who believe in its political viability.”

348. Mr Blair wrote to President Bush on 20 December, in part to report his recent visit to Iraq.¹⁹¹ He emphasised the importance of support for Prime Minister Maliki, through increasing the speed at which the Iraqi Army was developing, supporting the reconciliation and outreach work, and helping to create a more effective system for the disbursement of money within Iraq.

349. Mr Blair reported that, in MND(SE), he had found UK forces with “surprisingly high morale” and in no doubt that Iran was the major player behind the violence.

350. On extra troops for Baghdad Mr Blair wrote “It’s your call obviously ...” but added:

“For what it’s worth, I think this might be sensible short term but only as part of a wider plan to boost Iraqi capability. There is no doubt US forces can lock down parts of Baghdad. But ... it is only very short term respite. So there has to be Iraqi force plus reconstruction.”

351. Mr Blair concluded his note by commenting: “My point is simply: whatever you do, the only ultimate solution is Iraqi.”

352. The following day Sir David Manning reported that President Bush had asked Secretary Gates to provide him with options for a possible surge of US forces focused on Baghdad and Anbar province, but had not yet taken a decision.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Letter Manning to Sawers, 19 December 2006, ‘Bush and Baker-Hamilton’.

¹⁹¹ [Note \[Blair to Bush\], \[20 December 2006\], ‘Note’](#).

¹⁹² eGram 56678/06 Washington to Various, 21 December 2006, ‘The “Review of Reviews”. Where Next?’

353. The British Embassy Washington did not know what Secretary Gates' views and advice would be but colleagues in the National Security Council and State Department had said they should expect "surges" in US support for reconciliation and reconstruction. A new Iraq strategy was expected to be announced by President Bush in the second week of January.

354. Sir David's advice was that:

"... we should remain cautious about drawing conclusions before the meetings of Principals have taken place. Right now the presumption is that there will be a surge in the level of US troops in the first half of 2007."

355. Mr Jonathan Powell met Mr Karl Rove, President Bush's Deputy Chief of Staff, and Mr Josh Bolten, President Bush's Chief of Staff, in Washington on 21 December.¹⁹³ They told him that President Bush would "almost certainly" announce 20,000 additional US troops for Iraq, remaining until 2008.

356. On Christmas Day, UK forces led an attack against the Jameat police HQ in Basra, the base of the Serious Crime Unit.¹⁹⁴

357. The British Embassy Office Basra reported that when British troops entered the HQ they found 127 prisoners, over 80 percent of whom showed signs of torture. The ISF played a "significant" role in the operation, processing and transferring the prisoners, although last minute "cold feet" had meant that the Iraqi Brigade intended to supply an outer cordon were ordered not to do so.

358. The British Embassy Office also reported a significant Iraqi reaction to the attack. Although the view of the majority of Basrawis was "good riddance", some members of the Basra Provincial Council publicly criticised the operation.

359. Lt Gen Shirreff told the Inquiry that it was a "deliberate operation" that he had discussed with the Basra security committee in advance:

"Minister Bulani, who was Minister of the Interior, authorised the disbandment of the Serious Crimes Unit. When we went to see Maliki in, I think it was mid to late October, with the security committee, he directed Hamadi to crush the police death squads. Before the operation, one of the Basra judges issued an arrest warrant for the 62 most wanted of the police."¹⁹⁵

360. Lt Gen Shirreff told the Inquiry that reactions to the operation were:

"Maliki was generally supportive, Governor Waili was delighted, the tribal sheikhs within Basra were delighted, the principal cleric of the largest Shia mosque in Basra,

¹⁹³ Minute Powell to Prime Minister, 21 December 2006, 'White House'.

¹⁹⁴ eGram 57155/06 Basra to FCO London, 28 December 2006, 'Iraq: Basra: Action Against Serious Crimes Unit'.

¹⁹⁵ Public hearing, 11 January 2010, pages 27-29.

with a congregation of 10,000 people on Friday prayers, thanked me for delivering the people of Basra from this nest of vipers. Elements on the Provincial Council weren't happy, but they were not going to be happy because they were in league with the Sadrists. So they saw their power being hit at."¹⁹⁶

361. Mr Blair was scheduled to speak to President Bush on 29 December.¹⁹⁷ The briefing note provided by his Private Secretary explained that the UK expected that President Bush would make an announcement in early January that he would increase the number of US troops in Iraq (possibly by as many as 30,000) for at least the first half of 2007. The note explained that such a surge would be "awkward" for the UK as:

"... our plans in Basra go in the opposite direction. If a decision is taken to close Shaibah logistics base in the new year, we aim to drawdown by at least one battlegroup at the next troop rotation in May.

"You should, therefore, probe Bush on his plans, insofar as they are finalised and say that we will need to co-ordinate closely with them to ensure that we are seen to be working from the same script."

362. During their phone call, Mr Blair told President Bush that he had returned from his visit to Iraq "convinced that we had to see the job through".¹⁹⁸ He had found similar determination in Baghdad and Basra along with a greater sense of unity of purpose amongst Iraqi politicians.

363. They discussed the US evaluation of the Iraq Study Group and the need for the US to "muscle up" in Baghdad to give the Iraqi Government room to do what was necessary.

364. Mr Blair commented that the problem was how to build the capability of the Iraqi Government, which was essentially "starting from scratch".

365. On 29 December, Maj Gen Shirreff wrote to Mr Blair in follow-up to his visit proposing the establishment of a "Joint Inter-Agency Task Force" in Basra led by the GOC MND(SE).¹⁹⁹ In his view this would "deliver concentrated British effect" and "improve the prospects of strategic success".

366. Maj Gen Shirreff's diagnosis was that the existing arrangement, with the PRT located in Kuwait, "lacks unity of command and unity of purpose". The solution was "a single organisation capable of planning, executing and commanding both security/military assistance and reconstruction operations".

¹⁹⁶ Public hearing, 11 January 2010, pages 31-32.

¹⁹⁷ Minute Phillipson to Prime Minister, 29 December 2006, 'Iraq: Phonecall with President Bush, 0920 (EST) 29 December'.

¹⁹⁸ Letter Phillipson to Siddiq, 29 December 2006, 'Prime Minister's Phonecall with President Bush, 29 December: Iraq, Isreal/Palestine, Iran'.

¹⁹⁹ [Letter Shirreff to Blair, 29 December 2006, \[untitled\]](#).

The execution of Saddam Hussein

On Saturday 30 December 2006 Saddam Hussein was hanged, having been sentenced to death on 5 November for the killing of 148 Shia in the town of Dujail in the 1980s.²⁰⁰

Only a small number of people witnessed the execution but film of the moments leading up to it was shown on Iraqi state television. Footage showing the execution itself later appeared on the internet, apparently captured using a mobile phone.

After the hanging, Mrs Beckett said:

“I welcome the fact that Saddam Hussein has been tried for at least some of the appalling crimes he committed against the Iraqi people. He has now been held to account. The British Government does not support the use of the death penalty, in Iraq or anywhere else ... We have made our position very clear to the Iraqi authorities, but we respect their decision as that of a sovereign nation.”²⁰¹

Appearing at a joint session of the Defence and Foreign Affairs Select Committees on 11 January 2007, Mrs Beckett explained:

“We have continued since the execution of Saddam Hussein to express our concerns and our opposition to the implementation of the death penalty. My understanding is that the government of Iraq continues to take the view that this is a matter for them.”²⁰²

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367. On 3 January 2007, Mr Dowse provided Sir Nigel Sheinwald with an update on Iranian officials arrested during raids in Baghdad on 20/21 December 2006.²⁰³ Two had been released within 24 hours. The remaining four had been released into Iraqi custody on 28 December and left for Iran the following day. The MNF continued to hold eight minor Badr officials who were originally arrested with the Iranians. Mr Dowse commented:

“Much of what has been revealed so far ties in with our previous assessments of Iranian activities and intent in Iraq: they seek to maintain Shia unity; enhance their political influence in the main Shia parties; and provide military support where they can.”

²⁰⁰ *BBC News*, 30 December 2006, *Saddam Hussein Executed in Iraq*.

²⁰¹ Statement by Margaret Beckett, 30 December 2006.

²⁰² Select Committee on Defence, *Examination of witnesses*, 11 January 2007, Q45.

²⁰³ Minute Dowse to Sheinwald, 3 January 2007, ‘Update: MNF detention of Iranian officials’.

368. On the same day, Secretary Rice told Mrs Beckett that President Bush was likely to announce the conclusions of his review of Iraq policy the following week, but:

“Contrary to media reports he had not taken any final decisions on the proposed ‘surge’ of 20,000 troops into Baghdad and was still considering Gates’ recommendations.”²⁰⁴

369. The following day, the Chiefs of Staff were briefed on:

“... the likelihood that a ‘surge’ of forces would be conducted with the aim of ‘breaking sectarian violence as the US transitioned’: associated implications for the UK which included the difficult presentational issue of a UK transition coinciding with a US surge and the possibility that an aggressive anti-militia campaign in the North would result in increased insurgency in the South ...”²⁰⁵

370. That possibility meant that there was a “critical need for the UK to have some influence on US operational planning”.

371. In the discussion on operations in Afghanistan that followed, Lt Gen Houghton explained that it would be important that the Worcester and Sherwood Foresters Regiment was stood down from Op TELIC by the end of January 2007 “to meet the enduring liability” in Afghanistan.

372. In his weekly report on 4 January, Maj Gen Shirreff defended his decision to attack the Jameat police station on Christmas Day:

“If I had left this up to the Iraqis to do it the Iraqi way (as we did in October) there would have been no operation. I judged that there was an operational imperative to carry out the operation; hence my decision to go for it ... I wanted to send an unequivocal message two ways: to our US allies that we are serious about conducting decisive, kinetic operations against the SCU [Serious Crime Unit] and corrupt police if PIC in Basra is to be credible; and a similar message to the Iraqi domestic audience and the people of Basra ... If the Sadrists and their fellow travellers have had their noses put out of joint, then so be it. Above all, it is seen locally as a major defeat for JAM and a significant victory for MNF in achieving a secure environment in Basra.”²⁰⁶

373. An expected announcement of a US surge (initially of 9,000 troops) was discussed by the Iraq Strategy Group on 5 January.²⁰⁷ The Group observed that the contrast between a US surge and the UK plans for drawdown could be problematic, but that this could be mitigated by explaining that Basra and Baghdad were in different places

²⁰⁴ Minute Siddiq to Sawers, 3 January 2007, ‘The Foreign Secretary’s telephone conversation with the US Secretary of State, 3 January 2007’.

²⁰⁵ Minutes, 4 January 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

²⁰⁶ Report Shirreff, 4 January 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq update – 04 January 2007’.

²⁰⁷ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 5 January 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 5 January’.

in their security development, and Op SINBAD represented an earlier equivalent surge in the South.

374. The structural proposal set out in Maj Gen Shirreff's 29 December letter to Mr Blair was also discussed at the Iraq Strategy Group, where VAdm Style made clear that Maj Gen Shirreff's views were not held by the MOD corporately.

375. Although better co-ordination and control were needed, a new organisation need not necessarily be military-led. Sir Nigel Sheinwald told the Group that Iraq was "entering a new phase, which required a coherent structure under a single point of contact" and asked the Iraq Senior Officials Group to work on new structures.

376. Sir Nigel Sheinwald reported to Mr Blair after the meeting that Maj Gen Shirreff's views:

"... represent his frustration, shared by the MOD, that the civilian reconstruction effort is uneven. We all agree that we need to make sure that we have an effectively led Basra operation for the next year (at least)."²⁰⁸

377. Sir Nigel reported that co-location of everyone at Basra Air Station, from late February onwards, would "help enormously" and that he had asked for advice on the right structure, though the view was that "it should be civilian led, with strong military input and follow-up". Sir Nigel had added that both DFID and the FCO were:

"... very fed up with Shirreff's disparaging comments about the civilian effort ... But the fact is that there have been constant problems between the military and civilian people in Basra from the start. We must make a last effort to get a joined-up operation."

378. Mr Blair annotated Sir Nigel's minute: "Put Shirreff in charge – the Army gets things done."²⁰⁹

379. Sir Nigel Sheinwald also provided Mr Blair with an update on Iraq in which he considered the expected announcement of a surge of US forces into Iraq.²¹⁰ The key issue for the UK was the potential impact on the UK's planned strategy for Basra. Sir Nigel wrote:

"The MOD are putting a positive gloss on Operation SINBAD because they are desperate to get down to 4,500 by May/June for Afghan reasons. I asked them at my Whitehall Strategy Group meeting today to be clearer about the **conditions** which would need to be met for security transition to take place. This is a mixture of the

²⁰⁸ [Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 5 January 2007, 'Iraq: Weekly Update' attaching Note Cabinet Office, 5 January 2007, 'Basra'](#).

²⁰⁹ Manuscript comment Blair on [Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 5 January 2007, 'Iraq: Weekly Update' attaching Note Cabinet Office, 5 January 2007, 'Basra'](#).

²¹⁰ [Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 5 January 2007, 'Iraq: Weekly Update' attaching Note Cabinet Office, 5 January 2007, 'Basra' including manuscript comments Blair.](#)

security situation on the ground and the level of capability of Iraqi Army and Police forces.”

380. Sir Nigel judged that:

“The **US decision** to put extra combat forces into Baghdad could have repercussions in Basra. If, for example, there are major operations in Sadr City, the JAM will react badly in Baghdad and possibly in Basra. This could lead to a deterioration in the security situation in Basra just as we are trying to re-posture. It could at the very least delay our plans. This is one of the reasons why the UK Chiefs of Staff are so nervous about US plans, but it is not the only one: their main concern is that this surge will simply be a re-run of the first two phases of the Baghdad security plan.”

381. Sir Nigel attached a Cabinet Office note on Basra which he described as suggesting “a pretty patchy picture”.

382. The note said that 14 of the 16 planned “pulses” in Op SINBAD had taken place so far. There had been some successes but there were concerns about relations with the Basra Security Committee, about the capacity of the Iraqi Army 10th Division, whose performance had been “mixed”, and about the return of militia control in particular areas.

383. The Cabinet Office reported that: “Despite these problems, MOD still assesses that we are on track to achieve Provincial Iraqi Control in Basra in May 2007.” Beside this, Mr Blair wrote:

“But how can we do this if we have not secured Basra?”

384. The Cabinet Office note concluded with a reminder of the importance of explaining the UK’s transition strategy effectively to the US, the Iraqis and other key allies, noting that “some suspect ... us of pursuing our own agenda or wanting to withdraw as quickly as possible”. The Cabinet Office considered:

“Although the potential surge in US forces in Baghdad presents an optical problem for both the UK and US, this can be explained by pointing out that Operation SINBAD was the equivalent UK surge, taking place in Basra sooner because of the different security situation there.”

385. Mr Blair wrote on the document:

“But the issue is not UK withdrawing troops and the US increasing them; it is whether in Basra the conditions for draw-down have been met.”

386. Sir Nigel also supplied Mr Blair with a minute setting out key points in preparation for a call with President Bush.²¹¹

²¹¹ [Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 5 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Conversation with President Bush’.](#)

387. In relation to the surge of US forces, Sir Nigel wrote that there was “insufficient clarity on the nature of the mission – is this just a repeat of the Baghdad security plan; or does it go wider, eg Anbar, border with Iran etc?”

388. Sir Nigel Sheinwald suggested that Mr Blair should discuss with President Bush:

- “– The need for him to present this as a **change** of policy, though not of course of objectives ...
- The need to put emphasis both in public and in terms of the follow-up on **Iraqi capability** ...
- The need to make clear that the **numbers and mission of coalition forces depends on the situation on the ground**. So what happens in Baghdad (surge of US forces) should not pre-determine what happens in **Basra** (where we anticipate a drawdown over the next six months following Operation Sinbad). It is important that Bush does not say anything next week which prejudices our plans ...”

389. Sir Nigel was explicit that the UK Chiefs of Staff did not support the US surge.

390. On 5 January, President Bush briefed Mr Blair ahead of his speech on Iraq the following week.²¹² During the call he described a significant increase in US and Iraqi troops, and a number of personnel changes.

391. Mr Blair said that it was vital to break the back of the violence in Baghdad. He urged President Bush to focus on reconciliation and reconstruction as well as security, suggesting that it might be helpful to designate individuals who would be accountable for leading work on those areas.

392. Mr Blair suggested that it would be vital to make clear that the coalition was supporting Iraqi efforts to establish security, so that “it did not look like it was just about increasing US troops”. President Bush agreed.

393. On 6 January, Prime Minister Maliki delivered what Mr Asquith described as a “robust” speech for Iraq’s Army Day, in which he called for Armed Forces that were without political bias, cohesive in the national interest and protected from political interference and militia.²¹³ He warned:

“We will not allow anybody to be an alternative to the state, whether the militias or anybody else, regardless of their affiliations ... We will confront them firmly.”

394. The following day, Mr Asquith met Prime Minister Maliki to congratulate him on his speech, to convey concern at the way in which Saddam Hussein’s execution had been handled and to discuss dealing with the militias. They also discussed Mr Maliki’s

²¹² Letter Phillipson to Hayes, 5 January 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s phonecall with President Bush, 5 January: Iraq’.

²¹³ eGram 534/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 7 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister al-Maliki, 7 January’.

priorities for government: reconciliation; tackling rebels and harnessing grass-roots popular support including among the Kurds and Sunnis. Prime Minister Maliki described proposals for offering an amnesty to those who would lay down their arms which might be put to Parliament in a week or two.

395. On 8 January, Mr Blair's Private Secretary wrote to Mrs Beckett's Private Secretary:

"We are entering an important new phase in the coalition effort in Iraq, as – following the US review and in the light of our plans in Basra – we and the US attempt to help the Iraqi government entrench genuine change and progress in the areas of security, reconstruction and reconciliation. The Prime Minister judges that our present level of effort should be stepped up in response. He would like to see a qualitative change in our ability to monitor progress in these key areas, to identify blockages to progress, and to take rapid action to fix these."²¹⁴

396. The letter asked for detailed reports and weekly updates on key areas, specifically:

- Weekly reports on Basra: "The Prime Minister is concerned that at present the picture emerging from Op SINBAD in terms of Iraqi security capability and economic/social impact is mixed. He welcomes the work commissioned by the Iraq Strategy Group to identify the detailed conditions we need to see in Basra before we can re-posture and draw down ... The Prime Minister ... agrees strongly that we need urgently to improve our ability to deliver economic effect in theatre, and that we need a joined-up operation."
- A detailed report on reconstruction efforts to date, identifying what has been done by the US and others: "Better liaison with and understanding of the US programme is essential" (see Section 10.2).
- A detailed account of the reconciliation activity currently under way (see Section 10.2).
- Advice on improving the UN effort in Iraq.
- Weekly reports on developments in ISF capability indicating details of any problems, how these were to be tackled and by whom (see Section 12.1).
- Advice on the current state of the Iraqi justice system, including the degree of governmental interference and how this might realistically be addressed.

397. In relation to the points made in Maj Gen Shirreff's letter of 29 December, the Private Secretary wrote that Mr Blair:

"... agrees strongly that we need urgently to improve our ability to deliver economic effect in theatre and that we need a joined-up operation. He retains an open mind on how best to deliver this (and looks forward to the advice already commissioned by

²¹⁴ Letter Banner to Siddiq, 8 January 2007, 'Iraq'.

Nigel Sheinwald). If necessary he is content that this should be delivered via a task force under military leadership.”

398. On 8 January, an official in the IPU reported a conversation with a counterpart in Washington which suggested that Prime Minister Maliki had been resistant to the surge, and that US officials were struggling to explain how the increase in US troops would support the Iraqi Government in taking more of a lead.²¹⁵

399. Mr Blair and President Bush spoke again on 9 January.²¹⁶ Mr Blair said that he considered the key points to get across in the President’s speech would be that additional troops had a specific and identified task in Baghdad and that “this was part of a way plan, to which Maliki’s government was committed”.

400. President Bush announced the new US strategy in an address to the nation on 10 January.²¹⁷ He said:

“The situation in Iraq is unacceptable to the American people – and it is unacceptable to me ...

“It is clear that we need to change our strategy in Iraq.”

401. The most urgent priority was security, especially in Baghdad, where:

“... violence is splitting Baghdad into sectarian enclaves, and shaking the confidence of all Iraqis ...

“Our past efforts to secure Baghdad failed for two principal reasons: There were not enough Iraqi and American troops to secure neighbourhoods that had been cleared of terrorists and insurgents. And there were too many restrictions on the troops we did have.”

402. President Bush announced that the Iraqi Government would appoint a military commander and two deputy commanders for Baghdad, and planned to deploy 18 Iraqi Army and National Police brigades. They would be supported by more than 20,000 additional US troops. Those troops would work alongside Iraqi units and be embedded in their formations. President Bush said:

“Our troops will have a well-defined mission: to help Iraqis clear and secure neighbourhoods, to help them protect the local population, and to help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing the security that Baghdad needs.”

²¹⁵ Email Casey to Lever, 8 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Bush Speech’.

²¹⁶ Letter Banner to Hayes, 9 January 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Phonecall with President Bush, 9 January: Middle East Issues’.

²¹⁷ The White House archive, 10 January 2007, President’s Address to the Nation.

403. President Bush made clear that the US goal was to see all 18 Iraqi provinces transferred to PIC during the course of 2007.

404. A few days before his statement, President Bush had announced that General David Petraeus would succeed Gen Casey as Commanding General Multi-National Force – Iraq.²¹⁸

405. The operation which resulted from the new strategy set out by President Bush is often referred to in contemporary documents as the new Baghdad Security Plan or Operation Fardh al-Qanoon, Arabic for ‘Enforce the Rule of Law’.

406. On 10 January, as part of the planning for transition to PIC, Mr Asquith proposed to the IPU that decisions on future diplomatic representation in Basra should be based on an analysis of the UK’s interests five years ahead.²¹⁹ He found it difficult to see Basra Air Station providing the right location for a diplomatic mission even one year ahead and argued for keeping open the option of re-occupying Basra Palace:

“... it is not feasible to think of a CG [Consul General] operating out of BAS [Basra Air Station] in the medium term. No BP [Basra Palace] presence therefore almost certainly means no Basra presence in a year or so ...

“If, whatever the merits of the case, there is not money to run an operation at Basra (because of Afghanistan), then Ministers should also be told.”

407. DOP(I) met on 11 January at 0800 and discussed the announcement made the previous day by President Bush.²²⁰ Mrs Beckett commented that the change in US plans should make little difference to the UK’s plans, although there would undoubtedly be media speculation about the possibility. Mr Browne described UK and US plans as “entirely consistent”; the idea of supporting an Iraqi lead meant that the concepts behind the surge and Op SINBAD were “virtually identical”.

408. DOP(I) also discussed plans for military transition in MND(SE).

409. An MOD paper said that transition to PIC in Maysan was expected to happen in February at the latest.²²¹ Transition in Basra would be reviewed in the light of Op SINBAD, which had “delivered promising results” and remained possible within the first half of 2007.

410. In preparation for PIC, the MOD planned to reconfigure the UK forces within MND(SE) in order to provide more effective support for the Iraqi Security Forces.

²¹⁸ White House news release, 5 January 2007, ‘President Bush Pleased to Accept Recommendations from Secretary Gates for General Petraeus and Admiral Fallon’.

²¹⁹ Email Asquith to Casey, 10 January 2007, ‘Basra Future’.

²²⁰ Minutes, 11 January 2007, DOP(I) meeting.

²²¹ [Paper MOD officials, 11 January 2007, ‘UK Military Transition Plans for Southern Iraq: Update’.](#)

The MOD proposed to consolidate MNF at a single operating base at Basra Air Station by the end of May. That would enable UK forces to:

- deliver enhanced Iraqi Army training through enlarged military training teams and a dedicated Joint Leadership Academy;
- improve support to the rule of law through concentrated work with the Iraqi police in areas such as forensics and continued mentoring at the Provincial Joint Co-ordination Centre (see Section 12.1);
- maintain a dedicated force reserve to ensure that they could react to events and support Iraqi security operations if required;
- reduce MNF vulnerability and exposure to attack, particularly indirect fire; and
- improve co-ordination with the UK civilian effort in MND(SE), much of which had been relocated to the Air Station in October 2006.

411. DOP(I) recognised that final decisions could not be made until after Mr Browne had discussed the proposals in greater detail with Secretary Gates.²²² There was concern that the US appeared to be adopting a “more purist approach” to the criteria to be met before transition to PIC and that this was likely to delay transition in Maysan.

412. The IPU wrote a paper proposing an engagement strategy regarding the UK’s future presence in Southern Iraq focused on the need for careful handling of others affected by the proposed relocation to the Air Station, for the same meeting of DOP(I).²²³

413. The paper said that civilian staff, including from the US State Department and the UN Development Programme, had been based in Basra Palace, but the FCO believed that all were content to relocate to Basra Air Station.

414. The IPU advised that it should be made clear that there was “no separate UK agenda in the South” and that there had been no unilateral decision-making by the UK.

415. The paper suggested that key messages to reinforce with US interlocutors included:

- “• There is no separate UK agenda in the South. We have not taken any unilateral UK decisions, nor will we. We are part of the coalition and will continue to act as such. What we plan in the South is part of the MNF Transition Bridging Strategy.
- We remain committed to delivering the agreed conditions in Maysan & Basra, to enable transition to happen on the agreed schedule. We are not arguing for ditching the conditions-based approach.
- ...
- The handover of Basra will not mean withdrawal of UK troops from southern Iraq. We have made very clear publicly that we intend to retain significant

²²² Minutes, 11 January 2007, DOP(I) meeting.

²²³ Paper IPU, 8 January 2007, ‘Future UK Presence in Southern Iraq: Engagement Strategy’.

forces in theatre, to do much the same range of ongoing support tasks the MNF envisages doing elsewhere in Iraq.

- There are some specific messages we should seek to promote in respect of the readiness of Basra for transition. The US are sceptical about the progress we have made in recent months. They point to the increased IDF threat. And General Casey has rightly identified the police as the main obstacle to transition.”

416. After considering the IPU’s paper, it was decided that Mrs Beckett, Mr Browne and Mr Benn would write jointly to members of DOP, setting out plans for transition and a proposal for the timing of an announcement.²²⁴

417. President Bush’s announcement was also discussed by Cabinet immediately after the DOP(I) meeting.²²⁵ Mr Blair told members of Cabinet that plans for a reduction in UK force levels were on track, but implementation would be dependent on achieving the right conditions on the ground, specifically rooting out the militias from Basra city and cutting off Iranian assistance to the extremists. During his visit at the end of 2006, he had “sensed, for the first time that Iraqi Generals felt that if they were given the right training and equipment they would be able to do the job”.

418. Mrs Beckett told Cabinet that Op SINBAD had been more successful than she had dared to hope. Although questions would be asked about UK withdrawals as the US surged, the answer was simple; conditions were different in Basra.

419. On 11 January, at the request of the MOD, the JIC released an Assessment covering the prospects for economic development and reconstruction in Iraq over the following two years.²²⁶

420. The JIC judged:

“I. Real economic growth in Iraq continues to be positive. But the government has shown little commitment to economic reform and large scale job creation is unlikely in the next two years.

...

“III. The security situation remains the main obstacle to domestic private sector investment and foreign investment. The inability of the security forces to create a safe environment for engineers to carry out repairs inhibits reconstruction. But even in a benign security environment, Iraq would still face severe economic challenges.”

²²⁴ Minutes, 11 January 2007, DOP(I) meeting.

²²⁵ Cabinet Conclusions, 11 January 2007.

²²⁶ [JIC Assessment, 11 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Economic Prospects’](#).

421. On 11 January, Mr Asquith and Mr McDonald called on Prime Minister Maliki, who was enthusiastic about the proposed surge of US troops announced by President Bush the previous day.²²⁷

422. Mr McDonald stressed that reconciliation remained high on Mr Blair's agenda and asked what the future was for the process in Iraq. Prime Minister Maliki confirmed that reconciliation was of strategic importance to Iraq and that he intended to persevere with it.

423. Mr Asquith asked Prime Minister Maliki to intervene to end the Basra Provincial Council's lack of co-operation with MND(SE). Prime Minister Maliki made clear that he believed that the Provincial Council was acting outside its remit.

424. On 11 January, Mrs Beckett and Mr Browne appeared before a joint session of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Select Committees.²²⁸ Mr Browne told members that "the United States' plans are entirely consistent with our objectives and activities in MND (SE)".

425. In response to a question on UK involvement in the decision to surge, Mr Browne said that the British deputies to US military commanders in Iraq were involved in the discussions. He added:

"Every single aspect of the structure of the way in which this coalition operates at a military level is reflected in agreements and in joint committee documents and we have a continuing role in the consideration of them and in the revision of them."

426. The following day, Mr Blair's Private Secretary told him that reaction to President Bush's speech had been "pretty negative in the US, less so in Iraq".²²⁹

427. Mr Blair wrote on his Private Secretary's update note: "I still need more info on Basra and have we established the Joint Working yet, led by military?"²³⁰

428. Lt Gen Lamb's weekly report on 14 January reported some important practical developments.²³¹ He advised that:

- The Iraqi Government had selected Lt Gen Aboud as the commander for the Baghdad Security Plan earlier that week: "A professional soldier, who is understood to have been well respected by his officers and men, chosen for his non-sectarian background (no known militia or political ties), he is regarded as a good man; and is likely to be able to call upon significant political muscle."

²²⁷ eGram 1246/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 11 January 2007, 'Iraq: Call on Prime Minister Maliki, 11 January'.

²²⁸ Select Committee on Defence, *Examination of witnesses*, 11 January 2007, Q2 & Q22.

²²⁹ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 12 January 2007, 'Iraq update, 12 December [sic]'.

²³⁰ Manuscript comment Blair on Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 12 January 2007, 'Iraq Update, 12 December'.

²³¹ Minute Lamb to CDS, 14 January 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (241) 14 Jan 07'.

- The Iraqi authorities were planning, in the context of the Baghdad Security Plan, to close the Syrian and Iranian borders.
- Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih had agreed to energise governance of the energy sector, and would chair a committee of Ministers on which Lt Gen Lamb would sit.

429. On planning for transition, Lt Gen Lamb commented:

“Get it right, and all our Christmases will come at once – it is powerful. Get it wrong and we potentially set ourselves up for a very messy finish.”

430. Mr Blair met Secretary Gates on 14 January and discussed the recent US announcement and the UK plans for MND(SE).²³² Mr Blair contrasted security in Baghdad and Basra, noting that this was a distinction that Prime Minister Maliki was always keen to draw. He said that the UK would not make its decision on re-posturing and drawing down its forces in Basra unless it was absolutely clear that the conditions had been met. It was essential to be confident that the Iraqi forces could hold Basra after UK withdrawal.

431. Secretary Gates welcomed that reassurance, explaining that the US would prefer the UK to remain in Basra until later in the year. In his view, Basra was not yet ready for transition. He was also concerned that a UK withdrawal would create political difficulties for other coalition partners and could have a negative impact on other countries’ contribution to the MNF.

432. Sir Nigel Sheinwald’s record of the meeting also noted that Mr Blair had mentioned Afghanistan “in the context of our proposed drawdown in Basra”.

433. On 15 January, the British Embassy Office Basra reported receipt of a letter from the Chairman of the Provincial Council which set a number of conditions to be met before re-engagement with the UK would be considered.²³³ They included an official apology, compensation and withdrawal from specified MNF bases in Basra city. The British Embassy Office recommended “a robust line” in response.

434. On 16 January, Mr Blair met ACM Stirrup and senior officials from the FCO, the MOD, SIS, DFID and the Cabinet Office for an update on Iraq.²³⁴

435. Mr Blair asked how the proposal to draw down to 4,500 troops would affect the UK’s capability in Basra. ACM Stirrup assured him that:

“... there would be no impact, and no difference in our ability to create military effect, though this would in future be focused on training and mentoring. The troops

²³² Letter Sheinwald to Forber, 15 January 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with US Defense Secretary, 14 January: Iraq and Afghanistan’.

²³³ eGram 1607/07 Basra to FCO London, 15 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Basra: Disengagement’.

²³⁴ [Letter Banner to Siddiq, 16 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Meeting with Officials’.](#)

who would be pulled out were involved only in static guarding, of bases which we intended to close in any case.”

436. ACM Stirrup said that Gen Casey understood and was comfortable with the idea of the UK drawing down to 4,500 troops by May:

“His concerns centred on the idea of ‘leaving Basra unattended’ (which we did not plan to do), the performance of the police, and Iranian activity. Moreover, Gates had agreed that the coalition should aim to get out of the centre of Iraqi cities.”

437. Mr Blair asked about work on joint civilian and military structures to deliver “assistance” in Basra, as proposed by Maj Gen Shirreff. ACM Stirrup said that it was too late in the day to implement Maj Gen Shirreff’s proposal; building capacity in the Iraqi system was now the focus and should not be militarily-led. Co-location of civilian and military personnel at Basra Air Station would help.

438. On 17 January, the JIC assessed developments in Iraqi security strategy, the readiness of the ISF and prospects for transition of security to Iraqi control.²³⁵

439. The Assessment said that sectarian violence had deepened over the past six months, and attacks on the MNF were “reaching new highs”. There had been “no coherent Iraqi national security strategy in response”.

440. The JIC judged:

“I. The Iraqi Government’s approach to security reflects its sectarian make-up: the Shia and Kurds want to take control of security in their own areas first. Plans for dealing politically with the Sunni Arab insurgency remain unclear. There is no coherent Iraqi national security strategy.

“II. The lack of united national political direction is reflected in Iraq’s national security machinery which remains unco-ordinated and only partially effective: undermined by personal and party rivalries, endemic corruption and the absence of a capable bureaucracy. This is unlikely to change significantly in the foreseeable future.

...

“V. The success of new US plans will depend in part on the willingness of the Iraqi Government to take on sectarian and political militias. Maliki will not take action which risks breaking the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and bringing down his government. Only a small proportion of the ISF are currently both willing and able to take on the Shia militias.”

441. A summary of contact with JAM1, produced by a senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) in 2007, said that in late 2006 officials “began to look

²³⁵ [JIC Assessment, 17 January 2007, ‘Iraqi Security Forces: Prospects in 2007’.](#)

again at [JAM1] as a man of violence who might develop a more political role as ... he had growing doubts about the impact of JAM's attacks on MNF-I".²³⁶

442. On 18 January, in the first of her weekly reports from Basra (as requested by Mr Blair's Private Secretary on 8 January), Dr Rosalind Marsden, British Consul General in Basra, set out the need to discuss security and other issues with appropriate Basra representatives.²³⁷ She wrote:

"The reaction of the Provincial Council, Emergency Security Committee (ESC) and PDoP [Provincial Director of Police] to the Jameat operation [on Christmas Day] illustrates the level of fear that JAM have inspired in Basra's political and security leadership. All three are dysfunctional. With very few exceptions, Provincial Council members are regarded as corrupt, self-serving, intimidated by the militias and, in some cases, criminal ... The PDoP and the ESC are widely regarded here as weak and ineffective. The Governor claims that he has lobbied in Baghdad for their removal ...

"The arrest of Sayid Naji, Basra's JAM commander, on 18 December has caused some disruption to militant JAM. MND(SE) continue strike operations to sustain this disruptive effect and keep JAM leaders on the run. However, over the last few weeks, JAM have continued to mount IDF and other attacks on MNF ... An American citizen was kidnapped on 5 January at a checkpoint north of Basra, almost certainly by JAM. The American is still missing and the two Iraqis who accompanied him have been found dead. Although militant JAM are relatively small in number, they are externally supported and getting more professional."

443. The Prime Minister considered that the weekly report had been "excellent" and was looking forward to more of the same.²³⁸ He and the Senior Officials Group agreed with Dr Marsden's recommendation that she insist on an end to any boycott of the MNF before discussions on preparation for PIC could begin.

444. Maj Gen Shirreff told the Inquiry:

"... it was pretty clear to me that ... looking over the period as a whole of my time in command – we had a strategy that involved extraction rather than necessarily achieving mission success. It was, in a sense, an exit strategy rather than a winning strategy. A winning strategy was going to require significant additional resources."²³⁹

²³⁶ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) to Lyall Grant, 9 November 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: Negotiations with JAM in Basrah'.

²³⁷ Letter Marsden to Aldred, 18 January 2007, 'Basra: Weekly Report'.

²³⁸ Letter Aldred to Marsden, 23 January 2007, [untitled].

²³⁹ Public hearing, 11 January 2010, page 7.

445. Major General Jonathan Shaw, who became GOC MND(SE) in mid-January 2007, told the Inquiry that he “wasn’t there” when negotiations with JAM1 first began and that “they were started by [officials working closely with the military]”, adding:

“... I can tell you from my perspective where it began. It began right back in January when I arrived, the germ of the idea had probably been in my head before I got there.”²⁴⁰

446. Maj Gen Shaw told the Inquiry that he had quickly concluded that “trying to annihilate JAM in a kinetic attritional confrontation was a bit futile” and that the way to deal with them was to “kill the irreconcilable and ... take the reconcilable on board”.²⁴¹ As a consequence “in January the idea started coming to me that we had to start looking for someone to talk to”.

447. Maj Gen Shaw “re-targeted” assets, by telling them “I want you to look for people to talk to in JAM”.²⁴²

448. On 19 January, Maj Gen Shirreff completed his post-tour report.²⁴³ In it he argued:

“... I am not convinced that we have correctly identified the strategic Main Effort and resourced it appropriately to avoid potentially disastrous failure in Iraq.

“We have no choice but to achieve mission success in Iraq. This means concentrating resources in pursuit of national interests: clouting, not dribbling. As we hand over, it is encouraging to see that the importance of committing UKSF [Special Forces] to support our efforts in SE Iraq has been recognised. However, we have left it very late and depended on a willing and generous ally to make good other shortfalls. I suspect that if we had concentrated strategic assets from the start of TELIC, the margin between success and failure would not be so narrow as it appears now.

“The same point applies to the Comprehensive Approach. We have preached its virtues in theory without giving genuine substance to it on the ground ... Compare the generosity, agility and flexibility of US CERP [Commanders Emergency Response Program] funding with the parsimony of Whitehall and the lack of any unity of command or purpose.”

449. Maj Gen Shirreff concluded his report:

“We can achieve mission success here [in MND(SE)] however complex and intractable the problems facing us. The key is to understand the narrowness of the margin between success and failure and to take nothing for granted.”

²⁴⁰ Public hearing, 11 January 2010, page 19.

²⁴¹ Public hearing, 11 January 2010, pages 19-20.

²⁴² Public hearing, 11 January 2010, page 21. Based on redacted material.

²⁴³ Report Shirreff, 19 January 2007, ‘Post Operational Report – Operation TELIC, Part One: General Officer Commanding’s Overview’.

450. Secretary Gates visited Basra on 19 January and was briefed by British officials including Maj Gen Shaw.²⁴⁴ The American Forces Press Service reported a press brief by the MND(SE) spokesman who said:

“Our political leaders are saying that if the conditions here continue to improve, we will have a reduction in force in the spring.”

451. On 19 January, Mr McDonald wrote to Mrs Beckett with a report on his recent visit to Iraq, which he said had left him feeling more optimistic.²⁴⁵

452. Mr McDonald judged that: President Bush’s new strategy had been well received; Prime Minister Maliki was showing greater energy and looking more like a leader, including by taking action against Sunni insurgents, the JAM leadership and Iran; and the latest Baghdad Security Plan looked “more likely to succeed than its predecessors” because of greater Iraqi ownership.

453. Mr McDonald commented: “Iraq will take a long time to put itself back together; in the end we may not be able to prevent it from falling apart. Meaningful reconciliation will take a generation.” He recommended deferring a referendum on Kirkuk’s status, which could be deeply divisive.

454. On Basra, Mr McDonald considered:

“... transition rather than Provincial Iraqi Control should be our focus. PIC is a somewhat arbitrarily chosen event. If the process of transition is our focus, our record looks better: completed in Muthanna and Dhi Qar, substantially under way in Maysan, and beginning in Basra.”

455. Mr McDonald asked:

“... what is the minimum we have to achieve before we leave? I conclude that the answer is to give Iraq’s nascent democratic institutions a fighting chance to overcome the insurgents and foreign agents. We cannot give them more than that, and the best way to help them now is to leave in a manner negotiated with them. If we cannot announce a timetable (which would potentially transform our relations with MAS [Muqtada al-Sadr]) I recommend that departure be an explicit aspiration, say before the end of 2007. We shall have to accept that the next phase, with fewer foreigners about, may well be bloodier.”

456. Sir Nigel Sheinwald commented to Cabinet Office and No.10 staff that Mr McDonald’s concluding judgements looked “too defeatist/minimalist”.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ News Article US Department of Defense, 19 January 2007, ‘Conditions in Southeastern Iraq Could Lead to British Force Reduction’.

²⁴⁵ Minute McDonald to Foreign Secretary, 19 January 2007, [untitled].

²⁴⁶ Manuscript comment Sheinwald 20 January 2007 on Minute McDonald to Foreign Secretary, 19 January 2007, [untitled].

457. In his weekly report on 21 January, Lt Gen Lamb observed:

“... the situation we find ourselves in Iraq is perhaps the most complex that I have ever seen in my 35 years of soldiering ... Every one of our actions results in multiple and unexpected consequences – requiring an increased understanding of the unintended implications that occur ... But ... one thing seems to have become crystal clear – the detrimental effect that Iranian influence is having on the people of Iraq, whether they be Sunni, Shia or Kurd alike.

“Recent Government of Iraq (GOI) and US actions that have ‘stressed’ the Iranian Quds [Force]²⁴⁷ have had a significantly positive effect both on the political front, and the prospects for reconciliation. The Sunnis are encouraged ... But, perhaps more notable though are the many Shia moderates who have also seen the actions as a positive move ... in curtailing what they see as a malign Iranian influence ...

“So, I sense that we may have just underestimated the nature and danger of the Iranian influence ... They all fear the extent to which the influence could undermine the Iraqi culture and potentially that of Islam in the region itself ...

“The Persian tiger, I sense, therefore has a direct effect on the issue of practical reconciliation, if not the outcome of our endeavour. If the militias are seen to be the accelerant, then I would venture that the removal of the malign Iranian influence would represent a major decelerator to the situation.”²⁴⁸

458. On 22 January, the Iraq Senior Officials Group discussed a draft paper on transition in southern Iraq, intended for DOP.²⁴⁹ The Group agreed that:

“... the paper needed to distinguish more clearly between the related but distinct processes of re-posturing and PIC and the arguments we needed to make for each process”.

459. On 22 January, Mr Blair met ACM Stirrup and senior officials from the FCO, the MOD, SIS, DFID and the Cabinet Office for an update on Iraq.²⁵⁰

460. Mr Blair said: “It was clear a significant effort was required on reconciliation and reconstruction.” He suggested that the key steps in Basra were:

- to clarify and fill gaps in the capabilities of the Iraqi Army’s 10th Division;
- to ensure that the Iraqi Government put capable people in place (about which he intended to speak to Prime Minister Maliki); and
- to take on the leaders of militant JAM.

²⁴⁷ A special section of the Revolutionary Guards which undertakes operations outside Iranian territory.

²⁴⁸ Minute Lamb to CDS, 21 January 2007, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (242) 21 Jan 07’.

²⁴⁹ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 22 January 2007, ‘Iraq Senior Officials Group’.

²⁵⁰ [Letter Banner to Siddiq, 22 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Meeting with Officials’.](#)

461. ACM Stirrup notes that the UK was targeting key individuals, but not JAM as an organisation, and was working to counter the indirect fire attacks on Basra Palace. The situation would improve after the move to Basra Air Station.

462. On reconciliation, officials reported:

“... a certain amount of complacency amongst Iraqi politicians, who believed that reconciliation would simply happen, without the ground having to be carefully prepared, and that a great deal of ad hoc activity was attempted and then, often, simply discarded”.

463. In a conversation with President Bush on 22 January, Mr Blair said that in Basra the UK had found that having Iraqis leading work prominently was making a significant difference and that tangible progress on reconstruction paid dividends.²⁵¹ Efforts on reconciliation and reconstruction needed to be intensified.

464. Mr Blair emphasised the importance of outreach to the Sunni community, and proposed choosing a particular Sunni area in which to agree a cease-fire in return for clear commitments on reconstruction.

465. On the same day, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary wrote to the FCO to report Mr Blair’s thanks for the briefing received in response to the request of 8 January.²⁵²

466. Mr Blair felt that it underlined “the necessity of securing better reconciliation and reconstruction plans and of filling gaps in Iraqi Army capacity” and commissioned further reports on the action being taken against militant JAM in southern Iraq; Lt Gen Lamb’s negotiations in Anbar; and shortfalls and bottlenecks in developing ISF capability.

467. At the request of the Iraq Senior Officials Group, on 24 January the JIC considered the Iraqi Government’s willingness to curb the power of Iraqi Shia militias and the implications of taking action against them.²⁵³

468. The JIC judged:

“I. Muqtada al Sadr’s Jaysh al Mahdi (JAM) and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq’s (SCIRI) Badr Organisation are behind much of the anti-Sunni sectarian violence in Iraq. Both militias’ political sponsors are key elements of the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and powerful forces within the Iraqi Government. Badr in particular are deeply embedded in official security and political structures and will not be rooted out in the foreseeable future.

“II. Prime Minister Maliki still seeks a political accommodation: he wants Sadr to exert greater control over the JAM and rein in the more violent elements. Maliki

²⁵¹ Letter Banner to Hayes, 22 January 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 22 January: Middle East Issues’.

²⁵² Letter Banner to Siddiq, 22 January 2007, ‘Iraq’.

²⁵³ [JIC Assessment, 24 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Tackling Shia Militias’.](#)

would probably regard this as removing the need for tough MNF or ISF action. Sadr is taking some action, but we doubt that he or many JAM leaders are prepared to disarm in the current security climate.”

469. If the Iraqi Government did act, the JIC assessed:

“... any perception that a full scale assault on JAM had begun or that Sadr was being personally targeted would be most likely to provoke fierce resistance. In such circumstances, violence would be likely across the southern provinces: in the worst case it could reach levels similar to those during the Sadrist uprisings of 2004.”

470. The JIC concluded that the Iraqi Government’s “symbiotic relationship” with the militias was a significant factor in Sunni disaffection and reluctance to engage in the national reconciliation agenda. It judged that Prime Minister Maliki:

“... genuinely wants to reduce violence. He accepts that some limited action against JAM is necessary. But despite recent assurances to the US and robust public comments, he will not support the sort of sustained military campaign needed to remove JAM’s ability to keep parts of Baghdad outside government control.

“Maliki’s overriding concern is the survival of the UIA and his government: like other Shia politicians he has a deep-rooted fear of a Ba’athist return. The UIA remains fragile and its survival is dependent on Maliki’s ability to balance the competing interests of the rival SCIRI and Sadrist heavyweights ...

“We judge that any other Shia politician in Maliki’s position ... would face similar pressures and behave in much the same way.”

471. Mr Browne wrote to Mr Blair on 24 January setting out his thinking about plans for future force levels in Iraq.²⁵⁴ Mr Browne intended to use his visit to Iraq the following week to confirm whether the plans were appropriate in scope and timing and to address reported US concerns. He wrote:

“Re-posturing ... reflects the growing capability of the ISF to take on a greater role ahead of a formal announcement of PIC. It is happening across Iraq. For example, just last week the Corps agreed that ... [the Iraqi Army] would take the lead in Mosul, Iraq’s third largest city ...

“Of course Basra is different ...”

472. In the US Administration, Mr Browne reported that:

“Casey and Khalilzad have recently expressed concerns both about the optics of a relocation of the US Regional Office from Basra Palace and the risk of leaving Basra in hock to Iranian backed elements. The fact is that the level of violence remains relatively low – half that in Mosul, and a fraction of that in Baghdad and most

²⁵⁴ [Letter Browne to Blair, 24 January 2007, ‘Next Steps on Force Levels in Iraq’.](#)

violence is directed against the coalition. Once that is excluded, the level of violence is very low compared with many areas in Iraq ...

“While acknowledging serious US concerns we must take the opportunity to build momentum towards Iraqi control ...

“There is no question of us leaving a vacuum in the city, as the IA [Iraqi Army] and IPS [Iraqi Police Service] are already doing patrols and we will remain present in the Provincial Joint Co-ordination Centre and military transition teams ...”

473. On the impact of reducing troop numbers, Mr Browne said:

“The clear military advice ... is that re-posturing and the associated drawdown will not adversely affect our capacity to provide support to the Iraqi Security Forces, including underwriting it by providing a battlegroup size reserve force. We must recognise that after re-posturing re-intervention would not be straight-forward but this is a nettle that must be grasped at some stage.

“I share your view that ... we need to have carefully considered the implications both for security in Basra ... and any knock on effect of the impending Baghdad initiative. But I can assure you that the military advice, as outlined by CDS, is based on precisely this kind of careful consideration ...”

474. Mr Browne added:

“So while there are inevitable risks and uncertainties I am confident we are doing our best to manage them. And we must also acknowledge that there are risks too on the other side ...

“There is also the risk that if we delay too long ... we will inadvertently be sending a wrong and damaging signal on Basra in particular – suggesting that Op SINBAD has not worked, or that we are not making progress against our plans, when in fact we are. Moreover there is a risk that we will appear indecisive at the very time that we are starting to face questions about announcements on troop levels and equipment in Afghanistan.

“These factors explain why I strongly believe we should make our final decisions and announce them, as soon as possible ...”

475. On 24 January, Maj Gen Shaw reported:

“On the re-posturing plans, whilst Corps is supportive, Casey has tasked Corps to conduct a security review of Basra with the aim of retaining a military operating base in Basra after the US and UK civil delegations have left. I mention this to illustrate the extent to which Casey is not comfortable with our re-posturing plans ...

“Pressure for anti-Iranian activity would seem to be mounting. I am steering activity towards countering the malign Iranian influence (IEDs, weapons etc) but keeping

firm on the line of my authority being required for any strikes by non MND(SE) forces in my Area of Operations. Given the mass of legitimate family, religious, trade etc links across a largely unpoliceable border, there is a real potential for second and third order consequences from blanket anti-Iranianism ... I am not confident in our ability to avoid miscalculation ...”²⁵⁵

476. The British Embassy Washington reported that they had picked up significant concerns within the US system that lawlessness was rife in Basra and that the UK military were doing little to confront it.²⁵⁶ The US was particularly concerned about the need to counter Iranian influence and militia control and feared that an early UK drawdown would leave a security vacuum.

477. After reading the Embassy’s account, Mr Blair commented:

“Either this is correct in which case we have a real problem, or it isn’t in which case we must correct it. But what is going on in Basra?”²⁵⁷

478. On 24 January, Sir Nigel Sheinwald discussed the UK’s plans with Mr Hadley.²⁵⁸ He explained that UK Ministers were about to make important decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan in the light of the results of Op SINBAD.

479. The expectation was that it should be possible for the UK military to withdraw from central Basra and to draw down from 7,000 to 4,500 troops. Sir Nigel “made clear that this would be conditions-based” but added that “if we were not able to reduce our strength in Basra, we would not be able to increase in Afghanistan”.

480. When Mr Hadley did not raise US objections, Sir Nigel concluded:

“... the White House is not opposed to our plans, and that the concerns within the US system either have not reached the White House or do not seem sufficiently significant to the White House to warrant their raising a flag”.

481. On 25 January, Ambassador Khalilzad gave an interview to the BBC.²⁵⁹ He praised the British as “great allies” but made clear that the US preference was “the longer we stay together here, the better”.

482. Mr Browne provided Cabinet with an update on military operations in southern Iraq on 25 January.²⁶⁰ He said that Op SINBAD had been an important part of the strategy for improving security in Basra, which remained significantly better than elsewhere in Iraq.

²⁵⁵ Minute Shaw to CJO, 24 January 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 24 January 2007’.

²⁵⁶ Letter Baker to McDonald, 24 January 2007, ‘Basra: US Views’.

²⁵⁷ Manuscript comment Blair on Letter Baker to McDonald, 24 January 2007, ‘Basra: US views’.

²⁵⁸ Letter Sheinwald to Forber, 24 January 2007, ‘Iraq’.

²⁵⁹ *BBC News*, 25 January 2007, *MOD dismisses Iraq policy ‘split’*.

²⁶⁰ Cabinet Conclusions, 25 January 2007.

483. Although the media were reporting disagreements between the UK and US about what the UK's force posture should be in MND(SE), that was not the reality; discussions with both the US and Iraqi governments were continuing. The UK was currently conducting an assessment of the impact of Op SINBAD, after which the UK would take a decision on what needed to be done in the future.

484. On security in Basra, Mr Browne stated:

“... the murder rate had reduced from over 100 to less than 30 a month, which compared favourably with a number of European States and American cities. The kidnap rate had been halved and polling suggested levels of confidence in security which would be welcome in the UK; 90 percent of those polled felt more secure than a year ago; only 2 percent had encountered intimidation in the last six months.”

485. The restoration of marshland by the military, DFID and the Iraqi Government had been described as “the most significant and successful restoration of the environment and lifestyle in the history of the world”.

486. On 25 January, Mr Asquith reported a series of discussions he and Lt Gen Lamb had held with Gen Casey and Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, Commander Multi-National Corps – Iraq, over the preceding 48 hours about transition plans for Basra.²⁶¹ He reported that they thought:

- As Iraq's second city, Basra had a key role to play in the country's regeneration. It could not afford to become (pre- or post-PIC) “another al-Amara” in which Western contractors could not operate, thereby making redevelopment impossible. The situation post-PIC needed to parallel that of Dhi Qar or Najaf, where the PRT could operate effectively with reasonable security protection.
- In addition to reconstruction work, there would still be a need for police training post-PIC. Gen Casey had recently observed problems in al-Amara, where the MNF were unable to visit police stations in the centre of town, requiring the IPS to visit MNF on the city perimeter. He ascribed this to the UK's re-posturing in September 2006 which meant the withdrawal from all bases in the city.
- A key benchmark for PIC was that the threat from armed groups should be low and expected to remain so following PIC. The US view was that neither Maysan nor Basra had yet passed that test.
- Although both Generals had received several briefings on the UK plans as they evolved, neither had yet seen a fully worked through set of options. That was clearly essential.

487. Mr Asquith commented that it would be necessary for UK plans to demonstrate that it would be possible for MNF to move around the city (including post-PIC) along the lines of Dhi Qar. It would also be important for the plans credibly to demonstrate that the UK

²⁶¹ eGram 3125/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 25 January 2007, 'Iraq: Basra: Handling the US'.

could provide not only combat MiTTs (Military Transition Teams – see Section 12.1) but also combat force to restore order if security conditions deteriorated.

488. Mr Asquith reported a deeply entrenched US view that the UK would:

“... continue to make the facts fit our timelines, a view reinforced by our argument that ‘Basra is different from Baghdad’”.

489. In conclusion, Mr Asquith considered:

“How best to respond? This military view in theatre does not take into account the Afghanistan dimension. We need to remind them of that ... There is some resonance to the argument that there is more risk associated in being cautious, thereby delaying transition, losing Iraqi consent and prompting the Iraqis to ask the MNF to leave so that they can finish the business in their own (sectarian) manner. But this will not carry the day with theatre commanders. We will need to reiterate clearly the expectations in the UK of delivering on our planned draw down timetable and the political damage if the US were to deploy forces to Basra in the transition process ... The degree to which anti-JAM/Iran operations in the South ramp up over this period will also affect US views. Most importantly ... the MND(SE) plan must credibly address the combat MiTT/combat force capability. I leave to the military planners to decide whether that requires a reduction in the numbers we currently plan to draw down.”

490. The Iraq Strategy Group met on 25 January, with Sir Nigel Sheinwald as Chair.²⁶² He reported to those present that:

“Ministers required a document which would settle our own minds, and provide a narrative to persuade the US, and Iraqis, and provide a basis for the Prime Minister’s parliamentary statement in the week beginning 5 February.”

491. Sir Nigel asked for the paper to be clear about the tasks that would need to be undertaken post re-posturing “to underpin the case”. The Group observed that there was still a question mark over the future of Basra Palace:

“The US were opposed to giving up the option to use Basra Palace, and wanted to retain a US flag over it at least until PIC. Simon McDonald said there were insufficient funds for keeping a Consulate in central Basra. For commercial, political and symbolic reasons, [Sir Nigel Sheinwald] expected we would want a Consulate in central Basra if the security conditions improved.”

492. In the light of the problems he had observed during his visit, Mr McDonald told the Group that he thought the UK’s plans were too ambitious.

²⁶² Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 26 January 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 25 January’.

493. On 26 January, after reading the weekly updates on Iraq, Mr Blair commented:

“We need to get a serious plan for Basra with JAM and Iranians targeted effectively. We can’t leave the city to them. Central to our plan to draw down is a continuing effective anti-JAM push.”²⁶³

494. On 26 January, a view was provided to Mr McDonald (with copies sent to various departments including No. 10) about the situation on the ground in Basra and the military’s approach.²⁶⁴ It stated:

“By nearly every measure, security in Basra has deteriorated in the past year ... Only a decline in sectarian murders in mid-2006 was a heartening indicator, illustrating the gulf between the sectarian position in relatively homogeneous Basra and the much worse situation in mixed Baghdad. Most Basrawis live in fear, including the civic leaders to whom we would look for the rebirth of economic, social and political activity in the city. All are subject to intimidation by Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) and to a lesser extent, other militias ... They do not feel that they can look to the CF [coalition forces], Iraqi Police (IPS) or Army (IA) for protection ... [F]or all the time, money and effort poured into the Basra IPS, they are undermining, not guaranteeing security ...

“Over the last year MND(SE) have pursued a strategy of intelligence-led strikes on militia members and their subsequent detention. This has had an effect ... Op SINBAD was predicated on the Iraq Government playing its part, both in clearing out the IPS and in using its available wealth to provide economic alternatives for the poor unemployed Shia who form JAM’s main recruiting pool.”

495. The author continued:

“The main security threat to MND(SE) during the past year has continued to be JAM. That threat has evolved ... MND(SE) arrests have prompted the formation of more secretive groupings, with a more professional mindset and approach. A number of these receive support from the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Quds Force (IRGC-QF) ... JAM’s local ambition is not only to drive UK forces out of Iraq but to derive the kudos of being seen to do this, in order to consolidate and legitimise their aspiration to run the districts and slums of the city, dominate local politics and infrastructure and assert a grip on some of Iraq’s most strategic economic assets, savaging any who challenge their hegemony. Now it is UK forces in the sights of these JAM elements ... Once UK forces have left Southern Iraq, and much will then depend on developments at a national level, JAM’s targets may become SCIRI and Badr elements (the MNF presence is key to

²⁶³ Manuscript comment Blair on Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 26 January 2007, ‘Iraq Update, 26 January’.

²⁶⁴ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East to McDonald, 26 January 2007, ‘The Basrah security situation’.

their relative quiescence in the south) and, eventually, even perhaps instruments of Iranian influence. But, regardless of their future direction, JAM have already spread a culture of criminality, intimidation and violence in Basra, which it would take years of sustained action by an effective central government in Baghdad to uproot ...”

496. Sir Nigel Sheinwald sent his copy of the minute to Mr Blair and Mr Powell. Mr Blair commented: “This is plainly utterly inconsistent with the CDS and Des [Browne] view. So who is right?”

497. In his weekly report on 28 January, Lt Gen Lamb commented that he was optimistic of progress, in particular on non-security operations (for example, industrial regeneration).²⁶⁵ He wrote:

“... after four months in theatre I have found myself asking the simple but nevertheless difficult question of just who is the enemy?”

498. Lt Gen Lamb suggested dividing MNF’s opponents into three categories:

- Those who genuinely wanted to see an end to violence (“more plentiful than one would expect”).
- The “architects of violence who would only wish to bring chaos to the country” found in organisations such as AQ-I, Ba’athist revival groups and foreign interventionists such as the Iranian Quds Force and its surrogates. These were, in his view, “not reconcilable” and needed to be “clearly identified and singularly prevented from interfering in the process”.
- Those who benefited from a degree of chaos in the country, whom Lt Gen Lamb considered were potentially “for turning – but may not have any reason to as yet”. Within this category were a very mixed set of groupings, including criminals exploiting the black market, the so-called “honourable resistance” Sunni insurgent groups (such as Jaysh al-Mujahidin, Ansar al-Sunnah, Al-Jaysh al-Islami and the 1920 Revolutionary Brigade) and Shia militia (such as moderate JAM), all of whom had expressed willingness to seek peaceful resolution. Lt Gen Lamb reported that the MNF were: “focusing hard on these groups in the engagement process to convince them that more is to be gained from a peaceful accord. This is where risk needs to be taken and from bold steps can progress be made.”

499. On 29 January, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary wrote to Mrs Beckett’s Private Secretary to say that Mr Blair had noted reports of the US perception of the situation

²⁶⁵ Minute Lamb to CDS, 28 January 2007, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (243) 28 Jan 07’.

in Basra, and concerns about the impact of the UK's proposed re-posturing and drawdown.²⁶⁶ Mr Blair judged that the UK's plans for re-posturing would have to include:

- a greater focus on embedding and continued support for police and security force reform, including the provision of equipment (see Section 12.1);
- continued operations targeting the JAM leadership, including after re-posturing; and
- further action with Iraqis to ensure that criminal cases were pursued against JAM and other criminal elements in the Basra police.

500. On 31 January, Maj Gen Shaw reported:

“Gen Casey is clear that PIC for Basra (and elsewhere) is moving to the right and there are no signs that Gen Petraeus will be any more forward leaning ... The Iraqis, of course, have a strong say in this, but there are signs that PM Maliki may too wish to push things further to the right ...

“Questions have been asked about the relevance of delayed PIC to our plans for a re-postured force at [Basra Air Station] ...

“All this led me to judge that ... keeping Basra Palace open beyond our original timelines may need to be considered ...

“Maintaining a foothold in the city until PIC will allow us to retain our (already limited) ... situation awareness coverage of the city. The Shia political appetite ... for our counter-militia strikes allows us a political freedom of operation to exploit this ... by targeted strike operations, both counter IDF/JAM and (an emerging imperative) counter-malign Iranian influence. This shift in political attitudes is significant, and is a major shift since Operation SALAMANCA was proposed and tellingly rejected.”²⁶⁷

501. Maj Gen Shaw continued that he considered:

“... the UK and US are viewing Iraq through the optics of different timelines. There is no coalition consensus about what is ‘Iraqi good enough’ and a frank political conversation is needed to determine what the shared vision is.”

502. At the end of January 2007, the US National Intelligence Council published its assessment of what was necessary to stabilise the situation in Iraq.²⁶⁸ It said:

“Iraqi society’s growing polarization, the persistent weakness of the security forces and the state in general, and all sides’ ready recourse to violence are collectively driving an increase in communal and insurgent violence and political extremism.

²⁶⁶ Letter Banner to Siddiq, 29 January 2007, ‘Iraq’.

²⁶⁷ Minute Shaw to CJO, 31 January 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 24 [sic] January 2007’.

²⁶⁸ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate, January 2007, *Prospects for Iraq’s Stability: a Challenging Road Ahead*.

Unless efforts to reverse these conditions show measurable progress during ... the coming 12 to 18 months, we assess that the overall security situation will continue to deteriorate at rates comparable to the latter part of 2006.”

503. The assessment pointed to a number of factors that were driving the violence:

- Shia insecurity about loosening their hold on power, born of “decades of subordination to Sunni ... domination”;
- many Sunni Arabs being “unwilling to accept their minority status” and being “convinced that Shia dominance will increase Iranian influence over Iraq, in ways that erode the State’s Arab character”;
- the “absence of unifying leaders among the Arab Sunni or Shia with the capacity to speak for or exert control over their confessional groups”;
- the fact that the Kurds, while willing to participate in Iraqi state-building, were reluctant to surrender any of their autonomy and seeking to increase their control of Kirkuk;
- the ISF’s inability to operate independently against the Shia militias with any success, and the sectarian divisions within many units;
- the presence of extremists – in particular AQ-I, whose members acted as a “very effective accelerators for what has become a self-sustaining inter-sectarian struggle between Shia and Sunnis”; and
- significant population displacement – the UN estimated by this stage that there were over a million Iraqis in Syria and Jordan.

504. Although the US intelligence community did not consider that the term “civil war” adequately captured the complexity of the conflict in Iraq, it considered that that phrase was an accurate description of key elements of the violence. It judged:

“Coalition capabilities, including force levels, resources and operations, remain an essential stabilizing element in Iraq. If coalition forces were withdrawn rapidly during ... [the next 12-18 months] we judge that this almost certainly would lead to a significant increase in the scale and scope of sectarian conflict in Iraq, intensify Sunni resistance to the Iraqi Government, and have adverse consequences for national reconciliation.

“If such a rapid withdrawal were to take place, we judge that the ISF would be unlikely to survive as a non-sectarian national institution; neighbouring countries – invited by Iraqi factions or unilaterally – might intervene openly in the conflict; massive civilian casualties and forced population displacement would be probable; AQ-I would attempt to use parts of the country – particularly al-Anbar province – to plan increased attacks in and outside of Iraq; and spiralling violence and political disarray in Iraq, along with Kurdish moves to control Kirkuk and strengthen autonomy, could prompt Turkey to launch a military incursion.”

505. Shortly after publication, Secretary Gates was asked at a news briefing whether he accepted that there was a civil war in Iraq.²⁶⁹ He replied:

“... I believe that there are essentially four wars going on in Iraq.

“One is Shia on Shia, principally in the South; the second is sectarian conflict, principally in Baghdad, but not solely; third is the insurgency; and fourth is Al Qaida, and Al Qaida is attacking, at times, all of those targets.”

506. Mr Browne visited Iraq from 28 to 31 January.²⁷⁰ In a report of the visit, an Assistant Private Secretary described continued differences between UK plans and US views on MND(SE) in a note to MOD Ministers and officials:

“A new US team is in no mood to take risks and re-evaluates across the board, expressing concerns in the South over 10 Div, Iranian influence and UK ability to apply its military muscle in Basra City after re-posturing. In response the new MND(SE) command team begin to look at re-posturing within US tolerances, which might lead to an extended presence in Basra Palace and less of a dividend at roulement.

“But the broad strategy can and should survive. Both re-posturing and some drawdown should proceed. Above all there is a need to see the wider context – US politics is driving the numbers up just as we feel ours can come down. Basra is still not Baghdad. Nevertheless the resulting tension is manifesting itself in the recently expressed operational concerns of US commanders. MiTTs and PTTs [Military Transition Teams and Police Transition Teams] are a key element in the US argument. The criteria for transition have always had a measure of interpretation in them, and the US are rapidly re-interpreting to fit the context in which they have to operate.”

507. Concluding his report, the Assistant Private Secretary wrote:

“For this visit the net effect was, at first sight, an alarming and unforeseen change in military advice over re-posturing, which has implications beyond Iraq. It suggested that we had either failed to foresee the scale of this US change of approach and its implications, or that perhaps our previous plan was lacking in some areas. There are bound to be a host of nuances that soften this rather stark conclusion but they were drowned out by the ‘shock of the new’.”

508. The Assistant Private Secretary recorded that Lt Gen Lamb had “confirmed a clear and widespread apprehension at the highest levels of the US military about our plans for Basra”.

²⁶⁹ US Department of Defense, 2 February 2007, ‘DoD News Briefing with Secretary Gates and Gen. Pace from Pentagon’.

²⁷⁰ [Minute McNeil to MA1/DCDS\(C\), 1 February 2006 \[sic\], ‘Defence Secretary’s Visit to Iraq – 28-31 January 2007’.](#)

509. Reporting a meeting with Ambassador Khalilzad, the Assistant Private Secretary recorded that Mr Browne had observed:

“US demands on us were somewhat conflicting, with an emerging expectation that we would increase our presence in Afghanistan against a much more clearly expressed desire for us not to reduce our presence in Iraq. The UK’s Armed Forces could simply not do both.”

510. Mr Browne had also:

“... stressed that any suggestion that UK forces would be augmented or replaced by US forces coming to work in the South was distinctly unhelpful. We could resolve the issues that faced us without indulging in that kind of language which was likely only to deepen any public perception of disagreement.”

511. In a report to the FCO of Mr Browne’s visit, Mr Asquith recorded a similar exchange with General Martin Dempsey, Commanding General Multi-National Security Transition Command – Iraq, and Lt Gen Odierno, who pointed out that “it was awkward if we ‘unsurged’ while the US surged” and said bluntly that what the US “did not want was our claiming success against the facts on the ground in order to justify the withdrawal of troops”.²⁷¹

512. Mr Browne “laid out the implications of our requirement to deploy in Iraq and Afghanistan”.

513. Mr Asquith also reported a meeting between Mr Browne and Prime Minister Maliki, who emphasised that his Government was focused on the Baghdad Security Plan and whether it would have an impact elsewhere in the country. If it did, “a precipitate withdrawal should be avoided to prevent a repetition of past problems”.

514. During the Basra portion of the visit, Mr Browne’s Assistant Private Secretary reported that Maj Gen Shaw said that the delay in the expected timing of transition to PIC meant there was a much greater risk that the UK would still have a defined security responsibility for Basra city after having re-postured completely outside the city, leaving his forces unable to fulfil that responsibility properly.²⁷²

515. In Maj Gen Shaw’s view, it would be necessary to maintain “a foot on the ground” in Basra city in order to maintain the ability to strike and so that the intelligence required for operations could be collected.

516. In his meeting with senior civilian staff in Basra, Mr Browne was told that several of them considered that the security situation was generally worse for the ordinary Basrawi than six months ago, primarily because of rising intimidation. Intimidation was also the

²⁷¹ eGram 4193/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 31 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Defence Secretary’s Visit to Baghdad, 30 January’.

²⁷² [Minute McNeil to MA1/DCDS\(C\), 1 February 2006 \[sic\], ‘Defence Secretary’s visit to Iraq – 28-31 January 2007’.](#)

main factor behind the decline in the local police effectiveness over a similar period – more so than any lack of training or capability.

517. Mr Browne’s Assistant Private Secretary commented that these views seemed in contradiction to the messages that had previously been received on the success of Op SINBAD. There was “a lack of firm indicators to substantiate or refute” the different conclusions.

518. In her weekly report Dr Marsden said she had advised Mr Browne:

“... that the political significance of Basra Palace should also be factored into military planning. As the location of the British Consulate and the US Embassy Office, Basra Palace was seen as the symbol of our continuing commitment to stabilising Basra. Withdrawing from purely military bases ... could credibly be presented as something we were doing at the request of the Government of Iraq and at a time of their and our choosing. The optics of leaving Basra Palace were different. However we dressed it up, we risked handing a propaganda victory to JAM and their Iranian backers.”²⁷³

519. On 31 January, Mr Blair met Lt Gen Houghton and senior officials from the FCO and SIS.²⁷⁴ In his briefing note for the discussion Mr Blair’s Private Secretary wrote:

“Initial reports suggest that Des is not making much headway with the American military in Iraq, partly because they (and, frankly, we) have never seen a worked up plan as to what our troops would be doing post-re-posturing, and how they would ensure e.g. mentoring, situational awareness, ability to re-intervene. We have been asking MOD for detail on this for some time.”²⁷⁵

520. In their meeting, Mr Blair stressed to Lt Gen Houghton that it would be necessary to get “absolute clarity on the position in Basra before taking a firm decision on, and announcing, a redeployment”.²⁷⁶

521. Lt Gen Houghton commented that it would be important to explain to the US that the UK was not proposing to abandon bases in Basra, rather they would transfer to Iraqi control, with UK training teams embedded within them. The approach to mentoring in Basra was different from that being developed by the US for other areas of Iraq, in part because the context was different.

522. Mr Blair remained concerned about Iraqi ability to ensure security after re-posturing and then PIC. He asked whether the UK’s plans would ensure that militias could not act with impunity. Lt Gen Houghton noted that the UK would retain a re-intervention capability, but accepted that there was risk involved.

²⁷³ Letter Marsden to Aldred, 1 February 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

²⁷⁴ [Letter Banner to Siddiq, 31 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Meeting with Officials’.](#)

²⁷⁵ Minute Banner to Blair, 30 January 2007, ‘Iraq Meeting, 31 January’.

²⁷⁶ [Letter Banner to Siddiq, 31 January 2007, ‘Iraq: Meeting with Officials’.](#)

523. Mr McDonald and C both noted the:

“... credible reports of widespread intimidation of the Basrawi population, the presence of several militias and the evident deficiencies of the Iraqi police. Together, these suggested that there would continue to be violence following re-posturing, but that this would be intra-Shia, and focused on gaining political dominance.”

524. Summing up the discussion, Mr Blair concluded that it would be:

“... premature to make an announcement on redeployment before we had a clear plan that answered the key points raised in discussion, and which had secured US and Iraqi agreement. We should nonetheless continue to plan on the basis that we would redeploy, in order to ensure that a prudent redeployment was not delayed.”

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525. On 1 February, Sir David Manning reported that Secretary Rice had asked him “to tell her honestly whether the UK was now making for the exit as fast as possible”.²⁷⁷ Sir David had replied that that was not the case, “explained the arguments for the change in force posture in Basra; and stressed that this should not be confused with transition to PIC”.

526. Sir David had continued:

“... as the Prime Minister and Secretary of State has said repeatedly, we wanted to move to PIC in Basra but only when conditions were right. We believed that time was coming: but we would not hand over prematurely; and we would not do so without full consultation with US Commanders on the ground.”

527. Cabinet Office officials co-ordinated a paper on ‘Transition in Southern Iraq’ for the meeting of DOP on 1 February.²⁷⁸ The paper invited Ministers to consider and endorse a series of assessments and proposals in preparation for a statement by Mr Blair on 7 February, including:

“i. continuing our fundamental strategy of building Iraqi capacity and progressively transferring responsibility for security to the Iraqi authorities;

...

“iv. the rationale for the co-location of military and civilian staff at the Basra Air Station, the impact this will have on operations, and the need for further work on a proposal for the future of the Basra Palace Compound;

...

²⁷⁷ Letter Manning to Hayes, 1 February 2007, ‘Conversation with the US Secretary of State, 31 January 2007’.

²⁷⁸ [Paper Cabinet Office, 31 January 2007, ‘Transition in Southern Iraq: Progress and Plans’.](#)

“vi. the success of our plans will depend greatly on the ability of the Iraqi Government to deliver the necessary political conditions. Other risks and challenges to our plans include our ability to tackle police corruption, continuing Iranian influence and militia activity, and the willingness and ability of Iraqi Army 10 Division to provide security.”

528. The paper stated:

“Transition – in particular security transition – is fundamental to the coalition’s strategy in Iraq ...

“Assuming – and being seen to assume – full control of Iraq’s security institutions has also been among the Iraqi Government’s highest priorities.”

529. The paper explained that it had been recognised in summer 2006 that significant work was needed to achieve the conditions for transfer to PIC in Basra. The result was the ‘Better Basra’ plan, delivered through Op SINBAD and the work of the British Embassy Office and PRT in Basra. This intensified effort was “yielding results, though it will need to be maintained in the period up to and following PIC”. The paper suggested that although “we should avoid setting unrealistic and rigid benchmarks for PIC” a “pragmatic minimum” needed to be agreed that was credible to the UK and US.

530. The paper then contained an assessment of each of the conditions for transition to PIC in Basra.

531. On the threat level, the paper stated that reported levels of violence in southern Iraq were “relatively low”, although much of the data was “incomplete or conflicting”. For example, although the reported murder rate had dropped from 100 per month to 30 per month, many murders were not reported.

532. Officials urged caution about relying on polling data that suggested public perceptions were more positive in Basra than elsewhere in Iraq, and recorded that “some other sources of information paint a different picture, of a deteriorating security situation, an increase in indirect fire attacks, continuing militia activity and intimidation ... and a pervasive culture of fear among Basrawis”.

533. On the strength of the ISF, the paper recorded an improvement in basic police capability, with 70 percent of police stations at the level required for PIC. However, trust in the IPS remained low and “some assessments indicate that the IPS continue to do more to undermine than guarantee security”. Militia infiltration of the police remained the key barrier to tackling militia activity effectively.

534. The paper stated that the Iraqi Army had also demonstrated “an improved ability to respond to security threats”, but had also been shown to be unreliable. The main issue was the quality of leadership.

535. The paper listed a number of “key activities” to address the action needed before PIC, including opening an Iraqi Army Leadership Academy and training centre, increasing the number of sub-units available for army training and mentoring, establishing a Leadership Academy for the police, supporting prosecutions for police corruption and increasing police advisory capacity.

536. On the ability of MND(SE) to re-intervene if necessary, the paper stated:

“In Basra the effect of closing the bases in the city will be to reduce our tactical and situational awareness, making any re-intervention high risk.”

537. A short note attached as Annex C to the main paper recorded that it would be “impossible to mitigate fully” the “serious implications” on situational awareness of leaving bases within Basra city. The annex said that those risks were “containable” post-PIC, and that mitigation measures were being “actively and aggressively considered”.

538. The paper stated that “we should consider retaining a military presence [in Basra Palace] at least until PIC”. If the Basra Palace base was to be retained for longer than planned, “a further UK battlegroup would be required”. The paper included a recommendation that public statements about the future of Basra Palace should be avoided, pending a separate proposal on its future.

539. The paper recorded that there were US concerns about the UK’s plans:

“... General Casey remains cautious about the timing of PIC in Basra and Maysan. He has expressed serious concerns about our re-posturing plans, and there are indications that General Petraeus may be more, not less cautious. Defence Secretary Gates has also raised questions.”

540. US interlocutors were reported to be concerned that the UK’s plans signalled a reduced commitment to the South, and that they could threaten the integrity of coalition and MNF-I supply lines. The paper stated:

“It is important that we are clear about what we are proposing. We are **not** suggesting that **PIC** must happen in Maysan and Basra on any fixed timetable. We accept that the case for moving to PIC in Basra in particular will be finely balanced. Our current assessment is that we have made sufficient progress to be confident that MND(SE) will be able to recommend that Basra can be transferred to PIC by the end of ... June. But the final decision will rest with MCNS [Ministerial Committee on National Security] and Maliki, and some of the key actions needed to get to PIC will require Iraqi decisions. Past experience suggests slippage may well occur before formal decisions get taken – indeed it has already done so for Maysan.

“What we are saying is that, in the light of progress thus far, and in anticipation of PIC, it makes sense now to set out a programme of change that will have demonstrable impact before PIC, and will pave the way for Iraqi-led progress

beyond. This will include some re-posturing of both our military and civilian effort. But our commitment, both military and civilian, will endure up to and beyond PIC.”

541. DOP met on 1 February, chaired by Mr Blair.²⁷⁹

542. Mr Browne reported on his recent visit to Iraq. In Basra he had “seen first hand the positive effect that Operation SINBAD had had”; the reported murder rate had reduced and “sectarian violence had almost stopped”. Continued violence was mainly directed against coalition forces. Mr Browne summarised that:

“... despite the change in tactics and a more cautious approach to transitioning to Iraqi control, the US strategic approach remained the same. The UK strategy was correct, but in order to maintain a capability to target JAM and assuage US concerns, the military were looking again at retaining a presence in Basra Palace ...”

543. As a consequence, Mr Browne reported that drawdown to 4,500 troops would take “a little longer”.

544. Summing up, Mr Blair concluded that the overall strategy for re-posturing and transition in southern Iraq remained the right one and invited the MOD to draw up a revised proposal for force levels and timelines, for discussion at a future meeting. That should take into account the potential need for a continued presence at Basra Palace and should set out firm proposals for the arrangements for training and mentoring the Iraqi Security Forces.

545. On 2 February, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary provided him with an update on Iraq.²⁸⁰ He wrote: “The security situation is poor, and worsening” and listed several major incidents in the preceding week, two of which had caused significant numbers of civilian casualties.

546. More positively, the Private Secretary reported signs that the recent campaign against extremist JAM leaders was bearing fruit: several were reportedly fleeing and Sadr city had become “considerably more permissive” than before.

547. Mr Blair queried how these two statements could both be true – that progress was being made against JAM yet the security situation was worsening.²⁸¹ He also noted that there remained a “big dislocation between [the intelligence] estimate and Ros M [Dr Marsden] & [Maj Gen] Shaw” on the security situation in Basra.

²⁷⁹ Minutes, 1 February 2007, DOP meeting.

²⁸⁰ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 2 February 2007, ‘Iraq Update, 2 February’.

²⁸¹ Manuscript comment Blair on Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 2 February 2007, ‘Iraq Update, 2 February’.

548. On 5 February, Mr Blair spoke to President Bush by video conference.²⁸² Mr Blair noted positive signs in relation to the Baghdad Security Plan, and advised:

“Our experience in Basra demonstrated that a well-conducted security operation, with political and reconstruction elements integrated into it, could deliver results in terms of increased local consent, and political buy-in.”

549. Mr Blair told President Bush that the UK would maintain a presence at Basra Palace to ensure that it had the ability and the tactical awareness to re-intervene, and would do more on training and mentoring. Once the ISF had progressed to a point where insurgent groups could see they could not win militarily “they would have to pursue other options”.

550. In a separate conversation, Sir Nigel Sheinwald talked Secretary Rice and Mr Hadley through “the plans set out by the Defence Secretary after his visit last week, ie in relation to the Basra Palace site, ISF mentoring and embedding, and continued action against the JAM”.²⁸³ Sir Nigel:

“... made clear that the re-posturing would go ahead, but the details were being worked on and were expected to lead to a smaller draw-down than first planned – but this could have a knock-on impact on our plans for **Afghanistan**.”

551. When they met on 6 February Mr Blair reassured Gen Petraeus that the UK would:

“... ensure that we retained good situational awareness, and the ability to re-intervene quickly and effectively. This would involve staying in the Basra Palace site for the time being, and doing more on training and mentoring.”²⁸⁴

552. On 7 February, the Chiefs of Staff noted that the “assumptions for the strategic force balancing work remained unchanged and a sound, logical basis was required to justify any continued presence in Basra Palace”.²⁸⁵

553. From Baghdad, Mr Asquith was reporting conflicting perspectives within the Iraqi Government on transition in Basra, ranging from insistence that a date must be set for withdrawal to considering it a low priority.²⁸⁶

554. On 8 February, Mr Asquith reported that the Baghdad Security Plan was about to enter its critical phase and was “unquestionably the best [plan] so far”.²⁸⁷ Prime Minister Maliki had appointed heavy hitters to head the political, economic and services strands.

²⁸² Letter Banner to Hayes, 6 February 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 22 January [sic]: Middle East issues’.

²⁸³ Letter Sheinwald to Hayes, 7 February 2007, ‘Dinner with US Secretary of State and National Security Adviser, 5 February 2007’.

²⁸⁴ Letter Banner to McNeil, 6 February 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with David Petraeus’.

²⁸⁵ Minutes, 7 February 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

²⁸⁶ eGram 4996/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 7 February 2007, ‘Iraq: Basra – call on National Security Adviser, 6 February’.

²⁸⁷ eGram 5326/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 8 February 2007, ‘Iraq: Weekly Assessment’.

555. Mr Asquith had been telling his Sunni contacts that they had to engage in the plan and “not cry foul at the first excuse”. He commented that Prime Minister Maliki’s grip had strengthened and tightened. For the first time he sensed a small group of Ministers working to a common end. However, the risk remained high that, after the first two months of security operations, the underlying political disharmonies and capability deficiencies in delivering improvements in services and economic reconstruction would re-emerge.

556. On 8 February, Maj Gen Shaw reported that he had reached a satisfactory agreement with the head of the Basra Provincial Council.²⁸⁸ A “Comprehensive Plan” was being developed by the UK military and civilian staff in Basra aimed at achieving a “unifying approach for all lines of operation” and defining, within the context of what was likely to be achievable, what “stability” and “success” would look like.

557. Maj Gen Shaw wrote:

“Achieving a deal in Basra is the real challenge; it is on this that the FCO political plan is to focus. Social and political power is weak and dispersed. Tribal influences are weak: the displaced Marsh Arabs that occupy the banlieu are rootless, disenfranchised and guns for hire. Political power is divided and unrepresentative ... It is not clear that either social or political power is sufficiently coherently organised for deals to be made. The only unifying themes would appear to be fear of the abyss were MNF to leave, fear of malign Iranian influence and greed ... The hope is that a Basrawi majority in favour of a deal will emerge, with our military role being to neutralise the irreconcilables ... Identifying where this split occurs, eg within JAM, will be key ... I have no sense that the precursor talks to any deal have yet begun between the potential parties; making a prediction as to when such a deal might be forthcoming and what form it might take becomes another key ... requirement. All of which emphasises the essentially political nature of the end state to which all on the SISG [Southern Iraq Steering Group] must work, and the importance of the aforementioned political plan.”

558. Dr Marsden reported on 9 February that she considered that the UK’s plans to re-posture within Basra were “an opportunity to change the political dynamics in Basra more in our favour and achieve greater political engagement in the run up to PIC, thereby reducing the chances of further boycotts”.²⁸⁹

559. Dr Marsden considered that local Basrawi politicians did not believe that the UK was serious about early transition to PIC and used this “as an excuse not to

²⁸⁸ Minute Shaw to CJO, 8 February 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 8 February 2007’.

²⁸⁹ Letter Marsden to Aldred, 9 February 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

take decisive action themselves against militant JAM, IDF teams and malign Iranian influence". She judged:

"We don't have time to change the political soil in Basra or any realistic prospect of getting rid of JAM. Given that, what will success look like? One possible definition of our political end state is a more stable Basra in which parties are willing to resolve confrontations without recourse to serious violence; and in which JAM can be kept in line by other political forces (as happens in Dhi Qar and Muthanna). Achieving a political equilibrium in Basra will be much more difficult than in those two provinces because tribal influences are weaker, the political parties and malign Iranian influence are stronger and there is a large population of poor and disenfranchised Marsh Arabs. But our planned re-posturing away from the city centre and the associated information operations campaign may provide a more favourable environment in which a political deal could emerge.

"At the centre of a revamped Better Basra Plan, we therefore need a political plan for getting Basra to PIC and beyond ... This will need to be carefully calibrated with the Central Government, whose attention currently is very heavily focused on Baghdad. And it is important to acknowledge that we do not have a sufficiently clear picture of Basrawi politics and their connection to Baghdadi politics to be confident that any plan is credible."

560. Dr Marsden set out an outline of elements that might form part of such a plan and sought approval from the Iraq Senior Officials Group to work up a more detailed plan.

561. On 11 February, Lt Gen Lamb reported successful operations by Iraq's security forces.²⁹⁰ He commented that the ongoing dialogue with those connected with the Sunni insurgency "continues to bear fruit" but his interlocutors were not yet ready to give full levels of trust to the government. The civil bureaucracy remained stretched and was "arguably untenable in its current form".

562. On 12 February, Mr Asquith met Mr Tariq Abdullah, Prime Minister Maliki's Chief of Staff, to talk through the UK's plans in Basra.²⁹¹ He explained that the UK intended to:

"... transfer sites in the city to the Iraqi authorities. In parallel, we would be concentrating most of our staff in the Air Station to maximise the effect of civilian and military effort designed to create the conditions for PIC."

563. Mr Asquith explained that there would remain a British military presence at Basra Palace. Mr Abdullah gave an assurance that the Prime Minister and his office were supportive of what Mr Asquith had outlined.

²⁹⁰ Minute Lamb to CDS, 11 February 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (244) 11 Feb 07'.

²⁹¹ eGram 5872/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 12 February 2007, 'Iraq: Basra – Discussion with the Prime Minister's Office'.

564. Mr Browne's Private Secretary wrote to Mr Blair's Private Secretary on 12 February to say that the MOD had picked up indications that the Danish Government was considering removing their ground forces from Iraq later that year.²⁹² Such a decision would "present military and political difficulties" for the UK's re-posturing plans in MND(SE), possibly requiring UK forces to replace the withdrawn Danish troops and "placing further unwelcome pressure on our force generation for Iraq and Afghanistan".

565. Mr Browne had relayed the UK's concerns to the Danish Defence Minister earlier that week.

566. On 12 February, Mr Dowse passed Sir Nigel Sheinwald a copy of an unclassified presentation that had been the basis of a media briefing by the US military on Iranian activity in Iraq.²⁹³ Mr Dowse commented:

"The brief's key judgement that 'Iran is a significant contributor to attacks on coalition forces' matches our own assessment ... The US brief also highlights casualties among Iraqi security forces and civilians from such attacks. This is factually correct, although we judge the MNF have been the prime target.

"Much of the brief offers evidence in the form of photos of fragments recovered from explosions, damaged vehicles, seized mortar rounds, man-portable surface to air missiles, roadside bombs and bomb components including TNT blocks, telemetry devices – much of the material exhibiting Farsi markings – and some photographic examples of similar material of known Iranian origin. We are familiar with this material and agree that it offers compelling evidence that Iraqi extremists are being equipped from Iran ..."

567. Mr Dowse observed that media reporting had highlighted the US briefers' assertion that support for Iraqi Shia extremists was a policy approved "at the highest levels" of the Iranian government, noting that that was consistent with JIC Assessments.

568. At DOP on 14 February, Ministers were asked to agree proposals for re-posturing and drawdown in Iraq and a request for additional troops for Afghanistan.²⁹⁴

569. A paper produced by the MOD for the discussion said:

"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."²⁹⁵

570. The paper stated that the UK could only sustain the enduring operational deployment of eight battlegroups. The "military judgement" was that commitment of additional UK resource in Afghanistan was likely to have more military impact than

²⁹² Letter and Note McNeil to Banner, 12 February 2007, 'Iraq: Future Danish Contribution to MND(SE)'.

²⁹³ Minute Dowse to Sheinwald, 12 February 2007, 'Iraq: US Brief on Iranian Activity'.

²⁹⁴ Minutes, 14 February 2007, DOP meeting.

²⁹⁵ [Paper MOD officials, 13 February 2007, 'Iraq and Afghanistan: Balancing Military Effort in 2007'](#).

continuing commitment in Iraq at roughly existing levels and that therefore it would be desirable to have four battlegroups deployed in Iraq and four in Afghanistan in the second half of 2007 (compared with the existing six and two respectively).

571. The MOD invited DOP to:

“agree that we should continue to reduce towards four battlegroups in MND(SE) but that in light of the practical challenges of handing over Basra Palace we should be prepared to maintain a fifth battlegroup there until the end of Aug 07.”

572. The case for retaining a fifth battlegroup was 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 ... At the centre of US nervousness is a 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 battlegroup 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.”

573. The paper recalled Ministers had agreed in January 2006 that Iraq was the UK’s top overseas security priority but went on to say:

“... 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.”

574. MOD officials explained that other factors should be taken into account – including the UK/US security relationship, the threat from Iran, and relations within NATO. They concluded 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 ...”

575. The second issue on which DOP was asked to reach a decision was a request for additional troops for Afghanistan.

576. The MOD paper explained that:

“... at least since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 we [the Armed Forces] 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.”

577. As a consequence, “some capabilities are very stretched, notably deployable ground troops and enables such as air transport, medical, intelligence and surveillance”.

578. The paper went on to state:

“... the military judgement is that we could sustain the deployment of eight battlegroups 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 eight in total. This means that for as long as we retain six, or even five, battlegroups in Iraq it will not be possible to contribute from UK resources the additional two battlegroups for ISAF it is CDS’s strong advice we should provide.”

579. The paper concluded that, given the scale of commitment in Afghanistan, the only scope for easing the pressure would be to reduce further in Iraq in 2008, and so the “continued commitment to Basra Palace should not extend beyond Aug 07”.

580. An MOD paper on the possible UK response to revised force requirements for Afghanistan, also written for DOP, was explicit that “delivery of additional battalions for Afghanistan and the enabling assets required is dependent on Iraq force levels”.²⁹⁶

581. Departmental briefs for Ministers attending DOP show that views were divided within Whitehall. The MOD was concerned that the Cabinet Office and Treasury were trying to postpone decisions on Afghanistan and told Mr Browne that the force packages proposed by MOD were designed to meet NATO’s specific needs.²⁹⁷

582. The FCO was concerned that US commanders in Iraq were sceptical about the UK’s assessment of progress in Basra and were concerned about UK plans.²⁹⁸

583. Cabinet Office officials advised Mr Blair that the MOD’s assessment of Op SINBAD would be:

“... drafted to be as positive as possible. There have been some beneficial short and medium term effects, such as stabilising the security situation, creating new employment opportunities, successful regeneration projects and improved capability of the Iraqi Security Forces. However, the assessment is also likely to identify a requirement for further work to be done to tackle the criminal elements of the Iraqi Police Service (especially death squad activities), the enduring economic

²⁹⁶ Paper MOD officials, [undated], ‘Afghanistan: Possible UK Military Response to Revised NATO Force Requirements’.

²⁹⁷ Minute Brown to APS/SofS [MOD], 13 February 2007, ‘Iraq and Afghanistan: Brief for DOP Meeting on 14 February 2007’.

²⁹⁸ Minute Lever to PS/Lord Triesman, 13 February 2007, ‘DOP, 14 February: Iraq’.

problems ... and the remaining flaws in the leadership of the Iraqi Security Forces. They have not yet agreed the note with other government departments.”²⁹⁹

584. At DOP on 14 February, Ministers accepted the recommendation to retain five battlegroups (around 5,200 troops) in Basra until the end of August 2007, which would allow the UK to retain a presence at Basra Palace.³⁰⁰ Ministers would review that presence in the summer in the light of conditions in Basra and any residual US concerns about the speed of withdrawal.

585. DOP agreed that Mr Blair should announce the UK’s decision to re-posture forces within MND(SE) to Parliament when it returned from Recess, in the week beginning 26 February.

586. In discussion, the point was made that it was not clear whether US concerns would have reduced sufficiently by the end of August to allow Basra Palace to be handed over as planned.

587. Mr Browne told the Inquiry that he was “not conscious that there were things we did not or could not do, particularly in Basra or in Iraq, because we had troops deployed to Afghanistan”.³⁰¹ He recollected that there was a long term strategy to reduce troop numbers in Iraq that was “fixed in any event and was not related to the fact that we were deploying troops into Afghanistan”. At every stage, Mr Browne added that he had taken and accepted the advice of the military.

588. VAdm Style advised the Chiefs of Staff on 14 February of “the very real sense from US interlocutors, notwithstanding the likely lack of a roll-over of UNSCR 1723, that there was a need to plan for an extension of the current US ‘surge’ of forces to Feb 08 ...”³⁰²

589. Maj Gen Shaw reported on 15 February that Gen Petraeus – who was visiting MND(SE) – was “largely receptive” to the UK’s proposed approach but had:

“... challenged the assumption that this UNSCR [authorising MNF presence in Iraq] will be the last; he suggested a growing appetite, both US and Iraqi/Maliki, for another one ... This threatens our assumptions about PIC this year across Iraq which drives the risk-taking, time-driven approach we have adopted. This requires political engagement at the highest level, because the answer to this question sets the context for all our military activity and planning.”³⁰³

²⁹⁹ Minute Cabinet Office [junior officials] to Prime Minister, 14 February 2007, ‘DOP 14 February – Op SINBAD Assessment’.

³⁰⁰ Minutes, 14 February 2007, DOP meeting.

³⁰¹ Public hearing, 25 January 2010, page 26.

³⁰² Minutes, 14 February 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

³⁰³ Minute Shaw to CJO, 15 February 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq update – 15 February 2007’.

590. Mr Blair's Private Secretary described the planned Parliamentary statement to Dr Meghan O'Sullivan, Deputy National Security Advisor for Iraq and Afghanistan, on 15 February.³⁰⁴

591. The Private Secretary advised Mr Blair the following day that there were "rumblings of discontent within the US system about the timing of the statement", which some in the US Administration would have preferred the UK to put off until April.³⁰⁵

592. The Private Secretary also told Mr Blair:

"There are signs that US, and Iraqi, attitudes to transition could cause us difficulties. Neither party shows much enthusiasm for transition in the Spring (or even Summer). This could well affect our own plans, with the [US] Corps now judging that Maysan might be ready for transition in May, but that Basra probably won't be ready in June. As you heard at DOP, the MOD are very keen that the idea of drawing-down by a further battalion at the end of August should be a fixed target. DOP agreed to review this in the Summer, and it will – as now – be difficult to justify a further draw-down (especially out of the city centre) if we retain nominal responsibility for security."³⁰⁶

593. Lt Gen Lamb sent a report on his work on reconciliation, which MOD forwarded to Mr Blair's Private Secretary on 15 February.³⁰⁷ Knowledge of the negotiations was limited to a very small number of individuals on both the Iraqi and the MNF-I sides.

594. On Sunni engagement, Lt Gen Lamb reported that there had been MNF-I effort since summer 2006 to bring Sunni insurgent groups into a dialogue that might lead to a cease-fire with the MNF/ISF.

595. Lt Gen Lamb had established substantive negotiations with leadership elements of Ansar al-Sunna, Jaysh al-Islami and Jaysh al-Mujahadeen. The groups were negotiating among internal factions the possibility of forming a single organisation, calling a cease-fire and working to defeat AQ-I. Lt Gen Lamb reported that a confidence-building test case was under way within Baghdad and Anbar, in which an economic reconstruction package was provided in return for "local protection in the area".

596. Lt Gen Lamb reported that negotiations with Shia/JAM representatives in Sadr City were less advanced and were more complicated. JAM was not a homogenous organisation. The Mayor of Sadr City had begun to engage politically with the MNF and ISF and the possibility of contact with other Shia/JAM leaders in Baghdad was being explored.

³⁰⁴ Minute Banner to Sheinwald, 15 February 2007, 'Iraq/NSC'.

³⁰⁵ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 16 February 2007, 'Iraq – Statement to the House'.

³⁰⁶ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 16 February 2007, 'Iraq update, 16 February'.

³⁰⁷ [Letter McNeil to Banner, 15 February 2007, 'SBMR-I Reconciliation and Outreach Update' enclosing Note 'SBMR-I Reconciliation/Outreach Sitrep'](#).

597. Gen Dannatt visited Baghdad and MND(SE) from 14 to 15 February.³⁰⁸ He reported Maj Gen Shaw's views that there was merit in maintaining a MNF presence in Basra Palace at least until PIC, both to help preserve the UK's relationship with the US in theatre and because he believed that a UK military presence in Basra was required for as long as MND(SE) was responsible for security there. Gen Dannatt commented in his report:

"The military logic behind maintaining situational awareness in the City is impeccable, but over time there may be different ways of delivering it at a reduced scale of MNF military commitment at the Palace ... PIC and our withdrawal from BP [Basra Palace] will be linked, but need not be slavishly.

"... Our decision to reinforce Afghanistan ... can only be delivered by the TRB [Theatre Reserve Battalion] ... In simple force generation terms, we can only do this if [we] get down to four battlegroup HQs ... in Iraq. And we are only likely to do this if we withdraw from BP ...

"Finally on BP, I found it rather incoherent to learn that ... our own Consulate were planning to withdraw from the Palace shortly ... I found all of this rather indicative to the whole BP issue: untidy and somewhat incoherent ... I sense our decision making across Whitehall has lacked agility, failing to mesh the different strategic dynamics and imperatives emerging from Washington, Baghdad, Kabul and Mons [i.e. NATO], over these past few months, in a timely manner. Meanwhile, soldiers are being wounded in BP – shortly one may be killed."

598. The Private Secretary to Mr Bill Jeffrey, MOD Permanent Under Secretary, annotated those comments:

"[Those paragraphs] don't strike me as very helpful. I don't recall him making these points before decisions were made."³⁰⁹

He added:

"I gather CDS [ACM Stirrup] raised this at the COS(I) [Chiefs of Staff Informal meeting] and CGS [Gen Dannatt] basically said this note had been badly drafted and he was (of course) totally onside ..."³¹⁰

599. General Dannatt also commented:

"It is the prospect of political accommodation that I found the most encouraging. 'Reconciliation' and 'outreach' are not exactly new concepts in the Iraq campaign, but I do sense that the conditions for them are increasingly favourable ...

³⁰⁸ Minute CGS to CDS, 19 February 2007, 'CGS Visit to Iraq: 14-15 Feb 07'.

³⁰⁹ Manuscript comment Helliwell to Jeffrey on Minute CGS to CDS, 19 February 2007, 'CGS Visit to Iraq: 14-15 Feb 07'.

³¹⁰ Manuscript comment Jeffrey on Minute CGS to CDS, 19 February 2007, 'CGS Visit to Iraq: 14-15 Feb 07'.

“Debates about political accommodation inevitably prompted the question of what strategic success in Iraq might now look like. Or to use the current mantra, what does ‘Iraq good enough’ actually mean? Given that the US and UK arguably began this war for different strategic reasons, the imperative to agree some common ground for the campaign’s endstate becomes yet more pressing. I sense it is the Iraqis who will determine what ‘good enough’ means for them and it may well be far short of our previous definitions of strategic success. I believe the time is ripe to re-open the debate with theatre and Washington on this fundamental issue.”³¹¹

600. Mr Blair’s Private Secretary put a draft Parliamentary statement on developments in Iraq into Mr Blair’s red box for consideration over the weekend of 17 and 18 February.³¹²

601. In an accompanying note, Mr Jonathan Powell advised Mr Blair:

“This is a major opportunity to change the way people think about the situation in Iraq and the way forward ... you need to give people the sense of an overall **plan** and a way forward that could lead to success ... The key question you have to answer is whether it is inevitable that Iraq will sink into a vicious civil war that will only end with the partition of the country and the success of Iran.”³¹³

602. On 18 February, Sir Nigel Sheinwald wrote a minute for Mr Blair describing two conversations with Mr Hadley over that weekend.³¹⁴ Sir Nigel explained that President Bush supported the timing of the UK’s announcement, but had asked that Mr Blair make clear that “re-posturing in Basra is the result of success, not an attempt to hedge against failure” and that substantial numbers would remain, with a continued training role.

603. In his weekly report on 18 February, Lt Gen Lamb wrote that Operation Fardh al-Qanoon was picking up momentum.³¹⁵ Gen Petraeus had ensured work on infrastructure and basic services had been placed into a new and higher gearing. Although the number of attacks in Baghdad remained broadly undiminished, the mood music on the street suggested small, but positive, indicators of change.

604. On 19 February, Mr John Howard, the Australian Prime Minister, committed to sending 70 additional military instructors to Iraq.³¹⁶

³¹¹ Minute CGS to CDS, 19 February 2007, ‘CGS visit to Iraq: 14-15 Feb 07’.

³¹² Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 16 February 2007, ‘Iraq – Statement to the House’.

³¹³ Minute Powell to Prime Minister, 16 February 2007, ‘Iraq Statement’.

³¹⁴ Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 18 February 2007, ‘Iraq and Israel/Palestine: White House views’.

³¹⁵ Minute Lamb to CDS, 18 February 2007, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (245) 18 Feb 07’.

³¹⁶ www.theage.com.au, 19 February 2007, ‘70 non-combat troops for Iraq’.

605. On 19 February, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary sent a record of a phone call between Mr Blair and Prime Minister Maliki to Mrs Beckett’s Private Office.³¹⁷ It said:

“He [Mr Blair] noted that Maliki was aware of our intention to start drawdown in Basra when conditions allowed. We hoped to start this between now and May as we judged the Iraqi forces capable of taking the lead. He emphasised that we would be maintaining a presence at Basra Palace. Maliki wondered if a two month pause would be possible to ensure that we were fully joined up. The Prime Minister reiterated that this would be done between now and May.”

606. The Private Secretary asked Lt Gen Lamb and Mr Robert Gibson, Deputy Head of Mission at the British Embassy Baghdad, to call on Prime Minister Maliki the following day to ensure he was in the picture on plans for the statement.

607. They reported back that Prime Minister Maliki had understood from the call that the UK would withdraw troops from Basra on 21 February.³¹⁸

608. Mr Gibson and Lt Gen Lamb told Prime Minister Maliki that:

“The UK would stay in Basra throughout 2007 and into 2008 for as long as Maliki ... wished and the conditions warranted it. The Prime Minister’s message and the UK decision to reduce troop numbers was not directly connected to handing over Basra to provincial Iraqi security control. The timing of that was a matter for Maliki. Rather the decision was driven by the requirement to balance British force levels between Iraq and Afghanistan.”

609. Following their meeting, Lt Gen Lamb and Mr Gibson reported that Prime Minister Maliki appeared to be happy with the proposed announcement.

610. Mr Blair spoke to President Bush on 20 February by video conference and told him that the UK’s re-posturing would be a little more cautious than some might expect; the UK would not be reducing “combat capability”.³¹⁹

611. Mr Blair’s Private Secretary recorded that:

“He stressed that we would also still be taking action against JAM in Basra.”

³¹⁷ Letter Phillipson to Siddiq, 19 February 2007, ‘Iraq: Prime Minister’s Phonenumber with Maliki, 19 February’.

³¹⁸ eGram 6918/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 20 February 2007, ‘Iraq: Maliki & the Prime Minister’s Proposed Announcement’.

³¹⁹ Letter Phillipson to Hayes, 20 February 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 20 February: Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Afghanistan’.

612. Mr Blair made his statement in the House of Commons on 21 February.³²⁰ He emphasised that the situation in Basra was:

“... very different from that in Baghdad. There is no Sunni insurgency and no al-Qaida base. There is little Shia on Sunni violence. The bulk of the attacks are on the Multi-National Force ...

“As a result of the operation in Basra, which is now complete, the Iraq forces now have the primary role for security in most parts of the city. It is still a difficult and sometimes dangerous place, but many extremists have been arrested or have left the city. The reported levels of murder and kidnapping are significantly down ...

“What all this means is not that Basra is how we want it to be, but that the next chapter in Basra’s history can be written by the Iraqis ...

“Already we have handed over prime responsibility for security to the Iraqi authorities in Muthanna and Dhi Qar. Now in Basra over the coming months we will transfer more of the responsibility directly to Iraqis. I should say that none of this will mean a diminution in our combat capability. The actual reduction in forces will be from the present 7,100 ... to roughly 5,500. However, with the exception of forces which will remain at Basra Palace, the British forces will be located at Basra Air Base and be in a support role ...

“The British forces that remain in Iraq will have the following tasks:

- training and support to Iraqi forces;
- securing the Iraq-Iran border;
- securing supply routes;
- and, above all, the ability to conduct operations against extremist groups and be there in support of the Iraqi army when called upon.

“Over time, and depending naturally on progress and the capability of the Iraq security forces, we will be able to draw down further, possibly to below 5,000 once the Basra Palace site has been transferred to the Iraqis in late summer.

“We hope that Maysan province can be transferred to full Iraqi control in the next few months, and Basra in the second half of the year. The UK military presence will continue into 2008, for as long as we are wanted and have a job to do.”

613. Mr Blair also told the House of Commons:

“I have discussed this with Prime Minister Maliki, and our proposals have his full support and, indeed, represent his wishes.”

³²⁰ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 21 February 2007, columns 261-280.

614. Dr Marsden reported an “extremely positive” reaction to Mr Blair’s statement from the Governor of Basra, who welcomed it at a press conference on the same day and praised co-operation between the MNF and the provincial government.³²¹

615. Dr Marsden also reported that the Chairman of Basra’s Provincial Council had not made a public statement, but was believed to be under pressure from within the Council to take a less positive line.

616. When they eventually met on 27 February, the Chairman told Dr Marsden “the Prime Minister’s statement had eased the way to end the boycott”.³²²

617. In the US, the statement received “extensive coverage”.³²³ A report from the British Embassy Washington characterised the debate as:

“The Administration puts on a brave face and tries to portray UK plans as evidence of progress. The media see the announcement as a serious setback for Bush’s surge. The Democrats use British plans as ammunition in their battle to force US troop withdrawals.”

618. The Embassy also observed:

“The disproportionate rejoicing in State Department at PM Howard’s decision ... is a good indicator of the fragility of the mood here.”

619. Mr Browne told Cabinet on the morning of 22 February that, although it was early days, Operation Fardh al-Qanoon appeared to be working well so far.³²⁴ The main difference between it and previous operations was the presence of US forces living in the districts of Baghdad, providing a permanent protective presence.

620. Mr Browne also briefed Cabinet on the situation in South-East Iraq, which was “relatively quiet”. He added that as a result of Op SINBAD the relationship between the UK troops and the people of Basra had improved. There was a recognition the ISF and the MNF must take action against militant JAM where a small minority were perpetrating violent attacks for political and economic gain. The MNF could not deal with that problem: only the Iraqi people could address the political and economic issues.

621. Referring to Mr Blair’s announcement the previous day, Mr Browne said that the reduction in troop numbers reflected military advice and that the UK’s strategy was “the same as that of the USA”.

622. Summing up the discussion, Mr Blair said that Gen Petraeus had a clearer idea of the links between civilian and military activity in addressing Iraq’s problems.

³²¹ Letter Marsden to Aldred, 23 February 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

³²² Letter Marsden to Aldred, 2 March 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

³²³ eGram 7440/07 Washington to FCO London, 23 February 2007, ‘Iraq-US: Reactions to the Prime Minister’s Announcement’.

³²⁴ Cabinet Conclusions, 22 February 2007.

623. On 22 February, Maj Gen Shaw reported on “a significant week” in which “All the indicators ... would suggest that JAM is losing the initiative in Basra.”³²⁵ As a result, JAM was threatening to “make Basra burn” if the ISF continued to co-operate with the MNF, and there had been increased intimidation of locally employed civilian staff which had reduced attendance levels.

624. Maj Gen Shaw continued:

“It is difficult to determine if this is the tipping point at which the people of Basra will either decide to stand and fight the influence of militant JAM or will choose to acquiesce to their control of the street. It is certainly not the moment to take the pressure off, and points to the need to continue STRIKE operations and this in turn emphasises the need of the ISTAR [Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance – see Section 14.1] and specialist ... assets that can help us maximise our effect.”

625. On 23 February, Dr Marsden wrote in her weekly report:

“We continue to get reports of JAM members leaving the city for fear of arrest. And there are signs that some elements of Basra JAM may be willing to talk to us. This and other indicators would suggest that JAM could be losing the initiative in Basra. But there are other Iranian-influenced elements of JAM who continue to hit us ... Reports of intimidation are at a new high. Over the month we have also seen a spike in execution-style killings ... One Locally Employed Civilian was found dead with a note attached to his chest stating that this is what happens to collaborators with MNF ...

“We are seeing noticeably less political fallout from our assertiveness than we would have done last year. There are signs that the political and public mood may be becoming more hostile to JAM – and more understanding of our attempts to deal with its most egregious elements.”³²⁶

626. Following Dr Marsden’s report, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs requested from the FCO “advice on what more MND(SE) can do to support action against the JAM, including Iranian elements”.³²⁷

627. At the request of the Iraq Senior Officials Group, a CIG assessed violence in Anbar province and the threat it posed to the MNF and the Iraqi government on 23 February.³²⁸

³²⁵ Minute Shaw to CJO, 22 February 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq update – 22 February 2007’.

³²⁶ Letter Marsden to Aldred, 23 February 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

³²⁷ Letter Fletcher to Siddiq, 26 February 2007, ‘Iraq: Basra’.

³²⁸ [CIG Assessment, 23 February 2007, ‘Iraq: The Struggle for Anbar’.](#)

The CIG judged that the insurgents in Anbar had proved resilient and that support for their insurgency was undiminished:

“Large areas of Anbar are outside effective MNF or Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) control. In several towns and in rural areas insurgents are able to operate freely. Where the MNF has an established presence, or patrols frequently, the insurgents’ ability to exert control is less.”

628. The CIG considered the ability of the Iraqi Government to assert its authority in the province and judged that:

“Central government’s influence in Anbar is weak. The provincial authorities send the right signals about economic and security problems, but they have been able to deliver little. Local administrative capacity is very limited and dogged by tribal rivalries. Living conditions across the province remain poor.

“There is little prospect of improvement in security. In a particularly hostile environment, the Iraqi Security Forces will require MNF combat support beyond 2007, or risk ceding *de facto* control of further large areas to the insurgents.”

629. The CIG Assessment concluded:

“Prospects for the Anbar tribal groups fighting AQ-I will depend on their gaining broader support among the Sunni population. We judge this will prove difficult as long as rival tribal and insurgent groups compete for local power and influence. More broadly, most Anbaris have no confidence in local political structures or in Maliki’s Shia-dominated government and its efforts at national reconciliation.”

630. An official working closely with the military discussed proposals for Shia outreach briefly with Lt Gen Lamb on 27 February and explained that the “main effort was to bring a limited number of high quality interlocutors to the table”, including JAM1.³²⁹ Lt Gen Lamb was happy with what was proposed and content for the plan to proceed with JAM1.

631. According to a JIC Assessment dated 31 October 2007, negotiations began in March 2007.³³⁰

632. SIS3 told the Inquiry that the dialogue with JAM1 was borne of opportunism.³³¹

633. Lieutenant General Sir Graeme Lamb told the Inquiry that he was not personally involved in the cease-fire negotiations, but “became aware of a dialogue which became established between the military, between [officials working closely with the military]

³²⁹ Email official working closely with the military, 27 February 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]/JAM Outreach’.

³³⁰ [JIC Assessment, 31 October 2007, ‘Iraq: Risks to the Negotiations with JAM in Basra’.](#)

³³¹ Private hearing, 2010, page 60. Based on redacted material.

and – GOC and a few other boys down there in Basra”.³³² He recounted having warned Maj Gen Shaw that “if you take one step ahead of the Iraqi Government, the answer is this is absolutely doomed”.

634. ACM Stirrup visited Iraq from 25 to 27 February, beginning in Basra and then moving north to Baghdad.³³³ A report of the visit written by Lt Col Richmond, his Military Adviser, said that Gen Petraeus “thought that MNF could establish a secure environment” and had said that PIC would continue, though “not necessarily to the previously declared timetable (all provinces by Nov 07)”. Lt Gen Odierno was judged to be “very on side with what the UK was doing in SE Iraq”.

635. Lt Col Richmond observed:

“It was striking how the high threat environment was taking its toll on people. It was no longer possible to return off patrol to relax and unwind in camp due to the IDF threat.”

636. Mr Robert Gibson, British Deputy Head of Mission Washington, was reported to have briefed ACM Stirrup that “whilst Washington was happy with the PM’s announcement on UK re-posturing, the US Embassy in Baghdad was not and he had been given a hard time.”

637. In response to concerns raised by Maj Gen Shaw, ACM Stirrup:

“... outlined how the strategic benefits of vacating Basra Palace (BP) outweighed the tactical benefits of remaining. He had not been willing to agree to remain in BP until further notice and the date of Aug was driven by the timeline for repositioning all the capabilities ... The situation in the city would never be good enough, therefore there was risk – but it was better to take risk whilst we had the force elements and before PIC as we would still be able to intervene when we wished.”

638. On 26 February, Mrs Beckett’s Private Secretary wrote to Mr Blair’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs to say that since December the US had been signalling their intention to counter Iranian-supported attacks.³³⁴

639. The FCO judged that an aggressive operation could fuel perceptions that the US was seeking military confrontation with Iran on a broader front. The UK was more vulnerable to Iranian retaliation than the US, because it maintained an Embassy in Tehran and because of Iran’s ability to make trouble in Basra and Maysan. Any UK involvement in the US-led initiative would require careful consideration of the rules of engagement for UK troops.

³³² Private hearing, 24 May 2010, page 88.

³³³ Minute Richmond to PSSC/SofS [MOD], 5 March 2007, ‘CDS Visit to Iraq 25-27 Feb 07’.

³³⁴ Letter Siddiq to Fletcher, 26 February 2007, ‘Iraq: Countering Iranian Activity’ attaching Paper IPU, 19 February 2007, ‘Iraq: Countering Iranian Activity’.

640. At the end of February, at the request of Mr McDonald, Dr Marsden produced an account of what life was like for ordinary Basrawis:

“For most people, life in Basra is still grim ... Modest improvements in their quality of life pale against a backdrop of militia intimidation, official corruption and inadequate basic services ...

“Violence and lawlessness are the overwhelming concern of Basrawis. Although life under Saddam was harsh, people often say that at least they knew where they stood. Now, life is less predictable and people are retreating behind the traditional defences of family and tribe. In polling, 95 percent said they felt a degree of safety in their immediate neighbourhood but only 30 percent felt safe further afield. Many Basrawis tell us ‘Before 2003, there was one Saddam to fear. Now there are thousands of Saddams.’

“Women are increasingly afraid ... to leave the house, fearing kidnap, harassment or sexual violence ... After sunset most people desert the streets, stay home and watch TV ... Threats and intimidation are an everyday occurrence ...

“After the lack of security, unemployment is the most commonly cited problem. Polling indicates that only about 30 percent of Basrawis are currently employed ...

“Asked what is the greatest improvement since the fall of the regime, many Shia cite the freedom to travel to shrines in Iran. However, perceptions of freedom differ depending on the ... individual.”³³⁵

641. Dr Marsden reported that polling data suggesting Basrawis had a positive attitude towards the police and wanted the MNF to leave was difficult to evaluate since people were afraid to complain about the police or militia, or to support the MNF, in front of individuals they did not know.

642. Although there was an “undeniable sense of desperation and gloom in Basra” the report also said:

“The better off can enjoy new consumer goods and the novelty of the freedom to travel outside Iraq. Women enjoy more political rights and there is an embryonic civil society movement. Many Sunni families who left Basra last year have now returned. There are some signs of growth in the local economy and public sector salaries have steadily increased.”

³³⁵ [Letter Marsden to McDonald, 28 February 2007, ‘Basra: Everyday Life for Ordinary Iraqis’.](#)

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643. In her weekly report on 2 March, Dr Marsden wrote:

“This week we have seen the Sadrists wondering how to respond to the Prime Minister’s announcement and a direct approach from a Sadrist MP ... to the FCO. This approach is encouraging and suggests that there is a political opportunity to be exploited. It also reinforces our sense that the Sadrists are still in disarray, not just here but across the country ...

“In parallel with ... [the Sadrists’] approach in London, there have been some tentative indications here that OMS/JAM in Basra would like to lower the temperature and de-escalate things. But it is far from clear how much of the Sadrist spectrum ... [they] will be able to deliver and how they intend to deal with the Iranian-controlled extremist elements, who can be expected to go on attacking us. The current lack of cohesion in the Sadrist camp underlines the need for caution ... We should certainly pursue this approach but will need to be clear where our red lines lie.”³³⁶

644. On the same date, Dr Marsden wrote to the Cabinet Office a second time, attaching the third iteration of the Better Basra Plan.³³⁷ Attached to the Plan were an annex setting out benchmarks, a detailed work plan for each element, an estimate of progress against the benchmarks set in December 2006 and a cost estimate for 2007/08 which totalled around £21m. The Plan had been drafted jointly by MND(SE), the British Embassy Office Basra and the PRT and had been discussed in detail with the US Embassy Regional Office in Basra.

645. The Plan set out “a comprehensive strategy for bringing Basra to the point where it can transition to Provincial Iraqi Control”. Implementation of the Plan would be led by the Southern Iraq Steering Group, bringing together civilian and military efforts.

646. The Plan defined “realistic” political success as:

- Iraqi leaders both at national and provincial level take the initiative in arguing the case for PIC ...
- the Provincial Government gains credibility bringing improvements to ordinary people’s lives
- a drop in the level of intimidation ... of those within the provincial government and security apparatus ...
- a reduction in malign Iranian influence and the removal from circulation of certain key individuals
- Iraqi Government control sustained after PIC with no breakdown of law and order.”

³³⁶ Letter Marsden to Aldred, 2 March 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

³³⁷ [Letter Marsden to Aldred, 2 March 2007, ‘Better Basra’](#).

647. In the plan, officials recognised that the UK authorities could not achieve those things without active support from the Iraqi authorities in Basra and Baghdad:

“The announcement of our planned withdrawal from MNF sites in the city centre has created a more favourable political environment in which to pursue this objective by showing that we are serious about transition. Early transition to PIC is important to some influential local leaders, who may be more willing than before to give rhetorical support to our transfer conditions. We also need support from the Central Government. Maliki’s attention is currently focused on the Baghdad Security Plan. Engaging him on Basra will be difficult, but must be our objective.”

648. On security, the Plan said:

“Our military actions should aim to create the conditions in which local politicians feel able to engage constructively to address Basra’s problems. Our aim is to reduce the threat from illegal armed groups and Iranian proxies and to build the capacity of the Iraqi Army to take on militant JAM ...

“Operation SINBAD has put MND(SE) on the front foot and served to kickstart the process of transition. One of the major benefits of this operation has been the experience it has given the local units of the Iraqi Army in planning and carrying out joint operations alongside the Iraqi police and coalition forces ...”

649. The Plan also said:

“We will reduce the threat from illegal armed groups by putting an increased emphasis on operations against militant JAM, death squad leaders and Iranian proxies. MND(SE) will maintain a heightened tempo of targeted strike operations and conduct more joint operations with the ISF (including Iraqi Special Forces) in order to neutralise irreconcilables and death squads, and deliver the message that we cannot be bombed out of Basra.”

650. The Plan listed objectives for policing, the judiciary and prisons (which are covered in Section 12.1), for infrastructure, governance and economic development (see Section 10.2) and for strategic communications, which aimed to “get Iraqis to deliver key messages on our behalf”.

651. On 3 March, Iraqi Special Forces, supported by MNF-I troops, carried out a raid on the Iraqi Police-run National Intelligence and Investigation Agency (NIIA) in Basra.³³⁸

652. The target was not the NIIA but a death squad leader, whom it was believed was present at the time.³³⁹ A number of prisoners discovered during the operation “inexplicably escaped”.

³³⁸ eGram 9049/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 6 March 2007, ‘Iraq: Meeting with Prime Minister Maliki, 5 March’.

³³⁹ Submission Brind to Casey and PS/Howells, 7 March 2007, ‘Iraq: DOP(I), 8 March’ attaching Speaking Note.

653. British military spokesman Major David Gell was quoted as saying:

“We believe there were about 30 people found imprisoned in the building and there was evidence of torture.”³⁴⁰

654. UK media reported a statement issued by Prime Minister Maliki’s Office calling for those behind the “illegal and irresponsible” act to be punished and reporting that an investigation into the incident had been ordered.³⁴¹

655. A more detailed account of the raid, and the Iraqi Government’s response to it, can be found in Section 12.1.

656. Prime Minister Maliki told Mr Asquith two days later that he was disappointed at the “reprehensible” way in which the raid had been conducted and the violation of Iraqi sovereignty that it represented.³⁴² He warned that the consequence of such operations might be severe restrictions on the ability to deploy the Iraqi Special Forces. A joint investigation was launched into the incident.

657. In a video conference with President Bush on 6 March, Mr Blair said that Prime Minister Maliki was “irritated” with the 3 March raid, but suggested that irritation was positive evidence of taking greater responsibility.³⁴³

658. Mr Blair said that the UK was “making progress against the JAM” in Basra, and retained “full combat capability” there. He suggested that close engagement on reconciliation remained necessary.

659. On 7 March, the Fadhila Party announced that it was withdrawing from the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and establishing itself as an independent bloc.³⁴⁴

660. Mr Asquith commented:

“That is good for Iraq in the medium term in that it introduces flexibility into the sectarian rigidities. But in the short term, it produces a further element of uncertainty ... There is no immediate threat to the BSP [Baghdad Security Plan], to which political leaders ... remain committed. However ... UIA is visibly weakened ... Fadhila’s platform (moderate, nationalist, non-sectarian, separation of clergy from active participation in policies) has wide appeal, particularly to other disaffected in the Shia bloc ... I doubt at this stage Allawi will formally join ... But he and Fadhila will be going after some of the same constituency ... This points to Allawi working more in opposition to Maliki than in support. Maliki, more exposed to SCIRI

³⁴⁰ *The Guardian*, 5 March 2007, *Raid at Iraqi compound finds signs of torture*.

³⁴¹ *BBC News*, 5 March 2007, *Iraqi PM condemns ‘illegal’ raid*.

³⁴² eGram 9049/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 6 March 2007, ‘Iraq: Meeting with Prime Minister Maliki, 5 March’.

³⁴³ Letter Fletcher to Hayes, 6 March 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 6 March: Middle East’.

³⁴⁴ eGram 9559/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 8 March 2007, ‘Iraq: Weekly Assessment’.

predominance in the UIA, will focus his efforts on co-opting those elements of the Sadrist movement he believes can be persuaded to support the political process – indeed may need to take greater risks with those whose loyalties are undecided ...”

661. On 8 March, Dr Howells updated DOP(I) on finalisation of the Better Basra Plan and the process for implementing it.³⁴⁵ It would be circulated out of committee for Ministers “to note”.

662. The MOD briefing for Mr Browne, who chaired the meeting, stated that the move to Basra Air Station would “impact significantly on the range of activity the FCO and the PRT can carry out” and encouraged him to ask:

- “Post re-posturing, will it be possible to deliver the effort required [on police training and reform] from Basra Air Station and the Warren?”³⁴⁶
- “Will FCO be able to achieve the level of local political engagement required, particularly over the critical period when UK forces are re-posturing?”³⁴⁷

663. DOP(I) also discussed a paper on the humanitarian situation in Iraq and concluded that the UK should lobby the UN, the Red Cross and others to step up their actions to address it.³⁴⁸

664. An FCO paper on the Iraqi judicial system was also tabled.³⁴⁹ It raised issues with a backlog of thousands of pre-trial detainees and with interference in judicial independence.

665. The Attorney General told the meeting that the importance of the rule of law could not be overstated and agreed to visit Iraq as proposed by the FCO.³⁵⁰

666. Also on 8 March, Maj Gen Shaw wrote in his weekly report:

“It is clear that the [NIIA] raid was both legal and, in tactical targeting terms, a good call ... Within the context of the wider politics of Iraq and with the benefit of hindsight, however, the operation was ill-judged. Local political reaction has been relatively muted ... My sense though is that, locally, the desire for progress and transition remains and this should motivate them to treat this incident more as a speed bump than an obstacle ...”³⁵¹

³⁴⁵ Minutes, 8 March 2007, DOP(I) meeting.

³⁴⁶ See Section 12.1 for a description of the Warren site.

³⁴⁷ Minute Fern to SofS-PSSC [MOD], 7 March 2007, ‘Defence and Overseas Policy Sub-Committee on Iraq – (DOP(I)) – Steering Brief’.

³⁴⁸ Minutes, 8 March 2007, DOP(I) meeting.

³⁴⁹ Paper IPU/Bagdad Embassy, 6 March 2007, ‘The Iraqi Judicial System’.

³⁵⁰ Minutes, 8 March 2007, DOP(I) meeting.

³⁵¹ Minute Shaw to CJO, 8 March 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 8 March 2007’.

667. In his Weekly Assessment of the same date, Mr Asquith wrote:

“Iraqi feelings that their sovereignty is being bruised by MNF actions are increasingly prominent ... Resentment about MNF actions will inevitably extend to questioning their authorities and then their presence ... Acceleration of the PIC timetable is now back on the table, having disappeared temporarily under the welter of activity related to the BSP [Baghdad Security Plan]. The impact of this mood on our plans for Basra, MNF ability to carry out operations against more sensitive Shia/Iranian targets, the June review of SCR 1723 and thereafter on any chances of a successor SCR at the end of the year ... is obvious. I don’t detect from Maliki any problems (yet) with our Basra timetable – though he is said to be seething at reporting in the Arabic press, drawing on press briefing in London, implying that we would be prepared to repeat the Jameat and NIAA operations if a further such opportunity arose.”³⁵²

668. On 10 March, a meeting of countries neighbouring Iraq and the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council was held in Baghdad.³⁵³ Attending for the UK alongside Mr McDonald, Mr Asquith reported:

“Maliki’s opening address ... sought to reassure participants that the Gol [Government of Iraq] was determined to tackle sectarian violence, but emphasised the common interest in a stable Iraq ... Delegates were constructive and supportive in their interventions and the tone of discussions was genuinely positive.

“A common theme was support for the Gol’s efforts to overcome the challenges. Iran sought a timetable for the withdrawal of MNF-I as they were part of the problem not the solution ... France and Syria also sought a timetable for MNF-I withdrawal.”

669. The IPU reported to Dr Howells that the meeting had failed to resolve the format, location and timing of a follow-up meeting of Ministers.³⁵⁴

670. The day after the neighbours meeting, Lt Gen Lamb reported that there had been a shift in focus within the MNF-I leadership, with greater recognition of the potential opportunities offered by the engagement/reconciliation framework.³⁵⁵

671. Lt Gen Lamb wrote that Gen Petraeus had been “seriously taken” with the quality of the small UK team that was working on this which, combined with the US specialists, had made a significant impact. The results of co-operation in Sadr City were looking promising, with around 1,000 MNF and ISF soldiers entering without a shot fired the previous week.

³⁵² eGram 9559/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 8 March 2007, ‘Iraq: Weekly Assessment’.

³⁵³ eGram 9887/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 11 March 2007, ‘Iraq: Baghdad Meeting of Neighbouring Countries and P5, 10 March’.

³⁵⁴ Minute Plato/IPU [junior official] to Casey/Howells, 12 March 2007, ‘Iraq Neighbours Meeting, Baghdad’, 10 March 2007.

³⁵⁵ Minute Lamb to CDS, 11 March 2007, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (247) 11 Mar 07’.

672. Lt Gen Lamb observed that if the MNF were unable to sustain the security initiative, the population would inevitably look to JAM for their future protection. Separately, he noted that the US was planning to send an additional 2,200 Military Police to Iraq to help with the expected additional prisoners resulting from Operation Fardh al-Qanoon.

673. In relation to the NIIA raid, Lt Gen Lamb reported that:

“The political aftermath of the Basra incident continues to play high in Baghdad a week after the event. Whatever the rights and wrongs, the facts or speculation ... the incident ... lit the touch paper on an issue that has been gaining increasing importance ever since May 2006 – that of Iraqi sovereignty and dignity. It is one that, above all, the Prime Minister [Maliki] has invested significant personal capital in, and ... will affect all our relationships and authorities throughout 2007 – seeing them becoming increasingly restricted ... Even with our most comfortable of interlocutors, the feeling has been of deep embarrassment and anger. So unless we ensure, both at home and in-theatre, that the coalition are operating within the GOI’s bounds of acceptable behaviour and sovereignty, we will find ourselves with much to lose. Consequently, I sense, the mid-year UNSCR review has the potential to be a significantly more important event than it was last time round.”

674. Gen Petraeus told Mr McDonald that the NIIA operation “continued to cause ripples”.³⁵⁶ Things had gone wrong and there were lessons to be learned, but he was “broadly content” with the UK’s plans for re-posturing in Basra, having been reassured by contact with No.10.

675. In his weekly report of 15 March, Maj Gen Shaw reflected:

“If we are to address the Iraqi end-state, our focus needs to be less on the 90 percent violence against us, more on the 10 percent reported inter-Shia/Iraqi violence which threatens stability when we are gone. Tackling death squad leaders ... who pose the major threat to the political stability of Basra, is the most useful application of military force to support the political end-state ...

“My short-term concern is that the issue blights transition ... A line needs to be drawn under this operation in the interest of achieving Iraqi self-reliance ... My long term concerns centre around the defining impact these investigations will have for our future operations and indeed rationale. Firstly, the ‘Untouchable’ status of ISOF [Iraqi Special Operations Forces] is already being attacked by the sectional interest within the GOI [Government of Iraq] that (quite rightly) feel threatened by such a body. The fear is that their freedom of movement and action is curtailed, their operations politically constrained; this would be most damaging to ISOF itself and PM Maliki’s ability to operate to the national interest. Secondly, the danger is that political constraints are so tightly drawn that MND(SE) cannot operate against the

³⁵⁶ eGram 9918/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 12 March 2007, ‘Iraq – Call on General Petraeus, 11 March’.

10 percent threat to the Iraqi end state. If we ever reached the stage when MND(SE) were restricted to operations in pursuit of our own force protection, we would need seriously to question our rationale for being here.”³⁵⁷

676. The Mayor of Sadr City, Sheik Raheem Al Daraji, and his friend Mr Mohammed Mutashar, were attacked on 15 March.³⁵⁸ The Mayor escaped with minor injuries but his friend was killed.

677. Lt Gen Lamb observed that the anger the attack generated within parts of the community had opened an existing rift within JAM/Office of the Martyr Sadr and the ‘city’ and created a greater willingness for at least parts of an emerging leadership to co-operate with MNF-I.

678. Mr Asquith reported on 15 March that there was growing speculation in Baghdad about the possibility of a coup against Prime Minister Maliki led by Dr Allawi, with one SCIRI cleric claiming that the UK was promoting such a coup.³⁵⁹ Mr Asquith wrote:

“Allawi as I suspected has moved into opposition mode. He aims to amass sufficient support to force and win a vote of no confidence and assume the Premiership ... The constituent elements of the UIA ... are testing where separate alliances might be made in case the Baghdad security plan founders ...

“My message (private and public) has been to reiterate our solid support for Maliki in his pursuit of establishing the conditions on the ground for greater stability; to encourage those working so hard to build a rival to the current government to direct their efforts instead to contributing to the success of the Baghdad Plan by reassuring Maliki of their support; and to focus them on how they might improve the effectiveness of the government with Maliki as PM ...

“Given their number, disparity of views and unpredictability, the Sadrists remain a key element in the political and security reckoning. Their quiescence in Baghdad is largely responsible for the positive early indicators in FAQ [Fardh al-Qanoon]. Essentially Arab (albeit Shia) nationalist in outlook, with non-Islamist and even politically secular strands, there are sections prepared to work with coalition forces – and Sunnis – if they see it to their advantage ... This is the moment to bring in the moderates, rather than to take on the whole movement which would risk provoking a schism and the emergence of a radical Taliban-like wing.”

679. In a telegram on 16 March, Mr Asquith assessed that the Baghdad Security Plan was continuing to make progress:

“Overall, the picture remains positive. Maliki ... continues to impress – out in front and even-handed. But, whenever he has an opportunity, General Petraeus

³⁵⁷ Minute Shaw to CJO, 15 March 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 15 March 2007’.

³⁵⁸ Minute Lamb to CDS, 18 March 2007, ‘SBMRI-I Weekly Report (248) 18 Mar 07’.

³⁵⁹ eGram 10744/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 15 March 2007, ‘Iraq: Weekly Assessment’.

continues to remind both Iraqi and US audiences that the plan is in its early stages. Success will take months, he says, not days or weeks. This chimes with General Odierno's emerging thinking, leaked to the New York Times last week, that the troop surge should be maintained until February 2008. If his argument gains ground ... this will add another dimension to the debate over the renewal of UNSCR 1723."³⁶⁰

680. In a letter to Mr Fletcher on 16 March, Mr Browne's Private Secretary reported that three investigations had been launched into the NIIA incident: one by the MNF, one by the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior and one by Prime Minister Maliki's Ministerial Security Adviser on Basra.³⁶¹ The MOD recognised that there could not be similar incidents. The MNF was reviewing mechanisms for informing the Iraqi Government of sensitive operations.

681. On 20 March, Mr Blair met ACM Stirrup and senior officials for an update on Iraq.³⁶² ACM Stirrup reported signs of improvement in security in Baghdad, though there was some concern that JAM might simply be lying low.

682. In Basra, he wrote that a large majority of attacks continued to be directed against the MNF, rather than being intra-Iraqi. If policing and rule of law issues could be addressed effectively, there was a reasonable chance that the overall level of attacks would come down significantly post-transition.

683. ACM Stirrup told Mr Blair that "Petraeus had been helpful in handling the fallout from the raid on the NIIA headquarters, and that this was in any case having only a limited effect on operations in Basra itself."

684. Mr Blair asked about progress on political issues, and in particular reconciliation, emphasising that "it remained one of the highest priorities in achieving long-term success in Iraq". He judged that a more effective strategy was needed "which would involve an identified US/UK figure, working with an identified Iraqi figure, both empowered to deliver serious benefits to Sunni groups". Mr Blair concluded that "if necessary, we should be prepared to exert leverage on Maliki and those around him to deliver on the political aspects of reconciliation".

685. On the same day, Mr Blair spoke to President Bush by video conference.³⁶³ Mr Blair welcomed the relatively positive news coming from Baghdad, observing that it was absolutely clear that the majority of people in Iraq did not want violence. Mr Blair said that it was important that the UK and US continued to support Prime Minister

³⁶⁰ eGram 10747/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 16 March 2007, 'Iraq/Baghdad Security Plan: Week Four of Main Operations'.

³⁶¹ Letter Beadle to Fletcher, 16 March 2007, 'Iraq: National Intelligence & Information Agency (NIIA) Operation'.

³⁶² Letter Banner to Hickey, 20 March 2007, 'Iraq: Meeting with Officials'.

³⁶³ Letter Banner to Hayes, 20 March 2007, 'Prime Minister's VTC with President Bush, 20 March: Middle East and Afghanistan'.

Maliki; a real effort by him on reconciliation would enhance Iraq's relations with its Sunni neighbours.

686. Maj Gen Shaw reported on 21 March: "The ripples of the raid on the NIIA are seemingly spreading the further we get from the operation itself."³⁶⁴

687. The Iraqi MOD had issued a letter stating that joint operations between the Iraqi Army in Basra and the MNF should cease (temporarily). Although this had since been rescinded, Maj Gen Shaw commented that "this makes moving Basra forward towards PIC more difficult".

688. On 21 March, at the request of the Iraq Senior Officials Group, the JIC examined the relative threat posed by AQ-I in Iraq compared with other Sunni insurgent groups.³⁶⁵

689. The JIC's Key Judgements were:

"I. Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) is the single largest Sunni insurgent network with the greatest geographical spread and influence. AQ-I's main effort is the prosecution of a sectarian campaign designed to drag Iraq into civil war. Its campaign had been the most effective of any insurgent group: it has had significant impact over the past year and poses the greatest immediate threat to stability in Iraq.

"II. Sustained Multi-National Force (MNF) pressure has prevented AQ-I from establishing unchallenged control across any significant part of Iraq. But it has had only temporary impact on the level of their violence ..."

690. The JIC judged that distinctions between "Sunni Arab nationalists" and "jihadists" were increasingly artificial:

"Although key AQ-I leadership elements remain non-Iraqi, the organisation's membership is overwhelmingly Iraqi and largely indistinguishable from the wider Sunni insurgency. We judge many Sunni insurgents see common cause in resisting Shia violence, the 'occupation' and, increasingly, what they see as a hostile Iranian-backed government."

691. The JIC added in a footnote:

"The AQ endorsed leader, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, is Egyptian; the nominal (and possibly fictitious) head of the Islamic State of Iraq is Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi."

692. The JIC stated:

"MNF have identified more than 50 groups by name, but they have no coherent overall leadership, only localised influence and no single dominant group has

³⁶⁴ Minute Shaw to CJO, 21 March 2007, 'GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq update – 21 March 2007'.

³⁶⁵ [JIC Assessment, 21 March 2007, 'Iraq: How Important is Al Qaida in Iraq'](#).

emerged ... A number of Sunni groups are involved in sectarian attacks, but we judge AQ-I is in the vanguard: ... its strategic main effort is the prosecution of a sectarian campaign designed to drag Iraq into civil war ...

“MNF have been successful in identifying and killing or capturing a large number of senior AQ-I leaders ... Sustained MNF pressure has prevented AQ-I from establishing unchallenged control across any significant part of Iraq. But it has had only temporary impact on the level of their violence ... Networks have proven resilient in the face of losses of both personnel and material ... We judge that in many Sunni areas support for AQ-I is now well established. We judge this support is not driven primarily by religious ideology. Coercion and intimidation play a part, but more important factors include AQ-I’s visible successes in attacks on the MNF and the Shia dominated Iraqi government, its ample funds and effective propaganda machine: particularly its achievement in portraying itself as the main defender of Sunni interests against Shia attack ...”

693. On future prospects the JIC judged:

“... the lack of progress by the Iraqi Government in delivering any tangible progress on national reconciliation, combined with spiralling sectarian violence, has helped bolster support for AQ-I. Unless the Iraqi government can convince Sunnis that it is genuinely interested in their concerns, we judge there is little chance of this trend being reversed. A hard core of Sunni support for AQ-I will remain irreconcilable, but some progress around key issues such as federalism, de-Ba’athification, reform of the ISF, and the release of detainees could erode support among the broader Sunni population.”

694. In preparation for a telephone call with Prime Minister Maliki, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary updated Mr Blair on the continued fallout from the NIIA raid:

“Maliki was annoyed about this perceived slight to Iraqi sovereignty but his Chief of Staff has advised us against dwelling on the subject. The MNFI investigation has concluded that the operation was conducted in good faith and in support of Iraqi law – that is, with a view to executing a sealed warrant issued by an Iraqi judge in respect of a suspected death squad leader. But no notification was given either to the Iraqi Government or General Petraeus ... because the operation has been deemed to be ‘time sensitive’ by those carrying it out.”³⁶⁶

695. Mr Blair spoke to Prime Minister Maliki on 22 March.³⁶⁷ He emphasised the UK’s and his own personal “full support” for Prime Minister Maliki’s government and assured him that nothing the UK did was intended to undermine or challenge the sovereignty of the Iraqi Government.

³⁶⁶ Minute Banner to Blair, 21 March 2007, ‘Phonecall with Maliki’.

³⁶⁷ Letter Banner to Hickey, 22 March 2007, ‘Conversation with Iraqi Prime Minister’.

696. Prime Minister Maliki recognised the need to tackle the militia but believed that, in destroying the NIIA Office, UK officers had contravened the understanding between the Iraqi Government and the coalition.

697. On 22 March, disturbances between JAM and Fadhila in Basra city centre left the Governor and Fadhila “severely rattled” and “beginning to question the advisability of PIC if the Iraqi authorities can’t guarantee security”.³⁶⁸

698. Mr Richard Jones, who had succeeded Dr Marsden as the British Consul General in Basra on 5 March, wrote:

“The immediate winner from the mayhem was JAM ... But I think JAM’s triumph will be pretty short-lived. It continues to disintegrate into splinter groups ... And it should realise that the public appetite for this sort of blatant violence has real limits ... If there is a single winner from 22 March, it may be Badr/SCIRI, who stood apart from the fray ...”

699. Mr Jones reported that the impact of the incident had been:

“Prominent Basrawis whom the GOC and I have met this week have all expressed concerns about future power struggles, particularly after transition to PIC. The general atmosphere among the local population remains one of fear, insecurity and a lack of trust in public institutions ... That said, the Iraqi authorities and the figures mediating between the parties ... managed to keep a lid on the situation ... So we should clearly continue our work to prepare the security forces to take on full responsibility as soon as possible. And we should prepare ourselves for the fact that ... the political solutions may not always be the ones that we would instinctively go for – what matters is that they buy the consent of Basrawi citizens.”

700. Mr Blair wrote on Mr Jones’ report: “How do we get a clear sense of who will control Basra & who do we want?”³⁶⁹

HMS Cornwall

On 23 March, 15 personnel from the frigate HMS Cornwall were captured by the Iranian navy.³⁷⁰ They were undertaking what the MOD described as a routine patrol in Iraqi waters and had been travelling in one of two small boats launched in order to board a vessel believed to have a suspect cargo. Iranian state television reported, however, that their boat had entered Iranian waters.

³⁶⁸ Letter Jones to Aldred, 29 March 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

³⁶⁹ Manuscript comment Blair on Letter Jones to Aldred, 29 March 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

³⁷⁰ *BBC News*, 23 March 2007, *UK sailors captured at gunpoint*; House of Commons, *Official Report*, 16 April 2007, columns 23-28.

Mr Browne made a statement to the House of Commons on 16 April describing the events that followed:

“The Iranians detained our personnel illegally, taking them first to an Iranian Revolutionary Guard naval base, and from there to Tehran. We made it clear, both directly to the Iranians and in public statements, that their detention was unacceptable and that they should be released immediately. We made intense diplomatic efforts to establish direct lines of communication with Iranian leaders, to prevent the situation from escalating and to resolve it quickly.”³⁷¹

The personnel from HMS Cornwall were held until 4 April, when their release was unexpectedly announced by President Ahmadinejad during a press conference.³⁷² Whilst in captivity, footage of some of the crew confessing that they had trespassed in Iranian waters had been broadcast.³⁷³

Lt Gen Lamb reported on 25 March that the incident:

“... has had an unhelpful impact on business, which will take some days to work through. Both the Ambassador [Mr Asquith] and I are working with Iraqi colleagues to secure a result and get our boys back, but unfortunately, this heaps more pressure on Maliki right when he doesn't need it.”³⁷⁴

After the personnel were released, considerable controversy was generated by the decision to allow individuals to sell their accounts to the media. Mr Browne told the House of Commons that he had “made a mistake” in agreeing the advice from the Royal Navy that this should be allowed to happen.³⁷⁵

On 8 April Lt Gen Lamb wrote in his weekly report:

“... the mood music here is that the US is delighted at the safe return of the crew, but somewhat mystified at their conduct both at the point of capture but more so on their behaviour subsequently in detention which they found very un-British ... The Iraqis are similarly nonplussed that we appear to have co-operated with the Iranians' media drive. I am unsighted to the detail but the breaking news that those detained by the Iranians have been given permission to sell their stories leaves an old and increasingly worn General like myself questioning what has become of a military whose heritage to this date has been revered by virtually every other nation as the benchmark of fortitude, service and sacrifice.”³⁷⁶

Lieutenant General Sir Robert Fulton was appointed by ACM Stirrup to lead an inquiry into the operational aspects of the incident, and an MOD review of media handling led by Mr Tony Hall, a former head of BBC News, was also launched.

³⁷¹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 16 April 2007, column 24.

³⁷² *BBC News*, 4 April 2007, *Iran drama played out on world stage*.

³⁷³ *BBC News*, 4 April 2007, *Images 'part of propaganda war'*.

³⁷⁴ Minute Lamb to CDS, 25 March 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (249) 25 Mar 07'.

³⁷⁵ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 16 April 2007, column 25.

³⁷⁶ Minute Lamb to CDS, 8 April 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (250) 8 Apr 07'.

The Foreign Affairs Select Committee (FASC) published its report into the incident on 17 July 2007.³⁷⁷ The FASC concluded that it was “difficult to fault” the UK’s diplomatic approach to the incident, and condemned the Iranian authorities for the actions. It found no evidence of a deal between UK and Iran to ensure release. The decision to allow individuals to sell their stories to the media, however, was found to be “a disturbing failure of judgement”.

701. On 23 March, Deputy Prime Minister Zawbaie, a Sunni, was seriously injured by a suicide attack carried out by one of his own security staff.³⁷⁸ Minutes later, at least nine people, including Mr Zawbaie’s brother and sister, two guards and an imam were killed by a car bomb in one of his security team’s vehicles.

702. Towards the end of March, Ambassador Ryan Crocker took up his post as the new US Ambassador to Iraq.³⁷⁹ A career diplomat, he had previously served as Ambassador in Lebanon, Kuwait, Syria and Pakistan. Between May and August 2003, he had deployed to Baghdad as Director of Governance in the Coalition Provisional Authority.

703. After a visit to Washington from 25 to 27 March Mr McDonald reported that the city was “obsessed by Iraq”.³⁸⁰ He wrote:

“Whatever the reasons for the Republicans’ defeat in November 2006 ... Democrats in Congress were behaving as if Iraq had been the main issue, giving them a mandate now to change policy. Nineteen months before presidential election day, Iraq is shaping the campaign ... The effect of Iraq on presidential politics rather than the effect of what the US is doing in Iraq is the focus of attention.

“No one I met expected Bush to change course. If Operation Fardh al-Qanoon failed, then there would have to be another similar plan; Bush would not leave or lose Iraq during his presidency. Whatever Petraeus said he needed, Bush would try to give.”

704. On 27 March, a Deputy Chief of the Assessments Staff provided Mr McDonald with an update covering recent intelligence on progress towards national reconciliation in Iraq.³⁸¹

705. The update said that progress on national reconciliation had been “negligible”, with no progress on de-Ba’athification, slim prospects of provincial elections going ahead in the near future, no significant progress on the constitutional review and limited progress on a Hydrocarbons Law.

³⁷⁷ Sixth Report from the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, Session 2006-07, *Foreign Policy Aspects of the Detention of Naval Personnel by the Islamic Republic of Iran*, HC 880.

³⁷⁸ eGram 12813/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 28 March 2007, ‘Iraq: attempted assassination of Deputy Prime Minister Zawbaie’.

³⁷⁹ US Department of State Biography, Ryan C Crocker.

³⁸⁰ Minute McDonald to Lyall Grant, 30 March 2007, ‘Iraq/US Presidential Election’.

³⁸¹ Minute [Deputy Chief of Assessments Staff] to McDonald, 27 March 2007, ‘Iraq: Reconciliation’.

706. Mr Powell passed a copy of the paper to Mr Blair, with the comment: “depressing reading”.³⁸² Mr Blair responded: “V. Depressing. Can we share this with the US? I remain of the view that this issue is central. Can I see Petraeus?”³⁸³

707. In a video conference with President Bush on 28 March, Mr Blair said that the UK would be able to make much better progress in Basra if Prime Minister Maliki “took a consistent, firm line on the sectarian militia elements that were causing trouble there” and asked the President to reinforce this message.³⁸⁴

708. In late March, a leading Sadrist militiaman, Qais al Khaz’ali, was detained by the MNF in Basra.³⁸⁵ He had been incriminated in operations against the MNF and had direct links with the Iranians; but he had also been used by Prime Minister Maliki as a channel to the Sadrist movement and Muqtada al Sadr. Prime Minister Maliki sought al Khaz’ali’s release, but Mr Asquith described the US as “unpersuadable”.

709. Mr Asquith saw this as a test of Prime Minister Maliki’s approach to reconciliation. He considered that it was in the UK’s interest to help Prime Minister Maliki neutralise a JAM challenge to Operation Fardh al-Qanoon. The coalition therefore needed “to help him find alternative routes into tractable Sadrists while reinforcing its own message that it is prepared to deal with the biddable”.

710. On 30 March, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary told him that:

“The Baghdad Security Plan is having some success in reducing the effectiveness, but not the number of attacks (by, for example, improving physical protection of market areas). But violence is being displaced out of Baghdad, and there have been a few major, mass-casualty attacks this week.”³⁸⁶

711. On Basra, the Private Secretary’s update stated:

“The continued disruption of JAM ‘secret cell’ activity appears to be reducing attacks on the coalition somewhat, but local politics are becoming more nakedly violent.”

712. Mr Blair annotated the section referring to progress of the Baghdad Security Plan with the comment:

“It is reconciliation that is the missing part of this.”³⁸⁷

³⁸² Manuscript comment Powell on Minute [Deputy Chief of Assessments Staff] to McDonald, 27 March 2007, ‘Iraq: Reconciliation’.

³⁸³ Manuscript comment Blair on Minute [Deputy Chief of Assessments Staff] to McDonald, 27 March 2007, ‘Iraq: Reconciliation’.

³⁸⁴ Letter Banner to Hayes, 28 March 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 28 March: Middle East issues’.

³⁸⁵ eGram 13103/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 29 March 2007, ‘Iraq: Weekly Assessment’.

³⁸⁶ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 30 March 2007, ‘Iraq Update; 30 March’.

³⁸⁷ Manuscript comment Prime Minister on Minute Banner to Blair, 30 March 2007, ‘Iraq Update; 30 March’.

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713. In his weekly update on 3 April, Maj Gen Shaw reported that despite “the noise of everyday events” the “surprising thing is how much UK campaign aspirations are on track”.³⁸⁸ He attributed that to an increasing US and Iraqi desire to accelerate transition to PIC.

714. Maj Gen Shaw’s report also reflected on UK understanding of the political dynamics within Iraq:

“When this HQ arrived we came with a thesis based on the work of the historian Charles Tripp ... that Iraqi power had been split since the 1920s between the official and the shadow states; that the official state had been degraded by the Iran-Iraq war, sanctions and then the 2003 invasion and subsequent CPA decisions; and that the 2005 elections were more of a census than a democratic election – people voted on sectarian lines. The result is an official state (political structures and parties) populated by the shadow state (militias), much of it backed by their own dark state (death squads, secret cells). The removal of Saddam removed the major unifying factor in Iraq; now there is competition within and between these layers of power. After three months ... this analytic prism [is] the only one that makes sense of what is going on here.”

715. Maj Gen Shaw observed that:

“It is people’s actions, rather than their affiliations to a particular militia, that determine whether they are a force for stability in Iraq or not. Muthanna and Dhi Qar achieved PIC precisely because of the stability generated by Badr/SCIRI dominated political and ISF institutions; Maysan’s PIC is based on JAM/OMS ability to deliver stability and in particular the Governor of Maysan who is a Sadrist and who undoubtedly has links to JAM in the Province. He is also, however, one of the most convincing, technocratic and professional politicians I have met in Iraq; if anyone can deliver Maysan, he can.”

716. Looking ahead, Maj Gen Shaw wrote:

“The major question for the South is the scale and depth of Iran’s ambitions with regard to Iraq. While Iran seeks currently to use its backing of a number of groupings to create a level of instability for MNF, the question is what its ambitions are once MNF has departed. There will always be an Iranian influence in Iraq, the bonds of family and tribe reach back years and do not respect the artificial borders drawn by others. Economic trade across the border is an essential feature of life and is potentially a positive factor for both Iraq and Iran in the future. Our assessment at present therefore is that an unstable neighbour is not in the longer-term interests

³⁸⁸ Minute Shaw to CJO, 3 April 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 03 April 2007’.

of Iran. If this is true then the question becomes what happens to the relationship between Iran and those it has been backing.

“Iran is ... backing a number of horses, providing funding to both their long-term partners Badr/SCIRI and others such as JAM ... This would seem to suggest that Iran will still wish to have influence (although not necessarily malign) through Badr/SCIRI and the political process and that JAM is a short term expedient to cause trouble for MNF. Once MNF has departed it is not clear how open SCIRI will be to being run from Iran – are they bought or have they been rented? We assess at present that they have not been bought and that their aspirations for Iraq are nationalist ones ...

“With Muqtada remaining in Iran he is unable to exercise control over his organisation [JAM]. This, along with strikes against JAM in both the north and south, all serves to make the JAM franchise increasingly incoherent. Perversely, while this is partly MNF’s aim, a complete fracturing of the organisation may not be in our interests – you cannot do a deal with chaos! There needs to be a rump left of sufficient size and coherence with which we can pursue reconciliation.”

717. On 4 April, the Iraqi Government announced that Maysan would transfer to PIC on 18 April.³⁸⁹

718. In a video conference discussion with President Bush on 5 April, Mr Blair said that “there was some chance of a deal with a more significant proportion of the Sunni insurgency than we had previously been able to reach”.³⁹⁰ He suggested that the coalition’s aim should be to “make common cause” with them against the elements of AQ-I whose attacks “were the greatest spur to continued sectarian violence”.

719. The impact of the NIIA raid continued to be felt: in early April Dr Safi al-Safa, Acting Justice Minister, issued a statement demanding a formal apology for the incident.³⁹¹

720. Dr al-Safa said that the coalition should “acknowledge that members of the Multi-National Forces have overstepped their authority, committed a major mistake and were negligent in allowing prisoners to escape”.³⁹²

721. Prime Minister Maliki’s office responded by saying that Dr al-Safa’s statement did not necessarily reflect the views of the Iraqi Government.³⁹³

³⁸⁹ eGram 14083/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 4 April 2007, ‘Government of Iraq Announces Transition in Maysan’.

³⁹⁰ Letter Banner to Hayes, 5 April 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 5 April: Middle East Issues’.

³⁹¹ Minute Jones to Aldred, 12 April 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

³⁹² Global Policy Forum, 6 April 2007, ‘Iraq Says British Raid Was a Violation’.

³⁹³ Minute Jones to Aldred, 12 April 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

722. Maj Gen Shaw's Chief of Staff reported on 12 April:

"It has been a sobering week. The conspicuously smooth and successful handover of the Shatt al-Arab Hotel was counter-pointed by ... attacks ... that resulted in the deaths of four soldiers, one interpreter and four wounded ... We are ... engaged in a dynamic struggle with a resourceful and adaptive enemy."³⁹⁴

723. On 12 April, Sir Nigel Sheinwald spoke to Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih who said that in order to make progress on reconciliation:

"Two key pieces of legislation were needed, which would require US and UK support and lobbying. The de-Ba'athification law had been agreed by Maliki and Talabani, but was still being resisted by parts of the UIA ... The Hydrocarbons Law was almost there, but still required some further engagement with the Kurds. There was also a need for structural reform of the government to enable power-sharing with the Sunnis and Kurds, and prevent their marginalisation."³⁹⁵

724. In a separate conversation Dr Muaffaq al Rubaie, the Iraqi National Security Adviser, told Sir Nigel that "there was a growing consensus in support of the need to rehabilitate and reconcile".³⁹⁶

725. After a discussion about Basra, Dr Rubaie proposed establishing regular round table discussions between key Iraqi and UK leaders in Baghdad and Basra. Sir Nigel thought this should go ahead. Mr Blair agreed.³⁹⁷

726. On 13 April, a Cabinet Office official told Mr Blair that an International Compact would be launched on 3 May, followed by a "Neighbours Plus Ministerial meeting" the next day (see Section 10.2).³⁹⁸ The Iraqi Government was expected to use that as an opportunity to urge international partners to pledge investment and consider further debt relief for Iraq.

727. The official wrote that "encouraging investment in the current security environment, and in the absence of any real progress on the **reconciliation** agenda, will be difficult". Against that point, Mr Blair wrote "this is the key".

³⁹⁴ Minute Thomas to CJO, 12 April 2007, 'COS HQ HMDMND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 12 April 2007'.

³⁹⁵ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Hickey, 12 April 2007, 'Iraq: Nigel Sheinwald's Conversation with Barham Saleh, 12 April'.

³⁹⁶ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Hickey, 12 April 2007, 'Iraq: Nigel Sheinwald's Conversation with Muaffaq al Rubaie, 12 April'.

³⁹⁷ Manuscript comment Blair on Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Hickey, 12 April 2007, 'Iraq: Nigel Sheinwald's Conversation with Muaffaq al Rubaie, 12 April'.

³⁹⁸ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 13 April 2007, 'Iraq Update, 13 April' including manuscript comment Blair.

728. On 15 April, Lt Gen Lamb reported encouraging signs of progress elsewhere in Iraq:

- significant increases in the volume of weapon and IED caches found in Multi-National Division (West), indicating a marked improvement in local tribes' co-operation;
- economic development in Baghdad, despite the continuing security difficulties; and
- a growing number of groups that were prepared to tackle their differences through dialogue rather than violence.³⁹⁹

729. In Basra, he considered the MNF-I were “seeing a subtle shift amongst the wider Sadrist trend and with it the tensions within JAM”.

730. On Iran, Lt Gen Lamb wrote:

“What is clear as we continue to ‘stress’ the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps], Quds Force and their surrogates inside Iraq is that we are unpicking what has been a slow build plan of active interference and Iranian control that set out to humiliate the coalition, especially the US and UK, kill its Forces and intimidate or buy its way into positions of superior influence and power. This plan is for the first time being seriously challenged and consequently damaged ... Our current actions ... intend to remove the current imbalance of interference and control of Iran within Iraq ...

“Iranian oil prices, as a result of an unsettled market due to Iraq’s problems, are resulting in an additional revenue to Iran of around \$30-\$40 million per day – funding terrorism in Iraq might seem a good investment. Regrettably, the same would be true for any other oil selling nation in the neighbourhood.”

731. In response to a call at Friday prayers the previous week, a demonstration against Governor Waili took place in Basra on 16 April.⁴⁰⁰ Despite the prior involvement of senior Baghdad politicians in planning the demonstration, the fear of unrest was sufficient for Prime Minister Maliki to order that official approval for the demonstration be withdrawn. It nonetheless went ahead (peacefully) on 16 April, with several thousand demonstrators, including a “prominent JAM presence”. Mr Jones commented:

“This doesn’t make it any easier to work out what outcome we would like. Our ability to pick winners under the circumstances is extremely circumscribed (and would in any case be the kiss of death for our favoured candidate). Nor will we ever be able to perform the complex acts of juggling which will be required to keep the three blocs satisfactorily in play for an accommodation to be found. But we can continue to encourage the politicians to go down the path of peaceful discussion within the law;

³⁹⁹ Minute Lamb to CDS, 15 April 2007, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (251) 15 Apr 07’.

⁴⁰⁰ Letter Jones to Aldred, 19 April 2007, ‘Basra: Weekly Report’.

and to nudge them towards choosing figures that would share this approach, and be more interested in delivering good governance in Basra than lining their own pockets and giving in to or actively supporting the men of violence.”

732. On 18 April, Baghdad was hit by a string of vehicle bomb attacks, which killed almost 200 people, including 140 in one incident at a food market in the Shia-dominated Sadriya district.⁴⁰¹

733. In mid-April, the six Sadrist Ministers withdrew from their positions in the Iraqi Government, citing the continued presence of US forces in Iraq.⁴⁰²

734. Mr Blair’s Private Secretary told him on 20 April that it was “becoming apparent that this was a Muqtada initiative”.⁴⁰³

735. On 19 April, Mr Browne told the House of Commons in a written statement that transition to PIC had taken place in Maysan the previous day.⁴⁰⁴ The statement continued:

“Establishing Provincial Iraqi Control does not guarantee Maysan is a benign environment in security terms, or that future challenges may not arise, but it does mean the Iraqi security forces are judged now to be able to respond effectively to those challenges themselves.”

736. Maysan was the third province within MND(SE) to be transferred to PIC, Muthanna and Dhi Qar having done so in July and September 2006. This left Basra as the only province for which the UK had yet to hand responsibility to the Iraqi Government.

737. On 20 April, Ms Aldred chaired a meeting of the Iraq Senior Officials Group which considered an IPU paper on reconciliation.⁴⁰⁵ Mr Blair’s Private Secretary suggested that the paper should be made more specific in a number of areas, including Sunni outreach.

738. A revised version of IPU paper was submitted to Mr Blair’s Private Secretary later the same day.⁴⁰⁶

739. A separate paper entitled ‘Engagement and Reconciliation in Iraq’ drafted by the MOD and Lt Gen Lamb was also submitted.⁴⁰⁷ Neither paper made reference to the other.

⁴⁰¹ *BBC News*, 18 April 2007, *Up to 200 killed in Baghdad bombs*.

⁴⁰² *BBC News*, 18 April 2007, *Sadrist pullout draws mixed reaction*.

⁴⁰³ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 20 April 2007, ‘Iraq update, 20 April’.

⁴⁰⁴ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 19 April 2007, columns 11WS-12WS.

⁴⁰⁵ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 20 April 2007, ‘Iraq Senior Officials Group’.

⁴⁰⁶ Paper IPU, 20 April 2007, ‘Iraq: Reconciliation: Forward Plan’.

⁴⁰⁷ Letter Beadle to Banner, 20 April 2007, ‘Iraq: Engagement and Reconciliation in Iraq’ attaching Paper [MOD and Lamb], ‘Engagement and Reconciliation in Iraq’.

740. In its paper, the IPU judged that there were “no quick fixes on offer” and that “the experience of the last four years argues against a ‘grand bargain’ approach”.⁴⁰⁸ Mr Blair annotated this paragraph “Why? The incremental approach has hardly worked.”

741. IPU diagnosed the main obstacle to progress as:

“Iraq has no tradition of power sharing or properly representative Government ... It can only work if the leaders of all Iraq’s main communities believe that it is in their best interests wholeheartedly to engage in it. That is not yet the case.”

742. In the future, IPU recommended that the UK should pursue a more strategic approach to the process of reconciliation, through support to Prime Minister Maliki’s Office and MNF-I’s Joint Reconciliation and Support Cell. Prime Minister Maliki should be persuaded to change his manner of governing and to make early progress on some of the key issues (de-Ba’athification, Hydrocarbons legislation and amendments to the Constitution). Violence should be reduced and Iraq’s neighbours should be persuaded to be more supportive.

743. On the IPU paper, Mr Blair commented:

“I’m afraid I don’t find this at all persuasive. It is essentially the same strategy but trying harder. It won’t work. The US/UK are consistently underestimating their ability to insist. Maliki & Iraq must be made to go down the reconciliation path with vigour. Encouraging it hasn’t worked. It has to be forced.”

744. The MOD paper summarised current activity on reconciliation by a small team led by Lt Gen Lamb in Baghdad and said that “senior commanders and others have identified a fleeting opportunity that has the potential to deliver a significant campaign advantage”.⁴⁰⁹ The MNF-I Engagement and Reconciliation effort was focused on drawing into the political process those insurgent groups that MNF and the Iraqi Government assessed as “potentially reconcilable” and was considered to be a “core output” of the military campaign.

745. The MOD explained:

“The ‘Sunni’ initiative has established and developed discreet dialogue with the key Islamic religious leadership of two of the major insurgent groups ... The emerging leadership ... is now, we believe, likely to open dialogue with the Iraqi Government and MNF-I, engage in the political process and, subject to these discussions, follow up with a series of confidence building measures. These range from fighting Al Qaida (AQ) as part of a Government authorised force and the signing of a ceasefire agreement with coalition and Iraqi security forces and to public statements exposing the true nature of the AQ threat to Iraq. This initiative has created tensions

⁴⁰⁸ Paper IPU, 20 April 2007, ‘Iraq: Reconciliation: Forward Plan’ including manuscript comment Blair.

⁴⁰⁹ Letter Beadle to Banner, 20 April 2007, ‘Iraq: Engagement and Reconciliation in Iraq’ attaching ‘Engagement and Reconciliation in Iraq’.

within the Sunni insurgent movement with clear indications of splintering within these groups. Elements are likely to break away and our judgement is that the majority will side with political engagement and away from violence. We are also making similar inroads with the Sadrist trend and National Ba'ath Party, amongst others ...

“The aim is to make tangible progress by late July to underpin General Petraeus’ ‘Honest Assessment’ to Congress in early August.”

746. In a covering letter, Mr Browne’s Private Secretary explained that the paper was being submitted to the Defence Secretary in parallel and commented:

“I am convinced there is something we can do to give a reconciliation initiative a push. In addition to making sure it is resourced properly and quickly we might also see whether there is a potential to push a UK/US announcement of the right sort. A direct reference to this specific work is too crude and potentially damaging but I think we can be imaginative about say wrapping up transition, cease-fires, weapons programmes and development in specific areas (Basra as a pilot?).”

747. At the same time as papers on reconciliation were being considered by Mr Blair, IPU submitted advice to Dr Howells proposing that the UK should work to postpone the referendum on Kirkuk and other disputed territories.⁴¹⁰ Iraq’s Constitution required that this should take place by the end of 2007.

748. IPU judged that delay was wise because of poor preparations, which meant that a referendum held before the end of the year was unlikely to be credible and could spark further insecurity. The main barrier to delaying the referendum would be Kurdish objections.

749. On 22 April, it was agreed at the Ministerial Committee on National Security meeting that Prime Minister Maliki would chair a group (to include MNF-I) to determine what the Government of Iraq would be prepared to offer to opposition and resistance groups in exchange for renouncing violence.⁴¹¹

750. Lt Gen Lamb reported on the same day that Gen Petraeus considered that his “Engagement” team was central to success in Iraq and should be enhanced to include a “British two-star lead and UK supporting cast of around eight people for a ‘surge’ of 60-90 days”.⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ Minute IPU [junior official] to Howells, 20 April 2007, ‘Iraq – Referendum on Kirkuk and Disputed Territories’.

⁴¹¹ eGram 16933/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 25 April 2007, ‘Iraq: Scen setter for Visit by Secretary of State for Defence, 30 April’.

⁴¹² Minute Lamb to CDS, 22 April 2007, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (252) 22 Apr 07’.

751. Lt Gen Lamb also reported that Operation Fardh al-Qanoon continued to make progress despite the 18 April attacks. He wrote:

“Regrettably it is all too easy for AQ to generate ‘spectaculars’ and give the impression that things are worse than they actually are, but the most recent trend data suggests otherwise.”

752. Maj Gen Shaw’s 24 April weekly report noted that an IED attack in Maysan on the day following PIC “served as a sharp reminder that problems remain in the Province and that it is not a benign environment for the soldiers serving there”.⁴¹³ He continued:

“Whether this has been a good or a bad week depends on your criteria, on what you are looking to measure. Positively, our posture is where we would want it to be ... But the cost mounts: a week to go and this is already the most costly month of Op TELIC since the invasion. We are at the limit of our ability to achieve effect, in particular to do anything about the casualties we are taking ... The threat will not go away; indeed, our Theatre view is that there is no incentive for it to do anything but rise for as long as we are here. This will necessitate continued and probably increasing investment in response, for as long as our presence here is judged to be of sufficient political benefit to justify the cost in coalition lives.”

753. Mr Blair annotated the final phrase, “it is only military benefit that counts”.⁴¹⁴

754. On 24 April, Lt Gen Houghton told the Chiefs of Staff that April:

“... had been a bad period for casualties and it was conceivable that the coherence between the number and rate of tactical losses and the UK’s strategic ambition in Iraq might therefore, in public and other eyes, be called into question”.⁴¹⁵

755. On 25 April, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary told the FCO that Mr Blair had concluded the IPU paper on reconciliation did not “do justice in urgency or scale of ambition to the task in hand”.⁴¹⁶ He asked Mr Browne and Mrs Beckett to use their forthcoming visits to the Middle East to explore the scope to intensify efforts on reconciliation. The FCO and MOD were to produce “a more ambitious reconciliation plan” by 8 May. In the meantime, there should be a rapid deployment of civilian and military staff to the Joint Reconciliation and Support Cell.

756. On 25 April, at the request of the Iraq Senior Officials Group, the JIC assessed the possible impact of PIC on southern Iraq.⁴¹⁷

⁴¹³ Minute Shaw to CJO, 24 April 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 24 April 2007’.

⁴¹⁴ Manuscript comment Blair on Minute Shaw to CJO, 24 April 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 24 April 2007’.

⁴¹⁵ Minutes, 24 April 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

⁴¹⁶ Letter Banner to Hickey, 25 April 2007, ‘Iraq: Reconciliation’.

⁴¹⁷ [JIC Assessment, 25 April 2007, ‘Iraq: Prospects for Transition in the South’.](#)

757. Overall, the JIC judged:

“I. Violence in Basra is increasingly focussed on the Multi-National Forces (MNF). Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) associated ‘secret cells’ believe their campaign has driven the MNF out: they will try to maintain momentum until the MNF withdraw from the province altogether. Attacks on the residual presence – particularly at Basra Air Station – will intensify. The JAM networks are resilient: MNF pressure is likely to have only temporary success in disrupting their activities.

“II. Most political parties in Basra see Provincial Iraqi Control as an opportunity to extend their power base. As the scale of MNF presence reduces, violence between rival Shia parties, backed by their militias, is likely to intensify. Provincial elections will be a catalyst.”

758. The JIC concluded that political events would have a decisive impact:

“III. The nature and scale of any intra-Shia conflict will be determined by events in Baghdad and Najaf, particularly the ability of the United Iraqi Alliance to stick together and assert authority over its provincial supporters. In the absence of an effective political brake on serious intra-Shia fighting, the Iraqi security forces would not be able to cope; the police would probably fragment and the army would try to avoid direct confrontation, while seeking to contain the situation.

...

“VI. Iran will continue to provide training and weaponry to Shia extremists, mainly JAM, attacking the MNF, with the aim of speeding MNF withdrawal from the south and making its life as difficult as possible so long as it remains.”

759. The JIC judged that reported levels of recorded violence in MND(SE) had increased since it last considered the issue in September 2006, and accounted for around 5 percent of the national total. The vast majority of the violence occurred in Basra province and consisted of attacks on the MNF by Shia militia, particularly JAM.

760. In Basra, the JIC assessed that Op SINBAD had had “some local effect in disrupting military activity and improving public confidence” and there was reported to have been a decrease in the number of sectarian and other murders. Politically, JAM was becoming more assertive and willing to use violence to gain advantage.

761. The JIC judged that Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces were “likely to remain mostly stable”, with Muthanna “one of the most stable provinces in Iraq” where the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) was able to operate with little interference.

762. In Dhi Qar, the JIC judged that JAM “secret cells” were becoming more active and there were already some no-go areas for the ISF in JAM-controlled districts of the provincial capital. Maysan was considered “more volatile” with “low level intra-Shia violence ... bubbling just under the surface”.

763. On 25 April, in a telegram which set the scene for Mr Browne's visit to Iraq, Mr Asquith said that it was hard to provide evidence of a significant improvement in the security conditions in Baghdad as a result of Operation Fardh al-Qanoon:

"Targeted sectarian assassinations and Shia militia presence on the streets remain at much reduced levels compared to January. But both continue to fluctuate. Spectacular attacks are continuing to push up the casualty levels and play strongly in the media. Al Qaida (AQ) are determined both to prove that they can still operate ... and to exacerbate sectarian violence. Shia retaliation has been contained, but the dyke of self restraint will not hold forever. The full effect of FAQ [Fardh al-Qanoon] still awaits full surge, expected by the end of June. Meanwhile, Shia and Sunni both claim they are being targeted by Iraqi and coalition forces ...

"In Basra, JAM are continuing to demonstrate their capability to attack us and take our lives. But in reality they are primarily engaged in a messy internecine struggle ... This is about the politics of power pursued principally by criminality."⁴¹⁸

764. Mr Asquith also reported US activity to drive forward reconciliation:

"Gates's message to the Iraqis during his recent visit was that the clock was ticking for Iraqi delivery on reconciliation. Petraeus and Crocker have signed off on a strategic assessment which ... will form the basis of the new campaign plan in May. It differs from previous plans in identifying political agreement between Iraqi leaders as a precondition for delivering security ..."

765. Mr Robert Tinline, Deputy British Consul General in Basra, reported on 26 April that the political struggle in Basra, and discussions over Governor Waili's future, continued.⁴¹⁹ He explained:

"... Basra may be on the brink of a new accommodation between the principal political blocs: Fadhila, SCIRI/Badr and OMS/JAM. It is hard to see a compromise which protects everyone's interests ... We are staying in frequent touch with key figures, reinforcing the need for a resolution through peaceful, constitutional means, and the potential impact of widespread violence, not least on the transfer of security. MND(SE) are continuing to make it clear to the relevant Iraqi security authorities that it is up to them to take the lead in controlling the situation, but that they would be able to act in support if requested."

⁴¹⁸ eGram 16933/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 25 April 2007, 'Iraq: Scenesetter for Visit by Secretary of State for Defence, 30 April'.

⁴¹⁹ Letter Tinline to Aldred, 26 April 2007, 'Basra: Weekly Report'.

766. On 27 April, Mr Blair's Private Secretary told him that April had seen the greatest number of UK fatalities in Iraq (11)⁴²⁰ since the end of major combat operations in 2003.⁴²¹ Mr Blair commented:

"I am really not happy about the posture of our Forces in Basra. We must discuss this. There is absolutely no point in taking casualties if they aren't helping the effort."

767. The Private Secretary also explained that he had commissioned further work from departments on reconciliation. Mr Blair replied: "But the FCO and MOD won't respond – we will have to do it."

768. On 29 April, Lt Gen Lamb reported a resurgence of tribal influence in Iraq, with the tribes seen as "an increasingly important coalescing force" who were "beginning to raise their heads above the AQ parapet" and "playing an increasing role in the engagement and reconciliation work".⁴²²

769. Lt Gen Lamb observed that "we are seeing increasing numbers of the Sunni in particular trying to become part of the AQ-I solution" and that the "co-operation we are receiving to assist in operations in the Ramadi/Fallujah/Abu Ghraib area is notable". Prime Minister Maliki appeared "reasonably comfortable" with the tribal engagement strategy and was continuing his own engagement efforts with Sunni interlocutors in parallel.

770. Lt Gen Lamb also recorded that eight new UK members of staff for the Joint Reconciliation Support Cell were expected in the coming week.

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771. Mr Dowse responded on 2 May to a request from Sir Nigel Sheinwald for a note on the status of Sunni outreach by the coalition and Iraqi Government.⁴²³ He explained that there were currently two major strands of activity: Sunni insurgent cease-fire negotiations and the initiative to co-opt Sunni tribes in Anbar province.

772. On the first strand of activity, Mr Dowse reported that Lt Gen Lamb had been continuing discussions with representatives of a small number of Sunni insurgents to explore the possibility of local cease-fires with the MNF but commented that the Assessments Staff remained unsighted on the detail, in particular the insurgents' demands.

⁴²⁰ Second Lieutenant Joanna Yorke Dyer, Colour Sergeant Mark Powell, Corporal Ben Leaning, Corporal Kris O'Neill, Kingsman Alan Jones, Kingsman Adam Smith, Kingsman DJ Wilson, Private Eleanor Dlugosz, Rifleman Paul Donnachie, Rifleman Aaron Lincoln and Trooper Kristen Turton.

⁴²¹ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 27 April 2007, 'Iraq Update, 26 April' including Manuscript comment Blair.

⁴²² Minute Lamb to CDS, 29 April 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (253) 29 Apr 07'.

⁴²³ Minute Dowse to Sheinwald, 2 May 2007, 'Iraq: Sunni Outreach'.

773. On developments in Anbar, Mr Dowse explained that, since October 2006, Prime Minister Maliki and the MNF had been backing an initiative where local armed tribal groups were being allowed to assume local security responsibilities – including control of police stations. Although it was far from finished, there were indications that AQ-I was feeling the pressure in Anbar. The extent of popular support for the tribal opposition to AQ-I was difficult to gauge but Mr Dowse considered that the impact so far was encouraging.

774. Mr Dowse reminded Sir Nigel of the JIC's judgement in February that the prospects for Anbar would depend on the initiative gaining broader support among the Sunni population. That would be difficult as long as rival groups were competing for local power and influence. There was also a risk that, if they prevailed against AQ-I, the Sunni tribal forces would redirect their energies against the Iraqi Government.

775. On 3 May, in response to a request from Sir Nigel, the Deputy Chief of the Assessments Staff provided a minute on Lebanese Hizballah involvement in training Shia groups in Iraq.⁴²⁴ It said:

“Lebanese Hizballah has well-established links to Shia groups in Iraq ... In May 2004 MNF first reported explosives technology exclusively associated with Hizballah (EFPs: explosively formed projectiles) being used in Iraq. More sophisticated EFPs (using passive infra-red initiators) appeared in December 2004.”

776. The minute said that the arrangements put in place by Hizballah for training Iraqis who wanted to attack the coalition were assessed to have been put in place at the request of the Iranians. It continued:

“We assess that the main recipients of Hizballah training are Shia extremists (mainly members of Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) but also some from the Badr Organisation); although ... a small number of Iranian-backed Sunnis may also have been trained ... Skills include small-arms and explosives training and instruction in kidnapping, assassination, surveillance and reconnaissance.”

777. Mr Blair commented:

“But what are we doing about this? Why aren't we raising it with Iran?”

778. In early May, Ambassador Crocker visited Basra.⁴²⁵ Mr Tinline reported to Ms Aldred:

“Ambassador Crocker's fleeting visit to the REO [US Regional Embassy Office] at Basra Palace seems to have left a very bleak impression of Basra. Rocket and mortar attacks on the REO dominate US perceptions. Transport complications

⁴²⁴ Minute [Deputy Chief of Assessments Staff] to Sheinwald, 3 May 2007, 'Iraq: Lebanese Training' including manuscript comment Blair.

⁴²⁵ Letter Tinline to Aldred, 3 May 2007, 'Basra: Weekly Report'.

during his tight visit meant that Crocker left without seeing the British team here. His conclusion that Baghdad needs to pay more attention to Basra may yet help us persuade Maliki to act. But his perceptions may make early handover a harder sell.”

779. On 3 May, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary told Mr Blair that:

“The US may be becoming more concerned about our own plans for Basra ... The US will see the timing [leaving Basra Palace in August] as presentationally, awkward, given Petraeus’s planned testimony in the Autumn. They may also have concerns ... about the level of criminality and the difficult political situation in Basra, which they would argue should delay PIC. For us, the two key issues are firstly the utility of what our military are doing in Basra; and secondly the need to free up capacity to deploy additional troops in Afghanistan.”⁴²⁶

780. On 3 May, Sir Nigel Sheinwald told Mr Blair that he had seen ACM Stirrup “privately” and asked him, in light of the high April casualty figures and recent comments, including by Maj Gen Shaw, whether he saw continuing military utility in the UK’s mission in Iraq.⁴²⁷

781. Sir Nigel informed Mr Blair that ACM Stirrup thought:

“We are getting ‘close to the end’, but Jock [Stirrup] thought that our presence would continue to be militarily useful at least until PIC and the closure of Basra Palace. Jock hopes that we will be able to keep to the present timetable – PIC in July and BP [Basra Palace] closure in August.

“At that stage, we would come down from 5,500 to around 4,700.

“Jock saw the military utility resting on the continuing need to train the Iraqi 10th Division (he did not talk about the Police, and I think the MOD now regard them as a busted flush), **anti-JAM operations** and capacity to **re-intervene**.

“Thereafter Jock thought that there would be at least a **couple of months** when we could re-intervene effectively and continue to run anti-JAM ... operations ... [but] once we vacate the Palace ... we would ... lose our ... situational awareness.

“The autumn would therefore be the decisive period ...

“If by late autumn the UK capacity to re-intervene and conduct ... operations had – as expected – degraded, there would be a residual training/mentoring role, but that did not warrant maintaining the force in its present shape. Jock therefore saw a **choice**, from around the turn of the year, between (a) a very rapid scaling down from 4,700 to around 500 (essentially a small military training team) in one go and (b) taking it in stages ... to around 4,000 in the **first** instance and then a more

⁴²⁶ Minute Gould to Prime Minister, 3 May 2007, ‘VTC with President Bush: 4 May’.

⁴²⁷ [Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 3 May 2007, ‘Iraq’.](#)

gradual tapering. Jock strongly favoured the first option, as once you begin this sort of process, our forces become vulnerable and it is best to get on with things as fast as possible.”

782. Sir Nigel commented to Mr Blair:

“This will obviously need to be debated and tweaked a good deal, but I found the overall thesis persuasive. It would be virtually impossible for UK Ministers to ask the Army to stay in significant numbers in Basra if the advice from the Chiefs is that there is no militarily useful mission to conduct – the risks are just too high ... The key issue remains the likely **US reaction** to this plan. I suspect that they will want Basra PIC to be delayed from July to the autumn ...

“You will need to chair a meeting of DOP in June which would finally confirm the closing of **Basra Palace** in August (which would need to be announced in July); discuss the timing of **PIC**; and could look ahead in general terms to the rest of the year. But it would be too early in June to make any firm judgments, still less any decisions about our long term intentions.”⁴²⁸

783. Mr Blair commented:

“I entirely understand it in military terms, but in terms of what happens in Basra, it will be very hard to present as anything other than a total withdrawal. This can work if Basra’s politics are sorted in the meantime but otherwise it cd be very dangerous for the stability of Iraq, & the US will, rightly, be v. concerned.”⁴²⁹

784. Mr Browne told Cabinet on 3 May that the “emerging political vacuum” threatened to undermine UK efforts and the gains made by Op SINBAD in Basra.⁴³⁰ The Governor of Basra was assailed on all sides and was ineffective. The militias were vying for political power and, although the MNF had the capacity to tackle them, doing so raised the threat level to UK forces deployed there: 90 percent of attacks were now directed against the MNF.

785. Outside Basra, Mr Browne said that the security situation was more complex: terrorism was fuelling sectarian violence. The Baghdad Security Plan was reducing violence but could not stop the “spectacular” attacks, coverage of which masked more positive developments. In Anbar province the tribal leaders were taking the lead in driving Al Qaida out.

786. The Shia “remained a significant problem” and were reluctant to let go of their monopoly on power for fear of further subjugation. Mr Browne judged that there was “a closing window for bringing the Shia round”.

⁴²⁸ [Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 3 May 2007, ‘Iraq’.](#)

⁴²⁹ Manuscript comment Blair on [Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 3 May 2007, ‘Iraq’.](#)

⁴³⁰ Cabinet Conclusions, 3 May 2007.

787. Both Mr Browne and Mr Blair said that reconciliation was the key to success; the Shia had to be made to understand that the UK's support was conditional on a non-sectarian future. Mr Blair also briefed Cabinet that British thinking on reconciliation had had "a great impact" on the US.

788. On 3 May, Sir Nigel Sheinwald sent Sir David Manning a "strictly personal" copy of a Note from Mr Blair to President Bush setting out his proposals for future coalition strategy, written in preparation for a video conference the next day.⁴³¹

789. In his Note, Mr Blair characterised the position as:

"Everywhere in the region at present, we are pinned back. We remain strong. We are not losing. But we are not really able to move forward."

790. Mr Blair argued that Islamist extremists had a "coherent political strategy" for Iraq whereas "our problem is that we don't". He considered himself and President Bush to be "lone voices", with new politicians keen to distance themselves from past events. As a result:

"People start to think this is a fight we can't win; when in reality it is a fight we have to win."

791. Despite military successes, Mr Blair wrote that progress was always fragile in the absence of a big political deal:

"For example, in Iraq, we fight on three fronts: the Sunni insurgency; Al Qaida; Iranian-based Shia militia. I asked our top people the other day: if you took Al Qaida and Iran out of the situation, ie the external extremists, would Iraq be manageable? Undoubtedly, they said ... But whilst we fight on all three fronts, the Sunni insurgents provide a justification for Shia death squads, and reinforce the Iraqi Government's fears of a Ba'athist return; Al Qaida can claim to be counter-attacking the Shia; and everyone, of course, can blame it on us."

792. In the absence of a "big political strategy for the region", Mr Blair wrote that the news was simply dominated by television pictures of "carnage". In response, Mr Blair saw a need "radically to upgrade our political approach across the region", changing the terms of the debate from "whether we can win", to an "insistence we have to win".

793. Mr Blair wrote that a new political strategy should have three components; reconciliation, exposing Iranian support for terrorism whilst offering a chance to alter and improve the relationship and making progress with the Middle East Peace Process. On reconciliation, Mr Blair commented that "The missing part is the politics" and that the Iraqi Government "can't succeed and won't survive without it".

⁴³¹ Letter Sheinwald to Manning, 3 May 2007, 'Iraq', attaching Note TB [Blair to Bush], 3 May 2007, 'Note'.

794. Mr Blair added:

“... Iraq has to be bigger than just Iraq. It has to be part of a more profound and wider picture. People have to see it as a frontier in a battle across the region and the world. That is a battle, as you always rightly say, between freedom and extremism, democracy and terror. But we have to get back onto the front foot politically. I am absolutely confident it can be done. Even after I go, which will be soon now, I will help in any way I can.”

795. On 3 May, members of the international community gathered in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt to launch the International Compact with Iraq.⁴³² It was formally launched by Prime Minister Maliki and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The UN described the Compact as:

“... a five-year national plan that includes benchmarks and mutual commitments from both Iraq and the international community, all with the aim of helping Iraq on the path towards peace, sound governance and economic reconstruction.”

796. Mr Asquith judged that the Iraqi Government would be seeking “headline-catching support and commitment, notably in terms of debt relief from the Saudis and others” and that a poor response “could undermine the willingness of line Ministries in Iraq to take the Compact seriously and therefore to undertake the reforms that it entails”.⁴³³

797. Mr Asquith proposed that Mrs Beckett, who led the UK delegation, should “encourage Maliki to develop a mechanism for engaging directly with his Arab neighbours (eg a personal envoy) and to establish the working groups agreed at the meeting in Baghdad on 10 March”.

798. The launch was followed by a Neighbours Conference on 4 May.

799. Sir David Manning reported US reactions to the meetings on 4 May. His contacts in the State Department and National Security Council considered that “the fact that there had been no big surprises was itself considered a success”.⁴³⁴ Now that the Compact had been formally launched:

“... the focus was now on substance: exploiting the Compact’s reform road-map and shifting the dynamic between Iraq and its neighbours. It was not clear the Sharm meetings had marked any real progress on the latter ...”

800. Mr Blair and President Bush spoke by video conference on 4 May.⁴³⁵ Mr Blair noted that although there were some positive signs emerging from the Baghdad Security

⁴³² Press Release United Nations, 27 April 2007, ‘Fact Sheet on the International Compact with Iraq’.

⁴³³ eGram 18202 Baghdad to FCO London, 1 May 2005, ‘Iraq: Scen setter for the Sharm Meetings, 3-4 May’.

⁴³⁴ eGram 19048/07 Washington to FCO London, 4 May 2007, ‘Iraq/Sharm Meetings: US Reactions’.

⁴³⁵ Letter Banner to Hayes, 4 May 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 4 May: Middle East issues’.

Plan, and from activity with Sunni groups in Anbar and elsewhere, enhanced effort was needed on the political agenda and in particular on reconciliation. A high-profile 'grand bargain' was needed to provide a framework for work like that under way in Anbar.

801. Mr Blair considered that a longer-term military commitment in support of Iraq, on a different basis, was needed and should be framed as conditional upon progress with reconciliation.

802. Mr Browne wrote to Mr Blair on 5 May with his assessment of the prospects for successful reconciliation in Iraq, based on a visit to Basra and Baghdad earlier the same week.⁴³⁶ He reported:

"Baghdad reinforced my belief that political discord is adding to the effects of terrorist tactics in fuelling sectarian strife."

803. Mr Browne wrote that, even though there was no agreed concept of reconciliation, a package was "deliverable". Work started from a "poor position" but it had US support. A realistic outcome would be to:

"... reduce the irreconcilable elements but in the end there will still be a significant terrorist threat beyond the reach of the Iraqi state system in the short and medium term."

804. Mr Browne considered that a visit by Mr Blair to Iraq, planned for later in the month, would be "an excellent opportunity to formalise a route to reconciliation". Mr Browne suggested that might mean:

"A joint UK/Iraqi PM and Iraqi Presidential statement; a clear public commitment from senior members of the GOI [Government of Iraq]; a meeting with a member of the Majar; and perhaps the launch of a suitable international commission of advisers."

805. Mr Blair spoke to Prime Minister Maliki on 7 May, and congratulated him on the outcome of the International Compact meeting.⁴³⁷ They discussed the security situation in Baghdad and Basra and the importance of MNF-I co-operation with local political and security institutions.

806. Alluding to the continuing difficulties in Basra, Mr Blair noted the difficulty in trying to establish which political forces were the appropriate ones to work with – Prime Minister Maliki said that he was not asking UK forces to deal with militias, but with politicians who had an influence on those militias, as the Iraqi Government did.

807. On 9 May, Mr Asquith reported: "The Political logjam looks as if it might be breaking up."⁴³⁸ It appeared that the political parties were on the verge of a deal that

⁴³⁶ [Letter Browne to Blair, 5 May 2007, 'Iraq: Reconciliation'](#).

⁴³⁷ Letter Banner to Hickey, 7 May 2007, 'Conversation with Iraqi Prime Minister'.

⁴³⁸ eGram 19585/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 9 May 2007, 'Iraq: Weekly Assessment'.

would see Prime Minister Maliki co-ordinating policy with the three-person Presidency, and a more effective division of responsibilities at the heart of government. Mr Asquith commented that the UK should seek to encourage former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi to support the deal and to work constructively with Prime Minister Maliki.

808. DOP(I) met on 10 May, chaired by Mrs Beckett.⁴³⁹ Four papers were provided for the meeting:

- Mr Browne’s letter to Mr Blair of 5 May, setting out his views on reconciliation.⁴⁴⁰
- A minute from Mrs Beckett to Mr Browne following her attendance at the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting, containing her views on reconciliation.⁴⁴¹
- Two very similar papers produced jointly by the FCO and MOD entitled ‘Iraq: After UNSCR 1723’ and ‘Iraq: MNF-I Mandate in 2008’ prompted by the imminent review of resolution 1723.⁴⁴²

809. In her minute, Mrs Beckett said that the fact that the meetings in Sharm el-Sheikh took place was proof that headway was being made on reconciliation.⁴⁴³ But she warned:

“If Sunni Arab governments do not help Maliki to make early progress [on] reconciliation, I am convinced that they will get what they most fear – an avowedly pro-Iranian (ie SCIRI) government in Baghdad.”

810. In private, she reported that the other participants in the conference had been downbeat:

“While none disputed the central importance of reconciliation, they were negative in their assessment of the Government of Iraq’s ability to deliver and guarded about their own willingness to help.”

811. The FCO and MOD papers, which considered the mandate for coalition forces in Iraq, both recommended that the UK should press for a further resolution to extend authorisation for the MNF to be present in Iraq, to continue to intern individuals for security reasons and to take “**all necessary measures**” to implement their mandate.⁴⁴⁴

812. The MOD and FCO judged that, despite the fact the Prime Minister Maliki was under pressure to demonstrate Iraqi sovereignty, he would want coalition troops to remain into 2008 because of the Sunni insurgency and levels of ISF capability. Challenges in achieving Security Council agreement were likely to come from the French and Russians, both of whom had called for a clear timetable for withdrawal.

⁴³⁹ Minutes, 10 May 2007, DOP(I) meeting.

⁴⁴⁰ [Letter Browne to Blair, 5 May 2007, ‘Iraq: Reconciliation’](#).

⁴⁴¹ Minute Beckett to Secretary of State for Defence, 8 May 2007, ‘Iraq: Reconciliation’.

⁴⁴² Paper Iraq Policy Unit FCO and Joint Commitments MOD, 3 May 2007, ‘Iraq: After UNSCR 1723’; Paper FCO and MOD, 3 May 2007, ‘Iraq: MNF-I Mandate in 2008: UK Non-Paper’.

⁴⁴³ Minute Beckett to Secretary of State for Defence, 8 May 2007, ‘Iraq: Reconciliation’.

⁴⁴⁴ Paper Iraq Policy Unit FCO and Joint Commitments MOD, 3 May 2007, ‘Iraq: After UNSCR 1723’; Paper FCO and MOD, 3 May 2007, ‘Iraq: MNF-I Mandate in 2008: UK Non-Paper’.

813. In the absence of a further resolution, the MOD and FCO considered that it would be necessary to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding or a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the Iraqi Government.

814. The MOD and FCO thought it possible that the Iraqi Government might write into a new Security Council resolution:

- a commitment to complete PIC transfer by a given date;
- more formal Rules of Engagement;
- a timetable for withdrawal;
- a commitment that this would be the last resolution of its kind; and
- removal of powers to intern.

815. The MOD and FCO judged internment to “make an important contribution to force protection”. If removed, individuals would have to be released or, in the case of the 30 percent of detainees where there was a criminal case to answer, handed to the Iraqi Government.

816. During the DOP(I) meeting, the point was made that Mr Blair’s forthcoming visit to Iraq would offer an opportunity to push for reconciliation, and that the UK and US should stress to the Iraqi Government that continued support and money was conditional on seeing demonstrable progress.⁴⁴⁵ An unnamed attendee highlighted the importance of “resolving the detainee situation” since 90 percent of detainees were Sunni.

817. Ministers agreed to aim for a renewal of resolution 1723 in 2008 and to share the paper ‘Iraq: MNF-I Mandate in 2008’ with the US.

818. Reporting on the situation in Basra, Mr Browne said that 80 percent of the violence there was directed against coalition forces, but that was a manifestation of the political struggles going on beneath the surface. The JAM militia represented a strong political force and there was evidence that some of their attacks against UK forces were being funded by the Iranians. Indirect fire attacks on Basra Air Station remained a serious problem; the US military had lent the UK some Apache attack helicopters which were proving useful.

819. Mrs Beckett told Cabinet on 10 May that the outcome of the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting had been “generally positive”.⁴⁴⁶ It had been a useful demonstration of international engagement, but in private many had been negative about the Iraqi Government.

⁴⁴⁵ Minutes, 10 May 2007, DOP(I) meeting.

⁴⁴⁶ Cabinet Conclusions, 10 May 2007.

Mr Blair announces his resignation

On 10 May, Mr Blair announced – first to Cabinet and then to party members in his Sedgefield constituency – that he was standing down as Leader of the Labour Party and would be resigning as Prime Minister on 27 June.⁴⁴⁷

820. On 10 May, Maj Gen Shaw reported a softening of the Provincial Council’s attitude towards co-operation with MND(SE), with the Provincial Chairman now prepared to engage in telephone (though not yet face-to-face) contact.⁴⁴⁸

821. Resolving the impasse would be important if transition to PIC was to be achieved in Basra in the planned timetable. Maj Gen Shaw commented:

“Ambassador Crocker’s comments post his visit to Basra Palace do not seem to reflect the reality of the situation here. His assertions to the Secretary of State that he had been struck by the seriousness of the security situation and that PIC in Basra under the current climate would be difficult would appear to have more to do with US aspirations to tie us to remaining in Iraq than they do with objective assessment. I was heartened, however, by the Secretary of State [for Defence]’s robust response that August was an important month for UK and we could not take decisions on Iraq in isolation from Afghanistan ...

“Ambassador Crocker’s comments about the Port (that Iraq’s politicians allowed it to be run by the militias) would also appear to have caused a flurry in Baghdad ... What is also depressing is the prospect of military intervention at the Port; this may be corrupt, but is also stable and functions. Upsetting the balance of power would not advance stability in Basra by a single step and would not be the best use of Iraqi Army assets ...”

822. Mr Blair discussed progress on national reconciliation with President Talabani on 11 May.⁴⁴⁹ They considered there had been significant progress, including recent public statements and fatwas from Abdul Aziz al-Hakim (leader of SCIRI) and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, which referred to the MNF-I as “guests”, with all that that implied in terms of Islamic custom.

823. Mr Blair commented that one of the lessons that had been learned in Northern Ireland was that “if the majority were not able genuinely to acknowledge the minority’s right to a share of power, then the majority’s own aims could not be met”.

⁴⁴⁷ *BBC News*, 10 May 2007, *Blair will stand down on 27 June*.

⁴⁴⁸ Minute Shaw to CJO, 10 May 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq update – 10 May 2007’.

⁴⁴⁹ Letter Banner to Hickey, 11 May 2007, ‘Meeting with Iraqi President’.

824. In his weekly update on 11 May, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary wrote:

“The big issue of the moment – rightly – is reconciliation. At Sharm, Maliki got the message from all present that this should be his priority, and the US have been using every tool at their disposal to reinforce the message.”⁴⁵⁰

825. The Private Secretary attached a copy of a speech given by Mr Browne the previous week, which included proposals relevant to Mr Blair’s planned visit to Iraq. In it, Mr Browne asked whether military intervention was working in Iraq and concluded “As ever, the difficulties are with the politics”. He continued:

“Delivering on reconciliation is simple in concept but will be extremely difficult to deliver where there is little cohesion between factions – who on the Sunni side can deliver the people? Who on the Shia side commands enough support to make the compromises?”

826. The IPU produced a revised reconciliation strategy on 11 May.⁴⁵¹ Its overall aim was to build mutual confidence and trust between Sunni Arabs and Shia. The detailed objectives were:

- more inclusive government;
- widening political representation and participation;
- progress in reducing the numbers excluded by de-Ba’athification;
- progress on agreeing hydrocarbons legislation;
- changing the regional context; and
- a more strategic approach to reconciliation both by the Iraqi Government and by the coalition.

827. The IPU also highlighted a “pressing need for action” on the issue of detainees, possibly by offering an amnesty.

828. Mr Blair commented:

“This is a much better paper. But the key missing element remains. Neither the process nor the individual items of attainment/goals of reconciliation are achievable unless set out in a proper agreement to which everyone – Iraqi Gov[ernment], Iraqi factions, clerics, US, UK, MNF and Arabs – sign up.”

829. On 13 May, Lt Gen Lamb reported that “significant progress” continued to be made in Anbar province, where attacks were down to five or six a day compared with 60 to 90 attacks a day “previously”.⁴⁵² He commented: “I see this as a clear indication of the

⁴⁵⁰ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 11 May 2007, ‘Iraq Update, 10 May’ attaching Speech Browne ‘Politics and the Art of War’.

⁴⁵¹ [Paper Iraq Policy Unit, 11 May 2007, ‘Iraq: Reconciliation’ including manuscript comment Blair.](#)

⁴⁵² Minute Lamb to CDS, 13 May 2007, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (254) 13 May 07’.

unwillingness of the local population to tolerate AQ activity and their desire to co-operate with CF [coalition forces].”

830. On relations with the Iraqi Government, he commented:

“... my sense is that the Prime Minister [Maliki] and the Iraqi Government Ministers, while continuing to listen to advice, are less inclined to be dictated to by what we the coalition want. Our contributions to the debate are embraced when they coincide with what they, the Iraqis, have in mind, whilst if our advice challenges what they have in mind (and is probably therefore not shared with us) then it becomes a much more difficult issue to push through. To some extent it was ever thus, but 2007 is becoming a year of hard bargaining and tense negotiation, albeit more in a spirit of partnership than the one-sided (US) affair it was in 2006.”

831. On reconciliation and outreach, Lt Gen Lamb reported that the newly enlarged Engagement Cell was being much appreciated by the US and that “another small UK inspired piece of thinking and work application” was emerging in the form of the “Energy Fusion Cell”, aimed at co-ordinating the various Iraqi ministries responsible for energy.

832. On 14 May, a letter on JAM and the prospects for outreach was provided to Mr Dowse at his request.⁴⁵³ It stated:

“Despite the ability to mobilise mass demonstrations ... JAM and OMS are in disarray, with no unified political or military leadership. This has been exacerbated by Muqtada al-Sadr’s extended stay in Iran and the arrest of al-Khaz’ali ... But the divisions already existed.”

833. The letter said that JAM activities fell into four categories, all of which were overwritten by complex regional and tribal allegiances between individuals:

- Iranian-sponsored secret cells;
- the mainstream organisation of OMS and JAM;
- criminal elements in Sadr City; and
- the demonstrators and occasional fighters who respond on an emotional level to the JAM call to arms.

834. As a result, “no one figure, including probably Muqtada al-Sadr himself, is capable of delivering JAM as a movement but a range of people have influence over parts of JAM”. The letter continued:

“In Baghdad in recent weeks, JAM militiamen have begun to reappear on the streets but apparently remain under orders (it is not clear whose) not to engage in attacks ... In Basra JAM command and control is also unclear but the result is the opposite to the relative lull in Baghdad ... Some senior members of the Sadr trend

⁴⁵³ Letter junior official specialising in the Middle East to Dowse, 14 May 2007, ‘Jaysh al-Mahdi and the Prospects for Outreach’.

in Basra are ready to engage in dialogue with coalition forces ... but they are fearful of Iranian sponsored rivals and want us to deliver power to them in partnership, rather than having existing influence over the movement that they can use on our behalf ...

“As with the Sunni insurgency, it seems we will have to engage the movement faction by faction ... An encouraging aspect is that the relationship with Iran appears tactical for JAM ... While disarray in the JAM movement has helped create breathing space for the Baghdad security plan, the empty Shia political space is occupied not by secularists and democrats but by Iranian sponsored groups tasked with violence, and Badr.”

835. ACM Stirrup visited Iraq between 13 and 16 May.⁴⁵⁴ He was reported to have sensed:

“... that the Iraqis are increasingly in a position to take on responsibility for their own problems and therefore they might wish to look to propose the south of the country as a model through which we can recommend a drawdown of forces.”

836. During the visit, Lt Gen Lamb told ACM Stirrup that he “saw increasing signs from MAS/JAM that they could be closer to a non violent approach and some moderation of a significant proportion of their number”.

837. Mr Asquith told ACM Stirrup when they met in Baghdad that he was concerned that the campaign plan was “hung up on sectarianism”. This meant that “we should be careful to demonstrate a degree of humility when dealing with these sensitive issues” in discussion with Iraqi politicians. There was an underlying fear of a return to Ba’athification in the minds of the Shia politicians and that affected much of their thinking. Mr Asquith suggested that perhaps there was a need for an “outside figure to help deliver something meaningful on reconciliation”.

838. On 16 May, at the request of the FCO, the JIC assessed the effectiveness of the Iraqi Government, including progress on security and national reconciliation.⁴⁵⁵

839. The JIC judged that:

“I. ... Violence continues to rise, distrust is deepening between and within increasingly sectarian communities, and government capacity remains weak. There has been no tangible progress on national reconciliation.”

840. Poor security, especially in Baghdad and central Iraq, was judged to have deterred political reconciliation and prevented economic reconstruction, although “most of the Kurdish north remains quiet and parts of southern Iraq have seen attack levels fall”.

⁴⁵⁴ Minute Poffley to PSSC/SofS [MOD], 17 May 2007, ‘CDS Visit to Iraq 13-16 May 07’.

⁴⁵⁵ [JIC Assessment, 16 May 2007, ‘The Iraqi Government: One Year On’](#).

Since the US surge, sectarian murders had reduced in Baghdad, and security in Anbar had been improved with the help of local forces:

“But the national monthly average of recorded attacks is 50 percent higher now than a year ago. There is a strong possibility that Shia frustrations will lead to increased sectarian violence.”

841. Faction-based sectarian politics was judged to be hampering the Government’s ability to function effectively:

“Recent diplomatic reporting indicated that there are plans to improve government policy co-ordination, but we judge that major improvements in performance are unlikely in the foreseeable future: many departments lack basic bureaucratic and administrative skills. Corruption remains endemic and is not being tackled effectively.”

842. On 17 May, at the request of the Cabinet Office, the JIC reviewed the threat to the UK posed by international terrorism over the next five years.⁴⁵⁶

843. The JIC judged:

“International terrorism will remain dominated by Al Qaida (AQ) and related Sunni Islamist extremists. There will be more attacks in the UK and on UK interests overseas ...

“AQ’s senior leaders ... can ... communicate with affiliated networks in places like ... Iraq ...

“AQ will remain flexible in seeking to create or exploit un-governed spaces wherever it can. Iraq and increasingly Afghanistan will remain key strategic theatres. If AQ establishes a firm base in either country, it will train and radicalise a large number of terrorists and launch attacks regionally and beyond.”

844. In his weekly report on 17 May Mr Asquith reported that Prime Minister Maliki was facing a number of political challenges:

- Threats that Sunni politicians would pull out of government if their demands in the Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) were not met. The key issues were the redistribution of powers between the centre and regions/governorates, fair distribution of revenues and a revision of Article 140 on Kirkuk, plus some movement on de-Ba’athification.
- Divisions within the Shia UIA bloc, resulting both from the withdrawal of Fadhila and internal divisions within the Dawa party.

⁴⁵⁶ JIC Assessment, 17 May 2007, ‘The UK and International Terrorism: The Next Five Years’.

- The position of Kirkuk, which had not been resolved and remained a key issue for the Kurds.⁴⁵⁷

845. Mr Asquith reported separately that the CRC had not met its 15 May deadline for presenting recommendations to the Council of Representatives.⁴⁵⁸ He commented:

“The constitutional review does provide an opportunity to be a building block towards reconciliation by facilitating agreement on some key issues. Establishing federal paramountcy over oil would increase the value and durability of any compromise reached in the Hydrocarbons Law and would ... address some of the Sunni insecurities ... But although the CRC may appear to be within reach of a tentative agreement on some of the critical issues, it is not clear that they have the endorsement of the political leadership, in particular the KRG [Kurdish Regional Government] to approve the necessary changes.”

846. In his weekly report on 17 May, Maj Gen Shaw reported:

“... across the three Provinces [in MND(SE)] under Provincial Iraqi Control we now lack the situational awareness to truly determine what is happening on a day-to-day basis.”⁴⁵⁹

847. Maj Gen Shaw described the impact of continuing indirect fire attacks:

“The frequency of attacks does of course have its own grinding effect on morale. Our greatest risk in this respect is if contractors elect to remove their personnel; their departure would leave us without critical life support. At present, and despite a number of individuals choosing to leave in April, contractor support remains firm. However, thinking ahead, should at any stage FCO, DFID or MOD decide to remove its Civil Service Personnel from theatre, the IO [information operations] message that this would send to contractors would need to be factored in.”

848. Mr Blair visited Washington from 17 to 18 May.⁴⁶⁰ A steering brief for the visit explained that:

“President Bush is under heavy domestic pressure on Iraq from all sides: not just the Democrats and the American public but also increasingly from within his own party. If significant, demonstrable progress has not been made in Iraq by September, the US Administration will find it hard to sustain support in Congress. So he is likely to welcome reassurance of continuing British commitment to Iraq and to sensitive handling of transition in Basra and any further troop drawdowns.”

⁴⁵⁷ eGram 21060/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 17 May 2007, ‘Iraq: Weekly Assessment’.

⁴⁵⁸ eGram 21038/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 17 May 2007, ‘Iraq: Constitutional Review Committee Report Delayed’.

⁴⁵⁹ Minute Shaw to CJO, 17 May 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 17 May 2007’.

⁴⁶⁰ Briefing [unattributed], [undated], ‘Prime Minister’s Visit to Washington, 17-18 May 2007: Iraq’.

849. A note from Mr Blair’s Private Secretary suggesting “deliverables” for the trip proposed that for Iraq the public outcome should be an enhanced focus on reconciliation.⁴⁶¹ In private, a positive outcome would be agreement that the senior US and UK military and diplomatic representatives in Iraq would hold the Leadership Council to its commitment to reconciliation.

850. On 17 May, Mr Blair and President Bush held a video conference with senior UK and US military and civilian personnel in Baghdad.⁴⁶²

851. Mr Blair underlined the importance of the Sunni and Shia coming together as part of a political process to focus on the true causes of the violence in Iraq, Al Qaida and Iran.

852. Mr Blair concluded that, by September, it would be important for the coalition to have given the Iraqis a strong sense that everything possible was being done on security and on reconciliation. It was imperative that people understood that the drivers of violence in Iraq were the same as for the fight against terrorism and that: “If we could deal them a blow in Iraq, it would have a wider impact on the fight.”

853. Mr Blair’s Private Secretary reported to Mrs Beckett’s Private Secretary that:

“Based on the VTC, the Prime Minister is strengthened in his view that the UK needs to make a concerted push on reconciliation working with the US. He would like a senior British official to be in charge of this who would work closely with the US, and who could be available to undertake dialogue in Iraq and the region.”

854. The FCO was tasked to produce some thoughts on that by 25 May.

US funding for Iraq

At the start of May President Bush vetoed a Congressional Bill which released funding for Iraq on the condition that US troops began to withdraw that year.⁴⁶³

On 11 May, the House of Representatives passed a further Bill which would release US\$43bn immediately and a further US\$53bn after July, subject to a demonstration that progress had been made.⁴⁶⁴

A compromise Bill was approved by Congress on 24 May.⁴⁶⁵ This guaranteed US\$120bn funding and did not include a timetable for withdrawal of US troops from Iraq but set out a series of conditions or benchmarks to be met for the release of funding for civilian reconstruction efforts.

⁴⁶¹ Minute Gould to Prime Minister, 11 May 2007, ‘Your Trip to Washington: Deliverables’.

⁴⁶² Letter Gould to Hayes, 17 May 2007, ‘Iraq: VTC with the Prime Minister, President Bush and Baghdad: 17 May 2007’.

⁴⁶³ *BBC News*, 2 May 2007, *Bush vetoes Iraq withdrawal Bill*.

⁴⁶⁴ *BBC News*, 11 May 2007, *US House passes Iraq funding Bill*.

⁴⁶⁵ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 25 May 2007, ‘Iraq Update, 25 May’.

President Bush was asked to submit two reports to Congress – by mid-July and by mid-September – demonstrating progress against each of the benchmarks.

855. Mr Blair visited Baghdad and Basra on 19 May.⁴⁶⁶ His Private Secretary reported that he had meetings with Prime Minister Maliki, President Talabani and senior UK and US military and civilian teams.

856. Mr Blair discussed reconciliation with Prime Minister Maliki, and the criticism of the Iraqi Government by foreign officials for its work against Ba’athists. Mr Blair observed:

“... that leadership presented many challenges, not least having to deal with criticism from all sides even when one was pursuing the right policy.”

857. In the briefing with US and UK senior teams in Baghdad, Mr Blair set out the case for “a political initiative which would provide a framework for and a context to security work under way in Baghdad and Anbar”. He agreed with Ambassador Crocker and Mr Asquith that a statement of intent would not be enough; there must be a plan.

858. In Mr Blair’s Basra briefing, Maj Gen Shaw noted that most of the violence was directed at the MNF; only time would tell whether the intra-Shia factional violence would increase as UK forces drew down. Following PIC, the ability of UK forces to intervene, including in strike operations against JAM and others, would gradually diminish, but it would still be both necessary and possible to retain a residual training and mentoring role.

859. Commenting on the Prime Minister’s visit in his weekly report, Maj Gen Shaw wrote:

“... the visit of the Prime Minister this week went well from the Division’s point of view but less well, I suspect, from the overall Campaign IO [information operations] perspective. The IDF attack during my brief to him was the story, described by the *Sunday People* as an AQ-inspired assassination attempt, an idiocy repeated by Sky TV ... IO is now the campaign main effort; it is not what we do between now and departure, it is how our actions and departure are perceived. If we are to stand any chance of leaving here with any national pride in our achievements, then we need to address the domestic media judgement that this is a lost cause during, and out of, which no good has come, and their practice of looking (and inevitably finding) evidence to back up their prior editorial judgement.”⁴⁶⁷

860. On his return from Iraq, Mr Blair spoke to President Bush to “report back” on his visit.⁴⁶⁸ Mr Blair said that in the present situation politics had to create security rather

⁴⁶⁶ Letter Banner to Hickey, 20 May 2007, ‘Visit to Iraq, 19 May’.

⁴⁶⁷ Minute Shaw to CJO, 24 May 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq update – 24 May 2007’.

⁴⁶⁸ Minute Sheinwald to Banner, 21 May 2007, ‘Iraq’.

than the other way round. What was needed was a new political vision and compact, reaffirmed by the political leaders in Iraq, with coalition involvement. The key elements for a new political deal would be:

- the Hydrocarbons Law;
- holding early provincial elections;
- a deal with insurgents, as in Anbar; and
- a new political platform agreed jointly by the Sunnis, Shia and Kurds in government.

861. Mr Blair said that the only way to tie Prime Minister Maliki into such a deal would be to use the leverage provided by his desire that US forces should not leave.

862. Sir Nigel Sheinwald's record of the conversation was sent only to staff in No.10. It ended: "The Prime Minister did not want this conversation reported widely." Sir Nigel therefore suggested that Mr Blair's Private Secretary reported in his formal record of the discussion that Mr Blair had followed up with President Bush on 20 May and that further discussion of the political initiative was expected.

863. Sir Nigel later added that Mr Blair had promised President Bush a short note on the elements of his proposed political/reconciliation initiative, which Mr Blair's Private Secretary was preparing.⁴⁶⁹

864. On 22 May, Mr Blair met Gen Dannatt.⁴⁷⁰ Mr Blair commented on the impressive work that UK troops were doing in Iraq and that, in his discussions with the troops, he had found morale and determination high.

865. Gen Dannatt observed that the underlying dynamic in Basra was intra-Shia competition motivated by financial gain, and "that, although there would remain an important training and mentoring role in Iraq, there was a robust case for the redeployment of forces to Afghanistan in the medium term". Mr Blair agreed that UK troops should remain in Iraq only so long as there was real utility in their doing so, though he observed that it was important to be "very careful about potentially leaving, or appearing to leave, the field open to the Iranians".

866. Gen Dannatt agreed it was important to ensure that the British Army came out of Iraq with its reputation intact, which would require "a perception of strategic success in the South".

⁴⁶⁹ Minute Sheinwald to Banner, 21 May 2007, 'Iraq: PM/Bush Phone Call, 20 May'.

⁴⁷⁰ [Letter Banner to Forber, 22 May 2007, 'Iraq: Meeting with Chief of the General Staff'](#).

867. On 23 May, Mr Asquith met Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker to “talk through how we might achieve the ‘political decision’ which the Prime Minister was pressing for”.⁴⁷¹ Neither of his US interlocutors thought this was likely to be possible:

“... while they accepted the desirability (and eventual requirement for) a political decision, it was unachievable in the timeframe before September [when Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker were due to report to Congress on progress in Iraq]; chasing it would at best sidetrack effort better put to achieving the achievable, at worst would erect obstacles to the achievement of the achievable.”

868. Mr Asquith commented that this had been:

“A useful, if deeply depressing, confirmation of the limited ambitions which the US has set itself and the extent to which September has affected the American approach to the agenda. Unless the PM can move Bush ... we are in the business of managing the political process between now and September. We can dress this up as reconciliation for public consumption, and doubtless there will be the occasional clerical or ‘comprehensive’ conference to pretend something is happening, but I see no scope for tackling the root problem until ... September.”

869. The same day, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary provided him with a draft Note to send to President Bush on reconciliation.⁴⁷² He explained that Mr Asquith had already trailed these ideas with Ambassador Crocker and Gen Petraeus but without success. There is no record that Mr Blair sent the Note to President Bush.

870. In his weekly update of 24 May, Maj Gen Shaw assessed that “the seesaw struggle with JAM continues, with events tipping in their favour this week”.⁴⁷³ He observed that the arrest of Aws Khafaji, believed to be a senior member of JAM, was likely to have an impact on the level of incoming fire.

871. On 24 May, Mr Blair reported to Cabinet on his recent visit to Iraq. He said that “there were some prospects for hope”; some Sunni tribes had started to reach accommodations with US forces and violence had reduced, for example in Anbar. But the question remained whether an accommodation could be reached with the Iraqi government. He attributed continued violence in Basra “almost entirely” to Iranian-backed Shia cells. Mr Blair concluded that “there was still undoubtedly a very long way to go”.⁴⁷⁴

872. Later on 24 May, Mr Blair met ACM Stirrup and senior Whitehall officials to discuss Iraq.⁴⁷⁵ ACM Stirrup said that the Baghdad Security Plan was “proceeding reasonably

⁴⁷¹ Email Asquith to McDonald, 23 May 2007, ‘US and Reconciliation’.

⁴⁷² Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 23 May 2007, ‘Iraq Meeting, 25 May’ attaching Note [Blair to Bush], ‘Iraq – Reconciliation’.

⁴⁷³ Minute Shaw to CJO, 24 May 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND (SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 24 May 2007’.

⁴⁷⁴ Cabinet Conclusions, 24 May 2007.

⁴⁷⁵ [Letter Banner to Hickey, 28 May 2007, ‘Iraq: Meeting with Officials’.](#)

well” and the rate of sectarian murders was down. Significant Sunni forces appeared to be emerging in Anbar and elsewhere; that could be a positive development but there was a danger that without effective reconciliation they could turn against the Iraqi Government.

873. On Basra, ACM Stirrup observed that economic progress would address some of the violence by reducing the number of unemployed young men. Officials noted that the Basra economy was largely based on criminality, but work was in hand to try to stimulate investment and sensible planning for economic development.

874. Mr Blair concluded that the UK’s objective should be “early Provincial elections, leading to a political setup in Basra with which we could work, and which provided a more effective link between Basra and Bagdad”. He commissioned papers from the FCO on:

- the state of politics in Basra, and how best to ensure effective investment and development there;
- the political, security and economic situation in those provinces which had already made the transition to Iraqi control; and
- the situation in outlying areas of Iraq.

875. Late on the evening of 24 May, Sir Nigel Sheinwald spoke to Mr Hadley.⁴⁷⁶ Mr Hadley said that recent discussion of a reduction to 4,500 UK troops in Basra had caused “considerable discomfort” to Gen Petraeus and others. They were concerned that it sent “conflicting signals” to “the Iraqis and international opinion” and would demoralise coalition partners, leading them to reduce their numbers.

876. Sir Nigel explained that the change in troop numbers was part of the announcement made in February, and “it made no sense to delay it further”. Mr Hadley asked for Gen Lamb to “talk this through urgently with General Petraeus in order to get a better understanding on the ground”. He added “the later we could leave it for an announcement, the better”.

877. Sir Nigel considered that such an intervention by Mr Hadley was relatively rare, and surmised that the issue may well have been raised at a US Principals’ meeting. He asked Lt Gen Lamb to “go over this again” with Gen Petraeus and report back:

“We can then decide what further action to take on the political and military nets to get the necessary level of American buy-in.”

878. The day after the meeting, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary provided his weekly Iraq Update.⁴⁷⁷ The update characterised the security situation as “difficult at the moment”.

⁴⁷⁶ Letter Sheinwald to Hayes, 24 May 2007, ‘Conversation with US National Security Adviser, 23 May’.

⁴⁷⁷ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 25 May 2007, ‘Iraq Update, 25 May’.

879. Mr Jones' weekly report on Basra, which was attached to the update, said that there had been 17 attacks on Basra Air Station in the past week, and high levels of indirect fire.⁴⁷⁸ An explosion at a Sunni mosque and attack on the headquarters of a Sunni political party had also "fuelled concern within the nervous Sunni community". Mr Jones added that:

"All of our contacts speak of a deterioration in the security situation more generally, and an undertow of increasing assassinations and kidnappings."

880. Mr Blair commented: "Why has Basra's security suddenly turned bad? And what can be done about it?"⁴⁷⁹

881. On 28 May, Lt Gen Lamb reported that the continued attacks on Prime Minister Maliki and his Government in the Arabic press meant that he was:

"... shouldering a huge burden with little in the way of support from a functional bureaucracy or supporting structures. He is clearly feeling the pressure but continues to show signs of increasing independence and I sense even ownership. Our part in the war, what we have done, will do and how we do it and how it is reported in the coming months, is how our coalition partners, the Iraqis and the Arab nations in particular will perceive us. Given our British heritage in this part of the world and the high regard for our honesty, principles and the quality of our contribution, there is, unless I am much mistaken, a lot yet to play for and a great deal at stake."⁴⁸⁰

882. Despite the problems faced by the Iraqi Government, at the end of May the FCO reported to the Iraq Strategy Group that the three Kurdish provinces had been transferred to PIC.⁴⁸¹

883. On 31 May, Maj Gen Shaw reported a "strike operation" against Basra JAM leader Wissam Abu Qadir in the previous week in which he had been killed whilst resisting detention.⁴⁸²

884. The BBC reported that the kidnap of five British nationals in Baghdad in the same week may have been retaliation for the strike.⁴⁸³

⁴⁷⁸ [Minute Jones to Aldred, 23 May 2007, 'Basra: Weekly Report'](#).

⁴⁷⁹ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 25 May 2007, 'Iraq Update, 25 May' including manuscript comment Blair.

⁴⁸⁰ Minute Lamb to CDS, 28 May 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (256) 28 May 07'.

⁴⁸¹ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Sheinwald, 31 May 2007, 'Iraq Strategy Group, 31 May'.

⁴⁸² Minute Shaw to CJO, 31 May 2007, 'GOC HQ MND (SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 31 May 2007'.

⁴⁸³ *BBC News*, 31 May 2007, *Suspicion falls on Mehdi Army*.

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885. On 6 June, at the request of the FCO, the JIC examined the current influence of Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formerly SCIRI) and Badr, their future strategy and the extent of Iranian influence on them.⁴⁸⁴ It judged:

“Increasing frustration with Prime Minister Maliki has led the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) to explore alternative alliances ... Ultimately, ISCI wants to be the dominant Shia political party.

“The Badr Organisation’s evolution from militia to political party has been largely cosmetic. Badr remains ISCI’s paramilitary wing; its prime goal is control of Iraq’s security institutions. It holds a disproportionate number of command posts in the police and is trying to secure similar authority in the army. Most of its members in the Iraqi Security Forces remain loyal to their former Badr command structures and many continue to pursue a partisan, and by its nature, sectarian agenda.

“ISCI/Badr have made common goals and close links with Iran ... However, ISCI/Badr’s willingness to take instruction from Tehran has probably been diminishing since 2003 and Iran’s ability to direct political outcomes in Iraq is limited ...

“Participation by the Office of the Martyr Sadr in provincial elections tentatively scheduled for December is likely to reduce ISCI/Badr’s power in many provinces across the South. Fierce competition for the Shia vote is likely to lead to increasing violence between Badr and JAM. ISCI/Badr may win the most votes in Basra, but this will not necessarily translate into effective control.”

886. On 7 June, Maj Gen Shaw reported that as a result of Qadir’s death there were “encouraging signs that a real blow has been dealt to JAM’s capability and will in the city”. He commented:

“Whilst JAM will continue to try to attack our people and will no doubt portray our eventual departure as their victory, the more important question now for the future security of Basra surrounds the relationship between JAM and the ISF ... Just as it will be the Sunni who rid Iraq of AQ, so the Shia are potentially the main threat to Iranian influence. But turning Iraqi nationalists against their co-religionists is made more difficult by our presence. Reconciling MAS/OMS [Muqtada al-Sadr/Office of the Martyr Sadr] and hence reconcilable sections of JAM to the ‘GOI now’ as opposed to the ‘GOI after MNF’ is vital.”⁴⁸⁵

⁴⁸⁴ JIC Assessment, 6 June 2007, ‘The Role of ISCI and Badr in Iraq’.

⁴⁸⁵ Minute Shaw to CJO, 7 June 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 07 June 2007’.

887. In his update on Iraq on 8 June, Mr Blair's Private Secretary said that DOP would need to take a decision shortly on the timing of a withdrawal from Basra Palace:

"Within the MOD, a view is emerging that leaving there would reduce our situational awareness to the extent that we would fairly rapidly lose all ability to generate military effect; we would also probably have to pull out of the PJCC [Provincial Joint Co-ordination Centre], where we undertake ISF training."⁴⁸⁶

888. Attached to the update was a paper by the IPU on the situation outside MND(SE) and Baghdad, as requested by Mr Blair on 25 May.⁴⁸⁷ It said that Babil, Wasit, Karbala and Qadisiyah were "generally stable" but that Salah ad Din and Ninawa were experiencing "major sectarian and ethnic tensions" and it was uncertain whether they would be judged to have met the standards for transition to PIC.

889. On 11 June, Mr Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Mr Browne made a joint visit to Baghdad and met a number of key individuals, including the Prime Minister and President, Gen Petraeus, Ambassador Crocker and Mr Asquith.⁴⁸⁸

890. Mr Gordon Brown told Prime Minister Maliki that:

"... the UK was keen to support the Prime Minister on changes to the Constitution, new laws and reforms and economic infrastructure and support."

891. On Basra, Prime Minister Maliki "promised rapid progress", specifically:

"... a new chief of police in two days, a new Governor within the week, appoint a new General to take overall charge of security ..."

892. President Talabani assessed that the Baghdad Security Plan had produced "a slight improvement but he had hoped for better". Gen Petraeus highlighted a "steadily falling sectarian murder rate" and produced a chart which showed a drop from 1,474 in January to 599 in May.

893. In response to a question about his September report to Congress, Gen Petraeus said:

"... the key point was that even if sectarianism could be tackled all of the other issues remained: Iran, AQ, the weak borders, Sadr and the state of the Iraqi Security Forces."

894. A note of the meeting prepared by Mr Brown's Private Office observed that "despite reported US concerns, there was a notable silence on Basra issues other than to confirm PIC was going to be a difficult call".

⁴⁸⁶ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 8 June 2007, 'Iraq Update, 8 June'.

⁴⁸⁷ Paper IPU, 8 June 2007, 'Iraq: Situation Outside MND (SE) and Baghdad'.

⁴⁸⁸ Letter Bowler to Banner, 13 June 2007, 'The Chancellor and Defence Secretary's Visit to Baghdad' attaching Paper [unattributed], [undated], 'The Visit of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Defence Secretary to Baghdad: 11 June 2007'.

895. Mr Blair's Private Secretary told Mr Blair that the visitors had found Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker:

"... heavily focused on trying to achieve the 'benchmarks' set by Congress, in time for Petraeus' interim testimony to Congress in July, and final testimony in September."⁴⁸⁹

896. On 12 June, the Chiefs of Staff noted:

"Some elements of the Gol's [Government of Iraq's] current plans for Basra Palace post-transition were of concern, including the intent to guard the Palace with a dedicated Palace Guard Force (which had yet to be raised, trained or equipped). Notwithstanding reported calls from within MNF-I for local publicity, the intent remained for the planned withdrawal from Basra Palace to be conducted in as low key a manner as possible."⁴⁹⁰

897. In his weekly report on 13 June, Maj Gen Shaw wrote:

"... the fate of BP [Basra Palace] rests now in the hands of GOI/MNF, and PM Maliki has taken a personal interest in it. Any idea that we might be able to extend our presence needs to appreciate the extent of Iraqi ownership of this issue, which itself is a result of hard selling of the imperative requirement for UK to leave the Palace in August."⁴⁹¹

898. Maj Gen Shaw also reported on the implications of the coalition's existing reconciliation effort for relations within MND(SE). He wrote:

"An MNF obsessed with the Sunni problem sees reconciliation through a Sunni prism, the focus on Sunni tribes vs AQ. For the Shia, I contend that reconciliation has to mean harnessing Iraqi nationalism in support of Gol against the Iranian malign influences. Our presence confuses Shia loyalties; some support Gol and hence don't attack MNF; some (JAM etc) see MNF as occupiers and attack us and hence are equivocal in their support of Gol; yet both sets would claim to be nationalists. This issue is beginning to be of immediate relevance in Basra with the question raised by JAM of senior public figures regarding their loyalties, 'are you a collaborator or nationalist?' Convincing Muqtada al-Sadr to buy in to the current, as opposed to the post-MNF, political process will be the key to Shia reconciliation success, particularly in tackling the malign influences of the secret cells and Iran ... Al Sadr is already courting both Sunni and Shia groupings and calling them to join him under a Nationalist banner. This, however, is at least in part balanced by Fadhila and their cohort's intention for a Federal Iraqi state. How well we manage to drive a wedge between the nationalists, their current Iranian patrons and the Iranian surrogates will have implications Iraq wide."

⁴⁸⁹ Minute Banner to Blair, 14 June 2007, 'Iraq Update, 14 June'.

⁴⁹⁰ Minutes, 12 June 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

⁴⁹¹ Minute Shaw to CJO, 13 June 2007, 'GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 13 June 2007'.

899. On 13 June, the al-Askari mosque in Samarra, which had previously been bombed in February 2006 (see Section 9.4), was bombed for a second time.⁴⁹² Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani publicly condemned the bombing, but appealed to the Iraqi Shia community to show restraint.

900. On 13 June, a senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) wrote to Mr McDonald seeking “policy guidance” on JAM and Shia outreach contacts.⁴⁹³ The minute was copied to Lt Gen Lamb, VAdm Style, Mr Howard, Maj Gen Dutton, Maj Gen Shaw, Mr Dowse, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary, Mr Asquith and Mr Jones. The document was not copied more widely in the Cabinet Office.

901. In the letter, the senior official explained that, with Maj Gen Shaw’s agreement and with the knowledge of Mr Asquith and Lt Gen Lamb, there had been “exploratory talks” for “some weeks” with JAM1 from his detention in Basra (see Section 9.4). He explained that JAM1 remained an influential figure in JAM in Basra and beyond and had continued to communicate with JAM whilst in detention.

902. During a series of interviews, JAM1 had expressed concern about growing Iranian influence over JAM. The senior official told Mr McDonald: “We assess that he is telling the truth in this respect”.

903. The senior official explained that JAM1 had said that he was ready to work to reduce JAM attacks on MNF, focusing initially on indirect fire. JAM1 maintained that, under his influence, the JAM mainstream in Basra would gradually be able to reassert authority over the secret cells. In return for reducing indirect fire from JAM, he wanted a suspension of strike operations and the release of detainees. To build confidence, it was proposed that this process would need to begin with a short trial period cease-fire.

904. The senior official reported that JAM1 accepted MNF’s right to self-defence and to continue to intercept smuggled arms supplies during this period but rejected the MNF’s right to target JAM secret cells, arguing that it was for JAM to control its own people. There was no intention to concede this point. The trial cease-fire was proposed for 15 to 17 June. If this was effective “the next step could be a longer cease-fire, for which [JAM1] would expect more detainee releases and a continued suspension of strike operations”.

905. The senior official also reported that Maj Gen Shaw was content to test JAM1’s ability to influence JAM, on the basis that a short suspension of strike operations and the release of some detainees fitted fortuitously with existing plans. Two of the detainees whose release had been requested by JAM1 were likely to be released before 15 June, which would be presented to JAM1 as being as a direct response to his cease-fire offer and a sign of coalition good faith.

⁴⁹² *New York Times*, 13 June 2007, *Shiite Leaders Appeal for Calm After New Shrine Attack*.

⁴⁹³ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) to McDonald, 13 June 2007, ‘Shia engagement: [JAM1]’.

906. The senior official recognised that there were risks, in particular that the Iraqi Government would view the bilateral negotiations with suspicion. Lt Gen Lamb had commented that the JAM1 talks should be handled as an aspect of the coalition’s broader engagement with JAM and the Sadrists.

907. In conclusion, the senior official wrote: “We would be grateful for your views. We will report back after the trial ‘cease-fire’ period to seek further guidance unless [JAM1] raises significant new issues before then.”

Detention by UK forces in Iraq

In the course of operations in Iraq, UK forces detained people:

- as Prisoners of War (POWs);
- who were suspected of criminal activities (criminal detainees); and
- who were considered to pose a threat to security (security detainees).

The Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (the Third Geneva Convention) defines the categories of persons entitled to POW status and the conditions of their captivity.⁴⁹⁴ Article 118 states that POWs shall be released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of active hostilities.

As an Occupying Power in Iraq, the UK Government derived its right to intern individuals who presented a security threat to the mission from the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (the Fourth Geneva Convention).

The Fourth Geneva Convention sets out provisions governing the status and treatment of “protected persons”, whom it defines as:

“Persons ... who, at a given moment and in any manner whatsoever, find themselves, in case of a conflict or occupation, in the hands of a Party to the conflict or Occupying Power of which they are not nationals.”⁴⁹⁵

The provisions of the Convention include the following:

- Article 27, which states that protected persons are entitled, in all circumstances, to respect for their persons, honour, family rights, religious convictions and practices, and their manners and customs. They should at all times be humanely treated and protected.
- Article 78, which states that: “If the Occupying Power considers it necessary, for imperative reasons of security, to take safety measures concerning protected persons, it may, at the most, subject them to assigned residence or to internment.” Decisions regarding internment should be made according to a regular procedure prescribed by the Occupying Power in accordance with the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention; the procedure should include the right of appeal and provision for a review of the decision to inter every six months by a competent body set up by the Occupying Power.

⁴⁹⁴ Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, 12 August 1949.

⁴⁹⁵ Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, 12 August 1949.

In so far as the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention allowed an Occupying Power to exercise functions of government in occupied territory, Article 6 provided that they should continue to have effect for as long as its military occupation continued. Article 27 therefore continued to apply throughout the Occupation of Iraq.

Ordinarily, these provisions, including Article 78, cease to apply “one year after the general close of military operations”. In the case of Iraq, the power to intern individuals for imperative reasons of security was extended beyond the initial period of Occupation, by virtue of UN resolution 1511 (2003) and by resolution 1546 (2004) and the letters referred to within it, and then by resolutions 1637 (2005), 1723 (2006) and 1790 (2007).

Security detainees were held as long as they continued to pose a threat to security, in accordance with Article 78 of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

908. In an email to Mr Casey on 14 June, Mr Asquith commented:

“... I do not doubt the tactical benefit of engaging those in Anbar and other Sunni areas in which AQ operate with the purpose of persuading them to turn against AQ. Nor do I have any reason to doubt MNF-I assessments that this engagement has delivered significant results in terms of identifying AQ operatives and caches, restricting AQ operating capabilities and reducing attacks ... against coalition forces. Engaging with local armed, militant, insurgency or opposition groups was of course what I and others were engaged in throughout 2005. I am not opposed to the principle.”⁴⁹⁶

909. Nevertheless, Mr Asquith questioned whether these groups had turned against AQ for wholly ideological reasons. He thought the groups were more strongly motivated either by a power struggle with AQ, which was encroaching the tribes’ territory; or money; or by a desire – under the protection of US forces – to re-arm and prepare for a future campaign against Iran and/or the “Shia government”. Mr Asquith considered that motivation had an adverse effect on the coalition’s broader reconciliation strategy. It increased Prime Minister Maliki’s concerns and put him “under severe pressure from his Shia constituency who pose the question: why is he tolerating the creation of what effectively are Sunni militias who pose a threat (now or later) to Shia communities, while at the same time tolerating regular coalition attacks on Shia militias?”

910. Mr Asquith wrote:

“Given the imperative for Petraeus to deliver something by 13 September ... we can’t halt the engagement process. We should instead seek to shape it in a way that reduces the risk.”

⁴⁹⁶ Email Asquith to Casey, 14 June 2007, ‘Anbar Engagement’.

911. On 14 June, Mr Blair's Private Secretary told Mr Blair:

"The US are ... focused on the Anbar model, but this is creating real tension with Maliki. Violence continues to be down in Anbar, but the motivations of the tribes remain unclear, and they continue to express their opposition to the Government of Iraq. Nor do they tie in to any convincing, wider, Sunni leadership ... Maliki is ... coming under pressure from other Shia over the creation of a well-armed Sunni militia, particularly as the US now propose to extend the model to areas of Baghdad ...

"The Pentagon this week also released its now regular quarterly report on progress in Iraq. This noted that overall levels of violence in the country had not decreased since the start of the surge, noted that the GoI's delivery had been 'uneven', and that it had made 'little progress' on the political front – reconciliation was described as a 'serious unfulfilled objective'."⁴⁹⁷

912. The Pentagon report referred to named Basra as "Partially Ready for Transition", in the same category as Wasit, Qadisiyah, Babil, Karbala, Baghdad, Diyala, Salah ad Din, Tamim and Ninawa.⁴⁹⁸ Only Anbar was marked "Not Ready for Transition".

913. On 17 June, the US military led a Corps-level strike operation in Maysan Province targeting Iranian-affiliated militants.⁴⁹⁹

914. Maj Gen Shaw expressed concern beforehand about the need to be seen to respect Iraqi sovereignty, the acceptable level of collateral damage and the way the operation would be presented. Despite the US going "some way to addressing the GOC's concerns", the operation went ahead with no Iraqi participation. It was unclear whether the Governor of Maysan had been informed ahead of the operation.

915. The MND(SE) weekly report stated: "The outcome was a degree of opprobrium levelled at British Forces who were blamed erroneously not only for participating directly in the raid but also for having done so without legitimate authority in violation of the PIC MOU."

916. Lt Gen Lamb considered that the response of the Iraqi Government and security forces to the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque contrasted positively with their responses in 2006.⁵⁰⁰ The Iraqi Government had moved quickly to intervene, to establish a curfew and, across the political divide, to denounce the attacks.

917. The positive response was counterbalanced by the fact that the number of attacks across Iraq remained high and had "broken the 200 per day mark this week".

⁴⁹⁷ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 14 June 2007, 'Iraq Update, 14 June'.

⁴⁹⁸ Report to Congress, June 2007, Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq, page 29.

⁴⁹⁹ Minute Thomas to CJO, 22 June 2007, 'GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 22 June 2007'.

⁵⁰⁰ Minute Lamb to CDS, 17 June 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (257) 17 June 07'.

In Lt Gen Lamb's view, that increase needed to be viewed in the light of the increased MNF and ISF activity against the insurgents across Iraq as the US surge kicked in.

918. Meanwhile, progress on reconciliation and engagement continued and Lt Gen Lamb saw "a rising groundswell of activity at the GOI [Government of Iraq] level" aimed at embracing the emerging opportunities.

919. On 18 June, Mr McDonald responded to the letter of 13 June from a senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2), saying:

"Thank you for your minute of 13 June. I was surprised to hear of this initiative only when it was well advanced (ie about to start delivery). As you say, it has major political implications.

"That said – I think it right and reasonable for us to try (and be seen to be trying) to do everything better to protect our forces. And I agree we should be hard headed about possible rewards to [JAM1] (it is fortunate that two of the six detainees he wants are already scheduled for release). Although we cannot expect complete quiet, we need a measurable difference directly attributable to [JAM1] before proceeding further.

"What were the results of the (first) cease-fire?"⁵⁰¹

920. In a summary of the negotiations with JAM prepared in November 2007, a senior official specialising in the Middle East (1) explained that early talks with JAM1 had focused on:

- The release of Basra detainees, which would help JAM1's local standing.
- The relationship between JAM and the Iranian-backed Secret Cells. JAM1 was adamant that he could bring the Secret Cells into line with his policy. MND(SE) and [government officials working closely with the military] insisted on a broad right to self-defence and the need to counter Iran.
- The risks of US intervention. [JAM1] feared a US takeover of MND(SE) and the transfer of detainees to US custody.
- The risks of Shia against Shia political conflict. From the start [JAM1] talked of the necessity of an accommodation with Badr, Fadilah and the other Basra parties. He wanted Fadilah detainees released as well as JAM.
- The need for development work to continue. Although [JAM1] wanted the military occupation to end as soon as possible, he requested an acceleration of visible development work and later provided a list of priority projects to improve quality of life in Basra."⁵⁰²

⁵⁰¹ Note McDonald to senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2), 18 June 2007, '[JAM1]'.

⁵⁰² Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) to Lyall-Grant, 9 November 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: Negotiations with JAM in Basrah'.

921. On 19 June, a senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) wrote to colleagues:

“Reaction in Whitehall has been predictably mixed. CJO is very supportive. FCO (McDonald) supports but would like to have been informed at an earlier stage. Aldred (Cabinet Office) hasn’t read the ... letter of 13 June but would like to call a meeting before any further detainees are released. No.10 (Sheinwald) have no objection, but want a submission on where we have got to so we can get ministerial top cover ... We are going with the No.10 ruling.”⁵⁰³

922. The senior official explained that the submission would be drafted in London but commissioned government officials working closely with the military in Iraq to provide contributions. It would need to cover:

- the “back story”;
- levels of IDF before and after the three-day cease-fire, and casualties;
- details of the next phase proposed (ie of the next two detainees JAM1 had asked for, and “what we would get in return”);
- an idea of “where we might go next”;
- technical details of how the Divisional Internment Review Committee (DIRC) process worked (who sits on the committee, what their legal responsibility is, and whether they consult with the US or Iraqis);
- what the US view was, because “if they don’t sign-off in theatre we will need to rethink”; and
- how to “handle the Iraqis” and what their views were.

923. On 20 June, a senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) sent advice to Mr McDonald and Mr David Richmond, FCO Director General Defence and Intelligence, for onward submission to Mrs Beckett.⁵⁰⁴ The advice was copied to Mr Desmond Bowen, MOD Policy Director.

924. The senior official sought authority to attempt cease-fire negotiations with key elements of JAM in Basra. This would be co-ordinated closely with GOC MND(SE) and the British Consul General in Basra. Urgent approval was requested in order to maintain momentum and to prevent possible discredit to the JAM interlocutor.

925. The senior official went on to describe the outcome of the trial cease-fire:

“Reporting from Basra shows a sharp reduction in rocket and mortar fire against Basra Palace and Basra Air Station (BAS) over 15-17 June. There were indirect fire (IDF) attacks on Basra Palace and BAS every day 11-14 June, no attacks at all on

⁵⁰³ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2), 19 June 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: [JAM1]’.

⁵⁰⁴ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) to McDonald, Richmond & Foreign Secretary, 20 June 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Shia Engagement’.

15 and 16 June and only one attack (at BAS) at 2245 on Sunday 17 June (which caused casualties). Attacks against the military re-supply convoy from the airbase into Basra were also markedly down. There have been attacks on BAS or the Palace every day since 18 June.”

926. The senior official explained that on 18 June, his colleagues had discussed the cease-fire with JAM1. The discussion had led to an “outline plan to build confidence on both sides” which involved:

- a. The release of two further named detainees, both of whom were classified ‘orange’ in MND(SE)’s system (‘of some risk to the coalition if released’). The senior official reported that “MND(SE) view the releases as relatively unproblematic”. This would happen at the end of the trial cease-fire, as a test of coalition good faith.
- b. A month-long JAM cease-fire in Basra province, matched by a continued suspension of strike operations by the coalition, which would retain the right to fire in self-defence, to interdict arms shipments and to intervene when asked to do so by the Iraqi Government.
- c. Consideration of the release of two further named detainees, depending on the effectiveness of the month long cease-fire. These individuals were more significant, and classed as ‘red’.
- d. The possibility of an indefinite cease-fire if the month-long version proved successful. JAM1 would be likely to seek additional detainee releases.

927. If the advice was approved, the senior official explained that Lt Gen Lamb would brief Gen Petraeus and either Dr Rubaie or Prime Minister Maliki on the proposal. The Foreign and Defence Secretaries would be consulted at every stage of the negotiations. Releasing the nominated detainees, who were “held on the basis of intelligence, under the powers of internment provided in the resolution, rather than on the basis of an evidential criminal case” was a matter for MND(SE) and the MOD.

928. The risks identified in the submission included that the US might view the contacts with JAM as undermining their security strategy, although it was reported that Lt Gen Lamb did not think this likely. The senior official wrote:

“GOC MND(SE) and HMCG Basra strongly support this initiative. HMA Baghdad is also in favour, with the caveat that al-Maliki will need careful handling. SBMR-I is also supportive but notes that the initiative will need to be integrated with broader coalition efforts to engage JAM.”⁵⁰⁵

⁵⁰⁵ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) to McDonald, Richmond & Foreign Secretary, 20 June 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Shia Engagement’ including manuscript comments Richmond and McDonald.

929. Mr McDonald annotated the submission on 21 June that he supported the recommendation on the basis that only two ‘orange’ prisoners were released at that point, with further releases being decided against the effectiveness of the month long ceasefire, and that the US and the Iraqi Government should be briefed soon.

930. Mr Richmond agreed with these comments, and was able to confirm on 22 June that Mr Browne had agreed to the proposals.

931. A meeting took place on 21 June between JAM1 and government officials working closely with the military.⁵⁰⁶ Although “the atmospherics were good” the officials had no news so far about releases and could only say that London had decided to consider all four releases at the same time. Once the principle had been established, they expected that further releases “should prove easier”.

932. The officials raised the heavy IDF that had followed the end of the trial cease-fire and caused the death of a UK soldier.⁵⁰⁷ JAM1 said that he regretted the death and that had the two detainee releases taken place as he had requested, he might have been able to contain the violence.

933. JAM1 noted that the negotiation process was becoming more widely known and made a “clear linkage” with transfer to PIC “saying, in effect, that our peace process would enable the transfer of the security portfolio to the Iraqis”. The officials asked JAM1 to consider ways in which he might guarantee the security of certain specific development projects in Basra, in particular hospitals.

934. A senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) responded that the meeting with JAM1 had gone as well as could be expected and that JAM1 was “not out of the game yet”.⁵⁰⁸

935. After the advice of 20 June had been submitted, Mr McDonald and Mr Richmond had commented, and Mr Browne had agreed the proposals, a discussion between officials working closely with the military and Lt Gen Lamb and Mr Asquith revealed that Lt Gen Lamb and Mr Asquith were not supportive of the advice that had been provided.⁵⁰⁹

936. On 20 June, Mr Blair’s Private Secretary told Mr Blair that Prime Minister Maliki had decided to disband the Basra Emergency Security Committee, replacing it with a new committee that would report to the Iraqi Ministry of Defence and have “operational responsibility for all aspects of provincial security, from police through port security to borders”.⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁶ Email government official working closely with the military, 21 June 2007, ‘[JAM1] 21 June meeting’.

⁵⁰⁷ Major Paul Harding.

⁵⁰⁸ Email senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2), 21 June 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] Submission Launched’.

⁵⁰⁹ Email government official working closely with the military, 23 June 2007, ‘SBMR-I Requests [...] withdraw and correct [NAME OF OPERATION] submission. HMA Comments’.

⁵¹⁰ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 20 June 2007, ‘Phonecall with Maliki’.

937. On 21 June, Mr Blair had a video conference with President Bush, his final as Prime Minister.⁵¹¹

938. A brief for the conversation by Mr Blair's Private Secretary suggested that President Bush might raise concerns about Basra.⁵¹² The Private Secretary wrote:

"You can reassure him that our current plans would see around 5,000 troops remaining in Basra over the Autumn, to focus on training, re-intervention (if required) and building situational awareness in the South. We will ensure that transition to Provincial Iraqi Control is conditions-based, and are working hard with (and on) Maliki to ensure that the Government of Iraq plays its part."

939. During the video conference, Mr Blair stressed the importance of a "visible fight-back" against "militant elements" in Iraq, and of a coherent, politically driven reconciliation process.⁵¹³

940. On 21 June, Mr Asquith reported to London on the focus amongst US staff in Iraq on the need to report to Congress in September.⁵¹⁴ As Ambassador Crocker and Gen Petraeus tried to "manage expectations", in the Embassy and in MNF HQ "teams of planners beaver away" producing metrics. In Mr Asquith's view:

"The Iraqis understand the urgency of what needs to be done. Plenty of pressure is being put on the leadership by their own disenchanting constituents ... But nonetheless the Iraqi clock is keeping slower time than Washington's. And much of what is being asked is difficult to deliver in circumstances where government struggles to be effective and the state of politics is such that decisions are more likely to be postponed than taken."

941. On the political front, Lt Gen Lamb continued to report progress.⁵¹⁵ On 24 June he wrote that:

- agreement had been reached on the Hydrocarbons Law;
- vital groundwork had been laid in reaching agreement on Provincial Elections;
- the Sunni community was increasingly rejecting AQ-I (in one area in southern Baghdad there had been an 80 percent reduction in IEDs); and
- progress on reconciliation and engagement continued, with a new committee – made up of representatives from key Iraqi Ministries and the MNF-I and

⁵¹¹ Letter Banner to Hayes, 22 June 2007, 'Prime Minister's VTC with President Bush, 21 June: Middle East issues'.

⁵¹² Minute Gould to Prime Minister, 20 June 2007, 'Your VTC with President Bush: 21 June 2007'.

⁵¹³ Letter Banner to Hayes, 22 June 2007, 'Prime Minister's VTC with President Bush, 21 June: Middle East Issues'.

⁵¹⁴ eGram 26691/07 Baghdad to London, 21 June 2007, 'Iraq: How Baghdad is handling Congress's 18 benchmarks'.

⁵¹⁵ Minute Lamb to CDS, 24 June 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (258) 24 June 07'.

reporting direct to Prime Minister Maliki – to implement bringing tribes and armed insurgents into the fight against AQ-I.

942. Lt Gen Lamb also wrote that he considered the appointment of General Mohan and Major General Jalil as the military and police leaders in Basra represented important progress.

943. Colonel Peter Mansoor, executive officer to Gen Petraeus from 2007 to 2008, recorded in his book *Surge* that Op SINBAD operations “suffered ... from the same deficiencies as the contemporaneous ‘Together Forward’ operations in Baghdad – areas cleared could not be held without keeping sufficient troops positioned among the people”.⁵¹⁶ Neither the Maliki government nor the MNF-I were willing to support “more robust” operations, and the ISF were “too few and too poorly trained to take on the responsibility for securing Basra”.

944. Col Mansoor assessed:

“Predictably, the ‘clear and leave’ operations did not achieve enduring security gains, as the Iraqi security forces to which the British quickly transferred control of cleared areas proved unable to keep them clear. As a result, Operation SINBAD was an exercise in futility, and Sadrist militiamen soon regained control of their safe havens in Basra. The alternative to renewing the fight, in the minds of British political and military leaders, was to cut a deal.”

US politics

On 25 June two Republican Senators, Richard Lugar and George V Voinovich, made speeches questioning the US troop surge and calling for troop withdrawals.⁵¹⁷ Senator Lugar was the senior Republican member of the Foreign Relations Committee.⁵¹⁸

Three days later, President Bush made a speech at the Naval War College in Rhode Island in which he defended the surge, arguing “our forces can see the difference” that it was making on the ground.

945. On 26 June, VAdm Style briefed the Chiefs of Staff that:

“In Basra itself, whilst a palpable threat to MNF existed, there was general agreement that the UK transition plan should continue. It was anticipated that there could, conceivably, be US pressure to delay the process, which had the potential to introduce a gap in the timing of the handover of Basra Palace and PIC in Basra.

⁵¹⁶ Mansoor PR. *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*. Yale University Press, 2013.

⁵¹⁷ *The New York Times*, 29 June 2007, *Bush Defends War at Naval College as Senate Republicans Show Increasing Impatience*.

⁵¹⁸ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 29 June 2007, ‘Iraq – update’.

Such a gap should be avoided as it would place GOC MND(SE) in an extremely difficult position with regards to the effective provision of security in Basra.⁵¹⁹

946. The Chiefs of Staff noted:

“Any pressure on de-latching the handover of Basra Palace and PIC should be resisted, however, it was recognised that some very limited flexibility may be required in order to avoid a potential ‘falling-out’ with the US on the run-up to the delivery of the Petraeus/Crocker report.”

947. After discussions in Baghdad, on 26 June a note containing Lt Gen Lamb’s comments on the 20 June submission on cease-fire negotiations was sent to VAdm Style. It said:

“SBMR-I would wish to offer the following comment, for consideration alongside [the submission]:

- He remains generally supportive of an [UK] approach;
- He suspects there might have been an underestimation of the sensitivity of the GOI/PM position;
- He suspects that there is a possibility at least that this local initiative might undermine the broader engagement;
- He suspects that [Gen Petraeus] would be unlikely to agree to ‘a continued suspension of strike operations from the coalition in Basra province’; and
- Noting the difficulty of capturing the detail of such negotiations on paper, he senses from the overall tone of [the submission] that there might be a lack of a hard edge to the MNF-I side of the agreement; in particular, that MNF-I would seek [JAM1]’s ‘approval’ for coalition action seems inappropriate.”⁵²⁰

948. On 26 June, a senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) submitted supplementary advice to Mrs Beckett, via Mr Richmond, copied to Mr Bowen and Mrs Beckett’s Principal Private Secretary.⁵²¹ The senior official wrote:

“Discussions on ... cease-fire talks with JAM detainee [JAM1] – have continued in Basra and Baghdad since my submission on 21 June. Both SBMR-I and HMA Baghdad have additional comments, based on their reading of the final draft of the submission and subsequent exchanges with [officials working closely with the military on the ground in Iraq]. I would be grateful if you could connect this letter with the ... submission.”

⁵¹⁹ Minutes, 26 June 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

⁵²⁰ Minute [junior officer on behalf of SBMR-I] to DCDS(C), 26 June 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] submission – SBMR-I comment’.

⁵²¹ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) to Richmond and Foreign Secretary, 26 June 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] – Shia engagement’.

949. Lt Gen Lamb's position was reported as:

"SBMR-I ... remains generally supportive of the initiative but flags up several risks, which are recognised in the submission and which we would not dispute:

- Possible Government of Iraq suspicion or outright opposition
- The risks of undermining broader engagement through a local approach in MND (SE)
- US opposition to a suspension of strike operations

"SBMR-I also comments that the MNF-I side in the negotiations is not being tough enough with [JAM1]."

950. Mr Asquith's position was reported to be that:

"... he did not have a problem with doing a deal with [JAM1], but he too argued that the negotiating position should be much tougher, commenting on policy as follows:

- a. We should not undertake to suspend strike operations (para 8b) – particularly as [operations by another body] will continue unaffected.
- b. We should include a cessation of EFP [Explosively Formed Projectile] attacks as the test for [JAM1] to pass (ie not just IDF).
- c. We should not leave ambiguity over strike action against secret cells or our expectation that [JAM1] controls their activity (para 15).
- d. It is unrealistic for the process to be brought to a close straightforwardly if the US at some point demand that we cease contacts with [JAM1]. Having led him down the garden path, he will take it out on us when he sees that we've deposited him on the compost heap.
- e. I don't see in the submission description of how we will seek to set mainstream JAM against secret cells (para 11).
- f. Any 'cease-fire' we might offer on our part should not, in my view, be province wide (para 8b) – we should limit it to Basra City.
- g. It seems that two of [JAM1]'s desired six were released before the 48 hour cease-fire – if so this was unwisely generous.
- h. [JAM1]'s been shut up for two years. Why is he now motivated by fear of being supplanted or suspicion of Iranian influence? Are we being uncharacteristically naïve?"

951. The senior official added:

"Following further discussions, HMA [Mr Asquith] raised the following:

- The end state is not clear. Buying repeated cease-fires of one month duration (until the UK military withdraw from Basra province?) seems a lot to give away for questionable delivery.

- How do we track the activities of the people we release.
- I still think we limit ourselves too much in what action we say we'll refrain from. But we don't explain to [JAM1] that others ... might conduct operations; so we still run the risk that he will interpret us reneging when in fact it is someone else. We end up with the worst of both worlds.

"HMA also questioned the resumption of IDF immediately after the trial cease-fire 15-17 June. [The senior official] explained that no deal was reached on immediate extension of the cease-fire so this was to be expected."

952. In conclusion, the senior official wrote:

"There is a difference of British views between Basra and Baghdad, which it is not for [us] to resolve. If the Secretary of State approves continuing negotiations with [JAM1], it is essential that there be a mechanism for agreeing UK policy lines reasonably quickly, within parameters laid down by ministers. One way of doing this would be for [government officials working closely with the military] to collate recommendations and views from theatre and send these to David Richmond, copied to Desmond Bowen."

953. On 27 June, Mr Blair stood down formally as Prime Minister. At the start of his final Prime Minister's Questions he paid tribute to two individuals recently killed in Iraq⁵²² and another killed in Afghanistan⁵²³ and said:

"I am sorry about the dangers that they [UK armed forces] face today in Iraq and Afghanistan. I know that some may think that they face these dangers in vain. I do not, and I never will. I believe that they are fighting for the security of this country and the wider world against people who would destroy our way of life."⁵²⁴

954. Iraq was also raised by Mr Jeremy Corbyn who asked when Mr Blair expected British troops to be withdrawn.⁵²⁵ Mr Blair replied:

"The numbers of UK forces in Iraq depend on the conditions in Iraq. The numbers of forces have come down from 9,000 to 7,000 to 5,500. When, in the next few weeks, we are able to complete a further phased withdrawal, they will come down even further, but they must come down as and when the security conditions allow."

955. Shortly after Mr Blair tendered his resignation, HM The Queen asked Mr Gordon Brown to form a government. He arrived at No.10 the same afternoon.

⁵²² Major Paul Harding and Corporal John Rigby.

⁵²³ Drummer Thomas Wright.

⁵²⁴ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 27 June 2007, column 323.

⁵²⁵ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 27 June 2007, column 328.