

Return to an Address of the Honourable the House of Commons
dated 6 July 2016
for

The Report of the Iraq Inquiry

Report of a Committee of Privy Counsellors

Volume VIII

Ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on 6 July 2016

HC 265-VIII



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Print ISBN 9781474110136

Web ISBN 9781474110143

ID 23051601 46561 07/16

Printed on paper containing 75% recycled fibre content minimum

Printed in the UK by the Williams Lea Group on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office

Volume VIII

CONTENTS

9.5	June 2006 to 27 June 2007	1
9.6	27 June 2007 to April 2008	181
9.7	May 2008 to October 2009	381
9.8	Conclusions: The post-conflict period	469

SECTION 9.5

JUNE 2006 TO 27 JUNE 2007

Contents

Introduction	2
June 2006	2
July 2006	11
August 2006	24
September 2006	30
October 2006	41
November 2006	49
December 2006	60
January 2007	69
February 2007	99
March 2007	120
April 2007	134
May 2007	144
June 2007	165

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 Hoshyar 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 response 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).

August 2006

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

September 2006

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 Shirreff 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:

"I. 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

January 2007

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.”

February 2007

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 Phonecall 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’.

March 2007

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 NIJA 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’.

April 2007

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: Scenesetter 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.

May 2007

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*.

June 2007

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 disenchanted 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.

SECTION 9.6

27 JUNE 2007 TO APRIL 2008

Contents

Introduction	182
June 2007: The Brown Government	182
July 2007	185
August 2007	212
September 2007	235
October 2007	266
November 2007	287
December 2007	301
January 2008	316
February 2008	323
March 2008	335
April 2008	353

Introduction

1. This Section addresses:

- the decision to withdraw UK forces from Basra Palace, including the development of the negotiations to ensure a safe exit and UK plans for the future deployment of its troops;
- the UK's role in the transition to Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) in Basra; and
- the UK's relationship with the Iraqi Government, including steps to safeguard the legal status of UK forces, and responses to the Charge of the Knights 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 2007: The Brown Government

4. Mr Gordon Brown succeeded Mr Blair as Prime Minister on 27 June 2007. In his new Cabinet he appointed Mr David Miliband as Foreign Secretary and Mr Douglas Alexander as International Development Secretary. Mr Des Browne remained in post as Defence Secretary. Baroness Scotland became the Attorney General.

5. Mr Brown also reorganised the structure of Cabinet Committees, as is usually the case when a new Prime Minister takes office. Iraq fell within the remit of the Committee on National Security, International Relations and Defence (NSID), and specifically its Overseas and Defence Sub-Committee (NSID(OD)).

6. Mr Brown spoke to President Bush on the telephone shortly after he arrived at No.10.¹ Mr Brown said that he believed there were a number of ways forward in Iraq and looked forward to further discussions with the President, including by continuing Mr Blair's practice of holding regular video conferences.

7. Mr Brown told the Inquiry that he had talked to President Bush both before and after becoming Prime Minister about the UK's future plans for Iraq, making clear the commitment to "finish the job" in Basra:

"Over time we would be reducing the number of troops but only as the Iraqis were capable of taking control of law and order ... And he was perfectly satisfied with what we were doing ... We had a series of phone calls as well during the summer of 2007 as we developed this new strategy ..."²

¹ Letter Henderson to Hayes, 27 June 2007, 'Prime Minister's Phone Call with President Bush'.

² Public hearing, 5 March 2010, page 153.

8. On 27 June, at the request of the MOD, the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) considered the state of the Iraqi Security Forces (see Section 12.1 for more detail on Security Sector Reform).³

9. The JIC's Key Judgements included:

"I. Work is under way in Prime Minister Maliki's government to develop a national security strategy, but it is unlikely to make a difference to Iraq's security as long as the government remains factionalised and fails to make progress on national reconciliation ...

"II. Policy incoherence is exacerbated by a plethora of competing and ineffectual committees operating with little central co-ordination ...

"III. The army continues to develop slowly ... [Quality] varies markedly between units and there are still serious systemic problems: leadership is weak; under-manning remains common; logistic support is poor; many units lack key items of equipment.

"IV. The local Iraqi Police Service is at best ineffective. In many areas the police are synonymous with militia or insurgents ... Corruption is endemic. Many police are probably unreformable."

10. The JIC also considered that in the "likely event of serious intra-Shia fighting the police would probably take sides ... and the army would try to remain on the sidelines". In Anbar, locally-raised Sunni tribal units had been successful in reducing violence, but it was "unrelenting" in Baghdad, Diyala and other mixed provinces around the capital.

11. The JIC assessed that: "In the absence of a significant reduction in the threat, the Iraqi security forces will be unable to cope" without combat support from the Multi-National Force (MNF) well beyond February 2008.

12. On 29 June, Mr Brown's Private Secretary provided him with an update on Iraq.⁴ Attached to it was a note described as:

"... draft new language, which you may want to use at PMQs [Prime Minister's Questions] ... which aims to strike a realistic, more downbeat, tone on the situation in Iraq and to put the onus for positive change firmly on the Iraqi Government."

13. The update characterised Iraqi politics as "tense and obstructed" and complicated by tensions between the Sunni and other groups.

14. In the South, the note said, the situation remained "difficult" but the appointment of a new police chief, Major General Jalil, and a new head of the Basra Operations Command, General Mohan, was good news.

³ JIC Assessment, 27 June 2007, 'Iraqi Security Forces and Structures: Quantity not Quality'.

⁴ Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 29 June 2007, 'Iraq – Update'.

15. The Private Secretary reported concern within the military “that the UK Battlegroup deployed in Maysan province, primarily to cover the huge border with Iran, is not achieving any military effect”. Officials were working on a paper “on the issues around (and implications of) moving out of the Basra Palace site, and security transition in the South”.

16. At Cabinet on 29 June, Mr Browne described three separate incidents involving British forces in Basra the previous day and observed that British forces were facing the brunt of violence in South-East Iraq.⁵ Cabinet expressed sympathy for the soldiers and their families.

17. Mr Dominic Asquith, British Ambassador to Iraq, reported on 29 June that Sunni distrust of the political process was becoming increasingly focused on Prime Minister Maliki personally.⁶ Despite this “atmosphere of mistrust”, discussions were continuing among the parties on restructuring the government around an Executive Council (consisting of the President, two Vice Presidents and the Prime Minister) and a moderate front involving five partners.⁷

18. Mr Asquith noted that there was a disconnect between the US and Iraqi approaches to the political process. Iraqis were arguing that the parties needed time to build trust while the US saw that process halting progress towards achieving their most pressing benchmarks: political agreement to the draft Hydrocarbons Law⁸ and revenue sharing arrangements. Mr Asquith commented:

“Managing this disconnect will require maintaining the focus on discrete elements of the programme that might be salvageable:

- the benchmark legislation, including a return to the de-Ba’athification draft, which I shall be discussing further with the Americans;
- the constitutional review, on which we are in discussion with the CRC [Constitutional Review Committee] chairs ...;
- continuing the schedule of Executive Council meetings with the aim of securing agreement at least on how it will operate;
- proceeding with preparations for provincial elections.”

⁵ Cabinet Conclusions, 29 June 2007.

⁶ eGram 28011/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 29 June 2007, ‘Iraq: Weekly Assessment’.

⁷ The Kurdish PUK and KDP, the Shia Dawa and ISCI and the Sunni IIP.

⁸ This would describe the governance and development of the energy sector in Iraq.

Terrorist incidents in London and Glasgow

On 29 June 2007, two cars containing gas canisters, explosives and nails were found in central London, one outside a busy nightclub on Haymarket.⁹

The following day, two men drove a blazing car into the main terminal building at Glasgow airport.¹⁰ The airport was evacuated and flights suspended.

After a meeting of COBR, the Government's emergency committee, Mr Brown raised the UK threat level for international terrorism to 'Critical', its highest level.

SIS5 told the Inquiry that one threat to the UK came from people, from a range of backgrounds, who had been radicalised and motivated by what they had seen reported about Iraq.¹¹ In SIS5's view, the attacks in London and Glasgow in June 2007 fell into that category.

July 2007

19. The security situation in Baghdad remained a cause for concern. On 1 July, Mr Asquith observed that, while the number of some events (for example, suicide attacks) had gone down, "public perceptions from polls and our own informal soundings ... remains sharply negative".¹²

20. Lieutenant General Graeme Lamb, the Senior British Military Representative – Iraq (SBMR-I) reported that there was "much relief" that a planned march, organised by supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr, had been called off.¹³ Lt Gen Lamb considered that, had the march gone ahead, there would have been a "major sectarian clash" the impact of which might have been a "terminal challenge" to the Iraqi Government and to "the ability of the coalition forces to affect the outcome". Work was in hand to "understand exactly how and whose political pressure was brought to bear" in calling off the march.

21. Mr Jon Day, MOD Director General Operational Policy from August 2007 to October 2008, told the Inquiry that:

"... there were contacts between the UK and the Sadrist in Basra from the spring of 2007, and that as a result of this continuing dialogue, a series of – I think I prefer to use the word "understandings" were reached with core elements of the Sadrist JAM [Jaysh a-Mahdi] militias in Basra. These understandings ran from mid-June 2007 and they therefore pre-dated and were separate from the national JAM cease-fire in late August."¹⁴

⁹ *The Guardian*, 1 July 2007, *Terror threat 'critical' as Glasgow attacked*.

¹⁰ *BBC News*, 30 June 2007, *Blazing car crashes into airport*.

¹¹ Private hearing, 2010, pages 43-44.

¹² eGram 28201/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 1 July 2007, 'Iraq: Baghdad Security Plan'.

¹³ Minute Lamb to CDS, 1 July 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (259) 1 July 07'.

¹⁴ Public hearing, 6 January 2010, page 32.

22. Mr Day considered that the UK had a number of motives for entering into a dialogue with JAM:

- to contribute to the coalition's overall outreach effort to groups involved in violence, in line with what was happening with Sunni groups further north;
- to encourage mainstream JAM (who it was believed were "looking for a way out of violence") to move towards a commitment to democracy, particularly with the provincial elections expected in 2008;
- to drive a wedge between the mainstream JAM core (who were nationalists and believed to be "reconcilable") and the largely Iranian-sponsored JAM Special Groups (who were following an Iranian agenda);
- to encourage a reduction in the level of violence, to make time for the Iraqi Army to develop its capability to enable it to confront the unreconciled militias successfully; and
- to reduce the threat to UK and other coalition forces.

23. The process of seeking Ministerial agreement for continued dialogue with an individual (JAM1) was interrupted by the formation of the new government (see Section 9.5), and had to be re-started in early July.

24. On 2 July, an official working closely with the military reported:

"HMA [the British Ambassador to Iraq] and SBMR-I ... judge that US and GoI [Government of Iraq] will reject the deal.

"To summarise a lengthy and detailed discussion: SBMR-I repeated that he could see some of the opportunities offered by [JAM1]. As such he would like to be able to write supportive comments on a submission. But as the submission currently stood – he would have to comment that he did not believe that either the GoI nor US would support the proposal. He was concerned that this would lead to Ministers not agreeing the submission, and would like to avoid this if possible."¹⁵

25. Although he could see the benefits of reducing indirect fire (IDF) and allowing transition to PIC to happen, US views reportedly remained a major concern for Lt Gen Lamb because:

"... such a deal in the South would represent an about-turn of the policy that had only months ago convinced them to establish [another operational body]. In short the suggestion of a no-strike agreement in the South was at loggerheads with the active targeting policy conducted against Iranian proxies by MNF-I [Multi-National Force – Iraq] and MNC-I [Multi-National Corps – Iraq] elsewhere in Iraq."

¹⁵ Minute official working closely with the military, 2 July 2007, 'New [NAME OF OPERATION] Submission: [...]'.

26. Lt Gen Lamb was reported to be concerned that “we might be giving up broader strategic interests for the future of Basra” and that this would be seen as “a hollow victory, gained for fixed British rather than strategic interests”. He therefore suggested either holding the submission back and continuing discussions with JAM1 to better define the options, or re-writing it to focus on broaching the issue with the US and Iraqi Government as an initial objective.

27. The official concluded:

“In sum, both HMA and SBMR-I believe the deal struck needs to be tougher; that it is not clear to them to what extent control of Basra will be handed over to JAM; that there will be serious reservations over the release of ‘red’ detainees without a better deal being struck, and that neither [General David] PETRAEUS [Commanding General MNF-I] or the GoI will agree to the proposal as it currently stands.”

28. On 3 July, Mr Simon McDonald, Mr Brown’s Foreign Policy Adviser, spoke to Mr Stephen Hadley, the US National Security Advisor, by telephone.¹⁶ Mr McDonald said that Mr Brown’s “analysis of the situation on the ground would be tough; he was likely to stress the importance of Maliki and his government improving their performance”.

29. Air Marshal Stuart Peach, Chief of Defence Intelligence, briefed the Chiefs of Staff on 3 July that it was “unlikely that ISF [Iraqi Security Forces] would have sufficient capacity to assume responsibility for security across Iraq by February 2008, in accordance with current plans”.¹⁷

30. Mr Brown’s Private Secretary advised the Iraq Senior Officials Group on 3 July that he had “indicated that he would stick broadly to the strategy outlined by Mr Blair in February”, but was keen that there should not be a significant gap between the handover of Basra Palace and transition to PIC.¹⁸ Mr Brown was currently occupied with domestic and counter-terrorism issues but would address strategies for both Iraq and Afghanistan soon.

31. Mr Brown told the Inquiry that his focus was on the area of Iraq for which the UK was responsible:

“... my determination was that we created the context in which Iraqis, that is the people of Basra, had more control over their own affairs. So we had to build up the training of the Iraqi forces and the training of the Iraqi police, and we did that ...

“Then we had to make sure that local government elections took place, so that there was some stability ... And then we had to do something about economic development ... So through ... 2007 ... we were planning what we called ‘overwatch’, where we would move from what was called ‘tactical overwatch’,

¹⁶ Letter McDonald to Hayes, 3 July 2007, ‘Conversation with US National Security Adviser’.

¹⁷ Minutes, 3 July 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

¹⁸ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 3 July 2007, ‘Iraq Senior Officials Group’.

where we were there as the forces but Iraqis were involved in the maintenance of stability and law and order; and then we would move to what we called 'operational overwatch', which gave the Iraqis far more control themselves of their own affairs; and we moved then to 'strategic overwatch', which is what we eventually did, where we stood back, the Iraqis had control of their own security but we had a re-intervention capability if it was at all necessary."¹⁹

32. Air Chief Marshal Jock Stirrup, Chief of the Defence Staff, visited Baghdad and Basra from 1 to 3 July.²⁰ In Basra, Major General Jonathan Shaw, General Officer Commanding Multi-National Division (South-East) (MND(SE)), told ACM Stirrup that he was confident the conditions set for PIC had been met; there was little military advantage in retaining a presence at Basra Palace with the exception of retaining a base for strike operations and for situational awareness. Maj Gen Shaw therefore advocated relocating to Basra Air Station at "the earliest practicable point". ACM Stirrup agreed, observing that only "in extremis" would UK forces then re-enter the city, and then only in support of the Iraqi Army.

33. Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, US Ambassador to Iraq, remained "circumspect" on the timing of PIC in Basra. They considered that there remained "significant problems" associated with "unstable politics" and "JAM infiltration" and advocated the need for "a few 'wins'" before formal transfer.

34. ACM Stirrup told them that the violence in Basra was "all about money and power, rather than sectarianism" and he considered that UK forces vacating the city centre could undermine the level of Iranian influence in the city. He argued that:

"PIC represented a catch 22 situation in which it was difficult to demonstrate the ability of the provincial authorities to assume responsibility for security without having handed over responsibility."

35. Mr Robert Tinline, Deputy British Consul General in Basra, briefed ACM Stirrup that the UK had "done as much as we can in Basra" and reported that although General Mohan wanted UK forces out of Basra City he did not want full PIC.

36. Lieutenant General Nicholas Houghton, Chief of Joint Operations, briefed the Chiefs of Staff on 3 July that General Mohan:

"... appeared to have formed a clear, objective and accurate assessment of the security and social situation in Basra, which chimed with the UK's position. He believed that the MNF-I presence distorted the loyalties of Basrawis and supported Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) as a precursor to turning Iraqi nationalism against malign Iranian influence."²¹

¹⁹ Public hearing, 5 March 2010, pages 151-152.

²⁰ Minute Kyd to PS/SofS [MOD], 5 July 2007, 'CDS Visit to Iraq 1-3 Jul 07'.

²¹ Minutes, 3 July 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

37. In his weekly update on 5 July, Maj Gen Shaw reported on the meeting between General Mohan and ACM Stirrup, who had concluded that “this was an individual with a plan” and that it was mainly coherent and well considered.²²

38. Maj Gen Shaw explained:

“Mohan’s vision regarding Shia reconciliation cites MNF as a distorting factor for Iraqi nationalist loyalties ... Mohan is quite resolute in what he believes is the solution: MNF to adopt a *de facto* PIC overwatch posture, moving out of the city but able to provide support and training as required. This will allow him to harness the motivation and mindset of the fundamentally nationalist population, a violent minority of which is currently distracted by the MNF ‘occupiers’ and mark those who work for MNF as collaborators. Mohan recognises that security in Basra cannot be achieved by military means alone and wishes to focus on Shia reconciliation with an aspiration to utilise Shia Iraqi Nationalism to drive a wedge between mainstream/nationalist JAM and militant JAM, exposing its Iranian proxies and tackling the longer term Iranian threat ... his focus on the will of the people is one I fully support ...”

39. But Maj Gen Shaw cautioned:

“What is unclear is how ... we will retain situational awareness should we, as he suggests, leave the city. Until PIC our *de jure* responsibility for security remains; keeping ISF as the first line of response is compatible with moving out of Basra Palace, and we have, as directed since February, successfully de-linked PIC and BP [Basra Palace] in the US and GOI planning, the UK driver being strategic sustainment. To re-link PIC and BP on the basis of the tactical advantages of a BP presence risks compromising our stated strategic position and might provide a US hook for our posture that we might regret ... The PJCC [Provincial Joint Co-ordination Centre] however provides us with situation awareness ... of the city, something I am loathe to give up as long as *de jure* PIC responsibility remains. Nonetheless today my preference is to move from the PJCC and BP at the same time. But this is fluid ... This whole Basra posture is a bargaining chip to get Mohan to support Basra PIC in August. For wider reasons I am prepared to accept the risk of security responsibility for Basra without troops in BP/PJCC for two months. Longer than that and the risk of my successor being exposed rises; in this case, strategic top cover might be required to protect our reputation with the US ...”

40. Maj Gen Shaw reported his assessment that for the past month Basra had met the conditions for PIC set by Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, Commander MNC-I. He considered that this argued strongly for Basra being granted PIC in July, though he had picked up some US and Iraqi concern about this timeline:

“The Iraqis, having finally taken Basra security seriously, may wish to see new security structures ... For the US, I sense that a reluctance to take risk, and a desire

²² Minute Shaw to CJO, 5 July 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 05 July 2007’.

to shore up the coalition through to September looms large. Neither argument is entirely rational and all UK levers will need to be applied to persuade them their fears are unfounded and that it is in the interests of GOI and US to grant PIC to Basra.”

41. Maj Gen Shaw told the Inquiry that:

“Our attempt to choreograph the granting of PIC and the withdrawal of troops and the handing over of Basra Palace just crashed and burned because of course we didn’t own the turf ... We owned the troop levels, and I was still trying to hang on to that. The Iraqis suddenly owned Basra Palace, and then it was the Iraqis and Americans that owned PIC. That sort of confusion of C2 [command and control] meant that choreographing those three was very difficult.”²³

42. On 4 July, Mr Brown answered the first set of Prime Minister’s Questions of his term in office.²⁴ Asked about whether he would set a timetable for withdrawing UK troops from Iraq, Mr Brown said that it would be:

“... wrong to set a timetable at this stage. What we have done is reduce the number of troops from 44,000 to 5,500 and move from combat to overwatch in three provinces of Iraq. What we await is a decision to move to overwatch in the fourth province of Basra, but we have obligations, which we have accepted, both to the United Nations and the Iraqi Government, and we are not going to break those obligations at this stage.”

43. On 4 July, a senior official specialising in the Middle East sent advice to Mr David Richmond, FCO Director General Defence and Intelligence, for onward submission to Mr Miliband.²⁵ It was copied to Mr Desmond Bowen, MOD Policy Director, and Vice Admiral Charles Style, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Commitments).

44. The senior official wrote that he sought:

“... authority for HMG officials to discuss an opportunity to bring about a reduction in violence from Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) in Basra, with the Government of Iraq (GoI) and General Petraeus, the (US) Commanding General Multi-National Force Iraq (CG MNF-I). Subject to GoI and US views, [UK officials] would aim to negotiate an initial month-long reduction in violence from JAM on satisfactory terms and, consulting continuously as appropriate, would then explore options for extending this reduction in violence and folding it into broader political engagement with JAM and the Sadrist movement.

²³ Private hearing, 21 June 2010, pages 35-36.

²⁴ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 4 July 2007, column 953.

²⁵ Minute senior official specialising in the Middle East to Richmond, 4 July 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: Negotiations with JAM in Basrah'.

“Clearance to proceed is sought urgently, as the opportunity for negotiations with JAM will not remain open indefinitely.”

45. The advice was not explicit about what would constitute “satisfactory terms” for such an agreement, but recorded that JAM1 had “insisted” on the release of two detainees at the start of the month and asked for suspension of MND(SE) strike operations for the duration. He was likely to seek the release of two further detainees at the end of the month but would be given “no guarantee on these releases at the outset”. The advice did not say what level of reduction in JAM violence would be considered to be satisfactory.

46. The senior official recommended that the discussions should proceed. He reiterated the background information provided by a colleague on 20 June about the trial cease-fire and subsequent discussions (Section 9.5), and reported views from UK officials in Iraq:

“From the local perspective, GOC MND(SE) and HMCG [the British Consul General] Basra strongly support moving to the next phase (i.e. the release of the two ‘orange’ detainees and initiation of a further, month-long mutual reduction in violence). HMA and SBMR-I, from their Baghdad perspective, understand the attractions of engagement with JAM1 but believe that these negotiations need to be considered in the wider coalition and Iraq context. In particular, they are concerned that the GoI could be suspicious, and that General Petraeus would want to consider how to integrate this proposal with wider coalition efforts at engagement, which have been directed mainly at Sunni elements but include Shia parties and groups. SBMR-I states that any suspension of strike activity in Basra Province and the release of the two ‘red’ detainees would require General Petraeus’ consent (since US forces in reality operate independently in MND(SE)). SBMR-I warns that General Petraeus would be unlikely to agree to suspend US strike operations in MND(SE). SBMR-I and HMA also suggest ... drive a harder bargain with JAM1, limiting the cease-fire to Basra City (rather than the whole Province), and insisting he take responsibility for stopping EFP [Explosively Formed Projectile] attacks as well as mortar and rocket attacks (which otherwise would require MND(SE) strike action in response).”

47. The senior official explained that if Mr Miliband agreed, Lt Gen Lamb would brief Gen Petraeus and the Iraqi Government. Subject to their views, and “further negotiation” with JAM1 on terms, the two “orange” detainees would be released to trigger the month-long reduction of violence. During that month there would be discussion of further detainee releases. The senior official wrote that conduct of the discussion would be agreed between GOC MND(SE), SBMR-I, the British Consul General in Basra and the British Ambassador to Iraq, and that Mr Richmond, Mr Bowen and VAdm Style in London would consult Ministers as appropriate.

48. Risks of the proposal were that the Iraqi Government would reject and react badly to it (judged to be “significant”); that Gen Petraeus would reject it; that divisions within JAM could be used as an excuse for continued attacks in Basra; that the talks would prompt attacks from other groups, who saw them as a threat to their position in Basra; and that

the media might find out and present the arrangements as a symptom of weakness in MND(SE).

49. The senior official reported that Mr Asquith had commented:

“The political context for securing GoI and US agreement to this proposal is unhelpful. Maliki’s relationship with Muqtada and JAM is at an all time low ... Meanwhile, Tawafuq’s suspension of participation in cabinet threatens the end to Maliki’s government, though this may take time to unravel.

“As for the US side, they remain convinced we are looking for a quick exit from Basra. They expect us to respect the conditionality required for PIC but will be likely to see this proposal as an attempt by us to create ‘security stability’, for just enough time to justify withdrawal.

“In the case of Anbar/Sunni tribal engagement, Petraeus wants MORE than cease-fires ... He is looking for evidence of a commitment to support the political process. Moreover he would not see the deal with [JAM1] as being analogous to Anbar, where the locals are actively collaborating with the US against the ‘bad guys’. He will be very aware, also, of the risk that the [JAM1] releases will merely move out of MND(SE) AOR [Area of Responsibility] to attack US forces elsewhere.

“That is why I will continue to argue for tougher conditions in the proposed deal with [JAM1]:

- a. The coalition should additionally make clear that strike operations will continue against JAM where evidence exists that individuals are about to/ planning to commit IDF and EFP attacks.
- b. We should be very careful to avoid giving [JAM1] any grounds to expect the release of the ‘red’ detainees as an inevitable part of this deal. We should therefore say that in circumstances in which attacks halt against coalition forces chances of releases obviously significantly improve.”

50. Lt Gen Lamb was reported to have said:

“I support the continuation of an engagement dialogue with [JAM1], with a view to exploring opportunities to reduce the level of violence in Basra, and indirect attacks in particular. The proposal as it stands seeks a level of support from GOI and MNF-I which should not be assumed at this early stage, however; furthermore it suggests a level of commitment to [JAM1] which is unreasonable, I believe, given the uncertainty of [JAM1]’s authority across a most complicated and multi-militia environment ... The Iranian influence, interference and control are cause for continued concern; thus a restriction on manoeuvre and strike operations at tactical, operational and strategic levels would be unwelcome at this stage.”

51. On 5 July, Mr Richmond annotated the advice:

“As the comments from HMA Baghdad and ... General Lamb ... make clear, this may well raise difficult issues in our relations with the US and the Iraqi Government. But you would only be authorising discussion at this stage (and MOD officials have confirmed that the Defence Secretary is keen to press ahead). I therefore recommend that you agree to the proposal. Nigel Casey, the Acting Director for Iraq, concurs.”²⁶

52. On 6 July, Mr Miliband’s Private Secretary wrote to the senior official who wrote the 4 July advice to say that Mr Miliband agreed that the discussion should “proceed as proposed”.²⁷

53. Mr Brown spoke to Prime Minister Maliki on 5 July.²⁸ He welcomed the recent security appointments in Basra and hoped that they would pave the way for further progress towards transition to Iraqi control of security. Mr Brown said that he would like to discuss the scope for economic initiatives (see Section 10.2).

54. Prime Minister Maliki said that he hoped it would be possible to reduce the burden on UK forces and for Iraqi forces to take the lead within three months. He hoped that UK forces would support this and not seek to take the lead themselves. It was important for the new Iraqi military commander in Basra to establish his authority, not least because Iraqi forces would soon have to take action against “troublemakers” there.

55. The weekly Iraq update for Mr Brown on 6 July set out the range of views on transition to PIC in Basra:

“Maliki seemed content with a target date of September, which would allow greater progress on Iraqi Security Forces’ readiness. US Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus were very negative about early transition to PIC, without a significant effort to embed new Iraqi security strictures and visible political progress.

“Both General Mohan and ... Mowaffaq Al-Rubaie [Iraqi National Security Adviser] focused on the advantages of early handover.”²⁹

56. The update also said:

“There have been some signs ... of a ‘cease-fire’ in Basra. But this can be overdone. [Government officials working closely with the military] and MND(SE) have been talking for some time to ... [JAM1], about agreeing a ‘cease-fire’ in return for limited prisoner releases ... There has been intelligence chatter to the effect that this is now

²⁶ Minute senior official specialising in the Middle East to Richmond/Miliband, 4 July 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Negotiations with JAM in Basrah’ including manuscript comment Richmond.

²⁷ Letter Hayes to senior official specialising in the Middle East, 6 July 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Negotiations with JAM in Basrah’.

²⁸ Letter Banner to Hickey, 5 July 2007, ‘Conversation with Iraqi Prime Minister’.

²⁹ Minute Banner to Brown, 6 July 2007, ‘Iraq – Weekly Update’.

in place. But equally, senior JAM figures do not feel bound by it or him. Although attack levels dipped slightly over the period dealt with in the reporting this could be a normal statistical variation and there have been some particularly significant and well-planned attacks ...”

57. On 8 July, Lt Gen Lamb reported that there were increasing signs of progress in Anbar province, where the Sunni “Awakening” was gaining momentum, and slowly shifting the security situation against Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I).³⁰ Lt Gen Lamb commented that the engagement was significant, but there remained risks for each of the four partners engaged in the process:

- For the Iraqi Government, there were concerns about being able to control locally-employed security forces, of which a large proportion were Sunni; the question of whether, and how, to integrate the “Awakening” movement within the Iraqi Security Forces was to remain a matter of debate in the months ahead (see Section 12.1).
- The tribes and former Sunni insurgents wanted to be sure that the Iraqi Government would support them and that the MNF would remain in Iraq long enough to reduce the threat from AQ-I, at least to a point that AQ would be unable to return in any strength.
- There was a risk for the MNC-I of being fixated by short-term gains and failing to manage the longer-term expectations of the tribal forces being raised.
- More widely for the coalition, there was concern that the developments in Anbar might lead to federalism or too great a degree of provincial independence, creating a risk that Iraq would fragment.

58. On 8 July, Mr Asquith reported that he had raised the renewal of the UN Security Council resolution governing the coalition’s activity in Iraq with Mr Hoshyar Zebari, Iraqi Foreign Minister, and Vice President Adel Abdul Mehdi.³¹

59. Mr Zebari said the Iraqi Government would want to include in that resolution “a commitment to the start of a coalition drawdown and the perspective of long-term security arrangements with the coalition”.

60. Vice President Mehdi said the problem with resolution 1723 (2006) was “the limits it imposed on GoI authority and Iraqi sovereignty”. Another way would have to be found of giving coalition forces cover for operations in Iraq.

61. Mr Asquith wrote that he would work with the US to press for substantive talks by August.

³⁰ Minute Lamb to CDS, 8 July 2007, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (260) 8 July 07’.

³¹ eGram 29226/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 8 July 2007, ‘Iraq: Update on Renewal of UNSCR’.

62. Mr Brown discussed Iraq with President Bush by video link on 9 July.³² Mr Brown commented that the Iraqi Government was making slow progress. Faster action was needed on the Hydrocarbons Law and on “democratisation”. Mr Brown indicated his intention to talk to Prime Minister Maliki regularly, and that he hoped to persuade him to work with the Executive Group.

63. Mr McDonald told the Iraq Strategy Group (ISG) on 9 July that contacts with the US indicated that they recognised there would be a need to move from a combat to a support role following the Congressional assessment (see Section 9.5).³³ Mr Brown’s instincts were reported to be “to keep close to the US”.

64. The ISG also discussed a paper on leaving Basra Palace. The question of when departure should happen was not resolved, but the Group concluded that “ideally, there should not be a large gap between leaving Basra Palace and moving to PIC”.

65. Mr McDonald told the ISG that NSID(OD) was provisionally scheduled to meet for the first time on 19 July.

66. Lt Gen Houghton reported to the Chiefs of Staff on 10 July that the number of incidents in MND(SE) had reduced from 123 to 85, of which 58 were attacks against MNF-I and 83 were in Basra.³⁴ Although IDF was the most prevalent form of attack, the threat from Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) on mobile patrols and strike operations was more dangerous and caused the most casualties.

67. The Chiefs of Staff noted that Maj Gen Shaw:

“... now considered that the issue of force posture in Basra should be de-coupled from the timeline for transition to PIC. Relocating from Basra Palace and the Provincial Joint Command Centre would degrade the granularity of our situational awareness, reducing our ability to conduct strike operations or intervene to provide security. However, such contingencies were to be conducted only *in extremis*. A successful withdrawal from Basra was predicated on the engagement of Iraqis, including the Palace Protection Force, who would assume responsibility for security. A clear plan for the handover of facilities and security responsibility was required. CJO [Lt Gen Houghton] was to outline the plan for the transition, including the arrangements for gifting of assets, the key Iraqi organisations and individuals who would be involved, the impact of Umm Qasr and the supporting Information Operations plan.”

68. In an interview on the *Today Programme* on 11 July, Mr Brown was asked whether he planned to change the UK’s strategy in Iraq. Mr Brown explained that the strategy the UK was pursuing focused on building security, trying to achieve political reconciliation and build democracy and providing the people of Iraq with a “stake in the future” by

³² Letter Henderson to Hayes, 9 July 2007, ‘Iraq/Afghanistan: Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush’.

³³ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 11 July 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 9 July’.

³⁴ Minutes, 10 July 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

helping the economic development of the country.³⁵ He attributed the UK's early failures in Iraq to insufficient resources being applied to help with economic reconstruction.

69. In advance of the NSID(OD) meeting planned for 19 July, Mr Bowen advised Mr Browne that there were indications that No.10 was keen to use it to reach a decision in principle on the UK's longer-term engagement in Iraq. An announcement would then be timed for late September, after the report to Congress by Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker.³⁶

70. Mr Bowen reported that it had also been suggested that the withdrawal from Basra Palace should be delayed to the same timescale, and be wrapped up in a single announcement. Mr Bowen recognised that this was a "seductive picture" but there were "substantial risks" that Mr Browne would want to weigh:

"To begin with, there could be real problems in linking the Basra Palace decision to a much bigger decision on the UK presence as a whole. First ... keeping a substantial presence in the Palace longer than is militarily necessary could, and probably would, cost lives and injuries. Second, leaving it until after the Crocker/Petraeus report will not necessarily make it any easier to handle with the US ...

"The bigger problem is how we handle the very significant political fall-out that would follow a decision and announcement of UK terms for MND(SE). There is a serious risk of major damage to US/UK relations across a range of security issues ... Moreover, we run the risk of undermining our trustworthiness as a close ally with the permanent organs of the US state and armed forces in a way which would do lasting damage to our security ... interests.

"Ironically enough, it could easily be that by the autumn, the US political picture could have changed sufficiently to make it less difficult for us to make such a decision/announcement by doing it in a way which goes with the grain of US/coalition planning. The problem with reaching a decision next week is that:

- a. it is difficult to see how the PM could not tell the President ...
- b. although we might plan to delay any announcement ... there is a strong chance that the decision in principle could leak."

71. At the request of the FCO, on 12 July the JIC assessed the internal dynamics within the Sadrist movement, Muqtada al-Sadr's political strategy and his attitude to violence.³⁷

72. The JIC judged that al-Sadr's immediate priority was "to secure (and get credit for) a timetable for the departure of 'occupation forces'" and that his consistent refusal to

³⁵ *BBC Radio 4*, 11 July 2007, *Today Programme*.

³⁶ Minute Bowen to PSSC/Secretary of State [MOD], 11 July 2007, 'Iraq: Basra Palace and the Longer Term UK Posture'.

³⁷ JIC Assessment, 12 July 2007, 'Muqtada al-Sadr: Keeping His Distance'.

engage in direct contact with representatives of the coalition was likely to continue “at least so long as there is no timetable for MNF withdrawal”.

73. The JIC’s Key Judgements included:

“I. Muqtada al-Sadr’s leadership of his movement will not face serious challenge: he has no obvious successor. But his followers are likely to remain fractious: deep seated animosities have been managed rather than resolved. As a political force, Sadrism will probably not survive Sadr himself: ...

...

“III. Backed by his Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia, Sadr continues to exercise considerable political clout in Baghdad and across large parts of the South. His relations with Prime Minister Maliki have soured. Although withdrawing from government, Sadr wishes to remain politically engaged ... Sadr, like others, is positioning himself to benefit from any change of Prime Minister.

“IV. Sadr’s relationship with other Shia political figures is equally fraught. Rivalry is particularly intense with ISCI [Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq], reinforced by a long standing dynastic feud. But neither side appears willing yet to risk Shia unity by forming an alternative alliance. ISCI and others in the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) are also nervous of Sadr’s ability to mobilise mass support to general widespread disorder.

...

“VI. Sadr uses violence as a political tool. He probably also has to accept some JAM violence to maintain its cohesion and his popular support. However, Sadr will try to calibrate anti-coalition attacks and prevent any return to large-scale sectarian conflict. To date he has intervened quickly to prevent intra-Shia violence from escalating: if he cannot prevent it, he will try to exploit it.”

74. The JIC judged that al-Sadr’s relationship with Iran was “complex”, he had “spent much of this year in hiding in Iran”, but he and the Iranians were “likely to remain uncomfortable partners”.

75. The JIC assessed that al-Sadr was also motivated by “a genuine desire to see improvements in the quality of life for his core constituency among Iraq’s Shia poor”. Popular appeal would make the Sadrists well placed to take seats on local councils in future provincial elections, in which they would be participating for the first time. The JIC assessed that JAM would be used to intimidate the Sadrists’ rivals and the electorate.

76. Members of the House of Commons Defence Select Committee visited Iraq from 8 to 11 July, focusing particularly on the UK military role in Basra, transition timing, the consequences of UK withdrawal and the readiness of the ISF.³⁸

77. Mr Asquith reported that during a visit to Basra the Committee had asked their Basrawi interlocutors about the current security situation in the city and the likely consequences of a UK withdrawal within 12 months:

“The Basrawis were clear: services and reconstruction were improving but the main problem was that the ISF were under-funded, unqualified and security was deteriorating. The British Government had promised a lot when it liberated Iraq, but had not delivered. Militias were more of a concern than criminal gangs. The provincial authorities were not able to confront the militias because the security forces owed their loyalty to political parties rather than the State ... Pulling no punches, they said a British withdrawal would ‘be followed by chaos sweeping the province like a hurricane’.”

78. The Committee asked Ambassador Crocker and Gen Petraeus about whether UK forces had a continuing role in Basra. They both made clear that conditions should determine the force numbers, not timelines. The continued presence of UK forces was necessary for security stabilisation, capacity building with the ISF and to allow the political situation with the Governor to be resolved. This should allow Basra to make the transition to PIC by the end of the year and, as bases were closed or handed over, UK troop numbers could fall. It was essential that Basra Palace was handed over without it becoming a JAM Party HQ, to demonstrate that Basra was stable enough for PIC.

79. Mr Asquith reported that Prime Minister Maliki had told the Committee that Basra would be ready for PIC in August or September. He did not think that UK military support would be required for much longer, and considered that there would be no effect from UK withdrawal in 12 months.

80. In advance of the NSID(OD) meeting planned for 19 July, FCO and MOD officials produced a joint paper setting out the latest “assessments and plans on security transition and the associated re-posturing and drawdown of UK troops in Basra”.³⁹

81. The paper had been discussed, in draft, at the ISG on 9 July, which considered that there should not be a large gap between leaving Basra Palace and moving to PIC.⁴⁰

82. The paper set out a series of key judgements:

- “• The political process in Iraq is not currently delivering what is needed to generate confidence that the country faces a sustainable future;

³⁸ eGram 30010/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 13 July 2007, ‘Iraq: Visit of House of Commons Defence Committee, 8-11 July’.

³⁹ Paper FCO and MOD, 12 July 2007, ‘Iraq: Transition in Basra’.

⁴⁰ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 11 July 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 9 July’.

- It is likely that debate in Washington about the results of the 'surge' [see Section 9.5] will result in an announcement this autumn that US troop draw down will begin either late in 2007, or in early 2008;
- The best way forward for us remains sticking to the transition strategy we have consistently followed, and handing over the fourth and last province in our sector, Basra, to Iraqi security control this autumn;
- The final decision on when Basra should be transferred to lead Iraqi security control lies in Iraqi and US hands. The actual handover will take place at the earliest in September;
- Thereafter, our engagement in Southern Iraq will move into a distinct new phase. Our effort is already reaping diminishing returns. This trend will accelerate once we move into 'Overwatch' mode in Basra. The threats we face will remain. Our ability to deliver military and civilian effect will be limited both by the security environment and Iraqi appetite for UK support. We therefore believe that we should see the period of 'Overwatch' lasting for a matter of months, not longer;
- Sustaining our presence at Basra Palace and the Provincial Joint Co-ordination Centre is already putting our forces at very high risk. The strong military recommendation is that we do not remain at these sites for any longer than is necessary. But before we leave Basra Palace, a robust Iraqi security force must be in place to prevent looting;
- When we leave Basra Palace, we will need to leave the Provincial Joint Co-ordination Centre too (meaning no UK presence in the city).⁴¹

83. The paper provided an assessment of progress against the UK's objectives in Iraq:

"Four years on ... we have achieved only some of our objectives. Iraq has the forms of democracy: a new Constitution ... a freely elected Parliament ... a Government of National Unity ... On paper, Iraq has the machinery of Government in place, and security forces over 350,000 strong (Police 160,000, Army 157,000).

"But behind these outward signs of progress lie deep-seated problems. The constituent parts of the Iraqi Government are not working together in pursuit of a genuine national unity agenda. Lip service is paid to the need for reconciliation between Iraq's main communities, notably between Shia and Sunni Arabs ...

"There has been little progress on the major political issues that have divided Iraqis since 2003: the Constitution (in particular the degree to which Iraq should be a federal state); the management of the oil & gas sector and how its proceeds should be distributed; the extent to which former members of the Ba'ath Party should be excluded from public life.

⁴¹ Paper FCO and MOD, 12 July 2007, 'Iraq: Transition in Basra'.

“... The loyalties of key institutions to the Iraqi state is mixed at best. Some 40 percent of the Iraqi Police Service is thought to owe loyalty to militias linked to political parties. Other security bodies ... have become personal militias for Ministers or Provincial Governors.”

84. In relation to the impact of the US surge, the paper said it had:

“... so far delivered mixed results. The US military has been taking the fight to AQ-I ... US troops are getting into areas ... they have not been in for some time. But US commanders are worried that the Iraqi Security Forces are not up to the job of holding onto the ground they have won – suggesting that the security gains from the surge may prove unsustainable when US troop levels begin to reduce.”

85. The paper also explained:

“One consequence of the surge and benchmarks has been that the earlier shared US/UK emphasis on transferring security responsibility to the Iraqis has been sidelined in favour of a short-term focus on improving security.

“General Petraeus ... and his staff now believe transition was happening too quickly in 2006 – indeed that the previous coalition strategy represented a ‘rush to failure’.”

86. As a result, the context in which transition in Basra was being considered had changed:

“The US are more, not less risk-averse. They are intensely nervous about transition in Basra. They believe the local Iraqi Security Forces are not robust enough to handle security without our direct support. They see pervasive, malign Iranian influence. And even the Iraqi Government, who had earlier been pressing for transition, has recently been more ambivalent.

“The US fear that the handover of the last province in the UK sector will signal a UK decision to withdraw entirely from Iraq in the near future, precipitating similar moves by other coalition members. And they fear that doing this in August would pose significant risks for the credibility of their attempt in September to persuade Congress to extend the surge.”

87. The paper explained the process and conditions that needed to be met to achieve PIC, and said:

“One further important consideration has informed our (but not US) thinking about the timing of PIC ... is about the balance of risk in retaining or handing over security responsibility. Do we assess that we have reached the stage where the benefits of retaining security responsibility are outweighed by the downsides? Is there any prospect that by holding on, we can hope either to effect further positive change, or to provide the time needed by the Iraqis to meet the challenges themselves?”

88. The paper reported that Maj Gen Shaw considered that Basra was ready for PIC and had made that recommendation to the MNF command. Lt Gen Odierno had turned down the proposal, arguing that the new Basra security and leadership structures needed time to demonstrate positive progress; he thought PIC in October might be achievable, based on a decision in September. The paper said:

“... we will need to continue to hold Iraqi and US feet to the fire if we wish to achieve PIC in the autumn ...

“The risk ... remains that if we try to force a positive decision in the teeth of US opposition and lukewarm Iraqi attitudes, we will reinforce the American belief that we are doing so for political reasons, driven by our desire to reduce UK troop levels.”

89. The paper explained that the next key decision for Ministers was the timing of the withdrawal from Basra Palace, the “most heavily mortared and rocketed place in Iraq”. That was complicated because:

- Withdrawing from Basra Palace “will mark *de facto* handover of responsibility” to the ISF; re-intervention by UK forces from the Air Station would happen only in extremis. A gap of a month or two between withdrawal and PIC “should be manageable” but a “significantly longer gap would put UK forces in a difficult position: responsible for security in Basra City, but unable to deliver it except at high risk”.
- The potential for an upsurge in violence surrounding the withdrawal, and the impact that might have in Washington in the run-up to Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker’s Congress hearing in September.
- The risk of looting – “it would be disastrous for our reputation if our departure were followed by the sort of looting at Basra Palace which happened at bases in Muthanna and Maysan provinces after we handed them to the Iraqis”. It was therefore essential that a credible ISF guard force was in place before the UK could withdraw.
- The impact on the UK’s Security Sector Reform (SSR) effort in Basra, currently co-ordinated from the PJCC, where 100 UK troops and seven UK police advisers were based. The threat to these staff if there were no significant MND(SE) presence at Basra Palace would be impossibly high because “there would be no quick way to get reinforcements to the site or to evacuate UK personnel in an emergency”. As a result, the paper concluded that a withdrawal from Basra Palace would mean closing the UK base at PJCC, and so halting SSR work and losing “situational intelligence within Basra City”.

90. Considering the scope for the UK to make a contribution to Basra’s development in the period beyond PIC, the paper observed that the situation was likely to remain challenging. UK activity within Basra was “already heavily circumscribed” by both the security situation and the willingness of the population to engage with UK personnel. This was likely to increase after PIC.

91. The paper said that there was “no coalition-agreed blueprint” for how long the post-PIC “overwatch” phase should last, observing: “The US has not addressed this in earnest, in part because they see themselves maintaining a significant military presence in Iraq for years to come (and tend to assume we will do likewise).”

92. The paper continued:

“But ... we already face a clear trend toward diminishing returns from our efforts in Southern Iraq across the board. This is bound to accelerate when we withdraw from Basra City ...

“So we do not believe the ‘overwatch’ period in Southern Iraq should be envisaged as lasting more than a matter of months from the date of PIC in Basra ...

“Our planning should assume that the UK civilian presence in Basra will have to be wound up shortly before the removal of the UK military envelope which enables it to operate (though if the US were to decide to move a military presence of their own to Basra Air Station, and to retain a US civilian presence, we could expect US pressure for us to maintain some sort of ongoing commitment to the Basra Provincial Reconstruction Team).”

93. The paper recommended early engagement with the US on a renewed political strategy, including a “change of Iraqi Government” and setting a date for coalition troop withdrawal.

94. In the longer term, the FCO and the MOD suggested that the UK would need to examine its “core interests in Iraq ... the assets at our disposal, and the likely major ongoing US commitment”. Those core interests were likely to be:

- preventing AQ from establishing a base in Iraq from which to attack UK interests;
- maintaining Iraq’s territorial integrity and deterring intervention by its neighbours; and
- preserving the stability of the region, and preventing disruption to energy supplies.

95. The paper argued for “a long-term UK commitment in Iraq”, which might include:

- niche contributions to the US-led fight against AQ-I or in conducting air strike operations;
- supporting the Iraqi Navy in ensuring the security of the Northern Gulf and the protection of key Iraqi oil infrastructure;
- influencing the Iraqi Government and supporting the long-term development of its capacity, in particular through the provision of advice to central government Ministries in Baghdad; and
- developing a bilateral defence relationship with the Iraqi Government.

96. In his weekly update on 13 July, Maj Gen Shaw reported that:

“Gen PETRAEUS considers himself to be the approval authority for PIC in Basra, he will personally make the decision when the conditions are right, and currently he does not consider that we are even close.”⁴²

97. Gen Petraeus was reported to be nervous about the readiness of the ISF to assume full security responsibilities. As a consequence:

“Given that the ISF are unlikely on their own to be sufficient to deliver security in Basra, the onus will be on the GoI to develop its confidence in its full suite of governmental/Shia levers and then to over-ride US advice and seize PIC as is their right.”

98. Maj Gen Shaw felt that the Iraqi Government would need “encouragement” to do so as “no shift in US attitude is expected before September, and one is not certain even then”.

99. Maj Gen Shaw took the opportunity to discuss prospects for PIC in Basra with Lt Gen Odierno and Gen Petraeus during the Corps Conference on 14 July.⁴³ He reported that Lt Gen Odierno had been “upbeat” and saw the South as “an area in which risk should be taken”. On PIC, Lt Gen Odierno considered that it would be important to give the new structures time to bed in before transferring security to them, to give the Iraqis the best chance of success. Gen Petraeus was clearly focused on how his September “Honest Assessment” to Congress would be received and relayed US political concerns about possible UK announcements on troop numbers beforehand. Maj Gen Shaw commented:

“What came across strongly from both Gen Petraeus and Lt Gen Odierno was an acceptance of our respective force level and political constraints; but no acceptance yet of the limitations of the utility of MNF, and the differences in the utility of our respective forces, derived from the difference in the challenges we face. There is still no agreed coalition prognosis of the future ... Persuading MNC-I and MNF-I that our projected force plans are justified by the conditions on the ground represents a major challenge ... it remains a hard sell.”

100. Maj Gen Shaw reported that Gen Mohan presented his initial report on the security situation in Basra to the Iraqi Ministerial Committee on National Security (MCNS). He painted a bleak picture: insufficient manning and equipment in the Iraqi Army, a corrupt police force, 24 heavily armed militias backed by Iran and organised Mafia-style criminality.

101. Maj Gen Shaw reported that Gen Mohan had “stated categorically ... that the security situation in Basra would be greatly improved by a British redeployment out

⁴² Minute Shaw to CJO, 13 July 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 13 July 2007’.

⁴³ Minute Shaw to CJO, 19 July 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 19 July 2007’.

of the city". This would help to legitimise the Iraqi authorities and remove much of the motivation for the current Sadrist attacks.

102. Maj Gen Shaw reported that he had commissioned a piece of work from the Southern Iraq Steering Group on what the South might look like after the MNF left. The conclusions were, in his view, optimistic for the long term; "the macro drivers are positive, but the micro issues will be messy in resolution". He sent a copy to MNC-I and MNF-I headquarters and to the Permanent Joint Headquarters as a contribution to what Maj Gen Shaw hoped would be a piece of JIC work on the same subject, to enable political judgements to be taken on the basis of a fully informed assessment.

103. On 15 July, Lt Gen Lamb reported that Gen Mohan and Maj Gen Jalil's focus on Basra had brought a degree of "much needed clarity to the situation".⁴⁴ He suspected that a recent IED attack on Maj Gen Jalil had been the work of an Iranian-backed JAM Special Group, "wishing to stop what they see as an unwelcome interference in their affairs down in Basra".

104. The Chiefs of Staff noted, at their meeting on 17 July, that "it was clear from discussion at the MCNS that Iraqi priorities would lie in establishing security for Baghdad and Diyala; security to enable PIC for Basra would need to compete with these higher priorities".⁴⁵

105. On 17 July, the Iraq Policy Unit sent a minute to Mr Miliband, in preparation for the NSID(OD) meeting on 19 July.⁴⁶ It said that there were arguments for sticking with the plan to hand over in August:

"Chiefs of Staff are clear that the cost in casualties of maintaining a presence at the Palace far outweighs the operational effect. The troop reductions ... are also needed in order to ensure the sustainability of our deployments in Afghanistan."

106. However, because of the difficulties in intervening within the city of Basra from the Air Station, the IPU recognised that:

"... reposturing from the Palace would represent *de facto* PIC. The prospect of this taking place several months ahead of *de jure* PIC is uncomfortable. We would continue to be formally responsible for security, while in reality having very little control."

107. Although the US Administration was likely to be "nervous" about the prospect of the UK leaving Basra Palace, and the consequent reduction in troops, the FCO's view was that such concerns "should be manageable". The FCO was more concerned at "the potential divergence in US and UK thinking on PIC, and on our military planning

⁴⁴ Minute Lamb to CDS, 15 July 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (261) 15 July 07'.

⁴⁵ Minutes, 17 July 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

⁴⁶ Minute Lever to Private Secretary [FCO], 17 July 2007, 'Iraq: Ministerial Meeting, 19 July'.

thereafter". Although the length of the "overwatch" period had not been formally defined, the US was:

"... likely to expect 'overwatch' in the South to be delivered through a long-term (one year plus), substantive UK military commitment ... This is at odds with much UK military thinking ... The military does not want an open-ended commitment, with our forces at BAS [Basra Air Station] confined to carrying out a limited range of training tasks for the ISF while exposed to continuing high levels of rocket and mortar fire. They believe we should enter overwatch with a clear plan for its nature and duration: effectively, a timetable for withdrawal."

108. The IPU reported that the impact on civilian activity in Basra City would be considerable since:

"... our diplomatic mission in Basra will not be able to continue after UK forces leave. We will similarly have to make plans for our post-PIC political and civilian capacity-building role in the South which take this reality into account."

109. Mr McDonald visited Washington from 17 to 18 July and met a number of senior members of the US Administration, including Dr Condoleezza Rice, the Secretary of State, Mr Hadley and Mr Robert Gates, the Defense Secretary.⁴⁷ They reported that "the military aspects of the surge were going well" and that Gen Petraeus was likely to report on progress in early September. Thereafter, the direction of US policy was not clear, but:

"... we would definitely enter a new phase, in which the coalition would protect the Iraqi population in a new role. The US was not simply going to 'stay the course'."

110. Mr McDonald told his US interlocutors that:

"... the UK objective was not to change its posture in Iraq until September. There was no difference between the approach of Gordon Brown and that of his predecessor. But the Government was under huge pressure to move after that, and to get ahead of the US. We needed to manage our own transition in a way that worked for Iraq, and worked for Transatlantic relations."

111. Reflecting on the report of Mr McDonald's visit, Maj Gen Shaw observed that he was "struck by the predominant mood of uncertainty and apprehension" in the US Administration.⁴⁸

112. In his own account of a dinner with Mr Hadley and Secretary Rice, Mr McDonald recorded a discussion about Basra Palace:

"Dr Rice said she had told Crocker to pull his civilians out just as soon as accommodation was ready at the airport. They had already suffered too many

⁴⁷ Letter Gould to Hayes, 20 July 2007, 'US: Simon McDonald's trip to Washington: 17/18 July'.

⁴⁸ Minute Shaw to CJO, 26 July 2007, 'GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 26 July 2007'.

losses. But when it came to leaving the Palace completely, Dr Rice said she hesitated: the situation was too delicate to predict; a spike in unrest in Basra would be most unwelcome ... Hadley said he hoped there would be no announcement about departure before the Prime Minister and President discussed Iraq when they met at the end of the month.”⁴⁹

113. On 17 July, Mr McDonald sent a minute to Mr Brown in advance of the planned NSID(OD) meeting on 19 July.⁵⁰ He explained that when Ministers agreed in February that in principle the military should withdraw from Basra Palace, it had been assumed that a residual presence would be retained at the Warren site to maintain situational awareness and to continue training and mentoring. As the FCO and MOD paper explained, the deteriorating security situation meant that it would no longer be possible to do that. Accordingly, the UK’s ability to re-intervene successfully if required would be “greatly diminished”.

114. Although the previous planning assumption had been for a significant UK presence in MND(SE) for most of 2008, Mr McDonald wrote:

“... given the serious questions about our ability to deliver either security or significant training or mentoring programmes post-PIC in Basra, those assumptions now look unrealistic. And the significant risks to our forces are likely to outweigh the security or other benefits derived from keeping them in Iraq. In these circumstances, there is a case for planning for the withdrawal of the majority of British troops from Southern Iraq to a much more rapid timetable.”

115. Mr McDonald argued that if the UK withdrew from Basra City in August as planned, very shortly afterwards there would be a need to explain to the US that UK would be withdrawing from MND(SE) altogether in spring 2008, meaning that “we would hit the US with unwelcome news twice at a politically sensitive time”.

116. Alternatively, if the UK were to delay withdrawal until September, it would be possible to present both “unwelcome message[s]” to the US simultaneously.

117. The NSID(OD) meeting planned for 19 July was cancelled and was not reinstated.⁵¹

118. A report sent to Lt Gen Houghton on 19 July said that Gen Mohan had given an expanded version of his MNCS presentation to a specially convened meeting of the Crisis Action Cell.⁵² This group usually focused exclusively on Baghdad security and was chaired by Dr Rubaie.

⁴⁹ Letter McDonald to Hayes, 19 July 2007, ‘Dinner with US Secretary of State and National Security Adviser: 17 July’.

⁵⁰ Minute McDonald to Prime Minister, 17 July 2007, ‘Iraq Transition in Basra: Meeting of NSID(OD), 19th July’.

⁵¹ Note Cabinet Office, 11 February 2010 [sic], ‘Cancellation Note’.

⁵² Minute Berragan to CJO, 19 July 2007, ‘MNC-I Update – 19 Jul 07’.

119. Dr Rubaie asked Gen Mohan to pull together all his requirements into a formal plan, “copied to MOD and MOI [Ministry of the Interior] to enable them to attempt to resource it”.

120. On 19 July, the Assessments Staff reported to Mr McDonald on the probability that JAM in Basra would consider the coming UK withdrawal from Basra Palace as a significant victory and use it to intensify attacks until UK forces were driven out of Iraq.⁵³ JAM appeared confident of being able to take control of Basra City soon and felt no need to negotiate with Iraqi or UK authorities.

121. Mr McDonald prepared further advice on transition for Mr Brown on 20 July.⁵⁴ He advised that the overwatch phase, conducted from Basra Air Station, should be time-limited from the outset. He estimated that withdrawing the majority of UK forces and moving to a purely training mission in Basra would take around six months.

122. Once withdrawal from the Air Station was complete, the UK “would have to persuade the Americans to house and protect our training forces”, possibly in Dhi Qar province, where Australian and Romanian training teams were already operating from a US base. Mr McDonald proposed that the UK should continue its other contributions to the wider Iraq theatre (a “niche contribution” to action against AQ-I in Balad, a naval deployment in the Gulf and a contribution to air strike operations).

123. Mr McDonald said that his proposals had not been discussed with government departments but he judged the military would support them “because they are keen to get out of Basra and MND(SE) but see the importance for alliance reasons of maintaining a presence in 2008”. President Bush was unlikely to be pleased but the rest of the US Administration “see that things are changing”. Mr McDonald judged:

“Only the Iraqis can fulfil the key task of political reconciliation. It seems that they won’t feel the necessary pressure to get on with the job until the coalition begins to leave; and, as they try to do that job, they will need continued training and mentoring. This plan would be compatible with that.”

124. The weekly Iraq update for Mr Brown on 20 July said that in Basra “a downbeat assessment of the security situation means that Provincial Iraqi Control is unlikely before October/November”.⁵⁵

125. Maj Gen Shaw and government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 on 25 July.⁵⁶ At the meeting JAM1 noted the success of the trial cease-fire from 15 to 17 June and said that he was still prepared to negotiate with MNF to bring about further reductions in violence. However, the stalling of negotiations since that cease-fire had

⁵³ Minute Burrell to McDonald, 19 July 2007, ‘Iraq intelligence update – 19 July 2007’.

⁵⁴ Minute McDonald to Prime Minister, 20 July 2007, ‘Iraq – transition’.

⁵⁵ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 20 July 2007, ‘Iraq – weekly update’.

⁵⁶ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) to Leslie, 10 August 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: update on negotiations with JAM in Basrah’.

cost him credibility with JAM, making additional detainee releases essential to enable him to re-assert control. As well as the two “orange” detainees whose release he had previously requested, he therefore asked for two “red” detainees to be released and said that this was a pre-condition for the start of the month-long cease-fire.

126. A senior government official reported that: “Despite this hardening of his position [JAM1] maintained he was still committed to a negotiated de-escalation of violence with MNF-I in Basra Province.” He wrote that all of the detainees held by MND(SE) would have to be released at some point, meaning that: “Obtaining a quid pro quo for detainee releases while we still have detainees to release is a factor in the equation.”

127. Maj Gen Shaw told the Inquiry that in this conversation with JAM1 it was interesting that:

“... his motivations entirely agreed with mine. He wanted the place to prosper. He was a strong Iraqi nationalist.”⁵⁷

128. A government official who worked closely with the military told the Inquiry that JAM1’s “motivations were, of course, wholly different” from the UK’s.⁵⁸

129. On 25 July, at the request of the FCO, the JIC assessed AQ-I’s external ambitions, its relationship with AQ core and other groups, and the threat it posed to the UK.⁵⁹ Its Key Judgements included:

“I. The relationship between the Pakistan-based Al Qaida (AQ) senior leadership (‘AQ core’) and Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) remains complex: AQ core can exert influence but has not succeeded in controlling AQ-I. AQ core and AQ-I view Iraq as the major theatre for jihad, presenting a realistic opportunity to gain control of ungoverned space; their intent remains to use this space to launch terrorist attacks elsewhere in the region and beyond.

“II. Significant pressure from intensified Multi-National Force (MNF) activity, the success of the Sunni tribal groups against AQ-I, the death of AQ-I leader Zarqawi and the adverse publicity for AQ-I’s Amman bombing may all have helped deter AQ-I from mounting the sustained campaign of external attacks envisaged by AQ core: it has not launched an attack from Iraq since November 2005. AQ core now wants AQ-I to concentrate firmly on Iraq as the immediate strategic priority.”

130. The JIC assessed that:

“The investigation into the attempted bomb attacks in London and Glasgow last month has revealed ... links between the two attackers – Bilal Abdullah and Kafeel Ahmed – and known Iraq-based extremists ... At this stage there are no indications

⁵⁷ Private hearing, 21 June 2010, page 23.

⁵⁸ Private hearing [government official who worked closely with the military], 2011.

⁵⁹ JIC Assessment, 25 July 2007, ‘Al Qaida in Iraq: External Ambitions’.

that Iraq-based extremists played any role in the direction or planning of the attacks. But the war in Iraq may have been a factor in the radicalisation of the two attackers ...”

131. Under the heading “Prospects”, the JIC judged that:

“For the immediate future AQ-I will continue to focus their attentions on Iraq: we judge they will attempt to intensify operations in the lead up to the September Congressional report in the US. AQ-I will aspire to conduct external operations – including in the UK – if an opportunity arises; we judge, at least in the short term, they will look for AQ core endorsement of any major plans outside of Iraq. We judge AQ-I will be able to resist pressure from the MNF and the Iraqis into 2008. As the MNF presence diminishes, AQ-I will seek to regain lost ground, establishing firm bases in Sunni areas and using them increasingly to reinvigorate its external attack capabilities.”

132. On 25 July, Lieutenant General William Rollo, who had succeeded Lt Gen Lamb as SBMR-I, sent a minute to ACM Stirrup recording his first impressions “after spending a month getting my head round this vast and multi-faceted operation”.⁶⁰

133. Lt Gen Rollo identified the key challenge as “to convert tactical into operational and strategic success”. The inability of Prime Minister Maliki to pass critical legislation and to spend money in provinces where Government control had been limited both raised a “risk of reversal”.

134. Lt Gen Rollo continued:

“The South, conversely, and in marked contrast to the situation three years ago, looks more problematic. Shia infighting between JAM and Badr, ineffective and corrupt governors, divided loyalties within the ISF, and infiltration/proxy war by IRGC [Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps] have all degraded governance and the GOI’s view had changed over the last eight months from disinterest and complacency ... to concern, particularly over Basra.”

135. In relation to timing of the handover of Basra Palace and subsequently of transition to PIC, Lt Gen Rollo did not detect “untoward concerns”, but observed that “we need to have plans robust enough to cope with whatever events unfold”.

136. Officials specialising in the Middle East sent briefing on Iraq for Mr Brown to No.10 on 26 July.⁶¹ The briefing said that recent reporting suggested that JAM viewed UK plans to withdraw from Basra as a victory and believed that they were on the verge of taking control of Basra. The brief recorded that JAM intended to continue attacks on Basra Air Station until UK forces had completely left Iraq.

⁶⁰ Minute Rollo to CDS, 25 July 2007, ‘First Impressions’.

⁶¹ Briefing government officials specialising in the Middle East, 26 July 2007, ‘Further [...] Briefing for PM’.

137. Under the heading “National Reconciliation”, the brief reported that government officials working closely with the military were continuing to work on initiatives to split and isolate Iranian special groups from criminal and nationalist elements of JAM, in an attempt to reduce attacks on MND(SE) and counter Iranian influence in Iraq. It was suggested that “elements of JAM are encouraged by recent detainee releases and would consider negotiating a cease-fire”.

138. In his weekly update on 26 July, Maj Gen Shaw commented that the US suggestion that the UK should retain a presence in Basra Palace in order to avoid giving the impression that JAM and Iran had triumphed was “both risk averse but also a recipe for UK remaining in its current posture and force levels”.⁶²

139. Maj Gen Shaw argued that such an approach would preclude “the middle ground of harnessing latent Iraqi nationalism, allowing the Shia Iraqis to sort their internal problems out for themselves”. There was no news from the US commanders in Iraq about whether or not they would agree to UK withdrawal from Basra Palace in the timescale proposed, beyond Gen Petraeus making clear that the decision on the readiness of the Palace Protection Force was for him to take.

140. Maj Gen Shaw cautioned against assuming that silence from the US indicated assent.

141. The Assessments Staff reported to Mr McDonald on 26 July that the number of attacks had remained steady at just over 900 in the preceding week.⁶³ Indirect fire attacks by Shia militias had continued against Basra Air Station and Basra Palace, killing four UK Service Personnel in separate incidents. There were some indications that JAM leaders were seeking to influence the police not to intervene in JAM attacks on coalition forces.

142. Mr Brown met ACM Stirrup on 27 July. The Government has been unable to supply a record of this meeting, and believes that no minute was in fact produced.⁶⁴

143. Mr McDonald reported to Mr Brown that he met ACM Stirrup after their conversation to follow up on the UK’s training contribution after the overwatch phase.⁶⁵ They agreed that Mr Brown’s line to take at a forthcoming press conference should be that the final decision had not yet been taken but that the UK would not leave Basra Palace until military commanders were satisfied that the necessary conditions for departure had been met.

144. Those conditions were that the Iraqi forces were able to protect the compound and were capable of taking lead responsibility for security in Basra City centre.

⁶² Minute Shaw to CJO, 26 July 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 26 July 2007’.

⁶³ Minute Tillbrook to McDonald, 26 July 2007, ‘Iraq Intelligence Update – 26 July 2007’.

⁶⁴ Email Cabinet Office [junior official] to Hammond, 16 June 2014, ‘Possible missing document’.

⁶⁵ Minute McDonald to Prime Minister, 27 July 2007, ‘Iraq’.

145. Pressed by Mr McDonald on the size of the UK's training contribution, ACM Stirrup characterised it as "whatever is necessary to carry out whatever tasks are decided". But those troops would need to rely on US life support as there would be no UK force protection.

146. ACM Stirrup had suggested that Mr Brown should tell President Bush that the UK was "prepared to provide some hundreds, provided the tasks are there". Mr McDonald observed that ACM Stirrup "was clearly reluctant to provide over 500".

147. Mr Brown discussed Iraq with President Bush at Camp David on 30 July.⁶⁶ The meeting note drafted by Mr Brown's Private Secretary recorded only that Mr Brown welcomed the common ground between himself and President Bush on Iraq and had outlined the UK's proposals for a "development agency" in Basra.

148. During the visit, Mr Brown and President Bush also met privately over dinner and breakfast. Over dinner they "discussed the progress in the provinces overseen by the UK now moving to overwatch" but the content of the discussion was not recorded.

149. Mr McDonald provided Mr Brown with a substantial 'Steering Brief' on Iraq for the Camp David meeting.⁶⁷ In it he wrote that, on the Iraqi political process:

"Bush is habitually optimistic about the prospects. But in reality, the picture is bleak. The political process is not delivering even gradual progress, as we hoped it would ..."

150. Mr McDonald wrote that the US surge had delivered mixed results, and that doubts over ISF capability raised concerns about the sustainability of the gains which had been made. In Basra, it was important that PIC should happen before November, when the next roulement of troops would take place, but Gen Petraeus was believed to be sceptical about the ability of the local ISF to handle the city's security.

151. In a press conference after the meeting on 30 July, President Bush told reporters that:

"There is no doubt in my mind that Gordon Brown understands that failure in Iraq would be a disaster for the security of our own countries, that failure in Iraq would embolden extremist movements throughout the Middle East, that failure in Iraq would basically say to you know people sitting on the fence around the region that al Qaeda is powerful enough to drive great countries like Great Britain and America out of Iraq before the mission is done."⁶⁸

152. Mr Brown re-emphasised the UK's obligations to the Iraqi people and the United Nations and his hope that the UK would shortly be able to transfer security responsibility

⁶⁶ Letter Clunes to Gould, 31 July 2007, 'Prime Minister's Meeting with President Bush: Iraq [...]'.
⁶⁷ Minute McDonald, [undated], 'Iraq: Steering Brief'.
⁶⁸ Camp David Press Conference, 30 July 2007.

in the fourth of its four provinces. He told reporters that a decision would be made on the “the military advice of our commanders on the ground”.

153. At the end of July, Lt Gen Rollo commented to ACM Stirrup that Lt Gen Lamb’s “energy and initiative acted as a catalyst for a marked change in the coalition approach”.⁶⁹

154. Lt Gen Rollo saw the various strands of work (including engagement with Iraqi tribes, with those close to the Sunni insurgency and with Shia militias) developing at different speeds but the rate at which the Sunni were joining the fight against AQ-I continued to accelerate and showed no sign of abating. The challenge, in Lt Gen Rollo’s view, was “no longer how to inspire such ‘awakenings’ outside Anbar, but how to manage the flood”. He commented:

“The future is all about turning engagement into reconciliation. Much effort is going into the reintroduction of governance and economic assistance in Al Anbar, as a way of further emphasising the advantages of returning to the Gol fold ... This is essential to limit the chances of regression, but will only probably go so far without progress on the major legislative items.”

155. Lt Gen Rollo reported that the progress on key pieces of legislation (for example, the Hydrocarbons Law) remained “opaque”.

August 2007

156. On 1 August, Mr Asquith met Prime Minister Maliki to deliver a letter from Mr Brown on economic reconstruction (see Section 10.2) and to discuss politics in Basra and nationally.⁷⁰

157. Mr Asquith stressed the importance of a stable security environment to making economic progress. In relation to the “troublesome” Governor Waili in Basra, Prime Minister Maliki advised that he had been legally dismissed but was appealing that decision, causing a delay in his removal.

158. Prime Minister Maliki agreed with Gen Mohan’s assessment that the removal of UK forces from Basra City centre would help to simplify the security situation. He asked Mr Asquith whether the UK was ready to continue to provide operational support for the ISF from Basra Air Station, specifically in relation to the protection of infrastructure and ports. Mr Asquith said that in principle the UK would continue to work with and support the ISF, as it was doing at present. It would be important for Major General Graham Binns, who would be succeeding Maj Gen Shaw as GOC MND(SE), and Gen Mohan to discuss the details of what was required.

⁶⁹ Minute Rollo to CDS, 30 July 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (263) 30 Jul 07’.

⁷⁰ eGram 32637/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 1 August 2007, ‘Iraq: Meeting with Prime Minister Maliki, 1 August’.

159. Mr Asquith raised the threatened withdrawal of the (Sunni) Tawafuq Party from the Iraqi Government, to which he reported that Prime Minister Maliki seemed “resigned”. Mr Asquith advised him that:

“... the best chance of keeping all the communities in government would be to work on specific issues ... where agreement could be reached. The idea of signing up to broad principles seemed rather past its time; the parties had done all that on many occasions in the past.”

160. Between the end of the meeting and Mr Asquith’s report of the outcome to London, five Tawafuq Ministers and Deputy Prime Minister Zawba’i formally announced their withdrawal from the government.

161. On 2 August, Mr Asquith reported a “political crisis” in Iraq and that “real progress [is] only possible if Maliki addresses Sunni security concerns – and that means ceding some authority in an area he views as his sole preserve”.⁷¹

162. Following the resignations by Tawafuq Ministers a “leadership summit” was planned, covering “legislation, government business (including shared decision making, reform of the security institutions, militias, detainees and human rights), national reconciliation (including some form of amnesty ...) and establishing a political front”.

163. Mr Asquith again advised senior Iraqi politicians that “the time for statements of principles had now passed” and that action was needed, focused on key Sunni concerns (human rights abuses, detainees and the protection of Sunni areas in Baghdad). He concluded:

“The prospect is a period of floundering and activity – largely for its own sake – in the hope that a way will be found to bring Tawafuq back into ... government ... It might just work if the effort is directed at taking action on Sunni concerns. But those are all essentially in the security field ...”

164. Priorities and timescales following Mr Brown’s visit to the US were discussed at the Iraq Strategy Group on 2 August.⁷² Mr McDonald reported that Mr Brown had told President Bush that the UK was planning to leave Basra Palace by 31 August if Gen Petraeus was content. The key issue would be Iraqi capability to continue to protect the site.

165. Mr McDonald told attendees that Mr Brown had stressed the successful transfer from combat to overwatch in three provinces in his public comments, but had made clear that there would be no announcement of any further changes to the UK’s posture or presence in Iraq before Parliament returned from its summer recess on 7 October.

⁷¹ eGram 32865/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 2 August 2007, ‘Iraq: Political Crisis: Where We Are’.

⁷² Minute Blake to McDonald, 2 August 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 2 August’.

166. After recess, Mr Brown would want to make a statement setting out “the way ahead for overwatch and thereafter, this should focus not just on our military engagement but look at the shape of our overall relationship with Iraq, covering the diplomatic, economic and development aspects”.

167. To do so would require detailed work, but Mr McDonald “stressed the sensitivity of any discussions, including with the US, in advance of the Petraeus/Crocker testimony” and instructed that departments “should not actively take forward any work on our post-PIC military presence” other than exploring “economic deliverables”.

168. Officials in the MOD provided advice to Mr Browne on 3 August, setting out the same background and proposals as in the submission to Mr Richmond and Mr Miliband on 4 July.⁷³ They said that an early meeting with Gen Petraeus had indicated the proposal would be a “hard sell” to the US. Gen Petraeus had asked for the views of Lt Gen Odierno before reaching a view on the proposal himself. The MOD judged that “Gen Petraeus will need to be persuaded that this initiative will contribute to the longer term security of Basra rather than being a short-term fix”.

169. The advice said that in return for the cease-fire, JAM1 wanted four higher risk detainees (two of whom were suspected of involvement in the deaths of British personnel) released, plus a suspension of strike operations against JAM in MND(SE). Officials asked Mr Browne to agree that MND(SE) should continue to pursue this initiative, the first stage of which would be to raise the matter with senior US commanders and Iraqi Government Ministers in Baghdad, with the aim of obtaining their agreement:

“If US commanders and the Iraqi Government agree in principle, further advice will be submitted to ministers before any releases take place.”

170. On 4 August, Mr Browne gave his agreement over the telephone and two days later his Private Secretary confirmed it in writing, noting that further advice would be submitted before any releases took place.⁷⁴

171. The MCNS discussed Basra briefly on 5 August.⁷⁵ Mr Abdul Qader, the Iraqi Defence Minister, gave Prime Minister Maliki a detailed report of his visit to Basra the previous week. He had been impressed by good co-ordination between Gen Mohan and Maj Gen Jalil, who were making a positive impact on the security situation and who were “enforcing law and order on the streets”.

172. Gen Petraeus’s brief for the MCNS meeting was reported to have predicted a date in November for transition to PIC in Basra. Governor Waili remained the “sticking point”.

⁷³ Minute Vincent to APS2/SofS [MOD], 3 August 2007, ‘Negotiations with Jaysh Al Mehdi (JAM) in Basra’.

⁷⁴ Minute Houghton to DJC-AD Pol1, 6 August 2007, ‘Negotiations with Jaysh and Mehdi (JAM) in Basra’.

⁷⁵ eGram 33092/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 6 August 2007, ‘Iraq: Ministerial Committee on National Security, 5 August’.

173. Lt Gen Rollo reported to ACM Stirrup that the security situation in MND(SE) had been discussed at the MNF Commanders' Conference on 5 August where Gen Petraeus described Basra as "complex and difficult".⁷⁶ Maj Gen Shaw's "injection of an alternative view of the Shia south" had prompted "genuine debate". His view that only MNF withdrawal would allow the Iraqis to sort themselves out, had drawn:

"... a range of views – not overtly unsympathetic but querying some of the logic of execution. Petraeus's own comments were that no-one disputed the wisdom of drawing down forces in Basra, but how it was done was very important. Fleet St would not have our nuanced understanding of the situation and it could be presented as a defeat. We had to make sure that the ISF are adequate, that the Palace was not taken over and ransacked, that Mohan's plans were coherent and, thinking more long-term, that a Hizballah-type organisation did not take over the South."

174. Ambassador Crocker told the Conference that he was:

"... concerned over a failure of governance in Basra in the short term, and wanted to explore further the potential for the GoI to re-establish itself while we gained understanding of our own limited control and influence."

175. Lt Gen Rollo commented:

"Both responses are legitimate and we need to shape both the message and the substance of our actions.

"We also need to be careful not to seize on aspects of these comments that favour our own interpretation of potential events. In the short term our ability to hand over Basra Palace is likely to be assessed by Petraeus and the GoI not only on the state of the Palace Guard Force but on the overall security situation in Basra. This during August, which, even without the added potential dynamics of the possible forcible removal (by the Iraqis) of the Governor or our own withdrawal from the City, is always a volatile month. In the medium term PIC should be possible in the autumn, with careful co-ordination with both the Iraqis and MNF(I), better politics in Basra, including hopefully a new governor, a steady build up of Iraqi security forces and the isolation and reduction in influence of criminal and Iranian backed JAM. Conversely a Basra in which JAM have free rein and are busily settling scores with anyone who either co-operated with us or stands in the way of their own criminal purposes will provide a much less attractive backdrop to PIC for both the MNF(I) and the GoI. I mention this not in any way to play Cassandra but because I want to convey a sense of the range of events that we may have to contend with."

⁷⁶ Minute Rollo to CDS, 6 August 2007, 'SBMR-I's Weekly Report (264) 6 Aug 07'.

176. Maj Gen Shaw's account of the discussion said that Gen Petraeus' key concern was the timing and method of withdrawal from Basra Palace, commenting "it must go well".⁷⁷

177. Maj Gen Shaw's judgement was that the threat to the Palace was low and the Palace Protection Force would be ready to take over responsibility at the end of the month. He continued:

"But I detect an increasing chorus of demands for certainty, for an absence of risk. Let me be explicit – there is no risk-free option. If we go as planned at the end of the month, we are dependent upon Iraqis both within friendly and enemy forces for success – they have a vote. This is battle space and it is impossible to prove the negative that nothing will go wrong if we hand over. And if we stay, there will be the risk of more deaths. I am working to, and my successor will execute, the plan to leave by the end of the month."

178. Maj Gen Shaw also reported that the projected date for PIC in Basra had been deferred again, to a likely announcement in October followed by PIC in November. Maj Gen Shaw observed that this had implications for the proposed Parliamentary statement by Mr Brown in early October, which would be much easier if it followed an announcement about PIC. He reported, "General Petraeus acknowledges that in the end politics will overcome conditionality".

179. On 9 August, an official in the MOD asked Mr Browne to agree that the release of the four detainees identified by JAM1 could proceed.⁷⁸ They explained that after "some initial reluctance" Gen Petraeus had agreed, as did Gen Mohan and Dr Rubaie.

180. The advice said:

"As this is the only currently available plan to try and trigger a step change in the security dynamics in Basra, there is a good case for proceeding: there is no way radically to change the position on the ground without accepting some risks."

181. Mr Browne's Private Secretary responded the following day to say that Mr Browne agreed that the releases should proceed.⁷⁹

182. On 10 August, a senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) wrote to the FCO Director General Defence and Intelligence with an update on negotiations with JAM1.⁸⁰ The advice was copied to Mr Bowen, Lieutenant General Peter Wall (Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Commitments)), Mr McDonald and Ms Margaret Aldred (Deputy Head of the Overseas and Defence Secretariat).

⁷⁷ Minute Shaw to CJO, 9 August 2007, 'GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 09 August 2007'.

⁷⁸ Minute Vincent to PS/Secretary of State [MOD], 9 August 2007, 'Negotiations with Jaysh al Mehdi (JAM) in Basra'.

⁷⁹ Minute Forber to CJV-AD Pol1, 10 August 2007, 'Negotiations with Jaysh al Mehdi (JAM) in Basra'.

⁸⁰ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) to Leslie, 10 August 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: update on negotiations with JAM in Basrah'.

It said that Lt Gen Lamb had sought and received “approval to proceed” from both Dr Rubaie and Gen Petraeus.

183. The senior official’s advice also recorded the meeting between Maj Gen Shaw, government officials working closely with the military and JAM1 on 25 July.

Assassinations in Diwaniyah

On 11 August, the Governor and the Provincial Director of Police in Diwaniyah were assassinated.⁸¹ Lt Gen Rollo commented that the attacks were “unexpected” and that there was increasing evidence that JAM, using Iranian supplied weapons, was responsible. The motive for the attacks was unclear.

184. A senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) wrote to the FCO Director General Defence and Intelligence on 20 August with an update on the negotiations with JAM1.⁸² He reported that on 11 August, government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 “to establish that a deal was still on the table”. JAM1 confirmed that it was, provided the four nominated detainees were released in advance. Government officials working closely with the military confirmed that this had been approved. The senior official recorded that MOD Ministers had given their agreement to the releases and that they had been discussed in advance with the Iraqi Government and with Gen Petraeus.

185. Another meeting had followed on 12 August, at which JAM1 sought to reassure Maj Gen Shaw that the deal would work, although it would take some time to impose a full cease-fire. Maj Gen Shaw noted that there was widespread scepticism within the UK, US and Iraqi systems over JAM1’s ability to deliver and his motives. The success of the initiative would be measured by a significant reduction in IDF and attacks on supply convoys; and by respect for the ISF’s occupation of Basra Palace. What constituted a “significant reduction” was not defined. JAM1 warned that there were attacks planned against the convoys withdrawing from Basra Palace and it would take him 10 to 15 days to call them off.

186. In his own record of the discussion Maj Gen Shaw wrote:

“The meeting exceeded my expectations and left me more optimistic about his intent and the potential scope of the success this proposal might engender.”⁸³

⁸¹ Minute Rollo to CDS, 13 August 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (265) 13 Aug 07’.

⁸² Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) to Leslie, 20 August 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: update on negotiations with JAM in Basrah’.

⁸³ Minute Shaw, 12 August 2007, ‘[JAM1]/GOC Meeting, 12 Aug 07’.

187. Maj Gen Shaw wrote that he had presented three tests “by which the viability of the deal might be judged”:

- IDF attacks on COB [Contingency Operating Base] and BP [Basra Palace].
- the safety of convoys from a week’s time re-posturing from BP.
- the safety of BP once it became a GoI property.

“The more he succeeded against these tests, the more he would show that he can deliver, that this deal works to the advantage of MNF and is no threat, indeed is supportive of GoI. All of which would give my successor confidence to continue with the deal.”

188. The senior government official reported that JAM1 had made clear that, when violence reduced, additional detainee releases would be his priority; he would need releases from across the Basra political and militia spectrum to avoid other groups disrupting the process.⁸⁴ He hoped for releases at a rate of 10 to 20 a month. The transfer of any detainees to US custody would end the initiative: this was a red line.

189. The senior official commented that while JAM1’s recognition of the wider political context in Basra was encouraging, it was tangible improvement on the ground that would matter. Maj Gen Shaw had established a working group in Basra, to be chaired by his successor, Maj Gen Binns. The group would meet regularly to review progress and the talks with JAM1, producing a report to be sent up the MNF-I chain of command to Gen Petraeus and to Lt Gen Rollo, Mr Christopher Prentice (who would be succeeding Mr Asquith as British Ambassador to Iraq), the MOD and the FCO. MND(SE) would keep Gen Mohan informed; Lt Gen Rollo and Mr Prentice would brief the Iraqi Government “as appropriate”.

190. Having seen the update, Lt Gen Rollo was reported to have commented: “I note the contrast between these negotiations and the situation elsewhere in Iraq where US policy towards JAM ill-behaviour is one of prompt retribution (while avoiding outright conflict). This may be mitigated by clear evidence that the process is contributing to overall stability in Basra.”

191. The account of the meeting produced by government officials on the ground working closely with the military on 13 August reported that it “figuratively signed and sealed the [NAME OF OPERATION] agreement”.⁸⁵

192. On 13 August, MND(SE) released the four detainees nominated by JAM1.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) to Leslie, 10 August 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: update on negotiations with JAM in Basrah’.

⁸⁵ Email official working closely with the military, 13 August 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: JAM1 - 12 August Meeting’.

⁸⁶ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) to Leslie, 10 August 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: update on negotiations with JAM in Basrah’.

193. JAM in Basra called a month-long cease-fire, beginning on 13 August.⁸⁷

Sir John Scarlett told the Inquiry that:

“... the cease-fire for a month on 13 August worked straight away. There was an immediate falling away of attacks, and it then carried on. It went beyond the month and it became effectively a permanent feature. So it was remarkably successful.”

194. The cease-fire was observed not just by mainstream JAM locally, but also by a number of the Special Groups.⁸⁸

195. A summary of the negotiations with JAM1 written by a senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) in November 2007, said that the reduction in violence:

“... began on 13 August, on the following terms:

- JAM in Basra would suspend their attacks on the coalition. [JAM1] would work to bring the Secret Cells under his control and in particular guarantee a peaceful withdrawal from Basra Palace. MND(SE) would suspend their detention campaign but would retain the right to strike anyone targeting coalition forces and to interdict weapons smugglers.
- MND(SE) released four JAM detainees as requested by [JAM1] to begin the process of de-escalation. If violence remained low, [JAM1] and MND(SE) would negotiate a timetable for the eventual release of all MND(SE) detainees, including [JAM1] himself. Discussions would continue on the political and development themes, with the aim of JAM and the Sadrists' full participation in the political process in Basra. GOC MND(SE) formed a steering group to guide the talks.”⁸⁹

196. On 13 August, a government official working closely with the military commented on the “welcome gear change” brought by the releases:

“... we are keen to think ahead so that we are clear what we need to do – and how – once the month's cease-fire period comes to an end. We sense that timing will be crucial at the end of this period so we will want to be prepared and not waste any time. For now, we need to ... work on ... who/how we inform/request permission at the end of the cease-fire period.”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Private hearing, 10 June 2010, page 41.

⁸⁸ Private hearing SIS3, 2010, page 62.

⁸⁹ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) to Lyall Grant, 9 November 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: Negotiations with JAM in Basrah'.

⁹⁰ Email official working closely with the military, 13 August 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION] - Looking Ahead'.

197. The official noted the importance of getting this right so as to maintain momentum, which might be lost if it was necessary to try and seek the views of all stakeholders at each stage:

“[We also need to] consider what next steps we will propose. Part of this will be giving thought to which of [JAM1]’s 16 detainees we would consider releasing and which not. If [JAM1] delivers and we see a significant decrease in IDF, it will be important that we are able to deliver a suitable reward/incentive to him in the form of further releases ... Similarly, if [JAM1] is less-than-successful in delivering a cease-fire and requests more detainee releases, how will we tweak our proposals accordingly?”

198. The day after they were released, government officials working closely with the military reported that two of the former detainees gave radio interviews in Basra.⁹¹ One interview was believed to have been fairly “banal” but in the other the individual suggested that releases were part of a cease-fire agreement.

199. On 15 August, the same officials sent a note to JAM1 saying that they considered it unwise for the released individuals to be adopting a media profile and asking “please could they tone it down a bit”. A telephone conversation with JAM1 followed, in which he agreed that media appearances were not helpful and would advise “that they should exercise discretion”. The officials told JAM1 that there had been one IDF attack on Basra Palace the previous night, to which MND(SE) had responded. JAM1 was surprised at the attack and acknowledged that the response was within the terms of the agreement.

200. Maj Gen Shaw completed his posting as GOC MND(SE) on 14 August. Looking back over his seven-month tour in his last weekly update, he identified the death of Basra JAM commander Wissam Al Qadir on 25 May as a turning point (see Section 9.5).⁹² After this point, JAM became “leaderless” and went into 40 days’ mourning. At the same time, there was a troop rotation within MND(SE):

“The enforced lull on both MNF and JAM coincided with the arrival of an Iraqi [General Mohan] with *wasta* [clout] ... and contacts in OMS [Office of the Martyr Sadr]/JAM who shared our vision of how to resolve the Basra security problem: re-task nationalist JAM violence away from MNF towards Iran. This political dynamic has set the context for ... operations which have continued ... to buy Mohan space to work on nationalist JAM. Our predicted move from BP by the end of the month ... is consistent with Mohan’s drive to clarify Iraqi nationalist loyalty. This sets the scene for my successor, with Basra *de facto* PIC’d, us firmly in support.”

⁹¹ Email government official working closely with the military, 15 August 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] Developments 15 Aug 07’.

⁹² Minute Shaw to CJO, 14 August 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 14 August 2007’.

201. But the cost had been high:

“With 41 UK deaths so far this year, my command has overseen just shy of one quarter of the deaths incurred during the entirety of Op TELIC, including the war-fighting phase. A further 400+ have been injured, of which about half will not return to service.”

202. Maj Gen Shaw wrote that there continued to be uncertainty over whether the Iraqi Army 10th Division or the Palace Protection Force (PPF) would take over responsibility for Basra Palace when MND(SE) vacated it. Gen Petraeus favoured the PPF, which Maj Gen Shaw considered to be “on track to being capable of taking over by the end of the month”. Reports indicated that that OMS/JAM had no intent to attack the Palace once it became Iraqi Government property.

203. In his formal end of tour report to Lt Gen Houghton, Maj Gen Shaw reflected on the possibilities for and constraints on achieving strategic “success” in Iraq:

“The issue of ‘success’ has centred on the unspoken question: Iraqi success or coalition (US/UK) success? The gap between the coalition’s goals for Iraq and where we are now has been a constant source of tensions, not just with the press but in judgements about risk ...”⁹³

204. On resources, Maj Gen Shaw reported:

“We have been hamstrung for resources throughout the tour, driven by the rising strategic significance of the Afghan deployment. The lack of clear Main Effort between the two theatres made a perpetual struggle of the bidding war for resources. This tour has reinforced my prior judgement that Iraq has more strategic significance than Afghanistan although our projected posture in the South is increasingly questionable.”

205. Despite these constraints, Maj Gen Shaw remained optimistic about the future of southern Iraq, concluding:

“... Shia unity makes violence in the South self-limiting; Iraqi nationalism will triumph over Iranian influence; the parties and factions, attracted by financial gain, will reach an accommodation in the South in a way that allows all to prosper from a functioning entity.”

206. On 16 August, the Iraq Senior Officials Group was told by an MOD official that handover of Basra Palace and the PJCC were both planned for 31 August, but a delay of a few days was possible to ensure that the PPF was properly equipped.⁹⁴

⁹³ Letter Shaw to Houghton, 14 August 2007, ‘Post operation report Shawforce Jan-Aug 07’.

⁹⁴ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to Aldred, 16 August 2007, ‘Iraq Senior Officials Group’.

207. The MOD official explained that:

“The current plan envisaged our withdrawal from the PJCC four days before the handover of the Palace site; but we would leave the PJCC by 31 August whatever the state of play over the Palace.”

208. On 19 August Maj Gen Binns would give his assessment of readiness to Gen Petraeus, who “continued to take a rational approach” to the UK plans. Mr Asquith’s farewell calls in Baghdad also suggested Iraqi Government support for the handover.

209. The MOD official wrote that the leadership summit had not yet taken place, although “all the main players were in town and engaging in bilateral discussions”.

210. Lt Gen Rollo hoped that it would convene that week.⁹⁵ He also reported that there were well-developed plans for Baghdad to take further offensive action against insurgents in the run-up to the autumn: “Provided the politics can come right, or even not go badly wrong, there is a clear way ahead.”

211. On 16 August, Mr Asquith wrote a valedictory letter to Mr Miliband which characterised Iraq as “still wracked by the culture of fear, distrust and prejudice, obstructing political compromise”.⁹⁶

212. Mr Asquith considered that:

“The surge has failed to create the space for politics to work because the military (tactical) successes (local sectarian security structures loyal to the MNF) conflict directly with the political objective (inclusive and integrated national Iraqi authority).”

213. The letter gave two reasons why each success was accompanied by “further complications”. First, “knowledge of what is happening on the ground is shockingly thin, particularly in Baghdad where the theatre policy is decided” which made analysing the significance of what was known “fragile”. Mr Asquith revealed that: “The [Multi-National] Force’s statistics on security – or even basic services – differ wildly from what our LE [locally engaged] staff (and the Iraqi media) report.”

214. Secondly, Mr Asquith wrote: “Domestic politics (and media coverage) have coloured the approach of the whole coalition, producing an ambivalence that has been corrosive.”

215. Mr Asquith considered that the benchmarks set by Congress were unlikely to reveal anything significant about Iraq because: “The timeframe ... has placed impossible demands on the Iraqi Government and coalition ... The lessons of the Constitution have been forgotten.”

⁹⁵ Minute Rollo to CDS, 13 August 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (265) 13 Aug 07’.

⁹⁶ Letter Asquith to Miliband, 16 August 2007, ‘Iraq: Valedictory’.

216. Looking to the future, Mr Asquith considered that the coalition would need to continue to work with the Iraqi Government to increase Sunni engagement in the political process. The Executive Council was a useful start, but there was also need to address immediate Sunni concerns about security and human rights issues. This would include the need to “address much more systematically sectarianism in the ISF ... establishing proper data on abuses and infiltration and ensuring that action is taken”.

217. Friction would be reduced as Basra was handed over to PIC, allowing the UK to make a difference through:

“The high regard Iraqis have for our advice ... We also fulfil for them something of the role of the psychiatrist’s couch, helping them to face their problems. And they look on us as a key influencer of the US.”

218. Mr Asquith continued:

“But we will still need to commit resources. I remain of the small school that believes we should continue to have a reduced military component (beyond some important niche areas), grouped with other coalition allies in a southern base other than Basra able to provide rapidly deployable forces to carry out operations at the sharp end.

“Outside the military contribution, our favoured route has been through providing expertise. That will remain necessary, but insufficient.”

219. On the UK’s ability to influence the wider effort in Iraq, Mr Asquith reminded Mr Miliband that after the UK had handed back Basra:

“The US will still be fighting a war ... The test of its and others’ action is how much they contribute to that war effort ... The degree to which we continue to contribute to that war effort will determine the influence we can bring to bear on US policy on Iraq. If it concludes we are merely hiding behind its effort and military losses, it will ignore ... our advice ...

“Stepping away I do not see as an option.”

220. An update sent to Ms Aldred by Mr Tim Dowse, the Chief of the Assessments Staff, on 16 August said that, overall, the level of violence across Iraq remained unchanged.⁹⁷ It was judged that Muqtada al-Sadr had effectively lost control of JAM. The Assessments Staff considered that this was a reminder that “whatever the interests of the Sadrist national political leadership, JAM behaviour (including in Basra) is likely to be determined as much if not more by local factors.”

221. Government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 again on 17 August to follow up a letter he had sent.⁹⁸ JAM1 complained that he had been

⁹⁷ Minute Dowse to Aldred, 16 August 2007, ‘Iraq Intelligence Update – 16 August 2007’.

⁹⁸ Email government official working closely with the military, 17 August 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Meeting with JAM1 and Next Steps’.

allowed only 10 minutes to speak to the four detainees immediately prior to their release, rather than the agreed one to two hours. A longer meeting would have allowed him to emphasise that this was an agreement for the benefit of all the detainees.

222. JAM1 said that this was a dangerous period, and there was plenty of potential for things to go wrong. He had asked his contacts to monitor those whom he suspected of being active in the Special Groups in order to curtail their attacks.

223. The officials reported their meeting with JAM1 to the Steering Group for the operation, now renamed the Mohan Initiative Group (MIG) and chaired by Maj Gen Binns, later that day. In their report back to London, the officials explained:

“We then discussed the substance of further agreement between MND(SE) and [JAM1]. We opined that this would come down to the number of detainees to be released. We would need to release more than four (because [JAM1] would be looking for progress); he would want us to release as many as possible ... GOC was admirably focused on the timelines for securing all-party sign up to Phase II (Phase III?) of the [NAME OF OPERATION] agreement. Working backwards, this looks like this:

- 13 Sep – second (third?) tranche of releases
- 12 Sep – final date for sign-off on agreement to releases/DIRC [Divisional Internment Review Committee]
- 7 Sep – agreement of SOSDEF [the Defence Secretary] secured
- 1 Sep – submission goes to SOSDEF
- 28 Aug – submission goes to PJHQ, with US assent
- 21 Aug – GOC travels to Baghdad to meet Odierno and Petraeus.”

224. Maj Gen Binns told the Inquiry that part of his mindset on arriving in post was:

“I thought – and this was before I knew about reconciliation – that only by engaging and seeking to reconcile leaders and organisations that possess some degree of credibility would there be any chance of a solution and that solution would be political and we would find it and we would meet it in Iraq.”⁹⁹

225. Having arrived in Iraq, Maj Gen Binns observed that:

“... almost every time we resupplied, the price just to deliver the bread and water there was a death, and that our impact outside the immediate confines of our bases was limited and we had become focused on force protection and trying to break the bones of this amoeba that was called JAM was difficult, if not impossible. I thought that the Iraqi army and police were standing by and watching us get killed, I thought that the rate of casualties was amongst the highest in Iraq and that self-protection and administration was consuming us. I thought the time for the UK was running out.

⁹⁹ Private hearing, 2 June 2010, pages 15-17.

I thought, in any counter-insurgency, patience is key and I thought that the UK in Iraq had lost its patience with Iraq and we were turning to other things like Afghanistan, so I thought I was running out of time.”

226. After being briefed on the negotiations that were under way, Maj Gen Binns told the Inquiry that:

“I had no better idea – set against all the background I’ve just explained, I couldn’t think of a better idea. So I stepped into it rather than stepped back from it and I thought it was precisely the right thing to do.”

227. On 20 August, Lt Gen Rollo reported that:

“The Presidency Council eventually sat this week amidst huge US frustration at the alliance between the Kurds and Dawa/ISCI, which appears to have given Maliki a reason not to compromise.”¹⁰⁰

228. Lt Gen Rollo reported that security within population centres was clearly improving across Iraq, cutting down Al Qaida’s freedom of movement. However, as bomb attacks in Ninawa against the rural Yazidi population had demonstrated, “it is still all too possible for terrorists to find poorly policed small towns ... which remain intensely vulnerable”.

229. Lt Gen Rollo reported that “Shia strategy and reconciliation” remained the subject of “fierce debate” within Baghdad. The Iraqi Government’s committee on reconciliation had begun to generate proposals for tribal outreach, amnesty and the beginnings of ideas for an approach to OMS and JAM. Lt Gen Rollo commented:

“Whether these ideas will come to anything, and whether they will do so before open hostility between Badr and JAM occurs, is wide open to question, but it is nonetheless of note that they are Iraqi ideas ...”

230. In Baghdad, Lt Gen Rollo reported that concerns about the situation in Basra had been “less loudly expressed this week” but that Gen Mohan had been visiting to lobby for additional resources to ensure that his forces were fully equipped when UK forces left Basra City. Lt Gen Rollo commented:

“Looking ahead, the British handover of the Palace offers the opportunity to refocus effort both within an evolving coalition concept of operations and a dynamic and constantly shifting Shia political outlook. Our aim should remain to leave Basra in the best possible nick that we can, but there might – and I emphasise might – be more room for manoeuvre than we had previously feared.”

231. Mr McDonald gave Mr Brown a verbal update on progress towards transition in Basra on the same day, based on an update note prepared by a Cabinet Office

¹⁰⁰ Minute Rollo to CDS, 20 August 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (266) 20 Aug 07’.

official.¹⁰¹ That note said that Maj Gen Binns was still expecting to be able to hand over responsibility for Basra Palace on 29 August, having written to Gen Petraeus with his assessment of the PPF's readiness. Equipment and fuel remained the key risks to handover.

232. On 20 August, at the request of the FCO, a Current Intelligence Group (CIG) examined the influence of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party on the insurgency and Iraqi politics.¹⁰²

233. The CIG's Key Judgements included:

"I. The influence of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party on the Sunni Arab insurgency is marginal. The party is fractured with little political relevance or popular support in Iraq; this is highly unlikely to change.

"II. Iraqi Shia politicians' fears of a Ba'athist resurgence, however exaggerated, are genuinely held. They will limit the Shia appetite for reconciliation with the Sunni more broadly."

234. The CIG judged that many former leaders of the Iraqi Ba'ath Party had been killed or captured in 2003; others had fled to neighbouring countries:

"Outlawed by the Coalition Provisional Authority, much of the Ba'ath Party's senior Sunni cadre (most of the rank and file were Shia) went underground, while the party's system of patronage collapsed."

235. In Syria, two former senior Ba'athists (Muhammad Yunis al-Ahmad and Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri) had established the New Regional Command, loyal to Saddam Hussein. Saddam Hussein's execution in December 2006 had exacerbated rivalry between al-Ahmad and al-Duri, leading to the emergence of two factions competing for primacy. Those in both factions wanted to see the full restoration of the party – and themselves – to power in Iraq.

236. The CIG judged that few Ba'athists still identified with their original Arab socialist roots. Although most Ba'athists were fundamentally secular and ideologically opposed to AQ-I, they were willing to co-operate with Sunni Islamists to attack the coalition and what they saw as a Shia-dominated Iranian-backed Iraqi government.

237. Although much of the insurgency involved former regime officials and members of the security forces, the CIG judged that most had abandoned Ba'athism.

238. Politically, the CIG judged that the Ba'ath Party was "a spent force" which had little political relevance or popular support in Iraq beyond pockets in former regime strongholds such as Tikrit: that was "highly unlikely to change". Nevertheless, many Iraqi

¹⁰¹ Manuscript comment [unattributed] on Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 20 August 2007, 'Iraq – Transition in Basra'.

¹⁰² CIG Assessment, 20 August 2007, 'Iraq: How Important is the Ba'ath Party?'

Shia politicians, including Prime Minister Maliki, typically labelled Sunni oppositionists and insurgents as Ba'athists.

239. The CIG judged:

“Shia fears of a Ba'athist resurgence, however exaggerated, are genuinely held (and are shared, to a limited extent, by the Kurds). We judge they will limit the Shia appetite for reconciliation with the Sunni more broadly.”

Assassination of the Governor of Muthanna

On 20 August, Mr Mohammed al-Hasani, Governor of Muthanna province and a Shia, was killed when a roadside bomb exploded next to his car in Samawah.¹⁰³

BBC News reported that Mr al-Hasani was a “key figure” in the Badr organisation, which had “clashed frequently with the Mehdi army militia loyal to Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr for control of areas in the south of Iraq”.

Maj Gen Binns reported a couple of days after the killing that “all indications are that the Iraqis believe JAM to be responsible, although Muqtada al-Sadr has gone on record condemning both this and the previous assassination of the Governor of Qadisiyah”.¹⁰⁴

240. Mr Browne's Private Secretary wrote to Mr Brown's Private Secretary on 21 August about the handover of Basra Palace.¹⁰⁵ The letter said:

“Handover on 29 August is of course not without risk, which predominantly revolves around equipment matters. Mitigating measures are, however, in place, following direction from General Petraeus ... In presentational terms, our communications posture for the handover of Basra Palace will be low key. This is set against the context of the broader process leading towards Provincial Iraqi Control and the run-up to the US reports on Iraq in mid-September. With specific regard to Basra Palace, officials in Baghdad are actively engaged with the Iraqi authorities to develop a media handling plan that matches our intent and portrays the handover as an Iraqi-led process ...

“There will be no ceremony or media event at Basra Palace itself for the handover, but a facility for Iraqi media at the Contingency Operating Base (COB) is planned where our aim will be to emphasise the effective training and support provided by MND(SE) forces to the PPF which has made handover possible.”

241. The letter confirmed that the combined handover of the PJCC and Basra Palace would mean “no Multi-National Force presence in Basra City”.

¹⁰³ *BBC News*, 20 August 2007, *Roadside bomb kills Iraq governor*.

¹⁰⁴ Minute Binns to CJO, 22 August 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 22 August 2007’.

¹⁰⁵ Letter Forber to Turner, 21 August 2007, ‘Iraq: Handover of Basra Palace’.

242. Mr Brown's Private Secretary added a covering note explaining that Mr McDonald and Ms Aldred had discussed the issue with General Douglas Lute, President Bush's adviser on Iraq, who had confirmed that on balance the US was content with the UK plan.¹⁰⁶

243. Ms Aldred's advice was that it would be important to "keep a careful eye on how things develop between now and handover" and to "establish clear and consistent media messages". Further advice was awaited from the MOD on operational handling between now and PIC, including the part the UK would play in the event of any intra-Shia or sectarian violence.

244. Government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 again on 21 August.¹⁰⁷ They suggested that it was important not to be too fixated on detainee releases; the cessation of hostilities was, at least from the UK side, every bit as important. In their report back to London, the officials advised that the "MOD POLAD [Political Adviser] here is preparing a submission that will seek transfer of future authority for releases at the end of each month's period (should the process survive) from SoS Defence to GOC".

245. Maj Gen Binns was reported to be "emphatically supportive" of the negotiations: "So far."

246. A further long meeting took place on 23 August, described by government officials working closely with the military as "difficult".¹⁰⁸ A large part of the meeting was spent debating further releases. JAM1 insisted that "there must be 15 releases on 30 August; otherwise our agreement was off". Without the releases there would be huge problems; Basra would become "another Fallujah". The slow pace of releases was damaging JAM1's credibility.

247. The officials explained that "we had a deal and must stick to it" – the month of cease-fire ended on 13 September. If the violence continued to reduce there "should be substantial releases" then, but nothing could be promised yet.

¹⁰⁶ Minute Turner to Prime Minister, 22 August 2007, 'Iraq: Handover of Basra Palace'.

¹⁰⁷ Email government official working closely with the military, 22 August 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION] 21 August Meeting with [JAM1]'.

¹⁰⁸ Email government official working closely with the military, 24 August 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: 23 August Meeting with [JAM1]'.

General Keane's comments

In August 2007, General Jack Keane, a retired US General who had just returned from Iraq, was quoted in the media saying that UK “disengagement” from southern Iraq was “worsening the security situation and fuelling frustration among American commanders.”^{109,110} He commented that the UK had “never had enough troops to truly protect the population” and described Basra as “almost gangland warfare”.

Gen Keane's comments were described by *The Guardian* as “the latest in a series of critical comments made by US officials, many anonymously, about Britain's commitment to Iraq”. They included a warning from academic and columnist Dr Stephen Biddle that the UK would have to fight its way out of Iraq in an “ugly and embarrassing retreat”.

248. In his weekly update on 22 August, Maj Gen Binns wrote that he was picking up “a mild suspicion in Baghdad over our CONOPs [concept of operations] post PIC and Basra Palace”.¹¹¹ He felt that:

“We have a robust plan engaging in capacity building/SSR with the ISF and engagement with Key Leaders, having an effect on smuggling over the borders ... extending Governance, infrastructure and the economy through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams, Civil Affairs and the development of Basra International Airport ...”

249. On 23 August, Mr Day wrote to Ms Aldred to follow up a conversation about “the PM's concern about the capacity and will of the Iraqi Palace Protection Force to secure the Basra Palace compound up to Petraeus/Crocker and then to PIC”.¹¹²

250. Having briefed Maj Gen Binns that Mr Brown “wants to be assured that decisions will be taken on the basis of an honest appraisal of PPF capabilities”, Mr Day reported that the collective view of those in Iraq, PJHQ and the MOD was that the Palace Protection Force would be “as well-trained and equipped as it can make them” and that mentoring would continue after the transfer. Maj Gen Binns would keep the situation under review and would retain the option of delaying transfer.

251. On 23 August, the Assessments Staff updated Ms Aldred that the level of daily attacks in Iraq was broadly unchanged.¹¹³ In Basra, rocket and mortar attacks had declined the previous week, though it was not possible to be sure of the cause. The Assessments Staff reported on the likelihood that the agreement between MND(SE) and JAM in Basra would succeed, but that a period of violent score-settling would follow the withdrawal of UK troops from Basra.

¹⁰⁹ *The Guardian*, 24 August 2007, *British troops on verge of long-awaited pullout from Basra*.

¹¹⁰ *The Guardian*, 22 August 2007, *US general questions British tactics in Iraq*.

¹¹¹ Minute Binns to CJO, 22 August, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 22 August 2007’.

¹¹² Letter Day to Aldred, 23 August 2007, ‘Iraq: Basra Palace’.

¹¹³ Minute Dowse to Aldred, 23 August 2007, ‘Iraq Intelligence Update – 23 August 2007’.

252. On 28 August, MOD officials sought approval from Mr Adam Ingram, the MOD's Duty Minister that day, for Maj Gen Binns "to conclude the next stage of discussions with JAM".¹¹⁴

253. The submission proposed that, in exchange for a "further one month cease-fire on UK forces", MND(SE) would continue their limitation on strike operations and, provided all the conditions were met, would release a further 11 internees on 13 September.

254. The proposal had been approved by Gen Petraeus, Gen Mohan and Dr Rubaie. The advice explained:

"It is intended that the GOC will develop a longer term plan for taking forward these discussions post-September. Given the uncertainty about how long UK forces will remain in the COB, we are naturally keen to ensure that we do not give up our negotiating leverage before we have an enduring agreement in place ...

"This remains a presentationally risky line of activity. The risks that the negotiations will get into the public domain are increasing. This is for a number of reasons:

- It is becoming increasingly obvious that there has been a step change in the security environment at the COB.
- We publish details of the number of internees being held, and it will become apparent that this number is falling;
- Rumours that a cease-fire deal has been reached are apparently circulating on the streets of Basra and these are being picked up by Arabic media outlets, some of whom have posed questions to the MND(SE) press office ...

"All internees released in future will be given a clear instruction by [JAM1] that they are not to publicise the terms of their release. For the moment a fairly neutral defensive line is holding in the face of inquiries from local media outlets."

255. Mr Ingram's Military Adviser responded on 28 August that Mr Ingram agreed Maj Gen Binns should now conclude negotiations with JAM1 along the lines proposed, "noting that Ministers will be informed in advance of the precise timing of the release of the internees and if there are any significant changes to the plan".¹¹⁵

256. In his weekly report on 28 August, Maj Gen Rollo reported Prime Minister Maliki's "evident concern" about security in Basra, which was helping General Mohan to "make progress" with his proposals to reinforce Basra.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Minute Freer to APS/Minister (AF), 28 August 2007, 'Negotiations with JAM: Next Steps'.

¹¹⁵ Minute Cameron to Deputy Command Secretary (Ops) PJHQ, 28 August 2007, 'Negotiations with JAM: Next Steps'.

¹¹⁶ Minute Rollo to CDS, 28 August 2007, 'SBMR-I's Weekly Report (267) 28 Aug 07'.

257. Lt Gen Rollo also reported a conversation with Gen Petraeus in the wake of the media stories:

“Unsurprisingly, he remains clear that there are a range of tasks based on a starved HQ to be done, albeit at potentially reduced force levels. These include key leadership engagement, training support to ISF, ISTAR [Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance] and support for ISOF [Iraqi Special Operations Forces], support for the PRTs [Provincial Reconstruction Teams] and in Basra the consulates, in addition to the provision of an intervention capability. At the tactical level General Odierno intends to formulate his position on the UK requirements post PIC ... When it appears this should provide helpful definition on what the US is asking for.”

258. When Mr Brown met C (Sir John Scarlett) on 29 August, part of their discussion covered Iraq.¹¹⁷ As a No.10 record of this meeting cannot be found, the Inquiry has used a record of it made by C.

259. Mr Brown was reported to be “currently very focused on Basra Palace and worried about US reactions to withdrawal, which he knows is due in the next few days”. Sir John and Mr Brown discussed the potential importance of the negotiation with JAM1.

260. At the end of August, government officials specialising in the Middle East were preparing two separate letters to the FCO on the negotiations and Basra: one updating Whitehall readers not in the MOD chain of command on the latest discussions with JAM1 and focused on the issue of Basra Palace and JAM1’s “guarantee” that JAM would not loot it, and a second “seeking to set the [NAME OF OPERATION] talks in context and to examine the implications of an accommodation with JAM for the future stability of Basra”.¹¹⁸

261. The second letter was intended to explain that “we may still be able to engineer a tolerable (no better) outcome in Basra if we accept the realities of militia politics”.

262. On 29 August, Mr Ahmad al-Shaybani, a senior JAM commander, announced that the activities of JAM would be suspended for six months.¹¹⁹ The suspension of activity, including against “occupiers”, was to allow some “restructuring” within JAM. The following day, he announced that he had been misquoted and that anti-MNF activities were not suspended. A Cabinet Office official advised Mr Brown that the cease-fire was likely to be an attempt by Muqtada al-Sadr to reassert control over JAM, and there was a “high risk” that some would not respect his call.

263. Lt Gen Wall reported to the Iraq Strategy Group on 29 August that there had been some limited militia infiltration and looting of the Warren site following the handover, with

¹¹⁷ Minute, C’s meeting with the Prime Minister – 29 August 2007’.

¹¹⁸ Email government official specialising in the Middle East, 29 August 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] Update Letter 29 August’.

¹¹⁹ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 30 August 2007, ‘Iraq – JAM Ceasefire’.

the possible collusion or acquiescence of the Iraqi Police Service.¹²⁰ As a result, General Mohan had deployed his entire reserve battalion to the site. For this reason, and the late arrival of some equipment, the withdrawal from Basra Palace had been delayed.

264. Mr McDonald asked whether a delay would be likely to have any negative impact on the JAM cease-fire. The FCO felt that the risk was low and that there were “some indications” though no guarantee that Basra Palace would not be targeted.

265. US officials in Baghdad had established a working group to discuss arrangements for the renewal of the UN Security Council resolution which provided the MNF with its mandate in Iraq. Mr Nigel Casey reported to the Iraq Strategy Group that engagement with UK officials “to agree a joint strategy for handling the Iraqis” would begin after Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker had given evidence to Congress.

266. Reflecting on the events that occurred after the UK had vacated the PJCC, Maj Gen Binns wrote:

“Whilst the events that unfolded within the PJCC after we vacated were unfortunate, there is much good that can be taken from them. Mohan quickly got to grips with the situation ... regaining control of the building ... The fact that the PJCC shift was back in the next morning ... is testimony to an Iraqi solution to an Iraqi problem and bodes well for the future ... I for one see the positives that came out of these events.”¹²¹

267. On 30 August, a government official working closely with the military reported that he had sent a copy of the letter on Basra Palace to colleagues in Whitehall.¹²² He recorded the “excellent news” that Mr Ingram had signed off the MOD’s advice.

268. A paper by the Assessments Staff on 30 August stated that an announcement that JAM would be “restructured” was “almost certainly prompted by the growing frustration of Muqtada al-Sadr and other senior Sadrist leaders over their lack of control over the movement”.¹²³

269. The Assessments Staff also considered that what was meant by “freezing” JAM activity was unclear and recorded that they doubted the ability of the Sadrist leadership to deliver a cease-fire.

270. Lt Gen Rollo told the Inquiry that JAM had “overplayed their hand” in August, in the area immediately south of Baghdad, by assassinating several chiefs of police and governors.¹²⁴ This led to a “fairly major push against them” by the ISF, which put them under pressure, resulting in the cease-fire.

¹²⁰ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 30 August 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 29 August’.

¹²¹ Minute Binns to CJO, 30 August 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 30 August 2007’.

¹²² Minute official working closely with the military, 30 August 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] Update to Whitehall’.

¹²³ Paper Assessments Staff, 30 August 2007, ‘Iraq: JAM Restructuring and Ceasefires’.

¹²⁴ Public Hearing, 15 December 2009, pages 71-72.

271. SIS3 told the Inquiry that Muqtada al-Sadr was “following events, rather than driving events from his bolthole in Iran”.¹²⁵

272. Maj Gen Binns reported on 30 August that UK forces had handed over the PJCC four days previously, ahead of schedule and without incident.¹²⁶ He was disappointed by Gen Mohan’s assessment that the PPF was unable to undertake security at Basra Palace yet. He judged this to be “brinksmanship with Baghdad”, that was being used to push for the resources needed for other security aspirations, rather than for Basra Palace.

273. Commenting from Baghdad, Major General Gerald Berragan, Deputy Commanding General (Operations) Multi-National Corps – Iraq, reported concerns that some of the additional resources that were being deployed to Basra at Gen Mohan’s request were not yet fully trained or equipped.¹²⁷

274. One of the (all Shia) National Police units had a reputation in Baghdad “for its seemingly active role in ethnic cleansing of Sunni districts” and for “turning a blind eye – or worse – to JAM activities”. He cautioned that “reinforcements from Baghdad may bring other complications to the Basra security scene, and these units will clearly require some serious support and mentoring if they are to be successful”.

275. Maj Gen Binns, Gen Mohan and Lt Gen Odierno agreed on 30 August that the conditions were set for handover of Basra Palace on the night of 2/3 September.¹²⁸

276. On the evening of 31 August, Mr Browne told Mr Brown that the handover would take place on 3 September.¹²⁹ He added that transition to PIC looked “likely” for November.

277. In a letter to Mr Brown of the same date, Mr Browne wrote:

“... following the handover of Basra Palace and our other Basra City bases, we will de facto be at PIC with the Iraqi Security Forces leading on security in Basra City. While our move out of Basra Palace has never been linked to PIC, it was not envisaged that the gap between the two events would be as large as it is now likely to be. Set against the background of the UK technically retaining responsibility for security in the province until PIC, this will entail a period of greater operational risk and, although UK commanders judge this to be acceptable, we should aim to keep this gap as short as possible.”¹³⁰

¹²⁵ Private hearing, 2010, pages 62-63.

¹²⁶ Minute Binns to CJO, 30 August 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 30 August 2007’.

¹²⁷ Minute Berragan to CJO, 30 August 2007, ‘MNC-I Update – 30 Aug 07’.

¹²⁸ Letter Browne to Brown, 31 August 2007, ‘Iraq: Handover of Basrah Palace and Provincial Iraqi Control in Basra’.

¹²⁹ Minute Robbins to McDonald, 31 August 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Conversation with Defence Secretary’.

¹³⁰ Letter Browne to Brown, 31 August 2007, ‘Iraq: Handover of Basrah Palace and Provincial Iraqi Control in Basra’. The papers indicate that Mr Brown did not see this letter as it was superseded by his conversation with Mr Browne.

278. On 31 August, Mr Browne's Private Secretary provided No.10 with an update on the security situation in Basra and ongoing discussions with JAM.¹³¹ In the letter, he recapped negotiations with JAM1 and actions to date and explained:

"This arrangement has to date been very successful. Rocket and mortar attacks on Basra Air Station have effectively ceased and those on Basra Palace much reduced. The UK forces withdrawing from the Permanent Joint Co-ordination Centre on 27 August did so almost without incident. And resupply convoys to and from Basra Palace have also proceeded with significantly fewer incidents than would previously have been anticipated. As part of these discussions, we have also secured assurances that the handover of Basra Palace will proceed smoothly.

"The cease-fire period is due to expire on 13 September: the next stage of the discussions is aimed at ensuring a smooth continuance of these arrangements beyond that point. It is due to involve the release of 11 internees and a further month-long cease-fire period. We are also working up plans to try and ensure that a more permanent arrangement is put in place."

279. Although the operation had "undoubtedly saved lives", presentational risks remained:

"Some of those involved in the release process are potentially linked, on the basis of intelligence information, to attacks against UK personnel (although in no cases do we have sufficient evidence to initiate legal proceedings through the Iraqi justice system and indeed many would likely have been released in the near future through our standard procedures for managing our internee population). And we face risks of accusations that we have done deals with terrorists, which may reinforce some of the negative comments emerging from the US in recent weeks alleging that we are not in control of events in South-East Iraq and are seeking an early exit."

280. The update also recorded media coverage alleging the UK had negotiated a cease-fire with JAM but "these have been inaccurate on the detail and have not yet been more widely followed up":

"But it does seem likely that it is a matter of when, not if, the story will break. We will consider whether there is scope to be more proactive in media handling of this process in the aftermath of the reports to Congress by Petraeus and Crocker. In the meantime we do not intend to comment on any negotiations that we may have held with JAM or other militia groups."

281. On 31 August, an article by Mr Miliband and Mr Browne entitled 'Still on Track in Basra' appeared in the *Washington Post*.¹³² In it they sought to "set the record straight" following criticism of the UK's role in southern Iraq. Although challenges in Basra

¹³¹ Letter English to Robbins, 31 August 2007, 'Update on the Security Situation in Basra and On-going Discussions with JAM'.

¹³² *Washington Post*, 31 August 2007, *Still on Track in Basra*.

were “real, wide-ranging and deep-seated”, Mr Miliband and Mr Browne described expectations that transition to PIC would be achieved within months, after a judgement “based on the conditions on the ground”.

282. The article continued:

“To recognise that such challenges remain is not to accept that our mission in southern Iraq is failing. Our goal was to bring Iraqi forces and institutions to a level where they could take on responsibility for their communities. It could not create in four years in Iraq the democracy, governance and security that it took Great Britain and the United States centuries to establish.”

283. Maj Gen Binns told the Inquiry that, in August 2007, the UK considered it had surged – “we believed that SINBAD was a surge of sorts” – and that “we had done what we could in Basra at the time”.¹³³ This left two alternatives:

“We could have stood and fought. We could have continued to do strike operations at the rate that 19 Brigade were doing them, we could have done that. We would have just had to endure, so we could have endured, we could have hunkered down and we could have just taken it and waited for some form of Iraq-wide impact of the surge that the Americans were conducting.”

September 2007

284. A few days later two senior former UK military officers, General Sir Mike Jackson and Major General Tim Cross, were also quoted in the media.¹³⁴ The roles they held in relation to Iraq in 2003 are described in Section 9.1.

285. Gen Jackson characterised US post-invasion policy as “intellectually bankrupt”, Maj Gen Cross considered it “fatally flawed”. Maj Gen Cross alleged that his warnings about the possible descent of Iraq into chaos had been ignored by Mr Donald Rumsfeld, US Secretary of Defense.

286. On 3 September, the longer letter on Basra’s future was sent by a senior government official specialising in the Middle East to Mr Mark Lyall Grant, FCO Director General Political.¹³⁵ He reported that, at least for the moment, JAM1 appeared to have the backing of the majority of JAM in Basra and its leadership in Najaf. Although the negotiations on detainees were proving hard going, the senior official judged that JAM1 had invested too much of his personal capital in the process to withdraw, though he could lose the trust of his constituents.

¹³³ Private hearing, 2 June 2010, page 29.

¹³⁴ *AFP*, 2 September 2007, *Second British general bashes US strategy in Iraq*.

¹³⁵ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) to Lyall Grant, 3 September 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: negotiations with JAM – Basrah Palace’.

287. The other Basra militia were aware of the negotiations and remained suspicious that the deal would marginalise them. JAM1 had given an undertaking that JAM would respect the Iraqi Government's takeover of Basra Palace and would not loot it, provided that there was an effective guard force in place.

288. The senior official concluded:

"This initiative has already delivered significant results but the negotiations remain fragile, uncertain and vulnerable to outside interference. This applies especially to [JAM1's] undertaking on Basra Palace. General Muhan's Palace Protection Force will be the main guarantor of a smooth handover."

289. The national JAM cease-fire was welcomed by the Iraqi Ministerial Committee on National Security meeting at the start of September.¹³⁶ Prime Minister Maliki agreed that it provided an opportunity to:

- support moderate Sadrists, isolating the criminal and terrorist elements;
- encourage Sadrists to engage in the political process;
- begin talks with the religious authorities in Sadrist areas;
- outlaw all non-ISF armed groups;
- cease the raids into Sadrist areas as a confidence-building measure, which would also help restore calm;
- release a number of arrested JAM members as a goodwill gesture;
- provide work for the young non-criminal elements of JAM; and to
- invest financially in the JAM areas to help with provision of services.

290. Asked on the *Today Programme* on 3 September whether the withdrawal from Basra Palace signalled that the UK was pulling out of Iraq, Mr Brown said that this was a "pre-planned and ... organised move" and that the UK would "discharge all our responsibilities to the Iraqi people".¹³⁷ The UK was moving from a combat role towards overwatch and retained the ability to reintervene if required. Mr Brown denied the accusation that Basra was being left to the mercy of the militias, pointing out that there were 30,000 Iraqi Security Forces (army and police) in Basra who would maintain security there.

291. On 3 September, government officials working closely with the military met JAM1, who was "even crosser than we expected" about the treatment of one of his contacts by a member of the British Consulate.¹³⁸ The officials commented: "Our despair with the

¹³⁶ eGram 36500/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 5 September 2007, 'Iraq: Ministerial Committee on National Security, 4 September'.

¹³⁷ *BBC Radio 4*, 3 September 2007, *Today Programme*.

¹³⁸ Email government official working closely with the military, 5 September 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: The Phantom Menace'.

Consulate here grows daily. Apart from this entirely avoidable episode ... there is still no perceptible effort from them on the political track.”

292. In a report to Maj Gen Binns and the MIG the following day, a government official working closely with the military explained:

“It was with some difficulty that I focused [JAM1] on the issue of what happens after 13 September (fortuitously more or less the start of Ramadan) following proposed release of eleven more detainees. [JAM1]’s main request was that to delay the next batch of releases until ‘Id al-Fitr would try the patience of his comrades: would it not be possible to release a few each week or so? I replied that I hoped that such flexibility would be feasible, but I could make no promises at this stage ... I said that, in return for these Ramadan releases, we would be looking for [JAM1] to persevere in his efforts to rein in the violence. [JAM1] was almost dismissive, implying that this was a given. He then expounded at length why our agreement had to be about more than just security.”¹³⁹

293. The official and JAM1 then discussed “what the end-state of the agreement might be”. JAM1 suggested that it was unlikely that resolution 1723 would be extended and that the UK would have to release all its detainees anyway. If they were released the UK would not appear to be a military occupying force but a social and economic one, so most of the current points of friction between the people of Basra and MND(SE) would fall away. JAM1 also considered it worth seeking to extend the agreement to al-Amara and Nasiriyah. The record of the meeting concluded:

“A difficult meeting in which the importance of the development agenda to [JAM1] became apparent. It seems clear that if we wish to gain the maximum benefit from this agreement we need to accelerate the process for delivering some tangible projects on the ground.”

294. In his weekly report on 3 September, Lt Gen Rollo wrote that he had suggested to Gen Petraeus that he would need to focus on three issues when he visited London in mid-September:

- what capabilities were required in Basra post-PIC until around April 2008;
- how this might evolve over summer 2008, including the potential for US troops to reinforce Basra in the event of the Iraqis being overwhelmed; and
- clarification of the long-term intent.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Letter government official working closely with the military to GOC, 4 September 2007, ‘Meeting with [JAM1], 3 September’.

¹⁴⁰ Minute Rollo to CDS, 3 September 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (268) 3 Sep 07’.

295. Lt Gen Rollo also wrote that it was important to be clear with the US about UK intentions:

“US slides continue to show a brigade in Basra bedecked with the Union Jack when coalition/US force levels have reduced to only five brigades. If this is not our policy then we should say so, and agree an event or time at which we step out of their plan.”

296. Lt Gen Rollo predicted that in his report to Congress Gen Petraeus would “acknowledge the need to drawdown, but will wish to maintain the present policy of securing the population while simultaneously transitioning steadily to the ISF”.

297. Neither Mr Browne nor Mr Miliband attended Cabinet on 4 September.¹⁴¹ Mr Brown said that had they been there, they would have provided an update on the position in Iraq and Afghanistan; he would ask them to report to a future Cabinet.

298. On the same day Maj Gen Wall briefed the Chiefs of Staff that the security situation across Iraq “remained positive”, with civilian casualties at their lowest level since the beginning of 2006; “prospects currently appeared positive” for the effectiveness of the six-month JAM cease-fire; but there was a recognised risk of a significant AQ-I attack in the run-up to the Gen Petraeus/Ambassador Crocker statement to Congress.¹⁴²

299. The Chiefs of Staff observed that “it was important that a period of stability elapsed before the handover could be considered a complete success. The pressure to achieve PIC needed to be maintained ...” The remaining potential barriers to PIC were the removal of Governor Waili (still legally challenging his dismissal) and the continuance of Gen Mohan and Gen Jalil in post until PIC.

300. A CIG assessed Iraq’s relations with its neighbours on 4 September.¹⁴³ It judged:

“Iran wants Multi-National Forces (MNF) to leave Iraq and is actively working to make life as difficult as possible for them. Iran will tolerate short-term instability to force a humiliating MNF withdrawal. Iranian support for Shia extremists continues unabated.

“Syria also wants MNF to leave Iraq ... Syria continues to provide safe haven to some Sunni groups supporting insurgent activity in Iraq, particularly those linked to the Iraqi Ba’ath party ...

“As the prospect of MNF drawdown looms larger, Iraq’s Sunni neighbours are increasingly fearful of a descent into civil war, an emerging Al Qaida safe-haven, or an Iranian-dominated Shia state ... So long as Iranian influence is seen to be increasing, regional tensions will continue to rise.”

¹⁴¹ Cabinet Conclusions, 4 September 2007.

¹⁴² Minutes, 4 September 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

¹⁴³ CIG Assessment, 4 September 2007, ‘Iraq: Relations with the Neighbours’.

301. At the request of the MOD and FCO, on 6 September the JIC assessed progress of the Baghdad Security Plan (known in Arabic as Fardh al-Qanoon (FAQ)) which had begun in February, and its future prospects.¹⁴⁴

302. The JIC judged that:

“I. Under the current Baghdad Security Plan, intensified Multi-National Force (MNF) and Iraqi security force (ISF) operations have improved security for Iraqis in general in Baghdad. Civilian, ISF and MNF casualties have reduced. Attacks on the MNF have fallen off since June, and are now at the lowest level since June 2006.”

303. The JIC assessed that MNF operations focused on the AQ-I threat and other Sunni Islamist extremists had had an effect. The number of high-profile suicide attacks against Shia targets had fallen.

304. Outside Baghdad, overall attack levels had fallen sharply after record highs in June. The JIC assessed it was “too early to say whether this trend will be sustained”.

305. The JIC judged that: “The Iraqis have taken no political advantage of the improved security to pursue national reconciliation or reconstruction.”

306. The JIC assessed:

“The Iraqi Government committees established to deal with economic regeneration and communal reconciliation have achieved little of substance. Electricity and fuel shortages remain more acute in Baghdad than elsewhere in Iraq and are the cause of widespread disillusionment, undermining the government’s credibility.”

307. In relation to performance of the ISF, the JIC judged:

“The initial higher level Iraqi management of and engagement with the complexities of FAQ was encouraging. From the start, Maliki took a ‘hands on’ approach, chairing FAQ’s Executive Steering Committee and co-ordinating security operations ... But in recent months his enthusiasm has worn off. Continuing high profile attacks in Baghdad (together with Shia nervousness over programmes to support armed Sunni tribes) have strained Maliki’s relations with senior MNF commanders. We judge Iraqi confidence, both among Ministers and more generally, has been damaged by the popular perception that security has not significantly improved.”

308. The JIC considered that key Iraqi structures established to manage FAQ were still “overwhelmingly Shia”. The government had taken some steps to address human rights abuses, including sacking 23 senior National Police commanders and disbanding an entire battalion accused of complicity in sectarian acts. But other individuals accused of sectarian abuses remained in positions of responsibility.

¹⁴⁴ JIC Assessment, 6 September 2007, ‘Baghdad Security Plan: Impact and Prognosis’.

309. The JIC Assessment ended with a section entitled ‘Outlook’, which said:

“Iraqi politics are paralysed. Despite upbeat claims following the recent leadership conference, we see no prospect of Maliki’s government making real progress on key legislation ... We continue to judge that any new leader would face similar challenges to Maliki: early significant improvements in government performance would be unlikely.

“We judge the levels of violence in Baghdad and across Iraq may continue to fall, but only as long as the US troop surge can be sustained: the ISF, even with tribal support, are not capable of maintaining the tempo or effect of current MNF operations ... The additional US surge can only be maintained until March 2008 ... When it reduces, we judge that Sunni extremists and Shia militias will try to reassert control on the ground.”

310. In his weekly update on 6 September, Maj Gen Binns described the withdrawal of UK troops from Basra Palace on 2 and 3 September as “extremely successful”.¹⁴⁵ Although one of the convoys was hit by an IED, there were no serious injuries and it arrived back in the COB “largely unscathed” – something that would have been “impossible” a month earlier.

311. The media coverage in Iraq and in the UK had been “largely positive”, with the only real criticism that the UK was leaving a security gap in the South coming from the US media.

312. Maj Gen Binns commented that Dr Rubaie’s decision to speak to the media (“in English, so none of the message was lost in translation”) was “further affirmation that the decision to hand over control of the Palace to the ISF had the full support of the GoI”.

313. Less positively, Maj Gen Binns reported:

“Whilst senior US Commanders recognise and understand the reasoning for our departure from the Palace ... it has become apparent that this understanding is not shared by junior and mid-ranking US personnel. My staffs ... detect at least a slight discomfort at the UK position ... at the working level, with a feeling that our return to the COB will leave Southern Iraq open to malign Iranian influence and the flow of EFPs. These feelings are no doubt buoyed by the address by POTUS [President Bush] to military personnel in Anbar; at a tactical level, the rallying call ‘if we let our enemies back us out of Iraq, we will be more likely to face them in America’ at a time when our own Government is announcing a reduction in troop numbers (regardless of how long this has been planned) further demonstrates the perception of a division between UK and US foreign policies towards Iraq.”

¹⁴⁵ Minute Binns to CJO, 6 September 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 6 September 2007’.

314. Sir John Scarlett told the Inquiry that withdrawing from Basra Palace – “a major exposed operation” – without a single casualty had been a “really important achievement”.¹⁴⁶

315. Colonel Peter Mansoor, executive officer to Gen Petraeus in 2007, wrote in his book *Surge*:

“By withdrawing their forces from Basra and consolidating them on a single base at the city outskirts, British political and military leaders had abdicated responsibility for the city’s security. Shi’a militia leaders had contested control of the city and outlasted the British will to continue the fight.”¹⁴⁷

316. Mr Dowse told the Inquiry that, although there was a policy statement to the effect that even after withdrawal from Basra Palace UK forces retained the ability to re-engage if required, his view and that of the intelligence community more generally had been that that was not true “in any meaningful sense”:

“The idea that we could have gone back into Basra and reoccupied in the event of a crisis ... was extremely optimistic, to say the least. We never actually were in a position where we wrote that in an assessment. I recall going to a couple of meetings where I asked the MOD representatives how confident they were of the assertion of re-engagement and was told ... ‘We recognise we are carrying a risk.’ Actually, it was never really tested.”¹⁴⁸

317. Asked whether the UK had the capacity to re-intervene if the agreement with JAM in Basra had broken down, Maj Gen Binns told the Inquiry that he “didn’t really define what ‘re-intervention’ meant, because it implies that we were intervening in the first place in 2007 and we weren’t”. Maj Gen Binns added:

“Did I have the capacity to go back and reoccupy the Palace? Yes, at a stretch, but it never really crossed my mind because I was so glad to get out of it.”¹⁴⁹

The impact of negotiations with JAM¹

Maj Gen Shaw told the Inquiry that he thought it likely that without the cease-fire, withdrawing from Basra Palace might have become “the totemic humiliation of the British forces shot out of Basra”.¹⁵⁰

Maj Gen Shaw subsequently added the following detail: “Indeed, subsequent conversations with [officials working closely with the military] relate JAM affirmation after

¹⁴⁶ Private hearing, 10 June 2010, pages 41-42.

¹⁴⁷ Mansoor PR. *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*. Yale University Press, 2013.

¹⁴⁸ Private hearing, 14 June 2010, pages 77-78.

¹⁴⁹ Private hearing, 2 June 2010, page 30.

¹⁵⁰ Private hearing, 21 June 2010, page 37.

the reposturing that attacks on it [Basra Palace] had been in the offing but were halted by the 'deal'."

However, references to the process as a "deal" had been unhelpful and Maj Gen Shaw told the Inquiry that:

"I should have packaged it better like the American Anbar uprising, which was broadly the same thing."¹⁵¹

Maj Gen Binns told that Inquiry that in his view:

"... the accommodation got us to the stage where the Iraqis took responsibility for the security of Basra and they wouldn't have done that if the violence had still been at an unacceptable level."¹⁵²

He thought that:

"... back here in London there were people who were deeply uncomfortable with this and the further you got away from Basra, the more uncomfortable people got with the nature of the deal."¹⁵³

Although Maj Gen Binns was confident that Mr Browne was aware of and comfortable with the risk associated with negotiations, he told the Inquiry:

"I think, you know, I think there were people in outer offices who wanted – not unreasonably, they wanted to mitigate that risk."¹⁵⁴

Maj Gen Binns also told the Inquiry:

"...in retrospect, I said, 'Well, look, we've done this before, surely, negotiated with terrorists, surely somebody could give me some advice on negotiations', and I didn't get any, so we were thinking on our feet about this process of negotiation. We were just trying to come up with a policy."

Mr Dowse told the Inquiry that the departure of UK troops from Basra City did affect the quantity, quality and reliability of the information he was receiving.¹⁵⁵

SIS3 told the Inquiry that the agreement reached had:

"... reserved the right for HMG to respond militarily to any individual or groups planning attacks, that we would interdict any weaponry moving in, and, furthermore, that we would reserve the right to intervene when the Iraqi Government requested us to, if they did. So, in other words, we were circumscribing our military activity to some extent, but I think with no risk to our overall posture."¹⁵⁶

He also considered that events in Basra had a wider effect across JAM:

"Muqtada al-Sadr, who of course is the rather idiosyncratic, not to say incoherent leader of JAM, sitting in Iran I think then made a virtue out of necessity by

¹⁵¹ Private hearing, 21 June 2010, page 22.

¹⁵² Private hearing, 2 June 2010, page 19.

¹⁵³ Private hearing, 2 June 2010, page 21.

¹⁵⁴ Private hearing, 2 June 2010, page 22.

¹⁵⁵ Private hearing, 14 June 2010, pages 75-76.

¹⁵⁶ Private hearing, 2010, page 62.

announcing his own six month freeze on activity on 29 August. But I have always rather felt that that was him following events, rather than driving events from his bolthole in Iran.”

SIS6 told the Inquiry that the understanding reached provided a six-month window for the UK to pull out of Basra safely and re-locate to the Air Station.¹⁵⁷

Asked about the impact on security in Basra City, SIS6 explained that he did not know, because the UK was not on the ground there.¹⁵⁸

A government official who worked closely with the military told the Inquiry he recalled that the negotiations had been described as “a treatment of the symptoms” which had not “brought about a cure” but was rather intended to “buy time and ... space”.¹⁵⁹

318. On 7 September, Mr McDonald provided Mr Brown with a timeline of actions on Iraq leading up to his statement to Parliament after Recess.¹⁶⁰ The main points were:

- a video conference with President Bush, to understand his reaction to the Petraeus/Crocker report, on 10 September;
- an update to Cabinet by Mr Browne;
- a meeting with Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker on 18 September;
- discussions between US and UK officials and military about future UK role;
- NSID to consider options and reach a view; and
- a visit to Basra by Mr Brown in early October.

319. Mr McDonald reported that work was under way in the MOD on options for a UK military contribution “in the next phase” post-PIC. There were two possible models:

- A small group of specialists and a headquarters in Baghdad, plus naval and air support, with a “training component” in the South, totalling 1,800–2,000.
- A large enough force to enable the UK to maintain command of MND(SE), totalling around 3,800.

320. After a short visit to Basra and Baghdad from 5 to 7 September, Gen Dannatt reported a “growing, albeit modest, sense of optimism about the strategic opportunities that are now potentially being presented to the coalition and specifically to our own forces in South-East Iraq”.¹⁶¹

321. That sense of optimism had been generated by a combination of the US surge, Sunni engagement and Muqtada al-Sadr’s cease-fire.

¹⁵⁷ Private hearing, 2010, page 23. Based on redacted material.

¹⁵⁸ Private hearing, 2010, pages 28-29. Based on redacted material.

¹⁵⁹ Private hearing, 2011.

¹⁶⁰ Minute McDonald to Brown, 7 September 2007, ‘Iraq: Timeline Before your H/C statement (and update on Pakistan)’.

¹⁶¹ Minute Dannatt to CDS, 10 September 2007, ‘CGS Visit to Iraq 5-7 Sep 07’.

322. Gen Dannatt recorded his impression that “at a low level the force levels in Baghdad are beginning to tip the balance”. He reported Lt Gen Odierno’s estimate that 65 percent of Bagdad was “firmly under control”.

323. On Basra, Gen Dannatt found that:

“... our own tactical thinking was beginning to reflect that in Baghdad ... we had far more in common than differences despite the best efforts of some of the US staff to confuse the situation.”

324. Gen Dannatt described Basra as “tentatively quiet” but observed that security would only be sustainable “if we now begin to deliver some results on the ground in terms of reconstruction and development”. He cautioned:

“We probably now have a very narrow window of opportunity to reinforce the success that has been achieved on the ground, but we must not become the victims of that success by believing that because it is quiet that we have done all we can – the emphasis must now shift away from the military line of operation ... Perhaps it is even time to consider whether we should be pushing the FCO or DFID into a more leading role?”

325. In relation to the UK’s ability to re-intervene in Basra, Gen Dannatt wrote:

“I sense that there is the potential for great confusion about what we actually mean by this widely used term. I believe that it is unrealistic to think that we could re-intervene in Basra without considerable cost, indeed to do so would be a massive retrograde step in campaign terms. The focus should be perhaps to enable ISF re-intervention in the city with the coalition enabling this task.”

326. If the ISF were unable to re-intervene successfully, the Corps Reserve brigade might be called on. The UK’s “residual focus for a time-limited period” would be on capacity-building with the ISF and in the Basra economy. If that was to be the case, Gen Dannatt saw the UK deployment as between 1,000 and 1,500 troops.

327. Gen Dannatt concluded his report:

“In summary, I found a campaign that is at a major crossroads and facing a narrow window of opportunity. The opportunities are time sensitive – we must be seen to be reducing our forces, we must be prepared to engage with all parties and we must follow up military operations with effective political and economic development. We must base our thinking on the fact that we only have a limited amount of time to change tack before ... we out stay our welcome once more ... I am conscious that we have not yet received any political direction, but from an Army viewpoint I can see a definite way forward on the ground in Iraq, consistent with any plans for greater investment in Afghanistan and in a modest return to contingency.”

The credit crunch

From September 2007, the global financial crisis became a major focus for the UK Government. Key events as the crisis intensified are described below.

On 9 August 2007, French bank BNP Paribas told investors that they would be unable to withdraw money from two of its funds because it could not value the assets in them owing to a “complete evaporation of liquidity” in the market. This triggered a sharp rise in the cost of credit, and alerted the world to the start of the credit crunch.¹⁶²

On 13 September, BBC News reported that Northern Rock had been granted emergency financial support by the Bank of England. The following day, customers of the bank withdrew £1bn, the biggest run on a British bank for more than a century.

On 21 April 2008, the Bank of England announced a £50bn plan to help banks by allowing them to swap high risk mortgage debts for secure government bonds.

At the end of the month, the first annual fall in UK house prices for 12 years was recorded by Nationwide.

On 7 September, US mortgage lenders Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac were taken over by the US Government. Together they had lost approximately US\$14bn over the previous year.¹⁶³

The management of both companies was to be replaced, and they were to be given access to additional funding. Both were to be administered by the Federal Housing Finance Agency until their long-term future was decided.

President Bush said: “Putting these companies on a sound financial footing, and reforming their business practices, is critical to the health of our financial system.”

On 16 September, Lehman Brothers – a major US investment bank – filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, which gives a company time to devise a plan to re-pay its creditors.¹⁶⁴ The BBC reported:

“Unwinding Lehman’s complex deals will take months if not years. During that time the global financial system will be snarled up. Many banks won’t know for sure how much they are exposed to Lehman, and will have difficulty freeing up the money in those deals.

“This in turn is likely to intensify the credit crunch, with potentially dire consequences for businesses and consumers.”¹⁶⁵

On 3 October, the US House of Representatives passed a US\$700bn plan to rescue the US financial sector.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² BBC News, 7 August 2009, *Timeline: Credit crunch to downturn*.

¹⁶³ BBC News, 7 September 2008, *US takes over key mortgage firms*.

¹⁶⁴ BBC News, 16 September 2008, *Lehman Bros files for bankruptcy*.

¹⁶⁵ BBC News, 16 September 2008, *Q&A: Lehman Brothers bank collapse*.

¹⁶⁶ BBC News, 7 August 2009, *Timeline: Credit crunch to downturn*.

328. Mr Prentice attended his first meeting of the Iraqi Ministerial Committee on National Security (MCNS) on 9 September. It was confirmed that the national JAM cease-fire was intended to include suspension of all attacks on the MNF.¹⁶⁷

329. After visiting Basra for the formal exchange of letters concerning the handover of Basra Palace, Dr Rubaie reported to the MCNS that he had agreed with Gen Mohan that the Iraqi Army would remain in the Palace in the short term, but that longer term it should be renovated and used by the Government.

330. Lt Gen Rollo told the MCNS that the MNF had reduced its anti-JAM operations by 50 percent nationally after the cease-fire was announced, but EFP attacks on MNF had risen and indirect fire continued unchanged. Prime Minister Maliki agreed with Dr Rubaie that this should not deflect the efforts of the reconciliation committee: if a political solution could be found, it should be pursued. He would take two steps towards peace for every step the militants took.

331. Lt Gen Rollo commented in his weekly report on 10 September that Muqtada al-Sadr's cease-fire announcement had "prompted considerable debate and action geared at capitalising on the situation, regardless of what it might mean in the longer term".¹⁶⁸

332. Lt Gen Rollo reported that the handover of Basra Palace had "generated little interest" in Baghdad, with "nothing but positive noises coming from my US colleagues". He continued:

"The reality of the situation in Basra more generally is also accepted, I believe, and fears of premature withdrawal or less than supportive behaviour from the British appear to be decreasing. CGS's visit provided a useful opportunity to test the acceptability of a transition from current force levels to a significantly smaller force next Spring, focused on assistance and development ..."

333. On 10 September, Mr Browne spoke to Secretary Gates shortly before he reported to Congress.¹⁶⁹ Secretary Gates indicated that he expected Gen Petraeus would recommend that while troops should remain in Iraq as long as possible, there were opportunities to draw down where the security situation allowed. Mr Browne observed that the UK strategy for MND(SE) was consistent with this approach; the UK could re-intervene in the South if required.

334. Secretary Gates confirmed that the US was content with the UK position. The US concern was whether a significant UK troop reduction would jeopardise the mission and impact on the commitment of other coalition partners. He encouraged Mr Browne to discuss the matter with Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Eric Edelman, Under Secretary of Defense, when they were in London the following week.

¹⁶⁷ eGram 38263/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 10 September 2007, 'Iraq: Ministerial Committee for National Security (MCNS) – 9 September'.

¹⁶⁸ Minute Rollo to CDS, 10 September 2007, 'SBMR-I's Weekly Report (269) 10 Sep 07'.

¹⁶⁹ Letter Forber to Fletcher, 11 September 2007, 'Iraq: Conversation with US Defence Secretary'.

335. Mr Browne shared plans for a Prime Ministerial statement on Iraq in early October, and said that it would be very difficult not to refer to PIC. The two agreed to speak again following Gen Petraeus' visit.

336. On 10 and 11 September, Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker testified to Congress on security and political progress in Iraq, and on the impact of the US surge.¹⁷⁰

337. Ambassador Crocker focused on political, economic and diplomatic developments in Iraq. He assessed that a "secure, stable democratic Iraq at peace with its neighbours" was "attainable" but warned that Iraq was, and would remain, "a traumatised society". In terms of progress he said:

"In my judgement, the cumulative trajectory of political, economic, and diplomatic developments in Iraq is upwards, although the line is not steep. The process will not be quick, it will be uneven, punctuated by setbacks as well as achievements, and it will require substantial US resolve and commitment. There will be no single moment at which we can claim victory; any turning point will likely only be recognised in retrospect ...

"2007 has brought improvement. Enormous challenges remain. Iraqis still struggle with fundamental questions about how to share power, accept their differences and overcome their past. The changes to our strategy last January – the surge – have helped change the dynamics in Iraq for the better. Our increased presence made besieged communities feel that they could defeat Al Qaida by working with us ... We have given Iraqis the time and space to reflect on what sort of country they want. Most Iraqis genuinely accept Iraq as a multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian society – it is the balance of power that has yet to be sorted out."

338. Gen Petraeus focused on security. He stated that the military objectives of the surge were being met in large measure with coalition and Iraqi forces dealing "significant blows" to Al Qaeda in Iraq and disrupting Shia militia.¹⁷¹ He highlighted the decline in civilian deaths during the period but recognised that the numbers were still at "troubling levels". Additionally, he described the "tribal rejection of Al Qaida" spreading out from Anbar province as potentially the "most significant development of the past eight months". As a consequence of the progress made, Gen Petraeus suggested that it would be possible to reduce troop numbers to pre-surge levels in summer 2008 although he warned of the dangers of handing over to Iraqi Security Forces too early.

¹⁷⁰ Testimony to Congress, 10 September 2007, 'Statement of Ambassador Ryan C Crocker, United States Ambassador to the Republic of Iraq, before a Joint Hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Armed Services September 10, 2007'.

¹⁷¹ Testimony to Congress Petraeus, 10-11 September 2007, 'Report to Congress on the Situation in Iraq'.

339. During the two days of testimony, Ambassador Crocker and Gen Petraeus were questioned on the UK's approach in Basra. A briefing paper on key points from those exchanges recorded that:

- Asked whether he agreed with the British drawdown and withdrawal from Basra City, Gen Petraeus said he did.
- Asked whether the British had lost Basra, Gen Petraeus said: "The British did a good hand-off to a force that was trained and equipped and certified to hand off the palace ... There's no question but that there is a competition down there between the Fadhila Party, the Supreme Council, the Badr Corps, and certainly Sadr's party and militia. Interestingly, there have been deals there recently, and the violence level has just flat plummeted. It's included some release of some Jaysh al-Mahdi figures – again accommodations between all of them. Again for the Shia south, that's probably ok."
- Asked why the British had a force protection mission whereas the US had a population protection mission, Gen Petraeus said that this was due to the lack of sectarian violence in Basra.
- Asked whether he could foresee a situation where US troops may have to be committed to Basra, Gen Petraeus said: "I don't think that we need to put US forces in southern provinces, other than, say, some special forces teams or occasionally sending something down to help out."¹⁷²

340. A few days after the testimony, Mr Prentice reported that it had "not been the climactic political event here which many were expecting a few weeks ago" but now that it was over "the Iraqi political class know better where the US stand and what is expected of them".¹⁷³

341. Mr Brown spoke to President Bush by video conference on 10 September.¹⁷⁴

342. The briefing provided for the conversation suggested he emphasise that no decisions had been taken on a radical drawdown of UK troops and that the UK remained committed both to the coalition and to supporting Iraq's stability and development.¹⁷⁵

343. Officials assessed that President Bush was unlikely to make any fundamental changes to US policy in the medium term; rather, his focus would be on short-term management of the surge. The briefing said:

"Although US commanders in Iraq did sign off on the Palace move [in Basra], Washington report continued anxiety on the part of US officers and policy-makers

¹⁷² Paper [unattributed], [undated], 'Crocker & Petraeus – Key Quotes & Exchanges'.

¹⁷³ eGram 37677/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 13 September 2007, 'Iraq: Future UK Posture; What is at Stake?'

¹⁷⁴ Letter Fletcher to Hickey, 10 September 2007, 'Prime Minister's VTC with President Bush, 10 September: Middle East'.

¹⁷⁵ Briefing [unattributed], 10 September 2007, 'Bush VTC'.

in both Baghdad and Washington about UK plans in the South. Their concerns are centred on the tension between (what they assume will be) further UK withdrawals in the South, and the US military surge in Baghdad and its surrounding provinces.”

344. During the video conference, Mr Brown said that the departure from Basra Palace had been smooth; he told President Bush that “elements of the media had misrepresented our strategy, and our long-term objectives”.¹⁷⁶ The next steps, including transition to PIC in Basra, had to be based on a military assessment. Mr Brown explained that he intended to make a Parliamentary statement on Iraq in early October but there would be no “hasty decisions” in the meantime.

345. At Cabinet on 11 September, Mr Browne commented that Gen Petraeus’ evidence had been less dramatic than billed: security in Baghdad had increased, and large scale sectarian violence in Iraq had decreased.¹⁷⁷ The US would wish to sustain its forces at a higher level until 2008, to provide opportunities for political progress, although overall numbers would reduce. By July 2008 the total would be 130,000; the pre-surge level. Mr Browne told Cabinet that the US was essentially adopting the same approach the UK had taken in the South; making reductions where security could be handed over to the Iraqis.

346. Mr Browne reported that the transfer of Basra Palace on 3 September had taken place without incident and the city was calm. British forces were now focused on mentoring and training, although they would retain a capability to re-intervene if necessary. Force levels would reduce to around 5,000 in November, with PIC expected at around the same time, conditions permitting. Future plans would, in part, depend on US decisions.

347. Mr Miliband observed that the UK’s focus had, inevitably, been on Basra for the last two to three years, but it was important now to think about the nature of the UK’s overall relationship with Iraq, in the context of the wider international community. He believed that there was a chance to persuade the European Union to develop serious economic and social relationships with Iraq.

348. Mr Brown concluded the discussion by saying that, over the next few weeks, the Government would need to look at security, reconciliation (where the emphasis was moving from the national to the local level) and the “stake in the future” initiative. Cabinet would have a further opportunity to discuss the issue at an appropriate time as matters became clearer.

¹⁷⁶ Letter Fletcher to Hickey, 10 September 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with President Bush, 10 September: Middle East’.

¹⁷⁷ Cabinet Conclusions, 11 September 2007.

349. At their meeting on 11 September, the Chiefs of Staff noted that:

“The Gen Petraeus/Amb Crocker statement to Congress had been encouragingly realistic but had not comprehensively articulated the future political intentions and progress of PM Maliki.”¹⁷⁸

350. Uncertainty remained about the direction Shia groups in Basra would take in the coming months. As a result:

“The current nature of the UK mission in Iraq had potential to change, given the security situation in MND(SE). It was important that the current security situation did not cause a premature shift in strategic direction. Potential future UK missions needed to be considered in a coalition context.”

351. Major General John Rose, MOD Director General Intelligence Collection, briefed the Chiefs of Staff that the freeze on JAM activity was welcome but its details remained unclear. The lack of Sadrist cohesion meant that “recalcitrant JAM members” were likely to continue to pursue Badr, MNF-I and their opponents within JAM on an opportunist basis, and there therefore remained a “potent threat of further violence”.

352. Iranian support to Badr/ISCI and some elements of JAM was believed to be continuing with the goal of influencing the security strategy in southern Iraq. The Chiefs of Staff noted that there would always be an element within JAM which would pursue violent ends. Iranian involvement was an important factor, although the Chiefs of Staff felt that Iran had no interest in promoting an intra-Shia struggle. The important question that remained unanswered was “the route that the Shia groupings in Basra would follow over the coming months: accommodation or confrontation?”

353. Government officials working closely with the military had a further meeting with JAM1 on 11 September to discuss detainee releases and development issues.¹⁷⁹ They reported that the release of a further 11 detainees would take place the following day and suggested that JAM1 and MND(SE) should:

“... be using the period of our agreement to demonstrate to both the Iraqi government/Provincial Council and coalition development officials that there were new opportunities ... But we should be looking further than a few individual isolated projects, towards accelerating and unblocking the projects which have already been drawn up and approved ... [JAM1] had brought a list of ideas for development projects ... [that] ranged from the relatively straightforward (street lighting, drinking water) to the much more ambitious (building a new hospital).”

354. Following the meeting, a government official working closely with the military reported to colleagues in London that they had been trying to assess the thinking

¹⁷⁸ Minutes, 11 September 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

¹⁷⁹ Email government official working closely with the military, 12 September 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: JAM1 Meeting 11 September'.

of interested parties on “where we are going with [NAME OF OPERATION]”. The responses were summarised as “we do not want merely to be buying JAM quiescence with releases; we do not want to be seen to be appeasing terrorists; we do not want to enter into an open-ended pork-barrel process; we do not want to be seen to be favouring one political trend over another”.

355. Mr Day sent Ms Aldred a “first cut” of options for future UK force levels in southern Iraq on 11 September.¹⁸⁰ While emphasising that the analysis remained provisional and needed further work, he outlined four options:

- A minimal contribution of 250-750 personnel, embedded within mainly US units to provide niche training or support to the Iraqis and/or the coalition.
- A 1,500-strong battlegroup or equivalent, plus logistic support, embedded within a US formation, primarily to continue SSR but with a limited combat capability.
- A one- or two-star HQ plus two battlegroups and limited logistic and enabling capabilities, totalling around 2,500 personnel, to form the framework of a multi-national brigade.
- A 500-strong framework brigade with a one- or two-star HQ, two battle groups and full logistic and enabling support capabilities, able to operate without US support.

356. The initial MOD view was that the third of these was the minimum contribution necessary to retain the UK’s lead nation and principal ally status in MND(SE), but that would need to be tested with the US. All options except the final one would require significant US logistic and enabling support.

357. MOD officials advised Mr Browne’s Private Secretary on 11 September that, as previously agreed, 11 internees would be released the following day and noted that advice on the long-term future of the operation would follow shortly.¹⁸¹ Referring to a “step reduction” in attacks on coalition forces since the start of the process, the advice said that there was “merit in pursuing this process”.

358. The advice included a substantial section on presentation, referring to articles in *The Sunday Times* and *The Guardian*. There had been some follow-up interest and Parliamentary interest was anticipated. As a result:

“We have reflected on whether and how we should adjust our presentational approach to this issue. At some point, some aspects of the overall strategy need to be explained to the public and Parliament and also to the families of service personnel who have been killed in Iraq. The best means of doing so might be as part of a wider piece on Iraq strategy ... rather than a media event focusing solely on [NAME OF OPERATION] issues. If the Secretary of State agrees, we will develop

¹⁸⁰ Letter Day to Aldred, 11 September 2007, ‘Iraq – Options for UK Military Contribution’.

¹⁸¹ Minute Keay to PS/Secretary of State [MOD], 11 September 2007, ‘Op TELIC: discussions with JAM’.

some text describing our approach to reconciliation in the context of developments in South East Iraq accordingly. In the meantime we will continue to avoid comment on specific cases, confirm that we have been and continue to be, engaged in dialogue with all relevant parties in our area, that this is in line with and supports Iraqi Government initiatives and that individual detainee releases occur only when they are no longer judged to be an imperative threat to security.

“In all this, we need to be particularly mindful of the families of UK personnel killed, either potentially as a result of the activities of those currently interned or in the course of capturing them ...

“Having reviewed the position, we believe that we should now routinely provide parallel notification to the families involved when detainees potentially linked to the death of UK service personnel leave the UK detention facility either being transferred to Iraqi control or being released.”

359. Mr Browne’s office replied on 13 September to confirm that he had noted the imminent release and that further advice would be put forward shortly on the long-term sustainability of the operation.¹⁸² Mr Browne was reported to be “particularly keen that any further releases are in the context of a strategy for a more enduring political/security solution for the South.” Presentational advice was also agreed, including the intention to inform bereaved families.

360. Senior officials discussed Mr Day’s note of 11 September to Ms Aldred at the Iraq Strategy Group on 13 September, and concluded that further work would be needed before NSID(OD) considered the options in early October.¹⁸³ The Group identified a need for “inter-departmental discussion of the political and military objectives for the UK’s continuing engagement in Iraq”. The Group also identified the need for discussion with the US about enabling support and their own plans, and the need for work on the location of a future UK military and civilian presence.

361. Mr McDonald also told the Group that Mr Brown would make a short statement the following day, confirming the UK’s commitment to Iraq. He still intended to make a substantive statement when Parliament returned, which would focus on PIC in Basra. By this stage, ideally a date would have been agreed and announced. While he did not favour artificial timetables and remained committed to a conditions-based approach to PIC, Mr Brown wanted to say as much as possible about the tasks and numbers of UK troops that would be required after PIC and give an indication of roughly when each phase of overwatch would be reached.

362. Lt Gen Wall noted that there would need to be some engagement with the US on the substance before Mr Brown made his statement: current US military thinking

¹⁸² Minute McNeil to PJHQ J9 Hd Pol/Ops 1, 13 September 2007, ‘Op. TELIC: discussions with JAM’.

¹⁸³ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 13 September 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 13 September’.

envisaged a process for Basra PIC beginning in late October, with an announcement in November. Mr McDonald said that officials would need to lobby the US about the timetable in advance of the statement.

363. In advance of Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker's visit to London, Mr Prentice sent some "thoughts" to the FCO on what the issues at stake were in Iraq, what was expected of the UK by the US and Iraqi governments and what roles the UK could and should continue to perform in order to meet or manage those expectations.¹⁸⁴ The advice had been discussed with Lt Gen Rollo, who was reported to be "in broad agreement".

364. Mr Prentice's summary assessment was that the best means to win agreement to PIC in Basra in November would be a "UK re-commitment now to a convincing range of longer-term tasks, including in the South". One of his first impressions was that:

"Uncertainty and therefore anxiety over UK long-term intentions is widespread, among both senior Iraqis and senior US contacts. And public perceptions, fed by the media, continue to misinterpret our strategy for Basra province."

365. Mr Prentice wrote that Iraq was important to UK interests both for reputational reasons and because Iraq's future was still in the balance; the risk of it descending into chaos and division, rather having a powerful positive influence in the region, was one that needed to be tackled:

"Whether they were at the beginning or not, our global CT [counter-terrorism] interests are certainly now closely engaged in the Iraq theatre."

366. Mr Prentice acknowledged that the UK's strategy in southern Iraq had been fully discussed and agreed by both the US and the Iraqi Government and that no decisions had yet been taken on medium- and long-term engagement, but also that public interpretation remained that "we are set on full military withdrawal in the shortest order possible". Although he and Lt Gen Rollo and their predecessors had sought to reassure the US that that was not so, "their confidence in us is becoming more fragile. The reputational risks in this for the UK are clear."

367. Mr Prentice said that US concerns were understood to centre on:

- whether the UK would maintain a Divisional Command in MND(SE);
- continuity for the Basra PRT;
- protection for the US Regional Embassy Office, which had just relocated from Basra Palace to the COB in order to fit in with UK strategy;
- continuing specialist military support for the ISF;
- continued training and mentoring of the ISF;

¹⁸⁴ eGram 37677/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 13 September 2007, 'Iraq: Future UK Posture: What is at Stake'.

- the ability effectively to counter Iranian influence, including handling the borders; and
- protecting the main MNF supply routes through southern Iraq.

368. Mr Prentice continued:

“We have invested heavily since 2003 in the South, in treasure, blood and reputation. We should be careful at this late stage not to waste that investment. We are not currently planning further infrastructure development projects but the successful programmes in local government capacity building and police leadership training and mentoring need to continue if they are to achieve sustainable results.”

369. Mr Prentice advised that the options for future UK roles and deployments would need to:

- reflect UK regional and strategic interests;
- address US expectations;
- take account of UK domestic political requirements;
- “satisfy UKMOD force generation constraints and the needs of the Afghanistan theatre”; and
- provide a secure platform in the South for non-military tasks.

370. On Basra, Mr Prentice wrote that the formal transfer of responsibility for security would “have a more psychological than real effect” given that the UK’s re-posturing to Basra Air Station was, in effect, “de facto PIC”. He understood that US officials suspected that the idea of de facto PIC was:

“... a device to slide past proper analysis of the conditions for PIC. These suspicions about PIC are fuelled by their continued uncertainty about our longer term intentions. The best means to win US support for PIC in Basra on our preferred timing will therefore be to calm their anxieties about our plans for the South and our continued military and non-military contribution to building Iraq’s future.”

371. On 13 September, Maj Gen Binns reported that Basra remained quiet.¹⁸⁵ There had been no attacks on the COB in the preceding week and a “decrease in collateral casualties, especially around Basra Palace”. While the situation remained fragile, there were positive indications to suggest that the militias had increased their contacts with the ISF and were moving towards a political accommodation.

372. Gen Mohan had attended a meeting of the “Basra Security Forum”, facilitated by OMS, and reported that it had been well attended by all the major parties except Fadilah. Maj Gen Binns observed that this was the first time that there had been

¹⁸⁵ Minute Binns to CJO, 13 September 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 13 September 2007’.

major cross-party discussion in Basra, something that would have been inconceivable a month earlier.

373. Maj Gen Binns also reported that he had received Lt Gen Odierno's response to his recommendations for PIC. Lt Gen Odierno agreed that Basra continued to make progress and projected that Basra would transition in November, with an announcement the preceding month. Maj Gen Binns reported:

"The sting in the tail is that this is not a recommendation; he considers that more time is needed to further assess the impact of Mohan and Jalil (in particular the effect the deployment of the National Police assets that Jalil has been provided has upon the security situation), cites the uncertainty over the fate of Waili ... and has concerns regarding ... reports of militia influence with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF)."

374. Maj Gen Binns judged:

"None of these really give me cause for concern. The ISF has no more militia influence in Basra than anywhere else in the country ... Mohan and Jalil have already proved themselves: a week on Basra is not burning and both Mohan and Jalil have delivered on their promises of more resources."

375. Looking ahead to 2008, Maj Gen Binns warned:

"... we are in danger of being seduced by the current lull in attacks against MNF. The crux is the need to move away from what is seen by the Iraqis as the offensive capability of an occupying force, to one that is focused on Military Assistance and Redevelopment. This progression will increase Iraqi self reliance and develop the economic and political environment necessary to secure external commercial investment. Seeing the political and economic Lines Of Operation undertaken by the FCO and DFID move to the forefront, with the military footprint reducing to provide the force protection and an enhanced BMATT [British Military Advisory and Training Team] role. We are reasonably confident that our engagement with the Shia polity proves this is the way ahead, although, inevitably, as this is Iraq, there will be difficult moments."

376. In a Current Assessment Note on Iranian support to JAM Special Groups, issued on 13 September, a CIG assessed that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC QF) was continuing to provide **"training, financial support and weaponry to Shia militants attacking Multi-National Forces (MNF) across Iraq"**.¹⁸⁶ JAM Special Groups were receiving significant help.

¹⁸⁶ CIG Current Assessment Note, 13 September 2007, 'Iranian Support to Jaysh al-Mahdi Special Groups'.

377. The CIG judged that it was unclear how the Special Groups would respond to the recent “freeze” on JAM activity by Muqtada al-Sadr, but doubted that it would affect Iran’s influence.

378. The Assessment Note continued:

“... we judge that **IRGC QF control over these special groups is far from total**. The special groups are using Iranian weaponry to target Shia rivals against Iranian wishes ... And ... there is increasing division between leaders of some of the special groups.

“In many areas the distinction between special groups and more militant elements of mainstream JAM is becoming increasingly blurred as Muqtada al-Sadr’s control of the latter ebbs, leaving them more open to Iranian influence ...”

379. On 13 September, President Bush made a speech on Iraq.¹⁸⁷ Describing the challenge there as “formidable”, he nonetheless pointed to the successes of the surge in Baghdad and Anbar. He said:

“Because of this success, General Petraeus believes we have now reached the point where we can maintain our gains with fewer American forces. He has recommended that we not replace about 2,200 Marines scheduled to leave Anbar province later this month. In addition, he says it will be possible to bring home an Army combat brigade, for a total force reduction of 5,700 troops by Christmas. And he expects that by July, we will be able to reduce our troop levels in Iraq from 20 combat brigades to 15.”

380. Having consulted with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, other members of his national security team, Iraqi officials and leaders of both parties in Congress, President Bush announced that he had accepted Gen Petraeus’ recommendations. President Bush directed that Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker report again to Congress in March 2008 with “a fresh assessment of the situation in Iraq and of the troop levels and resources we need to meet our national security objectives”.

381. Mr Prentice reported to the FCO on 13 September that it looked likely agreement would be reached to renew resolution 1723, on the understanding that it would be the last time and that a new bilateral US/Iraq security arrangement would be put in place by the end of 2008.¹⁸⁸

382. Mr Prentice commented that there was a new US team in Baghdad, which had no corporate experience of the negotiations that led to resolution 1723. Those officials had told him that their interpretation was that a long-term partnership should include coalition partners. Mr Prentice had explained to them why moving to a security relationship

¹⁸⁷ Speech Bush, 13 September 2007, ‘Speech – President Bush on Iraq’.

¹⁸⁸ eGram 37790/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 13 September 2007, ‘Iraq: UNSCR – US Activity Behind the Scenes’.

without a UN resolution would be problematic for the UK, but suggested that this would be an important point to reinforce with other US interlocutors.

383. Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that, despite this concern, he had felt “absolutely joined at the hip” with his US colleagues, who had invited him to sit in on their negotiations with the Iraqis on the text of a new resolution in order to ensure that the UK’s legal requirements were satisfied in the resulting text.¹⁸⁹

384. On 14 September, Mr Brown said publicly that the UK would meet its responsibilities and honour its obligations in Iraq.¹⁹⁰ Decisions on the strength of UK forces would “continue to depend on conditions on the ground” but would be a UK choice.

385. Mr Prentice discussed Basra in his introductory meeting with Prime Minister Maliki on 15 September.¹⁹¹ Prime Minister Maliki agreed that Gen Mohan and Maj Gen Jalil had done an excellent job in Basra. He had authorised extra resources to sustain the momentum. He was optimistic that a solution could be found that would result in the replacement of Governor Waili so that Basra would be ready for PIC within the next two months, and that arrangements would be “well under way” by Mr Brown’s October statement.

386. Prime Minister Maliki emphasised that, despite the ISF’s readiness to take on security responsibility, the UK should be certain about its capacity to fulfil its agreed future roles for the next phase. Mr Prentice assured him that was the case.

387. Mr Prentice also discussed the likelihood of renewing resolution 1723 during his introductory call with Prime Minister Maliki and also with Dr Rubaie.¹⁹² He reported that Prime Minister Maliki believed some change in the MNF mandate was inevitable, reflecting the changed situation in Iraq.

388. Dr Rubaie confirmed that negotiations on the resolution should begin formally in October, at the same time as talks on the content of a future US/Iraqi bilateral security agreement. He wanted that bilateral agreement to be in place by January 2009 and asked whether the UK would be interested in a similar relationship which would encompass political and economic development as well as security.

389. Mr Prentice said that the UK would still need a firm legal basis for its continued presence in Iraq and would need to know more about the thinking about a bilateral/trilateral security relationship before committing. Obviously the UK could not be bound by any US/Iraqi negotiations to which it had not been party. Dr Rubaie agreed with

¹⁸⁹ Public hearing, 6 January 2010, page 40.

¹⁹⁰ *BBC News*, 14 September 2007, *Troop numbers a UK choice – Brown*.

¹⁹¹ eGram 38048/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 15 September 2007, ‘Iraq: Meeting with PM Maliki’.

¹⁹² eGram 38042/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 15 September 2007, ‘Iraq: UNSCR Call on PM Maliki and Dr Rubaie National Security Adviser’.

his suggestion that the UK should join the US/Iraqi negotiation group (the High Level Working Group).

390. On 15 September, the Sadrists withdrew from the UIA grouping in protest at the Iraqi Government's failure to meet their demands for an unbiased investigation into the clashes between JAM and Badr forces during the holy pilgrimage to Karbala in August.¹⁹³

391. Their action, together with the withdrawal of Fadhila in March, left the UIA (which had originally held 128 of the 275 seats in the Council of Representatives) with only 81 seats. Attempts to join forces with the Sunni Islamic Party and to encourage Fadhila to rejoin the Alliance had failed, leaving Prime Minister Maliki vulnerable to attempts from others to oust him (former Prime Minister Ja'afari had been making moves to do so), creating a wider destabilising effect on the Baghdad political scene.

392. Mr Prentice commented:

"Our interest, and the higher Iraqi interest, remains the emergence of a competent, inclusive administration able to command a majority in the CoR [Council of Representatives] for its programme. Maliki is leaching parliamentary strength but is far from finished ... The better result would still be Hashemi and Tawafuq's return to government and the CoR's endorsement of a Maliki-led Cabinet refreshed with new technocrat recruits."

393. The leader of the Anbar "Awakening", Sheikh Sittar, was murdered in mid-September. AQ-I claimed responsibility.¹⁹⁴ In his weekly report, Lt Gen Rollo described Sheikh Sittar's death as "most unwelcome news", commenting that it was "too early to tell how Sittar's death will affect the security environment in Anbar – in the short term the province has remained calm, with tribal leaders vowing to continue his work".

394. Lt Gen Rollo also reported that a feared spike of violence in Iraq around the time of Ambassador Crocker and Gen Petraeus' testimony to Congress, which was also the week before Ramadan, had not materialised. Lt Gen Rollo contrasted the attack rate in the week before Ramadan in 2006 (986 attacks, averaging 140 per day) with the figures for 2007 (569, averaging 81 per day).

395. On 16 September, Maj Gen Binns wrote to Lt Gen Houghton in relation to negotiations with JAM1 to recommend that:

"Working to an agreed set of objectives, I seek the authority to negotiate and agree the best deal I can get."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ eGram 39173/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 24 September 2007, 'Iraq: Political Manoeuvring'.

¹⁹⁴ Minute Rollo to CDS, 16 September 2007, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (270) 16 Sep 07'.

¹⁹⁵ Minute GOC MND(SE) to CJO, 16 September 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION] Strategy'.

396. Maj Gen Binns explained that he needed to be able to approve a deal at short notice in order to “keep the process alive”.

397. Government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 again on 18 September and said that “If the peace held there would be further releases in 23 days or so.”¹⁹⁶ JAM1 said that “it was time for us, the British, to establish proper plans to exploit this period of reduction in hostilities. There should be three clear headings: Security, Economics, Politics, each to be followed by an agreed plan.”

398. Reporting to London following the meeting, the officials explained that hopes of demonstrable development work in Basra attributed to the British had been dashed by the PRT, whose “key themes are empowerment and mentoring – nothing that smacks either of MNF direction or dictation”.

399. Mr Browne reported to Cabinet on 18 September that there had been little change in Iraq over the past week: Basra was still calm and the level of attacks on UK forces at Basra Air Station had reduced to “a very low level”.¹⁹⁷ This was primarily “a reflection of political developments within the various factions of Jaysh al-Mahdi, with some wanting to participate in the political process and others ... who were inclined to violence”. Both he and Mr Brown would be meeting Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker that afternoon with a view to establishing US thinking on the medium to longer term, including expectations of the UK.

400. Mr Brown said that there would need to be a discussion on Iraq in Cabinet in the next few weeks.

401. Mr Brown and Mr Miliband, accompanied by ACM Stirrup and officials, met Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker on 18 September.¹⁹⁸ Mr Brown underlined how successful the handover of Basra Palace had been. Gen Petraeus agreed and said that a decision on PIC could be possible later that year, but there were issues to be resolved, including the status of the Governor. Nevertheless:

“By the time of the Prime Minister’s statement in October, it might be possible to give a sense of the timeframes, with November/December as a possible PIC target.”

402. Gen Petraeus added that he considered it would be important to retain a divisional HQ in Basra, given its political and economic significance.

403. Mr Brown said that economic development of the South remained a major UK priority (see Section 10.2). Gen Petraeus said there were a number of initiatives on

¹⁹⁶ Email government official working closely with the military, 19 September 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: 18 September meeting with JAM1’.

¹⁹⁷ Cabinet Conclusions, 18 September 2007.

¹⁹⁸ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 18 September 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with General Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, 18 September’.

which the UK should engage, including clearance of the port, the contract for which was out to tender.

404. At the end of the discussion Mr Brown highlighted three areas for follow-up:

- further discussion, including with the Iraqis, of the timeframe for Basra PIC;
- an enhanced UK effort on economic development, including the port; and
- further US/UK discussion of long-term force requirements.

405. Mr Brown asked Mr McDonald to take forward work on these three strands of activity during his visit to Washington the following week.

406. On 19 September, MOD officials sought Mr Browne's agreement for Maj Gen Binns to release up to 10 further internees in two groups of five, if necessary, "as a bridging measure pending negotiation of a longer-term agreement".¹⁹⁹ The minute explained:

"... GOC MND(SE) is concerned that the discussions have hit an awkward patch and that the already fragile security and political dynamics may unravel, causing a breakdown in the cessation of violence. There are already some initial signs that JAM Secret Cells are stepping up efforts to resume attacks on the COB ... an MND(SE) response to these attacks may trigger a wider escalation of violence.

"... we wish to give the GOC the flexibility to manage these discussions in the short-term, pending agreement to a longer term negotiating strategy. The GOC believes that it may be necessary to release one or possibly even two further batches of five internees in order to prevent a breakdown in the discussions. The GOC judges that a release of up to ten people over Ramadan would be enough to buy sufficient time properly to consider with our interlocutors how to align our other activities to deliver our desired long term objectives. If we do not have this flexibility, and delay any further releases until we have agreed a longer term plan, there is serious risk that the Secret Cells will gain sufficient authority within JAM to resume their attacks against the coalition."

407. The advice reported that only one of those proposed for release by JAM1 had previously been judged to be high risk, and MOD officials had informed MND(SE) that he should only be released if "absolutely essential". Advice on long-term strategy would be accompanied by advice on presentation, following a request by Mr Browne in light of comments made by Gen Petraeus in his testimony to Congress.

408. On 20 September, Mr Browne marked the advice "agreed".²⁰⁰

409. Mr Richard Jones, British Consul General in Basra, wrote to Mr Frank Baker, FCO Iraq Group, on 20 September, to provide some background on the "Mohan Initiative" as

¹⁹⁹ Minute Keay to PS/Secretary of State [MOD], 19 September 2007, 'Op TELIC: Discussions with JAM'.

²⁰⁰ Minute Keay to PS/Secretary of State [MOD], 19 September 2007, 'Op TELIC: Discussions with JAM' including manuscript comment Browne.

Ministers considered the next phase of the UK presence in Iraq because Mr Jones was not clear to what extent Mr Baker had been kept informed.²⁰¹

410. After describing the process of negotiation and detainee releases, and the accompanying reduction in IDF, Mr Jones concluded: “This is the context of optimism within which the military have drawn up their options for a future posture in southeastern Iraq, which are far more forward-leaning than they would have been before the summer break.”

411. Mr Jones described maintaining the relationship with JAM1 and keeping “the plates spinning in the complex relationship between JAM/OMS, Badr/ISCI, Fadhila and Mohan/the ISF/the Gol” as “the sine qua non for sustained quiet in the province”.

412. Maj Gen Binns reported to Lt Gen Houghton on 20 September that, after returning to Iraq, Gen Petraeus had guided his staff towards a goal of transition to PIC in Basra in mid-December.²⁰²

413. Maj Gen Binns also wrote that information from multiple sources indicated that the security situation in Basra was improving and the Iraqi Police and Army were conducting joint military/police patrols within the city. Basrawis seemed “reassured” by this, though they remained concerned that the militias were using the cease-fire period to reorganise and resupply. Criminality and gangsterism continued to be “endemic”. Maj Gen Binns considered that the security situation was best summed up as “bad, but a lot better now”.

414. AM Peach told the Chiefs of Staff on 20 September that the Iraqi Government had “welcomed” the Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker testimony and that:

“PM Maliki was reportedly buoyed by the report and had interpreted the lack of direct personal criticism towards him as a sign of international support.”²⁰³

415. The Chiefs of Staff observed that the next review of progress in Iraq commissioned from Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker in March 2008 “had the potential to create a further strategic pause, which could make longer term UK planning problematic”.

416. The MIG met on 22 September.²⁰⁴ According to an account of the meeting by a government official working closely with the military who had attended it, Maj Gen Binns wanted to use the time bought by the next detainee releases “to turn the [NAME OF OPERATION] cease-fire into a genuine peace process”. The key aim was to bind JAM into the process so that it continued when there were no more detainees to release. A Basra political conference outside Iraq or a development conference in the city itself were possible means for doing so.

²⁰¹ Letter Jones to Baker, 20 September 2007, ‘Basra: The Mohan Initiative’.

²⁰² Minute Binns to CJO, 20 September 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 20 September 2007’.

²⁰³ Minutes, 20 September 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

²⁰⁴ Email government official working closely with the military, 24 September 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Implications for [presence at current location]’.

417. The official continued:

“Basra City remains a difficult place with JAM carrying arms on the streets with impunity ... But JAM would have been worse if they had unambiguously bombed coalition forces out of the city ...

“The risk is the further weakening of already-weak Iraqi state control in these southern provinces. HMCG [the British Consul General in Basra] is at sea because his instructions to promote and develop the democratic structures of the new Iraqi state are out of touch with what is happening on the ground. The aim of any Basra political conference has to be to bridge the gap between the necessary deals done with the militias and the ineffectual provincial council, to say nothing of the governor. Everyone has a sense that this process should culminate with fresh elections, which would be when the militias such as JAM would theoretically swap their military power for political power, as Muqtada al-Sadr now appears to want. But it remains unclear how we will reach this point. In such circumstances, we view the idea of a political conference as a sensible stopgap.”

418. In his weekly report on 23 September, Lt Gen Rollo wrote that after returning to Iraq Gen Petraeus told him that he thought his visit to London had been:

“... a great success: the mood was quite different from February. Everyone was on side; there was a commitment to Iraq, and a common view on tasks over the winter.”²⁰⁵

419. The MNF-I had formed a working group to look at the conditions for PIC and the tasks for the UK military beyond that. Lt Gen Rollo’s view was that the UK’s planning focus should be on:

- clarifying the mission and tasks anticipated for next summer in Basra;
- producing force packages to carry out these tasks, with and without US support, recognising that the US would have also substantially reduced numbers by next summer;
- thinking through the implications of events going better or worse than anticipated; and
- thinking through the end-game and agreeing it with the US.

420. Government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 again on 24 September and again discussed the security situation, prisoner releases and development work.²⁰⁶ JAM1 reported that his engagement with the UK had received wider endorsement from overall JAM command, who were interested in a wider peace agenda.

²⁰⁵ Minute Rollo to CDS, 23 September 2007, ‘SBMR-I Weekly Report (271) 23 Sep 07’.

²⁰⁶ Email government official working closely with the military, 25 September 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: 24 September meeting with [JAM1]’.

421. The report included the comment:

“This might be a straw in the wind. Or it might represent a significant opportunity to stretch out for a much larger prize ...”

422. Sir John Scarlett and Mr McDonald met on 24 September to discuss Iraq.²⁰⁷

According to his record of the meeting, during the discussion Sir John observed that decisions about the pace of the UK’s drawdown in Basra needed to be taken “with a clear eye to the current cease-fire”. It was important that the JIC reached a judgement on the robustness of the cease-fire and what was keeping it going.

423. Sir John considered that creating a “long-term calm” in Basra would require “energetic” reconstruction and political action.

424. The MCNS discussed Basra at length at its 25 September meeting.²⁰⁸ The Minister of State for National Security, Mr Sherna al-Wa’ili, reported, based on his recent visit to Basra, that it was “not as bad as portrayed”. During the visit he met Gen Mohan and Gen Jalil, who had claimed the problems were due to foreign interference and the many political groups struggling for power. He considered that Gen Mohan was doing a good job, but needed additional support from Baghdad and more forces. Gen Jalil also needed additional forces plus support in retraining 6,000 police officers and more materiel support, including fuel and equipment.

425. Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh said that he had met 12 cross-party Basrawi MPs at their request. Their assessment was that the situation was bad and they expected it to get worse. The numbers of assassinations and attacks were rising and there had been only one arrest. The MPs were critical of both Gen Mohan and Gen Jalil and argued that it was necessary to bring in forces from outside the local area.

426. Deputy Prime Minister Saleh said that it would be important to ensure that politicking between the main political parties in the Council of Representatives did not adversely affect the situation in Basra. He concluded that Baghdad-based Basrawi politicians should be encouraged to keep their local representatives in line.

427. Mr Prentice commented:

“The discussion on Basra reflects the continued unease in the Iraqi system about the situation there. We are not going to overcome this in the coming weeks as we move towards a decision on PIC. But we will continue to address it with all interlocutors, including the incessantly gloomy (and self-interested) MPs: taking them through all the work we have done to improve Basra’s security and economic situation; underlining that we will continue to provide support post-PIC; but emphasising that the Gol and others in positions of influence must also play their part in working

²⁰⁷ Minute C, 25 September 2007, C’s Meeting with Simon McDonald’.

²⁰⁸ eGram 39796/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 27 September 2007, ‘Iraq: Ministerial Committee on National Security, 25 September’.

constructively towards a better future for Basra. We will also continue to work on the US – whose REO [Regional Embassy Office] persists in sending out downbeat reports, contributing to US disquiet over Basra, most recently predicting a rise in Shia on Shia and other Islamic violence.

“Overall it is welcome that the centre is finally paying attention to Basra and Basra’s needs: their worries reflect a growing sense of ownership, which we have long wished to see.”

428. On 26 September, Maj Gen Binns wrote to Lt Gen Houghton, observing that he had not received a formal response to his minute of 16 September, which asked for authority to negotiate the best deal possible without seeking further clearance.²⁰⁹ The minute had instead resulted in a request from PJHQ for a campaign plan. Having seen an early draft of one, Maj Gen Binns concluded that “the work would be nugatory. The operation is too dynamic.” He believed that enthusiasm for the negotiations was waning in London, and asked Lt Gen Houghton for instructions.

429. Maj Gen Binns asked Lt Gen Houghton to agree that “end state” should be “enduring security which facilitates and preserves a political climate suitable for development”. He wrote:

“I am operating with current headroom to release two further tranches of five internees on 28 September and 5 Oct. I need more headroom; another five for release on 12 Oct and then a further 15 to be released between 13 Oct and 3 Nov in order to keep the process alive.”

430. In his weekly update on 27 September, Maj Gen Binns commented that the UK should be seeking to:

“... marshal its available and not inconsiderable resources to convince the US hierarchy that PIC is doable so that we can get past PIC and work on the post-PIC mission. The key point is to trust the Iraqis to take responsibility for their own destiny, having given them the tools to do so.”²¹⁰

431. The MNF-I had established a working group to review the situation and Maj Gen Binns intended to use the forthcoming visit to Basra by its leader, US Major General Roberson, to “take the initiative and enlist his aid to get Basra to PIC”.

432. In the same report, Maj Gen Binns reported that a car bomb attack at a police station in Basra on 25 September had killed three and wounded 17 others. He wrote that car bomb attacks were a “relative rarity” in MND(SE). Locally, the attack was believed to have been carried out by AQ.

²⁰⁹ Minute GOC MND(SE) to CJO, 26 September 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] Strategy’.

²¹⁰ Minute Binns to CJO, 27 September 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 27 September 2007’.

433. A separate explosion at a Sunni mosque near Basra the following day, which killed five people, looked to have been a sectarian retaliation fuelled by this belief. MNF considered that the earlier attack could well have been intra-Shia violence.

434. On 28 September, government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 again. The day before the meeting JAM1 had telephoned to warn that JAM elements had identified British soldiers deployed to the north of Basra, and were preparing an attack.²¹¹ The officials alerted MND(SE) and the troops were extracted immediately.

435. The previous day's incident was not discussed during the meeting which began by focusing on an IDF attack on Basra Air Station that morning. The officials reported that Maj Gen Binns had been talked out of cancelling the release of five detainees due that day as a result, adding "some still have not quite got the concept that we are buying [JAM1's] support and influence to advance peace, not peace itself".

436. The officials then asked JAM1 what JAM members were doing while they were not fighting – was there a risk that redundancy would inspire boredom and restlessness and increase the chances of further violence? JAM1 agreed that people needed work. Possibilities might include the Army, the Police Force, manual work on reconstruction or learning new skills.

437. Mr McDonald discussed future plans for Iraq with Mr Hadley in Washington on 27 September.²¹² Reporting on their meeting to the MOD, Mr McDonald said he had explained the UK assumption that PIC would happen in November or December 2007, after which point the UK would retain a similar military presence until March 2008 (5,000 troops, 4,500 of which would be based at Basra Air Station).

438. Beyond March 2008 the UK aspired to reduce troop numbers in stages over the spring and summer, to around 1,500. That would require "significant US support in Basra".

439. Mr Hadley's staff expressed concern about the numbers after March 2008. They indicated that the US had hoped that the UK would retain the lead in Basra throughout 2008; the US had not planned to deploy to Basra in large numbers. Gen Petraeus had already set out the tasks that he wanted the UK to fulfil in MND(SE).

440. In response, Mr McDonald said that the UK was already unable to perform some of those tasks: the UK had therefore "considered the list as a high opening bid". Mr McDonald reported that they had discussed "the bare bones of a compromise": the UK would retain 4,500 troops in Basra until March 2008 (the "tactical overwatch" period); between March and November ("operational overwatch") the UK would reduce its troops to 2,000-2,500, focused on training and mentoring but retaining some intervention capacity. In extremis, they would need to rely on "over-the-horizon US support".

²¹¹ Email government official working closely with the military, 30 September 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: Meeting with [JAM1] on 28 September'.

²¹² Letter McDonald to Forber, 28 September 2007, 'Iraq; Meeting with Steve Hadley, 27 September'.

441. After November 2008, it might be possible to move to “strategic overwatch”, with re-intervention capacity based elsewhere in Iraq and in Kuwait. Mr McDonald and Mr Hadley agreed that “it was now important for our senior military personnel to discuss the relative merits of the plans”.

442. Once Mr McDonald had returned to the UK he briefed Mr Brown on the discussion. When Mr Brown and President Bush spoke by video conference on 28 September, the President said he had also been briefed on the meeting and was comfortable with UK plans.

443. Basra “took top billing” again at the 30 September MCNS meeting.²¹³ With the exception of Dr Safa al-Safi (the Acting Minister of Justice), the Committee agreed that Gen Mohan had performed well in bringing Basra under control and that his tenure should be extended.

444. Mr Prentice commented that the “general tone of Iraqi debate on Basra seems to be improving. General Petraeus was especially supportive.”

October 2007

445. Government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 on the morning of 1 October.²¹⁴ In order to mitigate his personal risk, JAM1 asked for future negotiations to be conducted through his lawyer. Under pressure from senior Sadrists, JAM1 also stressed the importance of his interlocutors having broader contacts with JAM, to protect the agreement that had been reached if anything should happen to him.

446. One of the officials commented:

“Seen from here, these latest developments emphasise the need for a rapid broadening of political engagement with the Sadrists in Basra.”

447. On 1 October, at the request of the FCO and the MOD, the JIC examined the prospects for political stability in Basra and the threat to UK forces up to spring 2008.²¹⁵

448. The Assessment included graphs showing the recent reduction in attacks on MNF bases in Basra, from a high of 226 attacks in July to nine in September.

449. The JIC’s Key Judgements were:

“I. No single political party dominates politics in Basra. Politicians use their positions primarily to pursue personal power and wealth. Most are supported by Shia militias

²¹³ eGram 40408/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 2 October 2007, ‘Iraq: Ministerial Committee for National Security, 30 September’.

²¹⁴ Email government official working closely with the military, 2 October 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: 1 October Meeting with [JAM1]’.

²¹⁵ JIC Assessment, 1 October 2007, ‘Politics and Violence in Basra: Prospects’.

who are in de facto control over many districts of Basra City. Baghdad's ability to determine events is very limited.

"II. The primary reason for the recent reduction in attacks against the Multi-National Forces (MNF) in Basra is the negotiation between MND(SE) and [JAM1]. It is unclear how long this can be sustained when or if all JAM personnel have been released ... in the absence of continuing visible momentum towards full departure of UK forces we judge that the point would eventually be reached when JAM sees the balance of advantage in resuming their campaign against the MNF. Sporadic attacks will continue in any case.

"III. As the MNF presence reduces and provincial elections approach, intra-Shia violence is likely to intensify. We cannot predict the scale. Concern to avoid provoking US intervention, pressure from national Shia political leader, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and probably the Iranians, and a desire among at least some of Basra's political leaders and security officials to reach local accommodations will all help restrain the militias. If street fighting did break out, it is likely to be of short duration, but in the worst case could surpass the small-scale skirmishes in other provinces that have transitioned to Iraqi control.

"IV. The Iraqis would only call for MNF re-intervention in Basra as a last resort, in the event of violence over an extended period beyond the capacity of the Iraqi army and police. Locally-raised army units are unlikely to be willing or able to cope in the event of serious and sustained intra-Shia clashes, but new units are being deployed which are loyal to the central government and are likely to be more effective in dealing with low level violence. The largely ineffective local police are heavily infiltrated by militias and would take sides in any fighting.

"V. Iran's aim is to speed the withdrawal of coalition forces while making their life as difficult as possible so long as they remain: the Iranians will continue providing training, weaponry and encouragement for Shia extremists to attack the MNF. Iran's ability to determine political outcomes or ease intra-Shia tensions is limited: it is unlikely to want to take sides in the event of clashes between rival Shia factions."

450. The JIC assessed that Muqtada al-Sadr's public call for a cessation of JAM violence might also have been a factor in the reduced number of attacks against the MNF. Other possible factors included a positive reaction by the militias and their political sponsors to the withdrawal of UK forces from Basra City and efforts by Gen Mohan and Gen Jalil to improve the performance of the ISF.

451. The JIC judged:

"It is unclear how long the lull can be sustained. Its success to date suggests that ... has the backing of the majority of mainstream JAM in Basra for his tactics, despite initial reporting showing that some local commanders were sceptical ... personal ambitions are unclear ... suggested that JAM's aim following withdrawal of UK

forces from Basra City would be to secure their complete withdrawal by attacking the remaining base at Basra airport.”

452. On 2 October Mr Brown visited Iraq.²¹⁶ He met Prime Minister Maliki, Vice President Hashemi, Deputy Prime Minister Saleh, Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker in Baghdad, and Maj Gen Binns and Mr Jones in Basra.

453. The objectives for the trip were to underline:

- UK commitment to Iraq;
- the importance of building on security progress by making a decision soon to transfer to PIC;
- the need for progress on reconciliation; and
- that economic progress was necessary as a strategic priority.²¹⁷

454. Mr Brown was provided with a briefing note on negotiations with JAM1 that had taken place “over the last year”.²¹⁸ It said that JAM had been pushed towards an accommodation with the MNF by a combination of:

- “• resolute British military action in the first half of 2007;
- a growing sense that Iranian tactical support was leading to Iranian infiltration of the Sadrist movement;
- a realisation that the UK really did plan to leave Basra;
- the risk that British forces might be replaced by US troops;
- JAM activists in MND(SE) detention feared that a continued insurgency might leave them marginalised.”

455. The briefing note said that the challenge was to broaden the existing cease-fire into a political process with backing from a wider range of Iraqi groups and the central government. Ideally this would transform Iraqi perceptions of UK forces as an army of occupation into acceptance of, and support for, a continuing UK military assistance and development mission, and would expand the process beyond MND(SE).

456. JAM1 was reported to want increased and visible UK development assistance for Basra province as well as more detainee releases. Until the process included political and economic elements, the cease-fire would “remain fragile and possibly short-term”.

457. A manuscript note on the briefing note by Mr Brown’s Private Secretary recorded that Mr Brown was grateful for the briefing and for the actions it explained. He would be writing to offer his congratulations.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Letter Fletcher to Forber, 3 October 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Visit to Iraq, 2 October’.

²¹⁷ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 1 October 2007, ‘Iraq Visit: 2 October 2007’.

²¹⁸ Briefing [unattributed], [undated], ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] – moving from ceasefire to peace’.

²¹⁹ Briefing [unattributed], [undated], ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] – moving from ceasefire to peace’ including manuscript comment Fletcher.

458. In their 45-minute bilateral meeting, Prime Minister Maliki told Mr Brown that 2008 would be the “year of reconstruction”.²²⁰ The Iraqi Government was working towards PIC in Basra on 21 November, and hoped to announce that on 1 November. Mr Brown welcomed this progress and emphasised the importance of following up transition with progress on political reconciliation.

459. An account of Mr Brown’s visit to Basra Air Station by government officials working closely with the military reported that Maj Gen Binns said “the situation that he would brief was wholly dependent on ... [NAME OF OPERATION] without which the picture would be utterly different”.²²¹

460. The officials judged that the FCO briefing attended by Mr Brown had been “thin” and considered it:

“... dispiriting to hear eager questions about the number of policemen trained from McDonald and references to the ‘dividends of Op SINBAD’ [see Section 9.5]. Clearly JIC papers are not going where they should. The impression given of a Basra growing to stability and majority through the wise tutelage of HMG in its various forms was fundamentally mendacious. But less grotesquely so than in the post-SINBAD days.”

461. Mr Brown was briefed on the negotiations with JAM1, which made “no secret of the fragility of the process”. Mr McDonald argued that the reduction in hostilities was a result of the UK departure from Basra Palace. The officials believed that their graphics “elegantly disproved this assertion”. The wider JAM cease-fire called by Muqtada al-Sadr had “camouflaged and perhaps subsidised” the Basra agreement.

462. Mr Brown told journalists in Baghdad that he believed:

“... within the next two months we can move to Provincial Iraqi Control, and that is the Iraqis taking responsibility for their own security in the whole of Basra ... And I believe that by the end of the year ... a thousand of our troops can be brought back to the United Kingdom ...”²²²

463. After returning from Iraq, Mr Brown’s Private Secretary commissioned advice from the Cabinet Office on:

- how best to support a Basra Investment Forum;
- greater UK resources for the effort on reconstruction and economic development;
- whether the UK should do more to support the clear up of Umm Qasr port;

²²⁰ Letter Fletcher to Forber, 3 October 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Visit to Iraq, 2 October’.

²²¹ Email government official working closely with the military, 3 October 2007, ‘PM visits Basrah Air Station’.

²²² Note, 2 October 2007, ‘Transcript of doorstep given by the Prime Minister, Mr Gordon Brown, in Baghdad on Tuesday 2 October 2007’.

- how best to maximise pressure on Iraqi political leaders to hold a further meeting of the “1 plus 3” group (the Executive Group); and
- how the UK could offer troops in theatre greater access to the internet.²²³

464. Government officials working closely with the military met JAM1’s lawyer on 3 October, who told them that Muqtada al-Sadr had told JAM1 not to advance negotiations with the UK any further.²²⁴

465. The lawyer argued that JAM1 himself should be released so that he could convince al-Sadr in person of the need to continue. This request was not repeated by JAM1 who met the officials later the same day. He indicated that he would send a letter setting out the case for the negotiations to al-Sadr, whose instruction did not yet reflect a final decision.

466. Sir John Scarlett discussed Iraq with Mr McDonald on 3 October.²²⁵ Mr McDonald said that he and Mr Brown were aware of the fragility of the situation in Basra. They did not necessarily think this affected PIC: that was a political decision and the timing had been in view for several months, since before negotiations with JAM1 began.

467. On 4 October, a government official specialising in the Middle East reported on a meeting chaired by Mr Day originally intended to discuss a negotiating framework but which had been extended to cover immediate threats to the deal.²²⁶ The official’s report of the discussion said:

“... there was a general complacency that the cease-fire was in the bag for as long as we had detainees to release. Emerging British policy in Basra was based on the firm fact of the cease-fire.”

468. If the cease-fire were to collapse, the official reported that Mr Day’s concerns were casualties, presentational difficulties for the Prime Minister, and difficulty in getting PIC approved: the “overriding aim of HMG’s policy in MND(SE)”.

469. The immediate aim of negotiation therefore “had to be to sustain the cease-fire until we got to PIC”. A submission, a draft of which was already circulating, would be put to Ministers setting out the short-term challenge and the potential risks of linking the UK Government’s success in Basra to JAM. Negotiations would be likely to confer a degree of legitimacy on JAM1, the long-term implications of which were not obvious.

²²³ Letter Fletcher to Forber, 3 October 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Visit to Iraq, 2 October’.

²²⁴ Email government official working closely with the military, 4 October 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] Meeting with [JAM1] on 3 October’.

²²⁵ Minute C, 3 October 2007, C’s Meeting with Simon McDonald, 3 October 2007’.

²²⁶ Email government official specialising in the Middle East, 4 October 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Sustaining the Ceasefire’.

470. The note continued:

“We pointed out that just because we engaged in talks, we did not necessarily have to come to any sort of agreement with JAM, beyond the exchange of detainees for a lack of IDF. But the aim of such talks was to tie JAM into a political accommodation, before all of our detainee chips were played and before we had to release [JAM1] himself. We also commented that we would have little influence over what happened in Basra after PIC. JAM would be a force whether we liked it or not ...”

471. The official who was leading on drafting the submission commented after the meeting that:

“Jon [Day]’s concern (which is shared by SofS) is that we need to be careful we are not seen to be taking sides in the politics of Basra ... he would be much more comfortable therefore to focus discussion on the security and development axes and leave the politics to the FCO ... after his release.”²²⁷

472. Mr Browne wrote to Mr Brown on 5 October setting out his proposals for the UK military commitment to Iraq during 2008.²²⁸ He reported that the MOD had agreed a revised set of tasks with Gen Petraeus which would be achievable within the force levels suggested. Mr Browne proposed:

- retaining current troops levels (4,500 in Basra plus 500 elsewhere) until March 2008; and
- drawing down to around 2,500 troops from March 2008, focused on training and mentoring the ISF with “only a limited *in extremis* re-intervention capability”.

473. Mr Browne assessed that this deployment would not require significant US support in southern Iraq. The estimate of costs from May 2008 was £650m per year. Possible options beyond November 2008 had not yet been considered.

474. Lt Gen Rollo reported on 7 October that Basra continued to attract the attention of Prime Minister Maliki and the MCNS: “in itself an entirely healthy indication of increasing acceptance that Basra is their responsibility”.²²⁹

475. A recent MOD/MOI delegation to Basra had returned with a list of recommendations, including on the need to “tighten up border and post security and to clear selected areas of the town of militias”.

476. Lt Gen Rollo also reported that in the margins of Mr Brown’s visit Gen Petraeus had queried the UK’s long-term intentions in 2009 and had pursued the matter again with Lt Gen Rollo subsequently.

²²⁷ Email PJHQ-J9 DCOMDSEC to PJHQ-CJO-MA, 5 October 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]’.

²²⁸ Letter Browne to Brown, 5 October 2007, ‘Iraq’.

²²⁹ Minute Rollo to CDS, 7 October 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (273) 7 Oct 07’.

477. Gen Petraeus had:

“... asserted that our [the UK’s] line had always been ‘in together, out together’ – quoting PM Blair as his authority. My response was that we had defined strategic objectives in Iraq which, when met, would see our departure ... While 2009 seems light years away at present, and retaining flexibility against uncertain future events will always offer advantages, some further definition on the nature of both our long term security relationship with Iraq, and the time/events that would lead to it, would be helpful as bilateral arrangements to succeed the proposed Dec 08 UNSCR start to be discussed.”

478. NSID(OD) met for the first time on 8 October.²³⁰ The main aim of the meeting, according to the Cabinet Office steering brief for Mr Brown, was for him to “inform colleagues of the content of your statement on Iraq, focusing on the military plans and economic initiative”.

479. Ahead of the meeting, Mr Prentice reported that political progress in Baghdad remained slow.²³¹ Key legislation remained stalled, with the Kurdish parties refusing to concede ground on revenue sharing and hydrocarbons legislation. Prime Minister Maliki still lacked a majority to complete his Cabinet and drive through legislation. The UK continued to work for the reconvening of the Executive Group but this seemed unlikely until after Eid, which began the following week.

480. At the meeting on 8 October, Mr Brown informed his colleagues that he would be making a statement on Iraq in Parliament that afternoon, which would reflect the three key elements he had focused on during his recent visit to Iraq:

- political reconciliation;
- economic reconstruction; and
- the security situation.²³²

481. There had been little progress on political reconciliation but economic reconstruction in Basra was making better progress, largely as a result of the improved security environment. The security situation had improved in recent weeks, making possible the handover of Basra Palace to the Iraqis in September and raising the possibility of PIC in December. If the current trend continued, it should be possible to reduce UK forces to around 2,500 by spring 2008.

482. In discussion, it was noted that progress on the security situation had been due to a number of factors, not least of which was the JAM cease-fire. That cease-fire

²³⁰ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 5 October 2007, ‘NSID(OD) Iraq Meeting – Steering Brief: Monday 8 October 09:30’.

²³¹ eGram 41205/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 7 October 2007, ‘Iraq: Political Update: Background for NSID, 8 October’.

²³² Minutes, 8 October 2007, NSID(OD) meeting.

was fragile, however, and would need to be sustained in order for the current relative calm to continue.

483. According to Sir John Scarlett's own account of the meeting, Mr Brown:

"... spoke very strongly on the cease-fire in Basra and the dramatic improvement in the security situation. This represented a huge opportunity."²³³

484. Mr Brown expressed thanks and admiration for the work on that initiative.

485. Sir John recorded that "CDS [ACM Stirrup] argued that we must take the opportunity to push forward events while the tide was running in our favour". Mr Brown endorsed the point that the cease-fire was not simply about prisoner releases; the UK had to show progress on the political and economic front, on which JAM1 was also focused.

486. In a covering comment, Sir John added that the Prime Minister had:

"... personally ... acknowledged the importance of [NAME OF OPERATION] ... He also understands that the effort has to move into the political and economic sphere and not just the security issue. So there are signs of traction at the top of government; ..."

487. Mr Prentice shared key points from an advance copy of Mr Brown's statement to Parliament with Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker, and shared its full text shortly before Mr Brown began to speak in Parliament.

488. Mr Prentice reported that Gen Petraeus had been "complimentary" about the statement, describing it as the culmination of "a good process of consultation altogether" which has worked out "a sensible way ahead" on UK force levels.²³⁴

489. Both Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker repeated the US concern that the UK presence should be centred on Basra, not elsewhere in southern Iraq. Mr Prentice assured both that this was not in doubt: the geographical description "Southern Iraq" was simply used to distinguish UK forces from those elsewhere in Iraq.

490. Gen Petraeus also emphasised the need to be cautious about the stability of improved conditions in Basra: the underlying factors behind it were fragile and the UK should be ready to respond if conditions required it.

491. On 8 October, Lt Gen Odierno recommended to Gen Petraeus that Basra should move to PIC in December.²³⁵ He had been encouraged by the positive impact that Gen Mohan and Gen Jalil were having but remained concerned by reports of

²³³ Email C, 9 October 2007, 'Iraq NSID 8 Oct 2007' attaching Note, 'NSID Iraq – 8 October 2007'.

²³⁴ eGram 41359/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 8 October 2007, 'Iraq: PM's Statement: Reactions from Petraeus and Crocker'.

²³⁵ Minute Binns to CJO, 11 October 2007, 'GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 11 October 2007'.

militia influence within the Basra ISF. Maj Gen Binns commented: “Not a ringing endorsement, but a positive step and an endorsement we’ve been trying to achieve since April this year.”

492. On the afternoon of 8 October, Mr Brown told the House of Commons that the UK expected to establish PIC in Basra in the next two months and that:

“As part of the process of putting the Iraqi forces in the lead in Basra, we have just gone through a demanding operation which involved consolidating our forces at Basra airport. That was successfully completed, as planned, last month. The next important stage in delivering our strategy to hand over security to the Iraqis is a move from a combat role in the rest of Basra province to overwatch, which will itself have two distinct stages. In the first, the British forces that remain in Iraq will have the following tasks: training and mentoring the Iraqi army and police force; securing supply routes and policing the Iran-Iraq border; and the ability to come to the assistance of the Iraqi security forces when called upon. Then in the spring of next year – and guided as always by the advice of our military commanders – we plan to move to a second stage of overwatch where the coalition would maintain a more limited re-intervention capacity and where the main focus will be on training and mentoring.

“... after detailed discussions with our military commanders, a meeting of the national security committee, discussions with the Iraqi Government and our allies and, subject, of course, to conditions on the ground – we plan from next spring to reduce force numbers in southern Iraq to a figure of 2,500 ... In both stages of overwatch, around 500 logistics and support personnel will be based outside Iraq but elsewhere in the region. At all times ... we will be honouring our obligations to the Iraqi people and their security, and ensuring the safety of our forces.”²³⁶

493. Mr Brown also announced a new policy on resettlement support for locally employed staff (see Section 15.1) and emphasised the importance of economic reconstruction “to ensure that ordinary Iraqis have a stake in the future”.

494. In the Parliamentary debate that followed, Mr Brown was asked whether he was satisfied that the Iraqi Security Forces were capable of maintaining the security of southern Iraq without UK support, whether the numbers of troops being retained was sufficient to ensure that the troops could protect themselves adequately and whether there was continuing value in retaining any military presence in Iraq.²³⁷

495. In response, Mr Brown explained that he was acting on the advice of his military commanders and that troops were remaining because the Iraqi Government wanted

²³⁶ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 8 October 2007, columns 21-25.

²³⁷ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 8 October 2007, columns 25-37.

their assistance. Asked whether the move from Basra Palace to the air base had shown that the UK presence was part of the problem, Mr Brown commented:

“... it was before our troops withdrew from Basra Palace that the security situation in that area became a great deal calmer. Because we are training up the Iraqi Security Forces, they are in a position to police and provide security to that area. Far from moving quickly out of Iraq ... our presence to train and mentor [the Iraqi Security Forces] is an important element in bringing about a calm, or calmer, security situation. On the basis of that calmer security situation, we can build a better future for the Iraqi people.”

496. By 9 October, the JAM suspension of activity had reached its sixth week and mainstream JAM elements remained compliant.²³⁸ Continued attacks had been attributed to the Iranian-backed JAM Special Groups. Mr Tony Pawson, the Deputy Chief of Defence Intelligence, briefed the Chiefs of Staff that the freeze was “unlikely to endure”.

497. Lt Gen Wall told the Chiefs of Staff that there would be a need for “careful handling” of the “differing long term US/UK strategic approaches to Iraq”.

498. Mr Prentice reported on 10 October that the public reaction to Mr Brown’s statement in Iraq had been low-key.²³⁹ Reductions in troop levels had already been widely reported during Mr Brown’s visit, and many Iraqi politicians had left Baghdad for Eid.

499. Mr Brown met Secretary Gates on 11 October and reassured him that the UK “would continue to fulfil its international obligations”.²⁴⁰ He explained that it would be important to accompany progress on security with political and economic improvements to demonstrate a “peace dividend”. The UK was particularly focused on Basra’s economic regeneration.

500. Maj Gen Binns commented in his weekly update on 11 October that the content of Mr Brown’s statement had been welcomed in MND(SE) because:

“We now have a medium term policy, endorsed by Ministers, for our involvement in Iraq.”²⁴¹

501. Government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 again on 11 October.²⁴² JAM1 had not yet received a response from Muqtada al-Sadr to his letter. He said that a delegation from OMS/JAM in Basra might travel to Najaf to speak

²³⁸ Minutes, 9 October 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

²³⁹ eGram 41700/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 10 October 2007, ‘Iraq: Reaction to the Prime Minister’s 8 October Statement’.

²⁴⁰ Letter Fletcher to Forber, 11 October 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with US Defence Secretary’.

²⁴¹ Minute Binns to CJO, 11 October 2007, ‘GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 11 October 2007’.

²⁴² Email government official working closely with the military, 12 October 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Meeting with [JAM1] 11 October’.

to al-Sadr about the positive effect of the agreement. JAM1 told the officials that “our agreement with him was safe” but broadening and deepening it would be difficult and would need to be dealt with via a third party (his lawyer) for the time being.

502. The officials also met JAM1’s lawyer separately on 11 October, who reiterated his request for JAM1 to be released.

503. In an email reporting the meeting, officials reported surprise at the extent to which the Secret Cells had acquiesced in the cease-fire and commented:

“But this good news presents us with more thinking to do. Specifically: is it appropriate that we ask [JAM1] to police Basra not just through policing of his own ranks but also those of other organisations? Does this, perhaps, leads [sic] us too quickly down the uncertain road of vigilantism?”

504. In the weekly update for Mr Brown on 12 October, a Cabinet Office official reported that his statement had “played well in Baghdad and coalition capitals, especially in Washington where the Administration was pleased at the prior levels of co-ordination which had taken place, as well as the content of the statement itself”.²⁴³

505. Although Gen Petraeus had welcomed the statement, he had been “quick to query the UK’s longer term intentions in Iraq, for 2009 and beyond”, making it likely that US-UK planning discussions would now shift to that timeframe.

506. The Cabinet Office official told Mr Brown that the security situation in Basra remained “relatively calm”. Governor Waili’s appeal against his dismissal from post had been successful, and the UK planned to “resume low-key co-operation with him in the interests of moving beyond the political stand-off in Basra” whilst the Iraq Government took other steps towards his dismissal.

507. An MOD official provided advice to Mr Browne on 12 October, seeking his agreement to the release of a further four detainees “to underpin the authority of [JAM1] and thus his ability to maintain control over JAM and other elements in Basra”.²⁴⁴ None of the four individuals was considered to be high risk.

508. This was not the submission on aims and negotiation strategy discussed at Mr Day’s meeting on 4 October; further more detailed advice covering those points was promised.

509. Under “presentational issues” the advice said:

“We have recently developed a revised strategy for handling this process. This involves being more forward about the need for reconciliation between Iraqi groups as a major part of solving the country’s security problems (this was a major feature

²⁴³ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 12 October 2007, ‘Iraq – Weekly Update’.

²⁴⁴ Minute Freer to APS/Secretary of State [MOD], 12 October 2007, ‘Negotiations with JAM: latest position’ including manuscript comment Browne.

of the Prime Minister's statement on 8 October 2007), whilst being prepared to explain the details of how this is being operationalised somewhat more openly when asked. We will seek proactively to promote the fairly successful MNF efforts to facilitate Iraqi reconciliation in other parts of the country. We will also provide some draft text for the Secretary of State's next operational update to Parliament which will go into greater detail about the efforts of General Mohan, supported by MND(SE), to achieve greater political accommodation in the South."

510. The advice also asked for Mr Browne's agreement on proposed lines to take. In answer to the question "are you negotiating with JAM?", the suggested reply was:

"Yes – we talk to JAM and other militia groups in our area of operations as part of the strategy of political engagement and reconciliation we and our coalition partners have long pursued – JAM and similar groups clearly have an interest in and an influence over Basra and the rest of Iraq, and an outright refusal to engage in dialogue with them would not be in Iraq's, or Basra's, best interests. Moreover the Iraqi Government and the US are aware of, and support, these discussions, which form part of the wider reconciliation initiatives being pursued through Iraq. And through the newly-appointed Iraqi Commander of the Basra Operations Centre (BOC), General Mohan, the Iraqis are also engaging with JAM and other groups with a view to reducing the violence perpetrated against MNF and Iraqi civilians. We and the Iraqis will engage with any groups who are interested in joining Iraq's democratic process and reducing violence – it is the right thing to do. We fully support General Mohan in these efforts ..."

511. In response to the question "Has the violence decreased in Basra since you began talking to these groups?", the suggested reply was:

"Talking to these groups is nothing new and so we wouldn't expect to see a sudden decrease in violence. The security situation in Basra remains stable with only a very small proportion of attacks in Iraq happening there. Indeed much of the violence in Basra was directed at the MNF and this has decreased recently. Where security incidents have occurred, the Iraqi security forces have demonstrated their ability to deal with them."

512. Mr Browne marked the submission "noted and agreed" on 13 October.

513. Maj Gen Rose advised the Chiefs of Staff on 16 October that a number of splinter groups, a mixture of Iranian trained/funded Secret Cells and rogue JAM groups opposed to the freeze on violence, had been established in southern Iraq.²⁴⁵

514. One group, Fayha al-Sadr, focused on Basra and Dhi Qar provinces, was thought to be responsible for recent attacks on the COB, but Gen Mohan and Maj Gen Jalil had made improvements in security that made it likely that it would focus its future efforts

²⁴⁵ Minutes, 16 October 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

on other parts of Iraq, where tensions between the Badr-dominated ISF and JAM had created a “more permissive environment”.

515. The Chiefs of Staff noted that work to determine the future UK force structure requirements for MND(SE) beyond March 2008 was being conducted, using a figure of 3,000 personnel as the planning baseline. It would be important to bear in mind the size and nature of the UK’s commitment in Baghdad, particularly the senior officers based there, as part of that work.

516. Government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 on 16 October.²⁴⁶ During the meeting, the compound was hit by indirect fire, which JAM1 described as “the work of wreckers”. The officials said that the attack and JAM1’s reaction to it had helped them to get the point across to MND(SE) that not all indirect fire was a contravention of the agreement reached.

517. The officials raised the prospect of political engagement, explaining that the UK was working with all the Basra parties to achieve political rapprochement and prepare for next year’s elections – except the Sadrists: “It was difficult for us to defend the Sadrists’ rightful place at the political table if they declined to work with other political entities to prepare the meal.” JAM1 explained that Muqtada al-Sadr was clear that foreign troops were “occupiers” and should not be dealt with:

“But this straight bat stuff out of the way, a more nuanced and positive picture emerged: there might actually be two OMS-affiliated parties standing, one of which was ‘pure’ OMS and the other more prepared to broker with minor parties. And OMS was preparing ... a group of leaders in Basra who would deal with other parties and, under the table, with MNF...”

518. The note continued:

“Furthermore, an interlocutor ... would be coming down to Basra from Baghdad ... and would visit [JAM1] in the DIF [Divisional Internment Facility]. This was a senior man, not of the OMS but a Sadrist, who would be seeking to broker a much wider deal which would embrace all the Sadrists on one side and all of MNF on the other ... To that end [JAM1] had already sent us a list of ten Basrawis in American custody whose release would endorse British credentials as the potential deal-makers for all of Iraq ... JAM1 noted that Basrawis still feared that the Americans would, sooner or later, occupy Basra. This would be a disaster, the end of all things. But Sadrists now recognised that the Americans were not beyond negotiation and believed that we offered the most trustworthy point of contact.”

²⁴⁶ Email government official working closely with the military, 16 October 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Meeting with [JAM1] 16 October and MND(SE) [NAME OF OPERATION] Discussions’.

519. Maj Gen Binns reported on 18 October that Gen Petraeus had agreed Lt Gen Odierno's recommendation of PIC for Basra in December.²⁴⁷ Although the meeting of the MCNS had been delayed to 21 October, Maj Gen Binns remained confident that it would confirm the recommendation that Basra should transfer to PIC in December.

520. Dr Zebari told Mr Prentice on 18 October that the Iraqi Government would be requesting a rollover of the current Security Council mandate, though they would need the new resolution to refer explicitly to parallel negotiations between the Iraqi Government and the coalition on a long-term strategic security partnership.²⁴⁸

521. The US and Iraqi Governments would issue a joint declaration in the next few weeks that would set out their longer-term vision. Dr Zebari agreed that the UK would be shown the text in advance and that "US/Gol positions on the declaration and on the shape of more detailed negotiations would need to be co-ordinated with us [the UK]".

522. On 18 October, MOD officials submitted advice to Mr Browne's Assistant Private Secretary, seeking agreement to the release of another three detainees "as a short term measure to help underpin the authority of [JAM1] and thus his ability to maintain control over JAM and other elements in Basra".²⁴⁹

523. The advice said that Mr Browne would be informed which individuals from JAM1's list would be released once the Divisional Internment Review Committee had reached a conclusion. It recorded that:

"Six of these individuals are assessed to be high risk and two in particular are closely associated with IDF attacks against UK forces ... It will also be very difficult to release one of the individuals on this list because he is being processed by the Iraqi legal system and his trial is due to commence in December 2007."

524. Mr Browne annotated the advice "Noted + agreed" on 18 October.²⁵⁰

525. Government officials working alongside the military had a "good-humoured meeting" with JAM1 on 19 October.²⁵¹

526. JAM1 proposed the creation of a reconciliation committee, to provide a public face for detainee releases. The officials proposed that this should "embrace all parties", which

²⁴⁷ Minute Binns to CJO, 18 October 2007, 'GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 18 October 2007'.

²⁴⁸ eGram 42918/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 19 October 2007, 'Iraq: Meeting with Foreign Minister Zebari, 18 October'.

²⁴⁹ Minute Freer to APS/Secretary of State [MOD], 18 October 2007, 'Negotiations with JAM: latest position'.

²⁵⁰ Minute Freer to APS/Secretary of State [MOD], 18 October 2007, 'Negotiations with JAM: latest position' including manuscript comment Browne.

²⁵¹ Email official working closely with the military, 19 October 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: Meeting with [JAM1]'.

JAM1 accepted. The officials said that any such meeting would be useful at present, as there was still too much violence in Basra.

527. On releases, JAM1 said that his new plan was that five prisoners should be released on 10 November, with a steady stream of releases for the next two months. JAM1 asked that his own release should form part of the 10 November batch.

528. The officials concluded:

“... [JAM1]’s assurance that hostilities are not about to resume ... and [JAM1]’s claim that the Secret Cells are signed up (we have some scanty collateral for that) are all positives although all such assurances should be treated with circumspection ...

“But [JAM1]’s request for his own release will be hard to play. He has proved relentless on releases to date and we sense that, however much we seek to draw it into the light, JAM’s feral instincts also remain fixed on the subject. It may be that, at heart, [JAM1] still fears transfer to American custody ... But whilst we might score negotiating points and perhaps even achieve concessions down the road we should be in no doubt that both [JAM1] and his JAM supporters will take this one to the wire. We sense that they, particularly [JAM1] have more to lose than we now. But they might not think so and the next set of negotiations will be hard.”

529. On 23 October, Mr Browne told the House of Commons Select Committee on Defence that:

“The security situation in Basra, in our assessment and in the assessment of the Iraqis themselves who are of course important assessors of this, is that it remains stable ... Attacks on Multi-National Forces decreased by 90 percent in September and the overall figure is 19 compared to August when it was 190 ... The other aspect of course of violence is crime against Iraqis themselves ... it has remained at similar levels to those seen in August prior to the handover of Basra Palace.”²⁵²

530. On 23 October, AM Peach briefed the Chiefs of Staff that tension between the Iraqi Government and the MNF-I had increased.²⁵³ Among the contributing factors were an incident on 16 September in which a private military security company had its operating licence revoked after being accused of excessive force in a convoy protection incident, a number of Iraqi civilian deaths in Sadr City on 21 October caused by the MNF-I, increased use of airstrikes and a belief that the MNF-I had been arming the Sunni bloc. In his view, these tensions might lead to changes to the draft resolution, and so delay it.

531. The Chiefs of Staff observed that “legal advice would be required to establish the status of UK forces should the current UNSCR lapse without replacement by 31 December 2007”.

²⁵² Select Committee on Defence Minutes of Evidence, 23 October 2007, Q4.

²⁵³ Minutes, 23 October 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

532. AM Peach also told the Chiefs of Staff: “Contrary to recent US assessments that AQ-I had been defeated, the UK view remained that AQ-I, whilst severely damaged, retained the ability to be resurgent, particularly if the current pressure were to be released.”

533. In a message to the FCO on 23 October, Mr Prentice urged that it should “start planning how the UK will meet these commitments [in Mr Brown’s 8 October statement] and best protect our wider strategic interests in the medium term – from the end of 2008 and beyond”.²⁵⁴ The urgency arose from the ongoing debate between Iraq and the US on the legal basis for a continued coalition presence in 2009 and beyond.

534. The Iraqi Government was insisting that there could be no extension of a Chapter VII resolution into 2009. Even renewal of the existing resolution for another year looked set to be “a struggle”. To secure what was needed from that continuing debate, Mr Prentice argued that the UK would need “to clarify now what role we see ourselves playing in Iraq beyond 2008 and what legal authorities we will require to enable us to do that”.

535. Mr Prentice continued:

“... to ensure that we do justice to the scale and cost of the UK’s commitment to the Iraq project over the last 4-5 years and secure our national interests for the period ahead, we need to accept now that we are in this for some years to come”.

536. Mr Prentice thought the UK role in Iraq in 2009 and beyond ought to include:

- capacity-building in the judiciary and police at the centre;
- training and mentoring of the Basra ISF;
- supporting the Basra development initiatives because: “We will be judged by the progress Basra makes following PIC ... There is also a case for us to be planning a last high profile project as visible proof for Basrawis of our continuing support and as a lasting UK legacy”;
- re-establishing a UK Trade and Industry presence in Basra “to pursue the huge commercial opportunities there will eventually be there”;
- military protection and active defence of the COB at Basra as the southern military HQ and the home for UK/US civilian missions and the PRT;
- defending coalition supply and exit routes to Kuwait, including a Quick Reaction Force capability;
- support, if requested, for ISF efforts against Iranian/militia influence; and
- niche military roles elsewhere in Iraq.

²⁵⁴ eGram 43230/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 23 October 2007, ‘Iraq 2009 and Beyond – Unfinished Business’.

537. Mr Prentice concluded:

“We need an approach that is ambitious in its vision, but remains flexible in its implementation:

- We must continue to remain engaged on the ground, both militarily and in a civilian capacity in Baghdad, Basra and Erbil.
- Even as that engagement shifts from being primarily military ... the security situation will still require us to provide protection to those engaged in our civilian efforts.
- We must not underestimate the scale of the task of helping to rebuild Iraq, nor the time it will take to achieve conditions when we can revert to a normal relationship with Iraq ...
- Our effort will need to continue to draw on the contributions of a wide range of government departments – including, but not only, FCO, DFID, MOD (civilian and military) ...”

“Given our best assessment of the prospects for security and our operating conditions, it would be a mistake to imagine that, in 12 months time, we might be free to start drawing down UK forces in southern Iraq below the ... figure that we will be at next spring. There remains an enormous amount at stake for the UK in Iraq ...”

538. On 24 October, a splinter group – the Iraq National Gathering (ING) – announced that it was breaking away from the main Sadrist movement.²⁵⁵ Maj Gen Binns reported that the announcement led to a “flurry of speculation that this may be the ‘next big thing’” because its leadership appeared to involve individuals closely associated with the Special Groups. Amidst indications of frustration with the JAM ‘freeze’ among its grassroots support, he judged that the ING had the potential to siphon off disaffected elements.

539. Government officials working closely with the military met a Basrawi Judge suggested by JAM1 as a possible interlocutor on 24 October.²⁵⁶ The officials reported that the Judge said that he was prepared to be an OMS public face in future negotiations but also “made it very clear where his loyalty and instincts lie – he is a Sadrist and he wants [JAM1] out of the DIF now”.

540. On 25 October, the Reconciliation Steering Group (RSG), successor body to the MIG, met and agreed a negotiating plan drafted by officials.

²⁵⁵ Minute Binns to CJO, 15 November 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 15 November 2007’.

²⁵⁶ Email government official working closely with the military, 27 October 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Meeting with [JAM1] 26 October’.

541. The negotiating plan said that it should be borne in mind that the ISF were not yet in a fit state to take on JAM. It considered that the UK wished to avoid:

- “• A resumption of the IDF/IED campaign that would send our policy in southern Iraq back to the unhealthy state it was in last May/June.
- Conflict between JAM and the ISF in Basra, particularly if it reaches the level where it demands our re-intervention”.

542. The plan went on to suggest that the UK’s position should be that:

- the increased tempo of demands had put “all in doubt”;
- if the negotiation process broke down and attacks resumed, the UK would reinforce a “vigorous ISF campaign” against illegal activity by JAM and releases would cease;
- the release of JAM1 should mark the formal end of “all hostilities” in Basra; and
- the agreements needed to underpin the end of hostilities should be in place by mid-January.

543. Those agreements should be:

- a demonstration of intent – a period of 20 days in which there were no kidnaps or crimes or attacks in Basra by JAM;
- a public declaration that JAM would subscribe to the rule of law and cease all military operations against the MNF and the ISF in Basra province and that OMS will look only to the political route;
- a public declaration that JAM would cease all attacks upon, or intimidation of, current and former Iraqi employees and contractors of MNF;
- the delivery of all mortar tubes, rounds and rockets, illegally held in Basra, to MNF or ISF; and
- a public commitment to free and fair provincial elections in Basra province.

544. On 26 October, government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 once again and put to him, as agreed by the RSG, that his own release should not take place until the structures were in place to ensure that hostilities could not break out again. The officials told JAM1 that some concrete proposals were being prepared for discussion. JAM1 was reported to have reacted calmly. The officials concluded:

“This went better than we might have expected ... This may simply because [sic] we did not, at this stage, say: ‘you are not being released on 10 November’. Equally he did not react poorly to our lines about agreements and declarations because he had yet to see how draconian and, in their original form, unpalatable, they might be.”

545. At a subsequent meeting with JAM1 on 30 October, government officials working closely with the military put forward the list of agreements needed to signal an end to

hostilities, as agreed by the RSG.²⁵⁷ JAM1 responded that it would take time to find a real solution on handing in heavy weaponry and the protection of the MNF's Iraqi employees, who were widely considered to be British spies.

546. JAM1 requested that a translation of the proposals be provided to his lawyer as a representative of the OMS, the ultimate signatory of any agreement. In their report to London, the officials concluded that "even genuinely determined attempts to engage with the OMS ... could take us up to mid-January and beyond. This would definitely not wash."

547. ACM Stirrup visited Iraq between 26 and 29 October.²⁵⁸ Reporting the visit to Mr Browne's Private Secretary, ACM Stirrup's Military Adviser recorded that Maj Gen Binns remained confident of achieving PIC in Basra in December 2007, although he was doubtful that the ISF had the ability to counter JAM if the cease-fire broke.

548. ACM Stirrup confirmed that the desired end state was "an enduring security which facilitates a political climate suitable for development". The ongoing JAM reconciliation process and the continued strengthening of the Iraqi Army and the police were all encouraging but: "the biggest lever for JAM to continue reconciliation was the fear of US intervention in Basra, if conditions deteriorated".

549. Lt Gen Odierno told ACM Stirrup that he had initially been wary about the UK's proposed withdrawal from Basra Palace but that his fears had been unfounded. He was "more than comfortable" with the prospect of PIC in Basra in December.

550. Mr Brown and President Bush spoke by video conference on 29 October. In a short discussion on Iraq, Mr Brown regretted that there had not been further Iraqi progress on reconciliation.²⁵⁹ He explained that the UK was focused on consolidating the security and economic situation in the south, and emphasised the importance of securing provincial elections to promote a "solid democratic message".

551. Sir John Sawers, UK Permanent Representative to the UN in New York, wrote to Sir Peter Ricketts, FCO Permanent Under Secretary, at the end of October to express his concerns about the approach to the new resolution.²⁶⁰ Sir John understood that the intention was that the new resolution would contain a formal commitment that it would be the last and that the future presence of the MNF would be governed by one or more

²⁵⁷ Email official working closely with the military, 31 October 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: Meeting with [JAM1] – 30 October'.

²⁵⁸ Minute Kyd to PS/SofS [MOD], 29 October 2007, 'CDS Visit to Iraq 26-29 Oct 07'.

²⁵⁹ Letter Fletcher to Carver, 29 October 2007, 'Prime Minister's VTC with US President, 29 October'.

²⁶⁰ Letter Sawers to Ricketts, 29 October 2007, 'Iraq: Renewal of MNF-I's UN Mandate'.

Status of Forces Agreements (SOFAs). Sir John outlined four potential risks to UK interests in doing so:

- Building in an implicit acceptance of a long-term US presence in Iraq would complicate the rollover of the UN mandate for 2008.
- UK options for a military presence post-2008 would be limited and dependent on negotiating a SOFA with the Iraqi Government. If that could not be achieved “the absence of such an agreement could prove to be the basis on which our presence in Iraq is terminated ... it would be hard to argue that our decision was based on prevailing security conditions”.
- The nature of the international presence in Iraq would change, narrowing the coalition and setting back the efforts the UK had made to “internationalise” the effort in Iraq.
- UK arguments that a Chapter VII mandate was required for similar operations (for example, in Darfur) would be weakened.

552. Sir John concluded his letter by asking that Mr Miliband be made aware of these risks. He wrote:

“I accept fully that there are other factors at play. Purely in terms of UN handling and sustaining the UN’s role in Iraq, I would prefer us to keep open the prospect of further renewals of the UN mandate and to stick as far as we can to last year’s US-Iraq exchange of letters.”

553. On 31 October, a government official working closely with the UK military briefed the US military on the negotiations with JAM1 and explored the possibility of Basrawi detainees in US custody being transferred to MND(SE)’s detention facility “to bolster our dwindling numbers in an effort to prolong the detainee release programme”.²⁶¹

554. Around 300 detainees in US custody were thought to be of interest to the UK. With the exception of “A Category insurgents” they could be released when needed. The official noted that there were legal issues to be discussed regarding any transfer to UK detention. US and UK military officers would discuss the practicalities.

555. Mr Browne visited Iraq between 29 October and 2 November.²⁶² In a letter reporting his observations to Mr Brown he described it as “markedly the most encouraging of my seven visits to Basra”. He continued:

“So progress there has been, but, as you well know, the space we have achieved is fragile and temporary. We have a window of opportunity in Basra and it is vital that both we and the Iraqis apply political and economic leadership to make the most of it.”

²⁶¹ Email government official working closely with the military, 3 November 2007, ‘Visit to Camp Bucca 31 October 2007’.

²⁶² Letter Browne to Brown, 2 November 2007, [untitled].

556. Mr Browne had impressed upon everyone he met in Iraq the need to announce “a detailed economic plan for Basra” to coincide with PIC in December. He observed that “If we are to deliver, and we must, this will need dedicated and energetic UK resource in London, Basra and Baghdad.”

557. During his stay in Baghdad, Mr Browne reported that Gen Petraeus described progress on reconciling the disaffected as “quite extraordinary”. He considered that: “The phenomenon that began amongst the Sunni in the Al Anbar but which is now reaching out to the Shia too, is now of sufficient magnitude that the Government of Iraq has no choice but to embrace it.”

558. Mr Browne raised the UK’s concerns about the renewal of resolution 1723 with both Prime Minister Maliki and Gen Petraeus. The latter’s view was that the strategic context had now changed and that in order to secure its passage Prime Minister Maliki would have to be able to tell the Council of Representatives that it would be the final resolution. Mr Browne “left him in little doubt about the legal constraint that the UK would face in the absence of the UNSCR”.

559. On 31 October, at the MOD’s request, the JIC examined the sustainability of the recent down-turn in JAM attacks on MNF-I in Basra.²⁶³ It assessed that a range of factors – including the withdrawal from the city centre, a number of development initiatives coming on stream, Gen Mohan and Gen Jalil’s efforts to improve ISF performance in the city – had “created an environment in which the evolving negotiation between MND(SE) and [JAM1] was able to progress to a formal cease-fire agreement in early August, which is still being observed”.

560. The JIC judged that:

“The agreement with [JAM1] is fragile. It has hitherto focused on linking a reduction in attacks on MNF to prisoner releases. Pressure for a more broadly-based negotiation including economic and political elements is likely to grow rapidly ...”

561. The JIC assessed that the reduction in violence that had been negotiated with JAM1 could be upset “by a number of players with potentially conflicting interests”. The JIC considered that:

“... the fractious nature of the Sadrist movement means we see a high risk that ... [the] initiative could become a pawn of infighting in Najaf.

“The attitude of **Muqtada al-Sadr** is important, in public he had made a point of consistently opposing any contacts with ‘occupation forces’ and the Najaf leadership would be unlikely to challenge an order from him ...”

562. The JIC judged that al-Sadr was trying to move his movement towards a more conventional role in Iraqi politics and might therefore see advantage in “an initiative

²⁶³ JIC Assessment, 31 October 2007, ‘Iraq: Risks to the Negotiation with JAM in Basra’.

which positions them more strongly is Basra". However, "al-Sadr is notoriously volatile and it would be unwise to count on his indefinite support for any deal".

563. The JIC judged:

"Prime Minister Maliki is briefed on MND(SE)'s negotiation with [JAM1] and has raised no objection. Maliki places a high premium on stability in Basra. However, he probably has reservations about any deals with JAM and there is a risk that he could miscalculate: an order for ISF to confront JAM directly in Basra could upset the negotiation."

564. Under the heading "Prospects", the JIC judged:

"The attitude of the Sadrist leadership ... is also likely to be coloured by their perception of the prospects for some lasting political gain, at least until provincial elections take place next year. But we judge that JAM views locally and nationally are also likely to be coloured by their perception of MNF intentions in the longer term ... If JAM conclude that momentum towards complete withdrawal has stalled, we judge they might well resume such attacks. They would almost certainly have Iranian support in doing so."

November 2007

565. Mr Browne's visit to Basra prompted Maj Gen Binns to evaluate progress made since the summer.²⁶⁴ On 1 November he wrote:

"We are now subject to far fewer attacks, are constructively engaged with the Governor ... and the Provincial Council, we transit through Basra in force ... without opposition (although there is always a quantifiable threat) and are looking to make more of the large amount of reconstruction work we are responsible for (through US resources) in Basra ... We are still subject to attack (and the danger is significant), but these attacks are, we believe, from rogue elements (possibly sponsored by Iran). The mainstream militias are for the most part quiet – unless provoked, as we saw on 23 October.

"Discussions are taking place in Basra, without our involvement, between political parties and JAM. We are also encouraging constructive engagement between the Iraqi Security Forces and the Provincial Council. I am in no doubt that encouraging, cajoling and supporting the various parties in Basra towards a peaceful resolution to their differences will lay the foundations for Basra's future prosperity and success for the MND(SE) mission ... But we should be in no doubt that this progress is not yet irreversible and, should there be any backsliding by local parties, we must hold our nerve as the groundswell of Iraqi opinion is moving towards reconciliation

²⁶⁴ Minute Binns to CJO, 1 November 2007, 'GOC HQ MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 1 November 2007'.

in order to achieve peace and prosperity. The result will not be pretty, and will no doubt have distasteful people in power ... but to be sustainable the solution must be an Iraqi one.”

566. In his weekly report of 4 November, Lt Gen Rollo agreed that “concrete action” would be necessary to make good on the commitments to accelerate economic development in Basra.²⁶⁵ The work would require “dedicated cells in London and Basra with clear accountability and an aggressive timeline” in order to be able “to clout not dribble”.

567. Lt Gen Rollo commented that Mr Browne’s visit had prompted useful US debate about the UK’s requirement for a Security Council resolution because:

“The effect of the lack of UNSCR cover for our operations had not been fully appreciated here, although it had been discussed in Washington.”

568. When the Iraq Strategy Group discussed renewal of the resolution on 5 November, the FCO position was described by Mr Baker as “to keep options open for 2009 in case a further resolution were required.”²⁶⁶ Mr McDonald told the Iraq Strategy Group that:

“... the Prime Minister was content that the next SCR would be the last, and given our stated plan for next year, it would send the wrong message if we appeared to be pushing far more than the US to keep our options open. If the US did not agree to our latest suggested amendments therefore, we should accept that as the last word. We should ensure, however, that all parts of the US system were aware of the consequences for the UK commitment of not having a SCR mandate.”

569. Mr McDonald also told the Iraq Strategy Group that there would be a review of the UK’s civilian and military posture in Iraq in spring 2008, when Ministers might take decisions on future plans for 2009 and beyond. He cautioned that it was too early to make assumptions about what the future posture might be, and that it should not be discussed with the US or Iraqis, but the long-term objective was “strategic overwatch in Iraq”. Papers were commissioned from the FCO and MOD for discussion by the Iraq Strategy Group, and eventually for Ministers’ Christmas red boxes.

570. On 5 November, in an account of a further meeting with JAM1, a government official working closely with the military recorded that a formal request for releases from US detention was with Lt Gen Odierno for consideration.²⁶⁷

571. In the meeting itself, JAM1 had not, as expected, pushed for himself to be one of those released on 10 November but officials had been prompted to consider whether it

²⁶⁵ Minute Rollo to CDS, 4 November 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (275) 4 Nov 07’.

²⁶⁶ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 6 November 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 5 November’.

²⁶⁷ Email government official working closely with the military, 5 November 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: [JAM1] Meeting 4 November’.

was “in our interests” to hold JAM1 until the end of the current phase of the operation. In particular, the official wondered, “how will it look presentationally if we keep him past PIC?”

572. Mr Day wrote to Lt Gen Wall on 5 November with an account of discussions between Maj Gen Binns and Mr Browne on JAM1 during Mr Browne’s visit to Basra.²⁶⁸ Mr Day suggested that the key points were:

- “• the extent to which a long term deal is embedded in – and, indeed, fundamental to – thinking in theatre on political engagement and shifting the gunmen into politics;
- [officials’] caution about the prospects for success;
- the fragility of our hold on [JAM1] after his release – the levers listed in previous draft papers are in my view inadequate to constrain him once out of our hands.”

573. Mr Day considered that it was important to recognise that:

“... negotiating a long term relationship with [JAM1] is tantamount to taking a punt at long odds. But the alternatives may well be even less attractive. Having discussed the pros and cons with SofS and Graham Binns, I think the key questions on which we need to provide advice are:

- What are the legal implications/commitment of the kind of political and economic ‘deals’ we are considering – in particular on providing intelligence to [JAM1] and transferring internees from US custody?
- How do we engage the key Iraqi players (presumably Maliki, Mohan and Jalil) and do they have a say or a veto?”

574. Mr Day concluded:

“This is essentially a political judgement call so we need to expose all of the factors for SofS. In the shorter term, I have confirmed with SofS’s office that they have no record of SofS agreeing that theatre can release further internees without consulting MOD. That was certainly my understanding, at least as until we have a long term policy in place.”

575. Mr Lyall Grant chaired a meeting on 6 November to consider the negotiations with JAM1.²⁶⁹ It was attended by representatives from the MOD, the FCO, DFID, the Cabinet Office, SIS and GCHQ.

576. The Inquiry has seen accounts of that meeting written by attendees from the MOD and other organisations, but the Government has confirmed that no formal minutes of the meeting exist.

²⁶⁸ Minute Day to DCDS(C), 5 November 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]’.

²⁶⁹ Email junior official specialising in the Middle East, 8 November 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: FCO Lead on Strategic Development of the Initiative’.

577. One of the accounts reported the purpose of the meeting as looking at the prospects for developing the negotiations from a tactical deal into a process that delivered strategic effect in MND(SE) and perhaps beyond.

578. One of the attendees reported internally on broad agreement that:

- The UK should aim to preserve the reduction in violence for as long as possible, because even after PIC a return to violence would make sustaining UK presence in MND(SE) difficult.
- The cease-fire would probably not survive JAM1's release as part of the last tranche of prisoners unless he had first been bound into a broader process.
- It would be necessary to wrap the UK's relationship with JAM1 into a broader process so as to avoid the political risks of directly backing a JAM leader.
- There were potentially strategic gains to be made from such a process, including countering malign Iranian influence and bringing the Sadrists and JAM more fully within Iraqi politics.

579. The attendee's account said that the FCO had agreed to take responsibility for developing a strategic plan, while the MOD would take forward the "tactical deal". DFID protested against short-term development projects initiated as part of the agreements reached, which could undermine structural reforms agreed with the Provincial Council. It was agreed unanimously that no reporting on cease-fire violators would be passed to JAM1.

580. Mr Day wrote to Mr Browne's Assistant Private Secretary on 7 November with an account of agreements reached at the meeting on the previous day.²⁷⁰ He said that the discussion had "resolved most of the outstanding issues" on longer-term aims and the negotiating strategy. He reported that it had been agreed that:

- the current process of negotiation should continue with the aim of minimising the IDF threat to the COB and "stringing out the deal for as long as possible" into 2008;
- subject to any legal constraints, the UK should be prepared to act as a conduit for the releases of internees in US hands, if the US agreed; and
- Mr Browne should continue to approve the release of detainees, up to but not including JAM1.

581. Mr Day wrote that it had been agreed that the FCO would lead on developing a strategy for wider political engagement in Basra, taking into account US and Iraqi views, into which JAM1 might be embedded. Mr Miliband would take Ministerial ownership. The strategy would "address the timetable for [JAM1]'s release, the relationship with PIC, the prospect of provincial elections and the role of aid funding (probably

²⁷⁰ Minute Day to APS/SofS [MOD], 7 November 2007, 'Negotiations with JAM: way ahead'.

CERPS [Commanders' Emergency Response Programme]) in encouraging political engagement”.

582. On 8 November, the JIC issued an Assessment of Iranian objectives in Iraq.²⁷¹ It judged:

“Supreme Leader Khamenei controls Iranian policy towards Iraq ...

“Khamenei sees violent resistance to the coalition presence in Iraq as a way to deter and deflect US military action against Iran itself ... He is prepared to accept an extended period of disorder in Iraq and continued US military deployment as the price for this. But Iran will not accept a permanent US military presence in Iraq.

“IRGC-QF will continue trying to calibrate violence by its proxies to keep US forces off balance without provoking retaliation against Iran. Should MNF-I appear to be achieving a stable Iraq – with the possibility of secure basing for US forces into the future – Iran would probably seek to respond with increased proxy attacks even at the risk of delaying US military drawdown.

“Iran’s main aim in Basra and its environs is to keep intra-Shia violence under control. Iran will keep pressure on UK forces there through its proxies, while trying to avoid provoking US intervention.”

583. Mr Brown met the Chiefs of Staff, Mr Browne and Sir Bill Jeffrey, MOD Permanent Under Secretary, on 8 November.²⁷² They discussed Iraq briefly, and Mr Brown agreed that there was a need to reach out to potential allies in the South, to maintain the pace of economic redevelopment and to hold Prime Minister Maliki to the target date of 17 December for transition to PIC in Basra.

584. Lt Gen Wall told the Chiefs of Staff on 13 November that:

“... the MOU [Memorandum of Understanding] for PIC had still to be finalised and it remained unclear whether Prime Minister Maliki would agree to full PIC or whether an interim solution would be pursued ... on account of his reservations with regard to Gov Waili’s ability to deal effectively with security.”²⁷³

585. Government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 and his lawyer separately on 8 and 7 November respectively.²⁷⁴ The lawyer pressed for rapid release of JAM1, although JAM1 did not. Maj Gen Binns was considering whether it should be linked to the transfer to PIC and the officials commented that they could “see some merit in this, if we can achieve satisfactory progress on the undertakings for the next stage”.

²⁷¹ JIC Assessment, 8 November 2007, ‘Iranian Objectives in Iraq’.

²⁷² Letter Fletcher to Forber, 9 November 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with Chiefs of Staff, 8 November’.

²⁷³ Minutes, 13 November 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

²⁷⁴ Email government official working closely with the military, 10 November 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Recent Meetings’.

586. The report concluded with a “note of warning” which indicated that they were unclear about the extent to which JAM1 was aware of the activities of JAM death squads, which were believed to be assassinating their enemies.

587. On 9 November, a senior official specialising in the Middle East (1) provided Mr Lyall Grant with advice on negotiations with JAM in Basra, intended to provide background for policy makers as they considered “the advantages and risks of moving ahead”.²⁷⁵ The advice was copied to Mr McDonald, as well as others in the MOD, the Cabinet Office and the FCO.

588. The advice opened by stating that negotiations with JAM in Basra had led to “a striking reduction in violence” and that there was an opportunity to “transform a tactical deal based on detainee releases into a process designed to achieve a strategic shift in JAM’s relationship with MND(SE) and possibly with the US and the Government of Iraq”. The senior official anticipated that this would be the subject of an FCO submission. There was “some urgency” to this as by the end of the year MND(SE) would have run out of significant detainees to release, meaning that the current arrangements could collapse, unless “developed into a wider longer term dispensation”.

589. The advice explained the background to the “initiative” in Basra and its impact to date. Around 50 detainees had been released already, with 31 still in detention. If releases continued at the same rate, all detainees were likely to have been released by the middle of January 2008.

590. The senior official advised that:

“The best date for [JAM1’s] release will depend on exactly how the ... process develops but Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) and Eid al-Adha on or around 20 December represent symbolic milestones. Fixing a date now for [JAM1’s] release might take the sting out of further demands for immediate release and focus minds on all sides on how to sustain the process.

“[JAM1] has said he does not want all the detainees released immediately to allow time for the transformation of the relationship with the UK. Nonetheless, despite his strong interest in development and politics, his roots in militia violence are never far from the surface and he is very responsive to pressure from JAM in Basra for a quicker pace of releases. Although the atmospherics of the talks are generally good, he remains at times a difficult and unpredictable interlocutor. He wants the cease-fire to work but his instincts are to discipline his own people ... He particularly distrusts Basra security supremo, General Mohan ... Getting him to work with Mohan or a replacement will be difficult but ... [reports suggest] that [JAM1] is beginning to recognise the necessity of security co-ordination with the Iraqi state.”

²⁷⁵ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (1) to Lyall Grant, 9 November 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Negotiations with JAM in Basrah’.

591. On the attitudes of others to the negotiations, the senior official reported:

“Mohan’s own attitude to JAM remains ambivalent. He talks of tough steps if JAM does not comply with his demands but he has also been keen to associate himself with the [NAME OF OPERATION] detainee releases. Some around PM Maliki seem to fear the UK might empower or even arm JAM, drawing parallels with US actions with Sunnis in al-Anbar ...

“Although there was considerable US suspicion of the [NAME OF OPERATION] process as a means to UK drawdown, there is strong US interest in the progress of the talks and especially the impact on Iran.”

592. On 9 November, Mr McDonald sent a minute to Mr Brown on the renewal of the Security Council resolution describing the MNF mandate in Iraq.²⁷⁶ He reported that Mr Miliband had decided, on advice from the UK Permanent Mission to the UN in New York, that the UK should propose new language for the US draft making clear that a decision on a resolution for 2009 should be conditions-based. It was expected that the US would reject that language. Mr McDonald continued:

“... we should not be seen to be leading the demands for a post-2008 resolution, as this may send the wrong message about the level of our likely commitment in Iraq from 2009 and beyond. I have therefore agreed in Whitehall that if the US does indeed reject our proposal we will accept their position.

“It is a fact, though, that the absence of a UNSCR will have greater implications for the level and scope of the UK commitment than it will for the US, given our obligation to comply with the European Convention on Human Rights. The US are aware of this ... Petraeus recognised that the absence of a UNSCR ... would significantly constrain our freedoms and may prejudice the tasks he wants us to perform ... Nevertheless, his view was that the strategic context had changed and that, to secure the passage of the next resolution, Maliki would need to present it internally as the last.”

593. Mr McDonald recommended that the UK should accept that the next resolution would be the last and should start to look at what would be necessary to replace it in 2009, which was likely to be some form of Status of Forces Agreement.

594. In his 11 November weekly report, Lt Gen Rollo reported that a group of mid- to senior-level Sadrists – the Mid Euphrates Awakening – had made contact with the MNF-I engagement cell and there were also signs of Sadrist engagement with MNF-I in western Baghdad.²⁷⁷

595. Lt Gen Rollo commented that these “and last but not least our – and the GOI’s – engagement with JAM in Basra” illustrated a “remarkable” increase in MNF-I

²⁷⁶ Minute McDonald to Prime Minister, 9 November 2007, ‘Iraq: UNSCR Renewal’.

²⁷⁷ Minute Rollo to CDS, 11 November 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (276) 11 Nov 07’.

engagement with the Sadrist movement in recent weeks. He observed that, together, these initiatives represented an opportunity for the Iraqi Government (if not directly for the MNF).

596. The impact on the UK was likely to be “increased Iraqi and coalition interest in our engagement with JAM in Basra, which will need a degree of careful management”. In particular, the US and Iraqi desire to regain control of the port from JAM would “need to be thought through in the context of wider political and security relationships” there.

597. On 13 November, Lt Gen Houghton briefed the Chiefs of Staff that the JAM cease-fire in Basra continued, “largely as a result of engagement, political accommodation and self-limiting violence”.²⁷⁸ Nonetheless, five variables had been identified that could put it at risk:

- Prime Minister Maliki’s continued pressure for General Mohan to act against militants in Basra;
- Iranian sponsorship of militant activity;
- JAM special groups intent on breaking the Sadrist freeze on military activity;
- the formation of JAM splinter groups undermining mainstream JAM elements; and
- the “exhaustion of current security accommodations in Basra”.

598. It was reported on 14 November that Mr Alexander had suggested that Ministers should be briefed orally on the negotiations with JAM1 and that Mr Brown had agreed.²⁷⁹

599. MOD officials submitted an update on negotiations with JAM to Mr Browne’s Assistant Private Secretary on 15 November.²⁸⁰ The advice asked Mr Browne to approve (subject to the agreement of the DIRC), by the following day, the release of five detainees, to take place on 17 November.

600. A revised handling strategy for the process had been developed and was “more forward leaning about the need for reconciliation between Iraqi groups as a major part of solving the country’s security problem ... whilst being prepared to explain the details of how this is being operationalised somewhat more openly”.

601. Mr Browne annotated the advice “Agreed” on 16 November.

²⁷⁸ Minutes, 13 November 2007, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

²⁷⁹ Email PS/C, 14 November 2007, ‘[...] – Briefing for Ministers’.

²⁸⁰ Minute Powell to APS/Secretary of State [MOD], 15 November 2007, ‘Negotiations with JAM: latest position’ including manuscript comment Browne.

602. On 17 November, *The Guardian* reported a press conference by Maj Gen Binns in Baghdad in which he:

“... confirmed ... that UK officials have been holding talks with supporters of the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army in the hope they would be drawn into the political process.”²⁸¹

603. Maj Gen Binns was reported to have said that not everyone in the Mahdi Army supported the talks, and that its main rival, the Badr brigade, was too weak to mount a challenge. *The Guardian* reported that:

“British officials last night were keen to emphasise that the talks with the militia were being held with the full support and, at times, participation of Major General Abdul Jalil Khalaff and General Mohan ... The talks have been accompanied by the release, by British forces, of Mahdi Army fighters detained in connection with attacks on British troops.”

604. On 18 November, Lt Gen Rollo reported that if Governor Waili remained in post, then the UK might be faced with “a difficult decision on whether to accept an unsatisfactory solution on 17 December or to hold out for one which will really set the conditions for next year”.²⁸² The Iraqi Government’s solution was “for the Prime Minister to accept the security file and delegate it to General Mohan”. The coalition view was that this was “bad in law, bad politically at home, and bad in practice in Basra, where we want a solid triumvirate, including the Governor, alongside the BOC Commander and the Chief of Police.”

605. Mr Prentice reported on 19 November that Dr Rubaie said that he had submitted a “favourable” memo to Prime Minister Maliki on UK recommendations for the handling of Basra PIC, but had yet to receive a response.²⁸³

606. On 19 November, a junior official from the FCO Iraq Group provided advice to Dr Kim Howells, FCO Minister of State, and Mr Miliband on “Broadening the basis of negotiations with [JAM1]” which reflected discussion at Mr Lyall Grant’s meeting of 6 November.²⁸⁴

607. The issue discussed in the submission was described as “To maintain a dialogue with ... [JAM1] once all detainees have been released, to ensure the recent political and security gains in Basra are expanded.” The preferred option was that Mr Miliband agreed to broaden the scope of negotiations with JAM1 to include “the integration of the Sadr-ists into Basra’s formal political process, including Sadrist participation in provincial elections”.

²⁸¹ *The Guardian*, 17 November 2007, *British officials hold talks with Mahdi army*.

²⁸² Minute Rollo to CDS, 18 November 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (277) 18 Nov 07’.

²⁸³ eGram 47120/07, Baghdad to FCO London, 19 November 2007, ‘Iraq; Political Round-Up’.

²⁸⁴ Minute FCO Iraq Group [junior official] to Private Secretary [FCO], 19 November 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Broadening the basis of negotiations with [JAM1]’.

608. The junior FCO official also described an alternative option, which was “to continue to limit the basis of our accommodation with JAM to detainee release”. If this option was to be selected, it was unlikely that “calm” in Basra would be sustained beyond the release of the last detainee.

609. In contrast to advice provided to Mr Browne a few days earlier, the junior FCO official proposed that discussions with JAM1 should be kept as low key as possible because “media attention would likely portray these as a tacit acknowledgement of defeat for the UK in southern Iraq”.

610. The junior FCO official wrote that negotiations with JAM1 had always included a political element, but that the “continuation and formalisation” of these talks was intended to bind JAM1 and the Sadrists into political reconciliation before JAM1’s release. The specific objectives of talks would be to secure commitments from JAM1 on:

- free and fair elections in Basra;
- support for the Iraqi authorities to limit crime and violence in Basra;
- ending hostilities;
- ending attacks on MNF current or former employees; and
- disarmament.

611. The junior FCO official recorded that Maj Gen Binns was recommending to Mr Browne that JAM1 was released earlier than planned if “significant progress” was made against these objectives.

612. The greatest risk was a described as “a failure of an accommodation with [JAM1]”, which was likely to mean a return to a high level of attacks against the MNF. The main threats to the dialogue were:

- JAM1 concluding that he could better advance his political interests through violence;
- JAM1 being killed after release;
- JAM1 losing control of JAM in Basra; and
- JAM being drawn into large-scale fighting with the MNF.

613. The junior FCO official also described the risk of negative reactions from the US and from the Iraqi Government, and of losing traction with other parties in Basra by expanding the scope of engagement with JAM.

614. Baroness Scotland visited Iraq between 19 and 21 November.²⁸⁵ In a report of her visit sent to Mr Miliband, Baroness Scotland observed that, while a lot had been achieved, “there is a long way to go to establish the rule of law in Iraq”. She had discussed the implications of a lack of a further resolution for the UK’s continued

²⁸⁵ Letter Scotland to Miliband, 3 December 2007, ‘Iraq’.

operation in Iraq with Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker. Although the general message appeared to have been taken on board, the detailed implications (for example, that the UK would have no power to intern) did not seem to have been appreciated.

615. NSID(OD) met on 20 November to take stock of the situation in Basra.²⁸⁶

Cabinet Office officials briefed Mr Brown, the Chair, that the main aim of the meeting was “to ensure that the transfer to Iraqi control in Basra, scheduled for 17 December is not delayed” and that the meeting would need to assess the security situation in Basra and look at how to sustain the present reduction in violence, including through possible political or economic measures.

616. At the meeting, Mr Miliband reported that the security situation was “encouraging”, putting the UK “on track” for the transfer to Iraqi control to take place, on schedule, on 17 December.²⁸⁷ Risk came from the uncertainty over Governor Waili’s position. Mr Miliband reported that the inter-departmental work on contacts with local militias had been good, but it would be important in future to ensure that negotiations with local militia leaders did not favour any one person but were inclusive – the UK should support the process, not an individual.

617. Mr Alexander reported that Mr Michael Wareing, the International CEO of KPMG, had agreed to help drive forward the work of the Basra Development Commission (BDC). Several of the projects included within the BDC’s 2007 plan had been requested by local militia leaders, which would help “lock them into the economic and political process”.

618. Mr Browne observed that, from a force protection perspective, it would be important to keep local militia leaders engaged and bring them into the wider political and economic process as much as possible. Sir John Scarlett agreed that it would be important to find ways of broadening the dialogue to address a wider range of political and economic issues.

619. Summing up the meeting, Mr Brown said that:

- the UK should “press ahead” for the transfer of security responsibility to Iraqi control on 17 December;
- economic projects should be agreed through proper discussion with local representatives, rather than favouring any faction or individual, though that “did not preclude using a coincidence of interest to draw local militia leaders into the wider political process”;
- Mr Alexander should write with plans for the launch of the BDC; and
- the UK should continue to encourage the Iraqi Government to hold provincial elections as soon as possible.

²⁸⁶ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 19 November 2007, ‘NSID(OD) Iraq Meeting – Steering Brief: Tuesday 20 November 16:45-17:30’.

²⁸⁷ Minutes, 20 November 2007, NSID(OD) meeting.

620. After the meeting (at which Mr Alexander's request for a briefing on discussions with JAM1 was to be answered), Sir John Scarlett's Private Secretary produced a summary of his account of the meeting.²⁸⁸

621. According to the summary, Mr Miliband said that:

"... there was a need to send clear political instructions about the parameters within which negotiations could be conducted, but he offered nothing concrete on FCO action in relation to broadening the process".

622. Mr Alexander had expressed concerns about development projects agreed with JAM1 drawing resources and expertise away from existing projects. There was general support for resource decisions to be taken in theatre where conflicts arose between priorities.

623. The account recorded Sir John's sense that:

"... there was a general consensus that [Mr Miliband] should approve the [NAME OF OPERATION] submission and that MOD should press ahead with a mid-December release date for [JAM1]. But the shortening of the meeting meant that there was not time to agree a detailed plan of action."

However, there had been "clear interest and support from the PM" which would help in agreeing a detailed plan.

624. Mr Brown "touched very briefly" on Iraq during a telephone conversation with President Bush on 20 November.²⁸⁹ He reported that the UK was making progress on its political and economic priorities in the South and still hoped to move to PIC in Basra on 17 December.

625. Government officials working closely with the military met JAM1 again on 21 November.²⁹⁰ As agreed by the Reconciliation Steering Group, their objectives for the meeting were to brief JAM1 on the forthcoming release of eight detainees; to discuss the draft agreement that must precede his own release; to explain the previous weekend's media coverage of the GOC's press conference in Baghdad; and to discuss post-release contact.

626. The officials reminded JAM1 that he would not be released until an agreement that marked an end to hostilities in Basra province had been completed. JAM1 agreed in principle but "asked, a little pointedly, what forum could bring together all significant leaders in Basra to sign such an agreement". They explained that the UK was continuing to discuss the options with local politicians and security officials.

²⁸⁸ Minute PS/C, 21 November 2007, 'NSID (IRAQ) 20 Nov 2007'.

²⁸⁹ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 20 November 2007, 'Prime Minister's telephone call with US President, 20 November'.

²⁹⁰ Email government official working closely with the military, 22 November 2007, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: Meeting with [JAM1] – 21 November'.

627. JAM1 reported that contact with the Iraqi Government in Baghdad had resulted in agreement to three “reconciliation” committees in Basra as part of a wider national initiative: one dealing with security, one with social affairs and one with politics/conflict resolution.

628. The officials observed that “our sense was, as well that we, [NAME OF OPERATION], the British, are starting to matter less” and concluded that they would “need to drive home the importance of continuing contact with [government officials working closely with the military]” after his release.

629. MOD officials wrote to Mr Browne’s Assistant Private Secretary with the latest position regarding negotiations with JAM on 22 November.²⁹¹ This explained that the arrangements remained “fragile”. Mr Browne was asked to agree that a further 10 detainees could be released by MND(SE) in three tranches over the following three weeks, subject to agreement that they no longer posed a serious threat. Approval was required by the next day.

630. Lt Gen Rollo reported that Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker held their quarterly review of the campaign in Iraq on 24 November.²⁹² Lt Gen Rollo wrote that, while no-one discounted the hard work still required on the security line of operations, the main debate focused on how to make more progress on politics and economics in a way that would contain and gradually reduce the inter-communal tensions that continued to dominate Iraq.

631. There was a significant debate about anti-corruption and terrorist financing, including the problems of militia infiltration and intimidation of the MOI and MOD. This mattered not only because of the need to starve AQ and the Special Groups of funds but because any dysfunctionality in those ministries undermined the Iraqi Government more generally. Lt Gen Rollo reported that there had been unanimity that economic development and employment were critical to the success of the next stage of the campaign.

632. Lt Gen Rollo also reported that the Supreme Court had found in favour of Governor Waili. He wrote:

“Whatever the merits of the legal case it is to be hoped that this now provides the basis for Maliki to accept that he will have to live with Waili as Governor, and therefore for work to be taken forward on the MOU for PIC on a relatively conventional basis on 16 or 17 December.”

²⁹¹ Minute Powell to APS/Secretary of State [MOD], 22 November 2007, ‘Negotiations with JAM: Latest Position’.

²⁹² Minute Rollo to CDS, 25 November 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (278) 25 Nov 07’.

633. Mr Baker told the Iraq Strategy Group that it appeared the ruling would be accepted by the Iraqi Government, and that 17 December was therefore still the target for PIC.²⁹³ The MCNS would take the final decision on 9 December.

634. In relation to the renewal of resolution 1732, Mr Baker confirmed to the Iraq Strategy Group that “the US were aware of the implications for us of this being the last resolution”.

635. Mr Browne’s Assistant Private Secretary replied to MOD officials on 26 November to record his agreement to the releases requested on 22 November, subject to it being assessed that they no longer posed an “imperative threat” to security.²⁹⁴

636. A senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2), accompanied by colleagues, met JAM1 again on 27 November.²⁹⁵ The purpose of the meeting was:

- to show JAM1 a draft of a possible Basra Agreement/Declaration that would precede his release;
- to discuss the progress of other OMS reconciliation talks, particularly with Gen Mohan;
- to resolve difficulties over specific releases; and
- to discuss post-release contact with JAM1.

637. JAM1’s reaction to the draft agreement was “neutral” and he agreed to reflect on it. His immediate concern remained one of process: who would organise the agreement and who would sign up as the leaders of Basra?

638. The officials visited JAM1 again two days later on 29 November in order to hear his reaction to the draft Declaration, which was positive. The RSG had also directed that the officials should secure endorsement for MND(SE)’s training/development role and draw on that to reach a fuller agreement to future contact. JAM1 considered that 70-80 percent of the Najaf leadership would sign up to the sort of MNF deployment envisaged.

639. The record of the meeting concluded:

“[JAM1]’s position is, of course, inconsistent, even schizophrenic. He has supported our development and training agenda by deed as well as word; he says the right things about development and governance; he draws a distinction between the view of the ‘old men’ in Najaf: reactionary, anti-development, anti-MNF in any form, and

²⁹³ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 26 November 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 5 November’. Note: the Inquiry believes that the title of this letter refers incorrectly to a previous meeting of the ISG.

²⁹⁴ Letter APS/Secretary of State [MOD] to AD1 Pol Ops PJHQ, 26 November 2007, ‘Negotiations with JAM: latest position’.

²⁹⁵ Email senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2), 30 November 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Meetings with [JAM1] - 27 November and 29 November’.

his own far more positive and constructive views. Some of this, particularly the last bit, is clearly heartfelt. But much of it may also be linked to the issue of releases, which is the subject that, until the threat to JAM in Basra, was the one that inspired most heat and emotion in our meetings. On the other hand he still talks bitterly about the ‘occupation’ and did not yet seem completely free of the dread inspired by the prospect of Najaf’s disfavour.”

640. On 29 November, Mr Prentice reported that a US/Iraqi bilateral Statement of Intent about a long-term military, security and economic relationship had been signed by President Bush and Prime Minister Maliki on 26 November.²⁹⁶ This included a firm US commitment to the Iraqi Government that the next resolution would be the final one under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

641. Mr Prentice advised that the next step would be negotiation of the resolution and the accompanying letter from the Iraqi Government formally requesting the extension of the MNF-I mandate. Mr Zebari had already said publicly that the letter would be submitted to the Iraqi Council of Representatives for approval. On the basis of the length of time it had taken to negotiate the US/Iraqi Statement of Intent, Mr Prentice considered it likely that negotiations would go “to the wire”.

642. The timeframe for negotiating long-term security agreements was a longer one and Mr Prentice thought it unlikely that talks would begin before the New Year. He commented that the UK would soon need to decide how best to frame the “new legal base for UK forces’ presence and activity in Iraq post-2008” and also whether the UK preferred its interests to be covered in relevant parts of the US-Iraq agreement or to negotiate its own agreement.

643. Several senior Iraqi politicians had already expressed the hope that the UK would want to build on the “positive and much appreciated” role it had played in founding the new Iraq, and that it would be natural for the new relationship to be expressed in a UK-Iraq bilateral agreement.

December 2007

644. In early December, Ambassador John Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State, and Ambassador David Satterfield, State Department Co-ordinator for Iraq, travelled to Iraq to lead negotiations on the new resolution.²⁹⁷ Mr Prentice stressed the need for transparency and consultation on both the resolution and the accompanying letters.

645. Mr Prentice reported that although Prime Minister Maliki had agreed that there should be no change in the operative paragraphs of the resolution, he wished to

²⁹⁶ eGram 48777/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 29 November 2007, ‘Iraq: the US/GOI Partnership Declaration and the UNSCR’.

²⁹⁷ eGram 49070/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 3 December 2007, ‘Iraq: UNSCR Renewal Negotiations’.

add a number of principles “unacceptable to both the US and ourselves” to the Iraqi Government’s letter to the Security Council. They included:

- the right of the Iraqi Government to assume full command and control of the ISF;
- that the recruitment, training and equipping of the ISF should be the responsibility of the Iraqi Government; and
- that all coalition detentions should be governed by Iraqi law.

646. In discussions with the US, Mr Prentice emphasised that the UK was keen for a smooth roll-over, but had concerns that the language in the letter could undermine the effect of the Chapter VII resolution. He wanted to ensure that UK legal advisers had an opportunity to clear the language and that any differences between the US and UK interpretations could be ironed out before the US responded formally to the Iraqi Government and before the texts were sent to New York.

647. Ambassador Satterfield agreed to share the text of the Iraqi Government’s letter as soon as he received it.

648. Lt Gen Rollo reported on 3 December that the US was focused on the new resolution.²⁹⁸ Although there remained “the possibility of political ambush on the subject of US military freedom of action”, US attention was beginning to turn to the Long Term Security Arrangement (LTSA) that would succeed it.

649. Gen Petraeus had directed his staff to help lay the groundwork for a UK equivalent of the LTSA or a Chapter VI resolution that would provide adequate protection for UK (and EU) involvement in Iraq. Lt Gen Rollo wrote that the UK would need to take an early view on the level of protection it required and whether it was obtainable without a Chapter VII resolution.

650. Lt Gen Rollo commented that, despite being “relatively innocuous” in itself, the US/Iraqi bilateral Statement of Intent had “acted as a lightning rod for Iraqi frustration over a number of sovereignty issues”, an indication of the friction that the debate on the successor resolution was likely to prompt.

651. On 3 December, the House of Commons Defence Committee published a report entitled *UK land operations in Iraq 2007*, based in part on its visit to Iraq in July.²⁹⁹

652. The Defence Committee said:

“In South-Eastern Iraq, there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of attacks against UK and coalition forces since the decision was taken to withdraw from Basra Palace, but there has been no corresponding reduction in the number of attacks against the civilian population of Basra.”

²⁹⁸ Minute Rollo to CDS, 3 December 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (279) 3 Dec 07’.

²⁹⁹ First report from the Defence Committee, Session 2007-08, *UK land operations in Iraq 2007*, HC 110.

653. The Defence Committee considered that there had been significant progress in the training, equipping and mentoring of the Iraqi Army in the past year but:

“There remain murderous, corrupt and militia-infiltrated elements within the Police which must be rooted out as a matter of priority. The UK continues to play an important role in training and mentoring the Iraqi Army and Police. It is unclear how its trainers will be supported once UK forces levels are reduced further in the spring.”

654. In relation to plans to reduce UK forces levels to 2,500 in spring 2008, the Committee wrote:

“Important questions remain about the sustainability of a force of this size. If there is still a role for UK Forces in Iraq, those Forces must be capable of doing more than just protecting themselves at Basra Air Station. If the reduction in numbers means they cannot do more than this, the entire UK presence in South-Eastern Iraq will be open to question.”

655. In a Current Assessment Note issued on 4 December, a CIG considered the significance to JAM and the Sadrists of the Iraqi National Gathering (ING) splinter group.³⁰⁰

656. The CIG assessed that those close to Muqtada al-Sadr were concerned that the ING’s establishment might lead to a significant number of defections from the mainstream Sadrist movement, but judged that those who might consider defecting were likely to wait to see the impact of the ING before joining the new movement.

657. The note continued:

“Sadr probably views the ING as a direct attack on his authority. He does not appear willing to make any concessions ...

“As former JAM special group commanders, the ING members have links to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force and Lebanese Hizballah. However, we have no intelligence to suggest that either is supporting the ING.”

658. On 4 December, a video was released of one of the five British hostages kidnapped from the Ministry of Finance in Baghdad on 29 May by men dressed in Iraqi Police uniforms.³⁰¹ In it, the kidnappers threatened to kill a hostage if the UK did not leave Iraq by 13 December.

659. Prime Minister Maliki and Governor Waili met on 5 December and “cleared the air between them”, paving the way for PIC. Prime Minister Maliki communicated his immediate priorities for Basra, including reconciliation encompassing all political parties and measures to curb corruption.

³⁰⁰ CIG Current Assessment Note, 4 December 2007, ‘Iraq: How Important is the Iraqi National Gathering?’

³⁰¹ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Brown, [undated], ‘Prime Minister’s Visit to Basra: 9 December 2007’.

660. When Mr Brown and President Bush spoke on the telephone on 6 December, Mr Brown reported that he was looking forward to the move to PIC in Basra on 16 December and the UK was planning to launch the Basra Investment Forum.³⁰² He reported “continued good progress” on security and economic reconstruction in the South.

661. On 7 December, government officials working closely with the military reported to London on a “difficult meeting” with JAM1 the previous day.³⁰³

662. The officials also reported that detainee releases were now in the gift of Maj Gen Binns rather than requiring sign-off in Whitehall. The release of JAM1 was an exception to this rule, and was to be delegated to Mr Prentice.

663. FCO officials advised Mr Miliband on 7 December that representatives of all the parties in Basra signed “a statement ... in which they agreed to support the security services in their efforts to maintain security and work for stability and growth in Basra”.³⁰⁴ Although there had been similar declarations in the past, the FCO considered this statement to be more significant because of the broad political support it had attracted, in particular from OMS. FCO officials described the statement as the work of Sayyid Abdul Ali al-Musawi, a prominent Shia cleric, and Sheikh Amr al-Faiz, a tribal leader.

664. Also on 7 December, officials in the FCO submitted advice to Mr Miliband on the strategy for negotiations leading to the release of JAM1.³⁰⁵ MOD officials sent a copy of that advice to Mr Browne, under separate cover, on the same day.

665. A junior official from the FCO Iraq Group advised Mr Miliband that the key issue was ensuring that the UK obtained “maximum benefit from the timing of the release of [JAM1]”.³⁰⁶ The advice explained that negotiations had always been based on the understanding that JAM1 would be released eventually, and recommended that Mr Miliband should delegate the decision on the precise timing of JAM1’s release to Mr Prentice, who would consult Maj Gen Binns, Mr Jones and “other interested parties on the ground”.

666. The junior official advised that JAM1’s release could attract media attention, in response to which the FCO’s message would be that “the process was part of the coalition’s and GOI’s wider strategy of reconciliation with armed groups in Iraq”.

³⁰² Letter Fletcher to Gould, 6 December 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s Call with US President, 6 December: Foreign Policy’.

³⁰³ Email government official working closely with the military, 7 December 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Meeting with [JAM1] on 6 December’.

³⁰⁴ Minute FCO Iraq Group [junior official] to PS/Foreign Secretary, 7 December 2007, ‘Iraq – Basra Developments’.

³⁰⁵ Minute FCO Iraq Group [junior official] to Jenkins etc, 7 December 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] – negotiating strategy’; and Minute Day to APS/SofS [MOD], 7 December 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]’.

³⁰⁶ Minute FCO Iraq Group [junior official] to Jenkins etc, 7 December 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION] – negotiating strategy’.

667. The junior official repeated the risks set out in his 19 November submission, concluding that “It is impossible to predict before the event how these risks will play in detail” and that choosing the best timing for JAM1’s release would mitigate them to some extent. On timing, the official explained that the final detainee releases were expected in early to mid-January, and “depending on developments on the ground, it might be tactically wise to release [JAM1] somewhat earlier, although we would not expect to do so before Basra has achieved Provincial Iraqi Control.”

668. The following day, the junior FCO official sent Mr Miliband’s office some additional text supplied by Mr Prentice “as further clarification” of his submission. It said:

“Whilst delegating the decision to us is fine, this is not just a sovereign issue. As GOC MND(SE) comes under MNF-I and Petraeus’ command, they would have to be consulted. And we would have to inform the GoI (Maliki) of our plans as such a decision would play into the broader Shia reconciliation strategy.”³⁰⁷

669. Mr Day’s parallel submission to Mr Browne explained that the FCO was taking responsibility for JAM1’s release. The submission reflected advice from theatre that delegated authority was needed because of the speed with which the position on the ground was developing.³⁰⁸

670. The Private Secretary to Mr Bob Ainsworth, Minister for the Armed Forces, to whom the submission was copied, wrote on the advice on 11 December that although Mr Browne had already “noted the submission” she had concerns about whether the decision should be delegated because:

“The implications of his release are strategic and I think the decision ought to be taken here, away from tactical considerations.”³⁰⁹

671. Mr Ainsworth replied in relation to the submission: “I think this is wrong and should not be delegated.”³¹⁰

672. On 9 December, Mr Brown visited Basra, primarily for the purpose of “a Christmas visit to the troops”.³¹¹

673. In a briefing for the visit, a Cabinet Office official told Mr Brown that the UK had reached agreement with the US and Iraqi Governments on the text of the draft resolution and supporting exchange of letters. The resolution would be tabled at the UN in New

³⁰⁷ Email FCO Iraq Group [junior official] to various, 8 December 2007, ‘Submission: [NAME OF OPERATION].’

³⁰⁸ Minute Day to APS/SofS [MOD], 7 December 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION].’

³⁰⁹ Manuscript comment Pusey on Minute Day to APS/SofS [MOD], 7 December 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION].’

³¹⁰ Manuscript comment Ainsworth on Minute Day to APS/SofS [MOD], 7 December 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION].’

³¹¹ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Brown, [undated], ‘Prime Minister’s visit to Basra: 9 December 2007.’

York during the following week. It extended the MNF-I's mandate for a further year, but the letters also acknowledged the Government of Iraq's wish that this should be the last resolution of its kind. The letters committed the US and Iraqis to negotiating a long-term agreement to cover the presence of US forces in Iraq in 2009 and beyond. The UK had yet to decide whether to pursue something similar.

674. During the visit, Mr Brown spoke by telephone to Prime Minister Maliki and congratulated him on the decision to move to PIC in Basra.³¹² Mr Brown promised that the UK "would continue to act sensitively in Basra" and that Mr Alexander and Mr Miliband would both visit soon, the former for the launch of the Basra Development Forum.

675. Lt Gen Rollo reported on 10 December that it had been a "further steady week" in security terms, with no major incidents in Anbar, Baghdad or the South.³¹³ There were some "interesting dynamics" in the South, with "Maliki's Iraqi led operations" in Karbala and Diwaniyah, together with "rumours of a major offensive in Basra". They were "having an effect on JAM" but the freeze was holding. In Basra, "despite much talk of defensive preparation, JAM, backed up by OMS from Najaf, have come to the table and appear to be willing to sign up to some if not all of Mohan's demands".

676. At the local political level, Lt Gen Rollo reported that Governor Waili was "reconciled to Maliki". Lt Gen Rollo considered that this cleared the way for the Basra Development Forum meeting on 12 December and for transition to PIC on 16 December. It also meant that the way was clear to:

"... focus hard on how the promises to be made at the Forum will be kept ... General Petraeus's challenge, reiterated to each UK visitor, to fulfil our Prime Minister's intent has been very clear. Barham Saleh underlined this point when he spoke to the MOD and FCO Permanent Secretaries who visited this week along with the DFID Director covering the Middle East. He said that while long term capacity building remained essential, 'jump starting' was now necessary ... That should give us our lead. The way that money has been poured into Anbar, by both the US and the GOI, to reinforce success is also setting the standard; recognising that in counter-insurgency operations, all the lines of operation must be properly supported."

677. Mr Brown reported on his visit to Iraq at Cabinet on 11 December.³¹⁴ He said that British troops would be transferring responsibility for the security of Basra to PIC on 16 December as planned. The number of violent incidents targeted at British forces had reduced by 90 percent since September, and they were already operating in an overwatch capacity in support of the Iraqi Security Forces: "Their main role would be

³¹² Letter Fletcher to Gooding, 9 December 2007, 'Prime Minister's Telephone Call with Prime Minister of Iraq, 9 December'.

³¹³ Minute Rollo to CDS, 10 December 2007, 'SBMR-I's Weekly Report (280) 9 Dec 07'.

³¹⁴ Cabinet Conclusions, 11 December 2007.

training the Iraqi Security Forces, although they would re-engage if necessary.” The transition would enable force levels to reduce from 4,500 to 2,500 by March 2008, at which point the future position would be reviewed.

678. Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Foreign Policy Adviser to Mr Blair until June 2007 and subsequently British Ambassador to the US, told the Inquiry that “we deliberately chose as a government to accept that as we left Basra it wouldn’t be perfect; it was going to be rough and ready and difficult. We developed deliberately this doctrine of sufficiency.”³¹⁵

679. On 12 December, a junior official from the FCO Iraq Group sent further advice to Mr Miliband, apparently in response to his request for “more detail on the criteria which we would use to inform a decision to release the detained JAM leader [JAM1]”.³¹⁶

680. The junior official advised that “it is not possible to provide a comprehensive checklist of things which would have to happen (or not happen) before we decided to release [JAM1]”. Since the negotiations had always been based on the understanding that JAM1 would be released at some stage, the question was when to release, not whether to release.

681. The junior official went on to explain that:

“... our main aim is to sustain the JAM cease-fire against us, and to secure ... a clear commitment to certain principles. These would centre on undertakings to end violence and intimidation against MNF, the ISF, other political parties, our LE [locally engaged] staff and others, and to respect the democratic process ...

“We will, as far as possible, seek to secure such a commitment from [JAM1] before he is released. But the time to do so is limited. In addition, it may be tactically preferable to release [JAM1] even if he has not given all of the commitments which we are seeking, either as a mark of our good faith or to increase his ability to deliver his JAM colleagues.”

682. At the MOD’s request, on 12 December the JIC examined the strength, cohesion and prospects for the Sunni insurgency in Iraq.³¹⁷

683. The JIC judged that the decreasing levels of violence in Iraq were due in significant part to a “shift in the priorities of some Sunni insurgents who had reduced attacks on the MNF in favour of working with it to resist AQ-I as part of the US-sponsored ‘Concerned Local Citizens’ groups (CLCs)” (see Section 12.1).

684. The JIC assessed:

“II. Though Sunni Arab insurgent groups remain divided by ideology, regional demographics and local concerns, factions of several groups are trying to work

³¹⁵ Public hearing, 16 December 2009, page 99.

³¹⁶ Minute FCO Iraq Group [junior official] to Jenkins, 10 December 2007, ‘Iraq: [NAME OF OPERATION]’.

³¹⁷ JIC Assessment, 12 December 2007, ‘Iraq’s Sunni Insurgency: Nationalists and Jihadists’.

together in some areas as recognition of the political benefits of unity is slowly emerging. The formation of new alliances and willingness of some groups to negotiate at a tactical level with the MNF shows that engagement is possible – albeit locally.

“III. The combination of Sunni resistance and pressure from MNF and Iraqi security forces is limiting AQ-I’s freedom to operate. It is struggling and no longer driving sectarian violence. But AQ-I remains capable of undermining stability in Iraq: it can still hit strategic targets. Without sustained military pressure and less sectarian politics, it could regenerate and reinvigorate sectarian violence.”

685. Looking ahead, the JIC concluded:

“We see no sign that the Sunni insurgency will recover its momentum at least as long as the US ‘surge’ and coalition support for CLCs lasts ...

“If the anti-AQ-I movement continues throughout 2008, we would expect Iraq to become a less attractive destination for those wishing to join AQ-I and fight the global jihad. Some Iraqis might abandon AQ-I for other insurgent groups of CLCs. However, we judge the Sunni community’s continued rejection of AQ-I and tolerance of the MNF will be fragile so long as Sunni grievances are not being addressed quickly enough. CLC members expect financial and political rewards ... Recently announced Iraqi and US plans to release about 15,000 (mainly Sunni) detainees by the end of 2008 might temporarily appease some more Sunnis, if implemented. But we judge there is still a high risk that the current security gains will fade after the US ‘surge’ ends in April unless Maliki’s government visibly improves public services in Sunni areas, provides lasting employment, allows for early provincial elections and reverses its policy on de-Ba’athification.”

686. On 12 December, Prime Minister Maliki and Governor Waili jointly hosted a meeting of the Basra Development Forum at Basra International Airport.³¹⁸ Mr Alexander attended to represent the UK and was joined by a number of Iraqi ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister Saleh. The work of the Basra Development Forum is addressed in Section 10.2.

687. Mr Prentice described it as a “hugely successful event” which struck “an optimistic note on the governance and economic agenda to complement the security handover” which was due to take place four days later. He reported to the FCO that the event had helped to bridge the divide between Basra and Baghdad, through the first visit by Prime Minister Maliki since July 2006 and his joint public appearance with Governor Waili.

688. Mr Jones told the Inquiry that it was “no coincidence that the third Basra development forum took place about four days before the PIC ceremony”.³¹⁹ He and his

³¹⁸ eGram 50733/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 13 December 2007, ‘Iraq: Basra Development Forum’.

³¹⁹ Private hearing, 24 June 2010, page 58.

colleagues had “many hours of amusement” discussing with their military colleagues in the preceding months how developments relating to the economy, which had been identified as “the crucial thing” in helping to keep Basra stable to allow for PIC, could support progress on security.

689. Lt Gen Rollo recorded that Prime Minister Maliki had made a strong speech in response to which Governor Waili promised that Basra would be disarmed and corruption rooted out.³²⁰

690. Maj Gen Binns observed that relations between Prime Minister Maliki and Governor Waili were clearly much improved as they sat together.³²¹ He reported that Prime Minister Maliki described 2008 as “the year of redevelopment and reconstruction”.

691. Maj Gen Binns wrote that, despite the operations MND(SE) had been conducting on the border in Maysan and Basra, the US chain of command appeared still to have concerns. They were proposing to build forward operating bases at border crossings in Basra and Maysan, and to deploy a US artillery battalion there from March 2008. Maj Gen Binns explained:

“I have made the point that I believe that militarily this is not necessary, but have also conceded that if MNC-I want to do this then we should be seen to support them. Not surprisingly Gen Mohan and Gen Abbas are supportive of the proposal. My chief concern has been the potential impact on reconciliation and Basra dynamics and the level of support expected from MND(SE).”

692. On 13 December, Mr McDonald updated the Iraq Strategy Group on Mr Brown’s visit to Iraq.³²² He said that:

“Despite some views expressed in theatre, the Prime Minister was clear that we should continue on our path of Iraqisation set out in his October statement, which should entail a significant reduction in our force levels from November 2008.”

693. SIS6 told the Iraq Strategy Group that “influence with local leaders was likely to reduce in the near future, and that might lead to a deterioration in the security situation”.

694. The Iraq Strategy Group also discussed a draft FCO strategy paper for 2008-2009 and concluded that it would not be ready for Ministers to read over Christmas as had been intended.

695. Mr McDonald commissioned the MOD to produce a paper setting out two options for force levels from November 2008: a reduction by half (to around 1,500) or to almost zero (a removal of UK combat forces from the South). The paper was to include what tasks could be carried out, what ability there would be to protect civilian

³²⁰ Minute Rollo to CDS, 17 December 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (281) 16 Dec 07’.

³²¹ Minute Binns to CJO, 13 December 2007, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 13 December 2007’.

³²² Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 14 December 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 13 December’.

staff and how quickly the reductions could happen. This and an updated version of the FCO paper would be discussed by the ISG in mid-January, then put to a meeting of NSID(OD) chaired by the Foreign Secretary in early February and finally to a meeting of NSID(OD) chaired by the Prime Minister in early March.

696. On 14 December, a Private Secretary confirmed that Mr Miliband was content to delegate authority to Mr Prentice to take the decision about when to release JAM1.³²³ He said that Mr Miliband believed that the negotiations had “proven their worth” and had “confidence in the team working on this”. The Private Secretary explained that Mr Miliband would be available should the team want further consultation.

697. Security responsibility for Basra province transferred to Provincial Iraqi Control on 16 December.³²⁴ Mr Miliband attended the handover ceremony for the UK, and Dr Rubaie for the Iraqi Government.³²⁵

698. After the transition in Basra, all of the four provinces within MND(SE) were under Iraqi control, with “overwatch” support from UK and other coalition forces.

699. In total, nine Iraqi provinces had made the transition to PIC, half of the total.³²⁶

700. After the ceremony, Mr Miliband remained in Iraq to visit Baghdad and Erbil.³²⁷ Mr Prentice reported that Mr Miliband told “Zebari and Maliki that PIC in Basra would not mean any diminution of our effort or commitment but did mark a new stage in our relationship”. Mr Miliband also “urged on all ... the need for political leadership to unblock vital legislation and make progress on political reconciliation”.

701. In his visit report to Mr Brown, Mr Miliband said that “Iraqi press coverage [of the handover] was on the whole favourable, characterising the event as a restoration of national authority.”³²⁸

702. Mr Miliband wrote:

“In spite of some of the recent press reporting, security has undoubtedly improved, not just in Basra but in Iraq as a whole. Attacks of all sorts have remained for 10 straight weeks now at levels last seen consistently in the middle of 2005.”

703. Mr Miliband attributed the improvement to political factors including the Anbar Awakening, the physical separation of Sunni and Shia communities in Baghdad, the

³²³ Email Hickey to FCO Iraq Group [junior official], 14 December 2007, ‘Iraq: [NAME OF OPERATION]: further advice’.

³²⁴ *BBC News*, 23 March 2009, *Timeline: UK Troops in Basra*.

³²⁵ Minute Rollo to CDS, 17 December 2007, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (281) 16 Dec 07’.

³²⁶ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 14 December 2007, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 13 December’.

³²⁷ eGram 51785/07 Baghdad to FCO London, 20 December 2007, ‘Iraq: SofS Visit to Baghdad 16-17 December’.

³²⁸ Minute Miliband to Brown, 27 December 2007, ‘My Visit to Iraq: 16-18 December’.

JAM freeze and “the emergence of a fragile but real inter-factional political process”. But he warned that the improvement would not be sustained without political progress:

“There is a general lack of political drive and leadership. No one in government is willing to accept responsibility for delivery of legislation through the Council of Representatives.”

704. The UK’s challenge, in Mr Miliband’s view, was “to decide what more it is that we can realistically do to help the country maintain forward momentum”. The work under way across Whitehall to review UK strategy would assist, but:

“My own initial view is that we should neither start with a numbers game in terms of troops, nor an open ended security commitment driven by commitment on economic development. Instead we need to build on the points of consensus: that Iraq depends on local political leadership supported by the international community, that we have distinctive sunk costs in Iraq but also distinctive assets to deploy ...; that there are real foreign policy arguments for continued engagement; but these need to be justified by a clear, coherent and agreed plan for Iraq supported by the international community.”

705. Mr Prentice recorded that during his visit Mr Miliband had been briefed on negotiations with JAM1 by Maj Gen Binns, who had explained his emerging conclusion that JAM1’s release “should come sooner rather than later in the remaining scheduled releases”.³²⁹

706. The Inquiry asked Mr Browne whether there was a sense that the UK had rushed the pace of transfer to Iraqi control.³³⁰ Mr Browne considered that, in fact, the reverse had often been true: the Iraqis were keen to speed up the process of transfer but the UK needed, at times, to slow the pace down a bit.

707. In his book *Surge*, Colonel Peter Mansoor (Gen Petraeus’ executive officer in 2007), wrote that after transition to PIC:

“The Jaysh al-Mahdi assumed control of large sections of Basra, inflicting on its residents a severe brand of Shari’a law that forced women to wear the *jihab* [sic] on pain of death, closed barber shops and music stores, and generally made life miserable for city residents. The situation proved yet again that without control or protection of the population, counter-insurgency efforts would fail and the Iraqi people would suffer. For his part, Muqtada al-Sadr took credit for forcing the British out of Iraq.”³³¹

³²⁹ Email Prentice to Hickey, 20 December 2007, ‘Iraq: [NAME OF OPERATION]: Imminent Release’.

³³⁰ Public hearing, 25 January 2010, pages 37–39.

³³¹ Mansoor PR. *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*. Yale University Press, 2013.

708. Mr Tinline told the Inquiry:

“... once we got to PIC and we could hand over control, at that point you could sort of take a deep breath and say; then what? Until we had got to that point and had got out of the city, I think we were very focused on: okay, how do we get to that point?”³³²

709. Resolution 1790 (2007) was adopted by the United Nations Security Council on 18 December 2007.³³³ It extended arrangements for the presence of the MNF-I in Iraq until 31 December 2008. Thereafter, the Security Council took note of the objectives stated in the Iraqi Government’s letter in relation to the resolution, “including the statement that the Government of Iraq considers this to be its final request to the Security Council for the extension of the mandate of the Multi-National Force”.

710. On 19 December, Mr Brown discussed Iraq briefly with President Bush.³³⁴ Mr Brown welcomed PIC in Basra and stressed the importance of full support from the international community for provincial elections. Gen Petraeus was reported to be positive about progress in the South and about US/UK consultation.

711. On 20 December, Mr Prentice sent an email to Mr Miliband’s Private Secretary to tell him that JAM1’s release was planned for the following evening.³³⁵ This followed a recommendation by Maj Gen Binns which had been agreed by MNF(I). Prime Minister Maliki had welcomed the proposal.

712. On the same day, Mr Miliband’s Private Secretary confirmed that he was content with the approach.³³⁶

713. Government officials working closely with the military told JAM1 the news that evening and they agreed he would leave detention late the following evening.³³⁷

714. On 20 December, the JIC circulated an Assessment of Iraqi security strategy and the proficiency of Iraqi Security Forces.³³⁸ The JIC’s detailed conclusions about the ISF are addressed in Section 12.1, but its Key Judgements included:

“I. Greater centralisation of Iraqi national security decision making has resulted in more effective implementation. The Ministry of Defence is steadily building capacity, but is unlikely to achieve complete self-reliance by the end of 2008. The Ministry of Interior is still largely ineffective, with endemic sectarianism and corruption.

“II. For the foreseeable future the army will depend heavily on the coalition for air support, logistics, heavy fire support and specialist enablers such as real time

³³² Private hearing, 24 June 2010, page 17.

³³³ United Nations Security Council resolution 1790 (2007).

³³⁴ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 19 December 2007, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with US President, 19 December’.

³³⁵ Email Prentice to Hickey, 20 December 2007, ‘Iraq: [NAME OF OPERATION]: Imminent Release’.

³³⁶ Email Hickey to Prentice, 20 December 2007, ‘Iraq: [NAME OF OPERATION]: Imminent Release’.

³³⁷ Email government official working closely with the military, 23 December 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: End of Act 1, curtain up on Act 2’.

³³⁸ JIC Assessment, 20 December 2007, ‘Iraqi Security Forces: Two Steps Forward’.

intelligence and surveillance. But overall capability continues to develop and far exceeds that of the police. Where violence has flared, combat units have been reinforced from elsewhere without recourse to MNF re-intervention.

“III. The large majority of local Iraqi Police remains wholly ineffective in tackling crime and turns a blind eye to sectarian, criminal and violent anti-MNF activity by colleagues who are also members of Shia militias. National Police (NP) and provincial special police units are more tactically capable, but the NP follows a sectarian Shia agenda. The judiciary is also overstretched and underperforming.”

715. On 21 December, MOD officials advised Mr Browne of the “probable imminent release” of JAM1.³³⁹ The advice said:

“The DIRC met yesterday and concluded that [JAM1] can no longer be held as an imperative threat to the security of Iraq ... Every effort has been made ... to ensure that we retain a link to [JAM1] after his release. Some procedures have been agreed in principle – but we judge that one way to help ensure that contact is maintained is for [JAM1] not to be the final internee released so that he needs to remain in contact to ensure that the release process smoothly continues to completion ...”

“It will be for ... /FCO to manage our relationship with [JAM1] post release, although MND(SE) will retain a strong interest and involvement, both because of [JAM1]’s importance to managing security in Basra and also because of continuing dialogue with [JAM1] regarding possible future releases of those of his supporters who are currently being detained by the US ...”

716. Mr Browne marked the advice “Noted” on 22 December.

717. Maj Gen Binns met JAM1 on the morning of 21 December.³⁴⁰ A government official working closely with the military reported that during the meeting JAM1 said that he had not wanted to go to war with the British, but they had “occupied his country and attacked his groups”. Now it was time for a fresh page and for reconstruction and reconciliation. He wished that the process of negotiation had begun in 2004 or 2005 but it had been impossible to find British interlocutors to take it on. He hoped that the process would now be a model for the rest of Iraq to follow. There should be no further animosity against the British Military and he hoped that British soldiers would get home safely. It was agreed that JAM1’s release should be brought forward by a few hours, because of security concerns.

718. On the evening of 21 December, JAM1 left the Divisional Internment Facility in Basra. The following day, officials made contact with JAM1 by email, and received a response a day later.

³³⁹ Manuscript comment Browne on Minute Powell to PS/Secretary of State [MOD], 21 December 2007, ‘Iraq Op TELIC: future detainee releases’.

³⁴⁰ Email government official working closely with the military, 23 December 2007, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: End of Act 1, curtain up on Act 2’.

719. A senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) wrote to Dr John Jenkins, FCO Director Middle East and North Africa, on 21 December to take stock following JAM1's release and to offer views on next steps for JAM and Shia engagement.³⁴¹ He wrote that "The key task for HMG is to preserve the relative peace in Basra" in order to protect what had been achieved already and "to try to bring the Sadrist movement nationally to the kind of strategic tipping point achieved with the Sunnis in Anbar". The objective was a "fractured, but not atomised, JAM". He wrote that Shia engagement would remain a "strategic priority in Iraq" with the aim of deepening dialogue with a range of Sadrist interlocutors. But only the US would have the "breadth and depth" for Shia engagement across Iraq, so the challenge was "to support and influence this effort not to go it alone".

720. Mr Browne wrote to Mr Brown on 22 December with an update on force levels from spring 2008, reflecting "further work" since Mr Brown's statement to Parliament on 8 October.³⁴²

721. Mr Browne wrote that the latest military advice, endorsed by the Chiefs of Staff and incorporating direction from Gen Petraeus, was that the UK should deploy 2,750 personnel in southern Iraq, supported by 800 in Kuwait. That was 550 higher than Mr Brown had announced on 8 October. The reason for the increase was a decision by the Czech government to withdraw its Basra contingent in 2008 and the need to have a slightly larger headquarters to provide for effective understanding of the situation on the ground and to ensure effective engagement with key Iraqi leaders.

722. Mr Browne advised:

"... I believe we can present these figures as broadly consistent with the aspirations you outlined to Parliament in October, and further that we can make a positive case for a small potential increase in our planning figures, as a demonstration of how decisions on force levels will be guided by advice from military commanders and an assessment of conditions on the ground – a point you and I have always emphasised."

723. On 24 December, Lt Gen Rollo reported a "startling sequel" to the handover ceremony in Basra.³⁴³ Gen Mohan and Governor Waili held a press conference alongside an OMS delegation from Najaf, live on Al Iraqiya television. The OMS spokesman had welcomed PIC and supported the Iraqi security organisations. Lt Gen Rollo observed that this was "All very welcome – both for Basra and for handling US perceptions of the situation in the South."

³⁴¹ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) to Jenkins, 21 December 2007, 'Shia engagement: [NAME OF OPERATION] after [JAM1]'s release'.

³⁴² Letter Browne to Brown, 22 December 2007, 'Iraq: Proposed Force Levels from Spring 2008'.

³⁴³ Minute Rollo to CDS, 24 December 2007, 'SBMR-I's Weekly Report (282) 23 Dec 07'.

724. Lt Gen Rollo also reported that Mr Kevin Rudd, newly elected Prime Minister of Australia, had visited Basra and announced the withdrawal of the Australian battlegroup and training contingent from Dhi Qar and Muthanna in June 2008, leaving only embedded staff.

725. On 31 December, Lt Gen Rollo sent ACM Stirrup a paper considering the main areas of coalition effort for 2008, and issues for the UK to address.³⁴⁴

726. In his introduction, Lt Gen Rollo wrote that Iraq was “in a much better condition than it was a year ago”. The “viciously destabilising sectarian conflict” was now largely absent; AQ-I had been driven out of most of Anbar and Baghdad and was gradually being driven into the North; the Sadrists were maintaining their freeze and were riven with internal conflict; and the ISF were rapidly increasing in number and capability. But significant sections of the country remained insecure and violence remained at an unacceptably high level, meaning that “we do not yet have ‘irreversible momentum’”.

727. Given the dynamic nature of the campaign, Lt Gen Rollo reported that Gen Petraeus would not make recommendations beyond the end of 2008 when he reported to Congress in March. The main themes of the coalition effort for 2008 would be:

- The pursuit of AQ-I, which was already badly damaged, and now able to operate effectively only in areas where there are inadequate security forces and where the population felt threatened, for example by local militias.
- The “reshaping of JAM/OMS”. The movement was splitting, its future direction unclear; the coalition and the Iraqi Government would continue to support the freeze, and would not go after any JAM members who respected it, but would pursue others (including the Special Groups) who continue to conduct criminal actions, seeking to separate the reconcilables from the irreconcilables and bind them into the political process.
- Working with neighbouring countries to reduce the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq.
- Opening up the economy and increasing employment. The immediate concern for the MNF was the need to help the tens of thousands of Sunni Arabs who had participated in the Anbar Awakening to find jobs, reducing their “economic motivation to take up arms against the Iraqi Government or MNF”.
- Building governance capacity at all levels.
- Developing future bilateral security relationships, to form the basis for coalition engagement in Iraq when resolution 1790 expired in December 2008.

³⁴⁴ Minute Rollo to CDS, 31 December 2007, ‘Iraq in 2008 – An Opportunity To Be Taken’.

728. As a consequence, Lt Gen Rollo considered that there were four main issues for the UK to engage with in 2008:

- Working out where the UK military contribution in Iraq sat within the wider strategic relationship with the US: “I fully appreciate that there are wider factors at play, but it may nevertheless be helpful to make the obvious point that the US military main effort (with 15 brigades deployed here, even in July 2008, against two in Afghanistan) unquestionably remains Iraq, that this will still be the case in 2009, and that General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker consistently express their wish for us to remain.”
- Determining the role, size and duration of the UK’s national effort in Basra: “Our military effort ... should be focused on support to the ISF. Our national effort should be focused on political and economic development in the area. But of course the two are inextricably related ... This will need national effort and needs to be properly resourced ... In the long run Basra should be a success, but without coalition support (which Petraeus and Crocker clearly believe should be British led) we risk it going backwards in the short to medium term.”
- Working out the extent to which the UK wished to support the ISF more broadly in the future.
- Engaging with the US on the restructuring of MNF-I, MNC-I and MNSTC-I, both in terms of headquarters and basing.

729. Lt Gen Rollo concluded:

“To say that the next six months in Iraq will be critical is a truism. What is clear is that the Iraqis, and their allies, have been given a chance to move decisively in the right direction, which if squandered is [not] likely to be reproduced.”

January 2008

730. On 3 January, Mr Brown met Prime Minister Maliki in the UK and urged him to make progress on the Hydrocarbons Law and on local elections as well as to appoint Iraqi staff to support the Basra Development Forum.³⁴⁵ He also encouraged Prime Minister Maliki to convene a further meeting of the “3 plus 1” Executive Group and to re-appoint Gen Mohan and Gen Jalil for another term. Prime Minister Maliki agreed to the re-appointments, and said he would increase Basra’s budget.

731. One of Maj Gen Binns’ senior officers met Gen Mohan on 4 January to discuss MND(SE) proposals for future support to the ISF (a “scalable support package”).³⁴⁶ Gen Mohan suggested that an MOU would be required to formalise the arrangement and guarantee the support. Maj Gen Binns commented that an MOU “would not be

³⁴⁵ Letter Fletcher to Carver, 3 January 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s Bilateral with Prime Minister of Iraq, 3 January’.

³⁴⁶ Minute Binns to CJO, 10 January 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 10 January 2008’.

helpful as it would require us to make some significant commitments and, potentially, make it difficult for us to meet expectations” so he suggested that they should look at “alternative confidence building measures” instead.

732. In a letter to Mr Browne’s Private Secretary on 7 January, Mr Brown’s Private Secretary said that the Prime Minister preferred to defer decisions and announcements on force levels in Iraq until after the final review had taken place at the end of February.³⁴⁷ The decision would need to be taken “in the light of advice from military commanders, a full assessment of conditions on the ground, a further effort to internationalise Iraq-handling ... and a review of the progress of the Kuwait Support Facility”.

733. The same Private Secretary also wrote to Mr Miliband’s Private Secretary, with Mr Brown’s response to the report of Mr Miliband’s visit.³⁴⁸

734. Mr Brown agreed with Mr Miliband’s conclusions on the 2008 Iraq strategy and was content for him to proceed as outlined. In particular, he was “keen to work hard to persuade the US of the need to support early provincial elections” and agreed strongly on the importance of “further internationalising the effort”.

735. On 7 January, Mr McDonald and Ms Aldred met members of the US Administration and explored US thinking on future force levels in Iraq.³⁴⁹ Mr McDonald explained that the UK was continuing to plan on the basis of a reduction in UK troops in March or April, but that the latest military advice was that the reduction should be to around 2,700 to 2,800; not 2,500 as previously envisaged. Options for beyond November 2008 were under consideration but the UK would be constrained once the resolution expired.

736. Mr McDonald and Ms Aldred were told that the US had not ruled out a further resolution completely, only that there would not be another under Chapter VII.

737. Lt Gen Houghton told the Chiefs of Staff at their 8 January meeting that HQ MND(SE) had assessed that the impact of the Australian withdrawal on UK forces would be “minimal”.³⁵⁰ Around 105 embedded personnel would remain. Danish troops had already withdrawn, and Czech forces were due to do so in June, leaving Romanian forces alongside those of the UK.

738. Gen Dannatt visited Basra and Baghdad between 13 and 15 January and had an “extremely useful” meeting with Gen Petraeus, who outlined options to use US forces to backfill into Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces once the Australian forces withdrew.³⁵¹

³⁴⁷ Letter Fletcher to Forber, 7 January 2008, ‘Iraq: Force Levels’.

³⁴⁸ Letter Fletcher to Hickey, 7 January 2008, ‘Iraq’.

³⁴⁹ Minute Aldred to McDonald, 7 January 2008, ‘Meeting with Eliot Cohen and Eric Edelman’.

³⁵⁰ Minutes, 8 January 2008, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

³⁵¹ Minute CGS to Various, 21 January 2008, ‘CGS Visit to Iraq 13-15 Jan 08’.

739. Two options were being considered; either extending the boundary of a combined MND (Centre South) and MND (Centre) to encompass Muthanna and Dhi Qar or placing US troops under UK command in MND(SE). Gen Dannatt wrote to the Chiefs of Staff and senior officials in the MOD:

“It may be that we wish to volunteer early to take the US forces under command, in order to shape the direction of our future engagement in Iraq rather than reduce to a two-star controlling a single province.”

740. Gen Dannatt also described experiencing in Baghdad and Basra a “palpable sense of optimism ... that has to be balanced against the growing realisation that unless we will build on the successes of 2007, we will miss the opportunities that 2008 presents”.

741. In his weekly report on 14 January, Lt Gen Rollo commented that although the final days of 2007 had “very much the feel of a boat without wind”, there was “a very different feel” to Baghdad at the start of 2008.³⁵² He wrote: “The emphasis is on politics, and there are clear signs of movement.”

742. Efforts to counter AQ continued, with a series of MNF operations against AQ strongholds in Baghdad and Diyala. Discussions continued in Baghdad on the commercial plans for the development of Umm Qasr port in Basra. Lt Gen Rollo commented:

“This offers a real opportunity for Basra and the South-East and we need to ensure that contracts are let as quickly as possible ... This will require co-ordination in Baghdad, and with the Ministries and the Japan Bank of International Co-operation. My team will continue to track this, but I remain of the view that the real answer is a Basra Development Office in Baghdad.”

743. Lt Gen Rollo recorded that US work on the long term US-Iraqi bilateral Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) had begun in earnest, with a negotiating team due to arrive in Iraq in February.

744. Lt Gen Rollo reported that there was provision in the US thinking for coalition partners either to be covered by their agreement, or to adopt its language, or to negotiate their own agreement. He believed that the US was aware that the European Convention on Human Rights imposed particular demands on UK forces and was keen to know what the UK would need in such an agreement. Maj Gen Rollo wrote that the SOFA would cover all aspects of the MNF presence in Iraq and one would be necessary regardless of the size of the UK’s commitment. He felt that: “A clear view on how we plan to engage is overdue.”

³⁵² Minute Rollo to CDS, 14 January 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (283) 14 Jan 08’.

745. Mr Prentice reported that the “3+1” group had a “positive and productive meeting” on 14 January, and formally agreed to rename themselves the Executive Council.³⁵³ In his view the atmosphere had clearly been different. Mr Prentice also reported that “re-energising the 3+1 has coincided with the first step forward on key legislation we have seen for some time”.

746. On 14 January, in response to a Parliamentary Question from Lady Hermon, Mr Browne said that the number of established military posts in Iraq had reduced by 100 in October 2007 and 600 in November.³⁵⁴ Mr Browne added that by the end of January he aimed to have reduced the number of posts by a further 350, and that work continued to plan for future reductions to around 2,500 in southern Iraq from spring 2008.

747. Maj Gen Binns’ weekly report of 17 January recorded that the Iraqi Department of Border Enforcement had arrested eight individuals on the al-Faw Peninsula, in “an area notorious for smuggling”, on 11 January.³⁵⁵

748. Initial investigation revealed that four of the men were Iranian consular officials from Basra, and the other four were Iraqis working as their personal security. Maj Gen Binns commented that it was possible that the individuals were engaged in smuggling lethal aid³⁵⁶ or in the reconnaissance of potential routes for doing so. The four Iranians were released two days later.

749. The day after the Iranians were arrested, the ISF in Nasiriyah detained a mainstream JAM figure who was believed to be the sponsor or leader of a splinter group operating in contravention of the freeze on activity.

750. On 18 January, a CIG considered foreign fighters entering Iraq via Syria.³⁵⁷ The CIG assessed that the majority of foreign fighters joined AQ-I to become suicide bombers. The main route for entry into Iraq was through Syria, using well-established extremist facilitation networks and professional smugglers.

751. The CIG judged that, although foreign fighters would undoubtedly find alternative routes into Iraq, tougher action by the Syrians against facilitation networks would restrict – at least temporarily – the supply of foreign suicide bombers and funds and help maintain pressure on AQ-I.

752. On 18 and 19 January, there was unrest in Basra and Nasiriyah during the Shia festival of Ashura.³⁵⁸

³⁵³ eGram 1592/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 16 January 2008, ‘Iraq: Rice Visit and a New Political Mood in Baghdad’.

³⁵⁴ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 January 2008, column 884W.

³⁵⁵ Minute Binns to CJO, 17 January 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 17 January 2008’.

³⁵⁶ There is no simple definition of “lethal aid”. It is generally used to mean military equipment which can be used directly to inflict serious injury or death.

³⁵⁷ CIG Assessment, 18 January 2008, ‘Iraq: Foreign Fighters Entering via Syria’.

³⁵⁸ Minute Binns to CJO, 24 January 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 24 January 2008’; Minute Rollo to CDS, 20 January 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (284) 20 Jan 08’.

753. Clashes between the ISF and a Shia group called the Soldiers of Heaven resulted in “dozens” of deaths.³⁵⁹

754. Maj Gen Binns observed that the ISF had handled both situations effectively, demonstrating evidence of enhanced capability and strength of resolve. MNF support to the ISF in both cities was “measured, successful and appreciated by the ISF”.³⁶⁰ JAM distanced themselves from the uprising and, Maj Gen Binns reported, “in some cases moved actively to assist the IPS restoring order in Basra”.

755. On 20 January, Lt Gen Rollo included “two initial observations ... to help frame the debate” about the future of the UK’s role in MND(SE) in his weekly report:

“First, before we go too far down the road of developing bilateral relations, we should not forget that we still have to help the Iraqi Government establish law and order in their country (in the face of a significant continuing threat from, amongst others, AQ-I, insurgent Sunni terrorist groups and various Shia militias. Second, as the campaign develops the route to success will increasingly be along the non-military lines of operation – especially the economic one. If we choose we could let the US take most of that burden, but in the South at least, they will be looking to us to drive it. And therefore, our reputation with the US (as well as the Iraqis) will be informed as much by our non-military contribution as our force numbers. And our contribution in 2008 will set the conditions for what we can achieve there in future years. As the Iraq Strategy work moves forward we would do well to keep this in the forefront of our minds.”³⁶¹

756. On 24 January, Mr Prentice reported a further meeting of the Executive Council which had taken place on the previous day.³⁶² The Council agreed a set of principles for moving the political process forward, including:

- proposals for a “slimmer” government – abolishing at least 14 Ministries, leaving between 17 and 22 Cabinet positions;
- further discussions between Prime Minister Maliki and Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi with a view to a Tawafuq return to government;
- the establishment of separate political and technical committees to discuss the long-term security agreement, chaired respectively by Foreign Minister Zebari and Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammed Hamoud;
- the establishment of a standing secretariat for the Political Council for National Security; and

³⁵⁹ *BBC News*, 19 January 2008, *Iraqi Shia pilgrims mark holy day*.

³⁶⁰ Minute Binns to CJO, 24 January 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 24 January 2008’.

³⁶¹ Minute Rollo to CDS, 20 January 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (284) 20 Jan 08’.

³⁶² eGram 2673/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 24 January 2008, ‘Iraq: Internal Political Progress?’

- a “decision to sign” the Accountability and Justice Law (formerly the de-Ba’athification Law), which had been passed by the Council of Representatives (see Section 11.1).

757. Mr Prentice observed: “The simultaneous intent to cut posts and broaden the coalition creates obvious difficulty in satisfying all demands.”

758. On 24 January, Maj Gen Binns reported that he had briefed Lt Gen Odierno on “the key elements of the mission for the first half on 2008” in MND(SE).³⁶³ They agreed that it was right for MND(SE) to be a command in support of the Iraqi Government, ISF, FCO and PRT. Lt Gen Odierno confirmed that Maysan remained an ongoing concern. Maj Gen Binns judged that:

“... the US command in Iraq are seriously concerned about the lack of MNF presence/control in Dhi Qar and Maysan. We may employ the argument that the provinces have been PIC’d and that we MND(SE) are in strategic overwatch, but this doesn’t convince US Commanders.”

759. Maj Gen Binns told Lt Gen Houghton:

“I should therefore be grateful for your direction on what the UK position is regarding the potential transfer of Dhi Qar, Maysan and Muthanna provinces to another MND’s area of responsibility and the line I should take in discussions ...”

760. Mr Brown and President Bush discussed Iraq briefly during a video conference on 24 January.³⁶⁴ Mr Brown considered that Iraq appeared to have turned a corner; progress on key legislation and a change in mindset were encouraging.

The Aitken Report

On 25 January, the MOD published a report of the army’s investigation into cases of “deliberate abuse and unlawful killings of civilians in Iraq in 2003 and early 2004” by UK Service Personnel.³⁶⁵ It included the case of Mr Baha Mousa.

The Aitken Report summarised what had happened in Iraq, and steps taken since 2003 to prevent similar events recurring. It concluded:

“The fact that these measures were not introduced in advance of the invasion of Iraq may suggest a lack of awareness of the operational context by those responsible for preparing our people for that operation, and thus a failing. At one level, the paucity of planning for nation-rebuilding after the invasion (a consequence, in part, of the need to give last-minute diplomacy a chance of success) was certainly a factor. Uncertainty over the reaction of the Iraqi people to being invaded was probably another; in some

³⁶³ Minute Binns to CJO, 24 January 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 24 January 2008’.

³⁶⁴ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 24 January 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with Bush, 24 January’.

³⁶⁵ *The Aitken Report: An Investigation into Cases of Deliberate Abuse and Unlawful Killing in Iraq in 2003 and 2004*, 25 January 2008.

areas we were probably surprised at how quickly the initial euphoria of liberation changed to insurgency.”

The Aitken Report recommended that:

“We need to ensure that lessons learned from the disciplinary and administrative processes (police investigations, legal advice and trials) are better collated as part of the Army’s formal Lessons Learned process, so that trends in criminal behaviour or professional shortcomings can be quickly identified and remedied. We need to ensure that a better understanding of the Army’s Core Values, and their application, is inculcated into all ranks, and especially commanders ...”

Announcing the report’s publication in Parliament, Mr Browne said he was “proud to acknowledge that the vast majority ... who have served in Iraq have conducted themselves to the highest standards of behaviour” and that he was “satisfied that the Army is doing everything possible to ensure that its personnel do not repeat the appalling acts that were perpetrated in these cases”.³⁶⁶

In May 2008 Mr Browne announced a Public Inquiry into the death of Mr Baha Mousa.³⁶⁷ Its report was published on 8 September 2011.³⁶⁸

761. On 27 January, Lt Gen Rollo reported “a very large explosion” in Mosul the previous week, which killed 34 people and injured a further 135.³⁶⁹ When the Provincial Chief of Police visited the site the next morning, he was killed by a suicide bomber.

762. As a consequence, Prime Minister Maliki had announced the “final battle” in the struggle against AQ-I, following this up with what Lt Gen Rollo judged to be a “purposeful performance” at the MCNS, arguing for the reinforcement of Ninawa.

763. Lt Gen Rollo commented: “This is not a question of changing strategic priorities – reinforcements, predominantly Iraqi, have already been despatched to Mosul as part of the overall operation, with more on the way – but it is a reflection of the political requirement to be seen to be responding to a part of the country in need.”

764. Gen Mohan and Gen Jalil conducted a review of the Ashura disturbances and were reported by Maj Gen Binns on 31 January to be “pleased with the outcome of the incidents in so much as they demonstrated ISF capability and gave confidence both to ISF and the people of Basra”.³⁷⁰ Maj Gen Binns also reported: “Ominously, both generals mentioned their preparation for the ‘next battle’.”

765. Towards the end of January there was an increase in the volume and sophistication of IDF attacks on the COB in Basra. Maj Gen Binns assessed that these were the work of Iranian-backed Secret Cells. Although many of the individuals

³⁶⁶ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 25 January 2008, column 65WS.

³⁶⁷ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 May 2008, columns 60-61WS.

³⁶⁸ *The Baha Mousa Public Inquiry Report*, 8 September 2011, HC 1452-I.

³⁶⁹ Minute Rollo to CDS, 27 January 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (285) 27 Jan 08’.

³⁷⁰ Minute Binns to CJO, 31 January 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 31 January 2008’.

involved were known to MND(SE), there were problems in targeting them directly as it would require UK forces to re-commence strike operations in Basra, “action that would prejudice the accommodation process with the mainstream of JAM”.

766. Maj Gen Binns discussed the attacks with Governor Waili and said that while UK forces could deal with the attacks, the people they would harm most were the people of Basra because of the direct impact on economic development and investment. Governor Waili undertook to develop a plan to deal with the problem as a priority.

767. Government officials working closely with the military in Basra also reported rising levels of IDF, including an attack on 31 January that was the heaviest ever experienced by Basra Air Station.³⁷¹ JAM1 claimed that the attacks were the work of a splinter group and not of his supporters, a claim which the officials considered to be justified.

February 2008

768. On 1 February, bombs exploded at two popular Baghdad markets in what appeared to have been co-ordinated attacks.³⁷² Mr Prentice reported that the local media believed there to be at least 70 dead and more than 120 injured, though MNF estimates were lower. Mr Prentice commented that these were the deadliest attacks in Baghdad since the surge began the previous summer. He wrote:

“Initial reporting was that these attacks had been carried out by female suicide bombers, with Al Qaida (AQ-I) being the prime suspect. However, eyewitness reports state that the two women wearing the bombs were mentally ill ... [and] regularly frequented the markets.”

That led to speculation that the bombs had been detonated by remote control.

769. Mr Prentice reported that there had been an increase in the use of female suicide bombers; they were actively recruited by AQ-I as they were unlikely to be searched by men at checkpoints. He commented:

“It may never be known for sure who was behind these attacks. But, if it is confirmed that two mentally ill women were used as ‘mules’, a new low in bestial criminal activity in Iraq will have been set.”

770. In early February, Lt Gen Rollo reported that the solution to replacing the Australian troops appeared to be focused on “the nearest wolf to the sled”, with backfill to be achieved by “double tasking a battalion already at Tallil”.³⁷³

³⁷¹ Email government official working closely with the military, 4 February 2008, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: Act 2' attaching 'Discussion Paper: Maintaining the Accommodation, Reducing IDF'.

³⁷² eGram 3913/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 2 February 2008, 'Iraq: Double Bombing in Baghdad Street Markets'.

³⁷³ Minute Rollo to CDS, 3 February 2003, 'Weekly Report 3 Feb 08'.

771. Ahead of the arrival of the US SOFA negotiating team in Baghdad in mid-February, Lt Gen Rollo reported that MNF-I was focused on retaining four key authorities within Iraq:

- the ability to train and equip the ISF;
- contractor immunities and privileges;
- the power to detain; and
- “full spectrum operations”.

772. All four of these were seen as “essential to mission success”. Lt Gen Rollo reported acceptance that the SOFA might need to be wrapped into a wider political and economic agreement.

773. On 3 February, officials produced a discussion paper for MND(SE) entitled ‘Maintaining the Accommodation, Reducing IDF’.³⁷⁴ They explained that, compared with early 2007, the attack figures remained “very modest” but that the upward trend required attention, and possibly a “tuning” of strategy and tactics.

774. A number of “carrots and sticks” were proposed in the paper, including releases from US detention, supplying intelligence on attackers to the ISF, political engagement, interdiction, a show of force, persuading Muqtada al-Sadr to extend his cease-fire, reducing Iranian influence and visible development activity.

775. The paper concluded: “It may well be that ... a confrontation between JAM and the ISF is inevitable. But our sense is that the longer the majority of JAM fighters can be persuaded to go without the stimulus and status of regular combat, the weaker the force will be.”

776. On 4 February, Sir John Scarlett wrote to Mr Miliband with an “update from the ground” following a recent visit to Iraq.³⁷⁵ It included the situation in the South. Although there had been some interest in re-creating the effect elsewhere in Iraq, the US was:

“... suspicious of our Shia engagement in the South, which, despite its parallels to the CLC programme, they see as allowing Iranian influence to expand.”

777. Sir John wrote:

“Although Basra province is relatively quiet, the political and military situation is still fragile and the risk of significant further conflict remains ... [JAM1] appears to be exerting a positive influence in Basra. But some Sadrist hardline militants, probably no more than 2-300 strong, continue to defy the accommodation and attack UK Forces. IDF into the COB is showing a spike. If it ramps up significantly HMG has few levers of influence. Development and economic projects might improve the

³⁷⁴ Email government official working closely with the military, 4 February 2008, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]: Act 2’ attaching ‘Discussion Paper: Maintaining the Accommodation, Reducing IDF’.

³⁷⁵ Letter C to Secretary of State [FCO], 4 February 2008, ‘Iraq: An Update From The Ground’.

wider situation but few are labelled as British and are unlikely, anyway, to dissuade committed hardliners from attacks ...”

778. Sir John observed that, as UK forces were concentrated in Basra Air Station:

“... HMG now has less situational awareness and ground truth on what is going on in Basra on a day to day basis ...”

779. Asked by the Inquiry whether the relocation had reduced the ability of UK forces to intervene in support of the ISF, Mr Day said: “No, I don’t think it did ... We retained the ability to re-engage, if asked to do so by the Iraqis, or if the threat to the airport required it.”³⁷⁶

780. On 6 February, a senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) wrote to Mr Jenkins with an update on the Shia engagement strategy, in advance of a planned discussion of Shia engagement at the Cabinet Office on 8 February.³⁷⁷ He outlined a proposal “to continue to work towards the broad strategy indicated in my letter of 21 December”.

781. On Iranian influence, the senior official explained:

“As illustrated by the changes in the Secret Cells, for the time being Iran’s main focus seems to be on building political influence. Just as [HMG] is seeking to pull Iran’s proxies out of an Iranian orbit, the Iranians are reaching out to the new Sadrist groups such as Adnan Al-Shahmani’s Iraqi National Gathering (ING) and Fadilah, to ensure continuing lines of Iranian influence across Shia politics in Iraq. Meanwhile, Muqtada al-Sadr remains marginalised.”

782. On 7 February, at the request of the MOD and the FCO, the JIC assessed changes in the Sadrist Trend, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, and their implications for violence and political reconciliation.³⁷⁸

783. It judged:

“I. The Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) is marginalised, in disarray and much weaker politically than at any time since 2003. Muqtada al-Sadr’s goals are largely unchanged. How he intends to achieve them and his own future role are less clear, including to him.

“II. Sadr’s lineage means he will almost certainly remain a key ideological influence for the Sadrist Trend. But his ability to exert political authority over the senior cadre of OMS officials is now weak. He may relinquish his position altogether ...

³⁷⁶ Public hearing, 6 January 2010, page 37.

³⁷⁷ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) to Jenkins, 6 February 2008, ‘Shia engagement: [NAME OF OPERATION] update’.

³⁷⁸ JIC Assessment, 7 February 2008, ‘Iraq: Whither the Sadrist Trend?’

“III. Whether Sadr’s political rivals, including those in the JAM Special Groups and the new Iraqi National Gathering, gain traction with the grassroots Sadrist movement will probably depend more on Sadr’s next moves than on what they can deliver for the Shia ...

“IV. The Iranians for now probably place more weight on overt political support to their traditional allies in ISCI/Badr than on military support for JAM. In areas of the South where the coalition’s footprint has diminished, ‘Iranian Intelligence’ may have started to replace the coalition as the focus of JAM’s campaign to get rid of foreign influence.

...

“VII. Sadr will almost certainly extend the ‘freeze’ on JAM activities beyond this month. But it will remain fragile and could give way in some areas at any time ... A large proportion of JAM will remain engaged in often violent criminality.”

784. The JIC assessed that fierce competition for the Shia vote between ISCI/Badr and OMS/JAM was likely to result in further clashes as the provincial elections approached (not expected until late 2008 at the earliest). However, under pressure from the Shia religious authorities, both sides had established joint committees to avert clashes, but the JIC judged that “some local Badr commanders are using the cover of ISF to exploit the JAM freeze and irreversibly weaken their chief rival”.

Kidnap of Mr Richard Butler

On 9 February 2008, Mr Richard Butler, a British journalist working with CBS, was kidnapped along with his Iraqi interpreter in Basra.³⁷⁹ The interpreter was freed three days later. Mr Butler was eventually freed on 14 April during a raid by members of the Iraqi Army, who were believed to have been looking for a weapons cache.

785. On 11 February, Lt Gen Rollo reported having discussed the MND(SE) boundary with Gen Petraeus, who was keen that the UK two-star commander had a proper role, and did not regard the tactical command and control advantages of a single nation covering an area of operations as decisive.³⁸⁰ Gen Petraeus also thought that the MNF divisional boundaries should mirror those of the Iraqi Army, which was likely to have a headquarters responsible for both 10th Division (Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Maysan) and 14th Division (Basra).

³⁷⁹ *BBC News*, 30 April 2008, *Journalist tells of Iraq kidnap*.

³⁸⁰ Minute Rollo to CDS, 11 February 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (287) 10 Feb 08’.

786. In addition, Lt Gen Rollo reported that Gen Petraeus had suggested:

“... political sensitivities over ground-holding responsibilities worked both ways, and that Washington might also be sensitive to an apparent extension of US responsibilities as allies departed ... The debate therefore remains open.”

787. Maj Gen Binns left MND(SE) on 12 February and was succeeded by Major General Barney White-Spunner.³⁸¹

788. Reflecting on the progress made during the previous six months in his last weekly report, Maj Gen Binns commented:

“It has taken me six months to develop an understanding of the Economic and Political Lines of Operation. I have learned to measure economic redevelopment in decades, to be patient, to listen to, and take the advice of, specialists in the PRT, some of whom have been in Iraq for more than three years. We should stop beating up on DFID; those, like me initially, who talk of ‘windows of opportunity’ and ‘economic surges’ are misguided. Iraq is awash with money. The Iraqis need help in spending it and overcoming corruption through good governance, which is exactly the approach taken by our PRT. Of course we will continue to use CERPs money to buy consent for military operations, but let us not pretend that this is sustainable development, because on some occasions it is the reverse. In 10 years time Basrawis will remember that the US Army Corps of Engineers built their Children’s Cancer Hospital; they will probably have forgotten Operation SINBAD.”

789. In his formal end of tour report, Maj Gen Binns wrote:

“The Consul General was hugely agile in getting politics moving and the PRT used the headroom created by improvements to the security situation to re-engage ... Inter Departmental co-operation in theatre is superb ...”³⁸²

790. Maj Gen Binns wrote that negotiations with JAM were “more successful than we dared imagine”. Although JAM remained capable of renewing hostilities, there was now “clear daylight” between the mainstream and the Iranian-backed cells. As a result of the negotiations “we now talk of how to stay, not when to leave”. He judged that:

“The reconciliation process was dynamic, and our key interlocutor was prone to inconsistency. The situation was complicated by the failure of some wholly to appreciate that we were negotiating with a potentially unstable force. So trying to apply reason to his argument and, in particular, to his negotiating position imposed an unrealistic constraint on our freedom of negotiation. I found it hugely frustrating that I was not trusted with delegated authority. By the time we worked up a submission the situation had changed. Decisions were taken in London by those least able to keep track of events. Only agile negotiation by [government officials

³⁸¹ Minute Binns to CJO, 7 February 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 07 February 2008’.

³⁸² Minute Binns to CJO, 12 February 2008, ‘Op TELIC – GOC 1 (UK) Armd Div Post Operation Report’.

working closely with the military] and some judicious risk taking kept us in the game. As a formation commander in Kosovo I could claim that I had significantly more freedom of action than my US counterparts – not so now.”

791. Maj Gen Binns concluded: “I did not think I would depart feeling so optimistic about Iraq and its future.”

792. Maj Gen Binns told the Inquiry:

“I’m wiser now and I think in that report I was just expressing the natural frustrations of somebody who is really trying to make the process work, living with the consequences of failure, and just being frustrated by what I thought was a risk averse culture back here. But I’m wiser and I’m probably now grateful that there was oversight and that somebody back here had taken responsibility and had been properly briefed. But at the time, as a field commander, I was frustrated by what I perceived to be a lack of delegated authority.”³⁸³

793. In advance of the 14 February meeting of the Iraq Strategy Group, Mr Day wrote to Ms Aldred setting out five options for future force levels from November 2008, not yet considered by MOD Ministers.³⁸⁴ All options assumed that legal cover for the UK presence would be found and that the threat in Basra would not deteriorate significantly.

794. The “illustrative” options ranged from maintaining the status quo (around 2,800 troops at Basra Air Station including a two- or one-star headquarters, two battlegroup equivalents and integral force protection, enabling and logistic support) to complete withdrawal.

795. Retaining 2,800 troops would require no increase to the US presence in Basra and would meet what the UK understood to be the US aspirations for a UK contribution. Mr Day judged that “in the absence of an entirely benign security environment, 1,000-1,500 is likely to be the minimum force level to support a national presence in the COB”. Although it was assumed that at some stage the COB would be handed over to the US, doing so would be “potentially destabilising”.

796. On 13 February, the Iraqi Council of Representatives passed three major pieces of legislation: the 2008 Budget Law, the Provincial Powers Law and the Amnesty Law.³⁸⁵ An official in the FCO Iraq Group judged that:

“Passage of these long awaited laws is welcomed, not least because it should help to reduce the tension that has been building between the Kurds and Arabs in the Council of Representatives. We have long been calling for early elections and action

³⁸³ Private hearing, 2 June 2010, pages 26-27.

³⁸⁴ Letter Day to Aldred, 13 February 2008, ‘Potential Options for the UK Military Commitment in Southern Iraq in 2009’.

³⁸⁵ Email Iraq Group [junior official] to Hickey, 15 February 2008, ‘Iraq: Passage of Budget, Amnesty and Provincial Powers Laws: Statement and Personal Message’.

on detainees, while passage of these laws still leaves much to be done before these issues are resolved it does represent a significant step which might boost reconciliation efforts ...”

797. Mr Prentice commented that the political atmosphere in the run up to the votes was “poisonous but gave way to relief and pride when all three Bills were passed and the CoR went back on holiday”.³⁸⁶

798. The passing of the 2008 Budget (60 trillion Iraqi Dinars, then equivalent to US\$50bn) followed a protracted battle between a Dawa-led Arab nationalist faction and the Kurdish alliance, in which the two main sticking points were the funding of the Peshmerga and the Kurdish Regional Government’s (KRG) share of revenues. A further postponement of a decision on funding the Peshmerga and agreement that the KRG should retain its existing 17 percent revenue share, with a census conducted later in the year, allowed the Budget to pass.

799. Mr Miliband issued a statement welcoming the approval of the legislation, as “three important and positive steps for Iraq” which would release “record resources for services and reconstruction”, lay “the foundation for greater Sunni reintegration” and move Iraq closer towards a new round of provincial elections.³⁸⁷ The statement continued:

“There is now a clear desire on the part of Iraq’s political leaders to reach out to each other in a spirit of compromise, and use the space created by the improved security environment to make real progress on reconciliation. I hope this positive atmosphere continues. Political reconciliation is key to Iraq’s development as a secure and stable country.”

800. The Iraq Strategy Group discussed “the strategy paper” again on 14 February.³⁸⁸ Mr McDonald underlined that the paper was “too ambitious, not UK-centric enough, and too long” and that it should not presume engagement beyond spring 2009. More work was needed before it could be put to Ministers. It was agreed to split the paper into two: one which dealt with the medium term (to spring 2009) and another dealing with the longer term, including future legal arrangements.

801. Those papers would be discussed again at the ISG and then by a Ministerial trilateral meeting on 4 March and NSID(OD) in early April, which would also consider force level options.

802. Mr McDonald asked that three clear options should be presented to Ministers:

- maintain the status quo at around 2,800;

³⁸⁶ eGram 6531/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 20 February 2008, ‘Iraq: 2008 Budget Passed’.

³⁸⁷ Email Hickey to Iraq Group [junior official], 15 February 2008, ‘Iraq: Passage of Budget, Amnesty and Provincial Powers Laws: Statement and Personal Message’.

³⁸⁸ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official], 15 February 2008, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 14 February’.

- a mid-level option (between about 1,800 and 2,200); and
- zero forces in southern Iraq.

803. Lt Gen Wall told the ISG that any drawdown below a critical mass of 2,800 should only be a short-term interim measure on the way to zero in order to reduce the period of high vulnerability for personnel. From a military perspective, he observed that a decision on post-November 2008 force levels did not need to be taken until the summer. Mr McDonald acknowledged this, but also noted that the way ahead would need to be clear by late March in order to inform Ministerial decisions on Afghanistan.

804. On 18 February, Lt Gen Rollo reported that the Provincial Powers Law set out the balance between the central and provincial authorities that would apply following the next provincial election.³⁸⁹ He wrote:

“The key differences to the current arrangement are the strengthening of Governors’ control over provincial security forces and the arrangements for dismissing a Governor (making it easier for a Provincial Council to do so, but also giving the Prime Minister and the Council of Representatives a potential role in the process). Whether this will be sufficient to see off a push for greater federalism when the Regions law takes effect in April remains to be seen.”

805. The Provincial Powers Law directed that an Elections Law be passed within 90 days and provincial elections be held not later than 1 October. Lt Gen Rollo observed that this would be “challenging” but that the UN’s view was that “the date should be technically possible”.

806. Lt Gen Rollo recorded that the Amnesty Law was likely to allow a significant number of those convicted of less serious offences, or who had never been charged, to be released from detention. Those convicted of serious crimes were excluded. Lt Gen Rollo observed that the law was a “positive move”, though much would depend on how it was administered, and in particular on the reintegration of former detainees.

807. Lt Gen Rollo commented it was:

“... difficult to overestimate the importance of this week’s political events. It commits Iraq to provincial elections in the autumn, offering the prospect of bringing in both Sunni and Shia groups who failed to vote in 2005, and decisively turning Iraq’s struggle for power onto a political path. Conversely, it also offers the prospect of increased instability if the armed wings of political parties compete to influence results ... These events are also, of course, the context for decisions on the timing and pace of future troop drawdown.”

808. Mr Miliband sent a personal message of congratulations to Speaker Mahmoud Mashhadani of the Iraqi Council of Representatives, which was delivered in person by

³⁸⁹ Minute Rollo to CDS, 18 February 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (288) 17 Feb 08’.

Mr Prentice.³⁹⁰ Mr Prentice reported that the Speaker had been grateful for the message, as he had been for President Bush's personal telephone call: it was encouraging that friends of Iraq and the major powers paid close attention to developments in the Council of Representatives and showed support for their achievements.

809. Speaker Mashhadani told Mr Prentice that once the Council had returned from its break there were three more key subjects to be addressed: oil, elections and Kirkuk. Mr Prentice observed that "the next three political challenges are even more politically charged than the last". Implementing the three new laws was also "key" in the Speaker's eyes. For the Amnesty Law in particular there was "a real danger of heightened expectations, particularly among the Sunni community, being let down by the limited scope of the legislation".

810. On 15 February, the *Financial Times* published an article reporting the details of a witness statement made by Mr Hilal al-Jedda.³⁹¹ Mr al-Jedda, a former British detainee, was reported to have said that "British military officers agreed on a schedule to release all detainees in return for a pledge by the militia to cease attacks on British forces". The article reported that the negotiations had involved Maj Gen Shaw and "members of a Shia militia associated with the radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army". He also reported that a Defence Advisory Notice (often referred to as a D-Notice) had been issued, requesting that the identities of Iraqi negotiators and the reason why Mr al-Jedda might have been privy to details of the talks should be withheld.

811. On 17 February, Mr Adnan al-Asadi, the Iraqi Deputy Interior Minister, briefed the MCNS that the Ministry of the Interior had formed a committee to look at issues surrounding election security.³⁹² Protection of election materials, officials and offices would be paramount, and MNF and MOD help would be required. He considered that clashes were likely in the South.

812. In his 21 February weekly report to Lt Gen Houghton, Maj Gen White-Spunner concluded that "everyone, for the time being, is doing the right tasks and doing them well" but that "we now need to think about the spring and summer very carefully ... we could, depending on whether or not Sadr continues his freeze, be in a more difficult period here".³⁹³

813. Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that the increases in indirect fire reported by Maj Gen Binns at the end of January had continued into February. In the week leading up to 22 February, when the JAM freeze was to expire, there had been six confirmed attacks including the first 240mm rocket since August 2007. He shared his predecessor's

³⁹⁰ eGram 6041/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 18 February 2008, 'Iraq: Message Delivered to Speaker Mashhadani'.

³⁹¹ *Financial Times*, 15 February 2008, *Iraq prison release deal alleged*.

³⁹² eGram 6052/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 18 February 2008, 'Iraq Ministerial Committee on National Security 17 February'.

³⁹³ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 21 February 2008, 'GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 21 February 2008'.

view that these were the work of JAM Special Groups and that there were limits on what MND(SE) could do to respond. He commented:

“Our position is somewhat constrained by the desire to maintain the accommodation with mainstream JAM and the number of troops at my disposal ... I shall redouble my efforts, but I hope that this may prove to be a momentary aberration through which we will have to stick it out.”

814. Mr Browne’s Private Secretary commented in the margins of Mr Browne’s copy of the report: “All this will push CJO towards conservatism in his force level recommendations.”³⁹⁴

815. On 21 February, the Turkish authorities crossed the border into Northern Iraq as part of a military operation to deal with a terrorist threat to Turkey.³⁹⁵ The incident raised tension between Turkey and Iraq and also placed a strain on the relationship between the Kurdish Regional Government and the central Iraqi Government in Baghdad.

816. On 23 February, Mr Prentice discussed the security situation in Basra with Dr Rubaie, who confirmed that an order replacing Gen Mohan had already been signed by Prime Minister Maliki based on a report that a “non-interference pact” had been signed with JAM.³⁹⁶ Mr Prentice commented that the UK had some understanding of the balance that Gen Mohan and Gen Jalil had to strike in handling the militias and that “It was probably wise not to seek a confrontation with JAM, while the army and police were still building their strength.” Dr Rubaie observed that there was a difference between calming the situation and fearing to confront it.

817. The day before the 26 February deadline for ratification of the three new laws by the Presidency Council expired, Mr Prentice reported the intention of Vice President Mehdi to veto the Provincial Powers Law on the grounds that central government should have no role in dismissing Provincial Governors.³⁹⁷ Mr Prentice wrote that if the veto was exercised:

“... the Law passes back to the CoR, which is in recess until c.18 March but unlikely to do much until after the Kurdish New Year later in March. The CoR can then reconfirm or amend the Law by a majority of its members. If rejected a second time, the CoR can override the second veto by a 60 percent majority of its members.”

818. Senior officials from the MOD, the FCO, DFID and the Cabinet Office discussed the draft strategy paper once again on 26 February, and made amendments to it; the

³⁹⁴ Manuscript comment Ferguson to Browne on Minute White-Spinner to CJO, 21 February 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 21 February 2008’.

³⁹⁵ Minute Rollo to CDS, 25 February 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (289) 24 Feb 08’.

³⁹⁶ Email Prentice to Betts, 24 February 2008, ‘Meeting with National Security Adviser Rubaie, 23 February’.

³⁹⁷ eGram 7171/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 25 February 2008, ‘Iraq: VP Mehdi About to Veto Provincial Powers Law’.

paper needed to say more about Iraqi views on whether the UK should remain and to include a more nuanced section on US views.³⁹⁸

819. On the same day, the Chiefs of Staff were told by Lt Gen Houghton that:

“The increase in attacks in MND(SE), together with the uncertain future intelligence picture meant that it might not be possible to make bold decisions with reference to operational transition in Iraq. It was felt that some troop reductions would be justifiable in terms of risk in order to demonstrate further progress and to ensure the ISF continued to take increasing responsibility for security in MND(SE). Any future troop reductions would have complex presentational aspects for UK ... The recommendations for future UK troop numbers in Iraq would be forwarded to COS by 28 Feb 08.”³⁹⁹

820. Lt Gen Houghton told the Chiefs of Staff that Prime Minister Maliki had become increasingly concerned about General Mohan’s “accommodations” with JAM elements in Basra. From a UK perspective, Lt Gen Houghton hoped that Gen Mohan would not be transferred from Basra, where he was “a known quantity” and was understood to be making use of the extended JAM freeze to isolate and eliminate the JAM Special Groups and splinter groups.

821. At PJHQ’s request, on 27 February the JIC examined the prospects for security, political, and economic stability across southern Iraq during 2008.⁴⁰⁰ Its Key Judgements were:

“I. Mutually reinforcing factors are helping to keep attacks against the Multi-National Forces (MNF) in MND(SE) at a low level [JAM1] remains active in preserving a cease-fire – though his influence may be reducing. Work by Basra’s Security Co-ordinator and Provincial Director of Police, and the continuation of Muqtada al-Sadr’s ‘freeze’ on JAM activity are also key. The situation is fragile and could quickly deteriorate.

“II. Iran’s attitude to anti-MNF-violence in Iraq is linked to its wider national agenda, particularly its relationship with the US. A more aggressive US posture in the South might prompt the IRGC QF to sponsor more anti-MNF attacks in response. Iran will continue its efforts to build political and economic influence and defuse intra-Shia rivalries in southern Iraq, driven by a desire to ensure that its influence pervades Shia politics more widely.

“III. Intra-Shia clashes will intensify as provincial elections approach. Assassinations of politicians and violent intimidation of the electorate are likely. In the worst case,

³⁹⁸ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 27 February 2008, ‘Iraq Strategy Paper Meeting, 26 February’.

³⁹⁹ Minutes, 26 February 2008, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

⁴⁰⁰ JIC Assessment, 27 February 2008, ‘Iraq: Security Prospects in the South’.

there could be outbreaks of street fighting on a large scale ... Delays to the elections might also provoke violence and civil unrest.

“IV. Economic initiatives such as job creation schemes and reconstruction projects have the potential to reinforce Iraq’s security gains and promote reconciliation. But there is little prospect of change in the South in 2008. Perceptions that conditions are not improving fast enough could erode popular consent for local and national authority.

“V. The Iraqi security forces’ (ISF) ability and willingness to maintain security in the south remains patchy and dependent on MNF training, logistic and specialist air support. Radical improvements in police effectiveness are unlikely. The army will remain at the forefront in providing security ... The Iraqis would only call for MNF troop re-intervention as a last resort.

“VI. Violent criminality, murders, kidnappings, score-settling and intimidation will remain part of life in southern Iraq. Pressure from national Shia political and religious leaders ... may limit the scope of unrest. But local ISF action, accommodations between the ISF and elements of JAM, and the perception of MNF willingness to intervene will also remain crucial tools for managing instability.”

822. The JIC reported that although reliable data for attacks against non-MNF targets was lacking, in Basra City alone there had been about 80 murders and 40 kidnappings. Accounts in the media suggested that Shia milita were increasingly punishing and sometimes killing women for “contravening strict interpretations of Islamic mores”. Around 10 women were reportedly murdered each month in Basra City.

823. Mr Brown discussed Iraq with President Bush on 28 February and observed that the situation in Basra had been more difficult in recent weeks, despite an extension of the JAM cease-fire.⁴⁰¹ They discussed the strategies that had worked in the north of Iraq, in particular mobilising grassroots tribal support.

824. Mr Brown indicated that he had pressed the Iraqi Government on ratification of the budget and election laws.

825. Mr Brown explained that the UK would “in time” be reviewing troop numbers, but would await the next report by Gen Petraeus in April before taking decisions.

826. In his weekly report on 29 February, Maj Gen White-Spunner considered that the impact of an extension to the freeze on JAM operations was likely to be a further splintering of JAM.⁴⁰² There were reports of a new hardline commander of JAM in Basra, who was expected to take an aggressive stance towards confronting the ISF, though he seemed likely to maintain the freeze by not attacking the MNF.

⁴⁰¹ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 28 February 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with Bush, 28 February’.

⁴⁰² Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 29 February 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 21 [sic] February 2008’.

827. Mr Browne's Private Secretary commented that this "presumably shows that JAM want the South for themselves and see us as yesterday's news and the ISF as the real threat to their hegemony".⁴⁰³

828. Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that at the MNF-I Commanders Conference on 23 February, Gen Petraeus had been upbeat about progress across Iraq.⁴⁰⁴ While Mosul and the North remained the focus, combating Shia militias and Iranian influence were the long-term challenges. For MND(SE), this would mean an increase in US attention on the South, particularly the borders with Iran in Maysan.

829. Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that US planning for drawdown was progressing at great speed, and the redrawing of command boundaries would form part of this work. While he believed that the US and UK were "thinking the same on Dhi Qar and Muthanna" it would be important to engage the US soon in relation to Maysan if the UK considered that the right approach view was to focus its effort on Basra alone.

March 2008

830. In his 3 March weekly report, Lt Gen Rollo wrote that he sensed MNF and Iraqi eyes were increasingly turning to the South and Basra.⁴⁰⁵ It was important for the UK to understand the implications for future UK responsibilities there and to "force the pace so that we can more accurately gauge our own contribution to it". The size of the area for which the UK would be militarily responsible remained a key issue.

831. A second key issue was "what we do while we are there". Lt Gen Rollo saw two aspects: the scale of the contribution and the relationship with the UK's Iraqi partners. On the scale of contribution he wrote:

"From a Baghdad perspective I have only three points. The first is that the force structure should be able to carry out the tasks agreed between CJO and General Petraeus. The second is that the continued use of force level reductions as the principal metric of success seems increasingly at odds with the reality of Iraq today. The third is that our willingness and ability to deliver genuine non-military effect will also be a factor in US thinking ...

"For most of the last four years, Basra has been, understandably, an economy of force operation. However, with the Iraq Strategy nearing completion, I hope that it will look at our plans for 2008/09 in the context of the wider campaign. I have no doubt that our longer term military focus ought to be on a BMATT [British Military Advisory and Training Team] ... but in the short term we need to get Basra right. If there is unfinished business in Basra, and there is, it is clearly Iraqi business to do

⁴⁰³ Manuscript comment Ferguson to Browne on Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 29 February 2008, 'GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 21 [sic] February 2008'.

⁴⁰⁴ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 29 February 2008, 'GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 21 [sic] February 2008'.

⁴⁰⁵ Minute Rollo to CDS, 3 March 2008, 'SBMR-I's Weekly Report (290) 2 Mar 08'.

it. However, it is equally clearly in our interests to see that they do do it, and that our joint efforts are integrated properly within the overall coalition and Iraqi plan. And properly resourcing that plan for the relatively short time that the Basrawis will continue to require and want our help seems the only sensible course of action.”

832. Maj Gen Rollo also reported that Gen Mohan had visited Baghdad in early March to present his security strategy for Basra to Ministers and to Gen Petraeus. Gen Petraeus had established a committee, chaired by the commander of MNSTC-I, to look at how this plan might best be supported by MNF. Lt Gen Rollo commented that it would continue to be in the UK’s interests to support Gen Mohan or his successor.

833. President Ahmadinejad of Iran visited Baghdad in early March, the first time an Iranian President had done so.⁴⁰⁶

834. Lt Gen Rollo commented that, in the short term, the visit had presented another handling challenge for Prime Minister Maliki as Iranian training and funding of terrorist groups was widely known and resented, particularly by the Sunni community.⁴⁰⁷ The visit resulted in seven co-operation agreements between Iran and Iraq on trade, transport, insurance and industry.

835. On 4 March, JAM1 was arrested by US forces in Baghdad.⁴⁰⁸ Officials reported the following day that Maj Gen White-Spunner had raised the issue with Gen Petraeus, explaining that the UK had difficulty with JAM1’s detention, to which Gen Petraeus replied “Release him now.”

836. Lt Gen Houghton briefed the Chiefs of Staff on 4 March that an Iraqi Vice President had vetoed the Provincial Powers Law “on constitutional grounds” and that “the possibility of a delay to the Provincial Elections timetable now existed”.⁴⁰⁹

837. Reporting on the detail of General Mohan’s security strategy on 6 March, Maj Gen White-Spunner commented that although MND(SE) supported the bid for extra resources for Basra in order to “over face” JAM:

“We would not support Mohan developing this strategy into the prosecution of a major urban battle for which he would need more IA troops than are likely to be forthcoming given other coalition/ISF priorities ...”⁴¹⁰

838. Mr Brown and Mr Browne had breakfast with the Chiefs of Staff on 6 March.⁴¹¹ On Iraq, the Chiefs told them that “there was quality in the ISF but it was not broadening as rapidly as hoped, so training and mentoring of 14 Div remained a vital job”. The

⁴⁰⁶ *BBC News*, 2 March 2008, *Iran leader in landmark Iraq trip*.

⁴⁰⁷ Minute Rollo to CDS, 3 March 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (290) 2 Mar 08’.

⁴⁰⁸ Email government official working closely with the military, 5 March 2008, ‘Detention of [JAM1] [...] by US [...]’.

⁴⁰⁹ Minutes, 4 March 2008, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

⁴¹⁰ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 6 March 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 6 March 2008’.

⁴¹¹ Letter Fletcher to Rimmer, 6 March 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s Breakfast with Chiefs of Staff, 6 March’.

extension of the JAM cease-fire was positive while it lasted, but provincial elections were essential. Training of the Iraqi Navy would take at least until 2010.

839. On 7 March, Mr Day provided advice to Mr Browne's Assistant Private Secretary on media handling of the "accommodation" with JAM, specifically whether the MOD should brief the media proactively.⁴¹² He explained that the advice had been requested by Mr Browne following a *Financial Times* article in February.

840. Mr Day recommended that Mr Browne should agree that the concerns of PJHQ and others were "sufficiently compelling" to justify maintaining "our present defensive posture on this issue".

841. Mr Day wrote that there was a risk that further details of the story would emerge and suggested that the advantage of a proactive briefing would be to allow the UK:

"... to explain the rationale and benefits to the UK of the accommodation and set out the facts of the case accurately rather than allowing stories based on between-cell whispers to stand unchallenged. Most journalists regard the basic principle of reconciliation as nothing new and any 'deal' that has been struck as a sensible step."

842. On the other hand, there was a concern about the risk to JAM1 personally, and "that disclosure would pose a risk to the accommodation itself, including the political process in Basra, and could lead to increased IDF attacks". They were therefore opposed to "proactive briefing of any kind in current circumstances":

"Presentationally, there is a risk that the recent rise in IDF attacks on the COB, and last weekend's fatality, would call into question the long-term benefit to the UK of the accommodation, and generate unhelpful debate over the partial truce at a time when the political situation in Basra remains finely balanced ... It is also possible, given that we invoked DA [Defence Advisory] Notice procedures with the FT, that we could be accused of publicising those details that suit us while suppressing those that do not."

843. Mr Day concluded:

"It will come out in more detail eventually, and we will need at that stage to put our case quickly and strongly. I have asked PJHQ and DJC [Directorate of Joint Commitments] to review our lines accordingly. SofS may also wish to consider briefing the Opposition on Privy Council terms."

844. Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, who had succeeded Lt Gen Odierno as Commanding General MNC-I, visited Basra on 8 March and shared his concerns about Gen Mohan's plan.⁴¹³

⁴¹² Minute Day to APS/Secretary of State [MOD], 7 March 2008, 'Accommodation with Jaish Al Mahdi – Media Handling'.

⁴¹³ Minute White-Spinner to CJO, 13 March 2008, 'GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 13 March 2008'.

845. Maj Gen White-Spunner observed that Gen Mohan had “laid it on thick when he presented his plan in Baghdad, so I had to explain to Lt Gen Austin that Mohan was feeding an Iraqi political demand when he talked about the forthcoming ‘battle for Basra’.”

846. Maj Gen White-Spunner explained that MND(SE)’s objective was to assist in building up the Iraqi Army so that they could win a psychological and political battle without the need for violence. Lt Gen Austin was reported to be reassured and said that he did not have the troops to open up a second front in the South while still dealing with the North.

847. Lt Gen Rollo discussed the US SOFA plans with Ambassador Satterfield on 9 March.⁴¹⁴ He reported that the US had shared drafts of the Strategic Framework Agreement/Status of Forces Agreement with the Iraqi Government and, as a result, recognised that compromises would be needed. Drafts would be shown to the UK the following week, and the UK would be consulted on emerging US thinking on possible compromises, although Ambassador Satterfield recognised that the UK had not yet settled its legal position “and he observed that that would be driven by our political position”.

848. On 11 March, Lt Gen Houghton briefed the Chiefs of Staff that Gen Mohan’s plan:

“... included three phases, with the first (preparation) involving the building of further ISF capability in terms of personnel numbers and equipment in Basra. Phase 2 (disarmament) would require PM to declare Basra as a ‘weapons free zone’ with incentives being provided for a voluntary handover of weapons: this phase would have a specific end date (possibly 1 June 08) after which Phase 3 (confrontation) would be entered. Phase 3 would consist of search and strike missions aimed at confronting those who were not reconciled.”⁴¹⁵

849. ACM Stirrup visited Iraq from 14 to 17 March, travelling to both Baghdad and Basra.⁴¹⁶ ACM Stirrup underlined to Maj Gen Binns, that “both a fully functioning airport and a capable and credible 14 (IA) Div [14th Division of the Iraqi Army] were pre-requisites for a UK withdrawal”. They agreed that both were achievable by the end of 2008.

850. ACM Stirrup and Mr Jones agreed that “the continuing military presence in the COB would hinder local economic development and perpetuate attacks”. In discussion with senior members of the US military, ACM Stirrup “noted with disquiet the current US plan earmarks the UK remaining in Tactical Overwatch in perpetuity”. This expectation would need to be “realigned and managed as potentially divergent UK plans unfold”.

⁴¹⁴ Minute Rollo to CDS, 10 March 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (291) 10 Mar 08’.

⁴¹⁵ Minutes, 11 March 2008, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

⁴¹⁶ Minute Kyd to PS/SofS [MOD], 17 March 2008, ‘CDS visit to Iraq 14-17 Mar 07 [sic]’.

851. Reporting on the visit, Lt Gen Rollo recorded that Gen Petraeus confirmed that he had given direction that the MND boundaries should remain as they were, and made clear that he had no difficulty with a US brigade coming under the command of MND(SE).⁴¹⁷

852. In Basra, ACM Stirrup and Gen Petraeus had agreed that once Gen Mohan had committed to his plan “he must not be allowed to fail”.

853. Lt Gen Rollo observed that, “2009 was barely discussed in any of the discussions over the last week”. He continued:

“... it is becoming increasingly apparent to me that there are risks in not taking decisions ... on our posture in Basra. Quite apart from the potential to confuse our allies, getting things done in Iraq requires commitment, which is harder to deliver in an atmosphere of unsettling uncertainty. There remains plenty to do. So while I accept that it might be necessary to defer decisions for a while, the opportunity cost of that approach needs to be clearly understood.”

854. In mid-March, Mr Browne visited Iraq with Mr Wareing.⁴¹⁸ After returning to the UK, Mr Browne wrote that:

“The overall mood in Iraq is optimistic, reflecting the improved security situation, political progress and the new focus on economic regeneration to which Michael [Wareing] is contributing. Inevitably in Iraq, the pace of change is lower than we would wish and no-one believes it is irreversible, but we have an opportunity over the next year or so to contribute to a step-change in the country’s economy and to put our bilateral relationship onto a sustainable long-term footing. That does, however, mean we need to redouble our efforts now ... to exploit the progress we have already made.”

855. Mr Browne reported that Gen Mohan’s plans to “confront and face down Basra’s militia later in the year” were supported by the Iraqi Government and Gen Petraeus. The visit had also confirmed Mr Browne’s view that “the rate of reduction [of troop numbers] should be slower than we envisaged last autumn, to deal with current threats and to support this [sic] Iraqis through until after the elections”.

856. In Baghdad, Mr Browne judged the main focus of activity to be negotiation of the Long Term Security Agreement. He observed:

“Given our different legal systems, the LTSA may not be sufficient for our requirements and, despite our best efforts, the US chose to table their draft with the Iraqis before discussing it with us ... I intend to send a team of our own to Baghdad shortly to start formal discussions, in concert with the US if possible, on a Status

⁴¹⁷ Minute Rollo to CDS, 17 March 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (292) 17 Mar 08’.

⁴¹⁸ Letter Browne to Brown, 18 March 2008, ‘Visit to Iraq and Kuwait’.

of Forces Agreement to meet our military and legal requirements from the end of this year.”

857. Maj Gen White-Spunner reported on 20 March that Basra had been “quite tense” that week, with “spasmodic violence between the ISF and JAM, including the assassination of senior police officers”.⁴¹⁹ He considered that JAM knew that Gen Mohan’s plan was gaining acceptance, and might be starting to act while they felt they still had the initiative. MND(SE) was focusing its efforts on developing Gen Mohan’s plans with him and “ensuring they are workable, not unduly kinetic”.

858. Brigadier Julian Free, Commander of the 4th Mechanised Brigade and Deputy Commander Operations, attended the first meeting of the joint MNF/Iraqi Government committee in Baghdad that was considering how best to support Gen Mohan’s security plan for Basra. Maj Gen White-Spunner described it as “a useful first meeting that has set the parameters and identified who was responsible for informing the key decisions that would determine how fast General Mohan’s plan can be enacted”.

859. Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that he had briefed Gen Keane in similar terms as Lt Gen Austin when he visited on 17 March, “emphasising that we believe General Mohan does not want to open up a major kinetic front in Basra”.

860. Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that Prime Minister Maliki had been:

“... hearing exaggerated reports in early 2008 about the deterioration in local security. There were some assassinations of people of consequence to him ... if he had a long-term vision it was that his political pitch in any national elections would have to be based on him having asserted the strong hand of government.”⁴²⁰

861. As a result, Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that when Prime Minister Maliki was briefed on Gen Mohan’s plan “he said ‘it’s too slow, too late’” as he “clearly wanted to have asserted his authority across the South in time for the provincial elections”.⁴²¹

862. Lieutenant General John Cooper, who had succeeded Lt Gen Rollo as SBMR-I on 23 March, reported two days into his tour that:

“The week’s most notable development ... has been Prime Minister Maliki’s trip down to Basra and his apparent replacement of Mohan as the commander of Basra Operations Command. Exactly what prompted this remains subject to speculation. I am told Maliki has for some time had concerns about ... [the Basra ISF’s] alleged deal-making and (arguably prudent) unwillingness to take action early against the militias ...

⁴¹⁹ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 20 March 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 20 March 2008’.

⁴²⁰ Private hearing, 15 June 2010, pages 33-34.

⁴²¹ Private hearing, 15 June 2010, page 34.

“Even on Friday evening when I listened to Mohan brief his Basra plan to Petraeus and Iraqi Ministers and senior officers, it was assumed that he would be the one to implement it ... By Saturday, however, Maliki was suggesting that the situation in Basra had degenerated to such an extent that he would need to go there with additional forces; by MCNS on Sunday he was talking of taking two IA battalions ... and a brigade of National Police ... with him. In the margins of the meeting it was being suggested that Major General Aziz (Deputy Commander of 11th IA Div) would replace Mohan ...”⁴²²

863. Lt Gen Cooper also reported that Vice President Mehdi lifted his veto of the Provincial Powers Law following “considerable US pressure, including from Vice President Cheney”.

864. Government officials working closely with the military reported on 24 March that the OMS was considering breaking off the truce in Basra in 24 hours’ time as a reaction to Prime Minister Maliki’s presence in Basra.⁴²³

865. On Tuesday 25 March, Prime Minister Maliki began his operation in Basra.⁴²⁴

866. It triggered heavy fighting between the ISF and militias in Basra and outbreaks of violence elsewhere in Iraq.⁴²⁵

867. On Wednesday 26 March, Prime Minister Maliki offered the militias a 72-hour period in which to hand over their weapons and sign a pledge to renounce violence. By the following day, the UK assessed that there had been almost no take-up.

868. Mr Prentice reported to the FCO in London on 27 March that Ambassador Crocker was surprised by Prime Minister Maliki’s decision and had “expected a Basra operation to come later on the agenda”.⁴²⁶

869. Lt Gen Cooper told the Inquiry that, in his testimony to Congress, Gen Petraeus “made it very clear that the coalition was taken by surprise by Prime Minister Maliki’s decision to go south”.⁴²⁷ Once announced, Lt Gen Cooper reported Gen Petraeus’ view as: “this is an Iraqi operation. It clearly can’t be allowed to fail.”

⁴²² Minute Cooper to CDS, 25 March 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s weekly report (293) 25 Mar 08’.

⁴²³ Email government official working closely with the military, 24 March 2008, ‘[...] Threat to Truce between MND(SE) and JAM in Basrah’.

⁴²⁴ *BBC News*, 25 March 2008, *Basra’s gun rule risks Iraq future*.

⁴²⁵ Briefing [unattributed], 27 March 2008, ‘The Current Security Situation in Basra’.

⁴²⁶ eGram11590/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 27 March 2008, ‘Iraq: Meetings with US Ambassador and UNSRSG, 27 March’.

⁴²⁷ Public hearing, 15 December 2009, page 75.

870. In a speech at the National Museum of the US Air Force in Ohio on 27 March, President Bush said:

“Prime Minister Maliki’s bold decision – and it was a bold decision – to go after the illegal groups in Basra shows his leadership, and his commitment to enforce the law in an even-handed manner.”⁴²⁸

871. On 27 March, Brig Free reported to Lt Gen Houghton on an “unexpectedly busy week” in Basra.⁴²⁹ Gen Mohan had returned to Baghdad to present his three-phase security plan for Basra to the Basra Planning Conference, chaired by Dr Rubaie and Gen Petraeus, on 22 March. The following day, the plan was presented to Prime Minister Maliki at the MCNS, and he decided, “based on a separate assessment of the security situation, that pre-emptive action was necessary and directed that additional troops should deploy to Basra immediately”.

872. Lt Gen Cooper told the Inquiry that Prime Minister Maliki “got up and flew to Basra the next day, and then Charge of the Knights emerged”.⁴³⁰

873. Mr Prentice reported that Prime Minister Maliki was taking a “tough line” with the Sadrists, refusing to speak directly to Muqtada al-Sadr and delegating contact to his advisers.⁴³¹ The Iraqi Government’s message to the Sadrists was:

- “• Surrender weapons (within 72 hours).
- Step aside and allow the ISF to take out/arrest the ‘outlaws’/Special Groups.
- Respect the law and stick to politics.”

874. Mr Prentice reported that “so far, the Sadrist response has been uncompromising”. Muqtada al-Sadr had demanded that:

- the ISF stop all operations against JAM in Basra;
- those detained so far should be released;
- Prime Minister Maliki leave Basra to meet him; and
- an apology be issued for the Basra operation.

875. Mr Prentice advised:

“There is increasing need for a formal UK public response to the Basra operation in order to manage US perceptions as well as Iraqi public and Gol attitudes. There has been contact with MODUK about this and we are in touch with Iraq Group. So far,

⁴²⁸ George W Bush, 27 March 2008, ‘More on Iraq: Address at the National Museum of the United States Air Force’.

⁴²⁹ Minute Free to CJO, 27 March 2008, ‘MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 27 March 2008’.

⁴³⁰ Public hearing, 15 December 2009, page 76.

⁴³¹ eGram 11590/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 27 March 2008, ‘Iraq: Meetings with US Ambassador and UNSRSG, 27 March’.

I have only spoken briefly on local Arabic TV on the first day of the operation and confirmed our confidence in the Gol's efforts to sustain the rule of law in Basra."

876. A briefing note of the same date, seen by Mr Brown, reported that poor intelligence and bad planning led to changes in the objectives of the operation immediately before it began.⁴³²

877. By 27 March, the Iraqi Special Forces had failed to take any of their targets and suffered a number of casualties before retreating. UK forces were on standby to provide "emergency support" but were not deployed. The militias remained "in control of the majority of the city" and attacks on the Basra Operational Command, where Gen Mohan and Gen Jalil were based, were described as "intense". There were rumours that the Iraqi authorities had entered into discussions with the militia groups but Prime Minister Maliki was reportedly "determined not to do a deal".

878. Reports suggested that the majority of the local population supported the efforts by the Iraqi Government to assert its authority over the city, although "it remains to be seen how long this will endure if the fighting continues". The two particular areas of concern for MND(SE) were the announcement by the UN Refugee Agency that it was suspending activities in southern Iraq; and secondly, the fact that the number of locally employed civilian staff turning up to work at Basra Air Station had, understandably, been reduced dramatically.

879. The briefing note reported that the UK had "given considerable support to the Iraqis" including air support, food, medical and logistical support. But "kinetic" support had "necessarily been limited on occasion as requests have fallen beyond what our rules of engagement allow". The Iraqis were reported to be frustrated at this "lukewarm" support, and the US was concerned:

"General Petraeus is reportedly of the view that the UK has not been sufficiently positive in supporting the Iraqi operation in the media. Moreover, it has also been reported that Washington has been briefed that the UK has refused to provide ground support of the Iraqis (when as far as we can judge the only two requests for such support were rejected by General Austin). We believe this perception has largely been corrected, but the fact that it seems to have got to a very high level in the US system very quickly perhaps reflects the degree of concern in the US system at the way events are unfolding."

880. Brig Free visited the Basra Operational Command on 27 March to discuss UK support for the Iraqi operation with the Minister for Defence and Gen Mohan, and later visited Prime Minister Maliki with Lt Gen Austin at Basra Palace.⁴³³

⁴³² Briefing [unattributed], 27 March 2008, 'The Current Security Situation in Basra'.

⁴³³ Minute Free to CJO, 27 March 2008, 'MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 27 March 2008'.

881. Lt Gen Austin asked him to sit out of the meeting “as things were a little sensitive between the PM [Maliki] and the UK”. Brig Free was clear that that was the right call: Prime Minister Maliki had made it “abundantly clear that he will not meet with a British officer ... he sees us as responsible for releasing the very criminals responsible for destabilising Basra, the ones he is now having to deal with”.

882. Mr Brown’s Private Secretary gave him an update on developments on 28 March, reporting that neither side had yet achieved a decisive advantage and it was looking increasingly likely that a stalemate would develop.⁴³⁴ The deadline for Prime Minister Maliki’s disarmament ultimatum had been extended to 8 April, but the best outcome was likely to be “some form of fudge through which both sides can claim victory”. Publicly, Prime Minister Maliki remained committed to defeating JAM.

883. The Private Secretary told Mr Brown that the next step was for him to speak to Prime Minister Maliki “to register our concern at lack of consultation in advance of the operation; and to offer further UK assistance”. Mr Browne would update Parliament following the outcome of NSID’s discussion of troop levels.

884. A report from the British Embassy Office Basra on 28 March suggested that “the current assessment is that the fighting is likely to be protracted”.⁴³⁵ The perception remained that the operation was targeted against JAM in general and not the criminal elements, which was “causing militia groups and Basra JAM to unite”.

885. Maj Gen White-Spunner returned to Basra on Friday 28 March and spoke by telephone to Governor Waili who reported that he had been present at a meeting that included Prime Minister Maliki and OMS representatives.⁴³⁶ Prime Minister Maliki had been persuaded to attend only on the basis that “he would not negotiate but only listen to what OMS had to say”. OMS agreed to consider the Iraqi Government’s suggestions that militia should hand over medium/heavy weapons and that senior leaders should hand themselves in.

886. Prime Minister Maliki made a statement on Iraqi television on 29 March. He said that he was trying to build a state governed by law and order and accused ex-Ba’athists and people with “influences from across the border” of not wishing stability for Iraq. He said that he had come to Basra to remove “gangs and thugs” – as long as such people were around there could be no future – and reiterated his intention to stay in Basra “until all had subjected themselves to the rule of law”.

887. There were reports in the Iraqi media that more than 100 police officers had been sacked in Basra, apparently for losing their weapons and/or abandoning their posts during the recent clashes.

⁴³⁴ Minute Turner to Prime Minister, 28 March 2008, ‘Basra’.

⁴³⁵ eGram 11870/08 Basra to FCO London, 28 March 2008, ‘Basra – Update 27/28 March 2008’.

⁴³⁶ eGram 11975/08 Basra to FCO London, 29 March 2008, ‘Basra – Update – 29 March’.

888. By 1300 on 29 March, the Director of Joint Commitments (DJC) reported to Mr Browne's Assistant Private Secretary that he considered "little tangible success has been achieved by either side, and sustained conflict looks set to continue".⁴³⁷ There had been a 24-hour relative lull in activity, possibly due to Friday prayers and a pause in ISF operations.

889. The DJC's report said that a Deputy Commanding General of MNC-I, plus a Command and Control cell, planners, analytical support and intelligence capability had arrived at the COB, from which seven US Apache helicopters were also operating. More US forces, including a tactical HQ and an infantry company were on their way and US Central Command had "instructed planning to examine the feasibility of diverting additional US troops to MND(SE) should there be a requirement".

890. MND(SE)'s planning "focused on the requirement for UK military effort to enhance the capacity of the ISF, whilst attempting to provide a 'Bridging Concept' for Basra from the current confrontation to the Mohan's [sic] original, more-considered Basra Security Plan."

891. On 29 March, Mr Prentice reported that, in an emergency meeting of the Executive Steering Committee (ESC) (usually focused on supporting Fardh al-Qanoon), Gen Petraeus described the situation in Basra as "confused and quite difficult".⁴³⁸ The military objectives that the Iraqi Government had set itself were more expansive than the MNF had expected and Gen Petraeus warned that they "would not be able to achieve their wider publicly stated objectives of gaining total control of Basra".

892. Mr Prentice reported that Ambassador Crocker had described Basra to the ESC as critical for the Iraqi Government and for the future of Iraq: it was important that all Iraqis came together. He also raised the idea of an "economic initiative for Basra". The proposal, as Mr Prentice understood it, was less of an economic initiative and more a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration exercise. Mr Prentice reported that DFID had some concerns about the proposals and he could not see how it would be feasible in the absence of a political settlement in Basra. He commented:

"If the idea becomes unstoppable, some obvious challenges to implementing it successfully will be:

- ensuring Basra has the capacity to manage this level of resources ...
- managing the fiduciary risk, and trying to ensure the scheme achieves long term impact and sustainability;
- ensuring that the initiative adheres to the 'do no harm' principle, safeguarding the advances made in provincial authority planning and delivery capacity."

⁴³⁷ Minute DJC to SofS/APS4 [MOD], 29 March 2008, 'Basra: MOD update'.

⁴³⁸ eGram 11998/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 30 March 2008, 'Iraq: Emergency Meeting of Executive Steering Committee (ESC), 29 March'.

893. In the margins of the ESC, Mr Prentice spoke to Dr Rubaie who told him that Prime Minister Maliki “had been led by others around him into an exaggerated sense of the urgency and a radical underestimation of the challenges” in Basra.⁴³⁹

894. In response to an email providing an account of discussions in the margins of the ESC, Mr Brown commented early on the morning of 30 March:

“Need to be clear of

(a) build up of local military and police strength – how big is it and how will it grow?

(b) conditions in which we would intervene.”⁴⁴⁰

895. Mr Brown’s Private Secretary replied that “a kinetic action would be triggered by a request from the Iraqis or Petraeus. Commanders on the ground have delegated authority to take realtime decisions”.⁴⁴¹ The most likely scenario would be for UK forces to support Iraqi units with a Quick Reaction Force, which ACM Stirrup had authorised for use if needed. The Private Secretary undertook to pass on to Mr Browne the message that there should be no specific announcements about UK troop numbers, given the current situation in Basra.

896. The same Private Secretary provided a further update on the situation in Basra to Mr Brown later that morning.⁴⁴²

897. In response, Mr Brown asked the Private Secretary to “summarise options now available to us”.⁴⁴³

898. The Private Secretary replied, “the short version is that our options are limited” and commented that Mr Miliband and Mr Browne were likely to conclude:

“... that it makes it more important that we accelerate drawdown of UK troops once we are through the current crisis. The challenge for the next month is to judge how to pitch this to Bush, how to create the conditions to show that it is from a position of strength, and how to manage the presentation in a way that does not make the wider US effort more difficult.”⁴⁴⁴

899. On Sunday 30 March, the British Embassy Office Basra reported that the overall situation in Basra was unchanged.⁴⁴⁵ Neither the militia nor the ISF had made gains but “ISF continue to show no sign of coherent planning, and troop morale remains low”.

⁴³⁹ eGram 11977/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 29 March 2008, ‘Baghdad: Update on Security Events and Political Implications’.

⁴⁴⁰ Email Brown to Fletcher, 30 March 2008, [untitled].

⁴⁴¹ Email Fletcher to Brown, 30 March 2008, [untitled].

⁴⁴² Email Fletcher to Brown, 30 March 2008, ‘Re: Basra Latest’.

⁴⁴³ Email Brown to Fletcher, 30 March 2008, ‘Re: Basra Latest’.

⁴⁴⁴ Email Fletcher to Brown, 30 March 2008, ‘Re: Basra Latest’.

⁴⁴⁵ eGram 12015/08 Basra to FCO London, 30 March 2008, ‘Basra – Update 30 March’.

900. The following day, the British Embassy Baghdad reported that Muqtada al-Sadr had issued a statement calling for a cease-fire, which:

- called for an end to armed demonstrations and to “illegal arrests” and for the return of those who were displaced because of the violence;
- appealed to the Iraqi Government to give a general pardon to and to release all those held in detention, particularly those from the Sadrist Trend;
- disowned all who owned weapons and used them to target government buildings and institutions;
- confirmed that the Sadrist Trend did not possess heavy weapons; and
- made a commitment to co-operation with the Iraqi Government and institutions in establishing law and order and working to restore public services.⁴⁴⁶

901. The Embassy reported that the Iraqi Government had welcomed al-Sadr’s statement and reiterated that it was not attacking any specific group or party, but only those who were breaking the law. Prime Minister Maliki had told Dr Rubaie that he intended to remain in Basra for a further two or three days to complete “cleansing operations” there. There would be two further unspecified security operations: one in a port area and the other in a district in Basra.

902. Questions were asked at the MCNS meeting that evening about the reports of police desertions in Baghdad and allegations of poor co-operation between the police and army. The representative of the Ministry of Interior told the Council that “only 10 percent of the national Police had proven ineffective” and that more than 400 police had been dismissed in Basra in recent days for “disloyalty”.

903. Mr Prentice commented to the FCO:

“If the JAM cease-fire proves to be real, the Gol will need to move quickly in lifting the curfew and returning life ... [in] Baghdad ... to normal asap ... The response of the Special Groups to both MaS’ [Muqtada al-Sadr’s] public cease-fire and Iran’s encouragement for some kind of truce, will be important in allowing normality to return quickly ... There is still a long way to go in Basra, both in shaping a workable military plan and framing the political settlement.”

904. In a telegram to London issued late on 30 March, Mr Prentice considered the possible outcomes to the situation in Basra, their likely result and options for the UK’s response.⁴⁴⁷ In his view, the worst case scenario would involve the ISF collapsing in Basra and the MNF being forced to come to their assistance. JAM would see this as a victory and Prime Minister Maliki’s credibility would be damaged.

⁴⁴⁶ eGram 12023/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 31 March 2008, ‘Iraq: Baghdad: Security and Political Update, Sunday 30 March’.

⁴⁴⁷ eGram 12020/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 30 March 2008, ‘Iraq: Whither?’

905. In the best case scenario, the ISF would be able to achieve its military and security objectives in Basra (possibly with MNF help), allowing Prime Minister Maliki to return to Baghdad with a “success” and able to act in a way that was seen by others (particularly the Sunni) as inclusive.

906. Mr Prentice thought that neither of these extreme scenarios was likely – and the most likely outcome would be something in between. He continued:

“The new Iraq has survived since 2003 through expediency. Their politicians and criminals are all capable of moving from violence to dialogue and back again with little pause. In this case, despite Maliki’s ... rhetoric about fighting JAM to the bitter end, there will be a limit to Shia tolerance for such internecine strife. Already ... a compromise seems to be emerging.

“Other politicians have had a major scare and, including even the Sadrist mainstream, will have had an object lesson in why all factions need to put aside their criminal wings. The tectonic plates of central Iraqi politics have shifted and all factions are assessing the opportunities they may have after the immediate security crisis passes. Until now, Maliki has not been aware of the weakness of his position. The rude awakening ... which he will receive on return to Baghdad may prompt him to be more inclusive (and therefore more successful) as PM. There is also a real possibility that the UIA will splinter as a result of the pressure his operation has produced and as elections approach across the South. It is too early to draw up the order of winners and losers but the prospect is of complex politicking and a range of pragmatic compromises.

“We should hope that Sadrist and other politicians will see opportunity in exploiting the aftermath to return to government. In the case of the Sadrists, this will require them getting the message convincingly from other factions that they recognise Sadrist as an essential constituent of Iraqi politics. To achieve this, the compromise yet to be worked out over Basra will have to have some plausible element of discipline by the Sadrists on their violent fringe. The compromise cannot be a thinly disguised climb-down in the face of JAM violence.”

907. Considering how the UK could best support the outcome, Mr Prentice suggested that the main areas for UK activity should be:

- encouraging Prime Minister Maliki to “draw the right lessons”, seeking to persuade him that (contrary to his historic suspicions about the UK) the UK had always supported him and wanted to “put this chapter behind us”; helping him realise that he had been the victim of “catastrophic advice and false intelligence” which nearly led to his humiliation; and persuading him that the success of his government required dismissal of those responsible;
- encouraging the Iraqi Government to act against all militias, not just JAM;

- emphasising to the Sadrists that a choice finally had to be made between building state institutions and pursuing factional influence through criminality;
- continuing to underline with political contacts the importance of supporting Prime Minister Maliki; and
- persuading the US to temper their public message to avoid giving fuel to the Sadrists' public accusations that Prime Minister Maliki was a US lackey.

908. Mr Prentice concluded:

"Despite the fevered talk ... that the State is in peril, state institutions are not about to disappear, even in the worst case. We are not about to see JAM in the palace ...

"The political deal in Basra will be a precedent for the rest of the South. Whatever the scale of concessions to JAM inherent in the eventual political compromise reached in Basra with the Sadrists, it will set the standard for handling the JAM challenge in other provinces. The wider public will also draw lessons about the risk of standing out locally against the militia ... Our aim must be to settle the country back into the recent slow grind of normal Iraqi politics. Some of the new dynamics released by events in Basra may in the end prove positive and help to build on recent political progress. But, immediately, there are still serious challenges in Basra."

909. On the evening of 31 March, Mr Brown's Private Secretary told him that:

"The US agree that the most likely outcome in Basra is stalemate. The Iraqi Security Forces can't muster what is needed for a clear and hold operation. Maliki will be weakened."⁴⁴⁸

910. The same Private Secretary also reported that Muqtada al-Sadr had made a further statement calling for an end to arrests, detainee releases, a pardon for JAM members, the punishment of those responsible for the death of Sadrists and for Prime Minister Maliki to leave Basra province. He added:

"Given the improvement on the ground, it may make most sense to focus tomorrow's meeting on the longer term strategy, while drawing lessons from the last few days ..."

911. In his second weekly report as SBMR-I, Lt Gen Cooper reflected on the impact that the recent events in Basra had had on key relationships within Iraq.⁴⁴⁹

"The US's relationship with Maliki has been damaged ... because of the surprise nature of the expedition ...

"US-UK relationships are polite but bruised. Suspicions about the Accommodation with JAM in Basra are not far below the surface. Those that were part of the

⁴⁴⁸ Email Fletcher to Brown, 31 March 2008, 'Iraq Update'.

⁴⁴⁹ Minute Cooper to CDS, 31 March 2008, 'SBMR-I's Weekly Report (294) 31 Mar 08'.

process understand the history, but the others who have been dragged in are less understanding. The existing UK military posture and lack of situational awareness due to having no ground troops in the city gave the perception that JAM had been allowed free rein. That said ... Lt Gen Austin told me that he was impressed by all he saw of MND(SE) when he visited ...

“The UK-Iraqi relationship is damaged. Various ... reports have highlighted Maliki’s ... outburst against the UK. Maliki blames us for the situation in Basra and perceived failure to support his forces. The fault lay largely with Iraqi lack of planning and a poor command performance, but what is clear is that post this event, UK-Iraqi relations will need some repair if we are to continue to make a contribution whilst in Basra. We do not know how this will turn out in the next days and weeks, but we should focus on shaping the future as best as possible.”

912. In preparation for a meeting of NSID(OD) on 1 April, to consider the UK’s “continuing role in Basra in 2008/2009, and the timelines and considerations for taking decisions on force level options”, attendees were supplied with three papers.⁴⁵⁰ They were a short-term strategy paper, a draft of a planned statement to Parliament by Mr Browne and a letter from Mr Alexander on economic progress.

913. A Cabinet Office ‘Chair’s Brief’ for Mr Brown identified five objectives for the meeting:

- agreeing the terms of Mr Browne’s statement to Parliament that afternoon;
- beginning discussions – to be continued once the situation in Basra was clearer – on future force levels in Iraq;
- considering “how best to sensitise US interlocutors to the possibility of a more rapid UK military withdrawal than they would wish for, while recognising the need to maintain our long term close relationship with the US”;
- securing agreement to officials engaging more actively in the US negotiations with the Iraqis on legal cover for MNF in Iraq once resolution 1790 expired; and
- reviewing progress on political and economic initiatives in Iraq, ahead of a more substantive discussion in NSID(OD) in May.⁴⁵¹

914. In a separate paper sent to all attendees, Cabinet Office officials recommended that Ministers agree that:

- Mr Browne should announce to Parliament that UK troop levels would remain at current levels (4,100 in southern Iraq) until the situation became clearer;
- no decision on the longer-term posture should be taken in the immediate future, but consideration should be given to “how best to sensitise US interlocutors

⁴⁵⁰ Paper Cabinet Office, 31 March 2008, ‘Iraq’.

⁴⁵¹ Minute Cabinet Office [junior officials] to Prime Minister, 31 March 2008, ‘NSID(OD) Meeting on Iraq and Afghanistan: 1 April 13:30 – Chair’s Brief’.

to the possibility of a more rapid UK military withdrawal than they would wish for, while recognising the need to maintain our long term close relationship with the US”;

- if the UK was likely to have a military presence in Iraq in 2009, officials should insert themselves into US negotiations with the Iraqis to secure adequate legal cover post-resolution; and
- notwithstanding the plans for a military drawdown, the UK should maintain areas of political and economic engagement “where we could continue to add value in order to maintain our reputation and relations with the Government of Iraq, as well as with the US”.⁴⁵²

915. The FCO short-term strategy paper looked at the options for drawing down UK troops in Iraq; the civilian and military tasks that the UK could continue to undertake; and assessed the impact of a diminishing UK contribution on the UK’s reputation.⁴⁵³

The FCO identified options for military withdrawal as:

- Withdraw by May 2009: “do the benefits of leaving early (less risk to life, cutting our losses in an environment where it is proving difficult to achieve objectives) balance the risk of serious damage to our global reputation (including accusations that after five years in Iraq the UK mission had failed) and to our relationship with the new US President?”
- Withdraw in late 2009, but no announcement of a decision until the new US Administration was in office: “should we maintain the costs of staying (financially/in asset resource terms, risk to life, political risk (including over legal basis), risks posed by increasing insecurity in Basra) into 2009 in order to protect the UK’s reputation and relationship with the new US Administration?”
- Withdraw in late 2009, but release Basra Air Station for economic development by the Iraqis earlier and move a “smaller transitional force” to the Iraqi Army base at Shaibah: “does reconfiguring our forces in this way enable us to withdraw forces from Iraq by the end of 09 in a more effective way? Can civilian effect, including delivery on the Prime Minister’s Economic Initiatives, be delivered during 09 if UK forces reconfigure in this way? Would the extra costs of developing Shaibah [Logistics Base] be justified?”
- Stay on indefinitely, with around 3,000 troops at Basra Air Station, in order to provide continued support for the ISF, a secure platform for political and economic work and “to protect the UK’s relationship with the new US President”: “do the costs of remaining (financially/in asset resource terms, risk to life, political risk) without a timeframe for withdrawal balance the benefits we would gain from a continued presence (possible political, security, economic progress; reputational (staying the course); better relations with the new President)?”

⁴⁵² Paper Cabinet Office, 31 March 2008, ‘Iraq’.

⁴⁵³ Paper FCO, March 2008, ‘Iraq: The Short Term’.

916. Beyond comments about how to evaluate each option – as set out above – the paper made no recommendation on troop withdrawals. It set out a number of areas in which the UK could continue to contribute in the absence of a significant military presence in Basra, evaluating the importance and the likely impact of UK involvement. They were:

- Progressing politics, top down: continuing the intensive diplomatic efforts in Baghdad and with the Kurds in Erbil, focusing particularly on resolving the Hydrocarbons Law and securing provincial elections and progress on Kirkuk and the constitutional review. This was assessed as high importance (“This process is slow and iterative, but without it the spectre of civil war looms large”) but only medium impact.
- Progressing politics, bottom up: continuing the reconciliation and outreach efforts led by the UK military in Baghdad and building on the links with JAM established in Basra. This was assessed as high importance and high potential UK impact.
- Economics: continuing to make an important contribution to Iraqi-led growth and economic reform, both in Baghdad and in Basra, where Mr Wareing’s leadership as co-chair of the Basra Development Commission was “making real progress” (see Section 10.2). This was assessed as of high importance, but low to medium UK impact, because of the contrast with the “massive US effort”.
- Security: primarily military SSR and support for ISF on operations. No assessment of importance or potential UK impact was given.
- Governance and security/justice sectors: continuing capacity-building projects in Baghdad (not Basra), focused on security and justice sector reform. This was assessed as of medium importance and medium impact.
- Pressing for more substantive multilateral and regional engagement by the UN, International Monetary Fund and World Bank, assessed as high importance and high UK impact (“We have more leverage with the EU, UN and World Bank than the US”).

917. FCO officials concluded the paper with a consideration on the reputational risk to the UK of withdrawing from Iraq:

“Reducing UK effort in Iraq risks accusations that we are drawing down or leaving prematurely and before the job is done, whenever we do it. The risk is more acute if we make significant further reductions this year, leaving the ISF to deal with any spikes in violence around the provincial/Presidential elections, and if the US backfill. Next year the risk will be (somewhat) mitigated by reductions in the US’s own force levels, if the security situation continues to improve, and if the US can be persuaded not to backfill.

“Either way, we will need to work up a strong public script, setting out the positive aspects of the work we have done in Basra since 2003, and why the situation on the ground justifies Ministers’ decisions on UK drawdown/withdrawal.”

918. Sir Nigel Sheinwald, British Ambassador to the US, wrote to Mr McDonald on 31 March to express concern that the analysis of the options did not fully take into account the risk to the UK’s relationship with the US, particularly in the run-up to a Presidential election.⁴⁵⁴ He argued that it was essential to allow recent events in Basra to:

“... shake down before we can sensibly take firm decisions on the right presence and approach over the coming 12-18 months, decisions which are going to have a major impact, not just on our Iraq policy but also our relations with the US and our international reputation.

“Over the past five years we have repeatedly said that we will draw down our troops as fast as conditions and Iraqi capabilities allow. It would be difficult, in the US and elsewhere, to justify a draw down under present conditions in these terms. If anything, the recent deterioration would suggest that we consider the reverse ...”

919. Sir Nigel commented that the Washington media were already picking up “mutterings of dissatisfaction” about the UK’s contribution in Basra from some lower level US military sources. Any suggestion that the UK was considering earlier withdrawal was likely to stir up much greater criticism:

“... our reputation in the US will be significantly damaged if we are seen to leave Basra in chaos or if UK forces have to be backfilled by US troops.”

920. Sir Nigel thought that the US continued to believe that the UK military had a valid continuing role in MND(SE): training and mentoring the ISF, protecting supply routes and providing a re-intervention capacity. But he cautioned that, once the situation in Basra had settled down, it would be necessary to reconsider the UK’s military posture there, because the “major gaps” in UK situational awareness in Basra City “directly affects our credibility here [in Washington]”. He therefore hoped that serious consideration would be given to embedding UK troops with ISF units “as the US already do and as we ourselves do in Afghanistan”.

April 2008

921. Mr Browne reported to Cabinet on 1 April about recent events in Basra.⁴⁵⁵ He said that the decision to launch the Charge of the Knights had come as a surprise to everybody.

⁴⁵⁴ Letter Sheinwald to McDonald, 31 March 2008, ‘Iraq: NSID, 1 April’.

⁴⁵⁵ Cabinet Conclusions, 1 April 2008.

922. The role of UK forces had developed during the operation, initially providing reconnaissance, medical and logistic support but expanding to include a Quick Reaction Force deployed to the outskirts of Basra to help extract the ISF. This was “wholly consistent” with overwatch. Mr Browne would tell the House of Commons that afternoon that there would be a pause in troop reductions until the position clarified.

923. Mr Browne observed that it would be some time before the full implications of the operation were clear. It could have positive effects, including the direct engagement of Muqtada al-Sadr in politics.

924. Mr Brown said that Ministers would have a further discussion of the implications of recent events at NSID(OD), but the events in Basra had demonstrated the perennial difficulties in Iraq. By acting early and without adequate planning, the Charge of the Knights had exposed weaknesses in the ISF.

925. When NSID(OD) met later that day, Mr Brown recognised that it was difficult to take firm decisions on longer term options until there was a clearer assessment of events in Basra.⁴⁵⁶ It was good that the Iraqi Army had sought to take control, but the way in which it had done so threatened to have a negative impact on political and economic progress, as well as the security gains achieved by UK forces. The UK “could not afford to be perceived to be irrelevant to the situation in Basra”.

926. Mr Browne observed that there were now US forces involved in Basra, and they were unlikely to leave. It was becoming clear that JAM1 was “a spent force”. The UK’s relations with Prime Minister Maliki had deteriorated severely and would need to be repaired.

927. ACM Stirrup reported that present events in Basra did not affect the expectation that the UK could complete its residual military mission in Basra by the end of the year.

928. Ministers agreed that troop levels should remain at 4,100 until the situation became clearer and that no decision on longer-term military commitment should be taken at present. Departments were commissioned to produce an assessment of current events in Basra before Mr Brown’s visit to Washington.

929. Concluding the discussion, Mr Brown said that hopes for political and economic stability to take hold in Basra had been “set back”. The UK needed to wait and assess the implications of events “but work to bring our political and economic objectives back on line”.

930. Lt Gen Houghton briefed the Chiefs of Staff on 1 April that the violence across Iraq that had erupted in the wake of the Charge of the Knights had been the worst seen since June 2007.⁴⁵⁷ More than half of the attacks had occurred in Baghdad. However, less

⁴⁵⁶ Minutes, 1 April 2008, NSID(OD) meeting.

⁴⁵⁷ Minutes, 1 April 2008, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

than 15 percent of the strength of the ISF had been deployed to Basra. Mosul, and the campaign to defeat AQ-I, remained the main focus for MNF-I attention.

931. On the afternoon of 1 April, Mr Browne made a statement to Parliament about the security situation in Basra.⁴⁵⁸ He told MPs that UK forces continued to have a role supporting ISF but:

“As the Iraqi Government have made clear, the main problems in Basra are criminality and militia elements that act outside the law ... While UK and coalition forces have done much to deliver broad levels of security, over the longer term only the Iraqis can tackle successfully criminal activity and political violence, which are often linked to social and economic factors. The events of the last week should be seen in that context.”

932. Mr Browne went on to describe the sequence of events leading to the Charge of the Knights:

“When I visited Iraq three weeks ago, I was briefed in detail about the Iraqi plan for improving security in Basra by General Mohan ... General Mohan then visited Baghdad the following week to present the same plan to the Government of Iraq for endorsement. Prime Minister Maliki formally announced his intention to accelerate the implementation of the plan at a meeting on Sunday 23 March, where both the US and the UK were represented at a very senior level.

“Let me be clear: what we have seen over the last week is action being taken by the Government of Iraq to fulfil their responsibilities for security in a province that has transferred to Iraqi control ...”

933. Mr Browne continued:

“It is too early to give a definitive or detailed assessment of how the operation has gone overall ... The situation remains fluid, although levels of fighting in Basra have reduced since the weekend ...

“We and our coalition partners are providing support to the Iraqis in line with our commitments under overwatch and in accordance with our usual rules of engagement. Requests for support are being made through the coalition, and I can confirm that UK forces have continued to meet all their obligations as part of the multi-national corps.”

934. On UK force levels, Mr Browne told Parliament:

“In October, we announced our plan for drawing down UK troops from southern Iraq, from 5,000 at the time of the announcement to around 2,500 by the spring, dependent on conditions on the ground and military advice. At the end of the year,

⁴⁵⁸ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 1 April 2008, columns 628-629.

when UK forces moved into overwatch in the last province of Basra, we reduced force numbers to around 4,500. Since then, numbers have been reduced further, to their current level of around 4,000.

“Before the events of the last week, the emerging military advice ... was that the further reductions might not be possible at the rate envisaged in the October announcement, although it remains our clear direction of travel and our plan. In the light of the last week’s events, however, it is prudent that we pause further reductions while the current situation is unfolding.”⁴⁵⁹

935. In the debate that followed his statement, Mr Browne was asked by Mr Adam Price whether ISF action was disproportionately targeting JAM over other militia and whether UK forces were therefore being drawn into taking sides in a civil war. Mr Browne said that the available information suggested that the Iraqi Security Forces were taking on a “complex mixture of criminal elements and gangs”, including JAM.⁴⁶⁰ JAM had attracted particular attention because Muqtada al-Sadr was a “significant player” in the Iraqi political process. However, to “suggest that the Iraqi security forces had been taking on only one element of the militia and criminal gang elements in Basra would be to misrepresent what they have been doing”.

936. Mr Browne also told MPs that it was well known that Iranian elements had been “interfering substantially” in southern Iraq in a number of ways.⁴⁶¹ He had no evidence to suggest malign involvement by Iran over the past week but there was “no question but that some of those people have been trained and equipped by Iran”.⁴⁶²

937. On 1 April, Prime Minister Maliki announced that he was going to supplement the ISF with 10,000 Basra citizens in a “Sons of Iraq” programme that he had developed with the local tribes.⁴⁶³

938. Maj Gen White-Spunner commented that a sufficiently robust governance structure would be required to prevent this group turning into another armed militia and a considered approach would be needed to prevent them becoming a new target set for JAM. Whilst the establishment of such a programme in MND(SE) was something that the UK had sought to avoid and continued to oppose, he observed that “our voice carries little weight and there is little that we can and ought to do other than support the MNC-I in developing recommendations”.

939. Mr Brown spoke to President Bush on the afternoon of 1 April.⁴⁶⁴ His Private Secretary’s record of the conversation indicates that they did not discuss Iraq but looked forward to a “full discussion” in the future.

⁴⁵⁹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 1 April 2008, column 630.

⁴⁶⁰ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 1 April 2008, column 637.

⁴⁶¹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 1 April 2008, columns 635-636.

⁴⁶² House of Commons, *Official Report*, 1 April 2008, column 643.

⁴⁶³ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 3 April 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 3 April 2008’.

⁴⁶⁴ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 1 April 2008, ‘NATO: Prime Minister’s telephone call with Bush, 1 April’.

940. On the same day, Mr Prentice met Vice President Hashemi in Baghdad, who attributed the cease-fire in Basra “entirely to the ‘role of Iran’”.⁴⁶⁵ Mr Prentice and Vice President Hashemi agreed that action in Basra was correctly targeting JAM first since they were “the most active group”.

941. Vice President Hashemi told Mr Prentice that he was urging Prime Minister Maliki to return to Bagdad and call for a Political Committee for National Security. He believed there was wide support for such a committee focused on Basra.

942. On 2 April, the British Embassy Office Basra reported that Prime Minister Maliki had left Basra for Baghdad on the previous day.⁴⁶⁶

943. On 3 April, Maj Gen White-Spunner briefed Lt Gen Houghton that the situation on the ground in Basra City had changed dramatically.⁴⁶⁷ JAM appeared to be abiding by Muqtada al-Sadr’s call to stay off the streets; the curfew had been lifted during the day and the streets seemed mostly calm and quiet. The resulting impact on MND(SE) freedom of manoeuvre in the city and on the threat against the COB had been significant.

944. Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that MNC-I had re-ordered its priorities so that Basra now sat above Mosul and was second only to Baghdad. Significant US forces had been deployed to Basra to support the ISF operation:

“With this influx, the US have recognised that MND(SE)’s current size and structure is insufficient to deliver a result in Basra at the pace they require and have asked [for] it to be reviewed. We should expect nothing less from a MNC-I Main Effort. The PM’s initiative, whilst not what we had planned for, does now pose a real opportunity that we must enable the Iraqis to capitalise on. A coalition-led, but Iraqi-faced surge over the coming month would build on the Basrawi consent and optimism and has the potential to dramatically reshape the security environment.”

945. US troops were expected to remain in MND(SE) for at least a month. The Deputy Commanding General MNC-I and Maj Gen White-Spunner had decided to integrate their staff into a joint headquarters in order to maximise the coherence of their efforts. Maj Gen White-Spunner wrote that:

“For the next month we are jointly focused on delivering the very best for Basra that we can and our approach is very much that the Iraqi operation offers an opportunity. We could, possibly, end up with a more peaceful and secure city in the coming weeks ... Whilst we are getting on with this, I suspect that the UK needs to answer some fairly fundamental questions. To preserve the level of effort the US feels is required in Basra will require substantial resources, certainly beyond what is currently available to MND(SE). If we are to provide these then we should expect to

⁴⁶⁵ Email Oppenheim to Prentice, 2 April 2008, ‘Meeting with VP Hashemi, 1 April’.

⁴⁶⁶ eGram 12405/08 Basra to Baghdad, 2 April 2008, ‘Basra – Update 1 April’.

⁴⁶⁷ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 3 March 2008 [sic], ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 3 April 2008’.

do so for a sustained period. Alternatively, the demonstrable lead that the ISF have taken could be argued to have opened a window of opportunity for us to reassess the mission. MNC-I think that the events of the last two weeks have advanced the campaign in Iraq by eight months and we have to accept, albeit painfully, that we have become somewhat irrelevant to the Iraqis now that they have access to US resources. We suggested to you last month the need to change the mission here to a training and economic mission ... and we would argue that the time has come to decide to do so and to fit that mission into a broader US structure in southern Iraq ... Whatever, we're beyond a 'patch up' to preserve a Union Jack in Basra just to look good. We will most definitely not look good if we can't preserve whatever may have been achieved in Basra and it slips back. We must only take on those tasks that we have the resources to deliver."

946. Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that, through the Charge of the Knights, Prime Minister Maliki had asserted central government authority over Basra and turned around the perception of Iraq drifting into renewed sectarian conflict.⁴⁶⁸ It had also served to reprioritise Basra within the MNF campaign. Until Prime Minister Maliki launched his initiative, Basra had never been the main effort for either the Iraqi Government or the Americans. The impact of that shift in priorities was, in Mr Prentice's view, a key turning point.

947. In an update on 3 April, the British Embassy Office Basra commented that it was "clear that the US ... feels that we moved to PIC in Basra too early".⁴⁶⁹

948. A Cabinet Office minute containing briefing for a telephone call between Mr Brown and Prime Minister Maliki on 3 April described one deliverable for the call as "our relationship with Maliki starts to rebuild, and he feels he still has the UK's support".⁴⁷⁰

949. Cabinet Office officials explained that Prime Minister Maliki had given the UK and US "minimal notice of his intention to travel to Basra, and did not consult at all on his plan to launch a major Iraqi-led offensive". He had then blamed the UK for lack of support when the ISF got into difficulties and excluded UK officers from planning meetings at his headquarters in Basra Palace. The brief suggested that Mr Brown should point out that "if UK planning staff had been involved from an earlier stage, we could have done more – and more effectively".

950. The minute said that the coalition had turned down a number of "ill-thought-through Iraqi requests for combat support" but "with the full knowledge and support of General Austin (Commander, Multi-National Corps)". As the operation continued, MND(SE) had expanded its involvement, providing air, surveillance, medical and logistical support to the ISF, as well as limited direct and indirect fire support.

⁴⁶⁸ Private hearing, 15 June 2010, pages 40-41 and 48.

⁴⁶⁹ eGram 12617/08 Basra to FCO London, 3 April 2008, 'Basra – Update 2 April: Changes on the Way'.

⁴⁷⁰ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 3 April 2008, 'Iraq: Phone Call with Prime Minister Maliki, 3 April'.

951. Mr Brown and Prime Minister Maliki spoke by telephone on 3 April.⁴⁷¹ The latter explained that events in Basra had been difficult but they had been a good opportunity to test the readiness of Iraqi Security Forces, which had undertaken their tasks with only limited logistic support from the MNF.

952. Mr Brown explained that all the UK's actions had been intended to support the restoration of law and order in Basra and the authority of the Iraqi Government; 4,000 UK troops continued to risk their lives to ensure that Iraq was stable and peaceful. Prime Minister Maliki expressed his gratitude, but observed that the Iraqis had not been informed about the agreement between the UK and JAM, which JAM had exploited. Commanders in Basra had told Prime Minister Maliki that there had been insufficient support for the Charge of the Knights from UK troops. In order to preserve the close working relationship between Iraq and the UK, better co-ordination and communication needed to be agreed.

953. Mr Brown "regretted that a misunderstanding had arisen over the UK role" and said that the UK "had offered full logistical support to the operations". He expressed concern that the UK had not been consulted in advance about Prime Minister Maliki's operations in Basra. Given the role and exposure of UK forces, it was important to ensure that this did not happen again. Mr Prentice would be instructed to meet Prime Minister Maliki and Dr Rubaie to go over the issues in more detail.

954. Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that:

"We were not doing what Maliki ... accused us of doing, which is taking ourselves out of the fight and essentially giving free rein to the militias in Basra, which is what he came to see as the role."⁴⁷²

955. The day after Mr Brown's telephone call, a senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) wrote to Mr Jenkins to say that Prime Minister Maliki's complaint was unfounded.⁴⁷³ His advisers – Dr Rubaie, and Mr Tariq Abdullah – had been briefed on the negotiations "at the outset and at various stages". Although the Iraqi Government had been "instinctively suspicious", it did not oppose negotiations because they made an early British withdrawal from the centre of Basra more likely.

956. The senior official told Mr Jenkins that he was unaware of any former detainees having returned to violence before the start of the Charge of the Knights. Attacks on the COB had been largely the work of "splinter groups". Information suggested that the releases had in fact "encouraged JAM towards pragmatism rather than radicalism".

⁴⁷¹ Letter Fletcher to Hickey, 4 April 2008, 'Prime Minister's Telephone Call with Iraqi Prime Minister, 3 April'.

⁴⁷² Private hearing, 15 June 2010, page 31.

⁴⁷³ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East (2) to Jenkins, 4 April 2008, '[NAME OF OPERATION]: GOI complaints'.

957. Maj Gen Shaw told the Inquiry that the job of discussing the accommodation with the Iraqi Government fell to Maj Gen Rollo, who “took it to the Government of Iraq through Rubaie, the security adviser, and got the clearance”. The reaction was “positive”. Maj Gen Shaw had also been told that “Maliki had been appraised of the situation and agreed”.⁴⁷⁴

958. On 4 April, a Cabinet Office official updated Mr Brown that the situation in Basra had “calmed considerably” but remained “fragile”.⁴⁷⁵ Operations continued, with both US and UK “Military Training Teams” now in support of Iraqi forces. Both Prime Minister Maliki and the Sadrists were claiming victory and relations between them were at a low point, both nationally and in Basra, which would be “a set back for reconciliation and the legislative programme”. Rebuilding UK-Iraq relations was likely to be “an uphill struggle”.

959. As a result of the Charge of the Knights the US now had troops on the ground in Basra (around 700 at the COB and more than 400 embedded with the ISF) and was proposing a joint UK-US headquarters since “a return to the status quo ante” was not an option. The UK’s “supposed red line for Basra’s militias has therefore already been crossed, with US troops already on the streets”. Indications were that the US intended to maintain an enhanced presence in Basra for the longer term, and there could be some additional short-term increases.

960. The Cabinet Office official also updated Mr Brown on Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker’s forthcoming appearance before Congress. They were “likely to present the Basra operation as a sharp spike in violence with repercussions still to play out, but highlighting some positives in the operation.” It was possible they would “major on the role of Iran” and the overall assessment was likely to prompt President Bush to “agree the case for a cautious approach to future troop reductions”.

961. Attached to the update was a letter from Mr Day to Ms Aldred containing advice on “how US and UK military planning was proceeding in Basra”.⁴⁷⁶ Mr Day wrote that short-term increases in US troop numbers were possible, to help the ISF “establish the security conditions on the ground that will allow consent-winning economic effect to be delivered”. Their activity might include “targeted strike operations, an information campaign, ground patrols and the establishment of ISF strong-points in the city”, but since Gen Petraeus had said there were no plans to send significant numbers of US troops to MND(SE) then “the responsibility for any reinforcement in Basra itself could fall to UK forces”.

⁴⁷⁴ Private hearing, 21 June 2010, page 30.

⁴⁷⁵ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 4 April 2008, ‘Basra: Update for the Prime Minister’.

⁴⁷⁶ Letter Day to Aldred, 4 April 2008, ‘Military Plans for Basra’.

962. Mr Day considered it too early to say how the UK ought to respond politically and strategically to new circumstances in Basra:

“At best, we could find the city stabilises and improves, which could ease a decision on our longer term commitment. At worst, we could find ourselves confronted with very difficult choices about how to respond to renewed violence, and a much more complicated background to our long term strategic direction. Initial analysis suggests that options might include our retaining control of MND(SE), with the expectation that this would require us to deploy extra resources to meet the new US plans; negotiating with the US to define a role in their plan that we could meet within existing resources, either retaining command of MND(SE) or operating under a US 2*; and using the changed circumstances as the catalyst for ending our mission in Basra.”

963. Lt Gen Cooper reported to ACM Stirrup on 6 April that Basra had been “relatively calm” in the week following the cease-fire.⁴⁷⁷ From Baghdad to Basra an “awkward faceoff seems to have developed, with the Government having to balance its (legitimate) determination to continue operations in support of the Rule of Law with the threat of the Sadrists to break their Freeze again”. Lt Gen Cooper described Prime Minister Maliki as “in control and emboldened” and outlined positive moves by the Iraqi Government to kick-start the economy in Basra “driven by a welcome recognition of the economic basis of criminality and militia-membership”.

964. Lt Gen Cooper reported having discussed Basra with Gen Petraeus and concluded: “I am confident that the driver behind the current reinforcement of MND(SE) is a theatre-specific desire to exploit an opportunity. He also confirmed that he had no intention of asking the UK to reinforce in Basra”. But Lt Gen Cooper believed that Gen Petraeus’ rejection of proposals to change the boundaries of MND(SE) was calculated to “tie in a UK two star officer to Southern Iraq for the foreseeable future”.

965. Lt Gen Cooper continued:

“We have to be honest about US perceptions. They see Basra as they found it as ungoverned space. They are determined that it will not revert. While Petraeus has told me that he sees no requirement for the UK to reinforce MND(SE), he also believes the MNF-I build up was the right thing to do. He was pleased with the results of action against JAM there ... as he has made clear, he believes economic progress is fundamental to underpinning the security line of operation. If the UK will not leverage Iraqi money to deliver rapid progress, the US will use their own expertise, links to Baghdad and manpower.

“The US view Southern Iraq through the prism of Iran. Events of the past week in Basra and Baghdad have reinforced perceptions ... It also explains why, sooner or later, MNF-I will move into Maysan in order to control better the Iranian border. Any

⁴⁷⁷ Minute Cooper to CDS, 6 April 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (295) 6 Apr 08’.

UK future posture that can be perceived as leaving Iran in a stronger position will not be welcomed.”

966. On 6 April, Mr Prentice attended the MCNS, which was told that in Basra the situation was “stable with the ISF fully able to control the situation”.⁴⁷⁸ The main priority now was finding civilian employment for 25,000 unemployed. Acting Justice Minister Dr Safa al-Safi had been appointed to co-ordinate the Iraqi Government’s economic efforts in Basra.

967. The main concern on the horizon was the protest in Baghdad planned by Muqtada al-Sadr for later in the week.

968. Dr Rubaie believed that agreement had been reached to confine the demonstration to Sadr City and to ensure that it would have no “inappropriate slogans/banners”. The ISF would work hard to protect the crowds from attack but also to control any violence from within the crowds. In the event, Muqtada al-Sadr called off the protest.⁴⁷⁹

969. On 7 April, a government official working closely with the military in Basra sent a “snapshot” of the area to London. The official reported that the “Basra landscape has, in the space of two weeks, changed dramatically.”⁴⁸⁰ Prime Minister Maliki was reported to have “loudly blamed the British for treating with the JAM ‘criminals’ and, hence, handing Basra over to them”.

970. The official argued that the “unsatisfactory” performance of the ISF in the initial offensive of the Charge of the Knights was a “vindication” of the objective to negotiate reduced levels of violence:

“Within four days the Al-Maliki offensive had brutally exposed the inadequacies of the ISF, united the Sadrist militias that we strove for so long to divide, and restored JAM military prowess and morale ... to excellent health.”

971. A meeting attended only by UK staff had discussed the future of the accommodation negotiated with JAM1. The official reported that they told the meeting it had “been a child of its time”:

“It was not dead (indeed JAM seemed keen to keep it alive and had sent warm greetings ... that morning) but its influence over British operational policy should be proportional to its fundamental usefulness. [JAM1] was on the run and the ISF, backed by MNF, were back at war with JAM. But – it was still both a potential weapon and an insurance policy. Essentially we should exploit it but not be restricted by it.”

⁴⁷⁸ eGram 13078/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 7 April 2008, ‘Iraq: Ministerial Committee on National Security, 06 April 2008’.

⁴⁷⁹ Email FCO [junior official] to Prentice, 9 April 2008, ‘Call on NSA Rubaie, 8 April’.

⁴⁸⁰ Email government official working closely with the military, 7 April 2008, ‘Basrah: A Snapshot’.

972. Mr Day told the Inquiry that the understanding reached with JAM1 did not in any way limit the ability of UK forces to assist with the Charge of the Knights, and that by the time it happened “that aspect of our dialogue with the Sadrists in Basra had come to an end”.⁴⁸¹

973. Mr Prentice met Mr Abdullah, Prime Minister Maliki’s Chief of Staff, on 7 April to discuss the phone call between Mr Brown and Prime Minister Maliki on 3 April and to “correct the prevailing misconceptions about a lack of UK military assistance in Basra and nefarious deals between the UK and JAM”.⁴⁸²

974. Mr Prentice expressed his surprise that the tone of the phone call had not been positive as he had discussed the issues with Mr Abdullah shortly beforehand. During the course of the conversation “a number of points had arisen that PM Brown had found difficult to accept”.

975. Mr Prentice added that allegations of a conspiracy between the UK and JAM were “very damaging, unfounded and not understood in London”. The UK had been open with Gen Petraeus and Dr Rubaie about its interaction with JAM. UK military commanders also recalled that, two years previously, when they had proposed operations against targeted JAM leaders in Basra (Operation SALAMANCA – see Section 9.5), Prime Minister Maliki’s office had blocked them. In light of that, it was difficult to accept accusations of malign intention and blame for JAM’s residual capacity. The fundamental problem was Iranian assistance.

976. Mr Abdullah agreed and acknowledged that the Prime Minister’s Office had been kept in the picture about the UK’s dealings with JAM.

977. Comments about lack of UK assistance during the Charge of the Knights were also surprising; Mr Prentice provided Mr Abdullah with a list of “non-kinetic support provided to ISF while Maliki had been present in Basra” and assured him that the UK “remained fully committed to helping in its post-PIC role in Basra”.

978. Mr Prentice asked Mr Abdullah to clarify the UK position with Prime Minister Maliki before he and Mr Brown spoke again, in order “to move the relationship forward” in advance of a planned visit to Washington by Mr Brown on 16 April.

979. Mr Prentice also called on Dr Rubaie the following day, and explored “how best to correct PM Maliki’s misapprehensions about the UK’s relations with JAM in Basra and the support that MND(SE) had given during the recent operations”.⁴⁸³ He emphasised the “delicate political atmosphere in the UK over Iraq” and that important decisions over Iraq policy were pending. Perceptions that the UK contribution and role were not appreciated at the top levels of the Iraqi Government were damaging and could “undermine political will to maintain UK engagement”.

⁴⁸¹ Public hearing, 6 January 2010, pages 37-38.

⁴⁸² Email FCO [junior official] to Prentice, 9 April 2008, ‘Meeting with Tariq ‘Abdullah (7 April)’.

⁴⁸³ Email FCO [junior official] to Prentice, 9 April 2008, ‘Call on NSA Rubaie, 9 April’.

980. Dr Rubaie expressed his personal regard for the UK and the UK role in Iraq over the previous five years. But Prime Minister Maliki had received information about the relationship between the UK and JAM which had undermined his confidence in UK forces in Basra, leading him to tell Gen Petraeus that he did not want UK forces involved in the operation.

981. The Chiefs of Staff were told on 8 April that it had “now become clear that the US had always considered Basra to be ‘ungoverned space’ which MNC-I had planned to address towards the end of 2008”.⁴⁸⁴

982. The Charge of the Knights had simply accelerated US intervention in Basra, which had now been designated by MNC-I as the second priority after Baghdad, “resulting (significantly) in the provision of continuous ISTAR coverage over the city which, combined with the deployment of US and UK Military Transition Teams (MiTTs), had dramatically improved situational awareness”.

983. The Chiefs of Staff noted that the current situation in Basra:

“... placed the UK in an uncomfortable position though it was important not to miss the current potential window of opportunity, alongside the US, to deliver tangible progress on development. The UK’s longer term strategic objectives in Iraq would need consideration alongside both national and military reputation. The Iraqi and US position with regard to JAM needed clarity in the light of the recent ISF operations in Basra; it was possible that the US might be forced to adopt a more robust position against JAM if it continued to support Prime Minister Maliki. This would have consequences for the current operational design in MND(SE).”

984. A message from the British Embassy Office Basra on 9 April said that, at Prime Minister Maliki’s request, a tribal committee had been established whose “broad plan is to establish dialogue with OMS; support ISF and police in the search for weapons, and support the process of handing in weapons”.⁴⁸⁵ The committee had divided the city into areas, within which a sub-committee would work to persuade militia members to hand over their weapons.

985. On 8 and 9 April, Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker testified in Congress on security and political progress in Iraq for a second time.⁴⁸⁶

986. Ambassador Crocker said:

“Immense challenges remain and progress is uneven and often frustratingly slow; but there is progress. Sustaining that progress will require continuing US resolve and commitment. What has been achieved is substantial, but it is also reversible.”

⁴⁸⁴ Minutes, 8 April 2008, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

⁴⁸⁵ eGram 13473/08 Basra to FCO London, 9 April 2008, ‘Basra Update – 9 April 2008’.

⁴⁸⁶ Testimony to Congress, 8 April 2008, ‘Testimony of Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee’.

987. Ambassador Crocker described newly passed laws as “not perfect and much depends on their implementation, but they are important steps”. He pointed to the importance of the Council of Representatives as a functioning institution and also highlighted the “intangibles” – the attitudes among the population and the conversations occurring among Iraqi leaders – stating: “The security improvements of the past months have diminished the atmosphere of suspicion and allowed for acts of humanity that transcend sectarian identities.”

988. Ambassador Crocker concluded:

“... almost everything about Iraq is difficult. It will continue to be difficult as Iraqis struggle with the damage and trauma inflicted by 35 years of totalitarian Ba’athist rule. But hard does not mean hopeless, and the political and economic process of the past few months is significant. I must underscore, however, that these gains are fragile, and they are reversible. Americans have invested a great deal in Iraq, in blood as well as treasure, and they have the right to ask whether this is worth it, whether it is now time to walk away and let the Iraqis fend for themselves. Iraq has the potential to develop into a stable, secure multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian democracy under the rule of law. Whether it realizes that potential is ultimately up to the Iraqi people. Our support, however, will continue to be critical. I said in September that I cannot guarantee success in Iraq. That is still the case, although I think we are now closer. I remain convinced that a major departure from our current engagement would bring failure, and we have to be clear with ourselves about what failure would mean.”

989. Gen Petraeus described “significant but uneven security progress” since the previous Congressional hearing in September 2007. He highlighted that levels of violence and civilian deaths had been reduced substantially, that extremist elements had been “dealt serious blows” and that the capability of Iraqi Security Forces had grown. Like Ambassador Crocker, he warned:

“Nonetheless, the situation in certain areas is still unsatisfactory and innumerable challenges remain. Moreover, as events in the past two weeks [the Charge of the Knights] have reminded us and I have repeatedly cautioned, the progress made since last spring is fragile and reversible.”

990. Both Ambassador Crocker and Gen Petraeus referred to the situation in Basra. Ambassador Crocker stated:

“News from Iraq in recent weeks has been dominated by the situation in Basra. Taken as a snapshot, with scenes of increasing violence, and masked gunmen in the streets, it is hard to see how this situation supports a narrative of progress in Iraq. There is still very much to be done to bring full government control to the streets of Basra and eliminate entrenched extremist, criminal, and militia groups.

“When viewed with a broader lens, the Iraqi decision to combat these groups in Basra has major significance. First, a Shia majority government, led by Prime Minister Maliki, has demonstrated its commitment to taking on criminals and extremists regardless of sectarian identity. Second, Iraqi Security Forces led these operations, in Basra, and in towns and cities throughout the South. British and US elements played important roles, but these were supporting roles, as they should be.”

991. Reporting on 10 April, Maj Gen White-Spunner said that the ISF had reasonable freedom of movement on Basra’s main routes and in the centre and east but less so in the north and west where effective IED attacks against their patrols continued and small arms fire incidents were commonplace.⁴⁸⁷ The militia strongholds of Qibla, Hayaniyah and Five Mile Market remained under JAM control. The city was increasingly tense, with people anticipating the second phase of ISF operations.

992. The weapons amnesty had ended on 8 April, but a lack of publicity meant that it had had limited success. The ISF planned to launch a series of clearance operations to find and confiscate medium to heavy weapons in key areas, although this phase of operations had been delayed twice.

993. Maj Gen White-Spunner concluded:

“We continue to believe that the events of the past two weeks, although unexpected and open to misinterpretation, are a real opportunity for Basra and hence our involvement here. The time for any recrimination over lack of Iraqi consultation and rumours of possible complicity by others in Baghdad is behind us; we now have a better chance than we have arguably had for two years to achieve better security and some initial development goals in the city. We will not have long to do so, given that the run up to the October elections will inevitably lead to polarisation and a possible recurrence of factional violence. The next two-three months are therefore critical and if the next phase of the ISF security operation is successful then we must be prepared to exploit that success more quickly.”

994. On 11 April, Dr Christian Turner, Deputy Director Middle East, North Africa and North America in the Cabinet Office Overseas and Defence Secretariat, advised Mr Brown that he should use his forthcoming visit to Washington to press President Bush for UK involvement in planning for Basra.⁴⁸⁸ He explained:

“At present we have little insight into their [US] thinking, and its effect on us. A key deliverable for your meeting with [President] Bush is to secure our involvement in planning: if we are to stay in the South, we need agreed plans ...

⁴⁸⁷ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 10 April 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) weekly letter – 10 April 2008’.

⁴⁸⁸ Minute Turner to Prime Minister, 11 April 2008, ‘Iraq: Implications of Basra Operation and US Visit’.

“The main ... question is what are US plans for the MNF Mission in the South? At a high level they want to help the Iraqis counter the militias, disrupt Iranian influence and extend Iraqi Government control. But we will need to be clear what we are getting in to, and guard against two strategic risks:

- (a) That MNF gets dragged into intra-Shia rivalries ...
- (b) That we become embroiled in an escalating Iranian confrontation. Events in Basra have greatly increased Iraqi perceptions of the threat posed by Iran’s sponsorship of JAM ... We are less convinced ... that the Iranians can control JAM, and ... judge that Iran’s role in the crisis was primarily one of observer and mediator. We judge that Iran is trying to limit intra-Shia violence ...

“Whatever the plan, we will see a more active US role, and renegotiation of UK tasks in MND(SE). We have three broad military options:

- (i) Step-up: seek to take full responsibility for delivering emerging plans for MND(SE), reversing our troop drawdown.
- (ii) Steady state: remain with existing force levels and negotiate a new set of tasks with the US ...
- (iii) Withdrawal: take the opportunity provided by the changed circumstance to accelerate our withdrawal from Basra before November.

“Much depends on US attitudes, which are conditional on whether the situation in Basra stabilises ...

“A US team will arrive in Basra in the next few days to step up reconstruction efforts. Presentationally, the US effort risks overshadowing UK economic initiatives ...

“We will need to ensure our projects are co-ordinated and complementary. Experience over the past five years in such projects is that they provide short term benefits, but are often not sustainable ... Our message to the US will need to be that such work takes time.”

995. Dr Turner provided Mr Brown with “a narrative stressing what we have achieved – and still hope to achieve – on military training, political reconciliation and economic reconstruction”. He advised:

“Publicly we will need to reinforce the principles of your 8 October statement: we will fulfil our obligations in Iraq as long as we are there at the invitation of the Government of Iraq and the international community ...

“In private, we will also need to keep reminding the US of our legal constraints, once the UNSCR lapses ...”

996. Mr Brown's Private Secretary sent him Dr Turner's advice on 11 April.⁴⁸⁹ In his covering email he reported having spoken to both Sir Nigel Sheinwald and to the White House and commented:

"They know we are irritated, but 'a lot of people here think the UK has failed in Basra'. I told Bush's people that ... your priorities were Iraq ... [and] you would have positive public messages on the three part plan for Iraq ..."

997. On 11 April, Mr Browne's Private Secretary wrote to No.10 with "a note on the implications if we were to decide to reduce our military presence in Iraq and Kuwait to c[irca] 1,750 later this year", provided at Mr Brown's request.⁴⁹⁰

998. The letter explained that current planning was conditions-based but rested on the assumption that the UK would not leave Basra until the training of the Iraqi Army's 14th Division had been completed and Basra Airport had been transferred to Iraqi control. Both were expected during the latter part of 2008, though the Change of the Knights had set back progress.

999. Although there was no cross-Whitehall "template" for the UK's relationship with Iraq, and no detailed planning had been done "on whether a 1,750 figure made sense militarily", the main military contribution could include:

- training the Iraqi Navy;
- helping to run the military staff college and junior officer training;
- continued MiTTing activity; and
- some niche capabilities – including ships in the northern Gulf and fast jets – provided an appropriate legal basis could be agreed once resolution 1790 expired at the end of the year.

1000. The Private Secretary wrote, "early planning suggests that it should be possible to meet all of these tasks with rather fewer than 1,750 people in Iraq and Kuwait".

1001. The letter continued:

"Moving from our current presence in Basra (c[irca].4,100 personnel) to this new model would be a complex and demanding operation ... Our provisional assumption ... is that we would need around six months to plan and implement withdrawal from the Basra COB ... Our preparations would become apparent very quickly to the Americans but a shorter timescale would carry major operational, morale and presentational consequences.

"The broader implications would need to be worked through. Our initial sense is that even with a significant residual commitment it would have an inevitable impact on UK-US relations ... We would need to work hard not only to minimise damage

⁴⁸⁹ Email Fletcher to Brown, 11 April 2008, 'Iraq – Handling Bush'.

⁴⁹⁰ Letter Ferguson to Fletcher, 11 April 2008, [untitled].

to UK-US co-operation ... and to mitigate damage to the domestic reputation of the Armed Forces.”

1002. Attached to the letter was a draft speaking note for use in explaining the policy to the US. It said: “it will only be possible for us to gain domestic support for an enduring commitment ... if we can at the same time announce that the task of our ground troops in Basra is coming to an end.”

1003. Phase II of the Charge of the Knights began on 12 April.⁴⁹¹ The British Embassy Office Basra reported that the ISF conducted successful house-to-house operations in two districts of Basra which “met little resistance and netted two significant weapons caches, an IED factory and at least 15 militiamen arrested”. However, it was “still not clear whether the failure of JAM to confront the army is a tactical move or indicates a significant breakdown of leadership and morale in mainstream JAM”.

1004. Mr Prentice met Prime Minister Maliki for half an hour on 12 April and for an hour and a half on the following day to discuss the UK military’s role in Basra and the alleged deals with JAM.⁴⁹² A record of the discussions by a member of the Embassy’s Chancery section said that they were “frank and open discussions without a hint of animosity”. During the first meeting, Prime Minister Maliki explained that his concerns were:

- information alluding to deals between JAM and UK forces in Basra, in particular allegations that UK forces had provided assurances that they would not intervene and that JAM detainees had been released without informing the Iraqi Government;
- lack of UK support to the ISF in Basra – Gen Mohan believed that UK forces had provided “no training and no equipment”;
- a lack of intelligence support on JAM’s capabilities from the UK;
- UK negligence in allowing JAM to re-arm and regroup during the “freeze”;
- the error of withdrawing from Basra Palace without proper consultation which had allowed JAM to take control; and
- that the UK had prevented US helicopters flying from Basra in support of the Charge of the Knights.

1005. Mr Prentice explained the support that UK forces had provided in Basra while Prime Minister Maliki had been there.⁴⁹³ The allegations that the UK had not provided support were untrue. Nor was there any agreement between JAM and the UK of the sort described. The OMS might have attempted to drive a wedge between the UK and the

⁴⁹¹ eGram 14079/08 Basra to FCO London, 14 April 2008, ‘Iraq: Basra Update 14 April’.

⁴⁹² Email FCO [junior official] to Prentice, 14 April 2008, ‘Meetings with PM Maliki: UK military’s role in Basrah and alleged deals with JAM’; Email FCO [junior official] to Prentice, 14 April 2008, ‘Maliki Meetings 12-13 April’.

⁴⁹³ Email FCO [junior official] to Prentice, 14 April 2008, ‘Meetings with PM Maliki: UK military’s role in Basrah and alleged deals with JAM’.

Iraqi Government but they had failed. UK forces had continued to confront those who used violence and to interdict, where possible, operations to smuggle weapons.

1006. Prime Minister Maliki expressed surprise at the amount and variety of weapons in JAM's possession. Mr Prentice explained that "Iran alone" was responsible for the weapons in JAM's hands. It was not possible to stem the flow of smuggled weapons either to Basra or to Sadr City completely.

1007. On the issue of helicopter support, Mr Prentice explained that both US and UK Rules of Engagement had prevented flights initially but that the US had altered theirs and so were able to conduct selected operations.

1008. Prime Minister Maliki concluded by thanking the UK for the support offered. He would be meeting the Minister of Defence on 18 April and would communicate the true picture of UK co-operation.

1009. Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that he had gone over the history of the UK's negotiations with JAM and the arrangements for releasing detainees with Prime Minister Maliki, who acknowledged that his Office had been informed.⁴⁹⁴

1010. A CIG assessed the performance of the Iraqi Security Forces during the Charge of the Knights in a note issued on 14 April.⁴⁹⁵ The CIG judged that:

"... on their own, the ISF underperformed against JAM in Basra, Maysan and Dhi Qar ... In Basra they relied heavily on MNF supplies (i.e. ammunition and rations), air strikes and eventually MNF mentoring ... Military reporting suggested little sign of a detailed operational plan or evidence of precision targeting of JAM Special Groups ... until the arrival of MNF training teams from 1 April ...

"Basra's Chief of Police reportedly believes that hundreds of local police melted away within the first 24 hours of fighting – others joined JAM's ranks ... Many of the National Police units drafted in from Baghdad, with superior arms and armour, fared much better. The affiliation of many to ISCI/Badr probably strengthened their resolve to try and weaken their chief rival (JAM).

"... even with reinforcements ... the Iraqi Army lost most tactical engagements against JAM ... prior to JAM's stand down on 31st March. However, neither did they cede ground, and specific successes ... [have] emboldened them. Iraqi Special Forces were ineffective until their US mentors were re-inserted."

1011. In his weekly report on 14 April, Lt Gen Cooper wrote that the theme from Gen Petraeus' and Ambassador Crocker's testimony likely to have the biggest impact on the campaign in the short to medium term was their renewed focus on addressing

⁴⁹⁴ Private hearing, 15 June 2010, page 32.

⁴⁹⁵ CIG Current Assessment Note, 14 April 2008, 'Iraqi Security Forces Performance in MND(SE)'.

Iranian influence.⁴⁹⁶ More than ever, he added, senior Iraqi officials were beginning to ask the same questions.

1012. Lt Gen Cooper considered that the fact that Gen Petraeus saw the South as the front line in the battle against Iranian influence in Iraq meant that he was likely to focus on Basra as soon as he returned from Washington after his testimony. US forces were expected to remain in MND(SE) for some time. Lt Gen Cooper commented:

“... there seems little doubt that MND(SE) has changed for good. I think there is also an increasing consensus around the UK's options to respond to this – probably best described as ‘lead’, ‘follow’ or ‘get out of the way’ ...

“It is clear from my discussions here that the US view of the current HQ MND(SE) is that it is not a proper two star HQ. That is why they reinforced ... in order to achieve greater situational awareness and an enhanced planning and fires capability. They will wish to ensure that these capabilities remain in the future in order to have the desired effect in Basra. The question will be whether the US or UK supplies those capabilities and in what balance. This may demand a re-enlargement of HQ MND(SE) in terms of UK staff and capability, but it should not require additional units ...

“I think we should be looking at the current position as an opportunity rather than a threat. It is hard to escape the view that the current situation in Basra is not that which we would wish. If we want to depart leaving a sound and robust legacy, with our reputation intact, Basra will need an improved Iraqi Army, a reformed IPS and a sound expectation for long term economic regeneration. We are now better placed to move more quickly to our desired endstate than we have been for some time, but this will require close and vigorous [effort] ... Taking this opportunity for the UK to lead this will be important for our collective self-esteem. As Ambassador Crocker said in his testimony this week ‘We will be judged on how we depart not on how we arrived’.”

1013. On 14 April, Mr Prentice reported to the FCO his view that Iranian influence had been central to Muqtada al-Sadr's decision to call a cease-fire at the end of March.⁴⁹⁷ Prime Minister Maliki's Charge of the Knights had unsettled the Iranians and caused them to reassess their 100 percent support for him. Mr Prentice commented:

“These events have once again shown the extent of Iranian influence in Iraq: having been a major contributor to the problem, Iran then became central to delivering the cease-fire. But many in the Gol ... have been shocked and angered by Iran's behaviour and their continued brazen support for JAM Special Groups in particular ...

⁴⁹⁶ Minute Cooper to CDS, 14 April 2008, ‘SBMR-I's Weekly Report (296) 14 Apr 08’.

⁴⁹⁷ eGram 14136/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 14 April 2008, ‘Iraq: Iranian Influence – Lessons From Basra’.

“Iran’s malign influence in Iraq is deep-rooted and extends across the political and sectarian spectrum. Their influence is supported by bribery, supply of lethal aid and an active and direct IRGC presence in Iraq. But it is only as effective as the Gol and the Iraqi people allow it to be. And in the end, only the Gol and the Iraqi people will be able to contain Iran’s malign influence in their country ... Our best strategy for helping the Gol contain malign Iranian influence remains:

- to continue exposing nefarious Iranian activity when we have evidence of it;
- to support the US in thumping Iran’s proxies when they are involved in violence; and in parallel
- to encourage US-Iranian-Iraqi dialogue over security in Iraq.

“We should also continue to acknowledge the legitimacy of benign Iranian activity – particularly in the South. Senior Iraqis often (rightly) remind us that they cannot change the map. Strong, mutually beneficial Iran-Iraq relations are in everyone’s interest.”

1014. Mr Prentice anticipated that, having being drawn into Basra by Prime Minister Maliki, the US was likely to want to take the opportunity to address negative Iranian activity in southern Iraq. Ambassador Crocker and Gen Petraeus had set up a cross-departmental team to draw up a strategy on how to combat Iranian influence.

1015. On 16 April, the JIC looked again at the extent and nature of Iranian influence in Iraq.⁴⁹⁸ It judged:

“In pursuit of its aims for Iraq, Iran backs all of the main Iraqi Shia groups – both those in Nuri Al-Maliki’s government and those in opposition. In relation to the West, Iraqi Shia militias offer Iran a means to exert pressure – albeit with adverse consequences for Shia political unity.

“Iran sees Al-Maliki as the best available Prime Minister ... But Iranian support for Al-Maliki is not a given ...

“Al-Maliki’s decision to take on the JAM in Basra in March was primarily to address internal Iraqi issues, including local crime and suppressing a rival political group ...”

1016. Maj Gen White-Spunner reported on 17 April that Gen Mohan and his successor, General Mohammed, were starting to look north of Basra towards al-Qurnah as a means of addressing the flow of lethal aid.⁴⁹⁹ If successful, any operation was likely to drive the remaining JAM elements further north into Maysan, specifically al-Amara, which was both a haven for those fleeing south from Sadr City and also the major hub for the distribution of lethal aid from Iran.

⁴⁹⁸ JIC Assessment, 16 April 2008, ‘Iraq: the Nature and Extent of Iranian Influence’.

⁴⁹⁹ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 17 April 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 17 April 2008’.

1017. MND(SE) continued to focus on drawing as much US and Iraqi resource into Basra as possible in order to take advantage of the “unexpected but very welcome changes” that the Charge of the Knights had brought. Maj Gen White-Spunner’s main concerns were ensuring that the Iraqi Police were “functioning again before the Iraqi army re-deploys” (probably in six months’ time) and preventing the return of JAM hardliners and Special Groups who had left the city.

1018. Mr Brown visited Washington from 16 to 17 April for a series of meetings, including with both President Bush and Senator Obama.

1019. The day before travelling he was interviewed by Mr Jon Snow from *Channel 4*, who pressed him on what continued purpose the UK forces in Iraq were serving.⁵⁰⁰ Mr Brown responded that “the idea we are not doing a useful job there is wrong because we are actually training the Iraqi forces” and declined to give a timescale for the withdrawal of UK troops:

“I am not going to give a time-scale, but what I do say [is] that the job we are doing is an important one and the very thing that we have moved from combat to over watch will mean that in future you will see Iraqi troops and the Iraqi police taking a bigger role. That is the right thing to do, it shows the progress that has been made that Iraqis themselves will gradually take responsibility for their own affairs and at some point they will take full control of their own country again.”

1020. President Bush and Mr Brown met on 17 April.⁵⁰¹ On Iraq, ACM Stirrup and Gen Petraeus would report to both Mr Brown and President Bush on troop numbers in Iraq before the President visited Europe in June. Mr Brown suggested that close US and UK consultation was needed on Basra and repeated his commitment to the troop deployments he had previously described to the President.

1021. Mr McDonald reported to the FCO that at dinner with Secretary Rice and Mr Hadley on 17 April they had reached a common understanding that President Bush and Mr Brown had commissioned Gen Petraeus and ACM Stirrup to “come up with proposals for how to work together in Basra”.⁵⁰² It was a shared assumption that the US would remain in MND(SE).

1022. Mr Brown met Senator Obama on the same day and discussed Iraq briefly.⁵⁰³ The Senator was reported to have been “mainly in listening mode” and interested in the concept of overwatch but “underlined that his policy remained to draw down US troops”.

1023. Before leaving the US, on 18 April Mr Brown delivered a Kennedy Memorial Lecture on international relations, from the John F Kennedy Presidential Library and

⁵⁰⁰ Transcript of an interview given by the Prime Minister, 15 April 2008.

⁵⁰¹ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 17 April 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s Bilateral with US President, 17 April 2008’.

⁵⁰² Letter McDonald to Gould, 21 April 2008, ‘Rice/Hadley: MEPP, Iran, Iraq’.

⁵⁰³ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 17 April 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s bilateral with Barack Obama, 17 April 2008’.

Museum in Boston.⁵⁰⁴ In it he said that “global problems required global solutions” and called for new international rules and institutions to assist. One force of globalisation, he said, was:

“... the sobering reality ... that we are exposed – unpredictably but directly – to the risk of violence originating in failed and rogue states around the world. Once we feared rival nations becoming too strong; now the worst threats come from states that are too weak.”

1024. Phase III of the Charge of the Knights – an operation in the JAM stronghold in the Hayaniyah district of Basra – was launched on 19 April.⁵⁰⁵ Although MND(SE) had expected the operation to be problematic, it went “remarkably smoothly, largely due to some very thorough joint planning and an insistence on unity of command and fire control measures which were welcomed by the Iraqi Army”.

1025. During the course of the operation, over 35 large weapons caches were found, containing 1,000 mortar rounds (some marked IRAN 2008), over 500 rockets, 450 rocket-propelled grenades and a large number of IEDs, EFPs and small arms. The most notable finds were four man-portable air defence missile systems.

1026. Lt Gen Cooper reported that on the same day that Phase III launched, Muqtada al-Sadr issued a threat “to declare war” if the Iraqi Government did not back off continued targeted operations such as those in Basra.⁵⁰⁶ The threat was being taken seriously but the Iraqi Government was not going to be forced into negotiation, “OMS/JAM will need to be de-escalatory in advance of any further talks”.

1027. Lt Gen Cooper also reported to ACM Stirrup that the “US view of the Bush/Brown discussion on Iraq is that it confirmed the move towards a shared venture in MND(SE)”.

1028. Gen Dannatt visited Basra during Phase III and “found everyone in the Division in an extremely positive, but cautious mood about the potential for delivering success on the ground”.⁵⁰⁷ At the end of his visit, Gen Dannatt reported that he:

“... came away from Iraq confident that we have *another* opportunity to be successful in Basra – we must not let this one go. In order to do that we must ensure that we are giving GOC MND(SE) the resources that he requires, not just in terms of numbers but in the capabilities. Most crucially, however, we must ensure that our message is proactive, aggressive and co-ordinated.”

⁵⁰⁴ *Maxims News Network*, 19 April 2008, *UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s Kennedy Memorial Lecture on Foreign Affairs*.

⁵⁰⁵ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 24 April 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 24 April 2008’.

⁵⁰⁶ Minute Cooper to CDS, 21 April 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (297) 21 Apr 08’.

⁵⁰⁷ Minute CGS to CDS, 22 April 2008, ‘GCS Visit to Basra – 19 Apr 08’.

1029. Mr Prentice reported that at the 20 April meeting of MCNS, Gen Petraeus praised the significant progress that the ISF had made in Basra in recent weeks.⁵⁰⁸ The challenge, Gen Petraeus said, would be to sustain it. He advised that the sustained campaign needed to secure lasting success meant that the ISF had to start planning future troop rotations so that they could stay on the offensive.

1030. ACM Stirrup spoke to Gen Petraeus by telephone on 21 April.⁵⁰⁹ They agreed that given the recent events in Basra the enterprise in South-East Iraq “now represented a ‘joint endeavour’”. Whilst the UK was content to retain the lead in the South-East for the moment, this would need to be addressed in the longer term.

1031. ACM Stirrup made clear that the UK had to remain within current force levels, accepting that there would need to be some restructuring to meet the new circumstances and that, “for political reasons”, the UK would need to deliver some further force reductions by the end of the year. They agreed that Lt Gen Houghton should discuss proposals in more detail with Gen Petraeus so that ACM Stirrup could give “some early thoughts” to Mr Brown.

1032. On the same day, Lt Gen Cooper reported his own discussion with Gen Petraeus, who said that he could accept a drop in UK combat force elements in return for an increase in HQ staff capability. This reflected expected resource pressure that the MNF would face when the Polish HQ in Multi-National Division (Centre-South) withdrew in October.⁵¹⁰

1033. Lt Gen Cooper reported that “the overall picture shows a return to pre-22 March attack levels (which were in turn similar to 2005 levels)”. A trio of AQ-I attacks in Mosul, Baquabah and Ramadi were a significant cause, along with “the continued constant dribble” of fatalities and injuries from JAM or Special Group attacks. Prime Minister Maliki’s attention was turning to “a new expedition” in Mosul.

1034. Lt Gen Cooper awaited the outcome of Phase III in Basra, but indications were that the JAM leadership had moved out of Hayaniyah. The key was to ensure they could not return.

1035. Phase IV of the Charge of the Knights was launched on 24 April, in the Five Mile Market area of Basra, focused on “isolation and clearance, providing the security required to conduct a detailed search”.⁵¹¹

1036. Maj Gen White-Spunner reported indications that Maysan province was becoming a refuge for JAM militants – both Special Groups and mainstream – driven out of Basra

⁵⁰⁸ eGram 15509/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 21 April 2008, ‘Iraq: Ministerial Council on National Security (MCNS) 20 April 2008’.

⁵⁰⁹ Email Poffley to DG Op Pol, 22 April 2008, ‘Petraeus Telecom with CDS: 21 Apr 08’.

⁵¹⁰ Minute Cooper to CDS, 21 April 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (297) 21 Apr 08’.

⁵¹¹ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 24 April 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 24 April 2008’.

by the Charge of the Knights. In the short term, he did not think that the increased JAM presence would destabilise Maysan:

“... as it is already under de facto ‘Sadr’ control from Governor Maliki downwards and the local ISF are unlikely to take any action against them. Of more concern is the likelihood they are using this period to discuss their future strategy for JAM co-operation in Iraq. In the event of an ISF-MNF operation to secure al-Amara, it is likely that the majority of key leaders will attempt to cross the border into Iran. In due course they will try to return to Basra, an eventuality we must take care to guard against.”

1037. In Basra, there was a continuing “anti-British sentiment” in Basra Palace, where the presence of UK personnel was still not welcomed.

1038. Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that, at the MNF-I Conference in Baghdad, Ambassador Crocker had described the action in Basra as “a defining moment in the Iraqi mission showing an assertion of Iraqi sovereignty by the GoI previously not seen”.

1039. Lt Gen Houghton visited Iraq on 25 April, to “talk through the options for the UK’s operational commitment to southern Iraq during the remainder of 2008” with Gen Petraeus, as ACM Stirrup had agreed he would.⁵¹² Reporting the meeting to ACM Stirrup, he explained that he had set out the UK position as:

- “a. That the UK should retain two-star Command of the four southern provinces for the immediate future.
- b. That the UK could only commit to tasks within a force level ceiling of 4,100 troops.
- c. That this force level ceiling only allowed the UK to effectively meet the following tasks:
 - (1) Provision of an integrated Division/Brigade composite Headquarters;
 - (2) MiTTing the BOC [Basra Operational Command].
 - (3) MiTTing of 14 IA Div with supporting QRFs [Quick Reaction Forces]
 - (4) Security of Umm Qasr;
 - (5) NaTT [Navy Training Team];
 - (6) BIA [Basra International Airport] Commercialisation.
 - (7) Force Protection.
 - (8) Force Support.”

1040. Lt Gen Houghton went on to explain that if the coalition was going to be able to exploit the opportunities now offered in Basra and not allow the situation to be reversed,

⁵¹² Minute Houghton to PSO/CDS, 26 April 2008, ‘CJO – Gen Petraeus Meeting 25 Apr 08’.

“the US would have to take on certain additional tasks and resource commitments”, specifically:

- a commitment of around 50 staff to the composite headquarters;
- MiTTing of 10 Division;
- border security;
- reform and retraining of the Iraqi Police Service; and
- a package of enablers amounting to around 750 US personnel.

1041. Lt Gen Houghton reported that Gen Petraeus “readily understood the UK policy context and was content with the scale of the continued UK commitment and the potential division of tasks”. More detailed work was needed but “in principle we had an agreement”.

1042. Gen Petraeus visited Basra and gave an upbeat account of his visit at the meeting of the MCNS on 27 April.⁵¹³ He congratulated the Iraqi Government on a job well done. The situation was transformed, but the ISF would need to stay focused and not relapse into static routine. Operations in the Five Mile Market area had been successful and the ISF were now moving on al-Qurnah.

1043. In his weekly report, Lt Gen Cooper recorded that Gen Petraeus had commented twice during the meeting “I can live with this”, but also observed that the situation was “not optimal”.⁵¹⁴ Lt Gen Cooper commented:

“The bill of manpower that the UK equity leaves the US (and specifically MND-C [Multi-National Division (Centre)]) to find will be possible, but will create some local pain and include a degree of reprioritising. We should not underestimate the pain that will fall to Lt Gen Lloyd Austin’s MNC-I, but I am confident that he will learn to live with it.”

1044. Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker:

“... definitively wished to preserve our participation in the coalition. They sensed ... a wish in London to draw a line under Iraq and to get our forces out as soon as possible, and they suspected somewhat a rush to draw down ... [They] understood the political realities for us, and also they had their understanding of the rising demands from Afghanistan and other theatres.”⁵¹⁵

1045. Mr McDonald updated the Iraq Strategy Group on Mr Brown’s visit to Washington on 28 April.⁵¹⁶ He reported that on troop numbers “the Prime Minister had stated his

⁵¹³ eGram 16416/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 28 April 2008, ‘Iraq: Ministerial Committee on National Security 27 April 2008’.

⁵¹⁴ Minute Cooper to CDS, 28 April 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (298) 28 Apr 08’.

⁵¹⁵ Private hearing, 15 June 2010, pages 71-72.

⁵¹⁶ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 28 April 2008, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 28 April’.

intention to resume a downward trajectory” after pausing at current levels and “would therefore need a clear script on this for his meeting with Petraeus on 1 May”.

1046. President Bush had “understood our sensitivities regarding the conduct of the recent ISF operation in Basra” but added that “the US had been operating under the same constraints, and believed the security situation in Basra had improved as a result”.

1047. Mr McDonald told the Iraq Strategy Group:

“It was now clear that there was a shared UK/US operation in the South, and that we would need to decide on their tasks and the division of labour. We needed to focus on our remaining political, economic and military tasks. The first two required provincial elections to take place, and tangible outcomes from the work of Michael Wareing and the Basra Development Commission. The third would require a focus on training and mentoring 14 Div, and might involve an accelerated push to achieve effect earlier, so that we could draw down combat forces more quickly in 2009. Our residual tasks should require no more than a few hundred troops.”

1048. Lt Gen Wall reported to the Group that attack levels – including IEDs and IDF – were lower in Basra since the Charge of the Knights, and JAM resistance to ISF operations was waning. The challenge would be to prevent JAM’s re-infiltration, but it was likely that the ISF would stay in the South in large numbers and therefore act as a deterrent. He reported also a “risk” that 14th Division might be moved into Maysan, “which would have implications for our MiTTs”.

1049. Lt Gen Houghton’s visit to Baghdad had “gone as planned” and although Gen Petraeus would prefer a “gentle glide path rather than rapid drawdown” once 14th Division was fully trained, he had “reluctantly agreed” to the UK’s proposals.

1050. The next likely focus for ISF operations would be Mosul, which would have implications for US resources in Basra, as would any uplift in Sadr City. Gen Petraeus remained concerned about the lack of capacity on the border and had urged the UK to consider greater use of private military companies (for example to provide airport security, which might free up 200-300 troops). Lt Gen Wall observed that the UK was “doing very little with the police, now that Jalil had departed”.

1051. Mr Miliband visited Baghdad and Erbil in mid-April.⁵¹⁷ On 29 April, he wrote to Mr Brown:

“However unfortunate its genesis, Maliki’s operation in Basra has created an opportunity to reshape our approach there and set a new direction towards transition. 2009 is the year we will need to move from a Basra military strategy to an Iraq political and economic strategy. If we get the strategy right I believe we can

⁵¹⁷ Letter Miliband to Prime Minister, 29 April 2008, ‘Iraq’.

emerge from Iraq with our military and political reputation intact and our relationship with the US protected.”

1052. Mr Miliband commented that the Iraqi Government was “for the first time since 2003” giving full attention to Basra. In support of that, the US had committed, “again for the first time since 2003, serious assets from the Multi-National Corps to bolster MND(SE)”. He believed that combined US, UK and Iraqi resources “will be able to accelerate the rate of positive change in Basra”, paving the way for a “proper and respectable end to our role as lead partner in the coalition” in the course of 2009 and the start of “a broad-based and natural relationship with the new Iraq, the ‘whole Iraq policy’ which we have long wanted”.

1053. To make the transition “in good order”, Mr Miliband advised that it should be clear to the US that the UK had properly completed the remaining military tasks to which it was committed. That had implications for the ongoing negotiations with the US over the “rebalancing” of US and UK efforts in MND(SE). Mr Miliband expressed concern that the UK should “not be locked into tasks or roles which either cannot be easily justified or presented domestically in the UK; or which have no discernable end and so risk locking us into an open-ended commitment”. He also proposed that agreement should be reached “sooner rather than later” on handing over the two-star Command of MND(SE) to the US.

1054. Concluding his letter, Mr Miliband wrote that:

“The opportunity in Iraq also cuts both ways. Iraq is discernibly shaping to be an important and assertive regional power. We have a strong interest in establishing a productive and full-scope bilateral relationship with that nascent Iraq. We will best do so on the basis of a positive conclusion to our military engagement within the coalition in MND(SE).”

1055. During his visit, Mr Miliband met Prime Minister Maliki.⁵¹⁸ Mr Baker reported to the Iraq Strategy Group that this conversation “had been held in a bad atmosphere, with Maliki blaming us for all of Basra’s shortcomings, and criticising our dealings with JAM.”

1056. Charge of the Knights Phase V took place in the Jumariyah district of Basra on 28 April.⁵¹⁹ On 1 May, Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that:

“What is becoming increasingly evident, as our situational awareness improves, is just what a poor state the city is in, with basic services non-existent in some areas and a serious problem with raw sewage and mounds of rubbish on the streets.”

⁵¹⁸ Letter Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 28 April 2008, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 28 April’.

⁵¹⁹ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 2 May 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 1 May 2008’.

SECTION 9.7

MAY 2008 TO OCTOBER 2009

Contents

Introduction.....	382
May 2008.....	382
June 2008.....	391
July 2008	398
August 2008	408
September 2008.....	411
October 2008.....	417
November 2008.....	421
December 2008.....	424
January 2009.....	434
February 2009	437
March 2009.....	443
April 2009	448
May 2009.....	450
June 2009.....	455
July 2009	457
August 2009	462
September/October 2009	464
The end of Op TELIC	464
Troop numbers 2003 to 2009	464

Introduction

1. This Section addresses:

- the conclusion of negotiations on the status of UK forces in Iraq;
- decisions on the drawdown and withdrawal of UK troops;
- the UK's objectives for its ongoing relationship with Iraq; and
- assessments of the UK's legacy, particularly in Basra and the South.

2. This Section does not address:

- the UK contribution to the reconstruction of Iraq and reform of its security sector, which are 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.

May 2008

4. On 1 May, at the request of the MOD, the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) assessed the strength of those groups and networks which had historically posed an immediate threat to Iraq's stability, and the extent to which the Iraqi Special Forces were ready to tackle those threats.¹

5. The JIC judged that nationalist Sunni insurgents no longer represented an immediate threat to Iraq's overall stability. Sectarian violence had subsided and, since the middle of 2007, many Sunni insurgents had refrained from attacking the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Multi-National Force (MNF) in favour of working with them to resist Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I).

6. The JIC assessed that 70,000 Sunnis had joined MNF-sponsored security forces, known as "Sons of Iraq". The JIC judged that their motivation for doing so was "partly financial and partly born of a growing sense that AQ-I represents their most immediate threat – plus recognition that MNF cannot be defeated and will eventually leave Iraq anyway".

7. The JIC judged:

"Iranian-backed Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) Special Groups are likely to remain an immediate threat to the MNF. They are increasingly fragmented and are unlikely to have a strategic impact on stability in Iraq without the support of mainstream JAM. Unless faced with a common threat from ISF, the Gol or MNF, as recently in Basra and Baghdad, such support is unlikely."

¹ JIC Assessment, 1 May 2008, 'Iraq Insurgency: The Hardest Nuts to Crack'.

8. In relation to AQ-I, the JIC assessed that it was failing to maintain its strategic impact and no longer represented the most immediate threat to Iraq's security, although it was "unlikely to be eradicated" and could re-generate without sustained military pressure.

9. The JIC assessed that the international threat from Iraqi Shia militias was "negligible".

10. In terms of tackling the threat, the JIC judged:

"ISF as a whole are in a much better position than a year ago. But their ability to defeat AQ-I and JAM Special Groups will depend heavily on their Special Forces, which will rely on MNF support for aviation, airborne surveillance and operational planning for some years."

11. Recent operations in Basra led the JIC to conclude that "significant problems" remained in the ISF's ability to tackle determined opposition alone:

"We assess their ability to successfully manage security outside Baghdad by the end of 2008, without MNF ground support will continue to be patchy and depend heavily on progress being made on national reconciliation and the maintenance of MNF-led security gains."

12. Mr Brown, Mr David Miliband (the Foreign Secretary), Mr Douglas Alexander (the International Development Secretary) and Mr Des Browne (the Defence Secretary), plus Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup (the Chief of the Defence Staff), Mr Christopher Prentice (British Ambassador to Iraq), Mr Simon McDonald (Mr Brown's Foreign Policy Adviser) and Mr Matt Cavanagh (Mr Brown's Special Adviser) met General David Petraeus (Commanding General Multi-National Force – Iraq) and Ambassador Ryan Crocker (US Ambassador to Iraq) on 1 May.²

13. Mr Brown's Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs reported that Gen Petraeus had emphasised the political dynamic in Iraq as increasingly more important than the military. Mr Miliband explained that the challenge for the UK was to make the transition from a military strategy in the South to a political strategy for the whole of Iraq. In his view, provincial elections were the next key step.

14. The discussion moved to the Charge of the Knights (see Section 9.6), during which "swift US/UK action" had ensured the right outcomes, leaving JAM and other local militia on the back foot. Gen Petraeus considered that the next priority was support for Prime Minister Maliki's plan for Sadr City. ACM Stirrup described key planned UK actions in Basra and Gen Petraeus agreed that a clear division of labour existed.

15. Mr Alexander reported that the recent investment event in Basra (see Section 10.2) had been a success. Ambassador Crocker commented that there needed to be greater synergy between the Iraqi reconstruction fund and the Basra Development Commission.

² Letter Fletcher to Rimmer, 2 May 2008, 'Iraq: Prime Minister's Meeting with General Petraeus, 1 May'.

16. Summing up the discussion, Mr Brown said that the central UK focus would be accelerated training of the 14th Division, preparations for provincial elections, progress on handing control of Basra Airport to Iraqi control and economic reconstruction. Decisions on troop numbers would be taken in the context of completion of these tasks.

17. Mr McDonald produced a note on troop levels in Iraq for Mr Brown on 2 May.³ He advised that the UK would need to retain around 4,100 troops in southern Iraq for the next six months to complete the key tasks it had agreed. Since these were higher force levels than originally planned, the job of training the 14th Division should be completed a few months sooner than planned, in January 2009.

18. Mr McDonald wrote:

“We’ll need to think about how we assess 14 Div’s readiness; we do not want to leave this solely to the US; they may be tempted to use that responsibility to delay us.”

19. Mr McDonald advised that it should be possible to begin drawing down forces from January 2009 onwards. The MOD had identified 3,500 as the critical mass of troops, below which they could not provide force protection for themselves. The MOD did not favour handing over tasks piecemeal to the US before achieving key objectives, both because “this would look like the UK admitting it couldn’t get the key tasks done” and because the US had indicated that it would not have the capacity to take on additional tasks before the end of the year. Consequently:

“We should therefore aim for a rapid drawdown of combat forces in southern Iraq from 4,100 to a much smaller niche contribution over the first six months of 2009.”

20. Mr McDonald recommended a further statement to Parliament on force levels in Iraq before the summer Recess, without going into specific timescales or numbers. In the meantime, he would discuss the proposals with Mr Stephen Hadley, US National Security Advisor, as part of the process of “sensitising” the US to the UK’s plans.

21. In an email covering Mr McDonald’s advice, Mr Brown’s Private Secretary explained that Mr Cavanagh was “also doing some work to see whether the numbers can be pushed any further”.

22. Lieutenant General John Cooper, Senior British Military Representative – Iraq (SBMR-I), reported on 5 May that Gen Petraeus had returned to Iraq “content in that he has no difficulty with the UK national position and appreciates the reasons behind it”.⁴ He would look to the UK to “deliver on its commitment on MITting 14 IA Div [see Section 12.1], the BOC [Basra Operational Command] and on the economic line”. To achieve the last of these, Lt Gen Cooper suggested that the time had come for a “properly staffed Basra Office in Baghdad”.

³ Email Fletcher to Brown, 2 May 2008, ‘Iraq Troop Numbers – Note from Simon’.

⁴ Minute Cooper to CDS, 5 May 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (299) 5 May 08’.

23. Lt Gen Cooper also reported that Prime Minister Maliki had told Gen Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker that “he had to remove JAM/SG [Special Groups] from Sadr City now”. Lt Gen Cooper considered that the Charge of the Knights had created an inflated view of the effectiveness of the ISF and that consequently Prime Minister Maliki “may yet ignore further advice that mounting a major operation in Sadr City is not a good idea at this time”.

24. On 6 May, the British Embassy Office Basra reported that Charge of the Knights Phase VI had been completed, and Charge of the Knights VII had begun, focused on three districts of Basra, one of which had been a launch area for indirect fire.⁵ The British Embassy Office commented:

“The GoI continues to extend its writ over Basra, and there is a sense of nervous optimism in the city. But the Basrawis will have high expectations of immediate improvements in their daily lives to follow on from the improved security environment. The risk otherwise is that sections of the population will return to support for the militia. Former militia stronghold areas ... are faced with particular problems, like poor sanitation, resulting from years of little or no investment. The next few months will be critical in delivering this change – but it is hard to see how the Provincial Council will be able to respond adequately to the city’s needs.”

25. On 7 May, the British Embassy Office Basra reported taking part in the opening ceremony of the Jameat market in Basra, built on the site of the Serious Crime Unit HQ destroyed on Christmas Day 2006 (see Section 9.5).⁶

26. The British Embassy Office wrote:

- this (so far as collective memory serves) is the first time in over a year that a UK diplomat has gone into the city;
- nobody can remember when we last visited the Jameat, hitherto a JAM stronghold;
- ...
- this is the first visible UK/Iraqi project to be opened in the city since at least last summer.”

27. After Gen Petraeus’ return to Iraq, Major General Barney White-Spunner, General Officer Commanding Multi-National Division South-East (GOC MND(SE)), briefed Lieutenant General Lloyd Austin, Commanding General Multi-National Corps – Iraq (MNC-I), on how MND(SE) intended to deliver the required tasks.⁷ He reported “genuine

⁵ eGram 17550/08 Basra to FCO London, 6 May 2008, ‘Basra – Update 6 May’.

⁶ eGram 17723/08 Basra to FCO London, 7 May 2008, ‘Iraq: A New Market Opens in Basra’.

⁷ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 8 May 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 8 May 2009’.

US commitment” to help with police reform and training, but the issue of who manned the border with Iran remained a difficult one:

“Our appreciation of the border is that we need to have a permanent presence on the main crossings, as unless these are controlled they will still offer the easiest passage for lethal aid ... that means we should man Shalamchah and Sheeb, which we do not have enough people for.”

28. Maj Gen White-Spunner anticipated that Lt Gen Austin would accept that the UK could not be responsible for Maysan and that the US would provide the guard force at Sheeb. In return, they would look to the UK to provide a temporary cover at Shalamchah, at least until the US construction work to create a more permanent base there was complete. Maj Gen White-Spunner commented:

“This will be painful, but I am inclined to agree to it as otherwise we will face an open border which is not in our interests, as it will allow an ingress of rockets from Iran which could negate much of what has been achieved in Basra and end up being fired at us here in the COB [Contingency Operating Base]. It is also very much in our interest to have responsibility for the Maysan border removed from us, as it is potentially much the most difficult to police.”

29. Maj Gen White-Spunner’s report also described “the end of large scale manoeuvre operations by ISF to clear Basra of militia”. Phase VII of Charge of the Knights met “limited resistance and low cache finds”, suggesting that the militias had fled.

30. Planning was also under way to “clear and search” the town of Al Qurnah, 70km north of Basra, to which many of the Basra JAM leaders were believed to have fled.

31. On 12 May, Lt Gen Cooper reported that in relation to Sadr City, Prime Minister Maliki “was dissuaded by Petraeus and Crocker from launching a premature major ground offensive”.⁸ Following negotiations between the Iraqi authorities and the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS), a peace deal was announced on 10 May, to come into effect the following day. The terms of the deal included:

- the right of the ISF to enter Sadr City (without coalition MiTTs in support);
- JAM producing maps and locations of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs);
- the right of the Iraqi Government to conduct raids and arrests under warrant in pursuit of weapons;
- a cessation of IDF attacks on the International Zone;
- easier access into the area for emergency aid; and
- an acknowledgement that only the Iraqi Government and its security forces had the right to bear arms.

⁸ Minute Cooper to CDS, 12 May 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (300) 12 May 08’.

32. Lt Gen Cooper reported that it was not clear to what extent the Special Groups had bought into the deal.

33. On 12 May, Mr Browne wrote to Mr Brown to report his visit to Basra the previous week.⁹ He agreed with the assessment in Mr Miliband's letter of 29 April (see Section 9.6) that the Charge of the Knights had "created the platform for transition we were hoping for from General Mohan's operations later in the year".

34. To capitalise on the opportunity presented, Mr Browne considered that the UK must:

- help ensure that the "still fragile" security on the ground in Basra continued to improve;
- finalise agreement with the US over the division of military effort in MND(SE) over the next six months; and
- "agree a narrative of what happened and why, and get it into circulation quickly – not only here but in the US, where our reputation is undoubtedly tarnished".

35. The medium term was "more complicated". Military advice was that it would be difficult to fulfil the commitments agreed with the US – in particular mentoring 14 Division – while also making significant force level reductions before November. While Mr Browne agreed with Mr Miliband that the UK should aim to transfer the two-star command sooner rather than later:

"Our discussions so far with General Petraeus will have engendered a US assumption that we have agreed to retain command of MND(SE) at least for the next six months."

36. Mr Browne continued:

"The key question implied by David [Miliband] is whether we intend to leave Basra this year, by mid 2009 or by the end of next year. We have prepared Washington for a significant further troop reduction after their elections but not, explicitly, for withdrawal ... we have the opportunity to be out by May 2009 ... if we are prepared to inform the President elect of our decision in November. Alternatively, we could negotiate an exit with the new Administration and ... be out at the end of 2009. Both risk compromising our relations with the incoming President but the former runs less chance of our being entangled in longer term commitments ..."

37. Mr Browne's letter concluded by mentioning the need to resolve the future legal status of UK forces in Iraq after resolution 1790 (2007) expired, something about which he "remained concerned". This had a direct bearing on the question of troop numbers

⁹ Letter Browne to Brown, 12 May 2007 [sic], 'Iraq'.

and role. In his view, it would be sensible for Ministers to confirm now that transition in 2008 was not an option:

“To do so would simplify military planning, allow us to concentrate on meeting our objectives in Basra, ease our relations with the US and remove the risk of being accused of misleading domestic audiences without prejudging when and how we make the transition in 2009.”

38. Mr Browne recommended that the Committee on National Security, International Relations and Defence (NSID) should commission the Iraq Strategy Group to produce a refined set of options for consideration the following month, together with a draft Parliamentary statement announcing the strategy to November and giving an indication of future possibilities.

39. In an Assessment dated 14 May, at the request of the FCO the JIC examined the impact of ISF operations against the JAM in Basra on Prime Minister Maliki, his government and the Sadrists.¹⁰ The JIC’s Key Judgements included:

“I. Prime Minister Maliki is enjoying broad political support following the success of Iraqi security forces’ (ISF) operations against the Jaysh al-Mahdi in Basra (the Charge of the Knights). Enthusiasm for dialogue on vital legislative issues has increased.

“II. Maliki ... still has many critics ...

“III. The Charge has significantly weakened JAM in Basra. Its disparate factions are unlikely to recover their dominance of Basra’s streets any time soon ...

“IV. ... Expectations in Basra are high. Maliki will need to deliver improvements in public services and job creation in weeks ... The same will apply in other places where the ISF take on JAM.”

40. In relation to the operation itself, the JIC judged that:

“Strong JAM resistance in the initial phases of the Charge exposed enduring weaknesses in the largely untested local ISF, though co-ordination improved as the operation progressed and more experienced Iraqi units from elsewhere performed significantly better. Targeted and sophisticated Multi-National Forces air support and assistance in command and control was also key to the eventual success of the Charge ...”

41. On 16 May, Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that the Deputy Commanding General of MNC-I, who had deployed to Basra during the Charge of the Knights, had left MND(SE), leaving behind a “strong detachment” of US forces.¹¹ Maj Gen White-Spunner

¹⁰ JIC Assessment, 14 May 2008, ‘Iraq: the Charge of the Knights’.

¹¹ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 16 May 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 15 May 2008’.

commented that his presence in the South had been valuable, and that MND(SE) was already seeing the benefit of him being back in Corps headquarters, where he was helpfully ensuring that the MND(SE) perspective was better understood.

42. Having a substantial US presence in MND(SE) had helped UK forces to understand how to work with the US Corps system, but Maj Gen White-Spunner thought that MND(SE) was still not articulating its requirements as fluently as other divisions, and still failed to feature in many of the Corps daily statistics, which had a direct bearing on the allocation of resources. He commented: “We are all learning enthusiastically how to speak American, although the military dialect does take time to master.”

43. Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that the operation to clear Al Qurnah had begun, but that many of the Special Groups they had hoped to detain had moved on.

44. A scene-setting telegram from the British Embassy Office Basra on 18 May, prior to a visit by Mr Browne, assessed the city’s prospects as “on a knife-edge” and judged:

“The Charge of the Knights has to be consolidated. That will require an energised civil society, with effective local government structures. It will need to be Iraqi-led ... If momentum can be maintained, and the militias kept out, Basra might just make it.”¹²

45. On 19 May, Lt Gen Cooper reported that the cease-fire agreed on 10 May appeared to be generally holding; it was not clear what the long-term impact would be on the Sadrist movement.¹³ The militias were in difficulty in Sadr City in Basra and had diminished in Maysan and the other southern Provinces. But the cease-fire was seen as being on the Government’s terms, and there was widespread criticism of Muqtada al-Sadr’s leadership. Lt Gen Cooper speculated that the Iraqi Government was in dialogue with representatives of the Special Groups (“the lack of IDF in recent days is an indicator of this”).

46. Lt Gen Cooper observed that as Prime Minister Maliki’s confidence and control grew, so the influence of the coalition waned. He added:

“How we use our remaining capital will be more and more important as the coalition’s room for manoeuvre is increasingly constrained, and Maliki continues to build a position very like that of the traditional Iraqi strong-man.”

47. On 22 May, Iraqi Security Forces entered Sadr City at first light and met almost no resistance.¹⁴ They secured key infrastructure locations, such as hospitals, and found 45 weapons caches.

¹² eGram 19343/08 Basra to FCO London, 18 May 2008, ‘Iraq: Defence Secretary’s Visit to Basra, 22 May: Scene-Setter’.

¹³ Minute Cooper to CDS, 19 May 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (301) 19 May 08’.

¹⁴ Minute Cooper to CDS, 27 May 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (302) 27 May 08’.

48. Lt Gen Cooper commented that the key question was “what, or where, next?”. Both the MNF and Iraqi Government were turning their attention to Maysan, in an attempt to disrupt Iranian operations and address militia infiltration of the police.

49. On 23 May, Mr McDonald wrote a report for Mr Brown of his meeting with Mr Hadley and his team in Washington two days previously to discuss troop levels.¹⁵ Mr McDonald described the meeting as “hard pounding” and reported that the US had been concerned about how UK troop reductions would be described and about reports that the UK was planning to reduce rapidly to 1,000 or fewer.

50. Mr McDonald explained UK military advice that “there was no sustainable combat deployment between 3,350 and zero”, which Mr Hadley suggested should be re-examined in light of the improved security situation in Basra, and that key tasks would be complete by year end.

51. Mr McDonald said that: “The British Parliament and public were expecting British troop numbers to fall to 2,500 this year.” He asked whether US forces would be able to take on any tasks that would allow UK numbers to fall to that level. General Doug Lute (“the US War Czar”) said that the US would look at that. They agreed to continue discussions in advance of President Bush’s visit to the UK from 15 to 16 June.

52. Mr Brown and President Bush discussed Iraq briefly by video conference on 30 May.¹⁶ Mr Brown reported that Mr Browne had returned from his recent visit to Basra feeling more optimistic and said that the UK must focus more clearly on its tasks for the remainder of 2008.

53. Mr Brown also confirmed that his “rough objective” was to draw down to 2,500 UK troops by the end of the year.

54. In his weekly report on 30 May, Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that the people of Basra “remain firmly behind” the ISF and Iraqi Government, as their quality of life had significantly improved following the end of militia dominance.¹⁷ MND(SE)’s weekly security assessment of the city showed that all but one of the districts was stable or improving. Basra’s night-life was returning, illustrated by restaurants opening again at night, the return of music to the streets and even the selling of alcohol.

55. Food and fuel prices, which had increased sharply during the early stages of the Charge of the Knights, had returned to normal. However, the militias continued low-level attacks against the Iraqi Police Service and soft targets (such as music shops or weddings) and the Special Groups continued to target the MNF. Phase XI of the Charge of the Knights, targeted at Abu Al Khasib and the al-Faw Peninsula, was due to begin on 31 May.

¹⁵ Minute McDonald to Prime Minister, 23 May 2008, ‘Iraq: US Views on UK Force Level Plans’.

¹⁶ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 30 May 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with US President, 30 May’.

¹⁷ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 30 May 2008, ‘MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 29 May 2008’.

June 2008

56. The Iraq Strategy Group focused on economic developments at its meeting on 2 June (see Section 10.2).¹⁸ Ms Margaret Aldred, Deputy Head of the Overseas and Defence Secretariat, stressed that economic deliverables would form a core part of the narrative that Mr Browne had asked for following his visit to Basra and asked DFID to lead on compiling it.

57. Mr Jon Day, MOD Director General Operational Policy, explained that that request had followed a briefing by the PRT highlighting the lack of capacity within the UK system to give an evidence-based account of what had been achieved in Basra.

58. Mr McDonald noted that Mr Brown would want to announce economic progress – or, at the very least, a Basra economic plan – in his planned Parliamentary statement in July.

59. Mr Frank Baker, FCO Head of Iraq Group, updated the Group on progress towards provincial elections. If the provincial elections law was passed by the end of June, the elections could take place on 1 October, although December was more likely. Some technical work remained to be done.

60. Mr Browne visited Iraq briefly, on his way to Afghanistan, at the end of May, where he “realised a personal ambition by having a cup of tea downtown”, the result of “a remarkable transformation of the security situation”.¹⁹

61. In a report of his visit sent to Mr Brown on 4 June, Mr Browne wrote that he had found UK troops “enthused about their new role, working alongside the resurgent Iraqi Security Forces”, adding:

“Everyone I spoke to sensed a real prospect now to leave behind us in Basra a positive legacy. As one officer put it to me, we are now in a similar position to 2003, but with the benefit this time of a security environment which has a predominantly Iraqi face. If we are to avoid the same pitfalls this time round, rapid investment is needed in Joint Security Stations for the Iraqi Army and Police in Basra, and in eye-catching short-term regeneration initiatives and medium term employment schemes. This needn’t be UK money – the Government of Iraq is revelling in the hike in oil prices ... – but perhaps we should consider across government, as we approach the final stages of Op TELIC, what value we would put upon some flagship projects that we can point to as part of a positive UK legacy in southern Iraq.”

62. Mr Browne explained that discussions with Lt Gen Cooper and Maj Gen White-Spunner had confirmed that it would not be possible to go much below the current troop level of 4,100 and still perform a useful mentoring and training role without the substitution of US troops in some of the UK’s current tasks.

¹⁸ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 2 June 2008, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 2 June’.

¹⁹ Letter Browne to Brown, 4 June 2008, ‘Visit to Basra’.

63. Mr Browne considered that it should be possible to conclude the training of 14 Division by the end of 2008 and thereafter, should the UK so decide, to declare an end to Op TELIC and a move to a longer-term bilateral relationship with Iraq, requiring hundreds rather than thousands of troops. The timing of such a shift would fit with both provincial elections and the expiry of resolution 1790. Even before UK troops departed, Mr Browne pointed out that by October the US would have three times as much combat power as the UK in MND(SE).

64. In conclusion, Mr Browne said that he would work with Mr Miliband and Mr Alexander “as a matter of urgency on the narrative that will put in context our withdrawal of combat troops, and explain what we have achieved since 2003”.

65. At the start of June, Australian and Czech troops left MND(SE).²⁰ Maj Gen White-Spunner observed that, with the imminent departure of the Romanians:

“Our Multi-National Division is now not as multi-national as it once was, being ... essentially UK and US – not forgetting the two Romanians and one Lithuanian in this headquarters.”

66. On 7 June, Mr Prentice reported to the FCO on a briefing from Ambassador David Satterfield, State Department Co-ordinator for Iraq, covering developments in negotiating the US/Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) and Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA).²¹ The US aimed to have both signed by 31 July, coming into effect at the start of 2009, and had almost reached agreement on the SFA. The SOFA had been set aside in favour of a new “Implementing Arrangement” in the form of a protocol to the SFA.

67. Mr Prentice reported that the US were “now settling for a degree of operational and legal risk and there will be no chance of us being able to negotiate legally watertight authorities or privileges and immunities which go beyond what the US accept”.

68. Uncertainty remained over whether any eventual UK/Iraqi agreement would be subject to separate Iraqi Government and/or Council of Representative approval. Mr Prentice observed that the more the UK sought distinct arrangements, the more risk there would be of particular political attention:

“There may also be some temptation to ‘go after’ the junior coalition partner; post-Basra, there are still anti-British rumours in the corridors ...”

69. In his weekly report on 9 June, Lt Gen Cooper wrote that:

“The key political issue this week has been the bursting into print and speech by many observers and politicians on the SFA/SOFA. Earlier in the week, most parties declared some form of opposition to the SFA or very qualified and conditional support based on significant caveats ... As the week wore on, several senior

²⁰ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 6 June 2008, ‘MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 06 June 2008’.

²¹ eGram 22049/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 7 June 2008, ‘Iraq: SFA/SoFA Negotiations’.

government spokesmen and officials began to ameliorate comment and produce greater objectivity.”²²

70. Public statements by the US Embassy and the MNF-I stressed “that any agreement would be transparent, that there was no desire to have permanent US bases and that there is no intent to use Iraq as a base from which to conduct offensive operations against third parties”.

71. In the same note, Lt Gen Cooper reflected on the remaining tasks for the UK in the South of Iraq:

“... it is worth considering what is achievable between now and the end of 2008 and the first half of 2009. I have already commented on the need to have metrics that are measurable and understandable to non-military audiences in relation to completing the training of 14 IA Div ... And if we can get 14 Div right, I am confident that we will have set the conditions for the successful delivery of Provincial elections in Basra.”

72. Lt Gen Cooper reported that Gen Petraeus had concluded on the basis of UK statements that there would remain a UK brigade in place in 2009, probably focused on Basra alone. Lt Gen Cooper cautioned that there had not yet been a political decision on future deployments. He told ACM Stirrup that:

“It is difficult in Baghdad to discuss the issue substantively in the absence of a confirmed political decision. Given the impending PM-POTUS meeting, I would expect Petraeus’ expectation to be briefed to President Bush.”

73. On 9 June, a Current Intelligence Group (CIG) considered Basra city’s economy, the impact of criminal activity, obstacles to reconstruction and the likely impact of provincial elections and Iranian influence.²³ The CIG’s Key Judgements included:

“I. The recent Iraqi Government security operation in Basra City had largely driven the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) from the streets and brought a degree of stability. While this lasts, there is a window of opportunity to create the conditions for economic growth. However, insecurity, institutional incapacity, corruption, legislation, competing political agendas, crime and smuggling will remain impediments to reconstruction and development for the next twelve months.

...

“V. Militia violence and intimidation, which specifically targeted middle class Basrawis, prompted many to leave, leaving a shortage of capable local entrepreneurs, which is likely to persist beyond 2008.”

²² Minute Cooper to CDS, 9 June 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (304) 9 Jun 08’.

²³ CIG Assessment, 9 June 2008, ‘Iraq: Basra’s Economy’.

74. The JIC examined the state of Sunni politics in Iraq in an Assessment of 11 June.²⁴ It confirmed a December 2007 judgement that, despite having worked together to oust AQ-I, there was little sign the Sunni community had rallied to a single political party or cause.

75. The JIC judged that Sunni participation in the forthcoming provincial elections was likely to be:

“... considerably higher than in 2005. Sunni expectations are high and are unlikely to be met by the opportunities that political participation offers. Alienation will grow unless Prime Minister Maliki’s government addresses their concerns.”

76. The JIC judged that Sunni politicians commanded little support from “the Sunni street” and that “established Sunni parties’ low credibility and growing competition for votes will probably render them less dominant in national Sunni politics”.

77. The JIC judged that “Iraq’s Arab neighbours are not driving Iraqi Sunni politics”.

78. The JIC assessed that immediate Sunni concerns were focused on seeing security gains translate into more jobs and better public services. Other common goals included increased representation in the ISF and in the government; the release of Sunni detainees; revision of the de-Ba’athification laws; constitutional review; a timetable for the withdrawal of the MNF; and resisting Shia and Kurdish moves towards federalism.

79. The JIC assessed that Sunni insurgent groups were increasingly interested in the potential gains from political engagement, but saw such engagement “as additional to, not instead of, armed resistance”. There was no sign that any such group had a coherent or realistic set of national political objectives.

80. On 11 June, Sir Mark Lyall-Grant, FCO Director General Political, circulated to members of the FCO Board a paper on ‘Preparing for the End-Game in Basra’.²⁵ The paper set out an analysis of the impact of the Charge of the Knights:

- “– Maliki’s failure to consult us, and his well-publicised refusal to receive British officers during the first week when things were going badly for the ISF, made it hard for us to sustain our claims that we were co-operating closely with the Gol on Basra, and that our military overwatch role was welcomed and valued by the Iraqis.
- the increased MNC-I (ie the US military) presence on the ground created a mistaken but widespread perception in the US, and in the international media, that we had abdicated to the US our post-PIC [Provisional Iraqi Control] responsibilities for providing *in extremis* support for the ISF.

²⁴ JIC Assessment, 11 June 2008, ‘Iraq: Sunni Arab Politics’.

²⁵ Email Lyall-Grant to Ricketts, 11 June 2008, ‘Board endgame paper’ attaching Paper Iraq Group, June 2008, ‘Iraq: Preparing for the End-Game in Basra’.

- the fact that Maliki felt moved to intervene so precipitously in Basra, along with the ISF's lack of success in the first week of the operation, led to a renewal of unfavourable comment from the US, Gol and the media about the state of Basra when we handed it over to Iraqi control; our failure to deal effectively with the militias; and the readiness of the Iraqi Security Forces we had trained."

81. The paper also said that the UK's relationship with Prime Minister Maliki had been:

"... severely tested by the events of late March: he believed that we had done deals to allow JAM control of Basra, and that we were consequently unwilling to support the Gol and ISF ... we cannot be confident that he values or appreciates the UK military role in the South, or that he would be particularly concerned by the timing of our departure."

82. On 13 June, Maj Gen White-Spunner sent Lieutenant General Nicholas Houghton, Chief of Joint Operations, an overview of MND(SE) prior to his visit to Iraq.²⁶ He wrote:

"The overall mood across Iraq is positive, with attacks at a low level. The success of the Gol's initiatives in Sadr City and Mosul, together with the perception that AQ and the Sunni insurgency are nearing defeat, have, of course, contributed to this, but from a Basrawi perspective the improvement started with Charge of the Knights in Basra, being Maliki's first sign of willingness to act against the militias and criminal gangs ... a new confidence has emerged in the city, with people openly speaking of life being better than it has been for years and a mood of optimism equal to that experienced in 2003."

83. Maj Gen White-Spunner commented: "There is a sense that the city is just waking from a nightmare and rubbing its eyes as it contemplates what could turn out to be a fine day, although it is too early to be sure."

84. On 13 June, Muqtada al-Sadr declared that JAM would be re-organised from a militia into a primarily civilian, religious, social and cultural organisation, called 'Mumahiidun' (Showing the Way), and its members would be banned from carrying weapons.²⁷ He added that a minority of JAM would be retained to resist the occupation.

85. On 13 June, Mr Brown's Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs emailed Mr Brown advice from Mr McDonald, explaining as he did that: "We asked Simon [McDonald] to have another go at the Iraq numbers."²⁸

86. Mr McDonald advised that it would be possible to reduce UK troop numbers to 2,000 by the end of 2008 if the US assumed a number of the current key UK roles, specifically either the training of 14 Division or the provision of enabling support.

²⁶ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 13 June 2008, 'MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 13 June 08'.

²⁷ JIC Assessment, 10 September 2008, 'Iraq: The Future of Jaysh al-Mahdi'.

²⁸ Email Fletcher to Brown, 13 June 2008, 'Iraq Troop Numbers'.

87. However, military advice was that leaving Iraq before the key tasks had been completed would damage the morale and reputation of the UK Armed Forces. ACM Stirrup strongly opposed the idea of the US taking over the training of 14 Division, which would leave the UK troops in a “low value-added supporting role of limited benefit”. The US was thought likely to resent taking on “British tasks” when already stretched.

88. Consequently, Mr McDonald recommended that Mr Brown should “decide that UK forces complete training 14 Division, and then prepare to leave Basra”. Completing the training “could make the difference to whether we can end our six-year engagement in Iraq as success or failure”. Departure from Basra could begin before the end of 2008, making the troop rotation that ended in May 2009 the last of Op TELIC. He advised that Mr Brown should agree the policy with President Bush and then with Presidential Candidates Mr Barack Obama and Mr John McCain, before being announced in July. Mr McDonald also recommended that Mr Brown visit Iraq after the announcement to highlight the UK’s economic and security achievements.

89. On 15 June, during a Presidential visit to London, Mr Brown hosted a dinner for President Bush and the two men had an hour-long one-to-one the following day.²⁹ There was no discussion of troop numbers in Iraq. Mr Brown said that it was right for the UK to focus on the four key tasks in MND(SE): training 14 Division, provincial elections before the end of November, economic reconstruction, and preparation of the port and airport for civilian control.

90. On 16 June, Lt Gen Cooper reported that Muqtada al-Sadr’s statement about the re-organisation of JAM left both OMS and JAM “in limbo”.³⁰ He reported that some commentators wondered whether it was a precursor to disbanding JAM. Muqtada al-Sadr had repeated that OMS would not participate in the provincial elections and the movement remained unregistered with the electoral authorities.

91. Lt Gen Cooper also reported that “stoppage in the SFA/SOFA negotiations is now well trailed in the local and international media. We await details of any new discussions to emerge.”

92. On 20 June, Maj Gen White-Spunner’s weekly report from Basra contained “some metrics which show what life is like for Basrawis”, based on a survey conducted for the MNF-I by an Iraqi team, which he judged to have “a good degree of independence and credibility”.³¹

93. The survey showed that:

“Since the start of Operation Charge of the Knights the responses of those polled (in May) show a definite improvement in public perception with 90 percent now considering they have enough to live on and 80 percent having enough food

²⁹ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 17 June 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with US President, 16 June’.

³⁰ Minute Cooper to CDS, 16 June 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (305) 16 Jun 08’.

³¹ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 20 June 2008, ‘MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 20 June 2008’.

the majority of the time. This is in stark contrast to March when only 60 percent considered that they had enough to live on and only 25 percent thought they had enough food. We are also seeing an upward trend in support for the ISF. The perception that the ISF are defeating the Militias increased by 11 percent in May to 59 percent with similar trends reported for general confidence in the security situation, now at 75 percent, and increase of 18 percent over the previous month, and in confidence in the ISF's ability to protect the population increasing by 10 percent to 70 percent overall. Finally, 74 percent of those polled consider the environment safe enough to report crimes to the ISF, which is an increase of 6 percent over last month."

94. Maj Gen White-Spunner also reported that Operation Charge of the Knights XIV had begun on 18 June, covering "the continuous maintenance of security and control by the ISF throughout Basra Province ... and, secondly, support to ISF operations in Maysan".

95. The British Embassy Office Basra reported on 23 June that Charge of the Knights XIV was targeting insurgents returning to the city, and had generated "further weapons finds and detentions" as well as an increase in attacks against the MNF and ISF, albeit "single rather than multiple rocket attacks which suggests a reduced capability".³² There appeared to be public support for ISF action.

96. In the same report, the British Embassy Office recorded "the first visit in ten months by UK CivPol [civilian police] to the Joint Police Command Centre (JPCC) in Basra". The report said:

"The success of the initial visit to the PJCC cannot be over-emphasised. It will enable, as the security situation allows, future opportunities for the CivPol team to engage close[ly] with the IPS as part of the continuing strategy to support, develop and assess policing standards."

97. On 23 June Lt Gen Cooper advised ACM Stirrup of the importance of engaging the Iraqi Government "sooner rather than later on the nature of our long term strategic relationship with them ... we need to see through Iraqi eyes ... rather than risk taking the future for granted".³³

98. The same report stated that Charge of the Knights XIV had been "well-co-ordinated" and "executed to plan". Lt Gen Cooper reported:

"A vignette that brings to life the burgeoning sense of confidence within the ISF is that a departing JAM member had painted the graffiti comment '*We'll be back*' on the Yugoslav bridge in Amara to which an Iraqi soldier had added '*We'll be waiting*'."

99. Qadisiyah and Anbar provinces were scheduled for transfer to Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) at the end of June, and Lt Gen Cooper commented that Gen Petraeus

³² eGram 24392/08 Basra to FCO London, 23 June 2008, 'Basra: Weekly Update'.

³³ Minute Cooper to CDS, 23 June 2008, 'SBMR-I's Weekly Report (306) 23 Jun 08'.

“went further than he had hitherto in commenting that he now had a sense of momentum about the future”.

100. On 30 June, Gen Petraeus was reported to have “accepted as likely .. that a bridging arrangement will be adopted and that a final SOFA will not emerge in 2008”.³⁴

101. Lt Gen Cooper judged that Iraqi desire to assert sovereignty was increasing, and was having a significant impact on the SOFA negotiations.

102. General Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the General Staff, visited Basra at the end of June, and reported a “very positive mood within MND(SE) and a real sense that we may actually be able to deliver success, although within a realistic timeframe”.³⁵ He believed it was important to be “absolutely focused on delivering success – in terms of the objectives that we have already set – rather than be too directed by any understandable desire for early delivery”. However, he remained “unconvinced that the PRT in Basra is demonstrating enough energy, purpose and drive to be able to deliver meaningful results in the timeframe we require”.

July 2008

103. On 3 July, Mr Day told the Iraq Strategy Group that negotiations between the US and Iraq on legal arrangements for the presence of US forces were going badly.³⁶ The SOFA was now “on the back burner” and the US was pursuing an Interim Protocol to span the gap between the end of the Security Council resolution and the completion of a SOFA.

104. Mr Day thought the most likely outcome was a six month rollover of the Chapter VII mandate contained in the resolution. Mr McDonald said that solution would be acceptable to the UK.

105. The UK would require an additional bilateral amendment, in light of its obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights. Mr McDonald noted that Mr Brown had previously stated that UK forces were in Iraq under a UN mandate and at the invitation of the Iraqi Government; it would be necessary to continue that cover into 2009.

106. Mr Day told the Iraq Strategy Group that the MOD was developing a paper on the long term UK military role in Iraq which would map the route to a normal bilateral military relationship.

107. Mr Prentice called on Ambassador Crocker on 4 July to discuss the SFA and SOFA.³⁷ A minute of the discussion written by British Embassy staff recorded that

³⁴ Minute Cooper to CDS, 30 June 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (307) 30 Jun 08’.

³⁵ Minute CGS to PSO/CDS, 4 July 2008, ‘CGS Visit to Iraq and Cyprus – 30 Jun-2 Jul 08’.

³⁶ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 7 July 2008, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 3 July’.

³⁷ Email Brett to Prentice, 6 July 2008, ‘Call on Ambassador Crocker, 4 July: SFA/SOFA’.

Mr Prentice described “clear signs that some in Maliki’s circle ... saw no need to give the UK and other non-US forces a role beyond 2008”.

108. Ambassador Crocker told Mr Prentice that, in his opinion, those views were based on “ignorance of the breadth of the present UK role and on overconfidence in the capabilities of the ISF”. He did not think that Prime Minister Maliki had a clear position yet on an agreement with the UK. Mr Prentice considered that the US and UK should avoid closing off any options.

109. Mr Prentice also described plans for Mr Day to visit Iraq with “a non-paper which set out what we would require in terms of legal cover for UK forces post Chapter VII and asked a number of open-ended questions” to discuss with the Iraqi Government.

110. On 8 July, the British Embassy Office Basra reported that the operational phase of Charge of the Knights had ended.³⁸ Phase XV, an influence/information campaign, was in the initial planning stage.

111. On 9 July a CIG provided a “sitrep on the electoral process”.³⁹

112. The CIG judged that for provincial elections to be held before the end of 2008, the relevant legislation needed to be passed by the end of July. The key issues still being debated were:

- whether the elections would run on an open list (allowing voters to back individual candidates) or a closed one (limiting choices to political parties); and
- whether the elections should be held simultaneously across all 18 provinces.

113. Parties that stood to lose out in the elections had been privately lobbying for a closed list, or a hybrid between the two systems, but the Iraqi Government favoured an open list system. Prime Minister Maliki favoured staggered elections, while the Independent High Electoral Commission, whose job it was to oversee and manage the elections, favoured a simultaneous approach.

114. The CIG considered that the elections had the potential to support the national reconciliation process by providing those who had been excluded from power with a means of entering the political process. Greater participation from OMS (which had boycotted the last elections), new Sunni political parties, the Sunni Arab Tribal “awakening” groups and a range of independent candidates was expected to improve the representativeness of local councils.

115. The CIG reported that OMS had not registered as a political party, on the grounds that Muqtada al-Sadr believed that participation would be tantamount to support for the “occupation”. However, the media had reported that OMS would field “independent” Sadrist candidates on other parties’ lists.

³⁸ eGram 26653/08 Basra to FCO London, 8 July 2008, ‘Basra: Weekly Update’.

³⁹ CIG Current Assessment Note, 9 July 2008, ‘The Iraqi Provincial Elections’.

116. The CIG assessed that any Sadrist gains were likely to come at the expense of the “smaller independent parties, Fadilah and, to a lesser extent, ISCI and Dawa”. The Note concluded:

“Newly registered parties to look out for include the Iraqi People’s Assembly (a possibly proxy for JAM Special Groups), First Iraqi Gathering (formerly the Sadrists splinter Iraqi National Gathering), the Independence and Rising Movement (affiliated to Jaysh al-Islami) and the Iraqi Awakening Conference (formerly Sahawa al-Iraq). Not all will win seats ...”

117. On 14 July, following a visit to Iraq, Mr Day told the Iraq Strategy Group that US negotiations on the SFA/SOFA were making little progress.⁴⁰ Iraqi officials and ministers had told him that Prime Minister Maliki wanted UK/Iraq talks on a future legal agreement, separate and parallel to the US negotiations. But Mr Day told the Iraq Strategy Group:

“... the Iraqis wanted the UK combat role to end by mid-2009 at the latest. They would want any residual military relationship to be far smaller and on a different legal basis.”

118. The Iraq Strategy Group agreed that, if NSID agreed, the UK should pursue bilateral talks with the objective of reaching agreement in October.

119. Mr Day also reported that there was “strong Iraqi interest” in an arrangement “regularising the bilateral relationship”, perhaps through a Memorandum of Understanding or Exchange of Letters, with the military relationship as a small component. The Iraq Strategy Group agreed that it would be helpful to begin discussions on future relations, but should not discuss a written agreement until after Mr Brown’s visit to Iraq or before the UK had clarified its own strategic objectives.

120. Lt Gen Cooper reported to ACM Stirrup that “as is clear from Jon Day’s meetings during his recent visit, there are differing views from various members of the Gol”.⁴¹ He concluded “there is a possibility that Maliki may adopt one of several positions when he meets the PM: receptive to our suggestions, hostile and indicating that he sees no need for UK presence or uncommitted either way”.

121. Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that for Prime Minister Maliki “the leitmotif from the start was: when are we going to get out of chapter VII”.⁴²

122. On 15 July, Mr Prentice called again on Ambassador Crocker, who told him that the Iraqi Executive Council had agreed the previous day to proceed with negotiations with the US, firstly on the SFA, then the short-term bridging Protocol and finally on the longer term SOFA.⁴³

⁴⁰ Minute Wigan to Aldred, 14 July 2008, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 14 July’.

⁴¹ Minute Cooper to CDS, 14 July 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (309) 14 Jul 08’.

⁴² Private hearing, 15 June 2010, page 36.

⁴³ Email Oppenheim to Prentice, 17 July 2008, ‘Your Call on Ambassador Crocker, 15 July 2008’.

123. Ambassador Crocker and Mr Prentice agreed that the UK negotiations could run in parallel with the US ones, but would be “shaped by them” and were unlikely to conclude until after the US/Iraqi negotiations had ended. Mr Prentice explained that the UK’s deadline for concluding talks was mid-October, both to ensure there was time to finalise the UK arrangements after the US arrangements were in place but also to allow time for the necessary Parliamentary procedures in London.

124. The Overseas and Defence Sub-Committee of NSID met on 15 July to discuss a paper prepared by Cabinet Office officials on UK strategy in Iraq 2008/2009.⁴⁴ The officials recommended that:

- The UK’s key tasks in Iraq for 2008/2009 should be:
 - training and mentoring the Iraqi Army’s 14 Division, until it was capable of independent operations with minimal coalition support (expected in about April 2009);
 - supporting provincial elections, due by the end of 2008; and
 - supporting economic development in Basra, based on Mr Wareing’s outline Economic Development Strategy (see Section 10.2).
- 4,000 UK troops would be required in southern Iraq until 14 Division was trained but after that UK forces should move to a significantly different future role, requiring fewer troops.
- Mr Brown should set out this policy in a statement on 22 July.
- Officials should continue to pursue legal cover for a continued UK mission, through either a resolution rollover (seen as “increasingly likely”) or bilateral relations with Iraq.
- The UK should continue to press for passage of the Hydrocarbons Law.
- Once drawdown plans were clearer, NSID(OD) should agree UK strategic objectives in Iraq and the resources needed to pursue them.

125. At the meeting, Mr Browne described his recent discussions in Washington with Mr Hadley and General Lute.⁴⁵

126. Mr Browne reported that the US was likely to agree to Iraqi demands for an indicative timetable for troop withdrawals and would welcome a UK policy statement which “could set out the conditions for a move from combat operations (ending Operation TELIC) to a long-term relationship” and “could say we expected to meet conditions in early 2009, and could then reduce troop numbers significantly”.

127. ACM Stirrup reported that the UK could expect to complete its current military tasks in 2009, allowing transition to a normal bilateral relationship. In discussion, it was suggested that the “remaining military tasks” beyond April 2009 were continued

⁴⁴ Paper Cabinet Office, 11 July 2008, ‘Iraq’.

⁴⁵ Minutes, 15 July 2008, NSID(OD) meeting.

“small scale” mentoring of 14 Division’s HQ, training the Iraqi Navy and supporting officer training. These would “resemble normal defence co-operation”.

128. Mr Miliband warned that provincial elections might be postponed until April 2009, or to coincide with Iraqi Parliamentary elections the following autumn.

129. Mr Alexander reported on Mr Wareing’s draft economic strategy (this is addressed in Section 10.2).

130. Concluding the discussion, Mr Brown welcomed the opportunity that his 22 July statement would provide to set out UK policy publicly, given the risk that the next US President might ask the UK to “hold further changes”. He summed up that the UK’s key goals for the year ahead should be to push for early provincial elections; hand over Basra Airport by the end of 2008; produce an economic plan shortly; and complete training of 14 Division by the end of May 2009.

131. On 15 July, the Assessments Staff reviewed recent intelligence on foreign fighters in Iraq against an earlier JIC judgement⁴⁶ that the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan were “creating a new supply of battle-hardened jihadists that will add resilience to the wider AQ campaign”.⁴⁷

132. The update stated:

“Since 2003, we estimate that several thousand foreign fighters ... have travelled to Iraq to undertake jihad. We judge that the majority of these joined Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) and became either suicide bombers or were killed in other action. But a proportion have left Iraq as experienced and competent jihadist fighters ...

“The total number of foreign fighters who have left Iraq since 2003 remains unclear ... We are aware of only a handful of individuals who have come to the UK after fighting in Iraq, and have seen no intelligence to suggest that these individuals are currently involved in attack planning.

“The impact of the return from Iraq of foreign fighters has, so far, been less than the JIC predicted.”

133. On 17 July, Maj Gen White-Spunner reported that MND(SE) was an entirely UK/US organisation, apart from one Australian “handling their loose ends”.

134. Maj Gen White-Spunner also reported that he had discussed with Lt Gen Austin the transfer of the UK’s remaining responsibilities in Maysan, Muthanna and Dhi Qar to Multi-National Division (Centre) (MND(C)).⁴⁸ They agreed the transfer made military

⁴⁶ JIC Assessment, 17 May 2007, ‘International Islamist Terrorism: Who’s Winning?’

⁴⁷ Intelligence Update Assessments Staff, 15 July 2008, ‘International Terrorism: The Departure of Foreign Fighters from Iraq’.

⁴⁸ Minute White-Spunner to CJO, 17 July 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 17 July 2008’.

sense but Lt Gen Austin thought that Gen Petraeus might take the view that it would be presentationally difficult for the US.

135. Maj Gen White-Spunner commented that if the transfer did not go ahead, “it will not make much practical difference to us as MND(C) are already dealing with governance and economic reconstruction”.

136. On 18 July, Mr Brown’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs informed Mr Brown that Prime Minister Maliki had told Mr Prentice that he wanted to end the coalition presence in Iraq as soon as possible.⁴⁹ Prime Minister Maliki did not want to agree to the continuation of any coalition forces other than the US beyond the end of 2008. US officials were concerned by this proposal and by the wording of Mr Brown’s statement which declared an end to Op TELIC and withdrawal of all UK combat troops in early 2009.

137. On the same day, *BBC News* reported a White House announcement that:

“Improving conditions should allow for the agreements now under negotiation to include a general time horizon for meeting aspirational goals – such as the resumption of Iraqi security control in their cities and provinces and the further reduction of US combat forces from Iraq.”⁵⁰

138. According to the report, the announcement was prompted by Prime Minister Maliki, raising the prospect of setting a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops as part of negotiations of a new security agreement.

139. Mr Brown visited Iraq on 19 July, during which he held a bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Maliki.⁵¹

140. Mr Brown underlined to Prime Minister Maliki the UK’s wish to help on key issues, including Basra port, oil and the steel industry as well as the training of 14 Division. He commented that the Iraqi police and army were “increasingly ready” and capable of taking over their responsibilities.

141. Prime Minister Maliki agreed that it was in the interests of both countries to have long-term co-operation in all fields, including training the military. The Iraqi people’s desire for the departure of all foreign forces did not necessarily mean that they were ungrateful for the help that had been provided, but they wanted to be a sovereign nation and he did not feel that there was a need for such a large number of foreign forces to be present.

142. Mr Brown explained that UK forces would not stay longer than was necessary to “finish the tasks we had started”, specifically training 14 Division, making Basra

⁴⁹ Email Fletcher to Brown, 18 July 2008, ‘Iraq’.

⁵⁰ *BBC News*, 18 July 2008, *US seeks ‘time horizon’ on Iraq*.

⁵¹ Letter Fletcher to Hickey, 19 July 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with Prime Minister Maliki, 19 July’.

Airport operational and supporting provincial elections. That would take until mid 2009. Negotiations could begin immediately, in advance of a further meeting in October.

143. Summing up the discussion, Mr Brown concluded that:

“... in principle they had agreed to negotiate until October this year; that the tasks the UK was undertaking would be complete by mid-2009; and that Maliki supported a further training role for the British Army while we finished our current tasks. It was essential that the GOI [Government of Iraq] understood that by the end of December 2009, we should have an MOU giving our forces a legal basis. He and Maliki should speak monthly to avoid misunderstandings.”

144. Later the same day, Mr Brown met Ambassador Crocker and Gen Petraeus.⁵² He told them that after meeting Prime Minister Maliki he felt that there was agreement to a transition process. Although Prime Minister Maliki had said he wanted an agreement with the UK, Mr Brown felt that he was “unclear about what he wanted in it”.

145. Ambassador Crocker explained that the White House statement the previous day did not mean a change in US policy: the “time horizons” were “aspirational” and did not have fixed dates. The Status of Forces Agreement with the Iraqi Government had so far “made good progress”. In response to a question from Mr McDonald, Ambassador Crocker said that he thought rolling over the UN Security Council resolution once again would be politically impossible for Prime Minister Maliki.

146. Following Mr Brown’s visit, on 21 July Lt Gen Cooper reported that the UK appeared to have a way forward to secure an agreement with Iraq in terms of future UK military contribution.⁵³ But he cautioned against an assumption that the Iraqi position would remain unchanged and urged “it will be essential for London to be very closely engaged with this office, in order to be fully informed on the current Baghdad atmospherics”.

147. Lt Gen Cooper also reported “a week of notable milestones” in Iraq. They included the return of Tawafuq to the Government, following approval by the Council of Representatives of a ministerial slate that appointed six Tawafuq ministers, and oil production exceeding pre-war levels for the first time. The provincial elections law was scheduled to pass through the Council of Representatives, giving a possible election date of 22 December, but there was “no overwhelming sense that it will actually happen”.

148. On 22 July, Mr Brown told Cabinet that he would be making a statement to the House of Commons later that day.⁵⁴

149. Mr Brown explained that UK force levels in Iraq had reduced to 4,100. A planned further reduction to 2,500 had been suspended in March when the Iraqi Government

⁵² Minute [unattributed], [undated], ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with Petraeus and Crocker, 19 July 2008’.

⁵³ Minute Cooper to CDS, 21 July 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (310) 21 Jul 08’.

⁵⁴ Cabinet Conclusions, 22 July 2008.

had decided to take action in Basra. UK troops had taken on a more active training and mentoring role, with around 1,000 UK personnel currently embedded in Iraqi units. Levels of violence had reduced significantly and life in Basra was returning to normal. The UK was pursuing four key functions:

- UK forces had moved from a combat to an overwatch role. UK troops' primary role was training and mentoring Iraqi forces, with a last resort intervention capability, although that was also gradually being taken over by Iraq.
- Pursuing economic development, which was showing some evidence of success, providing Iraqi citizens with work and a stake in their future.
- Local government elections, which would give former members of the militia the opportunity to engage in democratic politics.
- Working to transfer Basra Airport from military to civilian control.

150. Mr Brown said that the Basra Development Commission would produce an economic plan in the autumn and he hoped that local elections and the handover of Basra Airport would take place by the end of the year. Training of 14 Division should also be completed by the end of the year, with additional training of headquarters and specialist functions required in early 2009. Mr Brown “expected that we would be able to make substantial reduction in the number of British forces next year, but that would depend on circumstances. He was not going to make an estimate of the numbers now.”

151. Finally, Mr Brown told Cabinet that the UK would be working to sign “a new agreement” with the Iraqi Government, and he would tell the House of Commons that the UK would be “ready to move to a new relationship in the first half of next year”.

152. Summing up, Mr Brown concluded that whilst some militia activity in Iraq was “inevitable”, in general “security had significantly improved”. A new agreement with the Iraqi Government would require “significant negotiation” and the Armed Forces would need a legal basis for operations post-December. If the UK had left Iraq a few months ago, the job would not have been finished; with the improvements in security, momentum for economic development and a move towards local democracy once the elections were held, the Iraqi people now felt that they had a stake in the future.

153. The House of Commons Defence Committee published a report into UK operations in Iraq on 22 June, before Mr Brown made his statement.⁵⁵

154. The report concluded that following the Charge of the Knights, a high degree of security had been restored to Basra and “the preconditions are in place for political progress and economic recovery”. However, “the UK Government must ensure that it continues to provide support to the ISF to ensure that the progress which has been made is not lost and that Basra does not slip back into instability”.

⁵⁵ Fifteenth Report from the House of Commons Defence Committee, Session 2007-2008, *UK Operations in Iraq and the Gulf*, HC982.

155. The Defence Committee considered that military training offered “an opportunity to maintain a substantial position of influence for the common good in southern Iraq, if we can commit the military capacity to do so”.

156. On the afternoon of 22 July, Mr Brown made a statement “to update the House on the latest developments in Iraq”.⁵⁶ He reiterated the objective he had described in October 2007 for “an independent, prosperous, democratic Iraq that is free of terrorist violence, secure within its borders and a stable presence in the region”.

157. Mr Brown told the House of Commons:

“In recent months, conditions in Basra have shown a marked improvement. Incidents of indirect fire against British troops in the Basra air station have fallen from 200 a month at their peak last summer to an average of fewer than five a month since April this year. As the all-party House of Commons Defence Committee ... says in its report today, the security situation in Basra has been ‘transformed’.

...

“The most important development is that the improvements that we have seen have been increasingly Iraqi-led. Security responsibility for 10 of 18 provinces has now transferred to Iraqi control, including all four provinces in Britain’s areas of operations ...”

158. Mr Brown continued:

“The improved security situation has provided a platform for further, essential progress on reconciliation. We have seen not only increased co-operation between Sunni communities and the Iraqi Government ... and the return of the Tawafuq Sunni party to the Government, but the passage of key legislation that is helping to embed democracy ... The next stage will be Provincial elections ... Our message to the leaders of all Iraq’s communities ... is that they must continue to make these right long-term decisions to achieve a sustainable peace ...

“We will also continue to focus on helping the Iraqi Government to rebuild their economy and ensuring that the Iraqi people all have a stake in the future.”

159. Mr Brown went on to describe the UK’s changing role:

“Nine months ago, I set out the key elements of our strategy for handing over security in Basra to the Iraqis and set out the stages for completing the tasks that we have set ourselves. We completed the initial phase on target, handing over Basra to Provincial Iraqi Control in December. This allowed us to reduce troop numbers in southern Iraq from 5,500 in September to 4,500. After the Iraqi Government launched Operation Charge of the Knights to enforce the rule of law in

⁵⁶ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 22 July 2008, columns 660-679.

Basra against the militias ... the military advice was that we should pause the further planned reduction ...

“Since then, we have responded to changing needs and embedded more than 800 UK personnel within the Iraqi command structure ... The focus of the 4,100 forces still in southern Iraq is now on completing the task of training and mentoring the 14th division of the Iraqi army in Basra ... Other remaining military tasks ... include finalising the preparation of Basra Airport for civilian control, and continuing to develop the capacity of the Iraqi navy and marines ...

“It is now right to complete the tasks we have set ourselves ...

“As we complete these tasks and as progress continues in these different areas, we will continue to reduce the number of British troops in Iraq. Of course, future decisions will, as always, be based on the advice of our military commanders on the ground, but I can tell the House today that, just as last year we moved from combat to overwatch, we expect a further fundamental change of mission in the first months of 2009, as we make the transition to a long-term bilateral relationship with Iraq, similar to the normal relationships that our military forces have with other important countries in the region.”⁵⁷

160. Concluding his statement, Mr Brown explained that Mr Browne and military commanders would work with the Iraqi Government to agree the details of the long term UK/Iraq relationship, including “its necessary legal basis”, and report to the House in the autumn.

161. On 26 July, Mr Brown met Senator Obama.⁵⁸ Mr Brown’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs reported that:

“... the Prime Minister explained why he had taken his decisions on timelines and overwatch.”

162. On 28 July, Lt Gen Cooper reported to ACM Stirrup that the US military were discussing agreeing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Iraqi Government instead of a Status of Forces Agreement.⁵⁹ An MOU would “look very similar” to a SOFA but would “avoid the political emotion that the term creates”. At the heart of the arrangement would be the formation of a joint committee that agreed operations.

163. Lt Gen Cooper also reported that the Council of Representatives had passed the Provincial Election Law, but the Presidential Council had rejected it. If issues were not resolved and the law re-passed before the Council of Representatives rose on 30 July, then elections were likely to be delayed into 2009, with possible implications for UK transition plans.

⁵⁷ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 22 July 2008, columns 660-679.

⁵⁸ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 26 July 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with Obama, 26 July’.

⁵⁹ Minute Cooper to CDS, 28 July 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (311) 28 Jul 08’.

164. Mr Baker briefed the Iraq Strategy Group on 28 July that the “sticking point” on the Electoral Law “was how Kirkuk would be governed until 2010” and “prospects for agreement were poor”.⁶⁰ Mr McDonald emphasised the importance to Mr Brown of elections taking place on time. The Group agreed to keep up pressure for the Electoral Law to be adopted before 30 July, including through conversations with US interlocutors.

165. Mr Baker also reported that FCO and MOD lawyers were working towards agreeing the UK’s internal position on the legal arrangements for British forces in Iraq, to enable negotiations to start in early September, subject to Iraqi agreement. He observed that the FCO and the MOD “would require a judgement by the Attorney General about use of force, given that the Iraqis would not want us to declare that an internal armed conflict existed in Iraq”.

166. The Iraq Strategy Group judged that the US negotiations, which were close to agreement, were unlikely to complicate the UK’s, although “we may face a tough negotiation if the US agreement did not include elements which we will want included in our own agreement”.

August 2008

167. On 7 August, the JIC reviewed security prospects for the Kurdish north of Iraq, at the request of the MOD and the FCO.⁶¹

168. The JIC judged that the Kurdistan Region was still the most stable part of Iraq, continuing to outpace the rest of the country in terms of trade, reconstruction, investment and economic growth. By contrast, the other northern provinces – Ninawa and Ta’min (formerly Kirkuk), which were administered by the Government of Iraq – accounted for more than 80 percent of insurgent attacks recorded across Iraq. Unlike central and southern Iraq, much of the violence there was ethnically motivated. Criminality, especially extortion and intimidation by insurgents, was a serious problem.

169. The JIC’s Key Judgments included:

“III. The Arab/Kurd dispute over control of Kirkuk and other territories is likely to intensify in the next few months as the UN makes its recommendations on their future administration. Street fighting and displacement of local communities could occur with little warning, and solidify ethnic divisions in local ISF.

“IV. Intensified coalition and ISF operations have failed to eradicate Al Qaida in Iraq (AQ-I) in Mosul. But they have greatly limited its operational effectiveness and access to funding. AQ-I is nevertheless likely to be capable of occasional surges in activity including high profile attacks in Iraq’s major cities for the foreseeable future.

⁶⁰ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 31 July 2008, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 28 July’.

⁶¹ JIC Assessment, 7 August 2008, ‘Iraq: Security in the North’.

“V. Against any determined and competent opponents in the north, ISF will still need help for at least the next few years with airborne surveillance, heavy fire power (including from the air) and embedded coalition training teams. The Kurds’ Peshmerga forces in the Kurdistan Region face fewer challenges.”

170. Considering longer-term trends, the JIC judged that:

“In the longer term, we assess that the balance of power is gradually changing: as the Baghdad government becomes more confident and assertive, it is likely to be less willing to accommodate Kurdish intransigence, and the risk of confrontations will rise, especially over disputed oil revenue sharing. KRG political unity is not assured. Power sharing between the two main political parties, the PUK and KDP, is working well. But tensions following their civil war in 1995-1998 remain. We assess that the process of who succeeds PUK leader Talabani (now 75) ... will test stability.”

171. Mr Brown wrote to Prime Minister Maliki on 11 August, attaching a copy of his 22 July statement to the House of Commons.⁶² In the covering letter he explained that the UK did not want to retain combat troops inside Iraq once their current tasks (particularly the training and mentoring of the 14th Division of the Iraqi Army in Basra) had been completed. He expected that, subject to conditions on the ground, it would be possible to complete training of 14 Division in 2009 and start to reduce the number of UK troops in southern Iraq. He explained that in order to complete the training, the UK would require a firm legal basis for the presence of personnel in Iraq beyond the end of 2008.

172. Mr Brown continued by addressing a concern expressed by Prime Minister Maliki about the detention of Iraqi citizens by UK forces in Basra. He explained that the UK held only two criminal detainees, on remand awaiting transfer to the Iraqi criminal justice system to be tried for involvement in the murders of two British servicemen. Mr Brown explained that only nine individuals had been interned in Basra in 2008, but “the UK is not at present holding any security internees”.

173. During a meeting with Mr Prentice on 17 August, Prime Minister Maliki agreed to open discussions on a UK SOFA in late August or early September.⁶³ Mr Prentice reported that the equivalent US/Iraqi negotiations were at a delicate stage, with no guarantee of a result.

174. Mr Prentice attended the Iraqi National Security Council on 24 August, and reported that Iraqi Ministers had requested advice on how long it would take for Iraq to be able to handle its own security needs without outside help, to inform political decisions on how long an MNF-I presence was required.⁶⁴ Defence Minister Abdul

⁶² Letter Brown to Maliki, 11 August 2008, [untitled].

⁶³ eGram 32303/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 19 August 2008, ‘Iraq: UK-Iraq: Meeting with PM Maliki: Agreement to Open Negotiations on a SOFA’.

⁶⁴ eGram 33064/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 25 August 2008, ‘Iraq: National Security Council, 24 August 2008’.

Qadir told the Council that he believed “the ISF would be able to run all its own internal security operations by 2010, but would still need outside logistical support until the end of 2011”.

175. On 27 August, Mr Day wrote to Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary with an update on the legal framework for UK troops.⁶⁵ He reported that since Mr Prentice’s meeting with Prime Minister Maliki, “US/Iraq negotiations have become increasingly difficult and seem to have reached an impasse”. Prime Minister Maliki was reported to have “fundamental concerns over Iraqi sovereignty”.

176. The key outstanding issues were jurisdiction over MNF service personnel and timelines for the withdrawal of combat forces. Mr Day said that UK officials and lawyers had been undertaking the technical work to prepare for negotiations with the Iraqi Government, but it was not possible to make substantive progress on the drafting of a UK/Iraq framework before the final outcome of the US/Iraq process. That was unlikely before the middle of September.

177. Mr Day considered that once US/Iraq agreement had been reached, it should be “reasonably straightforward” to complete a draft UK/Iraq agreement as a basis for discussion. The aim remained to reach agreement on text by the middle of October, in advance of Prime Minister Maliki’s proposed visit to London.

178. Mr Day also reported that “If the US does not succeed it will focus on trying to renew the current Chapter VII Security Council mandate”.

179. On 29 August, Mr Browne’s Private Secretary wrote to Mr Brown’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs with an update on the US proposals for military transition in southern Iraq.⁶⁶ Reports from Iraq suggested that “the US military has become reconciled to the departure of UK ground troops from Basra by the end of May 2009” and was working to generate the forces they believed were needed as replacements.

180. Mr Browne had agreed that “planning on the basis of the US proposals represented a good opportunity both to meet the Prime Minister’s intent of moving to a fundamental change of mission in the first half of 2009 and to maintain our strategic relationship with the US”. Transition at the end of May would enable completion of the training of 14 Division and the handover of Basra Airport. The MOD would look to make reductions in force levels before the end of May, but military advice was that it was unlikely to be possible to make significant reductions before “we are able to relinquish core functions to the US Brigade”.

181. Mr Browne’s Private Secretary also reported that contingency planning was under way in case agreement could not be reached on a legal basis for UK operations in Iraq, and forces had to be withdrawn sooner.

⁶⁵ Letter Day to Catsaras, 27 August 2008, ‘Legal Framework for UK Military Presence in Iraq After 2008: Update’.

⁶⁶ Letter Ferguson to Fletcher, 29 August 2008, ‘Iraq: Transition Planning for 2009’.

September 2008

182. At the start of September, Mr Prentice sent the FCO a “snapshot of what has gone well and badly over the summer break” and an assessment of prospects for the autumn and into 2009 as “background to work starting in Whitehall on a ‘whole Iraq’ strategy and UK transition in 2009”.⁶⁷ Mr Prentice summarised the content of his advice as “arguments for sustaining our investment in the ‘New Iraq’”, but wrote that the prospects were “more clouded” than when he arrived in Iraq the year before.

183. Under the heading “What went well”, Mr Prentice recorded that the security situation across Iraq had continued to improve throughout the summer. Casualty statistics were at a four-year low and, despite occasional major incidents, the trends remained downward. The declaration of transition to PIC in Anbar on 1 September had been a “highly symbolic success”, as was Tawafuq’s return to government.

184. “What went badly” included the stalling of Iraqi Army operations in Mosul because of a lack of manpower. There had been a deterioration in relations between Governor Wa’ili and the local Iraqi Army command in Basra. Clashes had narrowly been averted between the ISF and the Peshmerga in Diyala, exacerbating Arab-Kurd tensions. The US/Iraq SOFA negotiations had become deadlocked and were suspended until mid-September. Reconstruction activity “showed little result” and service provision across the country remained problematic.

185. In Mr Prentice’s view, Iraq had not yet settled a national vision: although the Council of Representatives had begun to enact some of the laws needed to frame the national political and constitutional settlement, they had postponed the most difficult issues.

186. The Council of Representatives would now need to tackle a series of tough legislative challenges including the passage of a SOFA, the Elections Law, the Hydrocarbons Law and the 2009 Budget, in addition to the ongoing review of the Constitution, all of which provided “ample scope for ... political deadlock”.

187. Mr Prentice concluded:

“It is against this background that work in Whitehall and here (Baghdad, Basra and Erbil) will shortly be coming together on:

- Our opening position for bilateral negotiations with the Gol [Government of Iraq] on a legal base for our forces to stay in Iraq beyond 2008 to complete their present tasks. I have advised already that this should be the least challenging and demanding bid we can make.

⁶⁷ eGram 34129/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 1 September 2008, ‘Iraq: Prospects for the Autumn’.

- The redesign of our economic and institutional development effort in Basra to take advantage of the improved conditions to deliver accelerated effect with full military-civilian co-ordination.
- A longer term 'Iraq Strategy', setting out the rationale for the broad-based relationship with the whole of Iraq, for which we are aiming post-transition. There is strong appetite for this form of UK connection among many Iraqis, in contrast to the (inevitable) irritations which have become associated with our/the coalition's long military presence. Iraq will be an enormously wealthy country with huge needs and long-suppressed demand. The opportunities for UK engagement in so many sectors – education, health, energy, services – will be mouth-watering. And beyond the bilateral interest, there is the strategic interest that the 'New Iraq' should develop as a pro-Western, broadly democratic and secular regional power, exercising its influence helpfully in world energy markets and acting as a link from Europe through Turkey to the Gulf and not from revolutionary Iran through Syria to Hizballah.
- We will also need to plan and fund the right long-term platform for HMG in Iraq to take best advantage of these opportunities ..."

188. On 10 September, at the request of the FCO and the MOD, the JIC examined the threat from the evolution of JAM.⁶⁸

189. The JIC's Key Judgements included:

"I. The surrender by Jaysh al-Mahdi of its strongholds in Basra, Sadr City and al-Amara and damage to its reputation have left it in greater disarray and weaker than at any time since 2003.

"II. The extent to which Muqtada al-Sadr will succeed in his attempt to transform JAM into a primarily 'cultural' organisation is unclear. It will not mean a transition to exclusively peaceful activity – Sadr's model is Lebanese Hizballah and there is a risk of at least some continuing intimidation to enforce strict Islamic codes."

190. The JIC considered that, although popular support for Muqtada al-Sadr and his championship of the Shia poor remained strong, JAM's standing had been undermined in the past year by its involvement in criminality, Shia on Shia violence, collateral damage to Karbala's holy sites and mounting evidence of Iranian support. Its claim to be a "defender of the Shia" was increasingly vulnerable, particularly following the severe degradation of AQ-I.

191. The JIC judged:

"III. The majority of JAM members will continue to lie low and will not overtly challenge Iraqi Security Force (ISF) control in the short term. Whether Sadr's new minority armed wing resumes attacks on Multi-National Forces (MNF) is likely to

⁶⁸ JIC Assessment, 10 September 2008, 'Iraq: the Future of Jaysh al-Mahdi'.

depend on whether the coalition issues a timetable for withdrawal. A small minority of other hard-liners will continue such attacks in any case ...

“IV. In the longer term, JAM members are likely to remain a source of instability through their recovery of criminal power and malign influence over Shia communities, unless military pressure is maintained. There is also potential for violence between the Sadrists and their Shia political rivals, especially as provincial elections approach.

“V. Prime Minister Maliki ... is likely to remain uncompromising towards any attempt by JAM or the Special Groups to continue as a militia, and will repeat the recent crackdown should they try to challenge his security gains.”

192. The JIC assessed that Iran was adopting a “more discriminating approach” to the provision of lethal aid to Shia militias, which it was likely to sustain at least until the MNF had left Iraq.

193. Lieutenant General Peter Wall, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Commitments), updated the Iraq Strategy Group on 11 September on the emerging plan for UK military drawdown and transition to US command in southern Iraq.⁶⁹ In summary, he said that:

- At the end of November 2008, command of Maysan, Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces would transfer to an expanded MND(C), under US command.
- At the end of March 2009, command of Basra would transfer to a new Basra based US division, MND(South), bringing UK forces there under US command.
- At the start of May 2009, US forces would begin to deploy to Basra.
- By the end of June 2009, the UK’s departure would be complete.

194. Mr McDonald emphasised the need to protect this planning, particularly in the lead up to the US elections, and highlighted the presentational problem if the US assumed tasks that the UK was currently undertaking.

195. Lt Gen Wall and Mr Day advised that “the US presence in the South would probably not be engaged in the same tasks that we had been doing”. The US was likely to focus more on border security and on protecting their main supply lines.

196. Mr McDonald told the Group that no further statement by Mr Brown was planned for 2008, although he would like to make one in early 2009.

197. Mr Brown and President Bush spoke by video link on 11 September and Mr Brown told the President that the UK would need to be part of a SOFA deal.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 15 September 2008, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 11 September’.

⁷⁰ Letter Catsaras to Gould, 11 September 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s VTC with US President, 11 September’.

198. On 12 September, an official from the FCO Iraq Group reported to Mr Miliband's Private Secretary that Ambassador Satterfield had visited London two days earlier and provided UK officials in the FCO, the MOD and the Cabinet Office with an update on the negotiation of the US/Iraq SOFA.⁷¹ Ambassador Satterfield had advised Washington that agreement would not be possible without US compromise on three points: jurisdiction, detention and timelines. To resolve those issues, he proposed that:

- US military and non-diplomatic civilian personnel would be subject to Iraqi jurisdiction if they committed a serious crime while off base and not on duty; and
- US forces would, in principle, hand over any detainees to the Iraqi authorities within 24 hours.

199. Ambassador Satterfield reported that both the US and the Iraq governments had agreed to a reference in the SOFA that US forces should withdraw from Iraq by 2011, but the Iraqi Government was keen to have a more concrete commitment.

200. The Iraq Group official advised Mr Miliband that Mr Browne shared US concerns about jurisdiction. If the US compromised on this, the UK was unlikely to "get a better deal". One possible "fix" was to declare all UK forces "on duty" for the duration of their deployment to Iraq.

201. From 15 to 16 September, ACM Stirrup visited Iraq and Kuwait.⁷² He asked General Raymond Odierno, Commanding General Multi-National Force – Iraq, whether he was content with the plans for MND(SE) transition, reporting that Gen Odierno had been "encouraged" and "comfortable" with the outline proposal though he had yet to see the detailed timeline. ACM Stirrup "underlined his need to bolster enablers in Afghanistan as soon as possible" though made clear that any Iraqi transition plan would need to meet "mutual timeline requirements".

202. Mr Brown and Mr Browne met the Chiefs of Staff and Sir Bill Jeffrey, MOD Permanent Under Secretary, on 18 September.⁷³ ACM Stirrup reported that "remarkable progress" had been made in Iraq over the past 18 months, although it was "fragile and reversible". In the South, the biggest risk was stalled economic progress. ACM Stirrup reported that the US commanders had high regard for the UK contribution in Basra and elsewhere in Iraq and were "bought in" to a timetable that would see "two-star UK/US handover in March and one-star in May". SOFA negotiations were "stalled".

203. Mr Brown said that it would be important to have projects that helped with employment in place before the UK left Basra, and to establish a UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) presence there. The main obstacle was not security but the business

⁷¹ Minute McKelvey to Baker and Private Secretary [FCO], 12 September 2008, 'Iraq – Update on US Status of Forces Negotiations'.

⁷² Minute Kyd to PS/SofS [MOD], 18 September 2008, 'CDS Visit to Iraq 15-16 Sep 08'.

⁷³ Letter Catsaras to Rimmer, 18 September 2008, 'Prime Minister's Meeting with Defence Chiefs, 18 September'.

climate. He would raise again with President Bush UK concerns about the SOFA, including “the real risk we would run out of time”.

204. On 18 September, at the request of the MOD and PJHQ, the JIC circulated its Assessment of the prospects for security across southern Iraq into 2009.⁷⁴

205. The JIC judged that overall security had improved significantly since the Charge of the Knights operation against JAM in March. The authority of the Iraqi Government now extended into previously “no-go” areas. There were reports of improved perceptions of general security among Basrawis, and instances of violent criminality and score-settling were reported to have fallen. There had only been three attacks on the MNF at Basra Air Base in the previous six weeks.

206. The JIC assessed that security gains in Maysan had been more limited in scope and restricted to al-Amara. Security in Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces remained “less of a challenge for local security forces”.

207. The JIC had recently assessed that JAM was “in greater disarray and weaker than at any time since 2003”, but a threat remained:

“II. ... Whether Sadr’s planned small armed wing resumes attacks on Multi-National Forces (MNF) is likely to depend on whether the coalition agrees a timetable for withdrawal ... A few other hard-liners will continue such attacks in any case. In the longer term, violent criminality, murders, kidnappings, score-settling and intimidation may gradually increase again.

“III. The Iranian-backed Special Groups ... are likely to be better trained and equipped and focused on attacking US forces as they return from Iran. They and a number of smaller Shia militias will probably also see attacks on withdrawing UK forces as an opportunity to claim victory over the coalition (albeit that US forces will take their place). But anti-MNF attacks are unlikely to reach anywhere near the peak seen in 2007.”

208. Looking to the future, JIC continued:

“IV. Locally raised army units in the South will continue to need coalition mentors and to operate alongside more experienced Iraqi forces to manage security for the rest of this year. By early 2009, provided JAM remains quiescent, they will be able to cope with only limited MNF mentoring. Intra-Shia clashes are likely to intensify as provincial elections approach ...

“V. Further growth in the local economy is probable in 2009. But significant economic improvement depends on security, sustained political support and a major improvement in government ability to implement reconstruction and development projects. All are likely to remain uncertain for some years ...”

⁷⁴ JIC Assessment, 18 September 2008, ‘Iraq: Security in the South’.

209. On 21 September, Major General Andrew Salmon, who had succeeded Maj Gen White-Spunner as GOC MND(SE) in August, reported that Gen Odierno had assumed command of MNF-I “with a clear focus on putting ISF into the lead”.⁷⁵ Gen Odierno had informed Prime Minister Maliki that the US would be “positioning elements in Basra next year”.

210. Maj Gen Salmon also reported that MND(SE) had been:

“... considering what being without a SOFA on 1 Jan means, either because we won’t get one, or because one hasn’t quite been finalised and we’re in limbo. There are probably various legal interpretations as to where we will stand in the latter case, so it might be useful to have some policy views in due course on the limbo scenario.”

211. Mr Brown met President Bush at the White House on 26 September.⁷⁶ In a report of the meeting, Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary recorded that a formula had been developed for the SOFA to cover when US service personnel would be subject to Iraqi jurisdiction. It meant that “in practice it was extremely unlikely that these conditions would ever be met”. Mr Brown emphasised that a SOFA needed to be agreed by the end of December. He told President Bush that in July Prime Minister Maliki had said he wanted the UK out of Iraq. Mr Brown had responded that the UK would stay.

212. An MOD note in the No.10 files entitled “Southern Iraq Force Levels”, dating from late September 2008, set out “as requested” the options “to reduce the overall size of the force to c.1,900 as part of the November 2008 rotation”.⁷⁷

213. The note explained that under current plans there would be 4,148 UK ground troops in southern Iraq until November. In October, it was expected that the number of support roles (engineers) could be reduced by 200, bringing the total to around 3,950.

214. The note continued:

“Our analysis shows that we could not achieve the required level of reduction through pro rata cuts across the force.”

As a consequence:

“The only alternative is to give up some of the tasks we currently undertake. In practice, that means transferring responsibilities to the US. We have identified two options for achieving a reduction to around 1900 posts. Both would make us very much the junior partner in MND(SE) and in these circumstances we assume that the US would take over command of the division ... The options are (a) transfer to the US responsibility for providing enabling capabilities and running the COB

⁷⁵ Minute Salmon to CJO, 21 September 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) weekly letter – 21 September 2008’.

⁷⁶ Letter Catsaras to Gould, 26 September 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s meeting with President Bush, 26 September’.

⁷⁷ Paper MOD, [undated], ‘Southern Iraq Force Levels’.

[Contingency Operating Base] ... (b) transfer to the US responsibility for training and mentoring 14 Division and providing the QRF [Quick Reaction Force] ...

“Both options carry major disadvantages. Neither would be at all attractive to the US. We would be asking them to make a substantial additional investment in southern Iraq ... We could not present a coherent military rationale for either alternative ...”

215. The author advised that the longer term damage to the UK’s military, defence and security reputation and interests in the US would be “considerable” because:

“Both Washington and General Petraeus believe they have a commitment from us that we will stay the course until 14 Division has been fully trained. These options require the US to share the burden and will be seen as the UK reneging on a deal ...

“There would be similar reputational consequences in Iraq and regionally. Domestically we could not present a credible military case for the reduction nor argue that it is conditions-based. Our contribution would be portrayed as a token sop and would be especially difficult to explain if we began to take casualties. We should expect an adverse and long-lasting impact on morale across Defence. Option (b), which would involve UK forces withdrawing into the COB while US troops took over our tasks in Basra, would be especially toxic to the Army’s morale and reputation.”

216. Mr Brown, Mr Browne and ACM Stirrup met Gen Petraeus (who had recently been appointed Commander in Chief US Central Command) on 29 September.⁷⁸ Briefing for Mr Brown stressed the importance of ensuring that Gen Petraeus understood that the UK’s plans for drawdown in Iraq had Mr Brown’s backing, and were not just contingent military planning. It was equally important that Gen Petraeus realised that “UK drawdown in Iraq will not translate to a scaling-up in Afghanistan”.

217. In their discussion, Gen Petraeus paid tribute to UK forces in Iraq: work to capitalise on operations in Basra, Baghdad and mentoring the Iraqi headquarters had all been “superb”.⁷⁹ No discussion of drawdown was recorded in the note of the meeting. Mr Browne was reported to have “questioned whether Iraq had the right Constitution”.

October 2008

218. On 13 October, an interview with Prime Minister Maliki appeared in *The Times*.⁸⁰ He was reported to have said that at their current strength (4,100), British troops were “definitely ... no longer necessary”. The tasks he envisaged for British military trainers did not warrant a deployment of anything like that scale. Prime Minister Maliki also

⁷⁸ Briefing No.10 [junior officials] to Brown, 29 September 2008, ‘Visit of General David Petraeus, Monday 29 September’.

⁷⁹ Letter Catsaras to Thorneloe, 30 September 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with General Petraeus, 29 September’.

⁸⁰ *The Times*, 13 October 2008, *Thank You, and Goodbye*.

warned that if the legal basis for their presence was not resolved by the end of the year, British troops would have to leave.

219. The “accommodation” reached with JAM was, in Prime Minister Maliki’s view, a “disaster”. *The Times* observed that “Iraq’s Prime Minister appears to have decided that, at a critical juncture, British Forces put their own security ahead of Basra’s”.

220. Mr Ian Forber, Head of the MOD Iraq Policy Team, briefed the Iraq Strategy Group on 15 October that the US had given its SOFA text to Prime Minister Maliki, “who had apparently agreed it”.⁸¹ The next steps were for the Council of Ministers and the Iraqi Parliament to consider it. The MOD and FCO view was that the US text would be sufficient for the UK’s needs. MOD officials would advise the Defence Secretary that the UK should pursue its own legal arrangements based closely on the US text, and that he should tell Prime Minister Maliki that when visiting Baghdad on 19 October.

221. The Iraq Strategy Group also discussed alternative scenarios in case the UK did not conclude its own legal agreement. Contingency planning for withdrawal was in place and it could be done within three months. Mr Forber told the Group that there was legal provision under Coalition Provisional Authority Order No.17 which was still in force. If withdrawal did happen, early discussions would be needed with the US to give them “time to back-fill”.

222. Mr McDonald commented that the option of a further resolution had not been ruled out, though would be difficult. The Group tasked the MOD and the FCO to produce a negotiating timetable and a public and diplomatic handling plan.

223. Mr Forber and his deputy also updated the Group on planning for transition, which was taking place against a range of scenarios. Plans had been co-ordinated with the US:

“In particular, including their plans to backfill us as we drawdown and, if we were forced to withdraw earlier, a plan for them to backfill more rapidly, also covering what assistance we would need from the US to withdraw.”

224. A day later, Mr Prentice reported from Baghdad that negotiations on a US/Iraq SOFA had entered their “endgame”, meaning that the UK could “finally launch our own bid for a bilateral agreement”.⁸² Although the UK’s objective of a broader bilateral relationship was consistent with Prime Minister Maliki’s own aims, Mr Prentice observed that “he remains deeply suspicious of us and feels politically besieged”. Those factors, plus a tight deadline, made the UK/Iraq agreement “a difficult trick to take”.

⁸¹ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 21 October 2009, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 15 October’.

⁸² eGram 41161/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 16 October 2008, ‘Iraq: Visit by the Defence Secretary to Baghdad: Scenesetter’.

225. Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that US negotiations on jurisdiction and legal immunities would “set the bar” for the UK.⁸³

226. In mid-October, a Cabinet Office official wrote to Mr Brown’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs with advice on a visit to Iraq, potentially including downtown Basra, being contemplated by Mr Brown.⁸⁴ He advised that such a visit “would present a number of difficult security issues, with presentational implications”. The official continued:

“The security situation in Basra has improved considerably over the past 12 months. But it is far from being inherently safe. Members of the JAM Special Groups are returning to Iraq from Iran and Syria and there are continuing reports of a return to violence, including assassination. And although the operating environment for militants and terrorists in Basra is difficult, it is by no means impossible ... Moreover, there remain corrupt elements in the Iraqi police, many affiliated to JAM, for whom the Prime Minister would be an attractive target ...

“Against this background, we advise against any visit by the Prime Minister to downtown Basra at this stage. If such a visit was to be contemplated there would need to be a significant security operation to ensure the Prime Minister’s safety. This in turn would raise presentational difficulties as the security precautions that would be necessary would not be consistent with a return to normality.”

227. Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary advised Mr Brown that:

“Whilst there is progress, there is no new policy announcement to add to your July statement ... A timetable and numbers for drawdown would be new and MOD have planning figures – but (a) any plans depend on an agreed SOFA or UNSCR rollover first (b) there may be a spike in violence after the elections (c) MOD have operational security concerns about releasing our timetable – they argue it encourages increasing attacks on UK troops so that militias can claim success for driving UK out.”⁸⁵

228. The Assistant Private Secretary further advised that visiting Basra before the US elections in early November risked annoying Prime Minister Maliki at a time when the UK SOFA was still being negotiated.

229. Although Mr Brown deferred his proposed visit, Mr John Hutton, who had succeeded Mr Browne as Defence Secretary on 3 October, visited Iraq in mid October.⁸⁶ In a letter reporting his visit, Mr Hutton told Mr Brown that in Basra he had:

“... found our troops in excellent spirits. They clearly feel that they are doing important work and are making a real difference.”

⁸³ Public hearing, 6 January 2010, page 40.

⁸⁴ Minute Gibbons to Fletcher, 16 October 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s Possible Visit to Iraq’.

⁸⁵ Email Catsaras to Brown, 20 October 2008, ‘Iraq Visit?’

⁸⁶ Letter Hutton to Prime Minister, 23 October 2008, [untitled].

230. Behind this optimism sat a “confident and capable” Iraqi Army with “complete freedom of movement throughout the city”, meaning that “we will soon have reached the point where we can say with confidence that we have fulfilled our training mission for 14 Division”.

231. During his visit, Mr Hutton confirmed with Gen Odierno that he was fully content with plans to draw down the vast majority of UK troops by mid 2009, adding that:

“The phased movement south of additional US forces will help to ensure that the withdrawal of our own combat troops is as seamless as possible. He [Gen Odierno] is alive to the presentational risks and will, I am sure, speak positively about our contribution.”

232. Mr Hutton reported that Prime Minister Maliki had told him that he wanted to build a strong, broad-based relationship with the UK and was keen to start bilateral discussions on the UK SOFA as soon as possible to ensure that an agreement was in place by the end of the year.

233. Ambassador Crocker and Ambassador Satterfield were more downbeat, and saw significant difficulties ahead. Mr Hutton explained that the UK had decided that before pursuing the UK SOFA he would await formal agreement from the Council of Representatives of the US/Iraq SOFA, on which it was largely based.

234. Mr Hutton concluded:

“Should the UK fail to secure a SOFA or a UNSCR extension, the operational and presentational risks associated with a hasty exit would be severe indeed ... We will need to watch this very closely, and to use any and all diplomatic means at our disposal to reach an agreement as early as possible.”

235. The MND(SE) weekly letter on 26 October said that Gen Mohammed and Governor Wa’ili had agreed to meet for the first time (having previously refused to do so), paving the way for co-operation on security issues ahead of the forthcoming provincial elections.⁸⁷

236. The letter also described a visit by the MNF-I Joint Campaign Plan Assessment Team, “not one but two multi-disciplinary teams” headed by a retired General and a former Ambassador and featuring “a broad cross-section of diplomats, academics and advisors”. Gen Odierno had tasked the team “to make an independent campaign assessment to inform the rewrite of the Joint Campaign Plan”.

237. Mr Hutton reported to Cabinet on 28 October that the security situation in Iraq had been “completely transformed and continued to improve”.⁸⁸ The MNF had had significant successes in disrupting and destroying AQ-I leadership. The UK would hand over Basra

⁸⁷ Minute Storrie to CJO, 26 October 2008, ‘MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 26 October 2008’.

⁸⁸ Cabinet Conclusions, 28 October 2008.

International Airport by the end of the year and was “on track” for a fundamental change of mission next year. The US had submitted the final text of its proposed SOFA though it was unclear whether or not the Iraqi Government would agree it.

238. Mr Hutton added that UKTI was about to establish a presence in Baghdad, but there was a need to consider what more could be done. Some commentators were suggesting that Basra had more potential for development as a regional centre, yet there were no British companies active in southern Iraq.

239. Concluding the discussion, Mr Brown said that further consideration would need to be given to building economic links with Iraq.

November 2008

US Presidential Election

On 4 November, Mr Barack Obama was elected as the 44th President of the United States.

He telephoned Mr Brown on 6 November.⁸⁹ Mr Brown spoke of the strength of US/UK common purpose in Iraq – success would not be achieved by military means alone.

240. In an Assessment issued on 6 November, the JIC examined the impact of the centralisation of power under Prime Minister Maliki.⁹⁰ The JIC judged:

“Though [Prime Minister Maliki] continues to operate broadly within a constitutional democratic framework, he has brought about greater centralisation of power.

“Maliki’s ... approach is driven by ... suspicion of political rivals and his perception that centralising power is essential to getting things done in stabilising Iraq ...

“Constraints on Maliki ... include the judiciary; the Shia religious authorities; parliament; his desire to share responsibility as broadly as possible for more controversial decisions ...

“... Maliki’s political rivals remain unwilling and probably unable at this stage to unseat him ...

“Maliki remains highly suspicious of HMG’s intentions in Iraq. He wants to restrict the future UK military presence to no more than a small number of training staff beyond the end of this year. Maliki will continue trying to maintain relationships with Iran and the US, but the influence of both over him will decline further throughout 2009.”

⁸⁹ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 7 November 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s Call with US President-elect, 6 November’.

⁹⁰ JIC Assessment, 6 November 2008, ‘Iraqi Politics: Maliki’s in Charge’.

241. The Iraq Senior Officials Group met on 7 November.⁹¹ Mr Forber and Mr Baker gave updates on the Status of Forces Agreement negotiations and the parallel US negotiation. Ms Aldred emphasised the importance of recommendations to Ministers being placed in the current political context, in particular what the Iraqi Government wanted and the information in the recent JIC Assessment. The Cabinet Office would draft an overarching context paper for NSID(OD).

242. Mr Forber reported that the Iraqi Government said that it was willing to agree a SOFA with the UK “providing it did not include combat elements”; it was not clear whether that was a firm position or a negotiating tactic. The MOD and the FCO argued for an increase in pressure on the Iraqi Government to persuade them to accept that the UK needed combat troops for a short while into 2009. US support would be crucial.

243. Ms Aldred reported a discussion with Gen Lute about the agreement between President Bush and Mr Brown on the timetable for UK drawdown, and the possible need for US help to agree a SOFA.

244. The Iraq Senior Officials Group also discussed a draft post-drawdown strategy, particularly the UK’s energy and commercial objectives and the proposed FCO, DFID, MOD and military presence.

245. On energy, the Group agreed that the Department for Energy and Climate Change and the FCO should develop a “coherent and detailed” strategy for Iraq, including what sort of presence would be needed to deliver it. DFID were to consider further:

“... whether a presence only in Baghdad supported by a communications strategy and programme funding in the South, would be sufficient to sustain our legacy there, protect our reputation and ensure the US did not win credit for progress that we had engineered.”

246. On 12 November, Mr Prentice reported a “highly successful” visit to Iraq by Mr Alexander the previous week.⁹² Mr Alexander met Prime Minister Maliki and Ambassador Crocker and attended the launch of the Basra Investment Commission (see Section 10.2).

247. Prime Minister Maliki “continued to insist that the UK had done little for Basra” but he welcomed Mr Alexander’s assurances that the UK wanted to move towards a more normalised bilateral relationship, including closer economic, cultural and educational links. They discussed the SOFA, “the success of which would be a fundamental first step in the transition both governments were looking for”.

⁹¹ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Aldred, 10 November 2008, ‘Iraq Senior Officials Group, 7 November’.

⁹² eGram 45112/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 12 November 2008, ‘Iraq: Visit by Secretary of State for International Development to Baghdad and Basra, 6 November’.

248. In an update on Iraq for Mr Brown on 14 November, Cabinet Office officials reported that Prime Minister Maliki remained reluctant to agree to the continuing UK combat role that the MOD judged essential for training 14 Division.⁹³

249. Although the US SOFA text had reportedly been agreed between Prime Minister Maliki and President Bush, it had yet to be approved by the Iraqi Parliament, suggesting that: “By December, the US may still be trying to get its SOFA while warming-up the UN Security Council Resolution track.” US lobbying on the UK’s behalf was unlikely while its own negotiations remained difficult.

250. More positively, the security situation remained “promising”, 14 Division was “operating increasingly independently”, Basra Airport would be ready to hand over “within weeks”, the Iraqi Electoral Commission had announced that provincial elections would be held on 31 January 2009 and Mr Alexander had announced the Basra Investment Commission ahead of schedule.

251. The update also said that, although AQ-I continued to pose a threat in Iraq, Basra remained calm, with no attacks on the UK Base for more than 40 days. That was “the longest unbroken period of calm since January 2006”.

252. On 16 November, the BBC reported that the Iraqi Cabinet had approved a “security pact” with the US, under which its troops would withdraw from the streets of Iraqi towns in 2009 and leave Iraq by the end of 2011.⁹⁴ An Iraqi Government spokesman also said that the agreement placed US forces under the authority of the Iraqi Government and that they would need its permission, and that of a Judge, to raid homes. US forces would also hand over their bases to Iraq during 2009.

253. In a televised statement on the agreement, Prime Minister Maliki explained that the Iraqi Government had “reservations” about the agreement, but saw it as “a solid prelude to the restoration of Iraq’s full sovereignty in three years’ time”.⁹⁵

254. Maj Gen Salmon reported on 23 November that a call by Muqtada al Sadr at Friday prayers for “increased opposition” to the SOFA had been “ignored”.⁹⁶ There had instead been a “pro-SOFA demonstration”.

255. In Baghdad, however, the BBC reported that “thousands of people” had responded to al-Sadr’s call and protested in Firdous Square.⁹⁷

256. On 24 November, Lt Gen Cooper reported to ACM Stirrup that the “only political game in Baghdad at the moment is that surrounding the US SOFA”.⁹⁸ The progress of the SOFA through the Council of Representatives had been “colourful” but it would

⁹³ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 14 November 2008, ‘Iraq: Update’.

⁹⁴ *BBC News*, 16 November 2008, *Iraq cabinet backs US troops deal*.

⁹⁵ *BBC News*, 18 November 2008, *Iraq leader defends US troop deal*.

⁹⁶ Minute Salmon to CJO, 23 November 2008, ‘GOC MND(SE) Weekly Letter – 23 November 2008’.

⁹⁷ *BBC News*, 21 November 2008, *Iraqis protest against troop deal*.

⁹⁸ Minute Cooper to CDS, 24 November 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (328) 24 Nov 08’.

be put to the vote on 26 November. If unsuccessful, the US was expected to press Prime Minister Maliki to take forward renewal of the Security Council resolution.

257. Lt Gen Cooper had recently discussed the UK SOFA with Gen Odierno, who had agreed to raise the UK agreement with Prime Minister Maliki if the US equivalent was agreed by Parliament. This was “a one shot weapon” and Lt Gen Cooper advised that “we need to hold our nerve and let him judge the moment”.

258. On 28 November, Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary wrote to Mr McDonald to record a discussion with Mr Brown on the UK/Iraq SOFA two days previously.⁹⁹ In the discussion, those present had “noted that the US SOFA was being considered by the Council of Representatives”. Before the note was circulated, the US SOFA had passed. Attention was now expected to turn to the UK SOFA.

259. The Assistant Private Secretary reported that Mr Brown said he had been clear with Prime Minister Maliki that the UK would not leave until the job was done, but he thought that Prime Minister Maliki wanted a fixed end point in the SOFA. Mr Brown directed that Mr McDonald should visit Prime Minister Maliki on his behalf and “negotiate a SOFA with combat authorities – initially offering May, but with a fall-back to March if necessary”.

260. In an update on Afghanistan and Iraq on 28 November, Cabinet Office officials told Mr Brown that the Iraqi Parliament had approved the US SOFA the previous day, but had also ordered a referendum on it by the end of July 2009.¹⁰⁰ If the Agreement was voted down, the US would have 12 months to leave Iraq.

261. It was looking increasingly unlikely that the UK SOFA would be agreed before the Iraqi Parliament rose on 22 December. That left a risk that the UK would need to suspend combat operations from the end of 2008 until a SOFA was approved. Mr McDonald was scheduled to meet Prime Minister Maliki on 1 or 2 December.

262. The update also recorded that “Basra remains calm and stable, with no attacks on UK forces for seven weeks”.

December 2008

263. On 1 December, Lt Gen Cooper reported to ACM Stirrup that he had spoken once again to Gen Odierno about the UK SOFA.¹⁰¹ Gen Odierno planned to raise the issue with Prime Minister Maliki that evening if the moment was right. Mr McDonald would meet Gen Odierno beforehand, and then see Prime Minister Maliki the following day.

⁹⁹ Minute Catsaras to McDonald, 28 November 2008, ‘Iraq/SOFA’.

¹⁰⁰ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 28 November 2008, ‘Afghanistan and Iraq; Update’.

¹⁰¹ Minute Cooper to CDS, 1 December 2008, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (329) 1 Dec 08’.

264. Mr Brown met ACM Stirrup on 4 December for a “personal and confidential” discussion.¹⁰² On Iraq, Mr Brown said that it looked as though Prime Minister Maliki would accept a legal agreement that included fixed dates for the withdrawal of UK troops. It would be important for the UK to show that the withdrawal was happening because the UK had completed all the tasks it had set out. A “last push” on economic development was needed, along with a communications plan for the next few weeks.

265. ACM Stirrup said that he hoped there would be cross-party support for a message of UK success. Although it was “never the intention to have transformed Basra”, nonetheless “we would have got it to the starting point”. UK troop numbers would reduce significantly in June, with the US brigade combat team arriving in May to “do their own tasks”.

266. Reporting his visit to Iraq to the Iraq; Strategy Group on 5 December, Mr McDonald said that Prime Minister Maliki had agreed combat authorisations to enable UK forces to complete the training of 14 Division and to continue naval operations in the northern Gulf.¹⁰³ Rather than putting a legal agreement to the Council of Representatives, there would be an exchange of letters between the two Governments. He added that:

“The imminent declaration by the Attorney General that a state of Internal Armed Conflict in Iraq continued to exist would be necessary to underpin the legal basis.”

267. Mr McDonald described three possible scenarios, all of which NSID(OD) would need to consider:

- An exchange of letters with the Iraqi Government, providing a legal basis for combat operations, but not as robust as a full SOFA. Ministers would need to decide if they were content with this.
- Political agreement with the Iraqi Government, with an uncertain legal basis. The UK would have to consider what it could still do, relying on the right to self defence.
- No agreement reached, meaning transition to a “normal bilateral relationship” from January 2009.

268. NSID(OD) discussed Iraq on 9 December 2008.¹⁰⁴

269. Papers provided for the meeting included ‘Iraq: Arrangements for Transition’.¹⁰⁵ The paper recounted Mr McDonald’s scenarios and Ministers were invited to consider “the implications of the three scenarios for the UK’s reputation, and what the Armed Forces would be able to do in each”. If no legal agreement was achieved, Ministers were

¹⁰² Letter Catsaras to Rimmer, 4 December 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s meeting with Chief of Defence Staff, 4 December’.

¹⁰³ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to McDonald, 8 December 2008, ‘Iraq Strategy Group, 5 December’.

¹⁰⁴ Minutes, 9 December 2008, NSID(OD) meeting.

¹⁰⁵ Paper by Officials, 8 December 2008, ‘Iraq: Arrangements for Transition’.

asked to consider whether a political agreement would be sufficient or whether the UK should move on 1 January 2009 to a “normal” bilateral relationship with Iraq.

270. The implications of the second scenario (a political agreement) were that the UK would have to “adjust” its force posture and halt activities supporting combat operations. Since UK forces would only be able to carry out advisory tasks, “the US would have to complete much of our mission in Basra”.

271. If no agreement was secured (the third scenario), UK forces would have to “leave as quickly as possible”, causing reputational damage for the Army in particular.

272. Since Mr McDonald’s discussion with Prime Minister Maliki, the paper explained that continued negotiations had produced a proposal for:

- “• a short draft law to the CoR [Council of Representatives] with: authorisation for UK (and Australian) forces to remain in Iraq until 31 July 2009 and exemption from Iraqi jurisdiction for those forces; and a statement that Maliki shall set the necessary arrangements for the tasks and missions of these forces.
- complement this law with a (non-legally binding) EoL [Exchange of Letters] between governments enshrining the tasks.”

273. This proposal looked “acceptable from a legal perspective” but carried “some political risk”, specifically that Prime Minister Maliki might leave the legislation “to its own fate” in the Iraqi Council of Representatives.

274. An annex to the paper suggested that the key elements of future relations with Iraq should be:

- diplomatic and political activity – lobbying and influencing in support of the full range of UK activities, encouraging Iraq’s political development and the usual migration and consular activities conducted by an Embassy;
- economic development – influencing Iraqi economic policy and supporting further capacity building on public finance management, investment, trade and higher education;
- defence – continued support for the coalition Naval Training Team, capacity building within the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, and Royal Naval and Royal Air Force participation in coalition maritime and air operations in Iraq and in the Northern Arabian Gulf;
- energy – ensuring the security of Iraq’s oil supply and long-term increase in oil output;
- commercial – support for trade missions, UK investor visits and political lobbying to ensure a level playing field for UK exporters and investors; and
- education – increased collaboration with Iraqi educational institutions, civil society, student exchanges and English language training.

275. The paper invited Ministers to agree that Mr Miliband should circulate detailed proposals on the UK's future relations with Iraq, for agreement in writing.

276. At the NSID(OD) meeting, Mr Brown outlined "strong progress" on the UK's four key tasks (training the Iraqi Army, promoting economic development, readying Basra Airport for transfer to Iraqi control and preparing for provincial elections).¹⁰⁶ He told those present that he would visit Iraq on 17 December.

277. In discussion of the future legal basis for military activity in Iraq, it was observed that it was vital to avoid any risk of UK troops facing Iraqi jurisdiction; without a legally binding agreement the UK would not be able to complete its tasks.

278. Summing up the discussion, Mr Brown concluded that the UK should keep up the pressure on Prime Minister Maliki and his advisers to "see the proposed agreement through" before his visit. Planning should proceed on the current proposed timescale, for now. If a legal agreement looked unlikely before the Prime Minister's planned visit "we should re-consider our options then".

279. Mr Brown also concluded that more should be done to improve economic development and prospects for investment, including with Ministries in Baghdad, and that it was also important to make progress on the Hydrocarbons Law (see Section 10.3).

280. Ministers agreed that sign off for the UK's long term strategy for Iraq would be sought out of committee.

281. The following day, Mr Prentice wrote to Prime Minister Maliki's Adviser on Foreign Affairs, attaching "a draft of the Exchange of Letters recording the tasks to be completed by the UK forces and the timeframe agreed with Prime Minister Maliki last week for their withdrawal from Iraq".¹⁰⁷ The letters assumed that the Iraqi Government would submit a "short law" to the Council of Representatives on 16 December, to give UK forces "the necessary jurisdictional protections".

282. Gen Dannatt visited Iraq from 13 to 15 December and reported to ACM Stirrup that Basra was:

"... marked by a sense of great optimism: attacks are now the exception rather than the rule; the Iraqi security forces are demonstrating impressive, albeit nascent, ability. And there are early signs of a bustling city attempting to return to normality."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Minutes, 9 December 2008, NSID(OD) meeting.

¹⁰⁷ Letter Prentice to al-Rikabi, 10 December 2008, [untitled].

¹⁰⁸ Minute CGS to Various, 15 December 2008, 'CGS visit to Iraq: 13-15 Dec 08'.

283. However, that positive assessment was tempered by concern about the state of the economy:

“... scratch the surface and the scale of the challenges that lie ahead becomes apparent ... the issues raised by the locals I spoke to cause me some concern: jobs, electricity, rubbish and jobs again – I see only limited progress in any of these areas. We must do all that we can to generate employment and encourage Iraq’s neighbours to invest in the potentially rich South. We must not over-sell the outstanding work that has been done.”

284. Looking to the longer term, Gen Dannatt reported that he did not support any residual Army commitment in the South of Iraq once UK troops had been extracted. Rather, the Army should plan to provide the lead for the NATO training mission in Baghdad, “though I am not convinced we fully understand the potential totality of this task, particularly in terms of FP [force protection] and life support”.

285. Gen Odierno had been “generous enough to suggest” that, once the US merged the MNF-I, MNC-I and MNSTC-I commands in early 2010, the UK should provide one of the three-star Deputy Commander posts. Gen Dannatt’s view, given the UK’s overall commitment and the focus of the training mission, was that a two-star post would be more appropriate.

286. Mr Brown told Cabinet on 16 December that, following delicate discussions, the UK had agreed with Prime Minister Maliki arrangements that would give legal protection for UK troops in Iraq after the expiry of resolution 1790 at the end of the year.¹⁰⁹ The law would be put to the Council of Representatives shortly.

287. Mr Brown noted progress on the four key tasks – training Iraqi forces, restoring local government, handing over Basra international airport and economic development. He urged further efforts over the next few months to complete these tasks and allow the drawdown of troops to begin in May, a timetable agreed with the Iraqi Government that suited UK forces. The UK would leave Iraq “with pride, having successfully completed our tasks”.

288. In discussion, members of Cabinet observed that although negotiations were not complete, the “risk of premature departure” was reduced. ACM Stirrup had advised that the outcome was “acceptable, if not perfect”.

289. Mr Hutton wrote to Mr Brown on 16 December to report that the MOD and FCO team in Baghdad had finalised negotiations with its Iraqi counterparts on a draft law providing UK forces with the necessary jurisdictional immunities, and was nearing agreement on a Government to Government Exchange of Letters.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Cabinet Conclusions, 16 December 2008.

¹¹⁰ Letter Hutton to Brown, 16 December 2008, ‘Iraq: Legal Arrangements in 2009’.

290. The Chiefs of Staff were content that these provisions “but no less” were sufficient to allow the UK military to complete its tasks. Mr Hutton and ACM Stirrup therefore recommended that Mr Brown agree with Prime Minister Maliki that UK forces should complete their mission in Iraq on that basis. The MOD would need to review the position if the text of the draft law changed as it proceeded through the Iraqi Parliament.

291. The draft law on immunities meant that UK forces were exempt from Iraqi justice unless they committed a crime “off-base and with intent or as a result of gross negligence”. Anyone captured by this would remain in UK custody. This was:

“... less than the US have secured through their Status of Forces Agreement, but UK forces are not doing the same range of tasks, are far fewer in number and, on current plans, will complete our key tasks and withdraw the vast majority of troops by 31 July 2009.”

292. The accompanying Exchange of Letters constituted an “invitation” from the Government of Iraq to complete the UK tasks.

293. The two main remaining risks were that the Iraqi Parliament amended or failed to pass the law, or that it was not ratified by 1 January 2009. However, Mr Hutton wrote that:

“... the Iraqi Council of Ministers voted today to agree the legal text and have passed it to the Council of Representatives ... The draft law is expected to have its first reading on 17 December. There is still a chance therefore, if there are no further delays, that it will pass its third Reading on 22 December and be ratified by the Presidency Council no later than 10 days afterwards.”

294. Mr Brown spoke by telephone to President Bush on 16 December.¹¹¹ He explained that the UK had almost agreed the legal arrangements for a continued UK military presence in Iraq in 2009 and that he was grateful for US support.

295. At its 17 December meeting, the JIC assessed the performance of the Iraqi Security Forces.¹¹²

296. The JIC assessed that:

“I. Major security decisions are driven by Prime Minister Maliki ... But his circumvention of over-bureaucratic processes has furthered rather than hampered the overall improvement in security.”

297. The JIC judged that the ISF would be “much better placed to manage internal security in 2009, including during elections, but will be unable wholly to prevent

¹¹¹ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 16 December 2008, ‘Prime Minister’s call with US President, 16 December’.

¹¹² JIC Assessment, 18 December 2008, ‘Iraqi Security Forces: Mixed Abilities’.

intimidation of the electorate or political assassinations". The ISF's ability to maintain security after the MNF's departure would depend on:

- continued improvements in capabilities;
- loyalty to the state;
- effective reconciliation of Shia insurgents;
- any resurgence of AQ-I; and
- popular trust.

298. The development of the ISF is addressed in more detail in Section 12.1.

299. Mr Brown visited Baghdad and Basra on 17 December accompanied by ACM Stirrup.¹¹³ During the trip Mr Peter Watkins, MOD Director General Operational Policy, briefed Mr Brown on the latest security agreement developments. ACM Stirrup's Military Adviser reported that he had been "clear that the final text had to ensure that 'our people must not be subject to legal proceedings in Iraq'" and was "*adamant* that 'we must have written legal confirmation for the spectrum of ... operations'". Mr Watkins was fairly confident that the law would complete its third reading by 30 December.

300. Mr Brown met Prime Minister Maliki in Baghdad on 17 December.¹¹⁴ He confirmed that the UK wanted to "finish the tasks we had set" and to "see Iraq in full control". It would be important to ensure that the public in the UK and Iraq knew about the successes that had been achieved. Mr Brown said that he intended to tell Parliament that UK forces would conclude their mission by 31 May and withdraw by 31 July.

301. Prime Minister Maliki said he was grateful for what the UK had achieved. Thanks to military co-operation, terrorism had been confronted in Iraq. The UK and Iraq would need to work together on the basis for the future involvement of UK forces in Iraq. His preference was for an MOU or exchange of letters, although he understood that this would not be legally binding. Once the arrangements had been agreed, it would be important to move to a broader bilateral relationship between the two countries.

302. On 18 December, Mr Brown made a statement in the House of Commons on "the future of British troops in Iraq, the timetables, our legal agreements and our force numbers".¹¹⁵

303. Mr Brown set out progress against the key tasks he had described in his statement on 22 July and told MPs:

"Yesterday in Baghdad, I told Prime Minister Maliki, and he agreed, that British forces in Iraq should have time to finish the missions I have just outlined."

¹¹³ Minute Kyd to PS/SofS [MOD], 18 December 2008, 'CDS Visit to Iraq 17 Dec 08'.

¹¹⁴ Letter Catsaras to Gould, 18 December 2008, 'Prime Minister's Meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister, 17 December'.

¹¹⁵ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 18 December 2008, columns 1233-1250.

304. Working with the Government of Iraq, the UK had defined:

“... first, the tasks that need to [be] completed; secondly, the authorisations needed to complete them; and thirdly, a way to provide a firm legal basis for our forces.”

305. Mr Brown explained that he expected the process of securing a legal basis for UK forces to be completed before resolution 1790 expired, but:

“In the event of the process not being complete, the Iraqis have told us that Coalition Provisional Authority Order 17, which confers protection on coalition troops, will remain in place. Our troops will therefore have the legal basis that they need for the future.”

306. Once the agreed tasks were complete, “the fundamental change of mission that I described in the House last summer will take place by 31 May 2009 at the latest”. Thereafter a “rapid withdrawal” of troops would begin, taking the total from around 4,100 to under 400 by the end of July. Most of the remaining troops would be dedicated to naval training.

307. After withdrawal had taken place, the future Iraq/UK relationship would be “one of partnership”, focused on “economic, commercial, cultural and educational relationships”.

308. The Council of Representatives rejected the law covering UK operations in Iraq on 20 December, by six votes.¹¹⁶ Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary told Mr Brown that there had been a dispute over whether the correct procedures had been followed in debating the proposal within the Council of Representatives.

309. Iraqi politicians told Mr Prentice that they were objecting to the process rather than the content of the law; Prime Minister Maliki was clear that he still wanted to ensure that the arrangements were put in place.

310. The Assistant Private Secretary advised Mr Brown that the UK was pursuing three options:

- discussing with Mr Maliki’s legal adviser whether it would be possible to reach agreement on a Government to Government basis, without formal ratification by the Parliaments;
- a letter from the Iraqi Chief Justice confirming that a Government to Government agreement could rest on CPA Order No.17; or
- making cosmetic changes to the law, which would then be resubmitted to the Council of Representatives.

311. Mr Hutton was quoted in the media describing the incident as “a minor hiccup”.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Email Catsaras to Brown, 20 December 2008, ‘Iraq Withdrawal Law Lost by 6 Votes’.

¹¹⁷ *BBC News*, 21 December 2008, *Blocked Iraq troop law ‘a hiccup’*.

312. Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that after further discussion with the Iraqi authorities, it was agreed that rather than proceed with the law as previously planned, the best way to achieve the outcome needed in the time available would be to ask the Council of Representatives to pass a legally binding resolution (rather than legislation) that would authorise the Council of Ministers to enter into the necessary MOUs with all the non-US coalition members.¹¹⁸

313. On 21 December, Mr Brown's Assistant Private Secretary emailed him to say that "the way forward is crystallising around a resolution of the Iraqi Parliament (one vote rather than three readings)".¹¹⁹ A vote was expected the following day.

314. Mr Prentice reported progress to the FCO on 24 December.¹²⁰ He explained that for Iraqi MPs, resolving the legal basis for coalition forces had been a "side show ... as they focused on how to remove their Speaker" after he made a series of insulting statements in the chamber.

315. Following Speaker Mashhadani's resignation – accepted "in an almost unanimous vote" – on 23 December, the Deputy Speaker read out a resolution which authorised the Council of Ministers to "take all necessary measures to regulate the presence and activities of the forces of the UK, Australia, Estonia, Romania, El Salvador and NATO from 1 January until 31 July 2009" which was then approved by "a clear majority".

316. Mr Prentice recorded: "The approval of the Resolution took three minutes from start to finish."

317. Mr Prentice commented that Prime Minister Maliki and his allies in the Council of Representatives had been instrumental in ensuring that the resolution passed, reflecting that he was in a "completely different (and much better) place" regarding the UK:

"We now have the opportunity to build on this better relationship in the transition we see to a wider 'normalised' relationship with Iraq, as it recovers its full sovereignty from 01/01/09. First we need to achieve 'closure' through the completion of our remaining military tasks and the drawdown of our forces with proper pride in their achievements. Thereafter, we should take care to retain due focus on Iraq's continuing strategic importance to our interests and the opportunities which will progressively open to us here."

318. Mr Watkins advised Mr Hutton on 28 December that the resolution had been ratified by the Presidency Council the previous day.¹²¹ But an exchange of letters between the UK and Iraqi Governments "recording the GoI's consent to UK forces' tasks

¹¹⁸ Public hearing, 6 January 2008, page 45.

¹¹⁹ Email Catsaras to Brown, 21 December 2008, 'Iraq Withdrawal Law Lost by 6 Votes'.

¹²⁰ eGram 50868/08 Baghdad to London, 24 November 2008, 'Iraq: Parliament Passes Resolution Providing Legal Basis for UK Forces Beyond 2008'.

¹²¹ Minute Watkins to PS/Secretary of State [MOD], 28 December 2008, 'Iraq: Legal Basis of UK Forces'.

and regulating other matters such as the use of bases, freedom of movement etc” was still required, and had run into difficulties.

319. Drafts had been prepared in early December, but discussions were put on hold while passage of the law was in progress. After the resolution was passed on 23 December, Iraqi officials did not appear willing to re-engage on the letters.

320. Mr Prentice and Mr Watkins met their key contact on 28 December and were told that it remained the Iraqi Government’s intention to complete the authorisation process in time for the letters to be signed on 31 December, but the indications were that there would be further delays within the Iraqi system. Mr Watkins commented:

“This is an unwelcome turn of events, although we had not expected the finalisation of the EoL [Exchange of Letters] to be straightforward ... Subject to developments tomorrow, there is a risk that the CoM [Council of Ministers] on Tuesday will (at Maliki’s behest) circumscribe the authorisation of our tasks in a way that effectively gives us a ‘training only’ mission in 2009 (which, the cynic might suspect, was his aim all along). We will have two options:

- Conclude the EoL on this basis (and inform the US that we will have to cease ‘operational’ MITting – and so induce an accelerated deployment of US forces into Basra ...)
- Push for combat authorisations and accept delay in the signature of the EoL beyond 31 December, leading to another operational ‘pause’ ...”

321. Just over 24 hours before the expiry of resolution 1790, at 2230 on 30 December Mr Prentice signed an MOU with the Iraqi Minister of Defence on behalf of the UK and Iraqi Governments.¹²² The Australians signed their own MOU the same day; other coalition partners were continuing their negotiations, supported by the US. Mr Prentice reported to the FCO that:

“A further UK-Iraq agreement is planned, to cover non-operational training tasks which will continue beyond 31 May. This may also need to be put to the CoR [Council of Representatives] in due course.”

322. In his evidence to the Inquiry, Lt Gen Cooper commented that the terms of the UK’s MOU had not been as strong as the Status of Forces Agreement that the Iraqis had negotiated with the US, but it was sufficient for the tasks that UK forces were conducting at the time.¹²³

323. Asked by the Inquiry why the UK had settled for an MOU rather than pushing for a Status of Forces Agreement like the US, Mr Prentice explained that, by this stage, there was “exhaustion in the Iraqi body politic with the idea of international agreements” and,

¹²² eGram 51110/08 Baghdad to FCO London, 31 December 2008, ‘Iraq: MOU Signed Sealing Legal Basis for UK Forces Post 2008’.

¹²³ Public hearing, 15 December 2009, page 88.

with several other coalition partners in addition to the UK, there “just wasn’t the capacity or the political will” to go through the process of negotiating another Status of Forces Agreement, having just agreed the US one.¹²⁴ So, on Iraqi advice, the UK went for an authorising law in Parliament.

324. On the Iraqi political dynamics surrounding the MOU, Mr Prentice told the Inquiry:

“The whole issue was ... a symptom and also a sort of football, kicked around amongst the political actors who were trying to manoeuvre each other into a position of appearing to be the advocate of continued international occupation of Iraq.”¹²⁵

January 2009

325. On 13 January, Mr Miliband’s Private Secretary circulated a draft strategy for “UK policy towards and relations with Iraq following military drawdown” to members of NSID.¹²⁶ It had been agreed by officials from all interested departments and by Mr Miliband and concluded that:

“... the UK will retain an important strategic interest in the emergence of a stable, unitary and broadly democratic Iraq, with a functioning economy, which can contribute to regional stability and prosperity and to global and European energy security.”

326. To retain influence on bilateral interests in the areas of trade, immigration and counter-terrorism, it was necessary that “the Iraqis believe we take the relationship seriously”. Both the UK’s bilateral objectives and the “wish to draw Iraq into a pro-Western ‘arc of stability’ reaching from Turkey to the Gulf States” would require “a high degree of engagement”. Mr Miliband had decided to maintain the Embassy in Baghdad as the “focal point” for that engagement, with an office in Erbil to support “commercial and other relationship building activity” but in Basra representation would be reduced to a “mini-mission” of three or four staff.

327. The strategy paper explained in more detail that the UK had:

“... a strategic national interest in a strong, stable and non-hostile Iraq that:

- acts in accordance with international law and does not threaten its neighbours;
- provides a counterweight against Iran, ideally as a pro-Western state ...;
- is able to deny AQ-I and other terrorist groups a safe haven in its national territory;

¹²⁴ Public hearing, 6 January 2010, pages 43–45.

¹²⁵ Public hearing, 6 January 2010, page 38.

¹²⁶ Letter Hickey to Catsaras, 13 January 2009, ‘Iraq: Strategy’, enclosing Paper ‘Iraq: A Review of Strategy’.

- contributes positively to stable world energy markets by maximising its potential as a producer and exporter of oil and gas, and increases EU energy security through developing new supply routes.”

328. In order to achieve these objectives, the paper suggested that it was essential that Iraq should remain a single entity; be capable of representing and serving the interests of all its communities effectively; be able to defend its own borders and maintain internal and external security; and have a functioning economy, which would require agreement on the Hydrocarbons Law.

329. It was also highly desirable that Iraq should be “a broadly democratic state”, should address critical humanitarian issues (in particular the large number of refugees and displaced people) and should develop a strong and open market economy.

330. The main strategic risk identified was “the inability of the Iraqi leadership and parties to rise above sectarian or partisan motivations and work in the interest of the whole of Iraq”. The main operational risk was the security situation, which remained “inimical to normal civilian operations”, so keeping the cost of operating in Iraq high.

331. An annex to the main paper described further “problem areas”, including:

“Fundamental questions about Iraq’s future have not yet been settled. There is still no broad agreement between a critical mass of Iraqi actors on the extent of centralism versus devolution (both economic and political); the nature of the relationships between Sunni and Shia, and between Arabs and Kurd ... In addition, serious doubts remain about the willingness and ability of Iraqi leaders to effect reconciliation between Iraq’s main communities and encourage an inclusive and fair political process.”

332. The strategy paper set out the elements of the future relationship, in broadly similar terms to those identified in the Cabinet Office paper for NSID. The main difference was the specific addition of counter-terrorism and the processing of voluntary and compulsory returns of migrants to Iraq, including the Kurdish Region. The paper stated that:

“The UK ... are no longer in a position to dictate political, economic and security outcomes in Iraq ... however, we have a clear interest in these outcomes insofar as they affect Iraq’s security, stability, prosperity and governance. We therefore need to remain politically engaged and seek to maximise our influence over Iraqi choices on issues such as reconciliation, energy sector development and Kirkuk which are fundamental to the future nature of the Iraqi state. This will only be possible if the Iraqis believe we take the relationship seriously ...

“UK assistance to Iraq should increasingly aim to support the Iraqis in ways they find useful and persuade them to leverage their own resources ... Elements of training and capacity-building assistance can continue to be offered outside Iraq. But overall,

the strategy will require the active involvement of a wide range of Departments in country ...”

333. On 16 January, the Principal Private Secretary to Lord Peter Mandelson, Business, Innovation and Skills Secretary, wrote to Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary setting out plans for UKTI resources in Iraq.¹²⁷ He reported that three new UKTI staff would be operating in Baghdad in the coming weeks and that a vacant Commercial Assistant slot had been filled. All four would cover the whole of Iraq and would work with UKTI staff in Jordan “maximising the potential for British exporters and investors”.

334. On 19 January, the day before the inauguration of Mr Obama as the 44th President of the United States, Mr Brown telephoned President Bush and said that he had been proud to work together on Iraq.¹²⁸

335. Mr Alistair Darling, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr John Hutton, the Defence Secretary, and Mr Alexander all confirmed their agreement to the proposed strategy.¹²⁹

336. Mr Hutton’s Private Secretary reported that:

“... the decision to retain an Embassy office in Basra is welcome, as this should help us to preserve our legacy and to support UK business in southern Iraq. Indeed, the Defence Secretary hopes that HMG will do all it can to encourage and support UK business to take advantage of the commercial opportunities now available in Iraq.”¹³⁰

337. On 26 January, days before the provincial elections, Lt Gen Cooper’s Policy Adviser reported that election planning had “generated major administrative and security challenges to which, as matters stand, the Iraqi Higher Electoral Commission (IHEC) and the ISF are responding positively”.¹³¹

338. On 28 January, at the request of the MOD, the JIC assessed the strategic threats facing Iraq and the UK change of mission in 2009.¹³² Its Key Judgements included:

“I. Iraq will face significant political and security challenges in 2009, but these are unlikely to threaten overall stability while US forces remain and the progressive shift from violence to politics continues. National elections will maintain the focus on political activity and delay progress on the long-standing disputes that divide Iraq.

“II. The greatest strategic threat to Iraq’s stability stems from internal political failures that could lead to renewed violence within and between Iraq’s Sunni, Shia

¹²⁷ Letter Abel to Catsaras, 16 January 2009, [untitled].

¹²⁸ Letter Fletcher to Gould, 19 January 2009, ‘Prime Minister’s Call with US President, 19 January’.

¹²⁹ Letter Jordan to Hickey, 26 January 2009, ‘Iraq Strategy’; Letter Ferguson to Catsaras, 29 January 2009, ‘Iraq: Strategy’; Letter Wright to Catsaras, 5 February 2009, ‘Iraq Strategy’.

¹³⁰ Letter Ferguson to Catsaras, 29 January 2009, ‘Iraq: Strategy’.

¹³¹ Minute POLAD to PSO/CDS, 26 January 2009, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (337) 26 Jan 09’.

¹³² JIC Assessment, 28 January 2009, ‘Iraq: Threats to Stability and UK Mission Change in 2009’.

and Kurdish communities. Pressure on the Iraqi budget by the low price of oil will increase factional competition over allocation of resources ...

“III. Government mishandling of Sons of Iraq Sunni auxiliaries would present a serious risk of a return to a large-scale Sunni insurgency. This is unlikely during 2009.

“IV. The threat from Al Qaida in Iraq has reduced significantly. It will continue to exploit ethnic and sectarian tensions and will remain capable of sporadic high profile attacks for the foreseeable future, but lacks sufficient support from the Sunni community or a sufficiently volatile sectarian environment to pose a strategic threat in 2009.

“V. The Sadrist threat has declined. But Sadrists are likely to cause some instability through their criminal activities and intimidation of Shia communities, particularly if they fail to achieve political representation. Some Iranian-backed Shia militants see attacks on withdrawing US forces as an opportunity to claim a victory but coalition and Iraqi forces will be able to prevent them from derailing the withdrawal plans.”

339. On 31 January, provincial elections were held across Iraq.¹³³ The BBC reported that there was “virtually no violence at all” on polling day.

February 2009

340. On 9 February, Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary told the Private Secretaries of Mr Miliband and Lord Mandelson that Mr Brown had endorsed the strategy, which was consistent with the approach described to Parliament on 18 December.¹³⁴ Mr Brown had “welcomed the recent provisional [sic] elections and discussed with Gen Petraeus the good progress with military drawdown planning”. Mr Brown was reported to be “keen to ensure maximum savings as we move to a normal bilateral relationship” but agreed that:

“... the UK will retain an important strategic interest in the emergence of a stable and prosperous Iraq, able to contribute to regional stability and global energy security; and that we will have important bilateral interests in Iraq which need to be secured and promoted ...

“In particular, the Prime Minister continues to believe that improving trade and investment in Iraq is key both to consolidating the security gains that have been made, and ensuring UK investors are able to benefit from the opportunities in Iraq ... We also need to ensure that investors in Basra continue to be supported as our military hands over to US.”

341. The Assistant Private Secretary wrote that a planned visit by Prime Minister Maliki to an Investor Conference in London at the end of April would be “an important

¹³³ *BBC News*, 6 February 2009, *UN hails Iraq election result*.

¹³⁴ Letter Catsaras to Hickey, 9 February 2009, ‘Iraq Strategy’.

milestone for showcasing progress in the transition to a new relationship with Iraq” and requested advice on the communications strategy for Iraq over the coming six months. He recorded that Cabinet Office officials had been asked to provide advice on “ambitious deliverables” for Prime Minister Maliki’s visit.

342. Lt Gen Cooper reported the provisional results of the provincial elections to ACM Stirrup on 9 February.¹³⁵ He wrote:

“There were several key themes. In Baghdad (with 38 percent) and the south, PM Maliki’s State of Law Coalition made very significant gains; in Basra and Najaf they were the leading party with 37 percent and 16 percent respectively. In the troubled provinces of Ninawa and Diyala there was significant change, principally reflecting the Sunnis’ return to local representation. In Anbar, fears of a violent reaction ... were averted when the two principal parties shared the spoils (with 18 percent and 17 percent respectively). In Diyala the Sunni/Kurd/Shia divide was resolved in favour of the Sunni and Kurds. Maysan was lost by the Sadrists who were pushed into second place with Maliki leading with 18 percent.”

343. Confirmed results were expected on 23 February at the earliest.

344. Mr Baker visited Basra in mid-February.¹³⁶ Reporting his “personal impressions” to senior FCO officials he commented:

“The provincial elections have left a definite winner – the Maliki coalition – but all leading politicians were clear that they wanted to work together for the good of Basra. This laudable desire could be torpedoed by Maliki if he decides to impose his own man as governor. But the initiative encouraged by us last year to bring the parties together under a unity and justice heading, has paid dividends in encouraging political co-operation.

“This unity argues well for the next Provincial Council. Which is as well, as it will face many challenges ... I have talked through potential for investment and assistance with the political leadership who responded enthusiastically to the thought of UK help. But they have little ideas of their own and their views on service delivery and investment came across as naive.

“I therefore discussed with the team in Basra ways in which we should be looking to help over the next few months and especially as we begin to draw down militarily. We have begun the investment work ... and we are well advanced on capacity building which will be taken over by the UN, funded by DFID. We now need to identify areas for UK companies to get involved ... Our continuing role in capacity-building will help identify further niche areas.

¹³⁵ Minute Cooper to CDS, 9 February 2009, ‘SBMR-I’s Weekly Report (339) 9 Feb 09’.

¹³⁶ Minute Baker to Jenkins, 19 February 2009, ‘Iraq: Visit to Basra’.

“We should also focus on the long-term relationships between Basra and the UK. I have asked my team to draw up a mini strategy focusing especially on areas such as co-operation in the educational field, including universities, local government co-ordination, city twinning (perhaps focused on oil, eg Aberdeen; or as a centre for a religion eg Canterbury), co-operation in the field of the arts and museums.”

345. Mr Baker reported that security in Basra continued to improve, and observed that the city was “increasingly reminiscent of Erbil: a good thing”. He added:

“While it is true that the key enabler for recent progress was Charge of the Knights, it was our reaction to those events which was critical. It would have been easy to have taken that opportunity to disengage with Basra. Instead, we recognised that we could take advantage of the improving security situation and formulated and then delivered a Basra policy which focused on empowering the Iraqis through (military) training, (PRT) service delivery and (CG) political reconciliation.”

346. Reflecting on what had gone well, Mr Baker wrote:

“... the last year in Basra has been a model of co-operation between the GOC, Consul General and the Head of the PRT. This excellent example of joined up government has allowed us to reach our objectives across the board, which in turn means we will be able to leave a lasting positive legacy, something that would not have been the case even six months ago. When preparing our next lessons learned paper, we need to factor in the success this team effort has had in shifting the policy focus and improving our reputation – and thus our legacy – on the ground.”

347. The Permanent Secretaries of the FCO, the MOD and DFID – Sir Peter Ricketts, Sir Bill Jeffrey and Dr Nemat Shafik – visited Baghdad on 23 February.¹³⁷ They met several Iraqi ministers and UK officials based in Iraq to discuss how the “whole Iraq” policy could be taken forward over the next 15 months.

348. Mr Prentice reported that all their interlocutors had welcomed the UK’s commitment to move to a broad-based bilateral relationship. Foreign Minister Zebari was reported to have said that there “had been some hard feeling towards the UK as a result of our operations in Basra but these should not negatively influence our future relationship ... The GoI was open to strategic partnerships.” Sir Peter Ricketts assured him that the UK “planned a continuing presence in Erbil and Basra”.

349. Although “normality” was returning to Baghdad, Mr Prentice commented that the visitors “will have been reminded, by what they saw ... and by what they heard on all sides, that Iraq remains a country in transition with continuing political, economic and security challenges”.

¹³⁷ eGram 7003/09 Baghdad to FCO London, 25 February 2009, ‘Iraq: Visit to Baghdad by FCO, MOD and DFID Permanent Secretaries, 23 November [sic]’.

350. On 26 February, Mr Hutton placed in the House of Commons Library a list of all individuals held in UK detention facilities in Iraq, first at the Shaibah Divisional Temporary Detention Facility and subsequently at the Contingency Operating Base in Basra.¹³⁸ The list had been compiled following a review of the record of detainee numbers commissioned by Mr Browne “to satisfy himself that appropriate procedures were in place to ensure that persons captures by UK forces and transferred to US detention in Iraq were treated in accordance with UK policy and legal requirements”.

351. Mr Hutton told the House of Commons that some previous government statements on the number of detainees had been inaccurate; on three occasions they had overstated the number of detainees held in the period following January 2004 by 1,000. The information below was placed in the Library of the House of Commons by Mr Hutton on the same day.

Table 1: Number of detainees held in Iraq by the UK¹³⁹

	Interned	Released	Escaped	Deceased	Transferred to US	Transferred to Iraqi system	Detainees held at year end
Dec 2003	105 ¹⁴⁰						
2003	44	9					140
2004	230	219	1	1	2	124	23
2005	47	21				12	37
2006	136	66					107
2007	77	165 ¹⁴¹	11			3	5
2008	12	11			4	2	0
Total	105 + 546	491	12	1	6	141	

352. Mr Miliband visited Baghdad and Basra on 26 and 27 February.¹⁴² In a minute to Mr Brown reporting the visit he described it as:

“... an opportunity to highlight with the Gol in Baghdad our new and positive agenda and to explain that we want to use 2009 to build up a comprehensive UK-Iraq

¹³⁸ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 31 January 2003, columns 394-397.

¹³⁹ House of Commons Library, 26 February 2009, ‘Record of Detainees – Review Conclusions; Oral Statement by Defence Secretary – 26 February 2009’.

¹⁴⁰ These individuals were transferred from US custody when the Shaibah base opened in December 2003.

¹⁴¹ This number includes 14 individuals released on bail.

¹⁴² Letter Miliband to Prime Minister, 9 March 2009, ‘My Visit to Iraq: 26-27 February’.

partnership following the end of our military presence; and in Basra to underscore the progress made and the surge of effort towards our transition.”

353. He continued:

“Overall we have an increasingly strong story to present about Basra ... The clear view of the US ... in Baghdad is that the key stage of the military transition will be ... on 31 March. They want to help us to make the most of that and to co-operate in presenting our key messages on what has been achieved in Basra ...

“In my view, a proper ceremony to mark the TOA [Transfer of Authority] on 31 March will be essential to our campaign to ‘end well’ in Basra. In June-July, after the US have been in command in the South for some months, it will be harder to distinguish between UK and US achievements.”

354. Mr Miliband described a number of obstacles to the development of a broader Iraq/UK relationship, most of which stemmed from “Iraq’s own continuing internal challenges”:

“Security had improved hugely but conditions for business visitors are still far from normal. Political and parliamentary dispute had replaced the clash of militias but the government does not yet have a monopoly of arms in society. Tensions, particularly between the Arabs and Kurds, could still flare into clashes along the Green Line. And Iraq’s economy is also facing its version of the global recession with the collapse of government revenues after the fall in the oil price. Corruption needs to be checked.”

355. Mr Prentice’s report of the visit recounted that Mr Miliband had agreed the basis for negotiation of a follow-on military training agreement, handed over a draft MOU on Trade and Investment and received an advance briefing from Gen Odierno on President Obama’s Iraq strategy.¹⁴³

356. Gen Odierno recommended that the US and UK should mark the transfer of command in Basra at the end of March – “the easiest and best moment to shape the public story over the British achievement and legacy”.

357. Mr Prentice commented:

“Only two months into the New Year and your visit has completed the first phase of our strategy to construct the new broad-scope bilateral relationship for 2009: telling everyone how different the relationship is and will become, and agreeing on the processes.”

¹⁴³ eGram 7488/09 Baghdad to FCO London, 1 March 2009, ‘Iraq: Your Visit to Baghdad, 26-27 February 2009’.

358. Cabinet Office officials told Mr Brown on 27 February that the confirmed provincial election results had been published:

“PM Maliki’s party did well and will have a working majority in both Baghdad and Basra councils. But it will have to rule in coalition in the seven other provinces where it gained the most votes. Female candidates won 103 of 440 seats. The new Provincial Councils will be working by end March.”¹⁴⁴

359. On 27 February, President Obama gave a speech at Camp Lejeune, a Marine Corps base, in which he announced that most US troops would withdraw from Iraq and the US combat mission would end by 31 August 2010.¹⁴⁵ After that point:

“... our mission will change from combat to supporting the Iraqi government and its security forces as they take the absolute lead in securing their country.”¹⁴⁶

360. Up to 50,000 troops would remain, leaving by the end of 2011, as:

“... a transitional force to carry out three distinct functions: training, equipping, and advising Iraqi security forces as long as they remain non-sectarian; conducting targeted counter-terrorism missions; and protecting our ongoing civilian and military efforts within Iraq.”

361. Sir Nigel Sheinwald, British Ambassador to the US, reported from Washington that President Obama set the announcement in the context of “a wider strategy towards the Greater Middle East”, stating that the US would work with partners to establish a new regional framework and would “pursue principled and sustained engagement with all of the nations in the region”, including Iran and Syria.¹⁴⁷

362. The need for a “comprehensive approach” was the reason the US was “refocusing on Al Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan; developing a strategy to use all elements of American power to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon; and actively seeking lasting peace between Israel and the Arab world”.

363. President Obama had said that the US would work to promote a “just, representative and accountable” Iraqi Government but cautioned that the US could not “let the pursuit of the perfect stand in the way of achievable goals”. He recognised that it would not be possible to rid Iraq of all who opposed the US or sympathised with its enemies, but a new US Ambassador, Christopher Hill, would lead a new strategy of “sustained diplomacy”.

¹⁴⁴ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 27 February 2009, ‘Iraq: Update’.

¹⁴⁵ *BBC News*, 27 February 2009, *Obama outlined Iraq pullout plan*.

¹⁴⁶ *BBC News*, 27 February 2009, *Obama’s Iraq speech: Excerpts*.

¹⁴⁷ eGram 7456/09 Washington to FCO London, 28 February 2009, ‘Obama Announces Iraq Drawdown Plan’.

364. Sir Nigel reported that the President had drawn a number of “lessons learned” from Iraq:

- that to go to war the US needed clearly defined goals;
- that funding for wars should be included in the budget as part of wider transparency about the costs of war;
- that the US would expand its civilian national security capacity; and
- that the US had learned “the importance of working closely with friends and allies”.

365. In a section of the speech addressed “directly to the people of Iraq”, President Obama praised Iraq’s history, civilisation and fortitude in recent decades, and continued:

“... let me be clear about America’s intentions. The United States pursues no claim on your territory or your resources. We respect your sovereignty and the tremendous sacrifices you have made for your country. We seek a full transition to Iraqi responsibility for the security of your country. And going forward, we can build a lasting relationship founded upon mutual interests and mutual respect as Iraq takes its rightful place in the community of nations.”

366. On the same day as President Obama’s announcement, the Cabinet Office provided Mr Brown with an update on Iraq.¹⁴⁸ It recorded that there had been “a slight deterioration” in security, including the deadliest single attack for three months which had killed 55 civilians.

367. Basra remained calm, and the training of 14 Division was “virtually complete”, meaning that embedded UK mentoring teams would start to pull out from early March. The UK government had assisted six investor visits in the previous week.

March 2009

368. After a year in post as SBMR-I, Lt Gen Cooper handed over to Lt Gen Chris Brown on 3 March 2009.¹⁴⁹ In his end of tour report Lt Gen Cooper wrote that:

“... 2008-09 was a very significant year in the Iraq campaign. It built on previous events in security terms but perhaps the key event was the assertiveness of Maliki in dealing with Shia militias that then gave him the credibility and authority to establish the writ of government across Iraq ... Notwithstanding the risks and fault lines that remain in Iraq and the weakness of the economic position, the glass is half full, with regular drips of progress entering it.”

¹⁴⁸ Minute Cabinet Office [junior official] to Prime Minister, 27 February 2009, ‘Iraq: Update’.

¹⁴⁹ Report Cooper, [undated], ‘End of Tour Report 4 Mar 09 to 3 Mar 09’.

369. In political terms, Lt Gen Cooper judged that:

“Despite frequent and frustrating in-fighting, a good deal of positive progress was made politically in the last year. The political parties cobbled together a mini ‘grand bargain’ to pass the 2008 budget and the amnesty and provincial powers law; the ... [Council of Representatives] passed the provincial elections law and brought down their powerful Speaker; and the GoI pushed the US back over successive red lines before concluding the Security Agreement. In many ways, the political class came of age ...”

370. Lt Gen Cooper attributed campaign progress in Iraq to a range of factors, including:

- The clear focus maintained by the US on its declared aim of defeating extremism and allowing democracy to develop. That led to a continued commitment to win, despite very evident pressures.
- The effectiveness of the US and Iraqi surges.
- The Sunni Awakening movement, and the Sunni reconciliation initiative started by Lt Gen Lamb (see Section 9.5): “one of the key factors why Reconciliation with the Sunni worked, was that it was initiated, negotiated and delivered from a position of strength ... Against that background, the MND(SE) Reconciliation/ Accommodation with JAM in Basra in 2007 may be perceived to have been completed from a position of relative weakness.”
- The JAM national cease-fire which had allowed political and security strength and legitimacy to accrue, over time, to the Iraqi Government and ISF.
- The scale of the resources committed (in particular the US contribution).
- Time, because: “*All COIN [counter-insurgency] campaigns take time.*”
- Strong leadership on both the civilian and military sides of the coalition and within the Iraqi government and security forces.
- US development of counter-insurgency doctrine, and its understanding of the nature of the conflict, which had been “hugely impressive”: “Meanwhile, in 2009, the UK has yet to update and publish its own doctrine on COIN operations – a serious omission.”
- Co-ordination across the various lines of operation within the US system: “There are powerful lessons here for the UK cross-Government approach to future campaigns and post-conflict reconstruction.”

371. Lt Gen Cooper observed that relations between the UK and Iraq had “warmed a little in the past four months” though he was frustrated that the UK had yet to confirm the nature, scale and resource of its long-term military relationship with Iraq, particularly with the Iraqi armed forces. The Iraqi MOD was very keen to establish links. Lt Gen Cooper wrote: “Thus far we have promised something but not yet delivered it.”

372. In relation to relationships with the US, Lt Gen Cooper commented:

“2008 was a difficult year in Iraq for the UK-US relationship, but it has recovered to a degree since then. A degree of certainty in our position in MND(SE) has helped. Whilst it is true that many US officers would have wished us to stay with them until the end of their mission here, the fact that we now have a defined end date to which both parties are working has allowed harmony in planning to be maintained.”

373. Mr Prentice reported on 5 March that President Obama’s announcement had received “blanket media coverage” in Iraq.¹⁵⁰ Given his campaign pledge to withdraw troops within 16 months of taking office, the announcement had come as little surprise. But the Iraqi Government had welcomed the statement and, although some were nervous about the implications, public opinion in Iraq appeared to be mostly positive.

374. Mr Prentice commented that the “phantom elephant in the room” was the promised referendum on the US Security Agreement, described in the law that ratified the US SOFA. The US and the MNF were working on the basis that there would not be a referendum.

375. On 9 March, a CIG considered the implications of Iraq’s provincial elections, at the request of the FCO.¹⁵¹ The CIG noted that the average turnout was 51 percent and that the formerly dominant parties all performed poorly. Overall, Prime Minister Maliki’s “Rule of Law” coalition and secular Sunni parties were the winners at the expense of the Kurds and Islamist parties. Sadrists won “a handful of seats” on all southern councils and in Baghdad.

Table 2: Seats won in January 2009 provincial elections

Party	Seats
Rule of Law	126
ISCI	55
Sadrists	41
Allawi’s coalition	26
Ja’afari’s coalition	23
Hadba	19
Total seats	440

376. The CIG assessed that improved security at the elections (11 reported attacks, compared with some 300 in 2005) indicated both improvement in ISF capability and

¹⁵⁰ eGram 8095/09 Baghdad to FCO London, 5 March 2009, ‘Iraq: Reactions to Obama’s Announcement on Military Drawdown’.

¹⁵¹ CIG Assessment, 9 March 2009, ‘Iraq After the Provincial Elections’.

“the increasing readiness of Iraqis to pursue their objectives through politics instead of violence”.

377. The CIG judged that Prime Minister Maliki viewed his coalition’s success as a personal victory. It had increased his standing but his power to achieve specific objectives would still vary with the issue. A successful challenge to his position was now unlikely before national elections, expected in early 2010.

378. The CIG assessed that the election results represented an endorsement of strong central government and a setback for federalism. It judged that Prime Minister Maliki would use his success to push for greater centralisation.

379. On 9 March, the Assessments Staff issued a Current Assessment Note that looked at the prospects for the ongoing reconciliation efforts between the Iraqi Government and the Sadrist movement.¹⁵² It said:

“Prime Minister Maliki has sought reconciliation with the Sadrist movement since he launched successful security operations against its Jaysh al-Mahdi militia in 2008. Progress has been slow ... but we judge that the prospects are now improving ...

“We assess that Maliki’s relationship with the Sadrists is changing and that the pace of this change is increasing. But achieving reconciliation and political alliance will take months. The reconciliation process allows Maliki to control the Sadrists without needing to give much in return. The Sadrists remain fragmented with no clear direction or strategy, and have few levers.”

380. Cabinet Office officials provided Mr Brown with an update on Afghanistan and Iraq on 13 March.¹⁵³ They reported that levels of violence across Iraq were at a six-year low, a 90 percent decrease since the US surge began in 2007. Violence in Basra remained low, with no UK or US casualties although a Pakistani civilian contractor had been killed.

381. UK military mentors and trainers embedded with the Iraqi Army had begun to disengage, and would have withdrawn completely by 31 March.

382. Discussions on an MOU for the UK’s “future (normal) military relationship with Iraq” had started and should have concluded by the time of Prime Minister Maliki’s visit for the Investment Conference.

383. The Council of Representatives had agreed the US\$59bn Iraqi Budget, but it remained US\$16bn underfunded; 86 percent of the revenue would be from oil.

384. Gen Dannatt paid what he expected to be his final visit to Iraq between 23 and 25 March, and described the mood in the South as “rightly positive about what has been achieved and optimistic about the future”.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² CIG Current Assessment Note, 9 March 2009, ‘Iraq: Prospects for Reconciliation with the Sadrists’.

¹⁵³ Minute Cabinet Office [junior officials] to Prime Minister, 13 March 2009, ‘Afghanistan and Iraq: Update’.

¹⁵⁴ Minute CGS to PS/SofS [MOD], 25 March 2008, ‘CGS Visit to Iraq – 23-25 Mar 09’.

385. Security in Basra was “improved” since his last visit in December 2008 and there were “strong signs of economic growth”. He considered it “vital that we continue to assist the Basrawis with their economic revival”. He concluded his report to Ministers and senior staff within the MOD with some reflections on the lessons that had been learned in Iraq:

“As our operations come to an end in Iraq we must be conscious that it has at times been a difficult and bumpy ride. We will not be universally praised for what we have achieved and some will be overtly critical but we have achieved what we set out to do and we leave Basra in good shape, secure and confident about the future. But it is also essential that we learn the lessons from this campaign and transfer them effectively to Afghanistan to ensure success there. Tactical military lessons have been learned and it is the higher level political-military issues that we must now focus on; whilst the Theatres may be different, political ambition and constraint will continue to influence military operation and we must not make the same mistakes in Afghanistan that we have made in Iraq. We must do what is right militarily in a dynamic and complex environment and must not allow long term political aspiration to drive what we do – to do so invites failure. We would do well to conduct a formal and open appraisal of the operational and strategic lessons we have identified across government – this should not be seen as a means to apportion blame for what did not go well but rather as an opportunity to ensure success in Afghanistan and thereafter.”

386. On 31 March, ACM Stirrup visited Basra to attend the Transfer of Authority Ceremony for the handover of Division command to the US.¹⁵⁵ His Principal Staff Officer reported that “clear positive public and private messages ... [were] received from all Iraqi and US participants”. In calls on senior US and Iraqi officers and in a speech at the handover ceremony, ACM Stirrup reinforced that:

“This was not the end, just an important milestone:

“This did not represent the end of UK and UK Mil engagement – indeed, it really marked a new beginning:

“On a military level we remained focused ... on our Maritime and Training responsibilities ...

“UK looked to establish a positive and long term military relationship with Iraq based on partnership, mutual understanding and mutual self interest.”

387. ACM Stirrup's Principal Staff Officer observed that “In an otherwise very upbeat day, the only thread of concern that ran through meetings was the degree of change (and drawdown) taking place around Iraq”.

¹⁵⁵ Minute Johnstone to PS/SofS [MOD], 1 April 2009, ‘CDS Visit to Iraq (Basra) to attend the MND(SE) Transfer of Authority Ceremony – 31 Mar 09’.

April 2009

388. A CIG Current Assessment Note issued on 1 April stated:

“Iraq’s increased sovereignty and security are giving it the confidence to become more assertive towards Iran. The Iraqi-US Security Agreement was the clearest example of Iraq putting its interests first.”¹⁵⁶

389. The note reported an apparent increase in Iraqi popular criticism of Iran. Nevertheless, the CIG judged that Prime Minister Maliki was not yet likely to risk antagonising Iran.

390. Lord Mandelson visited Basra on 6 April, accompanied by a UK business delegation and Mr Wareing, to attend an investment conference at Basra Airport.¹⁵⁷

391. Mr Nigel Haywood, British Consul General in Basra, reported the event to the FCO and commented that it had been “timed perfectly” so that the UK could “demonstrate that whilst the military were drawing down, the UK’s commitment to Basra continued”. The event is addressed in more detail in Section 10.2.

392. On 19 April, the Council of Representatives elected Tawafuq MP Mr Iyad al-Samarrî’e as its new Speaker, filling the vacancy left by Dr Mashhadani’s resignation in December 2008.¹⁵⁸ Mr Prentice commented that this marked another important step along the path to embedding Iraq’s democratic system.

393. Mr Hutton wrote to Mr Brown on 20 April setting out the plans to mark the completion of the UK’s current military mission in Iraq, including a report to Parliament on the deliverables set out in Mr Brown’s statement of 18 December.¹⁵⁹ Mr Hutton wrote that:

“Prime Minister Maliki’s visit and the London Conference are the next key milestones for our overall bilateral relationship with Iraq. Excellent progress by UK and Iraq forces means that 30 April will now ... see the completion of our current military mission – a month ahead of previous plans ... We also hope by then to have signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) we need to cover the enduring military activity ... agreed in February. You and Maliki could highlight this at your joint press conference as an example of how the transition in our relations you set out to the House in December has been implemented.”

394. Mr Hutton explained that after 30 April the main UK activity under Op TELIC would be “the Royal Navy’s protection of Iraqi oil platforms and territorial waters, while also training the Iraqi Navy and Marines to take on this task in due course”. Officer training,

¹⁵⁶ CIG Current Assessment Note, 1 April 2009, ‘Iraqi Relations with Iran’.

¹⁵⁷ eGram 12607/09 Basra to FCO London, 7 April 2009, ‘Iraq: Lord Mandelson’s Visit to Basra, 6 April’.

¹⁵⁸ eGram 13869/09 Baghdad to FCO London, 20 April 2009, ‘Iraq: Iyad al-Sammari’e Elected COR Speaker’.

¹⁵⁹ Letter Hutton to Brown, 20 April 2009, ‘Iraq: End of Current Military Mission’.

under NATO auspices, would also continue and a small number of embedded personnel remained in coalition HQ. Troop numbers would reduce to around 250 by April 2010.

395. On 24 April 2009, the Military Adviser to Lt Gen Wall provided him with briefing about the negotiations with JAM1 (see Section 9.6), to enable him to brief Mr Hutton “following his query to DG Sec Pol”.¹⁶⁰ The briefing set out the background to the operation and described its objectives as:

“**GOC MND(SE).** The objective as seen by GOC MND(SE) was to split JAM into pro and anti-Iranian elements to place into a majority those viewing Iran (rather than the coalition) as the root cause of violence and instability in Basra).

“**SofS.** At the strategic level, the perspective was slightly different. 2006 saw a steady increase in the number of UK fatalities; by 2007, on average, three UK Service Personnel were being killed each month. The focus was on reducing these attacks. Further, at the end of 2006, there was a realistic prospect of 2007 being the last year in which our presence in Iraq would be authorised by a UN Security Council resolution from which coalition forces drew their authority to hold detainees. In Jan 06, there were 117 detainees held in the UK run facility in MND(SE). Given that the vast majority of these detainees would have to be released anyway, the then Secretary of State agreed that we should make a virtue out of necessity by negotiating with Basra JAM to use the releases to persuade them to stop attacks on coalition forces.”

396. The advice also reported how the negotiations were likely to be treated by an Iraq Inquiry, if one were to be commissioned:

“The extent to which [NAME OF OPERATION] would form part of an Iraq enquiry [sic] would depend on the ToRs of the enquiry (public, private, dates covered). It is, however, reasonable to assume at this stage that the operation would be admissible. In any event, most elements of the operation are in the public domain; this would be unlikely to stop the issue becoming one of a few high profile headlines in an enquiry.”

397. In an email on 29 April, Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary described the following day as “a big day for Iraq”.¹⁶¹ Mr Hutton was in Basra for the transfer of authority ceremony, Prime Minister Maliki was making his first formal visit to the UK as Prime Minister, and a major Iraq investment conference would be held in London. The Assistant Private Secretary told Mr Brown that Prime Minister Maliki was “increasingly well-disposed to the UK”.

398. Mr Prentice described the “Invest Iraq” conference as the UK’s “headline initiative ... demonstrating in a practical way our desire for a new and normalised bilateral

¹⁶⁰ Minute MA1/DCDS(Ops) to DCDS(Ops) & DG Sec Pol, 24 April 2009, ‘[NAME OF OPERATION]’.

¹⁶¹ Email Catsaras to Brown, 29 April 2009, ‘PM Maliki’s Visit – Briefing’.

relationship”.¹⁶² Around 100 Ministers and senior officials from the Iraqi Government would attend, plus Iraqi businessmen and around 200 UK businesses. Prime Minister Maliki would address an evening reception at No.10.

399. The conference is described in more detail in Section 10.2.

400. Mr Brown and Prime Minister Maliki had a meeting on 30 April, during which they discussed “the bilateral relationship, and closer political, economic and investment relations based on the military co-operation between the two countries”.¹⁶³

401. The discussion also covered the need for an agreement on the legal basis for the ongoing UK military presence. Prime Minister Maliki told Mr Brown that since it was unclear legally whether there was a need to seek the approval of the Iraqi Parliament, he would do so. He assured Mr Brown that he would do so by the end of May.

402. In a letter to Mr Hutton’s Private Secretary, Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary highlighted that both Mr Brown and Prime Minister Maliki had paid tribute to the work of UK Armed Forces in Iraq, and especially those who had lost their lives serving their country and bringing stability to Iraq, in their joint press conference.¹⁶⁴

403. Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary confirmed that Mr Brown “welcomed the completion of the current military mission today – a month ahead of previous plans.”

May 2009

404. On 14 May, a Current Intelligence Group examined the prospects for Arab-Kurd conflict over the coming year at the request of the FCO.¹⁶⁵

405. The CIG’s Assessment recalled that the Iraqi Kurds had played a leading role in the 2003-2005 state-building process and had established territorial, political and financial power unique to their community. They enshrined the powers and territorial claims of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the Constitution, extended their political and military influence beyond the KRG into disputed territories, gained control of Iraq’s northern oil fields and secured 17 percent of the federal budget, and central funding for their Peshmerga militia. The CIG judged that the Kurds wanted to protect these gains and to extend them by bringing Kirkuk into the KRG.

406. Although the Kurds were allied with Arab parties within the Iraqi Government, disagreements over budget allocation, Peshmerga funding, the oil industry, disputed internal boundaries and constitutional review all continued to cause tensions between the KRG and the central government. This had manifested itself in a challenge to

¹⁶² eGram 15041/09 Baghdad to FCO London, 28 April 2009, ‘Iraq: Invest Iraq Conference, London – 30 April – 1 May’.

¹⁶³ Letter Catsaras to Hickey, 30 April 2009, ‘Prime Minister’s Meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister, 30 April’.

¹⁶⁴ Letter Catsaras to Ferguson, 30 April 2009, ‘Iraq: End of Current Military Mission’.

¹⁶⁵ CIG Assessment, 14 May 2009, ‘Iraq: Arab-Kurd Relations – Opportunities & Risks’.

the Kurds' share of the national budget and in the creation of the Hadba party, which successfully campaigned in provincial elections against Kurdish domination in Ninawa.

407. The CIG's Key Judgements included:

"I. The prospects for a 'grand bargain' encompassing constitutional review, disputed internal boundaries and hydrocarbons legislation are poor before national elections ... Maliki and Barzani have an opportunity to establish a constructive dialogue ... which might reduce friction between Arabs and Kurds and increase the chances of eventually reaching a deal. But it is not clear whether they will take it.

"II. The relationship between the governments in Baghdad and Erbil is largely shaped by Maliki and Barzani ...

"III. Agreement on national hydrocarbons legislation is the most likely area for progress among the issues dividing Arabs and Kurds. But this will not be achieved in 2009. There will also be no real progress on the review of Iraq's Constitution this year.

"IV. The Iraqi and Kurdish government have incompatible maximalist demands over disputed territories. International pressure will be needed on both sides if they are to take the opportunity to establish a constructive dialogue over Kirkuk following the UN report."

408. On 15 May, Maj Gen Salmon sent his end of tour report to Air Marshal Stuart Peach, Chief of Joint Operations.¹⁶⁶

409. Maj Gen Salmon reflected that October 2008 had been a significant turning point in Basra, with the local people ceasing to be "preoccupied with security" and "looking to the future with greater optimism".

410. Maj Gen Salmon was optimistic both about the progress that had been made during his time in post and the prospects for the future:

"Basra has arguably progressed from anarchy to democracy in 12 months. The militias have been defeated and residual insurgent activity is limited ... There is widespread acknowledgement of the Rule of Law, with judicial processes being developed to meet the needs of a democratic society ... In terms of wider Basrawi security, policy and border security have improved considerably ... The first free and fair elections in Iraqi history have been conducted without violence or intimidation and the results have been ratified and acknowledged internationally. The new Provincial Administration is now established. International trade through UQP [Umm Qasr Port] is flourishing and the Port ... is secure. BIA [Basra International Airport] has been handed over to trained Iraqi management. Progress has been made

¹⁶⁶ Report Salmon to MA/CJO, 15 May 2009, 'COMUKAMPHIBFOR OP TELIC 12/13 (HQ MND(SE) Post Operational Report (POR)'.

on improving essential services and Basrawi quality of life. External investment is growing rapidly and the future economic prognosis of the region is very positive. Basrawis are optimistic about their future. Our in-Theatre relationships with the US are very strong and there is widespread US and Iraqi acknowledgement of the UK's contribution to this six-year campaign. Six of the eight remaining suspects implicated in the murders of the RMP 6 in 2003 are now in custody. The conditions have been met and plans made for transition to a more normal defence relationship with Iraq. UK combat operations have now ceased ahead of schedule and the plan of UK drawdown is well under way. UK Defence can withdraw from Iraq having delivered on this promises and with its professional reputation intact. We must now focus on learning the lessons."

411. Mr Prentice updated the Iraq Strategy Group on 21 May on negotiations with the Iraqi Government regarding the future of the UK military presence in Iraq.¹⁶⁷

412. So far, UK lobbying "had not yet got traction". A meeting of the Council of Ministers on 26 May was expected to be critical. In the absence of an agreement, Lt Gen Wall told the Group that remaining UK personnel (naval trainers, a ship, personnel embedded in the MNF and at the military academy) would need to be withdrawn.

413. Mr McDonald told the Group that it should consider whether failure to secure an agreement was damaging in substance, or in presentational terms. Mr Watkins felt that "on balance staying with an agreement would benefit the UK". The Group considered whether offering a reduced UK package might be helpful. Mr Prentice was given "delegated authority on whether and how to offer Maliki different options on the UK package". Lt Gen Wall and Mr Watkins agreed to consider this further and offer guidance.

414. Mr McDonald told the Iraq Strategy Group that he saw "two conflicting objectives": firstly that the UK should not devote increasing effort to a diminishing presence and secondly that it should not end its military presence in Iraq on "a sour note, having successfully withdrawn from Basra". Mr McDonald concluded that the UK should make a final major effort before the 26 May meeting of the Council of Ministers, including reminding them of the commitment Prime Minister Maliki made to Mr Brown in April. If that failed, the UK should be ready to leave and should develop a handling strategy. Mr Brown should be informed.

415. Mr Prentice confirmed that Ambassador Hill and Gen Odierno were clear that if the UK withdrew it was because of the Iraqi Government's stance, not a weakening of the UK's commitment.

416. Mr Hutton wrote to Mr Brown on 22 May to say that a Defence Memorandum of Understanding looked "increasingly difficult to achieve".¹⁶⁸ Prime Minister Maliki was

¹⁶⁷ Minute Wigan to McDonald, 21 May 2009, 'Iraq Strategy Group, 21 May'.

¹⁶⁸ Letter Hutton to Brown, 22 May 2009, 'Iraq: Negotiations on the Defence MOU'.

reported to believe it would be near impossible to secure Cabinet and Parliamentary agreement.

417. FCO and MOD officials in Baghdad were engaged in a final round of lobbying but Mr Hutton cautioned that Ministers might “need to make a decision shortly on whether to withdraw all remaining UK forces from Iraq”. To do so by 31 July, as the December agreement required, would mean military commanders needed instructions to depart by 15 June.

418. The key disagreement was about jurisdictional immunities for UK troops, which the Council of Ministers had diluted “to such an extent that I [Mr Hutton] and the Chief of Defence Staff consider them unacceptable”.

419. Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary reminded Mr Brown that:

“Our December agreement was already less than some other NATO allies were prepared to accept – so any further dilution also risks the future NATO training mission.”¹⁶⁹

420. Mr Brown told his Assistant Private Secretary that he was prepared to speak to Prime Minister Maliki provided the groundwork had been done, and was prepared also to speak to other Iraqi politicians.¹⁷⁰ He suggested that the government could “send out David M[iliband] or John H[utton] to talk to people”.

421. Mr Brown telephoned Prime Minister Maliki early on 26 May.¹⁷¹

422. In a brief for the conversation, Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary reported that Prime Minister Maliki was thought to be concerned that the agreement would be used to attack him in Parliament about extending the presence of foreign forces.¹⁷² As a result “the level of political exposure is too great for the limited reward which 400 troops and five ships can provide”.

423. Mr McDonald told the Inquiry that “one of the features of Iraqi democracy then was, something supported by the Prime Minister was looked at even more sceptically by the Iraqi Parliament”.¹⁷³

424. Prime Minister Maliki told Mr Brown over the telephone that he had been keen to reach agreement but his Cabinet had been surprised by “demands for additional elements” in the proposal “including increasing troops to 1,000”.¹⁷⁴ The version adopted by Cabinet would pass through Parliament but the UK’s current proposal would not.

¹⁶⁹ Email Catsaras to Brown, 23 May 2009, ‘Iraq: Negotiations on the Defence MOU’.

¹⁷⁰ Email Brown to Catsaras, 24 May 2009, ‘Iraq: Negotiations on the Defence MOU’.

¹⁷¹ Letter Catsaras to Ferguson, 26 May 2009, ‘Defence MOU: Prime Minister’s Call with Iraqi Prime Minister, 26 May’.

¹⁷² Email Catsaras to Brown, 26 May 2009, ‘Maliki Briefing’.

¹⁷³ Public hearing, 5 January 2010, page 41.

¹⁷⁴ Letter Catsaras to Ferguson, 26 May 2009, ‘Defence MOU: Prime Minister’s Call with Iraqi Prime Minister, 26 May’.

425. Mr Brown said that the UK was not asking for any more troops than he and Prime Minister Maliki had already discussed: 400 troops plus ships. It would be possible to discuss a reduction in troop numbers but the UK could not weaken jurisdictional immunities.

426. Prime Minister Maliki said that Iraq had three concerns:

- The number of locations for troops in Iraq was unspecified.
- Immunities were being requested even inside Iraqi installations.
- Troop tasks were not limited to training and naval support but also involved participation in command chains.

427. Prime Minister Maliki suggested that the British Embassy should recommence negotiations with the Iraqi MOD. Mr Brown said that he hoped that rapid progress could be made during the course of the day and would call again later; Mr Maliki said that Iraq could move quickly but would require the UK to be flexible.

428. Later that day Mr Brown's Assistant Private Secretary reported that there remained no agreement in Baghdad.¹⁷⁵

429. The Assistant Private Secretary advised that the MOD and the Embassy wanted to "throw in the towel" but Mr McDonald, Mr Cavanagh and he disagreed and thought that agreement could be reached on a new package, for example offering places at Sandhurst plus the naval operation. Mr McDonald would go to Baghdad as Mr Brown's personal envoy after visiting Washington the following day.

430. Mr Brown's Private Secretary wrote to Mr Hutton's Private Secretary on 28 May to say that Mr Brown had asked Mr McDonald to visit Baghdad early the following week to seek agreement on a package comprising:

- an offer to withdraw the remaining 400 troops, and re-badge UK training assistance under the NATO training mission;
- enhanced training opportunities in the UK, including a substantial number of officer training places at Sandhurst; and
- continuing with the UK's naval operations, especially to protect oil platforms.¹⁷⁶

431. Mr McDonald told the Inquiry that it had been "quite easy" agreeing with Prime Minister Maliki that Iraq had a training need to give the navy extra capabilities and the

¹⁷⁵ Email Catsaras to Brown, 26 May 2009, 'Maliki'.

¹⁷⁶ Letter Catsaras to Ferguson, 28 May 2009, 'Iraq: Defence MOU'.

UK was well placed to assist.¹⁷⁷ But it was less easy agreeing the legal basis for that to happen:

“... as I had been involved in it in December 2008, I went back to Iraq in the spring of 2009, saw Prime Minister Maliki’s key advisers, saw Prime Minister Maliki himself, and agreed a package, which eventually became Iraqi law.”

432. Mr Prentice told the Inquiry that he saw this agreement as “meeting Iraqi needs, expressed needs, and also being a natural part of a full bilateral relationship with a country with whom we have historical ties with their military”.¹⁷⁸

June 2009

433. Mr Brown reshuffled his Cabinet on 6 June and appointed Mr Bob Ainsworth, formerly Minister for the Armed Forces, as Defence Secretary. Mr Miliband and Mr Alexander remained in their posts as Foreign Secretary and International Development Secretary.

434. On 12 June, Mr Brown told Cabinet that since the withdrawal of British troops was nearly complete, “the time was right to announce an Inquiry into the war in Iraq”.¹⁷⁹ It would be an inquiry by Privy Counsellors, following the model of the Franks Inquiry into the Falklands War.

435. On 15 June, Mr Brown made a statement to the House of Commons on the UK’s future involvement in Iraq.¹⁸⁰ He said:

“Our troops first went into Iraq in March 2003 and now they are coming home. In total, 120,000 men and women have served in Iraq during the last six years, so it is fitting that I should now come to the House to talk of their achievements through difficult times; to chart the new relationship we are building with Iraq; and to set out our plans for an inquiry into the conflict.

“In my statement to the House last December, I set out the remaining tasks in southern Iraq for our mission ... I can report that those three objectives are being achieved ...

...

“Significant challenges remain, including that of finding a fair and sustainable solution to the sharing of Iraq’s oil reserves, but Iraq’s future is now in its own hands, in the hands of its people and its politicians. We must pay tribute to the endurance of the Iraqi people; we pledge to them our continuing support ... As the House knows, our military mission ended with the last combat patrol in Basra on 30 April. As of

¹⁷⁷ Public hearing, 5 January 2010, page 40.

¹⁷⁸ Public hearing, 6 January 2010, page 42.

¹⁷⁹ Cabinet Conclusions, 12 June 2009.

¹⁸⁰ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 15 June 2009, columns 21-22.

today, there are fewer than 500 British troops in Iraq, with more returning home each week.”

436. On the UK’s continued military presence in Iraq, Mr Brown told the House of Commons that:

“At the request of the Iraqi Government, a small number of British Navy personnel – no more than 100 – will remain in Iraq for long-term training of the Iraqi Army. Royal Navy ships will continue to protect the oil platforms on which Iraq’s exports depend, and we will continue to offer training to the Iraqi army as part of a wider NATO mission. We will also offer training opportunities at Sandhurst and elsewhere in the United Kingdom for Iraqi officers of high potential. At the core of our new relationship however will be the diplomatic, trading and cultural links that we are building with the Iraqi people, supporting British and other foreign investors who want to play a role in the reconstruction of southern Iraq.”

437. Mr Brown also announced the establishment of the Iraq Inquiry, with a “primary objective ... to identify lessons learned”.

438. On 28 June, Mr Prentice attended his final meeting of the Iraqi National Security Council.¹⁸¹ As previously agreed with the US Embassy, at the end of the meeting he made a statement announcing that the UK would not attend in future (and he believed that it was also the US intention to withdraw). He told the Iraqi ministers present that:

“We had greatly appreciated the privilege of being part of the NSC over the previous five years. Now on the eve of a further major demonstration of Iraqi lead responsibility through the withdrawal of US troops from cities and towns, it was the right time for us to bow out. The Iraqi Government was showing its ability to deal with the tough security issues and should be allowed to continue their discussions in the NSC without any external presence.”

439. Although the announcement came as a surprise to the Iraqis, it was welcomed. Prime Minister Maliki thanked the UK and US for their support over many years, emphasising that there should still be a means to discuss security issues bilaterally or as a group. Other NSC members welcomed the announcement and afterwards thanked Mr Prentice for the UK’s role.

440. Following the meeting, Mr Prentice, Ambassador Hill and Gen Odierno sent a joint letter to Prime Minister Maliki, thanking him for the opportunity to take part in the NSC, confirming US and UK withdrawal, underlining the progress the NSC had made and emphasising their readiness to provide support or advice in the future.

¹⁸¹ eGram 23890/09 Baghdad to FCO London, 30 June 2009, ‘Iraq: National Security Council Meeting, 28 June: Our Last Bow’.

441. A few days later, Mr Prentice reported that, on 30 June, US troops completed the transfer of responsibility for all urban areas to the Iraqi Government.¹⁸²

442. The Iraqi Government had declared the day a national holiday, with the title National Sovereignty Day or the Day of Dignity. Despite increased violence in the run-up to the transfer, the arrangements on the day were “broadly successful” with the exception of a car bomb in Kirkuk which killed 33 people.

443. Mr Prentice reported that Prime Minister Maliki compared the day to the Arab Revolt against the British in 1920 (see Annex 1). President Talabani thanked the coalition for its commitment and sacrifice, although “noticeable by its absence was any statement of thanks to coalition forces from the Prime Minister”. Mr Prentice reported that the public mood was “a mixture of pride and apprehension” and judged that “the Gol is now unequivocally in the lead and the Iraqi people are watching to see whether it can deliver”.

July 2009

444. At its meeting on 8 July, the JIC examined the likely political and security trends in Iraq over the next six months.¹⁸³ Its Key Judgements included:

“I. Maliki is determined to secure a second term as Prime Minister in the 2010 national elections. This influences all of his political decisions and relationships.

“II. The current fluidity of Iraqi politics makes predictions difficult. But Maliki will probably be able to assemble a cross-sectarian nationalist coalition if he can attract a Sunni partner. Given the Iraqi government’s continuing commitment to the success of the Sons of Iraq initiative, his best chance probably lies with the Awakening movement, though will retreat towards a Shia alliance if he doubts the stability or popularity of a cross-sectarian nationalist alliance.

“III. The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) will probably seek to join Maliki in any type of coalition; it is less clear whether Maliki will accept an alliance with ISCI, given its reputation as a sectarian party influenced by Iran. The Sadrist are preparing to participate fully in the elections and want to be part of a nationalist alliance, but Maliki and Sadr will not commit to an alliance until polling is complete.

...

“V. Violence across Iraq will probably remain around the current level during 2009 – an average of about 130 attacks per week compared with nearly 1,600 attacks per week in mid 2007. The progressive shift from violence to politics will continue,

¹⁸² eGram 24067/09 Baghdad to FCO London, 1 July 2009, ‘Iraq: Withdrawal of US Troops from Urban Areas, 30 June’.

¹⁸³ JIC Assessment, 8 July 2009, ‘Iraq: Political & Security Trends’.

denying terrorist or insurgent groups the opportunity to escalate violence significantly by provoking organised sectarian violence. Recent security gains will not be lost.

“VI. A spike in attacks and especially casualties over the coming months, following withdrawal of Multi-National Forces from the cities, might lead to perceptions that security gains are eroding. But this would not indicate that violent groups are growing, becoming more lethal or position a greater challenge to Multi-National Forces or Iraqi Security Forces.

“VII. Western military and civilian groups will remain a priority for violent groups.”

445. On 21 July, at the request of DFID, a CIG considered the impact of corruption in Iraq.¹⁸⁴

446. The CIG judged that corruption “has a significant impact on the economy and governance” in Iraq, with cost estimates ranging from 3.5 to 10 percent of GDP.

447. The Assessment stated:

“In 2008 the global anti-corruption society Transparency International (TI) designated Iraq the third most corrupt country in the world, behind Somalia and Burma. TI’s Global Corruption Barometer 2009 reported that 44 percent of Iraqis had paid some form of bribe in the last 12 months, compared to 3 percent in the UK and a worldwide average of 11 percent. 42 percent of Iraqis polled in TI’s survey felt that corruption was most prevalent in the public sector and civil service, while 27 percent considered political parties most tainted. The survey suggested that public trust in the judiciary and news media was much higher.”

448. The CIG judged that government ministries were “riddled with” corruption and recorded that:

“Iraq’s Commission on Integrity (CI) has identified the Ministries for Oil and Foreign Affairs as prominent embezzlers ...”

449. The CIG reported that, in 2006, Mr Stuart Bowen, the US Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction had referred to a “virtual pandemic” of corruption costing Iraq US\$4 billion a year (equivalent to approximately 3.5 percent of GDP). The CIG assessment stated:

“Later estimates suggest the cost of corruption in the South alone could be as high as \$12bn pa. This range of cost estimates suggests corruption at a level which is significantly hindering macroeconomic recovery, as well as damaging local economics. In March 2007, Rhadi Hamza al-Rhadi, CI Chairman, claimed that corruption was worse than under Saddam’s regime. CI had brought corruption charges against eight Ministers and forty Directors-General, but all had fled

¹⁸⁴ CIG Assessment, 21 July 2009, ‘How Corrupt is Iraq?’

abroad. Bowen described al-Rhadi as Iraq's most prominent corruption enforcer, but by September 2007 al-Rhadi had resigned following repeated death threats, and subsequently sought asylum in the US. Bowen called the corruption problem 'the second insurgency' for its destabilising effects on Iraq. We judge that the US draw-down will have an impact on oversight, making international scrutiny of institutional corruption more difficult."

450. The CIG assessed that corruption was "driven both by a desire for personal enrichment and by political considerations" and that "the practice of soliciting bribes at checkpoints was commonplace". Shia militias had "exploited their control of economic assets for political gain".

451. The CIG judged that "the Iraqi public is more tolerant of certain kinds of corruption such as nepotism than in the West, but is growing tired of political graft". That had "led to an increase in anti-corruption rhetoric, but little change in behaviour". The Assessment stated:

"In May [2009] CI announced that 97 officials were under investigation for graft, including 53 ranked as Directors-General or higher, and that 120 Iraqis had been arrested for corruption in April and May. On 30 May former Trade Minister Sudani was arrested on charges of embezzlement and corruption regarding food imports and rations under the Public Distribution System, which was established in 1995 as part of the UN Oil-for-Food Programme following the 1991 Gulf War."

452. The CIG reported that, in mid-June, the son of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani had urged Prime Minister Maliki to lead the fight against political corruption, believing that corruption and the provision of public services would be the public's fundamental preoccupations in the forthcoming elections.

453. The CIG judged that nepotism and cronyism were "widespread" in Kurdistan, where:

"Lucrative construction contracts are regularly awarded to families of party or regional government officials. Corruption has become a prominent issue in the run up to the KRG parliamentary elections ..."

454. The CIG assessed that corruption also affected governance at regional and local levels. Endemic public sector corruption in Basra had prevented the delivery of social security payments, and health and education services.

455. The CIG also assessed that:

"The lack of effective anti money-laundering and counter-terrorism finance regimes deters foreign financial institutions from doing business with their Iraqi counterparts, and severely cramps the development of the Iraqi financial sector."

456. In the oil sector:

“Corruption within the Oil Ministry acts as a deterrent to some foreign investment. Despite attempts to make bidding processes more transparent, foreign oil companies willing to pay bribes are likely to receive preferential treatment.”

457. The assessment concluded, under the heading “Outlook”, that:

“Corruption is strongly associated with the slow pace of development and reconstruction. These issues resonate with voters. As the January 2010 national elections approach, we judge that Maliki is likely to intensify his policy focus on corruption as a vehicle for popular appeal and as a tool with which to attack political opponents.”

458. On 23 July, a letter from Mr Ainsworth’s Private Secretary to Mr Brown’s Private Secretary for Foreign Affairs explained that further delays in the Iraqi Parliament meant that it was very unlikely that the UK/Iraq defence agreement would be ratified before late September.¹⁸⁵ The Chiefs of Staff had agreed that the UK should begin the temporary withdrawal of the remaining UK military personnel to Kuwait.

459. In parallel the UK would make clear that it was prepared to resume activity ahead of the formal ratification provided that the Iraqi Government issued a clear invitation to the UK for this purpose and explicitly recognise that the UK’s legally binding jurisdictional immunities continued beyond 31 July.

460. Mr Ainsworth’s Private Secretary explained:

“The government-to-government agreement we signed on 6 June has ... been proceeding through the Iraqi parliament and passed its second reading (of three needed) on 7 July. Unfortunately, despite broad support from the main Iraqi political blocs, walk-outs from the Sadrists (who oppose the presence of any foreign troops on Iraqi soil) prevented the agreement from being put to a third reading and vote as planned on 11 and 13 July ... It failed again on 21 July ... because the Iraqi parliament did not reach it before finishing for the day.”

461. The FCO Iraq Policy Team advised Mr Miliband’s Private Secretary that in Baghdad the “Embassy has lobbied key figures to support the agreement throughout, and aside from the Sadrists there is no major organised opposition inside the CoR”.¹⁸⁶ The British Embassy Washington was preparing to lobby Prime Minister Maliki during his visit to the US.

462. Mr Jon Wilks, Chargé d’Affaires at the British Embassy Baghdad, called on Prime Minister Maliki’s Chief of Staff on 27 July to review the position.¹⁸⁷ He explained that UK

¹⁸⁵ Letter Ferguson to Fletcher, 23 July 2009, ‘Iraq: UK Military Presence After 31 July 2009’.

¹⁸⁶ Minute Croker to PS, 22 July 2009, ‘Iraq Update: Defence Agreement’.

¹⁸⁷ Email Wilks to Bowers and Baker, 27 July 2009, ‘UK-Iraq Military Agreement – Call on PM’s Chief of Staff’.

personnel were withdrawing from Iraq to Kuwait for two weeks, after which point they would go on to the UK.

463. Mr Wilks identified two options until the Council of Representatives returned in late September and could again be asked to ratify the agreement:

- a letter from the Iraqi Government extending the UK's previous security agreement for two months; or
- a letter from the Iraqi Government creating a new temporary agreement, for the UK naval training team.

464. Prime Minister Maliki's Chief of Staff recommended writing to Prime Minister Maliki with these proposals.

465. A Cabinet Office official discussed the options with Mr McDonald on the same day, who considered that an extension of the current agreement was the best interim option.¹⁸⁸ He asked that no decision on permanent withdrawal of UK staff be taken before the situation was reviewed at the end of September.

466. Mr Wilks, "emphasising the PM's interest in reaching an interim agreement", delivered a letter proposing the two interim options to Prime Minister Maliki's Chief of Staff on 29 July.¹⁸⁹ He asked whether the UK would consider bringing its training under the agreement signed between the Iraqi Government and NATO. Mr Wilks explained that it would not be feasible to re-open the NATO agreement.

467. Mr Wilks also provided the Cabinet Office with an assessment of the chances for a successful vote in the Council of Representatives in the autumn. He suggested that the prospects looked good – there were indications that a majority of MPs supported the agreement, though also that opponents were consolidating their support. There was a risk that:

"... as negotiations on electoral alliances continue over Ramadan, the Sadrists will make opposition to our agreement a pre-condition for their joining an alliance. This could tip the balance among MPs against our agreement if the Sadrists were to join a large alliance."

468. On 30 July, Sir John Chilcot formally launched the Iraq Inquiry.¹⁹⁰ The full text of Sir John's statement can be read on the Inquiry's website. In it he emphasised the Inquiry's focus on establishing what happened and identifying what lessons can be learned. Sir John said that hearings would be held in public and inquisitorial in nature.

¹⁸⁸ Email Cabinet Office [junior official] to Forber, 28 July 2009, 'Iraq: UK Defence Agreement – Next Steps'.

¹⁸⁹ Email Wilks to Cabinet Office [junior official], 29 July 2009, 'Re: Iraq: UK Defence Agreement – Next Steps'.

¹⁹⁰ Statement Chilcot, 30 July 2009, 'Statement by Sir John Chilcot, Chairman of the Iraq Inquiry, at a news conference on Thursday, 30 July 2009'.

He also described meeting the families of those who died in the conflict as one of the Inquiry's first priorities.

469. Mr Forber advised Mr Hutton's Private Secretary on the way ahead for the defence agreement on 31 July.¹⁹¹ In addition to the two options put forward by Mr Wilks, he identified a third:

"The Government of Iraq and NATO agree that the UK maritime training activity should in future come under the NATO mission."

470. Mr Forber assessed that this option would:

"... not allow for protection of Iraqi oil platforms/territorial waters, it would meet all our requirements for training of the Iraqi navy including jurisdictional immunities – the NATO agreement has slightly better immunities than the UK agreement as we ensured it explicitly included Umm Qasr as a potential location to cover just such an eventuality."

471. On 31 July, Mr McDonald called Prime Minister Maliki's Chief of Staff to press for rapid progress on an interim agreement.¹⁹² He observed that "UK media was portraying this as a problem in our bilateral relationship". Prime Minister Maliki's Chief of Staff said that the Iraq Government would "continue to work on trying to find appropriate ways forward".

August 2009

472. On 5 August, the JIC again considered Iranian influence in Iraq, and Iraq's reaction to it.¹⁹³ It judged:

"Iraq can stand up to Iranian political interference and will begin to reject it as it exercises its sovereignty with increasing confidence. Iraq can also withstand Iranian military interference through its strategic defence agreement with the US, improvement of its armed forces and political accommodation with the Shia militants that Iran supports ...

"In the longer term, Iran's increasing trade and investment are laying the foundations for 'soft power' by establishing dependency in areas where Iraqi and Iranian interests coincide. The planned withdrawal of large numbers of US forces in 2011 will be a particularly testing time for the Iraqi Government and armed forces ...

"Iraqis, even most Shia, consider Iran to be their biggest strategic threat, but many also see Iranian money and investment as an opportunity for personal gain and national economic well-being. Friction between the two countries is inevitable, but

¹⁹¹ Minute Forber to PS/Secretary of State [MOD], 31 July 2009, 'Iraq: UK Defence Agreement'.

¹⁹² Email Wilks to [various], 31 July 2009, 'Iraq: Security Agreement and Hostages: Simon McDonald call on Tariq Abdallah, Maliki's CoS'.

¹⁹³ JIC Assessment, 5 August 2009, 'Can Iraq Stand Up to Iran?'

Iran understands that an Iraq ruled by a Shia government is unlikely to pose a threat to the Iranian regime.”

473. Mr McDonald called Prime Minister Maliki’s Chief Political Adviser on 6 August, and asked whether the Iraqi Government could provide an answer on whether they would extend the former security agreement.¹⁹⁴ Prime Minister Maliki’s Political Adviser said that legal advice was that the Council of Ministers could not do so; the Council of Representatives must agree.

474. In the absence of an agreement, Mr McDonald proposed that four naval trainers and one naval operational commander should be appointed as naval attachés to the British Embassy. Their names had already been submitted through the normal process. Mr McDonald “emphasised this was a key point for us, this matter was entirely in Gol hands, and the signal sent by this would be serious in our eyes”.

475. On 18 August, Mr Hutton’s Private Secretary wrote to Mr Brown’s Assistant Private Secretary with an update on the defence agreement.¹⁹⁵ He explained that the Iraqi Government had made it clear they were not prepared to offer an interim agreement and that all military personnel except five liaison officers in Kuwait had returned to the UK. US teams would take over the UK tasks in approximately late September, but would step aside if the UK/Iraq agreement was signed in October.

476. Mr Prentice had discussed bringing UK activity at Umm Qasr under NATO auspices with the US commander, who was enthusiastic provided it did not breach the 300-person ceiling allowed by the NATO-Iraq agreement. As a result:

“We are now working with the US to identify the minimum number of UK personnel required to do the training task. If the UK/Iraq defence agreement fails to have its third reading by mid-October, US commanders will then go to the Iraqi Defence Minister and invite him to decide whether to incorporate the Umm Qasr activity permanently under NATO (using UK trainers) and accept compensating reductions elsewhere in the NATO establishment.”

477. The Private Secretary added: “Defence Secretary is content with this approach provided that the Government of Iraq explicitly agree and that other NATO allies are also content.”

478. Mr Brown spoke to Prime Minister Maliki on 23 August, and said that the defence agreement was “unfinished business which we trusted could be resolved”.¹⁹⁶ Prime Minister Maliki indicated his support, but suggested that the Iraqi Parliament’s actions were “politically motivated”.

¹⁹⁴ Email Wilks to Cabinet Office [junior official], 6 August 2009, ‘Simon McDonald call on Sadiq al-Rikabi: UK/Iraq Training Agreement’.

¹⁹⁵ Letter Ferguson to Catsaras, 18 August 2009, ‘Iraq: UK Defence Agreement’.

¹⁹⁶ Letter Catsaras to Brooker, 24 August 2009, ‘Prime Minister’s Call with Iraqi Prime Minister, 23 August’.

September/October 2009

479. In early September, Prime Minister Maliki's Chief of Staff informed Mr Wilks that diplomatic status for the five-man naval team had been approved.¹⁹⁷

480. On 15 October, Mr Prentice reported to the FCO in London that the UK-Iraq "training and maritime support agreement" had completed its third and final reading in the Council of Representatives.¹⁹⁸ It passed with 99 votes in favour and 40 against or abstaining.

481. Mr Prentice wrote:

"All the elements of our broad-based relationship are now in place. Symbolically, the ratification by the Iraqi parliament of this agreement confirms the will of a majority of Iraqi political groups to continue a special relationship with the UK, including in the security field."

482. He concluded:

"We are well-placed to be a prime partner for Iraq, as overall security improvements and Iraq's slowly growing political and economic capacity enable it for the first time in the last six years to begin to fulfil its vast potential."

The end of Op TELIC

483. The UK maintained a small national presence in Iraq until 22 May 2011, when the final 81 members of a Royal Navy training team left the country.¹⁹⁹ Op TELIC formally ended with their departure.

484. A small number of UK personnel remained in Iraq working as part of the NATO training mission.

Troop numbers 2003 to 2009

485. The table below records changes in the number of UK troops in Iraq between the start of Op TELIC I in 2003 and the withdrawal of the last UK Service Personnel from Iraq in 2011.

¹⁹⁷ Paper [unattributed], [undated], 'Op Telic PJHQ Chronology 2009'.

¹⁹⁸ eGram 35899/09 Baghdad to FCO London, 15 October 2009, 'UK/Iraq: Training and Maritime Support Agreement Ratified by the CoR, 13 October'.

¹⁹⁹ *BBC News*, 22 May 2011, *UK's Operation Telic mission in Iraq ends*.

Table 3: UK Service personnel deployed to Iraq

Time period		Number of UK Service personnel deployed
Op TELIC I	"March/April" 2003	46,000 ²⁰⁰
	Mid May	25,000-30,000 ²⁰¹
	31 May	18,000 ²⁰²
	11 June	17,000 ²⁰³
	25 June	14,000 ²⁰⁴
	10 July	12,000 ²⁰⁵
Op TELIC II	4 August	10,000 ²⁰⁶
Op TELIC III	17 November	10,500 ²⁰⁷
	29 March 2004	8,827 ²⁰⁸

²⁰⁰ The National Archives, [undated], 'Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures'. The figure includes support staff stationed outside Iraq.

²⁰¹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 30 April 2003, column 16WS. The figure describes UK Service Personnel deployed in the Gulf region.

²⁰² The National Archives, [undated], 'Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures'. The figure describes UK military personnel deployed in Iraq.

²⁰³ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 11 June 2003, column 51WS. The figure describes UK servicemen and women in the Gulf region.

²⁰⁴ House of Lords, *Official Report*, 25 June 2003, column 307. The figure describes the number of personnel in Iraq and Kuwait.

²⁰⁵ Letter Williams to Rycroft, 10 July 2003, 'UK Force Levels in Iraq'. The figure refers to personnel deployed in the Gulf region on activities related to Op TELIC.

²⁰⁶ Letter MOD [junior official] to Rycroft, 4 August 2003, 'Iraq: Force Level Review'. The figure describes the total deployed strength.

²⁰⁷ Ministry of Defence, *Operations in Iraq: Lessons for the Future*, December 2003. The figure describes forces "in theatre" at 17 November 2003.

²⁰⁸ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 29 March 2004, column 1256. The figure refers to Armed Forces personnel serving in Iraq.

Op TELIC IV	31 May	8,600 ²⁰⁹
	17 June	9,200 ²¹⁰
	21 July	8,500 ²¹¹
	21 October	8,500 ²¹²
	25 October	8,100 ²¹³
Op TELIC V	29 November	Just under 9,000 ²¹⁴
	21 January 2005	Some 8,100 ²¹⁵
	7 February	About 8,150 ²¹⁶
Op TELIC VI	25 May	Around 8,100 ²¹⁷
	31 May	8,500 ²¹⁸
	10 October	About 8,500 ²¹⁹
Op TELIC VII	November	Around 8,000 ²²⁰
	9 March 2006	8,000 ²²¹
	13 March	8,000 ²²²

²⁰⁹ The National Archives, [undated], 'Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures'. The figure describes UK military personnel deployed in Iraq.

²¹⁰ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 17 June 2004, column 49WS. The figure includes a net increase of around 270 personnel "in theatre".

²¹¹ House of Lords, *Official Report*, 21 July 2004, column WA45. The figure describes British troops deployed in Iraq.

²¹² House of Lords, *Official Report*, 21 October 2004, column 980. The figure describes "our deployment in Iraq".

²¹³ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 25 October 2004, column 1128. The figure describes UK Armed Forces personnel deployed in Iraq.

²¹⁴ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 29 November 2004, column 343. The figure describes UK troops deployed in Iraq.

²¹⁵ Minute DJC AD Pol 1 to APS/SofS [MOD], 21 January 2005, 'Iraq: Planning for the Replacement of Dutch Forces in Al Muthanna'. The document refers to a further 800 personnel supporting Op TELIC elsewhere.

²¹⁶ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 February 2005, columns 1168-1169. The figure refers to troops in Iraq.

²¹⁷ House of Lords, *Official Report*, 25 May 2005, column WS11. The figure describes troops in Iraq.

²¹⁸ The National Archives, [undated], 'Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures'. The figure describes UK military personnel deployed in Iraq; House of Commons, *Official Report*, 25 May 2005, column 15WS.

²¹⁹ House of Lords, *Official Report*, 10 October 2005, column 35. The figure describes troops in Iraq.

²²⁰ House of Lords, *Official Report*, 10 October 2005, column 35. The figure describes troops in Iraq.

²²¹ Minute SofS [MOD] to Prime Minister, 9 March 2006, 'Iraq: Force Level Review and Announcement'. The figure describes overall numbers of personnel in theatre.

²²² House of Lords, *Official Report*, 13 March 2006, columns 1008-1009. The figure is constructed from description of a reduction of 800 personnel to just over 7,000 British forces in Iraq.

Op TELIC VIII	31 May	7,200 ²²³
	18 July	Approx 7,100 ²²⁴
	September	Approx 7,460 ²²⁵
Op TELIC IX	21 February 2007	7,100 ²²⁶
	31 May	5,500 ²²⁷
Op TELIC X	September	5,500 ²²⁸
		5,200 ²²⁹
	October	5,100 ²³⁰
Op TELIC XI	November	4,500 ²³¹
	December	4,910 ²³²
		4,500 ²³³
Op TELIC XII	7 March 2008	4,100 ²³⁴
	31 May	4,100 ²³⁵
	22 July	4,100 ²³⁶
	13 October	4,100 ²³⁷

²²³ The National Archives, [undated], 'Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures'. The figure describes UK military personnel deployed in Iraq.

²²⁴ House of Lords, *Official Report*, 18 July 2006, column WS83. The figure describes the total number of UK troops in Iraq.

²²⁵ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 11 September 2006, column 111WS; House of Commons, *Official Report*, 10 October 2006, columns 172-173. This figure describes the UK force package, including a temporary deployment of 360 troops between September 2006 and January 2007.

²²⁶ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 21 February 2007, column 264. This figure refers to number of forces.

²²⁷ The National Archives, 'Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures'. The figure describes UK military personnel deployed in Iraq.

²²⁸ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 8 October 2007, column 30. The figure describes troops in Iraq.

²²⁹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 January 2008, column 885W. Figure calculated by subtracting the 300 troops referred to in the table from 5,500.

²³⁰ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 January 2008, column 885W. Figure calculated by subtracting the reduction of 100 troops referred to in the table from 5,200.

²³¹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 January 2008, column 885W. Figure calculated by subtracting the reduction of 600 troops referred to in the table from 5,100.

²³² House of Commons, *Official Report*, 5 December 2007, column 1224W. The figure describes the number of personnel deployed to Iraq.

²³³ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 14 January 2008, column 885W.

²³⁴ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 March 2008, column 2849W. The figure describes UK force levels in southern Iraq.

²³⁵ The National Archives, [undated], 'Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures'. The figure describes UK military personnel deployed in Iraq.

²³⁶ House of Lords, *Official Report*, 22 July 2008, column 1677. The figure describes UK forces in southern Iraq.

²³⁷ *The Times*, 13 October 2008, *Thank You, and Goodbye*.

Op TELIC XIII	2 February 2009	4,350 ²³⁸
	30 March	4,100 ²³⁹
	31 May	4,100 ²⁴⁰
	15 June	Fewer than 500 ²⁴¹
Training Missions	31 January 2010	150 ²⁴²
	January 2010 – 22 May 2011	128 ²⁴³
	23 May 2011 – 31 December 2011	44 ²⁴⁴

²³⁸ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 2 February 2009, columns 869W-870W. The figure describes endorsed force levels for UK military operations in southern Iraq and Baghdad.

²³⁹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 30 March 2009, column 874W. Figure refers to members of the UK forces deployed on land in southern Iraq.

²⁴⁰ The National Archives, 'Operations in Iraq: Facts and Figures'. The figure describes UK military personnel deployed in Iraq.

²⁴¹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 15 June 2009, column 22.

²⁴² The National Archives, [undated], 'Operations in Iraq: British Forces in Iraq'. Figure describes British military personnel in Iraq.

²⁴³ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 18 May 2011, column 19WS; *BBC News*, 22 May 2011, *UK's Operation Telic mission in Iraq ends*. Report states that 128 staff remained in Iraq: 81 Navy trainers; 44 engaged on the NATO Training Mission; and three personnel in Baghdad.

²⁴⁴ *BBC News*, 22 May 2011, *UK's Operation Telic mission in Iraq ends*; www.NATO.int, 1 September 2015, 'NATO in Iraq: the Evolution of NATO's Training Effort in Iraq'.

SECTION 9.8

CONCLUSIONS: THE POST-CONFLICT PERIOD

Contents

Introduction and key findings	470
Objectives and preparation	471
Overview of the post-conflict period	472
Occupation	473
Looting in Basra	473
Looting in Baghdad	474
UK influence on post-invasion strategy	475
Resolution 1483	475
UK influence on the Coalition Provisional Authority	476
A decline in security	479
The turning point	484
Transition	485
UK influence on US strategy post-CPA	485
Planning for withdrawal	485
The impact of Afghanistan	487
Iraqisation	489
Preparation for withdrawal	491
A major divergence in strategy	491
A possible civil war	492
Force Level Review	495
The beginning of the end	498
Did the UK achieve its strategic objectives in Iraq?	499
Issues in the UK system	501
Strategy-making	501
Optimism bias	502
Lessons	503

Introduction and key findings

1. This Section addresses conclusions in relation to evidence of the UK's role after the conflict in Iraq, including:

- the development of UK strategy and deployment plans in response to the changing security situation, particularly in Basra and the South;
- UK influence on the development of a new political system in Iraq; and
- UK influence on US decision-making in relation to Iraq.

2. This Section does not address:

- preparations for the UK's post-conflict role in Iraq, which are covered in Sections 6.4 and 6.5;
- detailed consideration of the de-Ba'athification of Iraqi institutions, which can be found in Section 11;
- the UK role in the reconstruction of Iraq, and the reform of its Security Sector, set out in Sections 10 and 12; and
- the provision of military equipment for use in Iraq, which is covered in Section 14.

Key findings

- Between 2003 and 2009, the UK's most consistent strategic objective in relation to Iraq was to reduce the level of its deployed forces.
- The UK struggled from the start to have a decisive effect on the Coalition Provisional Authority's policies, even though it was fully implicated in its decisions as joint Occupying Power.
- US and UK strategies for Iraq began to diverge almost immediately after the conflict. Although the differences were managed, by early 2007 the UK was finding it difficult to play down the divergence, which was, by that point, striking.
- The UK missed clear opportunities to reconsider its military approach in Multi-National Division (South-East).
- Throughout 2004 and 2005 it appears that senior members of the Armed Forces reached the view that little more would be achieved in MND(SE) and that it would make more sense to concentrate military effort on Afghanistan where it might have greater effect.
- From July 2005 onwards, decisions in relation to resources for Iraq were made under the influence of the demands of the UK effort in Afghanistan. Although Iraq remained the stated UK main effort, the Government no longer had the option of a substantial reinforcement of its forces there.
- The UK's plans to reduce troop levels depended on the transition of lead responsibility for security to the Iraqi Security Forces, even as the latter's ability to take on that responsibility was in question.

- The UK spent time and energy on rewriting strategies, which tended to describe a desired end state without setting out how it would be reached.
- UK forces withdrew from Iraq in 2009 in circumstances which did not meet objectives defined in January 2003.

Objectives and preparation

3. Before the invasion began, the UK defined ambitious objectives for Iraq after the removal of Saddam Hussein and his regime from power.

4. The UK's strategic objectives for Iraq were described by Mr Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, in a Written Ministerial Statement on 7 January 2003. The objectives included the following definition of the UK's desired end state:

"We would like Iraq to become a stable, united and law abiding state, within its present borders, co-operating with the international community, no longer posing a threat to its neighbours or to international security, abiding by all its international obligations and providing effective and representative government to its own people."¹

5. At the Azores Summit on 16 March, Mr Blair, President Bush and Mr José María Aznar, the Prime Minister of Spain, declared in the 'Vision for Iraq and the Iraqi People':

"We will work to prevent and repair damage by Saddam Hussein's regime to the natural resources of Iraq and pledge to protect them as a national asset of and for the Iraqi people. All Iraqis should share the wealth generated by their national economy ...

"In achieving this vision, we plan to work in close partnership with international institutions, including the United Nations ... If conflict occurs, we plan to seek the adoption, on an urgent basis, of new United Nations Security Council resolutions that would affirm Iraq's territorial integrity, ensure rapid delivery of humanitarian relief, and endorse an appropriate post-conflict administration for Iraq. We will also propose that the Secretary General be given authority, on an interim basis, to ensure that the humanitarian needs of the Iraqi people continue to be met through the Oil-for-Food program.

"Any military presence, should it be necessary, will be temporary and intended to promote security and elimination of weapons of mass destruction; the delivery of humanitarian aid; and the conditions for the reconstruction of Iraq. Our commitment to support the people of Iraq will be for the long term."²

¹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 7 January 2003, column 4WS.

² Statement of the Atlantic Summit, 16 March 2003, 'A Vision for Iraq and the Iraqi People'.

6. As described in Sections 6.4 and 6.5, the UK's pre-invasion planning and preparation for its role in the Occupation of Iraq was not sufficient to deliver these ambitious objectives, in part because the UK had placed a great deal of reliance on planning by the US, as the lead member of the Coalition.

7. Many of the difficulties which the Coalition encountered after the successful military campaign had been, or could have been, foreseen. After facing those difficulties during his six-month posting in Baghdad, in March 2004 Sir Jeremy Greenstock concluded:

“The preparations for the post-conflict stage were abject; wrong analysis, wrong people ...”³

8. The UK hoped that, once the fighting had ceased, the UN would take a leading role in the reconstruction operation, including the establishment of an Iraqi Government, facilitating the arrival of resources from the international community and in particular from nations which had not contributed to the military Coalition.

9. The UK recognised that it would have responsibility for the area of southern Iraq controlled by its forces. It aspired to manage the post-conflict response in that region in such a way that it would be considered “exemplary” in relation to the rest of Iraq, drawing on resources provided by other nations.

10. Although officials had warned that knowledge of conditions within Iraq was incomplete, it was assumed that Iraq would have a functioning civil service, criminal justice system and security forces which, after the removal of Ba’athist leadership, would all play their part in its reconstruction.

Overview of the post-conflict period

11. After the invasion force had rapidly brought down Saddam Hussein’s regime, the UK’s six-year engagement in Iraq fell into three broad phases, which the Inquiry has used to provide a simplified framework for describing events:

- **Occupation – March 2003 to June 2004:** during which the UK was formally a joint Occupying Power alongside the US, and Iraq was governed by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA);
- **Transition – June 2004 to the end of 2005:** characterised by the increasing power of Iraqi politicians and institutions, and ending with elections and the formation of the Maliki Government; and
- **Preparation for withdrawal – 2006 to 2009:** during which period the UK sought to transfer its remaining responsibilities in Multi-National Division (South-East) (MND(SE)) to Iraqi forces so that it could withdraw its remaining troops.

³ Telegram 109 IraqRep to FCO London, 26 March 2004, ‘Iraq Valedictory: Six Months in the Cauldron’.

12. In each phase, the UK had dual responsibilities in Iraq: it contributed to the overall direction of the Coalition's strategy and to those activities which took place at a national level, and also led the international effort in MND(SE), comprising the provinces of Basra, Dhi Qar, Maysan and Muthanna. From the outset, the UK placed particular emphasis on Basra province, and its capital – Iraq's second city.

13. This Section considers the UK's dual responsibilities in each phase.

Occupation

Looting in Basra

14. As described in Section 8, UK forces entered Basra City on the night of 6/7 April 2003 and rapidly gained control, meeting less resistance than anticipated. Once the city was under its control, the UK was responsible, as the Occupying Power, for maintenance of law and order. Within its predominantly Shia Area of Operations, the UK assumed that risks to Coalition Forces would be lower than in the so-called "Sunni triangle" controlled by the US.

15. Before the invasion, the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) and the Defence Intelligence Staff had each identified that there was a risk of lawlessness breaking out in Iraq, and that it would be important to deal with it swiftly. Others, including Mr Blair, Sir Kevin Tebbit (the MOD Permanent Under Secretary) and the Iraq Policy Unit had recognised the seriousness of that risk.

16. However, the formal authorisation for action in Iraq issued by Admiral Sir Michael Boyce, Chief of the Defence Staff, on 18 March contained no instruction on how to establish a safe and secure environment if lawlessness broke out as anticipated. Although it was known that Phase IV (the military term for post-conflict operations) would begin quickly, no Rules of Engagement for that phase, including for dealing with lawlessness, were created and promulgated before UK troops entered the country.

17. Both before and during the invasion Lieutenant General John Reith, the Chief of Joint Operations, made the absence of instructions to UK forces covering what to do if faced with lawless behaviour by the Iraqi population in Basra explicit to the Chiefs of Staff.

18. Faced with widespread looting after the invasion, and without instructions, UK commanders had to make their own judgements about what to do. Brigadier Graham Binns, commanding 7 Armoured Brigade which had taken Basra City, told the Inquiry that he had concluded that "the best way to stop looting was just to get to a point where there was nothing left to loot".⁴

⁴ Private hearing, 2 June 2010, page 11.

19. Although the implementation of tactical plans to deal with lawlessness was properly the responsibility of in-theatre commanders, it was the responsibility of the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Chief of Joint Operations to ensure that appropriate Rules of Engagement were set, and preparations made, to equip commanders on the ground to deal with it effectively. They should have ensured that those steps were taken.

20. The impact of looting was felt primarily by the Iraqi population rather than by Coalition Forces. The latter initially experienced a “honeymoon period”,⁵ although the situation was far from stabilised.

21. Lt Gen Reith anticipated that UK forces could be reduced to a medium scale effort by the autumn, when he expected the campaign to have reached “some form of ‘steady-state’”.⁶

22. The JIC correctly judged on 16 April that the local population had high hopes that the Coalition would rapidly improve their lives and that “resentment of the Coalition ... could grow quickly if it is seen to be ineffective, either politically or militarily. Such resentment could lead to violence.”⁷

23. By the end of April, Mr Geoff Hoon, the Defence Secretary, had announced that UK troop levels would fall to between 25,000 and 30,000 by the middle of May, from an initial peak of around 46,000.

24. Consequently, by the start of May there was a clearly articulated expectation of a rapid drawdown of UK forces by the autumn despite the identified risk that the consent of the local population was built on potentially vulnerable foundations, which could be undermined rapidly and with serious consequences.

Looting in Baghdad

25. In the absence of a functioning Iraqi police force and criminal justice system, and without a clear Coalition Phase IV plan, looting and score-settling became a serious problem in Baghdad soon after the regime fell. The looting of ministry buildings and damage to state-owned infrastructure in particular added to the challenges of the Occupation.

26. Reflecting in June 2004, Mr David Richmond, the Prime Minister’s Special Representative on Iraq from March to June 2004, judged that the failure to crack down on looting in Baghdad in April 2003 released “a crime wave which the Coalition has never been able to bring fully under control”.⁸

⁵ Public hearing Walker, 1 February 2010, page 16.

⁶ Minute Reith to SECCOS, 14 April 2003, ‘Phase 4: Roulement/Recovery of UK Forces’ attaching Paper CJO, 14 April 2003, ‘Phase 4 – Roulement/Recovery of UK Land Forces’.

⁷ JIC Assessment, 16 April 2003, ‘Iraq: The Initial Landscape Post-Saddam’.

⁸ Telegram 359 IraqRep to FCO London, 28 June 2004, ‘Iraq: Valedictory: The End of Occupation’.

27. After visiting Iraq in early May 2003, General Sir Mike Jackson, Chief of the General Staff, observed:

“A security vacuum still exists [in Baghdad] ... particularly at night. Looting, revenge killing and subversive activities are rife ... Should a bloody and protracted insurgency establish itself in Baghdad, then a ripple effect is likely to occur.”⁹

28. Gen Jackson recognised that the UK’s ability to maintain the consent of the population in the South depended on a stable and secure Baghdad, and advised:

“The bottom line is that if we choose not to influence Baghdad we must be confident of the US ability to improve [its tactics] before tolerance is lost and insurgency sets in.”

29. Gen Jackson, Major General David Richards (Assistant Chief of the General Staff) and Lieutenant General Sir Anthony Pigott (Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Commitments)) all offered advice in favour of deploying the UK’s 16 Air Assault Brigade to Baghdad to support Coalition efforts to retrain Iraqi police officers and get them back on patrol.

30. However, the Chiefs of Staff collectively considered that the benefits of making a contribution to the security of Baghdad were outweighed by the risk that UK troops would be “tied down” outside the UK’s Area of Responsibility, with adverse impact, and advised on 21 May against deploying 16 Air Assault Brigade. The Chiefs of Staff did not conclude that the tasks it was proposed that 16 Air Assault Brigade should undertake were unnecessary, but rather that US troops would complete them.

UK influence on post-invasion strategy

RESOLUTION 1483

31. On 21 March 2003, the day after the start of the invasion, Mr Jonathan Powell and Sir David Manning, two of Mr Blair’s closest advisers, offered him advice on how to influence the post-invasion US agenda. Key among their concerns was the need for post-conflict administrative arrangements to have the legitimacy conferred by UN endorsement. Such UK plans for the post-conflict period as had been developed relied on the deployment of an international reconstruction effort to Iraq. Controversy surrounding the launch of the invasion made that challenging to deliver; the absence of UN endorsement would make it close to impossible.

32. Discussion between the US and UK on the content of a new UN Security Council resolution began the same day. Resolution 1483 (2003) was eventually adopted on 22 May.

⁹ Minute CGS to CDS, 13 May 2003, ‘CGS Visit to Op. TELIC 7-10 May 2003’.

33. US and UK objectives for the resolution were different, and in several substantive respects the text of resolution 1483 differed from the UK's preferred position.

34. The UK wanted oil revenues to be controlled by an Iraqi body, or failing that by the UN or World Bank, in line with the pre-invasion promise to use them exclusively for the benefit of Iraq. Instead, resolution 1483 placed the power to spend the Development Fund for Iraq into the hands of the CPA, overseen by a monitoring board. That was in line with US objectives, but did not address UK concerns.

35. The UK considered that an Interim Iraqi Administration should have real powers, and not be subordinate to the CPA. Resolution 1483 said that the CPA would retain its responsibilities until an internationally recognised representative government was established. The text did not go so far as to require an interim administration to report formally to the CPA, as the US wished, but that was in effect how the relationship between the CPA and the Governing Council established by resolution 1483 operated.

36. The UK's policy position was that the UN should take the lead in establishing the Interim Iraqi Administration. Resolution 1483 gave the UN a role working with the people of Iraq and the CPA, but did not give it the lead. Evidence considered by the Inquiry suggests that there was consistent reluctance on the part of the UN to take on such a role and the UK position was therefore not wholly realistic.

37. Resolution 1483 formally designated the UK and US as joint Occupying Powers in Iraq. It also set the conditions for the CPA's dominance over post-invasion strategy and policy by handing it control of funding for reconstruction and influence on political development at least equal to that of the UN.

UK INFLUENCE ON THE COALITION PROVISIONAL AUTHORITY

38. By the time resolution 1483 was adopted, the CPA was already operating in Iraq under the leadership of Ambassador L Paul Bremer, reporting to Mr Donald Rumsfeld, the US Defense Secretary. There was no reporting line from the CPA to the UK.

39. The resolution's designation of the US and UK as joint Occupying Powers did not reflect the reality of the Occupation. The UK contribution to the CPA's effort was much smaller than that of the US and was particularly concerned with Basra.

40. The UK took an early decision to concentrate its effort in one geographical area rather than accept a national lead for a particular element of the Coalition effort (such as police reform). However, it was inevitable that Iraq's future would be determined in Baghdad, as both the administrative centre and the place where the power shift from minority Sunni rule to majority Shia rule was going to be most keenly felt. Having decided to concentrate its effort on an area some distance removed from the capital, the UK's ability to influence policy under debate in Baghdad was curtailed.

41. In Baghdad itself, the UK provided only a small proportion of the staff for the military and civilian headquarters. The low numbers were influenced in part by reasonable

concerns about the personal legal liabilities of UK staff working initially in the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance and then in the CPA, and what their deployment might imply about the UK's responsibility for decisions made by those organisations, in the absence of formal consultation or the right of veto.

42. The pre-invasion focus on a leading UN role in Iraq meant that little thought had been given to the status of UK personnel during an occupation which followed an invasion without Security Council authorisation. Better planning, including proper assessment of a variety of different possible scenarios, would have allowed such issues to be worked through at a much earlier stage.

43. There was an urgent need for suitably experienced UK officials ready to deploy to Baghdad, but they had not been identified (see Section 15).

44. No governance arrangements were designed before the invasion which might have enabled officials and Ministers based in London and Washington to manage the implications of a joint occupation involving separate resources of a very different scale. Such arrangements would have provided a means to identify and resolve different perspectives on policy, and to facilitate joint decisions.

45. Once the CPA had been established, policy decisions were made largely in Baghdad, where there was also no formal US/UK governance structure. This created a risk described to the Inquiry by Sir Michael Wood, FCO Legal Adviser from 2001 to 2006, as “the UK being held jointly responsible for acts or omissions of the CPA, without a right to consult and a right of joint decision”.¹⁰

46. To manage that risk, the UK proposed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the US to establish procedures for working together on issues related to the Occupation, but it could not be agreed. Having supplied the overwhelming majority of the CPA's resources, the US had little incentive to give the UK an influential role in deciding how those resources were to be used, and the UK lacked the will and leverage to insist.

47. In the absence of formal arrangements, there was a clear risk that the UK would be inadequately involved in important decisions, and the UK struggled from the start to have a significant effect on the CPA's policies. This was a source of concern to both Ministers and officials in 2003, but the issue was never resolved.

48. Senior individuals deployed to Iraq by the UK at this time saw themselves either as working for the CPA in support of its objectives and as part of its chain of command, or as UK representatives within the CPA with a remit to seek to influence CPA decisions. No-one formally represented the UK position within the CPA decision-making process, a serious weakness which should have been addressed at an early stage.

¹⁰ Statement Wood, 15 March 2011, page 22.

49. Managing a joint occupation of such size and complexity effectively and coherently required regular formal and informal discussion and clear decision-making at all levels, both between capitals and in-country. Once attempts to agree an MOU had failed, the chances of constructing such mechanisms were slim.

50. In the absence of an MOU with the US, the UK's influence in Baghdad depended heavily on the personal impact of successive Special Representatives and British Ambassadors to Iraq and the relationships they were able to build with senior US figures.

51. Some instances of important CPA decisions in which the UK played little or no formal part were:

- The decision to issue CPA Order No.2, which “dissolved” (or disbanded) a number of military and other security entities that had operated as part of Saddam Hussein’s regime, including the armed forces (see Section 12). This was raised informally by Ambassador Bremer in his first meeting with Mr John Sawers, Mr Blair’s Special Representative on Iraq, who – unbriefed – did not at that point take a contrary position. The concept of creating a new army had also been raised by Mr Walt Slocombe, CPA Senior Adviser on National Security and Defense, in discussion with Mr Hoon. Dissolution was a key decision which was to have a significant effect on the alienation of the Sunni community and the development of an insurgency in Iraq, and the terms and timing of this important Order should have been approved by both Washington and London.
- Decisions on how to spend the Development Fund for Iraq, which resolution 1483 gave the CPA the power to make. CPA Regulation No.2 subsequently vested Ambassador Bremer with control of the Fund, effectively placing it under US control. This exacerbated concerns about the under-resourcing of CPA(South) as expressed in Mr Straw’s letter to Mr Blair of 5 June 2003 (see Section 10.1).
- The creation of the Iraqi Central Bank as an independent body in July 2003 (see Sections 9.2 and 10.1). This came as a surprise to the UK despite the close involvement of officials from the Treasury in arrangements for Iraq’s new currency and budget.
- The creation of a new Iraqi Central Criminal Court (see Section 9.2), the announcement of which UK officials could not delay for long enough to enable the Attorney General to give his view on its legality under the terms of resolution 1483.
- Production of the CPA’s ‘Vision for Iraq’ and ‘Achieving the Vision’ (see Sections 9.2 and 10.1). Mr Sawers alerted the FCO to the first document on 6 July when it was already at an advanced stage of drafting, and by 18 July it had been signed off by the Pentagon. No formal UK approval was sought for a document which was intended to provide strategic direction to the Coalition’s non-military effort in Iraq.

52. UK involvement in CPA decisions about the scope and implementation of de-Ba'athification policy is considered in Section 11.2.

53. In some areas, the UK was able to affect CPA policy through the influence that Mr Sawers or his successor Sir Jeremy Greenstock exerted on senior US officials. Both used their diplomatic experience to build connections with Iraqi politicians and contribute to the political development of Iraq. Instances of UK influence included:

- Mr Sawers' involvement in the plans for an Interim Iraqi Administration, in respect of which he considered that "much of the thinking is ours".¹¹
- Sir Jeremy Greenstock's "two chickens, two eggs" plan, which overcame political stalemate between the CPA and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani on how the new Iraqi Constitution should be created. The plan led to the 15 November Agreement which set the timetable for transfer of sovereignty to a transitional administration by 30 June 2004.
- Ensuring that negotiations on the content of the Transitional Administrative Law reached a successful conclusion. Sir Jeremy Greenstock told the Inquiry that he had prevented the Kurdish delegation from leaving, "which Bremer wasn't aware of".¹²
- The level of female representation in Iraq's new political structures, including the 25 percent "goal" for members of the National Assembly set by the Transitional Administrative Law, which the UK pursued with some success.

54. In the absence of decision-making arrangements in which the UK had a formal role, too much reliance was placed on communication between Mr Blair and President Bush, one of the very small number of ways of influencing US policy. Some issues were addressed by this route: for instance, using his regular conversations with President Bush, Mr Blair was able, with some success, to urge caution in relation to the US operation in Fallujah in April 2004.

55. But the channel of communication between Prime Minister and President should be reserved for the most strategic and most intractable issues. It is not the right mechanism for day-to-day policy-making or an effective way of making tactical decisions.

56. It is impossible to say whether a greater and more formal UK input to CPA decisions would have led to better outcomes. But it is clear that the UK's ability to influence decisions made by the CPA was not commensurate with its responsibilities as joint Occupying Power.

A decline in security

57. From early June 2003, and throughout the summer, there were signs that security in both Baghdad and the South was deteriorating. The MOD's Strategic Planning

¹¹ Telegram 028 IraqRep to FCO London, 1 June 2003, 'Iraq: Political Process'.

¹² Private hearing, 26 May 2010, page 64.

Group warned that “more organised opposition to the Coalition may be emerging”¹³ as discontent about the Coalition’s failure to deliver a secure environment began to grow in the Iraqi population.

58. The extent of the decline in Baghdad and central Iraq overshadowed the decline in MND(SE). Food shortages and the failure of essential services such as the supply of electricity and water, plus lack of progress in the political process, however, began to erode the relationship between UK forces and the local population. The deterioration was exemplified by attacks on UK forces in Majar al-Kabir in Maysan province on 22 and 24 June.

59. As the summer wore on, authoritative sources in the UK, such as the JIC, began to identify issues with the potential to escalate into conflict and to recognise the likelihood that extremist groups would become more co-ordinated. The constraint imposed on reconstruction activities by the lack of security began to be apparent. Mr Sawers and Sir David Manning expressed concern about whether the UK had sufficient troops deployed in MND(SE), and about the permeability of Maysan’s substantial border with Iran.

60. From early July, security was seen in Whitehall as the key concern and was raised by Mr Blair with President Bush.

61. A circular analysis began to develop, in which progress on reconstruction required security to be improved, and improved security required the consent generated by reconstruction activity. Lieutenant General Robert Fry, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff (Commitments), reported “a decline in Iraqi consent to the Coalition in MND(SE) due to the failure by the Coalition to deliver improvements in essential services” and that Shia leaders were warning of a short grace period before further significant deterioration.

62. By the autumn of 2003, violence was escalating in Baghdad and attacks were becoming more sophisticated. Attacks on the UN in August and September, which injured and killed a number of UN officials including the UN Special Representative for Iraq, prompted some organisations to withdraw their international staff. Although Basra was less turbulent than the capital, the risk of a ripple effect from Baghdad – as identified by Gen Jackson in May – remained.

63. The JIC assessed on 3 September that the security environment would probably worsen over the year ahead. There had been a number of serious attacks on the Coalition in MND(SE), and Islamic “extremists/terrorists”¹⁴ were expected to remain a long-term threat in Iraq. The UK’s military and civilian representatives on the ground were reporting a growing insurgency in central Iraq.

¹³ Minute SECCOS to PSO/CDS, 10 June 2003, ‘OP COS Paper: UK contribution to Iraq: strategic intent and direction’ attaching Paper SPG, 9 June 2003, ‘UK contribution to Iraq: strategic intent and direction’.

¹⁴ JIC Assessment, 3 September 2003, ‘Iraq: Threats to Security’.

64. Despite that evidence, military planning under the leadership of General Sir Michael Walker, Chief of the Defence Staff, proceeded on the basis that the situation in Basra would remain relatively benign.

65. The Inquiry considers that a deterioration in security could and should have been identified by Lt Gen Reith by the end of August 2003 and that the cumulative evidence of a deteriorating security situation should have led him to conclude that the underlying assumptions on which the UK's Iraq campaign was based were over-optimistic, and to instigate a review of the scale of the UK's military effort in Iraq.

66. There were a number of issues that might have been examined by such a review, including:

- whether the UK had sufficient resources in MND(SE) to deal with a worsening security situation; and
- whether the UK should engage outside MND(SE) in the interests of Iraq's overall stability (as had been advocated by Gen Jackson, Maj Gen Richards and Lt Gen Pigott).

67. No such review took place.

68. There was a strong case for reinforcing MND(SE) so that it could handle its high-priority tasks (providing essential security for reconstruction projects, protecting existing infrastructure, guarding key sites and improving border security to inhibit the import of arms from Iran) effectively in changing circumstances. Those tasks all demanded a higher level of manpower than was available. Although additional military personnel were deployed in September 2003, mainly to fill existing gaps in support for reconstruction activities, their numbers were far too small to have a significant impact.

69. The failure to consider the option of reinforcement at this time was a serious omission and Lt Gen Reith and Gen Walker should have ensured that UK force levels in MND(SE) were formally reconsidered in autumn 2003 or at the latest by the end of the year. Increases in UK force levels in order to address the security situation should have been recommended to Ministers. Any opportunity to regain the initiative and pre-empt further deterioration in the security situation was lost.

70. In October, Sir Jeremy Greenstock reported that Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, Commander of Combined Joint Task Force-7, had “come to recognise that Coalition operations are at a standstill and that there is a need to regain momentum”.¹⁵ Doubts started to build about the chances of credible elections based on a legitimate constitution in the course of 2004 and work began to look for alternatives to the plan set out by Ambassador Bremer. The “bloodiest 48-hour period in Baghdad since March”,¹⁶

¹⁵ Telegram 230 IraqRep to FCO London, 24 October 2003, ‘Iraq: Security Update’.

¹⁶ Telegram 1426 Washington to FCO London, 28 October 2003, ‘Iraq: US Views 28 October’.

including an attack on the al-Rashid Hotel in Baghdad's Green Zone, was sufficient to convince some that a pivotal point in the security situation had been reached.

71. When President Bush visited London in November, Mr Blair provided him with a paper written by Sir Jeremy Greenstock which argued that security should be the highest priority in the run-up to June 2004, when the Iraqi Transitional Government would take power. Sir Jeremy suggested that troop levels should be looked at again and highlighted "the dangers we face if we do not get a grip on the security situation" as a topic that President Bush and Mr Blair needed to discuss in stark terms.

72. The constraints within which the UK was operating as a result of the limited scale of forces deployed in Iraq were articulated clearly for the Chiefs of Staff in December. Lt Gen Fry argued that a strategy of "early effect"¹⁷ was needed which prioritised campaign success. Operation TELIC was the UK "Main Effort", but deploying additional resources in a way that was compliant with the Defence Planning Assumptions would require the withdrawal of resources from other operations.

73. On 1 January 2004, Sir Jeremy Greenstock wrote bluntly: "This theatre remains a security crisis."¹⁸

74. Despite mounting evidence of violent insurgency, the UK's policy of military drawdown in Iraq continued. After force levels had been reviewed in January, the rationale for continued drawdown was based on adjusted criteria by which the success of Security Sector Reform would be judged, meaning that such reform would be implemented "only to applicable standards for Iraq".¹⁹

Sectarianism

The UK's approach to the development of new political structures for Iraq assumed the need for an Iraqi Government that was as inclusive and representative as possible. A more representative government was bound to reflect the views of the Shia majority more closely. This created a risk of reprisals against members of the minority Sunni community, of which Saddam Hussein was a member, after many years in which they had dominated Iraq.

The UK sought to minimise the opportunities for reprisals and to ensure balance, supported by the JIC's assessment that "disaffected Sunni Arabs – not necessarily connected to the former regime – who fear Shia domination and are frustrated by lack of money and jobs"²⁰ were a potential source of resistance to the Coalition.

¹⁷ Minute DCDS(C) to COSSEC, 5 December 2003, 'Op TELIC – Review of UK Military Strategy for Iraq'.

¹⁸ Telegram 337 IraqRep to FCO London, 1 January 2004, 'Iraq: Six Final Months of Occupation'.

¹⁹ Minute Reith to PSO/CDS, 29 January 2004, 'Op TELIC Force Level Review – Jan 04'.

²⁰ JIC Assessment, 31 March 2004, 'Iraq Security: Prospects'.

Concerns about a lack of balance led to a focus on constitutional arrangements founded on proportional representation for Shia, Sunni, Kurdish and minority groups, based on the assumption that those belonging to one confessional or ethnic group could only be represented fairly by a member of the same group.

The electoral system that developed led to the dominance in government of Islamist parties such as Dawa and SCIRI from 2005, although UK would have preferred a moderate secular leader. The UK sought to compensate for the political dominance of Shia parties by encouraging active outreach to the Sunni community.

The Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) agreed by the Governing Council on 1 March 2004 intended that the National Assembly would have “fair representation” for all Iraq’s communities. The UK thought of the TAL as a power-sharing arrangement, but it could not deliver the change of mindset needed to embed genuine sharing of power, notably a majority willing to listen to the representatives of minority groups.

As described in Section 11.1, the TAL prevented senior Ba’athists from standing for election unless they had been successful in an appeal to the de-Ba’athification Commission, and stipulated that “full” members must renounce the Ba’ath Party. Both measures would mainly affect the Sunni community, and reflected anxiety about a Ba’athist resurgence.

A key UK objective for the new Iraqi Constitution which would replace the TAL was to protect the provision that three provinces voting against it would constitute a veto. Originally considered to be protecting Kurdish interests, after the January 2005 elections this was also seen an important safeguard for the Sunni community, which had turned out in very low numbers to vote on membership of the Transitional National Assembly (TNA) that would draft the Constitution.

In October 2005, the Constitution was approved. Like the TAL, it placed restrictions on Ba’athists, and the party was banned from participation in “political pluralism in Iraq”.

Although it contained a range of rights and liberties guaranteeing equality before the law and the right to liberty, the Constitution left some divisive issues unresolved. In particular, the text did not make explicit how Iraq’s oil and gas reserves would be managed by the federal government “with the producing governorates and regional governments”; it left the question of Kirkuk for a referendum; and – despite containing clear statements about the right to freedom of worship – stated in Article 1 that “No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam”.

The Constitution continued to reinforce the need for strict confessional/ethnic balance. In relation to the Council of Representatives, the federal legislature, it said that “the representation of all components of the people shall be upheld in it”. Regarding the Iraqi Security Forces, it said they would be “composed of the components of the Iraqi people, with due consideration given to their balance and representation without discrimination or exclusion”.

In recognition of limited Sunni involvement in its drafting, the Constitution provided for a committee comprising members of the Council of Representatives “representing the principal components of the Iraqi society” to recommend amendments.

The combination of ambiguity and an ongoing process may have convinced many Iraqi communities to support the Constitution, but the failure to resolve some fundamental issues helped to aggravate increasingly sectarian divisions.

The turning point

75. February 2004 was the worst month for Coalition casualties since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. More than 200 people, mainly Iraqi citizens, were killed in suicide attacks. Attacks on the Iraqi Security Forces were increasing and concerns about Islamic extremists operating in Iraq began to grow. By the end of March, more than 200 attacks targeting Iraqi citizens were being reported each week.

76. In April, there was a sudden escalation in attacks by the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) in Basra, described by the General Officer Commanding MND(SE) as "like a switch had been flicked".²¹ In Fallujah, a US offensive which followed the ambush and murder of four security contractors provoked an angry response from the Sunni community.

77. The significant worsening of security, coupled with revelations of abuse by members of the US military of Iraqi detainees held in Abu Ghraib prison, led many of the Inquiry's witnesses to conclude that the spring of 2004 had been a turning point.

78. At the end of April, Mr Blair's analysis was that the key issue in Iraq was not multi-faceted, rather it was "simple: security".²²

79. Despite the failing security situation in MND(SE) in spring 2004, Gen Walker was explicit that no additional troops were required for the tasks currently assigned to the UK.

80. The Chiefs of Staff maintained the view they had originally reached in November 2003, that HQ Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) should not be actively considered for deployment to Iraq, even though:

- Iraq was a higher priority for the UK than Afghanistan;
- security in Iraq was clearly worsening and had been identified by Mr Blair as the key issue; and
- there had been a specific US request for deployment of HQ ARRC.

²¹ Public hearing Lamb, 9 December 2009, pages 67-68.

²² Letter Rycroft to Owen, 26 April 2004, 'Iraq: 15 Reports for the Prime Minister'.

Transition

UK influence on US strategy post-CPA

81. In June 2004, the US and UK ceased to be Occupying Powers in Iraq and the CPA was disbanded. Responsibility for day-to-day interaction on civil affairs with the Iraqi Interim Government passed to the newly appointed British and US Ambassadors.

82. After the handover, the UK's priorities were to maintain the momentum of the political process towards elections in January 2005, and to ensure that the conditions for the drawdown of its forces were achieved.

83. Mr Blair and President Bush continued to discuss Iraq on a regular basis. It continued to be the case that relatively small issues were raised to this level. The UK took false comfort that it was involved in US decision-making from the strength of that relationship.

84. Themes which Mr Blair emphasised to President Bush included the acceleration of Security Sector Reform and the Iraqiisation of security, UN engagement, better outreach to the Sunni community (often referred to as “reconciliation”), provision of direct support to Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and better use of local media to transmit a positive message about the coalition's intentions and actions.

Planning for withdrawal

85. By July 2004, the UK envisaged that, providing the necessary criteria were met, there would be a gradual reduction in troop numbers during 2005 leading to final withdrawal in 2006, to be followed by a period of “Strategic Overwatch”.

86. The most important of the criteria that would enable coalition troops to withdraw was the ability of the Iraqi Security Forces to take the lead on security (Iraqiisation). Having recognised that a stable and secure environment was the key factor on which progress in Iraq depended, by May 2004 the UK solution was “a better and quicker plan for building Iraqi capacity in the Police, Civil Defence Corps, the Army and the Intelligence Service”.²³ This made sense in the long term but was unlikely to meet the requirement to regain control of Iraq rapidly in the face of a mounting insurgency. Reform of the Iraqi Security Forces is addressed in detail in Section 12.

87. By mid-August, the level of attacks against coalition forces had matched the previous peak in April of the same year. In September, Lieutenant General John McColl (Senior British Military Representative – Iraq) judged that the Iraqi Security Forces would not be able to take full responsibility for security before 2006.

88. In September 2004, Gen Walker received a well-argued piece of advice from Lt Gen McColl which made clear that the conditions on which decisions on drawdown

²³ Letter Bowen to Baker, 13 May 2004, ‘Iraq: Security’.

were to be based were unlikely to be met in the near future. Despite the warnings in Lt Gen McColl's paper and his advice that "the time is right for the consideration of the substantive issues",²⁴ the Chiefs of Staff, chaired by Gen Walker, declined to engage in a substantive review of UK options.

89. The Inquiry recognises that the scale of the resources which the UK might have deployed to deal with the issues was substantially less than the US could bring to bear. It is possible that the UK may not have been able to make a real difference, when the key strategic change that might have affected the outcome was the deployment of a much larger force. But proper consideration ought to have been given to what options were available, including for the deployment of additional personnel. Mr Straw raised the need for such a debate with Mr Blair in October.

90. The UK had consistently resisted US requests to deploy additional personnel, which Lt Gen McColl described as having "chipped away at the US/UK relationship",²⁵ but in October it was agreed that the Black Watch would be deployed to North Babil for 30 days to backfill US forces needed for operations in Fallujah. Approximately 350 personnel from 1st Battalion, the Royal Highland Fusiliers were also deployed to Iraq to provide additional security across MND(SE) during the election period in January and February 2005. The UK remained reluctant to commit any further forces in the longer term: when Dutch forces withdrew from Muthanna province, the UK instead redeployed forces from elsewhere in MND(SE) plus a small amount of additional logistic support.

91. In January 2005, Lt Gen Fry produced a thoughtful and realistic assessment of the prospects for security in Iraq, observing that "we are not on track to deliver the Steady State Criteria (SSC) before the UN mandate expires, or even shortly thereafter".²⁶ He judged that "only additional military effort by the MNF-I [Multi-National Force – Iraq] as a whole" might be able to get the campaign back on track. Lt Gen Fry identified three possible courses of action for the UK: increasing the UK scale of effort, maintaining the status quo or, if it were judged that the campaign was irretrievable, accepting failure and seeking to mitigate UK liability.

92. The Inquiry endorses Lt Gen Fry's assessment of the options open to the UK at this point and considers that full and proper consideration should have been given to each option by the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee (DOP).

93. In his advice to Mr Blair on 21 January, Gen Walker did not expose the assessment made by Lt Gen Fry that only additional military effort by the MNF-I might be able to get the campaign back on track.

94. On 30 January, elections for the Transitional National Assembly and Provincial Assemblies took place across Iraq. Security arrangements involved 130,000 personnel

²⁴ Minute McColl to CDS and CJO, 26 September 2004, 'Report 130 of 26 Sep 04'.

²⁵ Report McColl to CDS and CJO, 20 October 2004, 'SBMR-I Hauldown Report – Lt Gen McColl'.

²⁶ Minute DCDS(C) to APS 2/SofS [MOD], 11 January 2005, 'Iraq 2005 – a UK MOD perspective'.

from the Iraqi Security Forces, supported by 184,500 troops from the MNF-I. The JIC assessed that perhaps fewer than 10 percent of voters had turned out in the Sunni heartlands and judged that “without Sunni engagement in the political process, it will not be possible significantly to undermine the insurgency”.

95. In April, the JIC assessed that:

“A significant Sunni insurgency will continue through 2005 and beyond, but the opportunities for reducing it appear greater than we judged in early February.”²⁷

The impact of Afghanistan

96. In June 2004, the UK had made a public commitment to deploy HQ ARRC to Afghanistan in 2006, based on a recommendation from the Chiefs of Staff and Mr Hoon, and with Mr Straw’s support. HQ ARRC was a NATO asset for which the UK was the lead nation and provided 60 percent of its staff.

97. It appears that senior members of the Armed Forces reached the view, throughout 2004 and 2005, that little more would be achieved in MND(SE) and that it would make more sense to concentrate military effort on Afghanistan where it might have greater effect.

98. In February 2005, the UK announced that it would switch its existing military effort in Afghanistan from the north to Helmand province in the south.

99. In 2002, *A New Chapter*, an MOD review of the 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR), had reaffirmed that the UK’s Armed Forces would be unable to support two enduring medium scale military operations at the same time:

“Since the SDR we have assumed that we should plan to be able to undertake either a single major operation (of a similar scale and duration to our contribution to the Gulf War in 1990-91), or undertake a more extended overseas deployment on a lesser scale (as in the mid-1990s in Bosnia), while retaining the ability to mount a second substantial deployment ... if this were made necessary by a second crisis. We would not, however, expect both deployments to involve war-fighting or to maintain them simultaneously for longer than six months.”²⁸

100. As described in Section 16.1, since 2002 the Armed Forces had been consistently operating at or above the level of concurrency defined in the 1998 SDR, and the continuation of Op TELIC had placed additional strain on military personnel.

101. By May 2005, the UK had been supporting an operation of at least medium scale in Iraq for more than two years. The Ministerial Committee on Defence and Overseas Policy Sub-Committee on Iraq (DOP(I)) recognised that future force levels in Iraq would

²⁷ JIC Assessment, 6 April 2005, ‘Iraq: The State of the Insurgency’.

²⁸ Ministry of Defence, *Strategic Defence Review: A New Chapter*, July 2002, page 14.

need to be considered in the context of the requirement to achieve “strategic balance” with commitments in Afghanistan, to ensure that both were properly resourced.

102. In July 2005, DOP agreed proposals for both the transfer of the four provinces in MND(SE) to Iraqi control and for the deployment of the UK Provincial Reconstruction Team then based in northern Afghanistan to Helmand province in the South, along with an infantry battlegroup and full helicopter support – around 2,500 personnel.

103. As described under the heading ‘Iraqisation’ below, the proposals to transfer responsibility for security in the four provinces of MND(SE) to Iraqi control were based on high-risk assumptions about the capability of the Iraqi Security Forces to take the lead for security. If those assumptions proved to be inaccurate and the UK was unable to withdraw, agreement to the Helmand deployment in Afghanistan effectively constrained the UK’s ability to respond by increasing troop levels in Iraq.

104. In January 2006, Cabinet approved the decision to deploy to Helmand. Dr John Reid, the Defence Secretary, announced that the UK was “preparing for a deployment to southern Afghanistan” which included a Provincial Reconstruction Team as “part of a larger, more than 3,300-strong British force providing the security framework”.²⁹

105. The impact of that decision was summarised neatly by Gen Walker as:

“Militarily, the UK force structure is already stretched and, with two concurrent medium scale operations in prospect, will soon become exceptionally so in niche areas.”³⁰

106. Niche capabilities such as helicopter support and Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance (ISTAR) were essential to the successful conduct of operations.

107. From July 2005 onwards, decisions in relation to resources for Iraq were effectively made under the influence of the demands of the UK effort in Afghanistan. Although Iraq remained the stated UK main effort, the Government no longer had the option of a substantial reinforcement of its forces there, should it have considered one necessary. When the US announced in January 2007 that it would send a surge of resources to Iraq, the UK was consequently unable to contemplate a parallel surge of its own.

108. The impact of the decision to deploy to Helmand on the availability of key equipment capabilities for Iraq, and on the level of stretch felt by military personnel, is addressed in Sections 14 and 16.

²⁹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 26 January 2006, columns 1529-1533.

³⁰ Letter Walker to Richards, 24 January 2006, [untitled].

Iraqiisation

109. After becoming Defence Secretary in May 2005, Dr Reid had continued the policy of reducing UK troop levels based on the transition of lead responsibility for security to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). In one of his early acts as Defence Secretary, he announced the deployment of just over 400 additional personnel to enhance the UK's effort in training the ISF, which would "enable them to take on ever greater responsibility for their own security and so pave the way for UK troops to withdraw".³¹

110. The proposals for transfer of the four provinces in MND(SE) to Iraqi control agreed in July 2005 suggested transition from MNF-I to ISF primacy in Basra from March 2006, based on the assumption that the ISF would, by that point, be capable of taking on responsibility for security in what was likely to remain a very challenging environment.

111. There was sufficient reliable contemporary evidence available, including from the JIC and in reports from commanders in theatre, to demonstrate that the assumption that the ISF would be ready to take the lead in Basra by that point was probably unrealistic.

112. In September 2005, Mr Blair expressed his concerns about ISF capability, following reports of police involvement in attacks on the MNF in Basra. But despite the concerns that had been expressed about the capacity of the ISF, Dr Reid recommended that a reduction in UK forces should take place in October or November 2005.

113. A few days after Dr Reid made his recommendation, the Jameat incident in Basra raised questions about the ISF in MND(SE). Officials from the FCO, the MOD and DFID judged that the incident had highlighted the risks to achieving UK objectives in MND(SE), and that those risks had implications for military resources. Nevertheless, assumptions about ISF readiness were not re-examined by Ministers. The incident should have prompted a more searching analysis of whether the conditions necessary for drawdown were likely to be met within the planned timetable. Reluctance to consider the potential implications of the Jameat incident obscured what it had revealed about the security situation in MND(SE).

114. The critical importance of ISF capability in assessing readiness for transfer to Provincial Iraqi Control, on which UK plans to draw down were based, was emphasised by the 'Conditions for Provincial Transfer' published by the Joint Iraqi/MNF Committee to Transfer Security Responsibility, and by Dr Reid, who told DOP(I) that "successful Iraqiisation remains the key".³² DOP(I) decided that Dr Reid should have lead responsibility for building the capacity of the Iraqi Police Service (IPS) in Basra in addition to his responsibility for the Iraqi Army.

115. In October 2005, Mr Blair asked for a major and sustained push to make progress on the ability of the ISF to take the lead on security. Gen Jackson raised concerns about

³¹ House of Commons, *Official Report*, 25 May 2005, column 15WS.

³² Paper Reid, 11 October 2005, 'Iraq: Security Update'.

ISF effectiveness in a minute to Gen Walker, and concluded: “it is not to our credit that we have known about the inadequacies of the IPS for so long and yet failed to address them”.³³ The Assessments Staff reinforced the lack of progress in reforming the ISF.

116. In October 2005, the Chiefs of Staff made a stark assessment of the insurgency and coalition strategy in Iraq. They concluded that “Ministers needed to be clear that the campaign could potentially be heading for ‘strategic failure’, with grave national and international consequences if the appropriate actions were not taken”.³⁴ Gen Walker judged that only 5 percent of UK military effort in MND(SE) was devoted to counter-insurgency operations. But neither Air Marshal Sir Glenn Torpy, Chief of Joint Operations, nor Gen Walker reassessed UK force requirements in Iraq, based on those two assessments.

117. The security situation at this point should have resulted in a reassessment of the UK troop levels needed to achieve the UK’s key outcomes in MND(SE). Although the responsibility for tactical decision-making rested with commanders on the ground, it was for Gen Walker to ensure that those commanders had sufficient resources to deliver.

118. The absence of additional resources placed further pressure on the UK’s ability to deliver the conditions required for transfer. At the end of 2005 and in early 2006 there were further indications that the ISF were not ready to operate alone. The MOD reported to the final DOP(I) meeting of 2005 that the capacity of the Iraqi administration and security forces to assume responsibility, acknowledging the challenge of increasing sectarianism and militia infiltration, was one of the key challenges remaining.

119. In March 2006, the JIC again highlighted doubts about the ability of the Iraqi Army to operate without MNF support and concerns about the corruption and infiltration of the Iraqi Police Service.

120. US concerns about UK plans for the transition of Maysan and Muthanna to Iraqi control in May were such that Dr Reid adapted them to include a small residual team providing mentoring and support to the Iraqi Army.

121. Dr Reid continued to press ahead with drawdown and announced that troop levels would reduce in May 2006 from approximately 8,000 to around 7,200 based on “completion of various security sector reform tasks, a reduction in the support levels for those tasks, and recent efficiency measures in theatre”.³⁵ That rationale did not include an assessment of the effect of those tasks on the capability of the ISF.

³³ Minute CGS to CDS, 18 October 2005, ‘CGS visit to Iraq: 10-13 Oct 05’.

³⁴ Minutes, 18 October 2005, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

³⁵ Letter Reid to Blair, 9 March 2006, ‘Iraq: Force Level Review and Announcement’.

Reconciliation

One clear focus of UK strategy was the need to bring the Sunni community back into mainstream Iraqi politics, often referred to as “reconciliation” or “Sunni outreach”. Mr Blair consistently said that reconciliation was the key to success, and UK Ministers regularly lobbied their US and Iraqi counterparts about its importance, and the added security risk if it was neglected.

Reconciliation was hampered from the start. The UK, understandably, had limited knowledge of Iraq’s complex tribal landscape, and how it interacted with broader confessional groups. Decisions about the scope and implementation of de-Ba’athification made in the early days of the CPA had a lasting legacy of mistrust and alienation.

The UK took a number of steps to promote reconciliation, including Sir Nigel Sheinwald’s meetings with hard-line Sunni nationalists and representatives of Sunni insurgent groups in November 2005 and February 2006, and work by Lieutenant General Graeme Lamb with insurgent groups in late 2006 and early 2007. The UK also lobbied for a unity Government in 2006, but ultimately in vain. Mr Dominic Asquith, British Ambassador to Iraq, observed that: “For a government of national unity, most of its members are in opposition.”³⁶

Preparation for withdrawal

A major divergence in strategy

122. US and UK strategies for Iraq had in effect been on different courses since the UK decision to focus its attention on MND(SE) in 2003. As a result of that decision, the UK had acquired distinctly different priorities from the US. It was only marginally involved in the central tasks of stabilising the Iraqi Government in Baghdad and managing sectarian divisions, while it had come to see its main task in Basra as one of keeping the situation calm while building the case for drawdown.

123. For some time, there had been indications of tension between the US and UK regarding assessments of progress, and differing assumptions about whether plans were needed for long-term bases in Iraq. In May 2006, Mr Blair was told about “rumblings from the US system about UK failure to grip the security situation in what they regard as a strategically vital part of Iraq”.³⁷ Gen Jackson felt compelled to report that:

“The perception, right or wrong, in some – if not all – US military circles is that the UK is motivated more by the short-term political gain of early withdrawal than by the long-term importance of mission accomplishment; and that, as a result, MND(SE)’s operational posture is too laissez faire and lacks initiative ...”³⁸

³⁶ Letter Asquith to Sawers, 12 September 2006, ‘Iraq: First Impressions’.

³⁷ Minute Phillipson to Prime Minister, 2 May 2006, ‘VTC with President Bush, 1615 2 May 2006’.

³⁸ Minute CGS to CDS, 22 May 2006, ‘CGS visit to Iraq: 15-18 May 06’.

124. In January 2007, the divergence between US and UK strategies was thrown into sharp relief by President Bush's announcement that the US would adopt a new strategy, of which a prominent feature would be the deployment of a surge of US forces, primarily to Baghdad and its environs. UK assessments of the prospects for the new US policy were bleak, reflecting widespread pessimism about the prospects for Iraq. UK strategy continued to look towards withdrawal.

125. US concerns about the differences in approach were evident. In February 2007, Sir David Manning, British Ambassador to the US, reported that Secretary Rice had asked him "to tell her honestly whether the UK was now making for the exit as fast as possible".³⁹

126. The divergence in strategies was also illustrated by the conditions-based process through which the four provinces in MND(SE) were transferred to Provincial Iraqi Control (PIC) during 2007. Although each transfer was signed off by senior members of the US military, there was persistent reporting of US concerns about readiness for PIC, whether the conditions had actually been met and the wider impact of transfer.

127. The US was also uncomfortable about arrangements made by the UK with a militia group in Basra which allowed the safe exit of UK troops from their main base in the city (see Box entitled 'Negotiations with JAM1 in Basra').

A possible civil war

128. By March 2006, senior members of the UK military were considering the possibility of civil war in Iraq, prompted by rising levels of sectarian violence and concerns that the Iraqi Government was "not ... perceived as even-handed in security issues".⁴⁰ The risk of civil war had been acknowledged by Prime Minister Ibrahim Ja'afari in the wake of the bombing of the al-Askari mosque in February. Although there was general agreement that the situation in Iraq did not constitute civil war, the risk that one might develop was considered to be real.

129. At this time, the presence in Iraq of the MNF was authorised by resolution 1637 (2005). The exchange of letters between Prime Minister Ja'afari and the President of the Security Council which accompanied the resolution clearly identified providing security for the Iraqi people as the reason why a continued MNF presence was necessary.

130. In late April, FCO officials were concerned that security in Basra was declining and that a determined and sustained effort, including a more assertive military posture, would be required to deliver the UK's objective of transferring Basra to Iraqi control by late 2006 or early 2007.

³⁹ Letter Manning to Hayes, 1 February 2007, 'Conversation with the US Secretary of State, 31 January 2007'.

⁴⁰ Minute Houghton to CDS, 5 March 2006, 'SBMR-I Weekly Report (201) 5 March 06'.

131. Accounts from mid-2006 suggested that security in MND(SE) was a significant concern, characterised by “steady, if generally unspectacular, decline”⁴¹ and increased militia activity. The UK military’s approach had generated US concern and the security situation was limiting UK civilian activity.

132. Gen Jackson’s assessment in May of the short-term security prospects in Iraq was bleak. He judged that “what we will leave behind will not look much like strategic success. Ten years hence our strategy may fully bear fruit.”⁴²

133. After visiting Iraq in early May, Air Chief Marshal Sir Jock Stirrup, Chief of the Defence Staff, advised Dr Reid that there should be no change to the operational approach and that there were “compelling reasons” why the UK should “press on” with handing over security to Iraq, including to permit the UK’s continuing build-up in Afghanistan.⁴³ ACM Stirrup identified the risk that UK withdrawal from Basra would be seen as a “strategic failure” and suggested that “astute conditioning of the UK public may be necessary” to avoid that.

134. ACM Stirrup’s view that the UK should press ahead with drawdown despite the security challenges in Basra was not consistent with Government policy that withdrawal should be conditions-based.

135. ACM Stirrup’s acceptance that the “law of diminishing returns” was “now firmly in play” and that there was “an increasing risk” that UK forces would “become part of the problem, rather than the solution” had some validity: it was clear from accounts of the situation in Basra that UK forces were not preventing a steady decline in security. ACM Stirrup was also right to advise Dr Reid that the MNF in Iraq faced a “multifaceted”, sophisticated and dangerous enemy; that serious issues remained in Basra (militia activity, poor governance, insecurity); and that it was possible the UK would be accused of strategic failure.

136. The established policy was that UK forces would withdraw as the capabilities of the ISF increased until responsibility could be handed over to the Iraqi Government. ACM Stirrup’s proposed remedy of continued drawdown and managing public opinion did not mitigate the risk of strategic failure he described.

137. In the summer of 2006, in recognition of the need to stabilise Basra and prepare it for transition to Iraqi control, the UK developed the Basra Security Plan, “a plan to improve Basra through operations, high impact reconstruction and SSR [Security Sector Reform] ... lasting for up to six months”.⁴⁴ The military element of the plan became known as Operation SALAMANCA and included operations against militia groups.

⁴¹ Minute senior government official specialising in the Middle East to Dowse, 12 May 2006, ‘Situation in Basrah’.

⁴² Minute CGS to CDS, 22 May 2006, ‘CGS visit to Iraq: 15-18 May 06’.

⁴³ Minute Stirrup to SofS [MOD], 8 May 2006, ‘CDS Visit to Iraq and Afghanistan – 5-7 May 06’.

⁴⁴ Minute Burke-Davies to APS/Secretary of State [MOD], 24 August 2006, ‘Iraq: Op SALAMANCA’.

138. In August 2006, ACM Stirrup was asked to give direction on both seeking US help for Op SALAMANCA and the possibility of deploying UK forces to support US operations outside MND(SE).

139. While ACM Stirrup stressed the importance of senior Iraqi political support if Op SALAMANCA was to be a success, Lieutenant General Nicholas Houghton, the Senior British Military Representative – Iraq, indicated a concern that even with US support the capabilities available in MND(SE) might not be sufficient successfully to deliver Op SALAMANCA.

140. 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.

141. ACM Stirrup also directed that the deployment of UK troops to Multi-National Division (Centre South):

“... 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.”⁴⁵

142. The decision not to allow the use of US support in Basra was an important one. The Inquiry considers that the question of what was needed to make Op SALAMANCA a success should have been addressed directly by ACM Stirrup, whose response instead precluded proper consideration of whether additional UK resources would be required.

143. There was continuing resistance to any suggestion that UK forces should operate outside MND(SE) and there may have been concern that US participation in Op SALAMANCA would have led to an obligation on the UK to engage more outside MND(SE). This might not, as ACM Stirrup observed, be consistent with a commitment to drawdown, but might have reduced the risk of strategic failure.

144. The nature of Op SALAMANCA was constrained by the Iraqi Government in September 2006, so that the eventual operation (renamed Operation SINBAD) left “Basra in the hands of the militant militia and death squads, with the ISF unable to impose, let alone maintain, the rule of law”.⁴⁶ This contributed to the conditions which led the UK into negotiations with Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) in early 2007.

145. Attempts were subsequently made to present Op SINBAD as equivalent to the 2007 US surge. Although there was some resemblance between the “Clear, Hold, Build” tactics to be used by US surge forces and the UK’s tactics for Op SINBAD, the UK operation did not deploy sufficient additional resources to conduct “Hold” and “Build”

⁴⁵ Minutes, 2 August 2006, Chiefs of Staff meeting.

⁴⁶ Minute Shirreff, 21 September 2006, ‘GOC MND(SE) – Southern Iraq Update – 21 September 2006’.

phases with anything like the same strategic effect. The additional 360 troops deployed by the UK could not have had the same effect as the more than 20,000 troops surged into Baghdad and its environs by the US.

146. At the end of 2006, tensions between the military and civilian teams in MND(SE) became explicit. In a report to Mr Blair, Major General Richard Shirreff, General Officer Commanding MND(SE), diagnosed that the existing arrangement, in which the Provincial Reconstruction Team was located in Kuwait, “lacks unity of command and unity of purpose”⁴⁷ and proposed the establishment of a “Joint Inter-Agency Task Force” in Basra led by the General Officer Commanding MND(SE).

147. ACM Stirrup’s advice to Mr Blair was that it was “too late” to implement Maj Gen Shirreff’s proposal. That may have been the right conclusion, but the effect was to deter consideration of a real problem and of ways in which military and civilian operations in MND(SE) could be better aligned.

148. The adequacy of UK force levels in Iraq and the effectiveness of the UK’s efforts in MND(SE) were explicitly questioned in Maj Gen Shirreff’s end of tour report.

Force Level Review

149. The balance of forces between Iraq and Afghanistan was reviewed by DOP in February 2007 on the basis that the UK could only sustain the enduring operational deployment of eight battlegroups.

150. ACM Stirrup’s “strong advice”,⁴⁸ with which DOP agreed, was that the UK should provide two additional battlegroups to the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, reducing the Iraq to Afghanistan battlegroup ratio from 6:2 to 5:3 and then 4:4.

151. This advice did not include an assessment of either the actual state of security in Basra or the impact on the UK’s ability to deliver its objectives (including that drawdown should be conditions-based) and responsibilities under resolution 1723 (2006). The advice did identify US “nervousness” about the UK proposals.

152. In early May, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Mr Blair’s Foreign Policy Adviser, sought ACM Stirrup’s advice on the future of the UK military presence in Iraq. ACM Stirrup advised that the UK should press ahead with drawdown from Iraq on the basis that there was little more the UK could achieve. There was “no militarily useful mission”.⁴⁹

153. Mr Blair was concerned about the implications of ACM Stirrup’s position unless the political circumstances in Basra changed first. He commented: “it will be very hard

⁴⁷ Letter Shirreff to Blair, 29 December 2006, [untitled].

⁴⁸ Paper MOD officials, 13 February 2007, ‘Iraq and Afghanistan: balancing military effort in 2007’.

⁴⁹ Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 3 May 2007, ‘Iraq’.

to present as anything other than a total withdrawal ... it cd be very dangerous for the stability of Iraq, & the US will, rightly, be v. concerned.”⁵⁰

154. After visiting Basra again in mid-May, ACM Stirrup continued to recommend the drawdown of UK forces. But other contemporary evidence indicated a more negative picture of circumstances in Basra than ACM Stirrup’s view 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.”⁵¹

Negotiations with JAM1 in Basra

In 2007, the UK reached an agreement with an individual described by the Inquiry as JAM1 for an end to the targeting of UK forces by members of the JAM militia in Basra in exchange for the some detainee releases.

This agreement was a response to the dominance of JAM in Basra, which UK military commanders had few remaining means to challenge, given the resources available to them, and the lack of support from the Iraqi Government for Op SALAMANCA.

The agreement was based on the commendable intention to safeguard the lives of members of the UK military as they defended, and then withdrew from, Basra Palace. It was a pragmatic tactical response to immensely difficult circumstances.

Those circumstances were at least in part of the UK’s own making, particularly because of the decisions that had been taken about the balance of resources between Iraq and Afghanistan. It was humiliating that the UK reached a position in which an agreement with a militia group which had been actively targeting UK forces was considered the best option available. It should have been possible for the UK to consider increasing troop levels in Basra even in 2007/08.

The agreement with JAM1 also had costs, which were little considered by the UK. Although it allowed withdrawal from Basra Palace without the loss of UK life, it did nothing to alleviate the impact of JAM activity on the residents of Basra.

155. In July 2007, FCO and MOD officials recognised that leaving Basra Palace would mean moving to PIC in fact if not in name. Mr Brown, who had become Prime Minister in June, was keen that the gap between leaving the Palace and transfer to PIC should be as small as possible, since UK situational awareness and ability to conduct operations in Basra would be limited once the Palace was no longer in use.

156. During a visit to Iraq at the start of July, ACM Stirrup sought to convince senior US officers that Basra was ready for transfer to PIC on the basis that it would not be possible to demonstrate readiness until after the transfer had taken place. General David Petraeus, Commanding General MNF-I, and Ambassador Ryan Crocker,

⁵⁰ Manuscript comment Blair on Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 3 May 2007, ‘Iraq’.

⁵¹ Minute Poffley to PSSC/SofS [MOD], 17 May 2007, ‘CDS visit to Iraq 13-16 May 07’.

US Ambassador to Iraq, remained “circumspect” on the timing of PIC.⁵² They considered that there remained “significant problems” associated with “unstable politics” and “JAM infiltration” in Basra.

Making the decision to leave Basra Palace

In Basra City, occupation of the Basra Palace base was crucial to UK understanding of what was happening and the consequent risks (known in military terminology as “situational awareness”). Centrally located, the Palace site was large enough to house both military and civilian staff, giving them access to Iraqi officials within the city.

The Palace was also a target. By summer 2007, it was considered the “most heavily mortared and rocketed place in Iraq”,⁵³ with the result that civilian staff were relocated to the more secure Basra Air Station on the edge of the city in the autumn.

The ‘in principle’ decision to re-posture/draw down UK forces in Basra, subject to a further review, was taken by DOP on 14 February 2007. Based on the minutes of that meeting, those present were entitled to assume that a further collective discussion would take place before the decision made in principle was implemented.

Before the decision was taken, the issue had been discussed once at DOP, and at its Sub-Committee on Iraq.

The broad timing of the withdrawal of UK forces from Basra Palace was subsequently decided by Mr Brown without discussion at the Ministerial Committee on National Security, International Relations and Development (NSID), the relevant Cabinet committee during his time in office. The timing was influenced by UK negotiations with JAM1 in Basra, which could have been discussed by NSID in a restricted session, if necessary.

The risks of withdrawing from the Palace to the UK’s ability to discharge its obligations in Basra were clearly understood by the MOD and the FCO.

Mr Brown was advised by Mr Simon McDonald (his Foreign Policy Adviser) that the withdrawal from Basra Palace would result in the loss of situational awareness and compromise the UK’s ability to discharge its responsibility to help the Government of Iraq provide security.

Leaving Basra Palace was a significant step towards the eventual withdrawal of UK forces from Iraq, and it carried risks to the UK’s reputation. Although responsibility for the fine detail rested with operational commanders, the importance of the decision on broad timing was demonstrated by the Prime Minister’s involvement. For these reasons, the decision to withdraw troops should have been formally considered by a group of senior Ministers.

157. As they reached the end of their respective tours of duty, both Major General Jonathan Shaw, General Officer Commanding MND(SE) from January to August 2007, and Lieutenant General William Rollo, Senior British Military Representative – Iraq from July 2007 to March 2008, identified the impact of limited resources on the UK’s military effort and questioned the drive for continued drawdown in Iraq in order to

⁵² Minute Kyd to PS/SofS [MOD], 5 July 2007, ‘CDS visit to Iraq 1-3 Jul 07’.

⁵³ Paper FCO and MOD, 12 July 2007, ‘Iraq: Transition in Basra’.

prioritise resources for Helmand. Maj Gen Shaw wrote: “We have been hamstrung for resources throughout the tour, driven by the rising strategic significance of the Afghan deployment.”⁵⁴

158. During a visit to Iraq in October 2007, ACM Stirrup was briefed by Major General Graham Binns, General Office Commanding MND(SE) from August 2007 to February 2008, that the ISF might have only limited ability to cope in the event that JAM resumed combat operations. The JIC and others also identified continued weaknesses in the ISF. Their “ability and willingness to maintain security in the South remains patchy and dependent on MNF training, logistic and specialist air support”.⁵⁵

Deciding the UK role post-PIC

Decisions on the UK’s role in Basra post-PIC were also taken without the opportunity for Ministerial discussion, despite Mr Brown’s 11 September commitment that Cabinet would have “a further opportunity to discuss” the UK’s future role in Iraq.

Mr Brown informed the Overseas and Defence Sub-Committee of the NSID of the content of his statement to Parliament a few hours before making it on 8 October 2007.

As a consequence, Ministers did not have the chance to explore:

- precisely what the number of troops proposed would be able to deliver; or
- conditions in Basra.

The decision had been discussed with the US, and with some Ministers individually, but no collective discussion took place before 8 October. We cannot now know what difference such a discussion might have made.

Although bilateral conversations are a useful and necessary part of preparing for Committee discussion, they are not an adequate substitute. The effective operation of a system of collective responsibility is founded on the opportunity for informed and timely discussion.

The beginning of the end

159. On 27 February 2008, the JIC assessed security prospects in the South at the request of the Permanent Joint Headquarters (PJHQ): security in Basra remained a concern.

160. In March 2008, Prime Minister Maliki instigated the Charge of the Knights to tackle militia groups in Basra. That such an important operation came as a surprise was an indication of the distance between the UK and Iraqi Governments at this point.

⁵⁴ Letter Shaw to Houghton, 14 August 2007, ‘Post operation report Shawforce Jan-Aug 07’.

⁵⁵ JIC Assessment, 27 February 2008, ‘Iraq: Security Prospects in the South’.

161. When the Charge of the Knights began, the UK found itself to be both compromised in the eyes of the Iraqi Government and unable to offer significant operational support, as a result of the tactical decision to negotiate with JAM1 and the absence of situational awareness in Basra after withdrawing from the Palace site.

162. On 1 April, ACM Stirrup briefed the NSID(OD) that the UK military task would be complete by the end of 2008; its timetable would not be affected by the Charge of the Knights.

163. ACM Stirrup's conclusion that there was no need to review UK drawdown plans was premature in the light of both the level of uncertainty generated by the Charge of the Knights and continued questions about the ability of the ISF to take the security lead in Basra.

Did the UK achieve its strategic objectives in Iraq?

164. From mid-2005 onwards, various senior individuals – officials, military officers and Ministers – began to consider whether the UK was heading towards “strategic failure” in Iraq.

165. The term “strategic failure” was variously used to mean:

- the development of a widespread sectarian conflict or civil war in Iraq;
- “victory” for terrorist groups;
- collapse of the democratic process;
- failure to achieve the UK's objectives;
- failure to achieve a stable and secure environment in Basra;
- the collapse of the UK/Iraq relationship;
- the division of Iraq and the end of its existence as a nation state;
- damage to the UK's military and political reputation; and
- damage to the relationship between the US and UK.

166. None of the contemporary accounts that the Inquiry has considered reached the conclusion that strategic failure was inevitable, although most recognised that without some form of corrective action it was a serious risk.

167. Although the UK revisited its Iraq strategy with considerable frequency, no substantial change in approach was ever implemented: UK troop numbers continued to reduce; the size of the civilian deployment varied very little; the Iraqiisation of security and handover of responsibility to the Iraqi Government remained key objectives.

168. The Iraq of 2009 certainly did not meet the UK's objectives as described in January 2003: it fell far short of strategic success. Although the borders of Iraq were the same as they had been in 2003, deep sectarian divisions threatened both stability and unity.

Those divisions were not created by the coalition, but they were exacerbated by its decisions on de-Ba'athification and on demobilisation of the Iraqi Army and were not addressed by an effective programme of reconciliation.

169. In January 2009, the JIC judged “internal political failures that could lead to renewed violence within and between Iraq’s Sunni, Shia and Kurdish communities”⁵⁶ to be the greatest strategic threat to Iraq’s stability.

170. The fragility of the situation in Basra, which had been the focus of UK effort in MND(SE), was clear. The JIC assessed that threats remained from Iranian-backed JAM Special Groups, and the Iraqi Security Forces remained reliant on support from Multi-National Forces to address weaknesses in leadership and tactical support. Even as UK troops withdrew from Basra, the US was sufficiently concerned to deploy its own forces there, to secure the border and protect supply lines.

171. In 2009, Iraq did have a democratically elected Parliament, in which many of Iraq’s communities were represented. But, as demonstrated by the protracted process of negotiating agreements on the status of US and then UK forces in Iraq, and the continued absence of a much-needed Hydrocarbons Law, representation did not translate into effective government. In 2008, Transparency International judged Iraq to be the third most corrupt country in the world, and in mid-2009 the Assessments Staff judged that Government ministries were “riddled with” corruption.⁵⁷

172. By 2009, it had been demonstrated that some elements of the UK’s 2003 objectives for Iraq were misjudged. No evidence had been identified that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, with which it might threaten its neighbours and the international community more widely. But in the years between 2003 and 2009, events in Iraq had undermined regional stability, including by allowing Al Qaida space in which to operate and unsecured borders across which its members might move.

173. The gap between the ambitious objectives with which the UK entered Iraq and the resources that the Government was prepared to commit to the task was substantial from the start. Even with more resources it would have been difficult to achieve those objectives, as a result of the circumstances of the invasion, the lack of international support, the inadequacy of planning and preparation, and the inability to deliver law and order. The lack of security hampered progress at every turn. It is therefore not surprising that, despite the considerable efforts made by UK civilian and military personnel over this period, the results were meagre.

174. The Inquiry has not been able to identify alternative approaches that would have guaranteed greater success in the circumstances of March 2003. What can be said is that a number of opportunities for the sort of candid reappraisal of policies that would have better aligned objectives and resources did not take place. There was no serious

⁵⁶ JIC Assessment, 28 January 2009, ‘Iraq: Threats to Stability and UK Mission Change in 2009’.

⁵⁷ CIG Assessment, 21 July 2009, ‘How Corrupt is Iraq?’

consideration of more radical options, such as an early withdrawal or else a substantial increase in effort. The Inquiry has identified a number of moments, especially during the first year of the Occupation, when it would have been possible to conduct a substantial reappraisal. None took place.

Issues in the UK system

Strategy-making

175. Between May 2003 and May 2007, there were more than 20 instances in which UK strategy and objectives were reconsidered.

176. It is important to reassess any strategy in the light of changing circumstances or new information, but that is not the pattern that emerged in relation to the UK strategy for Iraq. The production of strategies consumed considerable time and energy, particularly in government departments, but new strategies did not result in substantial changes of direction. There are a number of reasons why that was the case.

177. Crucially, UK strategies tended to focus on describing the desired end state rather than how it would be reached. On none of the 20 occasions when UK strategy was reconsidered was a robust plan for implementation produced. Setting a clear direction of travel is a vital element of an effective strategy, but strategies also require a serious assessment of the material resources available and how they can best be deployed to achieve the desired end state. That is especially important when the strategy relates to an armed conflict in which it will be actively opposed by organised and capable groups. There is very little evidence of thorough analysis of the resources, expertise, conditions and support needed to make implementation of UK strategy achievable.

178. Without properly defined and resourced delivery plans, the UK faced obvious difficulties in converting strategy into action. Consequently, the strategies that were developed had limited longevity and impact.

179. In the absence of a Cabinet Minister with overall responsibility for Iraq, leadership on strategy rested with Mr Blair. His judgement regarding the issues holding back progress was often right. For instance, in April 2004 he recognised that the lack of a stable and secure environment was key and wrote to President Bush: “The good news is that the problem we face is not multi-faceted. It is simple: security. The bad news is that I am not sure we yet have a fully worked-out strategy to tackle it. But we can get one.”⁵⁸

180. In the UK system, however, the Prime Minister does not lead a department of his or her own. Mr Blair’s ability to solve the strategic problems he identified therefore relied on his Cabinet colleagues, and the departments they led, working together.

⁵⁸ Letter Sheinwald to Rice, 26 April 2004, [untitled] attaching Note [Blair to Bush], [undated], ‘Note’.

181. A recurring issue between 2003 and 2007 was the difficulty of translating the Government's strategy for Iraq into action by departments. The system that drove policy on the invasion of Iraq, which centered on No.10, could not be easily transformed into a system for the effective management of the aftermath, in which a coherent collective effort was needed to pull together the many interrelated strands of activity required. Although Iraq was designated the UK's highest foreign policy priority, it was not the top priority within individual departments. As a consequence, Whitehall did not put significant collective weight behind the task.

182. One indication of that, as described in Section 13, was the failure to resource the UK effort coherently. Others included:

- Sir Nigel Sheinwald's identification of "definite signs of Iraq fatigue"⁵⁹ within Whitehall in September 2004, and his advice to Mr Blair that he would have to press for greater engagement.
- Concerns expressed by Sir Nigel and Mr Blair in July 2005 about the ability to deliver Sir Nigel's "Comprehensive Strategy".
- Mr Jonathan Powell's identification in September 2005 that amongst those dealing with Iraq a "weary cynicism and feeling that it is all inevitable has sunk in"⁶⁰ and Mr Blair's recognition that the new strategy proposed would require Mr Powell to spend "much time pushing it through".⁶¹
- Mr Blair's observation in April 2007 that the FCO and the MOD were unwilling to push forward further work on reconciliation, meaning "we will have to do it".⁶²

Optimism bias

183. Throughout the UK's engagement in Iraq there was a tendency to focus on the most positive interpretation of events.

184. One manifestation of that was failure to give weight to the candid analysis that was regularly supplied by the JIC, by some commanders in theatre, and by others that things were going wrong.

185. The default position was to judge that negative events were isolated incidents rather than potential evidence of a trend which should be monitored and which might require a policy response. This meant that underlying causes were not always investigated and brought to light.

186. This became a particularly serious issue in relation to considering whether the conditions for transfer to PIC had been met.

⁵⁹ Minute Sheinwald to Prime Minister, 13 September 2004, 'Visit to Iraq: Some Impressions'.

⁶⁰ Minute Powell to Prime Minister, 21 September 2005, 'Iraq: Strategy'.

⁶¹ Manuscript comment Prime Minister to Powell on Minute Powell to Prime Minister, 21 September 2005, 'Iraq: Strategy'.

⁶² Manuscript comment Blair on Minute Banner to Prime Minister, 27 April 2007, 'Iraq Update, 26 April'.

187. One of the most senior individuals displaying this tendency was Mr Des Browne, who held the post of Defence Secretary from May 2006 to October 2008.

188. Mr Browne repeatedly downplayed the negative aspects of the situation in Iraq and failed to ensure the dissemination of a full and unvarnished version of the truth on the ground in Iraq; and that the UK's policy was assessed and reviewed with due rigour based on that information. Mr Browne should himself have proposed a reappraisal of the UK's posture and tactics in Basra in 2007, on the basis of the evidence available to him.

189. In four instances, Mr Browne gave an unbalanced account of the situation in Basra to the Prime Minister, Cabinet or Parliament:

- On 11 January 2007, Mr Browne presented Op SINBAD and the US surge to DOP(I) as being “entirely consistent”, which did not give a full picture of the substantial differences between UK and US strategy.
- Mr Browne briefed a meeting of Cabinet on 25 January 2007 that there was no disagreement between the US and UK on force levels in MND(SE), downplaying the concerns being raised by senior members of the US Administration. Mr Browne also painted an extremely positive picture of conditions in Basra, when other contemporary accounts provided a different view.
- From 28 to 31 January 2007, Mr Browne visited Iraq. After returning to the UK, he continued to stress to DOP the positive effect of Op SINBAD. Mr Browne's reassuring report did not take into account: the strength of US objections to the UK's approach; the serious risk that the UK would have responsibility without control in Basra, which was driving consideration of a continued UK presence in Basra Palace; or evidence of the dangerous situation faced by ordinary Basrawis.
- On 1 April 2008, Mr Browne gave a positive account of the reduction of corruption in the Basra police to Parliament. This painted a significantly more positive picture than contemporary reporting from those on the ground in Basra.

Lessons

190. The UK had not participated in an opposed invasion and full-scale occupation of a sovereign State (followed by shared responsibility for security and reconstruction over a long period) since the end of the Second World War. The particular circumstances of Op TELIC are unlikely to recur. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be drawn about major operations abroad and the UK's approach to armed intervention.

191. The UK did not achieve its objectives, despite the best efforts and acceptance of risk in a dangerous environment by military and civilian personnel.

192. Although the UK expected to be involved in Iraq for a lengthy period after the conflict, the Government was unprepared for the role in which the UK found itself from April 2003. Much of what went wrong stemmed from that lack of preparation.

193. In any undertaking of this kind, certain fundamental elements are of vital importance:

- the best possible appreciation of the theatre of operations, including the political, cultural and ethnic background, and the state of society, the economy and infrastructure;
- a hard-headed assessment of risks;
- objectives which are realistic within that context, and if necessary limited – rather than idealistic and based on optimistic assumptions; and
- allocation of the resources necessary for the task – both military and civil.

194. All of these elements were lacking in the UK's approach to its role in post-conflict Iraq.

195. Where responsibility is to be shared, it is essential to have written agreement in advance on how decision-making and governance will operate within an alliance or coalition. The UK normally acts with allies, as it did in Iraq. Within the NATO alliance, the rules and mechanisms for decision-taking and the sharing of responsibility have been developed over time and are well understood. The Coalition in Iraq, by contrast, was an ad hoc alliance. The UK tried to establish some governance principles in the MOU proposed to the US, but did not press the point. This led the UK into the uncomfortable and unsatisfactory situation of accepting shared responsibility without the ability to make a formal input to the process of decision-making.

196. As Iraq showed, the pattern set in the initial stage of an intervention is crucial. The maximum impact needs to be made in the early weeks and months, or opportunities missed may be lost for ever. It is very difficult to recover from a slow or damaging start.

197. Ground truth is vital. Over-optimistic assessments lead to bad decisions. Senior decision-makers – Ministers, Chiefs of Staff, senior officials – must have a flow of accurate and frank reporting. A “can do” attitude is laudably ingrained in the UK Armed Forces – a determination to get on with the job, however difficult the circumstances – but this can prevent ground truth from reaching senior ears. At times, in Iraq, the bearers of bad tidings were not heard. On several occasions, decision-makers visiting Iraq (including the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Chief of the General Staff) found the situation on the ground to be much worse than had been reported to them. Effective audit mechanisms need to be used to counter optimism bias, whether through changes in the culture of reporting, use of multiple channels of information – internal and external – or use of visits.

198. It is important to retain a flexible margin of resources – in personnel, equipment and financing – and the ability to change tactics to deal with adverse developments on the ground. In Iraq, that flexibility was lost after the parallel deployment to Helmand province in Afghanistan, which both constrained the supply of equipment (such as ISTAR) and took away the option of an effective reinforcement. Any decision to deploy

to the limit of capabilities entails a high level of risk. In relation to Iraq, the risks involved in the parallel deployment of two enduring medium scale operations were not examined with sufficient rigour and challenge.

199. The management, in Whitehall, of a cross-government effort on the scale which was required in Iraq is a complex task. It needs dedicated leadership by someone with time, energy and influence. It cannot realistically be done by a Prime Minister alone, but requires a senior Minister with lead responsibility who has access to the Prime Minister and is therefore able to call on his or her influence in resolving problems or conflicts. A coherent inter-departmental effort, supported by a structure able to hold departments to account, is required to support such a Minister.

