

SECTION 9.8

CONCLUSIONS: THE POST-CONFLICT PERIOD

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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 Iraqisation 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.