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LM/GOC/002

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Lt Gen T Metz

MND (SE) - SADR SITUATION

I owe you a formal written explanation of the situation in MND (SE) with regards to the situation regarding OMS and the Sadr Militia. I fully recognise that our refusal to close down the OMS offices and take overt aggressive action against Sadr Militia will appear from Baghdad to be both ineffective and apparently out of line with your intent. However, I wish to explain why we are playing it the way that we are. One size does not fit all for Iraq and the south east is different. I believe that our actions are being effective.

My main effort throughout this crisis has been to retain the consent of the majority of the people in the south east. I see that consent as our centre of gravity and thus it is vital that I defend it. Whether we like it or not, Sadr's movement is part of the political fabric in southern Iraq. For example, OMS is represented on the Basra Political Council and discussion at a meeting of the Council yesterday produced unanimous endorsement of Sadr's views regarding closure of Al Hawza and the arrest of Yacoubi. Similar views are held in Al Amarah, An Nasariyah and As Samawah. This does not mean that the south east is under the thumb of the Sadrists. On the contrary nearly all our interlocutors from the political and religious parties to 'the street' express dislike of his methods, but his sentiments resonate. We should also be clear that OMS in the south is not a homogenous grouping. It consists of a variety of different individuals and groups who are using this as an opportunity to achieve their own very separate goals. They need to be defeated in a different way.

There is consensus, even among the secular political parties, that the Sadr phenomenon needs to be contained and managed rather than confronted head-on. In the south east that is what has happened. The greatest issue on Friday Prayers in Basrah this week was not Sadr but Fallujah, with nearly every Shia mosque calling for humanitarian donations to assist their fellow Iraqis (no mention of Sunnis). It is also absolutely apparent to us that any confrontation at Najaf will result in the loss of Shia consent in the south east which would be disastrous. In the eyes of the people, both opinion formers and those on the street, Najaf is the most holy site of the Shia faith. Similarly, in the view of one of our Dawa intellectuals the coalition lifting Sadr would not be regarded by the Shia as the arrest of a criminal, but rather as an attack on a pillar of the Shia Establishment in the form of the Second Martyr Sadr.

This is not to say that we lack resolve to deal with the Sadrists when they are clearly acting outside the law. In Al Amarah and Basrah we conservatively estimate that we have killed over 30 Sadr Militia in various engagements with minimum collateral damage. We have been robust, but have done all we can to maintain the consent of the local population in what is a highly volatile area. Going on to a general offensive without careful targeting and intelligence would be seen as us taking on the population and we have seen their reaction in the past at both Majar Al Kabir and

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Qalat Salih. We would quickly destroy all that we have achieved over the last year. In An Nasariyah the Italians took offensive action when necessary over the bridges and filled the town's hospital. The result was that the local Iraqis effectively negotiated the dissipation of the Sadr Militia. Last night the OMS office in An Nasariyah was destroyed and Aus al Khafaji, the leader of OMS there, has gone to ground.

Meanwhile, coalition forces and ISF have secured and continue to secure every municipal building within the four provinces of MND (SE). As an aside, contrary to what you might be told, the TV station in An Nasariyah has been under the control of the Italians since 6 Apr, since when it has not transmitted due to lack of equipment. Iraq's second city of Basrah is relatively calm. It is our assessment that much of the recent activity there has not, in fact, been from Sadr Militia, but from other organisations that have taken advantage of the situation to try to settle old scores with CF.

Most importantly, we take the view that it is the Iraqis who will have to go on living here after we depart and surely it is best to produce an Iraqi solution to an Iraqi problem. The recovery of the Basra Governate Buildings and the dissipation of the Sadr Militia in An Nasariyah were both achieved by Iraqi mediation where the moderate elements of: the tribes, the political and religious parties and local government produced peaceful resolution. Today, in Maysan, the Provincial Council agreed a charter of principles by which political parties must behave. Even as I write this they are visiting OMS in Al Amarah to insist that they too meet those principles. OMS may refuse to sign up, or sign up but go back on their word. In either case they will be picking a fight with local Iraqi leaders, not just with us, and thus we shall be able to act without losing consent.

We are now starting to see this on a national scale. Yesterday I saw Sheikh Sami Al Majun, IGC member and Minister of Labour and Social Affairs. He is assembling a confederation of tribal chiefs from the southern provinces to initiate dialogue with Muqtada al Sadr. Abu Hatem, IGC member and Iraqi Hizbollah leader, visited Najaf yesterday afternoon in an attempt to broker a deal which sees the Iraqis resolving the issue after 30 Jun 04. While a 'deal' such as this may be unacceptable, at least dialogue has started. The Iraqis want a solution as much as we do. It is certainly the case that your coercive strategy has been most successful and is bringing people to the table, but we should now give time for dialogue to play out.

What I am saying is that for us in the south east, the future of Iraq and what part the coalition will play in it, will be decided over the next few weeks. The Shia are on the edge. We must not push them over it. I believe that our current tactics in MND (SE) are correct. The final decision on how Sadr will be dealt with is out of my hands. It is not a comfortable feeling, but is one I am prepared to accept. I earnestly hope that you will be prepared to have a similar uncomfortable feeling about how we are dealing with the situation in the south east.

AREdeC STEWART
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