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Transcript

Iraq Ten Years On: Keynote Address

Ambassador Simon Collis

British Ambassador to Iraq

Chair: Dr Robin Niblett

Director, Chatham House

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Robin Niblett:

I'm delighted that we can kick off this discussion with Ambassador Simon Collis as our keynote speaker, and a chance to have some conversation with him as well. I think he is known to all of you here. When they say that the FCO has great Arabists, I think Simon Collis fits certainly within that category, having served since 1978 in the FCO but really specializing in the Middle East – having served in Tunisia, in Bahrain, in Jordan; as consular general in Dubai and in Basra; ambassador in Doha and then in Damascus through to February of last year, before becoming ambassador in Baghdad in June of last year. So I think he's somebody who's perfectly placed at the moment to kick us off, share his impressions of where Iraq is at the moment – its achievements and its challenges.

Then we should have a little bit of time for some Q&A and conversation before we try and stick with the programme and get on at 9:30 with our first panel, which will be chaired by Sir Jeremy Greenstock.

Simon, delighted you could be with us. Look forward to your remarks and maybe to get a few questions in as well. Over to you.

Simon Collis:

Thank you, Robin. Good morning, everybody. I was at a forum in Basra on Saturday that was also sponsored by Shell. I seem to be spending quite a lot of time there at the moment, but please don't read anything into that.

Iraq, Baghdad, Basra – these are words that evoke often strong memories among people in Britain and more widely. As the British ambassador in Iraq since last summer, talking to parliamentarians, journalists, businesspeople and so on – not to mention friends, relatives, strangers on trains – it's been my experience that 10 years on, these memories are still pretty vivid and that they are mostly negative. People recall the divisions over whether the decision was the right one, how it was taken. They remember the material costs, the human costs – perhaps the moral costs. They recall the many thousands of Iraqis and Coalition forces who died, including 179 British servicemen and women as well as a number of British civilians. They ask, as I was asked on Radio 4 this morning: was it worth it?

The current government hasn't taken a view on the decision to go to war in Iraq in 2003. The reason for that is that they are waiting for the independent

Iraq Inquiry, chaired by Sir John Chilcot, to present its report to the prime minister. It is right to wait for the findings of that inquiry.

As the first British consul-general in Basra in 2004–05, I have of course asked myself those questions as well. Some of the victims – British contractors and Iraqi consulate local staff – worked for the consulate that I opened in Basra; others – Iraqis and British service personnel – died during the year that I was there.

But while it's right to remember those who lost their lives and to reach conclusions in due time, and to seek to learn lessons, it is a mistake to keep looking back. Iraq has moved on. The Iraqi people have moved on. The Iraqis I meet haven't forgotten the past but for them the past isn't a light that was switched on suddenly in 2003. Their past covers the wars with Iran and over Kuwait; it covers the years of sanctions and isolation; it covers the decades of tyranny and authoritarian rule under the Ba'ath Party.

In my experience, when they think of Britain, Iraqis think more about the decades of the British mandate during the last century; they think about the 400 years of British commercial engagement in Basra and the Gulf. Some of them tell me with pride how their grandfathers took part in the revolt against the British presence at that time, and in the next breath they speak about the positive legacy of *abu naji* – the part-mocking, part-affectionate term that Iraqis use for the Brits. They talk about how it's associated in their minds with quality in engineering or in goods or education, and with integrity in governance.

Iraqis know that their own history also includes millennia of human development: the first agriculture, the first cities, the first laws. They know that it includes centuries of world-leading civilization in medicine and the sciences, and in arts and literature that is still read across the Arab world today.

They look at that own long history and at our own shared history and they know that it's complex, that it's nuanced and that it has much that is of value as well as much that is painful. They don't obsess about 2003, in my experience – they have moved on. They live in the present and they think about the future. And they would like us to get over ourselves and continue to be part of their present and to work with them, this time as genuine partners, as they set about building their future.

Iraq today, of course, continues to face many challenges. The number of deaths from political violence and the extent of corruption are very real problems. There is a constitution but there is not yet a settled, shared understanding about how it should be implemented. This gives rise to major

disputes between Iraq's political leaders. There are ethnic and sectarian tensions inside Iraq that affect and are affected by sectarian tensions elsewhere in the region, particularly at present in Syria. The impact of the Arab Spring and the fall of authoritarian leaders in other parts of the region gives rise to some of the same questions that Iraq today is facing: about state-building, about governance, about the exercise of freedoms and how to tackle extremism. And also about expectations – popular expectations for jobs, services and security, as well as freedom from corruption.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki told me and other P5 ambassadors last week how he sees these challenges and how he's seeking to handle them with other regional leaders and with other leaders inside Iraq. He spoke about what role he hopes the wider international community will play. Part of the problem, of course, is that there is not yet a shared, settled view on what is wrong or how to fix it, either within Iraq's borders or in the region.

But while these significant challenges remain – terrorism, unresolved fundamental political issues that are holding back development, and poor services and living standards for too many ordinary people – while all of this remains the case, it's not the whole story. Violence is significantly lower than it was a few years ago. Three democratic elections have been held since 2005. Life across much of Iraq, especially in the south and in the Kurdistan region, is peaceful for most people, most of the time. Oil production has increased sharply, to around 3 million barrels a day. This is generating over $10 billion of revenues every month that can support the reconstruction of Iraq's infrastructure, which has been ravaged over 40 years, and which can launch human development in health care and, above all, in education.

This offers huge opportunities for the future. Iraq's economy is forecast to grow by 10 per cent or more every year over the coming years – as Robin said, other things being equal. As oil and gas production rises toward perhaps 8 or 9 million barrels a day, Iraq needs homes, hospitals, schools, power and clean water. While the political logjam in Baghdad persists, what I find during my visits to Irbil and Sulaymaniyah in Kurdistan, and to the southern cities like Najaf, Nasiriyah and Basra, is that local and regional leaders are focused on delivering development and services for their people there – people who they know will be voting on their performance in provincial elections next month.

In Basra two days ago, I took part in a forum organized by Shell to engage local businesses in their supply chain operations. It felt pretty joined-up. The oil minister was there from Baghdad. The governor of Basra and the president of the provincial council were there. Iraqi businesspeople there wanted to find

out how they can gain a bigger share than the 10 per cent of the supply chain value that they already access. They understand absolutely that this means working with external partners from the UK and elsewhere to achieve international standards of quality on the goods and services that they supply, and that this has to include a focus on standards in health and safety, in tendering and in other processes. They understand absolutely that if they achieve this, they will have better capacity and be better placed to win business in other sectors as their city develops. They know that Basra was once a major trading hub and that growth now means that their children may have a bright future as inhabitants of Iraq's economic capital.

Back in the political capital, in Baghdad, as well as in the provinces, I've noticed increased debate in recent months about decentralization of budgets to the regions and provinces while the centre focuses more on the sovereign issues of defence, security and control of natural resources. If – and it remains a big if – this process is managed in a politically inclusive way, this may accelerate decision-making, ease the political and bureaucratic logjam, and enable a faster and more effective rebuilding of the country.

I find that Iraqis very much want the UK to be a partner in this future. At present our trade is about £1 billion a year. There are some signature successes. Iraqis would like our businesses to be present in the market. They want to send their children to British universities. Importantly, this is a consistent message from every community and pretty much every political party and political leader across the country, from the prime minister down. It's one of those few things perhaps that everyone in Iraq seems to agree on.

We're working to make this happen. After a lull in high-level engagement, the foreign secretary visited Iraq in September last year. There have been three ministerial visits in the first two months of this year, covering energy security, trade and political relations. These ministers have visited Basra and Irbil as well as Baghdad. We've established a joint ministerial council on trade and investment that will focus on identifying and spreading awareness of opportunities, as well as working to remove obstacles.

We're making it easier for Iraqi and British people to get together to take forward these partnerships. We've opened a visa centre in Iraq and are working out how to roll out services to Basra and Irbil. The Iraqi government has made it easier for British businesspeople and others to get visas in London and from Iraqi embassies in the Gulf, where many of our people are based. Three weeks ago I travelled with the transport minister on the inaugural Iraqi Airways flight to London. In Baghdad we now offer a business

embassy service that allows British businesspeople to stay with us, to use our accommodation and transport, to operate more securely while they take a first look at this market. The Iraqi education minister has just been in the UK to look at taking the already strong links with some of our universities to the next level. In June we're preparing a ministerial-led delegation of a hundred companies to Iraq, working closely with the Iraq Britain Business Council and other organizations.

As I said at the outset, many challenges remain. There are security challenges, there are unresolved political issues. It is right for Britain and other friends of Iraq to continue to engage in a robust political dialogue and to speak out in favour of increased political inclusion and stronger action to reduce human rights abuses, particularly in the treatment of detainees.

But my main proposition to you this morning is that perceptions of Iraq in the UK too often remain backward-looking and that it's time for us to pay more attention to the actual situation in Iraq today and to look forward – to understand what tomorrow may look like in a country that presents the challenges of a post-conflict society, yes, but which also has the enormous potential of a country that is growing fast toward emerging power status, with a young population that wants to build a more stable, democratic and prosperous future, and which would like us to play a part in that endeavour. Thank you.