



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript Q&A

Iraq Ten Years On: Keynote Address

Ambassador Simon Collis

British Ambassador to Iraq

Chair: Dr Robin Niblett

Director, Chatham House

19 March 2013

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

Robin Niblett:

Let me encourage people here who are participating in this conference to participate as much as you can – we've got some great people in the audience as well as on the panels. So have a think of some points you want to make.

Let me, while you're thinking of a question, just throw one, if I may, to you, which is the comment about decentralization – that you felt there is some political decentralization taking place right now. You noted that the centre obviously is focused on defence, security and control of natural resources – and yet within the context of Iraq and its economic future, centralization of control of natural resources is one of the big conundrums. So I just wonder if you could share with us your thoughts right now on where that process of balancing the centre with the regions on the control of natural resources, on oil and gas resources, is going, and whether this remains one of the most difficult areas for the government and what your sense is of prospects for the future on that space.

Simon Collis:

Thank you, Robin. Yes, it's a live debate and it's a critical one. As far as oil and gas is concerned, that's mainly about Kurdistan, of course, but also in the south – in Basra they get their dollar-a-barrel directly into the budget but they are constantly frustrated by slow decision-making. There's a political logjam in Baghdad. Perhaps it's a feature of countries with the sort of ethnic and sectarian makeup that Iraq has. If you look at Lebanon, for example, there's always a risk that in politics nothing gets decided until everything gets decided, and you never reach the point where everything gets decided. That's a major issue now that people need to work out. It leads to an increase in rhetoric from political leaders.

But what you find outside the capital is that governors, business leaders, council members – people who are closer, particularly in the areas that are more stable – really do want to get on. They are intensely frustrated by the bureaucracy and focus on control over development, the focus on control over execution and implementation that Baghdad presents. What I've been hearing in Baghdad particularly over the last few months is the possibility that by narrowing the areas where central government seeks to keep control, it will free up decision-making in those areas. There isn't a consensus about how to do that but I think it's important that they have that conversation.

Question 1:

Ambassador, I wanted to ask you about the current political mess that is in Iraq. We have ministers that are not in Baghdad anymore, they are completely disengaged. There are those that fear for their lives. As you know, there are accusations going between both sides – or various sides, not even both sides anymore. Is the Iraqi government functioning at the moment? Is it actually functioning as a government?

Question 2:

Ambassador, you have also served in Syria. You are saying that the Iraqis want to get on with the future – do they see Syria and the situation there as a potential impediment to that future?

Question 3:

Ambassador, thank you very much for your assessment. You're absolutely right: Iraqis are moving on. The government headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is moving on to develop Iraq. I hear now today the sad news that there have been a series of explosions in Iraq. As a result of this deteriorating situation, the provincial elections have been delayed for six months, according to my information.

Given that Iraqis are trying and they are moving on, we have this huge attack on us, on Iraq, by supporters that are clearly supporters of regional powers who are unfriendly to development and democracy in Iraq. How does Iraq move forward? It needs international backing. It needs the backing of the West and the friendly regional states to move on. Can you elaborate on how Iraq can get this support?

Simon Collis:

Is the government working? The main development of the last few months has been a sharpening of the confrontation, whereas there had been a period of political shouting and nothing being decided. The two more dangerous things that have happened have been in relation to the Kurds – the Dijla Operations Command controversy, which had an impact directly on the ground and could have sparked trouble, and has intensified the standoff with the Kurds; the personal relationships between [Iraqi Kurdistan] President [Massoud] Barzani and Prime Minister al-Maliki are not good. Shortly

afterwards, not in parallel, there was an increase in the confrontation with the Sunnis in particular, following the move against Rafe al-Essawi's head of security.

These are both actions that were initiatives taken by the prime minister – he had control of the timing of that. He wasn't responding to events forced on him. So I think he does take some responsibility for some of the consequences. The net result has been a decrease in national unity at a time when Iraqis perceive that they are facing increased external threat.

In answer to your question, I think when Iraqis look at Syria – and I spent four years there before coming to Baghdad – they all feel that they are looking in the mirror. They interpret it – perhaps over-interpret it – in sectarian terms, because there are quite significant differences between the two countries which I won't go into now. But certainly at the very least, we have seen in the past foreign fighters coming into Iraq from Syria; that border is live again. There are security issues on that border right now which are affecting both countries.

In answer to your question, sir, it's important – and one point that doesn't get made nearly enough is to recognize the incredible patience which the Shia community and their leaders, by and large, have shown in the face of constant provocation. When we talk about a decrease in violence, there has been a decrease in violence – but the aim of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and of the old Ba'athists is to provoke a Shia backlash in order to destroy the rebuilding of the country around the present constitution. They aim to do that by attacking civilians. The restraint that has been shown needs to be acknowledged and saluted. It's very important that it be maintained.

I think having said that, it is not possible for the prime minister or others in Iraq simply to blame outsiders for Iraq's current problems. Again, there is perhaps a comparison to be made with Lebanon. The Lebanese, in my experience, always like to complain about outside intervention as being at the root of their problems. Actually, the root of their problems is the failure of leaders inside Lebanon to do deals with each other in order to reach understandings so that they're not vulnerable to outside intervention, rather than drawing in outsiders. One of the more worrying developments in Iraq is the tendency to blame outsiders and also to seek outside support. At a time when the region is facing increased sectarian challenges, there is a clear risk of that being played out in Iraq as a playground.

Question 4:

I have a specific question. Would the British government endorse or encourage British companies to be involved in infrastructure-building in Iraq on the initiative of PPP – private-public partnership?

Question 5:

When I left Iraq in 2006, they had begun the discussions on the hydrocarbon law. So following up on the question: could you give your assessment of the prospects of an agreement on the hydrocarbon law anytime this decade?

Simon Collis:

The answer to your first question is yes, the British government is prepared to support this. There are some project proposals that are already under consideration. UK Export Finance are looking at their cover with a view to increasing it. I think it's important not to underestimate the legal challenges and how you measure and price risk in this situation. But in principle, the British government supports that approach.

As far as the hydrocarbon law goes, there is no immediate prospect of progress on that. On the contrary, people are seeking to establish facts on the ground in order to pre-empt that discussion. So that's something that I don't expect to see anytime soon. I think other things will have to happen first.

Robin Niblett:

Simon, I know you're very kindly going to remain here for a good part of the conference, so people will have the opportunity to speak to him on the margins in the coffee breaks. Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts and kicking off this conference. Some good questions. I think the themes we've heard already will be coming back.

Thank you very much, Simon.