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HM Ambassador

Dear John

IRAQ: FIRST IMPRESSIONS

1. First impressions in the traditional sense these may not be. But a month on the ground gives some of the issues a different perspective from that which they assumed from London. I am consigning these thoughts to a limited distribution by letter in the hope that they will not appear in public out of context.

A government in opposition

2. For a government of national unity, most of its members are in opposition. Rumours of an alternative government (of national salvation) or a military-led coup circulate. As one aged politician, who has witnessed (at times been directly involved in) most of Iraq's political changes during the 1950s-70s, remarked to me last week, at any other time in Iraq's recent history this government would have been replaced in a coup; only the MNF presence had prevented it.
3. For the Shia religious parties, CPA's apportionment of representation on sectarian lines encouraged them to lay hold to a preponderance of power which the UIA are seeking to convert into a monopoly over key decisions on security and the economy. At the last elections, however, only about 30% of the total (ie. potential) Iraqi electorate voted for the governing Shia alliance. Alternatively put, half the Shia of Iraq did not vote for the UIA. That, not just the history of exclusion and recent persecution, may underlie the strikingly honest admission by Abdul Aziz al Hakim to the Foreign Secretary that the Shia (equivalent in his mind to the UIA) are in government but feel in opposition (something many of us have argued for some time, but I had not heard it from
4. Those election figures lay at the heart of my attempt earlier in the year to lead the Shia into their own debate about the nature of Shia representation. Should their focus not shift from "preserving Shia unity" at any cost (in reality no more than UIA cover to lay sole claim to represent the Shia, which would always render them vulnerable to the most extreme in the alliance) to how best to represent the interests of the Shia community? Sistani's influence has ensured unity has won; but it is a debate which the Shia militia and the competition for power in the Sadrist movement (very far from being just a Muqtada preserve) may have made inescapable. We should promote it.
5. The Sunni Arabs unquestionably are excluded from the decisions that affect their communities. They own a large share of the blame for that. Their pool of credible leaders may be small.

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6. Still difficult for them to grasp is that they cannot exert decisive influence by right and on their own terms (ie. irrespective of their behaviour), but need to develop a variety of alliances and exploit opportunities which they will have to earn. The more politically adept have recognised that one ticket into the political process is to provide convincing evidence of an uncompromising stand against AQ, takfiris and Saddamists – in Shia eyes the “real enemies”. They are working to split other parts of the Sunni resistance from and turn them against those groups. The UK, US and MNF have a common interest in promoting that agenda. The risk is that the MNF/US seek to monopolise the channel: the Sunni politicians must secure credit if they are to persuade the Shia to share power. I have mentioned this to the newly arrived SBMR(I).
7. The Kurds feel squeezed and increasingly vulnerable. They argue that the Sunni and the Shia Arabs have their neighbours to call on for assistance if their existence is under real threat. They have no one.

1. Iraqi unity is –

for now – their only option.

Iran

8. And so to the heart of the problem. If facing us down on the nuclear agenda is Iran's top priority and ensuring at least a non-hostile government in Baghdad is sufficient for them, they will advance their nuclear objective and achieve their sufficiency in Iraq by manipulating their assets here against MNF and stoking the ambitions or sectarian prejudices of those in the UIA.

On such a reading, they will seek to ensure the Baghdad Security Plan fails, calculating that Maliki's failure and the resulting chaos are tolerable risks when set against the greater political damage caused to the US Administration, securing their goal of calling off the hounds on uranium enrichment.

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9. From our side, it may be impossible to compromise sufficiently on the nuclear negotiations in a way that creates for the Iranians an incentive not to obstruct our objectives in Iraq. Preventing them acquiring a nuclear capability may be viewed as a higher priority than securing a reasonably stable, democratic and united Iraq. If so, how do we alter the dynamics inside Iraq in a way that limits Iran's ability to manipulate the circumstances to its advantage?

JAM today but no JAM tomorrow

10. Breaking up the UIA is the first step. It is desirable to do so in a manner which does not provoke internal Shia violence, merely allowing Iran scope to promote its preferred agent into power. A UIA reduced to its constituent parts would allow Maliki greater freedom to conclude alliances outside the UIA and take on the Sadrists less constrained by Sistani's "unifying" directive. A more fluid political scene in a context where the Sunnis have demonstrated a commitment to tackling the "real enemies" as perceived by the Shia could in turn advance the second component of breaking the Iranian stranglehold: dissolving the militias. The UIA has an unattractive swagger about it. But it is fragile. Moreover, the Sadrist movement is competing among itself. Muqtada's control appears to be weakening over the armed elements, which may explain signs of a drift in his focus to the political. Muqtada look-a-likes are stealing his recipe. Fadhila needs to regain influence, if only to fund patronage.
11. There is no simple route through this maze. It is not helped by Maliki's true intentions remaining an enigma even to those in his government: sectarian going through the motions of reconciliation, or genuine power sharer constrained by Shia supremacists? It is still reasonable to give him the benefit of the doubt that he is the latter: one senior member of his government told me that Maliki had confided that he did not want the Shia to be the wood in a fire of Iranian making.

Some ingredients of success

12. Success will require a combination of the following, to give him the space in which to operate.
 - Building up his confidence and credibility by ensuring the success of the Baghdad and Basra security plans; and persuading political leaders (including those outside Iraq like Iyad Allawi) to return and support him
 - Winning the argument with him that the (Shia) militias are the ones who are undermining his authority. His willingness to use ISF against JAM in Diwaniya may mark a new approach. The test, as ever, will be nearer home in Sadr City – one that he looks set to face earlier than previously planned. One advance could be to insert into the Provincial Election Law (which has to come before the CoR shortly) a prohibition on parties standing which have ties to militias (they will of course find way to circumvent this and

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effective monitoring will require solid political support from Maliki – eg. with the Oil Protection Force in Basra)

- Reintegrating Iraq into its Arab political and cultural context via the International Compact (which is why over the next couple of months discreet persuasion of the Gulf Arabs to recognise how badly their interests will be affected by failure in Iraq is so important)
 - In time, persuading parties outside the UIA to insert new provisions in a (national) electoral law permitting participation in elections only by single parties (ie. no alliances during elections, though not prohibiting alliances to be formed once in Parliament).
13. Not a single one of the above is entirely in our gift. The Baghdad Security Plan has already demonstrated our limitations in securing delivery by the Iraqis of adequate security forces of their own, projects on the ground (for which funding exists but management abilities are absent) and improved services. On all these we and our military colleagues continue to work on practical outcomes with the Iraqis. Basra being smaller in scope may prove easier to manage. But Maliki needs to block off the Iranians.

We can still succeed over the next six months, but no one pretends it will be anything but a damn close run thing if we do.

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Cc: PS, PUS, David Richmond, Simon McDonald, Sir N Sheinwald, Martin Howard (MOD);
Rosalind Marsden (Basra); HMAs Kuwait, Tehran, Amman, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Bahrain,
Riyadh, Damascus, Cairo, UKMis New York, Washington

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