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IRAQ: RECONCILIATION

I visited Basra and Baghdad earlier this week and assessed the current work on reconciliation and its prospects for success. I met with Prime Minister Maliki and Vice-Presidents Adel Abdul Mehdi and Tariq Al-Hashemi as well as Aziz Al-Hakim, US Ambassador Crocker and General Odierno. Separate reporting details these meetings.

Baghdad reinforced my belief that political discord is adding to the effects of terrorist tactics in fuelling sectarian strife. We must mend this quickly to reduce violence and isolate the extremists. Something significant is needed, and fast, to consolidate the security gains from Farhd Al Qanun. There is a role for the statesmen of the Coalition and the GOI in creating a framework for a new phase – that of reconciliation. That work needs to start now and must gain the clear backing of a broad base of moderates both inside and outside the existing political system.

A reconciliation package is deliverable. But after nearly 3 years of weak, dysfunctional and sectarian government we start from a poor position. There is work going on to address some of the key elements but I do not believe we

The Rt Hon Tony Blair MP
Prime Minister

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have a broad, commonly understood and agreed concept for reconciliation that all parties can support – this requires a complex set of factors to be brought into alignment. Even then, we should not hope for a truly all-encompassing settlement – we can reduce the irreconcilable elements but in the end there will still be a significant terrorist threat beyond the reach of the Iraqi state system in the short and medium term.

Encouragingly some of the key factors are beginning to come together: MNF dialogue with some of the hard line groups is ongoing; the senior US leadership in theatre are converts to the concept; and the requirement for progress on reconciliation is a key assumption in the new Campaign Plan that General Petraeus will be selling in Washington.

But I found that while reconciliation is on everyone's lips, at this stage it means different things to different parties:

- The Sunni moderates want to see equity and increased political power and recognition. At the moment they remain marginalised, both in the centre and at the extremes;
- The Shia feel the pressure to reconcile but they have yet to be convinced it is in their interest. They consider reconciliation as a sign of weakness and they lack the confidence to let go of their monopoly on power for fear they will be subjugated once more. Power sharing remains an alien concept.
- The senior Coalition leaders in Theatre, faced with delivering demonstrable success in a very short timeframe, see their priority as delivering ceasefires by means of a series of focused discreet dialogues with groups that straddle the border of extremism.

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- HMA and SBMRI well understand the bigger picture but in the current fractured circumstance have to deliver in stages.

A model is required that will give the parties a real incentive to take a reconciliation initiative forward, but this will be only half the battle. We must then find the levers that will help us bind them to this model and therein lies the real challenge. Some form of short term bridging package would allow parties to show their supporters that the political process can work. This will be particularly important for the Sunni, whose leaders are feeling exposed and looking increasingly unable to persuade their constituency that engagement with the Government has paid off. To all parties we may need to lay down a hard political deadline; this has worked in the past and we are short of helpful deadlines at present.

For the Sunni, a package that would attract a broad range would include: recognition, amnesty, reversal of de-Ba'athification, progress on sharing natural resources (and a guarantee of profit sharing from oil is more important than the detailed sovereignty issues in the draft hydrocarbons law), investment, employment, political representation, and release of detainees. The last of these in particular is a significant lever to bring the more extreme groups to the reconciliation table. There are currently a minimum of 25,000 detainees held by the Coalition and the Iraqi Government: their release would demonstrate good faith and would be something concrete and immediate that Sunni leaders could deliver for their supporters. This cause is not lost: we must build on examples like Al Anbar, once considered all but lost, where tribal leaders are now working with the Coalition to drive out Al Qaida.

But the problem is the Shia. They have all of the power but they are still locked in the psyche of the repressed. Convincing them they will gain, not lose, from sharing power will be very difficult. But that is the challenge facing us. Political leaders, including PM Maliki, are talking the right language, but it is clear to me that they recognised that this is what we want to hear. It was

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telling that Adel Mehdi felt that the oil sharing agreement for all Iraqis was a 'concession' by the Shia that had not been matched, rather than an obviously necessary step in building a unified nation.

We must be clever in our approach, but also robust, if we are to get the Shia to embrace reconciliation. We have the means to tempt the Sunni to the table; with the Shia, it may have to be more 'push' than 'pull'.

The Shia religious leaders are absolutely crucial. A shared push for reconciliation by both the senior Iraqi political leadership and the Shia clerics would be a powerful combination. Each holding the other to account in the eyes of the people. Reaching out to Sistani, Mohammad Sayeed Al-Hakim and others of the Majar in Najaf will be difficult to manage but we should try. Traditional approaches via GOI must be run in parallel with using our relationship with Aziz Al Hakim and others.

Current Work

Coalition forces continue to demonstrate that they will win any set piece firefight – vital to ensuring that none but the truly irreconcilable will join the direct fight against us – and therefore that the rest will potentially look towards politics for a solution.

Alongside this, we are working to build our understanding of the shifting sands of Iraqi politics. GOI approaches to the Shia groupings remain opaque. As does the degree to which deals have been struck on immunity from detention and collusion to avoid detection. Iraqi political parties, including some from within the UIA, are seeking new alliances. This will affect their attitudes to reconciliation. At the moment I have the sense that they do not have a clear plan – they are keeping their options open and looking for alternatives. So our

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attempts to get a clear picture are difficult and ongoing – but this is an important strand, and it will be crucial for HMA and his team to keep up the excellent work they have been doing so far.

A Force Joint Reconciliation Support Cell has been established by Gen Petraeus to take Graeme Lamb's work forward as well as fuse the various reconciliation strands together. It is concentrating on the extremes at both ends where it can have most effect. The task of bringing in the large Shia power blocks including those in Government will require heavy lifting, and will have to fall to the Coalition at the senior political level.

The Cell of around 35 will have a UK 2* lead and a US civilian equivalent with about 10-12 UK staff. We have responded very quickly, our people have been identified and the first MOD people will be going out in the next few days.

Immediate Further Work

Your visit will provide an excellent opportunity to formalise a route to reconciliation. A joint UK/Iraqi PM and Iraqi Presidential statement; a clear public commitment from senior members of the GOI; a meeting with a member of the Majar; and perhaps the launch of a suitable international commission of advisers. There is not much time to get this together but my team will help wherever they can.

Ambassador Crocker and General Odierno acknowledged a growing problem with detainees. Both agreed that the majority would have to be released. Odierno talks of amnesty while Crocker felt that release under guarantee might be acceptable. Maliki is more concerned with handling criticism by UN on treatment of prisoners :

. But a solution is vital. Detainee release schemes offer the best short term incentive to the Sunni groups outside the political process – and on

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the other hand, if this problem is not grasped, it presents a serious threat to future stability.

Regional and other international players will have a key role to play in promoting and incentivising reconciliation and I look forward to hearing from Margaret on the outcomes of Sharm el Sheikh in the hope it will provide leads for further work in this direction. Publicly recognised regional incentives for reconciliation say through the GCC or Arab League should be matched by public bilateral encouragement to reach agreement. A unilateral security guarantee is a difficult issue for the US but a discussion is edging closer as long term basing issues will be part of a forward looking strategy.

So while a workable reconciliation package is simple in concept it will be very difficult to deliver. For now, all other lines including military are holding and creating security space whereas a genuine reconciliation initiative represents our best chance of moving forward.

I am copying this letter to the Foreign Secretary, Secretary of State for International Development, Sir Nigel Sheinwald, Sir David Manning and HMA Baghdad.



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