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**Briefing from Robert Wilson, FCO Research Analyst
Dated November 2009**

What was my role 2001-2003?

I had been the main FCO contact point with the UK-based Iraqi opposition from November 1993 until about September 1998 when I went on a posting to Bahrain. Martin Hetherington succeeded me as the officer responsible for liaison with the Iraqi opposition. I returned from Bahrain in late 2001 and started back in the Research Analysts Department in early 2002, initially to deal with the Gulf, though Iraq was rising steadily up the agenda and I gradually found myself sharing some of the load that fell on to Martin.

Much of the period leading up to March 2003 was spent remaining in contact with the Iraqi opposition, providing material for and commenting (sometimes) on drafts of the No10 briefs (including forwarding the text of Ibrahim al-Marashi's *Iraq's Security & Intelligence Network: A Guide & Analysis* which ended up being cited extensively, without acknowledgement, in one of the No 10 papers); latterly, when it became clear that the UK would become primarily responsible for Basra and the southern governorates rather than the Kurdistan region in the north, developing a broader range of contacts with specifically southern connections; attending CIG meetings and providing input as needed to CIG drafts; keeping alongside the US State Department sponsored "Future of Iraq" project (Martin had a longer history with this)

Once the Iraq Planning Unit was set up I spent a fair amount of time briefing staff from FCO and other departments who had been assigned to it.

Very shortly after the military operation in March 2003 Martin Hetherington was seconded to Baghdad to assist John Sawers in the CPA in Baghdad. Only after his return to London was I released to begin a secondment to CPA-S in Basra, where I went in mid July 2003 to head up the Political side of the civil operation there.

What were the main sources of information drawn on by the FCO on internal Iraqi affairs and Iraq's relations with its neighbours in the period?

There was no shortage of information of varying degrees of reliability. Iraqi politicians and exiles tended to have good contact with what was going on inside Iraq, either directly or through the Kurdistan Region which was under the protection of a no-fly-zone. Some internal issues were difficult to assess, in particular, how much reach the external political movements really had inside Iraq. We were always aware that the Da'wah Party probably commanded extensive support, but even highly-placed members in exile in the UK chose to have minimal contact with HMG, and there was considerable uncertainty (justified as it turned out) about how effective their network inside Iraq was. A small number of academics had good contacts with what was going on in Iraq, as did some journalists. The Arabic media were also a source – both Martin and I could read the Arabic press directly. We had no trouble talking to the Kuwaitis, the Saudis, the Jordanians and the Turks about Iraqi matters; Syria and Iran were obviously more difficult, but both had tense relations with Iraq then (as, of course, did almost all the others – only Jordan needed some sort of *modus vivendi* with Saddam's Iraq).

[REDACTED] In February/March 2003 we tried to identify Iraqi contacts with a specific knowledge of the south, and also to scan Iraqi web sites which gave some insights into the sorts of issues that we might have to address there.

What work on the internal situation in Iraq and its relations with its neighbours was commissioned from you, by whom, for what purpose, and what use was made of it? (Please submit any papers)

Generally speaking, Research Analysts were not called upon to produce policy recommendations, but to provide input into recommendations made by others, principally the Iraq Desk of Middle East Department. I do recall producing a paper on the likelihood of Iraq splitting up, in which I argued that the likelihood was low; and doing some sort of work in the late stages on the sort of successor regime that might emerge post-Saddam: a strong argument was being made that only a military strongman could succeed Saddam and hold the country together. I warned that a democratically elected government might not be automatically friendly towards western values. I am not sure if this paper ever appeared in a final form, though I would have made the same arguments in meetings. Other papers that have been identified by colleagues in Research Analysts are attached.

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What contacts with Iraqi groups or individuals did you have or were you aware of that informed this work?

Contact with Iraqi groups and individuals had been at the centre of my Iraq work since late 1993. Iraqis – Arabs and Kurds – would also introduce friends or associates who might be able to give an insight into conditions in new areas or on new topics. The Iraqi individuals and organisations that I had contact with, though almost all opposed to Saddam Hussain's regime, were far from homogenous in their analyses and policies – religious organisations and NGOs tended to be able to offer more nuanced views on the internal situation than the politicians, who undoubtedly sought to influence as well as to inform. At the same time there were some who were either sceptical of British and Western policy if not actually supporters of Saddam Hussein, as well as media commentators like Abd al-Bari Atwan (not himself Iraqi) who were strongly critical of the anti-Saddam campaign in both the UK and the Arabic media.

In your opinion was sufficient and timely analytical work carried out in order effectively to inform policy-making in the period? If not, why not?

My short answer would be a heavily caveated "yes", as far as Iraq was concerned. The political imperatives that HMG was seeking to maintain were firstly to ensure that Iraq was deprived of WMD and secondly to remain hand in hand with the US. More rigorous intelligence analysis (not my field) might have cast doubt on the reality of Saddam's weapons programmes and the soundness of the intelligence that informed us about them; and more detailed political analysis might have led us to the conclusion that Saddam could not possibly admit to an absence of effective weapons programmes because of the threats to which he would have felt himself exposed from Iran and Israel. But neither point would have done much to avert military action, since Saddam had put himself in defiance of the UN and its WMD investigators.

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussain March 2003 I don't think that there was any manifest shortage of knowledge or lack of understanding on the part of the UK, and certainly not at the operational level. The three most outstanding misjudgements (in my opinion) would not have been affected by more or better analysis. These were: the failure to give the Iraqis ownership of their own liberation; the abolition of the armed forces; and the decapitation of the administration by disqualifying former Baath members from too low a level in the organisation (the comparison has already been made with post WW2 Germany). All of these were political decisions taken without regard to political or social analysis, or full risk analysis.

The analytical work that might usefully have been carried out had less to do with Iraq itself, and more with the administration of occupied territories. However, the intention, or expectation, was that a military occupation would be followed by a period of internal dislocation – with which ORHA was intended to cope – and then rapidly by a UN administration that would soon hand power back to Iraqis.

What was your input to cross-Whitehall analysis and planning on post-conflict Iraq?

There wasn't very much cross-Whitehall analysis and planning – the MOD had taken on planning for a military operation and engaged as a "red cell" a small number of academics (known to the FCO) to advise them on possible post-conflict scenarios from 2002, but the view of the FCO was that we should pursue a policy of ridding Iraq of WMD through the UN process, and that planning for a military occupation, which was likely to become public, would give the impression that UK policy was to take control of Iraq (with the US) rather than to enforce its disarmament. The Iraq Planning Unit was set up at a very late stage, and, though it usefully brought together representatives from a number of key government departments, it was not, in the event, very well placed to do any real planning. It was useful as a forum to share analysis. The FCO was particularly hampered by the Treasury's insistence that any additional commitments arising from military action or occupation would have, in the first instance, to be met from existing budgets. The FCO team, therefore, had neither a clear task nor a commitment that any significant costs would be met. My own role in the late stages included researching the area of southern Iraq that would fall into our area of responsibility. This included highlighting the already dilapidated state of the infrastructure (gleaned from semi-official Iraqi web-sites and from Iraqi NGO representatives). On and after military operations we were not well placed to advise on who might be put into positions of responsibility though we had a number of likely names. More weight was given to contacts and assessments made through intelligence channels (though in many cases the pool of names was the same); in practice the military made its own choices based on the assessments of its own advisers (POLADs) and FCO secondees (CLOs) on the ground – they were often able to make pragmatic and effective decisions that met immediate requirements, drawing on experience from post-conflict experience in the Balkans.

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After the coalition move into Iraq the IPU (I think it was) held fairly broad meetings to follow the progress of the military campaign and discuss the civilian aftermath. Separate meetings were held with members of the Iraqi community in the UK, and their responses to the military operation fed into the IPU meetings. I see that some of the notes I wrote at that stage highlighted the fact that the Iraqis we were liberating were apparently being sidelined. I'm not sure, at that stage, whether the military would have been in the mood – or even able – to take the advice of bureaucrats in London over their own advisers in the field. I suspect that there wasn't really a mechanism to feed this in anyway.

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