

Briefing from Martin Hetherington, FCO Research Analyst

Dated November 2009

What was your role in 2001-2003?

I had been Research Analyst on Iraq (plus at various points Kuwait and Iran) from late 1998 and I was in that position throughout that period except for a period of temporary duty in Islamabad for around 3 months in March to May 2002 and during April to July 2003 (see below). Robert Wilson was also providing Research and Analysis on Iraq in the later period.

In this position I provided analysis and support for Middle East Department, particularly leading on contacts with Iraqi opposition members based in London or travelling through and keeping in touch with academics, NGOs, journalists and other experts on Iraq. My written output was a mixture of analytical papers and comments on submissions and other papers from the FCO policy department and elsewhere. I attended CIG meetings.

As the State Department's Future of Iraq project started I attended meetings held in the UK and when asked provided recommendations of people and sources that the project should be getting in touch with. I attended the Edgware Road conference of Iraqi oppositionists in December 2002.

When the Iraq Planning Unit was set up, I provided briefing and advice to both the FCO and other staff there. I was less involved than Robert Wilson was on Basra-specific planning.

During April 2003, I attended with Mike O'Brien the Baghdad conference of leading Iraqi personalities, both those from the external opposition and from within and attended his separate meetings with Zalmay Khalilzad, the lead American on the political process. At Mike O'Brien's request I stayed on at ORHA to keep in touch with the Americans on this. After briefly returning to London, I returned with John Sawers as Political Advisor to the Special Representative on Iraq from late April 2003 to mid-July 2003 during the time of the transition from ORHA to CPA and the consultations to set up the initial Iraqi Governing Council.

When I returned to London in late July 2003 I resumed my work as Research Analyst on Iraq, particularly looking at the political dynamics and constitutional issues.

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?

I would agree with Robert Wilson's characterisation of our sources of information.

I would add that there was a Second Secretary in Amman throughout the pre-conflict period who visited Baghdad around once every two months to look after the Embassy premises and had both (minimal) official contacts and a chance to observe life there at first hand. This officer also followed Iraqi affairs closely from Amman. At the same time there was a First Secretary based in Ankara who regularly visited Northern Iraq (the part outside Iraqi government control) and had contact with senior political leaders there and with those working on DfID-funded and other projects.

Our contacts in London also included those who had either visited Baghdad as part of anti-sanctions campaign groups or NGOs accredited with the Iraqi government or working with the oil for food programme.

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)

I would regularly record for Middle East Department my meetings with oppositionists and wrote assessments of the situation in Northern Iraq following my visits there in 1998 and early 2000s. As a Research Analyst I arranged at least one conference bringing in outside speakers who had worked in or on Iraq to debate how Iraq's future may turn out. These were core tasks in my job as Research Analyst agreed with Middle East Department rather than specifically tasked by them.

In addition, I wrote papers on the position of the Kurds in previous Iraqi constitutions and how that might affect future negotiations; on the key constitutional issues; on how representative political structures may be set up post-Saddam. I also remember contributing to a profile of Qusay Hussein. Research Analysts did do some work in Spring and Summer 2003 on how Iraq's neighbours may react to a future Iraq. Research Analysts in London have traced many of those papers and submitted them.

Much of my work however was commenting on others' work, principally the Middle East Department and to provide oral analysis and comments during meetings such as CIGs.

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

I would agree with Robert Wilson's characterisation of our contacts.

There were however Iraqis who shied away from contact with the British government, either fearful of reprisals against family members living in Iraq or because of their opposition to UK policy on sanctions.

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?

From mid-2002 more attention was paid in analytical work to looking at post-Saddam scenarios but the political imperative for us to not be seen to be plotting for Saddam's removal meant that these focussed on regime change or a leadership vacuum generated from within. This meant that whilst the analysis could be done on what might happen to the political leadership in Iraq (and much of the analysis and flagging up of potential problems and dynamics was broadly accurate), little attention was paid to how the civil functions of the state might be affected and what problems and deficiencies there might be. The politicisation by all sides of the debate of the Oil For Food programme - whether it catered adequately for the needs of the Iraqi population and if it did not whose fault that was - meant that there were few reliable statistics on the level of Iraqi need. An analysis of these needs would have needed technical consultants with aid and post-conflict reconstruction expertise, not primarily FCO-based political analysis, though of course the FCO could have flagged up more clearly the need for such analysis.

We were aware of course that most Iraqi sources that we were in contact with had their own agendas to pursue. However, too much attention was given to the glib analysis that Iraq was a secular, post-sectarian state with an educated, technocratic middle class: arguments and quota setting within the Iraqi opposition in exile and eye witness accounts from Iraq about the weakening of the middle class during the sanctions era should have signalled that this was too simplistic.

Not enough weight was given to divisions within the US administration. From autumn 2002 we were aware that the State and Defence Departments were carrying out separate post-conflict planning exercises, sometimes seemingly talking to us more than each other. The consequences of this dysfunctional set up impacted clearly on the work of ORHA and its transition to CPA.

As Robert Wilson notes, the lack of lessons learnt from previous conflicts and post-conflict administration and the dramatic decisions taken in April and May 2003 with little or no debate impacted much more than any gaps in our knowledge of Iraq itself.

It is beyond my area of expertise to assess whether intelligence gathering and analysis could have been done more effectively.

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

The Iraq Planning Unit was set up late in the day and I was a source of background advice and analysis for those there. However, by this stage US planning – both by the State and Defence Departments – was in at a much more advanced stage so much of the work of the Unit was to provide policy positions and input to debates taking place in Washington and within ORHA (the latter largely via our secondees there).

My particular inputs were on the shape of any post-Saddam political process, analysis and background information on key political figures in the national process and comments on US ideas on this aspect of post-conflict planning. It was in this capacity that I went to Baghdad with John Sawers as Political Adviser and served within the Governance Team in CPA liaising with political contacts, many of whom I already knew from my work in London. When I returned to London I continued to focus particularly on the political and constitutional processes and on the Kurds – the latter an area I had focussed on whilst in Baghdad and during numerous visits to Iraqi Kurdistan.