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16 August 2007



British Embassy  
Baghdad

The Rt Hon David Miliband, MP  
Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs  
Foreign & Commonwealth Office

HM Ambassador

Sir,

## IRAQ: VALEDICTORY

1. The US recognised that key interests would be lost if Iraq descended into violence: the long war to defeat Al Qa'ida, countering Iranian influence in the region and protecting its own reputation with friendly states. The sectarian agendas of the various Iraqi political groups were driving towards such an outcome. Thus over two electoral cycles the US committed sufficient forces to hold off the threat from AQ, avert the collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) into militias and stifle external interference. Most importantly, it also recognised it was dealing with the wrong politicians. It broke down the monolithic Shia and Sunni Islamist political blocs, creating the space for new political actors and structures. It reinforced federal and local government institutions, attracting back the professional classes who had fled the country. It systematically tackled ISF sectarianism, monitoring abuses, punishing those responsible and imposing the Rule of Law. It made clear to the political leaders that it would no longer play the combat role of keeping the sectarian armed groups apart, was on an irreversible but gradual draw down of forces, during which it was only prepared to provide the political, military and financial support to a government that shared its own vision.
2. The histories of 2006/7 written a decade later won't read like that. Instead they are more likely to record a brief US military "surge" designed to "create the breathing space for politics to work" by preventing AQ regaining the ground it had lost in Sunni areas, the collapse of ISF into militias, civil war, regional interference and a humanitarian crisis. But it is having trouble achieving that. As Admiral Mullen (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs) said on 31 July: "the surge is giving our operational commanders the forces they need to execute more effective tactics." The last word is telling. The surge has failed to create the space for politics to work because the military (tactical) successes (local sectarian security structures loyal to the MNF) conflict directly with the political objective (inclusive and integrated national Iraqi authority). Moreover, the politicians are not being forced to make compromises and so escape the consequences of their indecision.
3. [In the redacted text, Mr Asquith acknowledged the limitations on the ability of the US and UK to influence political leaders in Iraq.]

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There have been improvements over the past year in the security sector, such as the fracturing of AQ in Anbar, the increased capability of the Iraqi Army and halting a free fall into sectarian war. But each "success" has been accompanied by further complications for which I will single out just two of a long list of reasons.

4. Firstly, knowledge of what is happening on the ground is shockingly thin, particularly in Baghdad where the theatre policy is decided. Therefore, the ability to analyse correctly the significance of what we do know is fragile. The company commanders on the ground are best placed to feed the knowledge base.

5.

statistics on security - or even basic services - differ widely from what our LE staff (and the Iraqi media) report. But even if one accepts that sectarian violence in Baghdad has dropped from the horrific levels of last year, the differing explanations of why reveal fundamentally differing analyses of the problem.

If an accurate sectarian map of Baghdad exists, I suspect it would be profoundly shocking. Iraqis claim it is now 70% Shia - and compare that to the 1930s when the Shia were the fourth largest community (after Sunni Arabs, Jews and Christians). If true, the implications are profound.

6.

7. The Congressional benchmarks (even if they are achieved) reveal nothing significant about what is happening in Iraq.

The lessons of the Constitution have been forgotten.

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8.

9. Iraq is still wracked by the culture of fear, distrust and prejudice, obstructing political compromise. So what options  
are left, against an assumption that the US will be pulling down troops through 2008, stabilising at roughly 100,000 into 2009 spread around half a dozen bases?
- (a) Pending a fundamental shift in political structures, we will need to manage the internal political relationships for some time. Promotion of the Executive Council is a start – and it helps that the US has now finally bought in. We and those top Iraqis who recognise the necessity of Sunni participation will need to keep the pressure on to address the Sunnis' immediate security and human rights concerns  
[... and give them a stake in] the security agenda.
- (b) We will need to address much more systematically sectarianism in the ISF and the detention centres, establishing proper data on abuses and infiltration and ensuring that action is taken.
- (c)
- (d)

However, the US will need to establish the ground rules and objectives – and we will need to keep a close eye on what they are.

- (e) We need to continue to work on securing regional political support (which should grow out of the practice of consultation slowly emerging from the Neighbours Plus framework). The

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objective should be to establish an informal security structure which prevents the malign forces stepping in wherever the US withdraws from.

- (f) We need to extend UN involvement, both on specific future flashpoint issues (Kirkuk) and on the deeper reconciliation problems, in tandem with more imaginative use of international facilitators (the Mandela and Soros Council of Elders) and track two discussions (which we have been helping others explore).
  10. How can Britain make a difference? The high regard Iraqis have for our advice, even discounting their natural courtesy and frustration with the US manner, is something we should never underestimate. We also fulfil for them something of the role of the psychiatrist's couch, helping them to face their problems. And they look on us as a key influencer of the US.
  11. As we complete the combat role in Basra and hand the last of our provinces over, one of the major sources of friction will have been removed (though we will be held responsible for Basra's ills). But we will still need to commit resources. I remain of the small school that believes we should continue to have a reduced military component (beyond some important niche areas), grouped with other Coalition allies in a southern base other than Basra able to provide rapidly deployable forces to carry out operations at the sharp end.
  12. Outside the military contribution, our favoured route has been through providing expertise. That will remain necessary, but insufficient. The Iraqis prize lasting legacies, as they repeatedly remind us over Basra. We should consider with an open mind taking a leaf out of the Japanese book, making use of some of the savings on the defence side to establish a joint or soft loan financed development fund for specific projects in the education and health sectors. Easier, and more realistic, would be to establish a large trust fund for a permanent scholarship scheme to supplement Chevening. Or we should switch our assistance focus to an area where we can operate - namely the Kurdish region which we have consistently and puzzlingly ignored.
  13. will depend on what we do after the hand over of Basra.
- The degree to which we continue to contribute to that war effort will determine the influence we can bring to bear on US policy on Iraq.
14. Stepping away I do not see as an option

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As one Iraqi said to me, "the Lebanese are gentle, we Iraqis are vicious; just imagine what we can do to ourselves."

15. On which note, a more personal parting comment. None of this effort would have been possible without our LE staff. They have struggled daily to our offices, in Baghdad, Basra and when we were in Kirkuk, through the wreckage that Shock and Awe and the subsequent decisions produced. They have risked their lives. Some have lost them. All have lost a friend or relation. All have suffered massive upheaval. It is heart-warming when my colleagues in the region seek to place in one of their embassies those who have to flee this country. Those are individual acts of humanity. I hope that, at a broader government level, the decision will be the right one when eventually ministers address collectively how to provide protection to those who supplicate us.
16. And finally my UK-based staff, from a variety of government departments and professions, who have devoted a part of their life to this venture. By the end of a tour in any of our three posts in Iraq, an officer experiences what elsewhere takes three or four years. Their professionalism and fortitude is of the highest order. Their determination to secure a better future for Iraq, in the face of daily frustration and barbarity, is a source of wonderment – particularly against a background when resources and attention are being diverted elsewhere. Iraq has been and always will be a key part of the Middle East. I have worked with some of the finest and most motivated officers over the past three-and-a-half years. If we are serious about it, we need to continue to encourage our best to go there. Moreover, in this spouse- and partner-free environment, their companionship during the past year has been a constant delight and their support a privilege to receive. It remains a special club of which I am proud to be a member.
17. According to what I think is the current practice, I leave it to officials in London to decide on any further copying of this.

*Dominic Asquith*

The Honourable Dominic Asquith CMG  
HM Ambassador  
British Embassy  
Baghdad

cc: PS/PUS  
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