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10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

20 November 2002

Dear Jonathan,

**IRAQ: PRIME MINISTER'S SEMINAR WITH ACADEMICS,
19 NOVEMBER**

The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary had a seminar with academics on Iraq on 19 November. The academics were Lawrie Freedman and Michael Clarke (KCL), George Joffe and Toby Dodge (Chatham House), Charles Tripp (SOAS) and Steve Simon (IISS). Jonathan Powell, Sally Morgan, David Manning, Desmond Bowen, Edward Chaplin and I were also present.

The Prime Minister made clear that this was all off the record, and that any discussion of post-Saddam Iraq did not imply that regime change was our policy or was inevitable. This records the main points made by the academics:

- The public mood in Iraq in September was relaxed, fatalistic, expecting an invasion. Some in the regime too were fatalistic: we'll be invaded whatever we do, so why should we disarm? They were arguing that any change of regime would be worse for the people of Iraq than the status quo. Iraqis feared disorder; Saddam guaranteed stability.
- Saddam was largely unpopular, including among regime members, and resented for his disastrous foreign and economic policy. But the closer to the core of the regime, the greater the costs of betrayal. So the regime would stay bound together. Any coup would come late in a military campaign.
- The most likely successor to Saddam was another General, probably from the Republican Guard, who would share much of Saddam's background, including hatred of Israel, distrust of Iran, dislike of the Iraq/Kuwait border. The next regime would probably be centralist, totalitarian and authoritarian, even if based less on fear than Saddam's. Its leader would almost certainly be better than Saddam, but over time could acquire similar "habits of mind" to maintain power.

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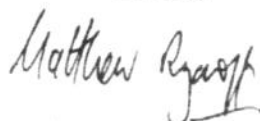
- To change Iraq substantively, we would have to address head on: (a) the shadow state behind the publicly visible state, (b) the role of the Armed Forces and their willingness to use force, and (c) the political economy of oil which led to a highly centralised bureaucracy and the power of patronage.
- Saddam had successfully used malleable instruments like family, kin, tribe, sect, ethnicity, economic power, patronage to bind the Iraqi people to the regime. This did not mean that Iraqis were immutably tribal etc.
- We would face tricky decisions on the extent to which we should work post-Saddam with the existing structures, including the Ba'ath Party (differing views on whether it would disappear with Saddam). We should work as much as possible with Iraqis in building their future governance structures. (There was no existing process to build on like the Loya Jirga in Afghanistan.) There was a danger of repeating the UK mistakes of 1920-32 if we were too prescriptive. Opposition groups outside Iraq had zero credibility inside Iraq.
- We should concentrate on building up local councils, as many Iraqis were localists at heart. Mixed views on whether oil revenues should be delegated to the local councils - the argument against being that using oil revenues to create political institutions would only encourage patronage.
- A strong sense of Iraqi nationalism, often underestimated outside, would hold the country together.
- There was lots of trade within Iraq and between Iraq and its neighbours. Under sanctions, the state had been pushed out of trade and been replaced by parallel structures. There was a dynamic, entrepreneurial but corrupt trading class. There has been a shift of wealth from urban to rural, and a rebirth of Iraqi agriculture. The end of sanctions and Iraq's reintegration into the global economy would throw up some major difficulties, especially claims and debt.
- The Sunni majority would continue to dominate Iraq's government, partly because the majority Shia were not a homogenous block. The central government had co-opted representatives of ethnic groups, regions etc, and played off one against the other. Many Shia were virulently secularist and anti-cleric. There was scope for greater cooperation between Shia/Sunni/Kurds. An Iraqi Islamist movement could emerge post-Saddam, and should perhaps even be encouraged.

- The Kurds knew independence was not possible. They administered themselves and would continue to do so. But there was much trade between Kurds and eg Baghdad. Baghdad was the biggest Kurdish city in Iraq.
- A more broad-based government was possible. The key to its success would be a stronger relationship than at present between its members and the regions they were meant to represent (in contrast to Saddam who had engaged in tokenism only).
- Sanctions and the NFZs were widely resented, but many Iraqis were relatively well disposed to the British.
- At the personal level there was more contact between Iraqis and Iranians than we would think. But for the Iraqi regime, Iran remained the enemy. Iraqis continued to resent the drawing of the Iraq/Kuwait border in Kuwait's favour. Relations between Iraq and Syria would remain bad as long as there were Ba'ath parties in both. Jordan was heavily dependent on Iraqi trade. If the oil price fell, Iraq would pump as much oil as possible to try to undermine the Saudi economy.
- If the UK, US and others were involved in regime change, there would be consequences for the MEPP, with raised expectations of our involvement in that too. We should not underestimate the extent to which Arab/Israel affected the climate for all Middle East issues.

Comment: no blinding insights, but a further dimension to the ongoing work exploring prospects for Iraq's future.

I am copying this to Peter Watkins (MOD), Anna Bewes (DfID), Mark Bowman (HMT), Ian Fletcher, John Scarlett and Desmond Bowen (Cabinet Office) and PS/C.

Yours,



MATTHEW RYCROFT

Jonathan Sinclair
FCO

