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Subject	IRAQ: VALEDICTORY: STILL IN THE BALANCE	
Summary	A year in which much has been achieved, but not enough yet to tip the balance firmly against the insurgency. Reasons not to be too gloomy. Where we should continue to add value. Tribute to the UK team and their home supporters. The ghost of Gertrude Bell.	

I leave Baghdad today after just over 10 months in post. I have already given accounts of Allawi's achievements as Prime Minister (my telno 167), and prospects for his successor, Dr Ibrahim Ja'afari (e-gram 4045/05). This final contribution attempts to put some perspective on recent events, and risks a few predictions about the future.

A bleak outlook?

A certain gloom seems to have descended in London and Washington about prospects for Iraq. There is certainly plenty of bad news around. Violence has surged since the new government was formed: attacks

DECLASSIFIED

509

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are running at about 70 a day; last week saw 40 car bomb attacks (the highest on record) and a total of over 700 casualties, 65% of them civilians. There is a nasty sectarian tinge to much of the killing. The long delay in forming the new government has exacerbated tensions and revived Sunni Arab fears of exclusion from any meaningful participation in the constitutional process - far more important to them than a few Ministries in the new government.

But we have been here before. At certain points last year (the crises in Najaf, Falluja and Mosul, occasional surges of violence in Baghdad, the insurgency coming nearer than they knew on a couple of occasions to shutting down fuel supplies to the capital altogether), the outlook seemed grim and the Allawi's government was badly rattled. And yet that government delivered the January elections, which despite the lack of Sunni Arab participation was a clear turning point, and defeated the insurgency's main objective. Small wonder that the insurgents are now trying so hard to prove that the new government is incapable of governing, targeting civilians to ensure maximum carnage and headlines.

Can Ja'fari's government make a difference? At his farewell dinner for me yesterday evening, recovering from Condi Rice's whirlwind visit, he had no trouble subscribing to the strategy which we all agreed months ago, that success against the insurgency depends on combining military action with economic and political progress.

Reasons to be more cheerful?

But there are some encouraging signs, even aiming off for our very imperfect knowledge of life outside the Green Zone. There are credible Sunni figures in the Cabinet, including as Defence Minister and Deputy PM. His key Ministers look competent and have been saying all the right things about delivering results and inclusiveness, and are conscious that they have little time to play with. There are at last serious numbers of trained and equipped ISF to deploy (60,000 police and border guards, 68,000 Army) and US transition teams to stiffen their front line capability are moving into place. With UK help, a coherent national policing plan should soon be in place. The Prime Minister is taking seriously advice about running an effective administration and especially the importance of managing public expectations. The international community is ready to pitch in with more help. Opinion polls show most Iraqis determinedly optimistic about the future.

The missing bit is an inclusive constitutional process. The Assembly has formed its Constitutional Committee - with only two Sunni Arabs on it. They are talking about mechanisms to include other groups in its deliberations, but have yet to produce anything credible. There is a risk that despite our and the UN's best efforts, the Alliance will not allow a sufficiently inclusive process and that the constitutional debate, instead of being an instrument for bringing Iraqis together, will drive them apart, with moderate Sunnis retreating into the arms of the extremists.

At the other end of the spectrum is the risk of the Alliance splitting into factions and Moqtada Al Sadr

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deciding he can gain more influence by opposing the government. Unlikely while Sistani is still alive; a real risk if he disappeared. Coping with Shia unrest in the south as well as a Sunni insurgency in the centre and north remains the nightmare scenario for any Baghdad government, and for the MNF.

Both risks should be taken seriously. But I believe the newly elected leaders will in the end work together to forestall these gloomy outcomes. There is even a reasonable chance that this government will be able to establish a virtuous circle, as described in our snapshot of its prospects, and in our separate reporting of plans to prosecute the counter insurgency campaign. It will take time, and much of the same sustained cajoling of Iraqis and allies alike as we have done over the last year, not least to persuade leaders to show leadership and broker unpopular compromises for the sake of national unity - a theme I have been pressing in my farewell speeches. But personally I expect to see a new constitution and government in place by early next year, only a few months later than scheduled.

What the UK does best

The UK effort in Iraq, substantial as it is (including almost 200 civilian staff divided between Baghdad, Basrah and Kirkuk, plus more than double that number in security support) is dwarfed by the US leviathan. We should continue to focus on what we do best:

- Quiet, informal advice to senior US military, of which the cumulative impact is clear;
- A better focused contribution to security sector reform in Baghdad and the South, producing a model in the MND(SE) for handing over security responsibilities to the Iraqis;
- Sustaining the flagship officer training effort at the Rustamiyah Academy and Staff College- a particular example of what we do best - as well as a substantial bilateral training programme which will produce benefits for years to come;
- Focusing DFID effort where we can add most value, in executing the short term power and fuel projects in the South, in improving Iraqi capacity there and in key parts of central government, in our macro-economic support and advice;
- Exploiting the tendency of almost all the leaders here to want a dialogue with the British, with particular attention in the coming months to Kirkuk;
- Sustaining the morale of key Iraqi ministers with high level contact: visits, certainly, but messages and phone calls make them feel less lonely and keep them going through the difficult patches.
- Using all these exchanges to push forward the bilateral agenda

Tributes

It has been a fascinating year, which I have found compelling, if at times exhausting. Every visitor who comes here is struck by the commitment and high morale of all parts of the UK team in Iraq. They work in an extraordinary environment. My morning meetings take silent comfort from the daily average of insurgent attacks falling below 50 a day, when any other mission would be reaching nervously for its evacuation plan. The achievements have been chronicled elsewhere. There are few areas where we have

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not added disproportionate value for our relatively small numbers.

Some of the toughest jobs in our missions here fall to those who have to look after the unglamorous tasks of security and administrative support: in the chaos of the new Iraq getting the simplest thing done requires much patience and perseverance

Tributes are also due to the unstinting efforts of the Iraq Policy Unit and others in Whitehall who have invariably responded quickly and generously to our many demands. And then one should be grateful above all for the fortitude of family and friends at home who have to live with often sensational coverage of all that is going wrong in this country. I am grateful to them all. They have made my job as Ambassador a great deal easier than I feared. We should not take any of them for granted: the Iraq package will have to remain special for some time to come.

The ghost of Gertrude Bell

One can easily overdo historical parallels. But I cannot resist a couple of quotes from the life of Gertrude Bell, Oriental Secretary to Sir Percy Cox, who was British High Commissioner in the early years of the mandate - especially when Residence guests eat off what was allegedly her dining table. She fiercely resisted the arguments of a certain Mr Asquith, who urged a House of Commons worried about the costs of British engagement in Iraq to confine our obligations to Basra. There was a titanic struggle in 1920 to form the first provisional Arab government which Bremer and Sawers would have found familiar (except for the choice of a Jewish businessman as Minister of Finance); so did Ja'fari when I related the tale to him yesterday evening. Except that then the Shia boycotted the British scheme, and the Sunnis were happy to keep them out - for the next 85 years. Ja'fari has made a slightly better start.

Writing home to her father, flushed with success, Gertrude exclaimed "Long Life to the Arab Government. Give them responsibility and make them settle their own affairs, and they'll do it every time a thousand times better than we can...once they've got responsibility, they'll realise their needs and the difficulties of government and they'll eliminate hot air in favour of good sense. Because they've got to run the show, and they can't run it on hot air". Amen to that.

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Contact Name
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TIM TORLOT



Original eGram