



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: [contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org)

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

Charity Registration Number: 208223

## Transcript

# Iraq: Searching for Stability in an Unstable Region

HE Dr Ali Al-Dabbagh

Spokesman for the Iraqi Government, Republic of Iraq

Dr Toby Dodge,

Reader in International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science

Emma Sky

Visiting Professor, War Studies Department, Kings College, London

Chair: Sir Jeremy Greenstock

Council, Chatham House; Special Envoy for Iraq (2003-2004); and Chairman, UN Association  
UK

20 June 2012

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

**Sir Jeremy Greenstock:**

Ladies and Gentlemen, good afternoon and welcome to this further meeting in the Middle East series of Chatham House. We have three speakers for you and questions and answers. The third speaker is stuck in a taxi on The Strand, which we've all experienced in our time, and will be with us shortly. But we have Dr Ali Al-Dabbagh, the Minister of State in the government of Iraq, spokesman for the Iraqi government; Emma Sky, Visiting Professor of the War Studies Department at King's college London; and Toby Dodge will be with us shortly, Reader in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

This is a meeting on the record throughout – no Chatham House Rule today. And we'll end promptly at two o'clock.

There has been a series of seminars on the prospects for Iraq and it's excellent that Chatham House is continuing to look at what's going on, on the ground internally, and in the region as Iraq forms new relationships, works out its internal challenges and explores and produces its oil and gas. His Excellency, Dr Ali, has been at, and will return to, a conference taking place at the Intercontinental Hotel at this moment on Iraq Petroleum 2012 and that is obviously one of the contexts for our talking about Iraq today.

But Iraq remains not just important but vital of our study of the Middle East region, and indeed wider than that, for two principle reasons: one is that it has the greatest potential for any oil or gas producing country of increasing production over the next ten years to meet the economic requirements of a growing – I hope – global economy; the greatest potential for increase.

And secondly, Iraq is ahead of the Arab awakening, not behind it. It began its new experiment, if you like, with democracy in 2004 under its own auspices and we've been following that as observers, professionals, think tankers, businessmen and politicians ever since and it's been a roller coaster journey, and it remains a roller coaster journey. But without a doubt in my mind I see the Iraqi people and the Arab awakening is all about the impact of the voice of the people. The Iraqi people showing a determination to take the democratic route, to choose and if necessary un-choose [sic] its own government, to be represented in parliament, and to show what an Arab country can do at the forefront of all these changes in the 21st century. And I think that's the context within which I hope we can explore with these excellent speakers, what is happening in Iraq at this moment.

Dr Ali is not just spokesman for the government of Iraq, he has a strong and deep experience in Iraqi business and regional business and trade, in human

rights issues surrounding Iraq, in the health and social welfare of the Islamic community through various charities that he has founded and supported, and in his role in insisting that every aspect of Iraqi society should get its due say in what the new era is to be. It's for those wider reasons that I very much welcome his presence on the stage today and look forward to what he has to say. Dr Ali.

### **HE Ali Al-Dabbagh:**

Thank you, Sir. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. I would like to thank Chatham House for giving me this opportunity to speak about the latest challenges we are experiencing with our political process in Iraq. I'm sure you are all aware that most of the regional powers surrounding Iraq were not happy with the change that took place in Iraq or with the manner in which that change was implemented by an international alliance led by the United States. They have openly and publicly declared such positions which ranged from reservation to rejection towards the new form of governance in Iraq by encouraging and supporting militants and terrorists to enter into Iraq under many pretexts. The domestic violence represents a great challenge to Iraq's security and stability which have a clear backdrop of political and sectarian tension. We don't deny Iraq is still experiencing violence and political crises which is still going on at extreme levels, and no signs that they will be resolved in the immediate or short term.

Many analysts thought that Iraq was on the verge of collapse or at least heading towards civil war. Fortunately this did not happen. And even now, the disputes with the Kurdish region and the efforts to have a no-confidence vote to oust Prime Minister al-Maliki have not resulted in the collapse of the junior democracy in Iraq. I am sure that we will continue to find peaceful ways to settle our differences.

However, with all such challenges Iraq decided last year to request the full withdrawal of American military forces and despite the concern of creating a power vacuum that was feared to be fuelled by other powers in the region, such fear of absence of a strong military force which could ensure the sovereignty of the country had to be considered extremely carefully and at the same time both Iraq and you as governments need to promote such a vital decision in their respective communities. I believe this was a remarkable decision, with all related challenges proved to be a success for the political process to maintain a better level of national unity and eliminate one of the most contentious issues amongst the political groups in Iraq. And the target for violent groups.

The political process in Iraq continues to be in transition. The form of governance and political partnership formula is not yet defined and completely accepted. We are still a junior democracy after decades of totalitarian and Ba'ath Party rule in Iraq. Iraq has played a huge price for being an important and strategic country through all its history and in recent history for its location with its huge reserve of oil and gas. The ongoing competition from some regional players who would rather not like to see a stable, secure and economically strong Iraq taking on its rightful position in the international community as a significant energy producer continues to be one of the most significant challenges for the development of Iraq's political process.

And in spite of all these challenge facing us in Iraq, it succeeded in establishing a balanced relation between Iran and some of its opponents.

We need to remember that historically Iraq was a battle ground between Persians and Romans, followed by the Ottomans, and more recently with the US and some regional countries. We are in a critical and sensitive situation and don't deny that the Iranians are exerting some influence in a volatile region. However, I believe Iraq succeeded in convincing the United States not to launch any military operations from its land or its airspace towards any of the neighbouring countries.

Iraq has continued to play a constructive role for mediating the dialogue between the US and Iran. It can play a pivotal role in resolving the current crisis with Iran. The role it played in the P5+1 meeting in Baghdad exceeded that of a host and strongly participated in bringing points of view closer to each other on the issue of Iran's nuclear programme, which has been a cause of concern for the region and the world over the past several years.

Iraq can take a lead to establish a bridge between Iran and Arab regional countries in order to bring a better and more protective understanding and dialogue with this neighbouring country with whom we must coexist. This is a great shift compared with the time when Iraq's neighbouring countries have had many high level ministerial meetings to contain the fear from an unstable Iraq and try to impose certain policies.

As we regard the situation in Syria, which has become of most paramount concern to Iraq and its stability, let me just clarify where Iraq is standing vis-à-vis this crisis. The official policy is not to support the current system of governance in Syria, ruled by one party, one leader, forever totalitarian rule. Radical reform must take place with an accepted democratic process brought about by the will and determination of the Syrian people, not by readymade

formulas set by others, which can only lead to further crises in the region. The policy of axis and imposing coercive solutions will not lead to security and stability in the Middle East. Instead, it will lead to a sectarian fire that can be easily sparked and fed but no one can control it and control its incantations. We are all witnessing such escalation of tension in Syria being extended to northern Lebanon. Iraq is extremely worried that such tensions and conflicts might extend to western Iraq which is a fertile region for such influence. This concern also includes Turkey, the Gulf region and Jordan, all of whom could be affected by such types [sic].

The on-going and future threat to the region is the extreme intolerance adopted by hardliners and extremists including the group led by Wahhabis, in the form of a Jihadist group who threaten and destroy even the moderate Islamist thinkers. And unfortunately this is not being challenged or dealt with. The increasing level of violence in Syria is clearly showing signs of escalating to a civil war which might be planned in a way to limit the Iranian influence in the region but this is a misguided notion as no one appears to be in control of any change. Iraq has suffered the most from the risk of having out of control, non-tolerant groups close to its border and it became the biggest corridor for terrorists crossing into Iraq.

So you can imagine the level of concern we have from any undesirable escalation of the situation in Syria that we are certain with the spillback uncertainty and security in Iraq. With all these challenges Iraq needs to behave in a responsible manner and not to take sides with or against Syria but tries to support any peaceful or negotiated settlement for the crisis there. Iraq is fully supportive of the Arab and United Nation initiative for Syria through Kofi Annan's effort. At the same time, Iraq condemns any parties who are committing any atrocities or supporting any of the violent acts taking place in this country by any side.

Generally speaking, all of Iraq's domestic tensions, sectarian feelings, political inconsistencies, negative views of power sharing by political parties in Iraq, the high level of corruption, the regional pressures and the regional instability and the so called Arab spring, all these are real challenges for the political process in Iraq and [we] need to deal with them in a wise and responsible manner. These difficulties are hardly conducive to building a political system particularly in the absence of appropriate institutions to protect its newly born democracy. This is the negative side of the scene.

Let us look to the positive side. Iraq aspires to lead the regional initiative that uproots the seeds of tension, sectarianism and inflammation in the region to

ensure that we build the bridges of coexistence and to resolve all the historical, geopolitical, ideological and nuclear issues in order to promote peace, security and stability. Iraq could be a role model of ethnicity and multi-religious coexistence in the region providing huge opportunities for investments in its economic resources for the entire region to benefit. Iraq offers a wealth of opportunities for business activities that will act as a bridge of constructive cooperation that should limit all the disputes and difficulties the region has suffered for centuries.

The region could live in a new European style of mutual economic interests and integration if the leaders of the region are prepared to accept that a critical time has finally come for all of us to put the actual interests of our people at the forefront of any consideration. The adoption of diplomatic political solutions are best served for the interests and wellbeing for all our people. This is the policy of the new Iraq.

The bigger question is how much support can we muster to support such policy?

Ladies and gentlemen, there have been many wrongs that have been committed over centuries and I say it is almost impossible for us to correct all of these wrongs but we should look forward to the future. When we look at our respective religions they all share basic human principles. These are based on the respect of all human beings, tolerance, forgiveness, justice and coexistence. As such I call on all of the people in the Middle East in particular and in the wider region to rise and embrace a new regional order based on these principles and this is the real spring that we need. Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen.

### **Sir Jeremy Greenstock:**

I'm going to continue with the order of speakers that we've got now that we have Toby with us.

Toby Dodge has been talking a lot about Iraq particularly since the 2003 invasion, [he] has written a lot about it, he is head of the LSE IDEAS Middle East International Affairs Programme, and has been directing his research and his comments particularly at the nature of the post-colonial state and therefore the post-2003 state in Iraq, and in my experience speaks with an unvarnished tongue about where Iraq is going. So, Toby, we look forward very much to hearing what you have to say.

**Dr Toby Dodge:**

Thank you. Firstly let me apologise, I think Iraq's problems are put in perspective and that takes the best part of an hour in a very hot taxi to get from one side of the Strand to the other.

To pick up on what His Excellency has said I take my point of departure to be October 2006 when 2,700 completely innocent Iraqi civilians were slaughtered in one month in the midst of a civil war. And I think from that point of departure we've travelled a long way in a fairly positive direction. I don't think Iraq is anywhere close to returning to civil war. I think the Iraqi state with its army and its police force is the strongest provider of order across Iraqi society. I think that's the good news.

I think we're at a crossroads, and a quite intriguing crossroads, between two political systems and this is Iraq evolving in a post-colonial, as Sir Jeremy said, or post-occupation way, between two different systems. The first is the one that was possibly born in 2003 and certainly solidified in the two elections of January and December 2005. Now we could call it a kind of rough and ready consociationalism; we could call it divided power; or, a series of governments of national unity. The ministries are divided up between those who win the elections, between the parties, the parties then sit in those ministries using them as best they can. Now the upside of this, the very reason why it was designed, is it stops or at least limits the tension, the violence, the possibility of the Kurdish parties succeeding, or indeed the possibility of other parties coming out of government and deploying violence from outside government.

The negativity, and there is a huge amount of negativity, is it has delivered to Iraq, I think, a system that is not fit for purpose. Ministries become the fiefdom of parties to be used for party political corruption or for personal corruption, responsibility of ministers to the prime minister or parties to their electorate is minimised under this system. And as we've seen, what the Iraqi population desperately need after order: electricity, clean running water or jobs, they are not getting from this system.

Now the second system, the other road that we may be travelling down, is equally as worrying but it may deliver coherence. We've seen the centralisation of power in the office of the prime minister, the office currently occupied by Nouri al-Maliki, and I think this is what worries a great deal of politician. Masoud Barzani, Saleh al-Mutlaq and Ayad Allawi have all over the last few months accused Nouri al-Maliki of harbouring authoritarian, centralised, even dictatorial tendencies.

So what we have on the table are these two different systems of government with the Prime Minister, I suspect, seeking to centralise power in his own office and you could argue who would blame him trying to push this governing system into coherence. The rest of the newly empowered governing league brought back to power after 2003 are saying, 'No, no, no, no, the system we like [is] the national pact. Bringing everyone into government is what we want. It no longer gives us a stake in government; it gives us some control over you.' Now that fight is unfolding as we speak in Baghdad. That there have been machinations, some covert now increasing overt, to try and push through parliament a vote of no confidence against Nouri al-Maliki to try to bring him down and remove him as a potential dictator. Now they need 163 votes to do that and I would argue that, and I'm not sure if anyone would agree with me, that they're nowhere closer to do that. The Prime Minister has very successfully bought off, co-opted, and persuaded parliamentarians not to vote for a vote of no confidence.

So going forward what we have is an Iraqi ruling elite that's clearly divided and that largely hasn't delivered the civilian needs – greater electricity, clean running water, an evolving economy – it hasn't delivered that to the population but they are working with two mutually incompatible models. One that doesn't divide government amongst the parties but breeds corruption, inefficiency and unaccountability and another that centralises power in the office of the Prime Minister, that breeds fear and worry that we may be going back to the future that the occupier of the office of the Prime Minister may well be driving towards dictatorship.

Now, I think, Nouri al-Maliki will survive. I don't think the rest of the ruling elite are coherent enough, unified enough – they distrust each other as much as they distrust the Prime Minister – so we are in a stasis, we're treading water. I've just come back from Washington, if [US] Vice President Joseph Biden was on the platform he would say, 'It's ok, there will be provincial elections, then national elections, then they'll sweep Nouri al-Maliki away and the voice of the people will be heard once again.'

I'm very worried about that because you see instances of, for example, the hierarchical Electoral Council, the director of that spending four days in jail on a trumped up corruption charge. Allegedly he was rung by the Prime Minister on his first night in prison and he said, 'Don't worry; it's nothing to do with me. I'll sort it out.' But he was still kept there for four days before being released. I think there are there are clear signs that we're moving from an incoherent political system back to some form of structural authoritarianism. If that's the case the next elections may be comparable much more closely to a



'Putinesque' show of democracy, not what Iraq has had in the last three elections which was a hard fought free and fair election. Thank you very much.

### **Sir Jeremy Greenstock:**

Thank you, Toby. [It was] what I expected.

Our third speaker is Emma Sky. She, at the moment, is a visiting professor at the War Studies Department at Kings College and has a role as a fellow at Oxford in the Changing Nature of War Programme but I think of her as an activist on the ground. Somebody who goes out to the countries that she is interested in mostly for development reasons to see what is going on on the ground and getting involved there. She has represented the Foreign Office [and] the British Council in Iraq. But actually most of all we value her for representing an independent view and for giving those views courageously and clearly about what is going on and engaging with the people on the ground. It's that voice that we want to hear today. Emma.

### **Emma Sky:**

Thank you very much for that introduction Sir Jeremy. It's a great honour to be invited to speak today at Chatham House alongside old friends particularly His Excellency Dr Ali Al-Dabbagh. I was an uninvited guest in Iraq for numerous years so it is wonderful to see you in London as a very welcome and invited guest.

So Iraq's potential is immense and, as Dr Ali outlined, Iraq is making great progress and as Toby said we've come a long way since the days of the civil war in 2005/6/7. It is a country blessed with a proud history, great national resources and amazing people. However, there are a number of factors that hinder Iraq's ability to achieve its potential and I want to highlight four of those.

Firstly, the economic structure of the state. Oil is a curse. 95% of the government's revenues come from oil rents, not from the productive labour of its citizens. There's no accountability between the rulers and the people. All the rent goes to the state. There's no transparent model of finance and political parties. They receive funds, either from neighbouring countries or from the state coffers in the form of contracts. Transparency International rates Iraq as the eighth most corrupt country in the world. It's the hardest country in the region to do business in.

Second factor: weak institutions. Democratic checks and balances were put in place in the institutions established in 2003 and enshrined in the constitution. A credible and legitimate election took place in 2010. However, a protracted government formation process produced no change and the same dysfunctional government remained in place. Since then, the executive has brought independent institutions under its control, heavily influences the judiciary and has weakened the powers of parliament. The strongest institutions today are the Prime Minister's Office and the army. Critics say we have rule without law.

The third factor: democracy without democrats. There is not yet a culture of democracy in Iraq. The political elite squabble over the spoils of the state. The public yearn for stability, even if that means a return to authoritarian rule. Democracy is not just about elections, it takes years to develop a culture of democracy.

The fourth factor is the regional climate. So as Dr Ali said, Iraq finds itself caught between the rivalries of the US and Iran, the resurgence of the old empires of the Ottomans and Persia and sectarian struggles between Shi'a and Sunni playing out between Iran and Saudi. There is a regional cold war in which Iraq and Syria both become proxy battlefields. Arab countries fear Iraq has become a client state of Iran. Iraq's contested domestic politics prevent it from pursuing a coherent foreign policy and invite external interference in its affairs. Different groups within Iraq pursue their own distinctive foreign policies, seeking regional support for their goals. In all of this Tehran has clearly become the regional winner from the fall of Saddam.

I want to end on an optimistic note. Recently, I was fortunate enough to see the Iraqi National Theatre Company's portrayal of Romeo and Juliet. They came over as part of the International Shakespeare Festival as part of the Olympics. The Iraqi director chose to set his interpretation of the play in today's Baghdad, portraying a family squabble not ancient hatreds of Sunni and Shi'a. The play was in Iraqi Arabic with references to a common history, shared experiences and cultural references understood by all Iraqis. The director said that when the play was performed in Baghdad members of the audience were weeping. It was a portrayal of the Iraq that most Iraqis wish to live in; not a country in which the other is absent; a country that has always celebrated its diversity; a country that had once been famed for bringing the world a written code of law.

Thankyou.