

The Middle East – the Arch of Instability [Slide]

You asked me to give a personal view on why the Middle East matters, and to do so from my background as a former Deputy Commanding General – and founder member - of the Multinational team which began the re-formation of the Iraqi Army, as a former Commanding General of MND SE and GOC British Forces in Iraq, and as the current Senior British Officer in US Central Command. My comments are therefore principally related to security issues. I stress that it is a personal view, and does not represent the views of the British Government, the British Army, or US Central Command.

Bearing in mind the qualifications and experience of my co-panellists I am going to concentrate on Iraq: to review the current situation in the light of President Bush's recent announcement on troop levels, to float three possible future outcomes there (without being silly enough to make any predictions) and then to make some general concluding remarks. At the beginning, I think we must be quite clear about the five big issues that pervade the Middle East, and which to an extent are all played out in Iraq **[Slide]**:

- **[Slide]** The rise of Al Qua'eda and associated movements with an extremist, Sunni, agenda that aims at the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate. It is hostile to the West, to Christianity, to Judaism, to Shia Islam and also to the Saudi model of Sunni Islam.
- **[Slide] [Slide and explain]** Radical Shia Islam, sponsored by Iran, and its clients like Hizbollah and Jaish al Mahdi.
- **[Slide]** The corrosive effects of the continuing Israel-Palestinian conflict
- **[Slide] [Slide and explain]** The continuing dependency of the World on Middle Eastern oil and gas
- **[S;ide]** The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, their role in destabilising inter-state relations in the region, and the possibility of these weapons finding their way into the hands of either set of extremists.

[Slide] In addition, the increasing youth bulge in the demographic make-up of the Middle East must be borne in mind. This translates into under employed or unemployed youths, with no prospects, no chance of changing things for the better by democratic means, and limited life expectancy. This is a fertile recruiting ground for extremism which can – can – then be exported to immigrant populations in the west.

[Slide] So what of Iraq? The regime of Saddam Hussein has been replaced by an elected government under a permanent constitution, and some democratic institutions have been established. However AQ terrorism, a vicious Sunni, rejectionist insurgency, and a lesser Shia insurgency, all continue - and are increasingly focussed on inter-sectarian violence. The national government lacks capability and capacity, and has little strategic vision. Central powers are tending therefore to drift to Provinces and, perhaps, regions. Malign Iranian influences are hard at work, and Syria continues to act as a conduit for AQ and for former Ba'athists. Support for the Coalition continues to decline, and in the absence of real security, many communities turn to self-help, which merely exacerbates the problem of armed militias and sectarian conflict.

So far we have not seen civil war – the fracture of the state and its institutions: the Iraqi security forces have grown, and are growing, but performance is far from consistent. Equipment is still not good enough, no uniform code of military justice exists and absenteeism is rife. The local police in particular remain riddled with corruption and are without doubt contributing to sectarian violence. As an aside, I am often irritated by criticisms that we - the Coalition - disbanded the old Iraqi Army. I was sure at the time (having been part of the process) that Bremer was right to do so and I can go into the reasons in discussion if you wish. Subsequently I am even more certain that this was right: the old army would never have withstood the sectarian tensions that exist today, it would have fractured; moreover the organisation that gives us real problems is the one that was not disbanded and rebuilt – the police.

[Slide] The situation in Baghdad is particularly bad. 90% of violence in Iraq takes place within 30 miles of the city and although much of the rest of Iraq is peaceful, it is Baghdad

that determines nationwide trends and international perception; and its stabilisation is vital to the maintenance of a unified Iraq.

Iraq floats on a sea of oil, and yet its government has been slow to invest in developing the decaying infrastructure that would increase its revenues and allow it to deal with some of its more pressing problems. Half its income is spent on security, another quarter on subsidising food handouts, utilities, public services, and fuel. The effects of this include the destruction of agriculture (if no-one needs to buy food, no-one will grow it); massive petrol smuggling across the borders to where street prices are higher; a thriving black market; and a legitimate market driven by consumption of imported goods rather than by indigenous production.

Introducing a democratic process has not been the cure for Iraq's diseases that some suggested it would be. Talk of "a stable and democratic" Iraq is notably absent nowadays: perhaps one cannot have an Iraq that is both stable and democratic – at least not in the near term, and not until whatever model of democracy that best suits Iraq evolves from the basis of solid state functions, and national institutions such as education, accountable security forces, governance and local and national levels, and a strong private sector.

Against this background, it will come as no surprise that the Coalition's objectives in Iraq continue to be **[Slide]**:

- The defeat of AQ, and the denial of safe haven for it in Iraq
- Securing Baghdad
- Securing Iraq's territorial integrity, and limiting the ambitions of Iran and Syria
- Strengthening democratic or legally accountable institutions, especially the security forces
- Developing oil exports as the basis of economic regeneration
- Assisting the Iraqi government to promote national reconciliation within Iraq, and proper relations with neighbouring states and regional governments.

[Slide] You all know the details of the current US surge (a brigade each month for five months). It is still in its beginnings, both in terms of military power and in the expansion of infrastructure developments. The latter is led by the Provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) – their personnel, for example, is to be doubled. But this surge is not open ended, and at some point the Iraqis must take responsibility for their own country. Personally I fear that the longer we stay, the easier it is for them to put the blame for everything that goes wrong on us, and to sit back and expect the coalition to pay the bills in blood and treasure.

So there is risk in these objectives. Surge or no surge, the coalition will increasingly have to let go – let Iraqis take charge, let them make mistakes, and accept models that do not necessarily accord with prior conceptions. The idea that “a bit more, for a bit longer, makes it a bit better”, cannot continue indefinitely. Even Bush and Blair were explicit about that. And it will not be lost on you that no other coalition country – including Britain – is surging. They do not need to, because of the concentration of violence in and around Baghdad.

In the meantime, while the Iraqi government struggles to come to grips with its responsibilities, politics has shifted to the streets. This brings me to my three possible outcomes for Iraq (you can doubtless think of others), and I stress again that I am not foolish enough to make any prediction not least because my experience tells me that when Iraqis are offered the choice between violence and politics to solve problems, they will invariably choose both **[Slide]**:

- Iraq fractures into three separate entities: Kurdish north; Shia south; Sunni centre.
- A strong central authority emerges, which is highly authoritarian but keeps just on the right side of international tolerance limits, and holds the country together.
- Iraq maintains weak central institutions, but descends into civil war – which may lead to outcome 1 or 2.

Let us examine each a little further.

Iraq Fractures [Slide].

Paradoxically, this scenario could emerge downstream from a successful surge operation and a coalition withdrawal, and is therefore not imminent. In this scenario, Iraq would splinter into three entities either by agreement or as the outcome of civil conflict: Leaving aside Baghdad for a moment, these would broadly consist of the three Kurdish provinces in the north (Suleymania, Dohuk, Erbil); the nine Shia provinces in the south (Basra, Maysan, Dhi Qar, Muthanna, Wasit, Qadisiya, Najaf, Karbala and South Babil; and the six mainly Sunni provinces in the centre (North Babil, Anbar, Salah-e-din, At Tamim, Ninewa, Diyala). This follows broadly the makeup of the three old Ottoman provinces that became Iraq after the Congress of Versailles. But fracture would be unlikely to be so neat and tidy. In the north, there are substantial Kurdish populations in three other provinces: Ninewa, Salah-e-din and Diyala; the city of Mosul divides ethnically along the line of the Tigris river; and ownership of the Kirkuk region, which sits on 25% of the known oil reserves of Iraq, is in dispute and subject to a referendum later this year. With this oil production in their hands, the Kurds could go their own way – as they have done for the last 10 years anyway, with considerable success. There are also Shia populations in Diyala, and Babil is split north and south; Ownership of oil is another key battleground for these factions too. If the Kurds took Kirkuk, the Sunni are left sitting on a piece of desert with their energy and water supplies controlled by unfriendly neighbours. It is probable that oil and gas reserves exist in Anbar province, which could partly offset this, but there is a great gap between reserves in the ground, and exportable crude, never mind refined product. It has always puzzled me greatly that this does not seem to occur to the Sunni: all they have to offer the other communities in Iraq at present is violence, and violence is not a powerful incentive to staying together.

[Slide] Then there is the problem of Baghdad which is, like Mosul, becoming increasingly divided into ethnic districts either side of the Tigris river. Clear ownership of the capital would be a key battleground between Shia and Sunni, which is unlikely to be

achieved easily. The possible outcomes for the city range from its being a constant battleground, to a partitioned city, or an intra-nationalised city; or some sort of neutral ground between the entities.

Could these three entities stand alone? Perhaps. More likely the Shia south would become a surrogate of Iran. The emergence of a Kurdish state in northern Iraq unmuzzles the dog that did not bark at Versailles. It would be bound to excite Kurdish nationalist feeling in all those countries with Kurdish populations: Turkey, Iran, Syria, Azerbaijan and Armenia. The attitude of the Turkish, Syrian and Iranian governments towards their Kurdish citizens is well known; and any moves on their part towards re-drawing of national boundaries would add yet more instability and violence to the region. And what of a Sunni rump, perhaps sitting on an amount of oil, perhaps holding western Baghdad as its capital and southern Mosul? Its options look limited. For its neighbours and the West, there would always be the suspicion that it was a safe haven for AQ and for renegade Ba'athists, making it the target for both economic and military sanctions for years to come.

There are many who view this option as the most likely for Iraq. It does not look pretty either for Iraq, or for the region.

A Strong Central Government Emerges [Slide]

This scenario could also emerge if the current surge operation in Iraq is successful. Although this is hard to see at the moment, it is traditionally the way that Iraq has been held together since its birth as a nation state, by the British, then by the monarchy, then by the military, then by the Ba'ath party. Iraq is, of course, an artificial creation, and several of Versailles' other artificial creations have since disintegrated or changed: Czechoslovakia, Jugoslavia, Palestine, the kingdoms that now constitute Saudi Arabia, and the Greek territories in Asia Minor being examples. Any authority seeking to control Iraq would have to do so through controlling the security forces, and its methods would undoubtedly throw the "stable *or* democratic" dilemma into sharp relief. Such an

authority would also need to maintain enough international support to avoid, for example, economic sanctions or an embargo on military aid and its methods would have to be tailored so that it stayed – just – on the right side of international opinion. Much would depend, I guess, on how badly the West needed Iraqi oil to keep prices manageable. Much might be acceptable on that count that would not otherwise be tolerated. The 64,000 dollar question is “where would this strong central authority come from?” Possibly the Kurds would decide that their future looked better within a unified Iraq, and given their undoubted collective strength and determination, they might produce the core of such a leadership. Possibly either the Sunni or Shia parties could throw up a figure, or figures, who could command enough support from within and from neighbouring states to take effective charge. The Kurds might decide to back such a figure, in order to remain inside Iraq and thereby neutralise Turkish, Iranian and Syrian hostility to their people. Maybe the Iraqi Army will produce the leadership. I guess much depends on how threatened most Iraqis feel, and how much of their new-found liberty they are willing to surrender in exchange for security. Do not make the mistake, however, of judging Iraqis by our standards: their tolerance of hardship and suffering – and therefore of strong-arm government - is very great.

Iraq Remains One Country, but Descends into Civil War [Slide]

This scenario is perhaps an extension of the current situation, and is a possible outcome from the failure of the current surge to establish security in Baghdad and elsewhere. The Kurdish provinces would be largely unaffected, however separatist Kurds would undoubtedly exploit chaos for their own ends. The agents of civil war are the deliberate AQ campaign to foment Shia-Sunni violence to the point where the institutions of state, and especially the army and police, fracture on sectarian lines; and the various armed militias such as Jaish Al Mahdi, Jaish Mohammed and so on. To prevent this, therefore, we should be in no doubt that a key target of the current coalition surge operation will be – must be – to assist the current Iraqi government in disarming and dismantling these militias. Given their size and the nature of the urban terrain in which they operate, this

will be neither quick nor easy and one must ask whether the surge is big enough and for long enough to achieve this end.

Such a civil war would be fought out along the sectarian divide, or where mixed populations occupy disputed territory such as Kirkuk, Mosul, the fringe of the northern Gulf south of Basra, and Baghdad. These areas have already been the subject of heavy ethnic cleansing – estimates suggest that around 2 million Iraqis out of a population of perhaps 24 million, are displaced. A civil war would also inevitably be a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, using their Shia and Sunni proxies inside Iraq. The first casualty of such a civil war would probably be AQ, since neither of these two antagonists can tolerate AQ's agenda in the medium to long term, whatever deals with the devil they may do in the short term. Its outcome could be either of the first two scenarios I described, or simply endemic instability of a type which is familiar to us from Somalia and parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

Conclusions [Slide]

None of these three possible outcomes looks pretty; but if you accept what I said earlier about there being something of a short term dilemma between stability or democracy in Iraq, perhaps we should make up our minds which we find least unsavoury – on the basis that it is always best to have a Plan B in case your Plan A fails to survive contact with the photocopier (never mind the enemy).

Currently, Plan A is the Baghdad Surge and supporting operations elsewhere, which are intended to lead to transition; that is, the control by the government and security forces of a democratic Iraq. Transition is not primarily, therefore, about conditions on the ground, because in Iraq, violence and progress go on at the same time and if we use conditions on the ground as the prime indicator of transition, we really will be there forever. We should certainly not write the surge off just yet; however if the outcome fails to match our hopes, if not our expectations, we need to identify and come to terms with an alternative end

state that contributes more to our own security than simple coalition withdrawal under unfavourable circumstances.