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Iraq: The Whole Thing Was Much Harder Than It Needed To Be

by Robert Tollast

Three former diplomats who served in Iraq during three phases of the conflict share their thoughts on the security, economic and political issues of their time in country.

Interview with Keith Mines, former CPA Governance Coordinator for Al Anbar in 2003

Many who worked with Paul Bremer in Iraq believed oil revenues and a re-invented Iraqi private sector would win the peace. Years later however, we see immense infrastructure projects funded by Iraqi oil money and vast foreign investment. They may have jumped the gun in 2003 with a rush to privatize, but were the neoconservatives right all along?

No, those who argued for a quick transition to a fully privatized economy were completely lost to the reality of Iraq in 2003 and more lost to the realities of transition economics. I came to Iraq in 2003 from Hungary, the darling of the Eastern European transition economies (at the time). I was aghast at those who argued for a forceful transition to a fully privatized economy for Iraq and used Eastern Europe as a model. Hungary did not immediately privatize its economy when the wall fell, in fact it went a full four years through the first democratic transitional government before the Socialists finally implemented the Bokros Plan and began the hard work of economic transition.

The first four years were spent transitioning the political system, the economy was kept stable with no great shocks that would have brought into question whether the whole project was a good idea or not. I argued forcefully, as did every military commander and diplomat in the field, for large scale public works projects of the kind that would employ tens of thousands of otherwise out of work men. All to no avail, we were told to go back and suck it up, Iraq would be dragged into the modern global economy; heaven forbid it should be just another distorted petro economy with a large public sector. It went kicking and screaming all right, at us mostly. The whole thing was much harder than it needed to be.

A lot of people from Coalition nations (e.g. CPA Deputy Governance Coordinator for Maysan, Rory Stewart) have reported a very fine line between influencing Iraqi policy makers and being seen as colonial masters or patronizing. Do you think there was a suspicion, even among Iraqis who joined the coalition that we were somehow there to dominate them?

Yes of course. That was a constant for all coalition officials, military and civilian, at all levels. But it played out very unevenly. On the one hand Iraqis were accustomed to being led by a heavy hand. They were used to none of the normal give and take within the bureaucracy and governing structures of even the Gulf States, with their milder tempered leaders and more open

political system. Most Iraqis we dealt with were looking for the big guy with the power and the resources whom they could come to and seek favors or redress.

We fell quickly into that role, reluctant though we were to play it. On the other hand there was widespread suspicion that we were there to steal Iraq's oil, or worse yet challenge its religious order, and that we were there to stay. It was interesting, and you can track this pretty clearly, that whenever there was an announcement from the Coalition that indicated the foreigners would be moving out of governing and turning things over to Iraqis, the violence went down. I am thinking especially of the November 2003 timeline announced in Baghdad for a national turnover to Iraqi authorities combined with MG Swannack's December announcement that the coalition would be moving out of the cities as Iraqi forces were trained and equipped to assume security duties. Iraqis were very sovereignty conscious. When these announcements turned out to be less than promised, the violence escalated again.

On a day to day basis MG Swannack and I tried hard to shift as much power as possible to the Iraqi government. I worked very closely with Governor Burgis (Abel Al Kareem Burgess Alzaldin was the coalition selected governor of Al Anbar province.) I would have liked to have seen him in an even more empowered role, having been elected through some form of a Loya Jirga like mechanism of provincial councils, but that wasn't possible so we worked with what we had. When I arrived there was a squad of U.S. soldiers living in the anteroom of the governor's office and I moved them out and then put myself in a smaller and less stately office upstairs to clearly indicated that he was the governor and I was a temporary representative of a temporary force.

We met daily in his office where I was careful to show absolute respect for him and his position. It helped to establish his authority and take some of the edge off the occupation, but at the end of the day we had the guns and everyone knew it and there were those times when our ultimate authority was laid bare.

During the provincial council caucuses in February 2004 we went to the mat with a raucous crowd over how to conduct the selection process. A decision had to be made and we, in the end, made it, over the protest of many in the room. So there were always going to be limits to how much we could finesse the issue.

In the end it might have been better, as many of us argued at the time and as was the original plan by Jay Garner, to quickly turn over power to a nationally selected Iraqi governing body that would be advised and supported, at their invitation, by the coalition.

You asserted in the 2007 article <u>The Only Iraq Worth Fighting For</u> that there were serious doubts about the long lasting effects of "The Surge" because of Iraq's ongoing political turmoil. You argue an 18 state Federalism for Iraq as the way forward. We've recently heard allegations of people still being arrested on the grounds of false or spurious "Baathist" connections and Kirkuk is still a powder keg. Is Federalism still the best hope?

It is virtually impossible for a country as ethnically and geographically diverse as Iraq to be a democracy that is anything other than federalist. The question I always had was what kind of federalism – the natural but probably impossible three state federalism where each ethnic group had its region and Baghdad was somehow "shared," or an 18-state federalism where each geographic state had to blend its people internally, and then show up in Baghdad with its state

issues, not simply fall in with its brethren from elsewhere in the country and vote by ethnic block.

Two or three state federations do not tend to last and I was simply arguing that an 18 state federation would mix up the ethnic groups enough that they could not fall into the toxic and ultimately fatal arrangement of a three state federation. So yes, I believe that if Iraq is to be a democracy, and it has no other good options for governance, it must be an 18 state federation. Federalism by the way is a "discipline" that is very poorly understood by most policy makers and could use more focus, in many cases more focus than democracy. Voting is easy, governing is hard, and in most of the countries in conflict in the past decade – Somalia, Sudan, the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan – federalism is probably the answer.

Do you agree with the following statement: South Korea took decades to become a healthy democracy, but were regarded as a vital ally in Asia all the same. Therefore, limited press freedom in Iraq should not affect their status as an ally: good democracy takes years.

I would be hard pressed to defend why Iraq in 2011 would not have full press freedom and if it did not, why we would condone it. I am also not sure South Korea couldn't have somehow muddled through with a bit more freedom of the press and fewer executions of dissidents during the Cold War.

Because we allowed it, it didn't make it right then, but in any event there is a huge difference between isolated and under the gun South Korea and contemporary Iraq which for better or worse is now a model for Arab transitions to democracy. Iraq simply must perform to a higher standard, and press freedom is pretty basic for a modern democracy.

What do you think is the biggest lesson you took from your time in Iraq that applies to your current role?

I have always been a huge fan of the Salvador and Colombia models for "small wars," with well placed advisors and material support to assist our foreign counterparts in developing their own security and political structures, but a minimum of boots on the ground. In the end it is their fight and empowering them is the key to success. Too direct involvement only serves to tarnish their nationalist credentials and create a cycle of dependency that then has to be broken later.

Keith Mines is currently director of the U.S Embassy Narcotics Affairs Section in Mexico City. The views expressed here are his own do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the U.S Government either now or at the time in question.

Interview with Gary Grappo, former Minister Counselor for Political Affairs at the U.S Embassy in Baghdad from 2009 to 2010

A lot of people from Coalition nations have reported a very fine line between influencing Iraqi policy makers and being seen as colonial masters or patronizing. What were your experiences?

Since 2003, so many individuals have been involved in Iraq – members of Coalition armed forces, diplomats, government and NGO aid workers, contractors, etc. – that describing their efforts using dated terms such as "colonial masters" fails to capture the range, complexity and enormity of their efforts. During the time I served in Iraq (2009-2010), it was very clear that the U.S. – then the sole Coalition member with combat troops remaining in Iraq – had no interest in

remaining in Iraq beyond what the Iraqis wished; indeed, the U.S. had earlier signed a security agreement with the Government of Iraq agreeing to withdraw our combat forces by the end of 2011.

The efforts of our servicemen and women and diplomats were directed at helping Iraqis rebuild national institutions – from parliamentary elections one year ago (generally regarded as free and fair) to organizations responsible for rule of law.

Far from patronizing, most every American with whom I had the honor to serve in Iraq, whether soldier, diplomat or aid worker, soberly recognized the daunting task ahead for the Iraqis and the complex challenges Iraqis face and will continue to face for another generation. Of course, in the first year, we were in charge with the CPA, and in subsequent years we and our coalition partners tried to influence Iraqis to make good decisions. Many of those Iraqi leaders had little experience in governance. That said, during the period I worked there, we were all very respectful of Iraqi sovereignty and understood very well that any hint of patronizing would be immediately rejected by Iraqis.

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You'll want to check the figures. The hope of "vast foreign investment" certainly remains but hasn't yet been realized. While Iraq is beginning to tackle the vital task of rebuilding its much diminished and neglected infrastructure, oil revenues are not yet at the level they will need to be in order to undertake this task as ambitiously as Iraqis and their government might wish and also meet the many other needs of rebuilding the nation and serving the people. Infrastructure projects and foreign investment will come as Iraq's oil reserves become more fully exploited and investor confidence grows. Importantly, foreign businesses and investors will watch closely developments in the country in 2012 following the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

There's a simplistic view of Nouri Al Maliki having a sectarian bias. A closer analysis might find he is in fact politically biased in favour of Al Dawa. What do you think?

In the summer of 2009, Maliki had expressed publicly his interest in forming a non-sectarian political coalition but failed. Iraq, then facing its first post-security crisis election, was apparently not ready for such a coalition. His State of Law coalition ended up almost entirely Shi'a and was effectively led by his own party, Da'wa. His connection and association with Da'wa, however, were no more or less than those of any other political candidate with his/her respective party. Iraq still suffers from sectarian tension, which carries over to political parties and coalitions. This may change with time as Iraq moves away from the period of sectarian strife, but doing so will mean addressing the very problematic issues and suspicions responsible for many of those cleavages, e.g., distribution of oil revenues, Kirkuk, etc.

Some people want to hold Maliki responsible for the arrests of journalists and the shooting of protesters. While it's clear that some of these abuses are not linked to Maliki, others are clearly I.S.F related. Is it right that the U.S Embassy in Baghdad publicly condemns this, as they recently did?

As I am no longer serving in Iraq, I cannot speak authoritatively to what is currently happening in the country. However, as a matter of standard policy, the U.S. remains strongly opposed to

any abridgement of fundamental human rights, e.g. of press/expression, peaceful assembly, etc. The U.S. has also spoken against mistreatment of journalists and the use of force against peaceful demonstrators. In recent weeks, the U.S. position has been articulated repeatedly in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and elsewhere.

Do you agree with the following statement? South Korea took decades to become a healthy democracy, but was regarded as a vital ally in Asia all the same. Therefore, limited press freedom in Iraq should not affect their status as an ally: good democracy takes years.

Irrespective of the time necessary for a nation to become a democracy, we should not shirk our responsibility to speak up on behalf of human rights. Allies and partners frequently criticize or offer advice to one another on how to improve each other's' policies or societies. We have listened to candid advice from our European allies, for example, on our judicial system. We hope Iraqis will understand and listen when we advise them that respecting press freedom and other universal rights will make their democracy – and ultimately their society – stronger and more stable.

What do you think is the biggest lesson you took from your time in Iraq that applies to your current role?

I took many lessons from my experience in Iraq. It was one like none other in my 26 years as an American diplomat. However, the biggest lesson I took from my service in Iraq and that applies to my current position is that despite the misgivings of some over America's taking the lead on international issues, American leadership is often indispensable to solving global crises and making progress on the host of challenges other countries face.

Observers, analysts and the media have highlighted mistakes and shortcomings of the U.S.'s involvement in Iraq. Even within the U.S. Government, considerable soul-searching and examination of lessons learned have been and continue to be done. In an open and democratic society such as ours, this is useful and necessary.

However, it is also important to take stock of what we, our coalition allies and the Iraqis did accomplish. One of the Middle East's most repressive and brutal leaders was removed. Rather than being summarily executed, the customary fate of dictators throughout history, he was captured, imprisoned, tried, offered the opportunity to present his defense and, only once convicted, sentenced to death. Such was not the fate of the unaccounted for tens of thousands of victims of his brutality during his reign.

Even more important, during and following the savage civil war, the U.S. did two extraordinary things: we negotiated as opposed to dictated the terms for our withdrawal from the country we had invaded and occupied and then led a Herculean effort to get all the Iraqi sides to come to agreement on a constitution that allows them to govern themselves civilly and democratically. These are unprecedented achievements in Iraq's history, or indeed the history of any Middle Eastern country wracked with such deep sectarian and ethnic divisions. While Iraq faces many tests in the months and years ahead, especially following the departure of U.S. forces at the end of this year, it now stands as the Arab world's first experiment in liberal democracy with a genuine chance of success.

There are other successes that could be mentioned – effectively imposing a sense of genuine freedom on a society that had never previously experienced such a phenomenon, laying a foundation in Iraqi law and its security forces for respect for human rights and the rule of law,

providing support and guidance for the creation of civil society organizations, completing countless development projects, etc.

None of this would have been possible without the leadership of the United States. The debate will persist for years to come on whether the U.S. should have begun this exercise in the first place. The cost, especially in lives, to Iraq, America and other coalition countries has been estimable. But the result at this stage cannot be argued. And it was American leadership (and sacrifice) that made it happen.

American leadership will also play and indeed must play a critical role in finally bringing peace to Israelis and Palestinians. It will, of course, require considerable leadership and courage on the part of the respective sides' as well as vital support from the international community. But the United States, despite the challenges and problems we face at home, still remains the only suitable, capable and accepted leader for positive change in the world today.

Gary Grappo is currently Head of Mission for the Office of the Quartet Representative. The Middle East Quartet is a diplomatic mission spanning the U.N, E.U, U.S and Russia looking to mediate the Israeli -Palestinian peace process. The views expressed here are his own do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the U.S Government either now or at the time in question.

Interview with Matthew Lodge, former Deputy Chief of Mission at the British Embassy in Baghdad in 2007

Iraq's deputy P.M Saleh Al Mutlak recently said there will be an Iraqi business delegation headed to Finland soon. Before "The Surge," Iraqi trade could be summed up by the American soldiers who joked the slogan for Baghdad's Doura Market could be "shop 'til you're dropped." Now countries are rushing to set up consulates and sign contracts. Thinking back to 2007, did you ever think we'd get this far?

Although the situation looked very uncertain at the time, I don't think anyone doubted Iraq's ability to get back on its feet, or indeed the determination of the Iraqis to do just that. Although the country had encountered real difficulties and progressively mounting violence in the years before 2007, there was a strong sense of a country rich in natural and human resources and with enormous potential. The challenge was to stabilize the security situation, encourage political reconciliation and dialogue and enable Iraq and the Iraqi people to resume their everyday lives. The recent trends towards greater normalization of Iraq's relations with the rest of the world and increasing trade cooperation with international business are a sign of how far we have come since 2007. At the time, I was confident that progress was possible – what was unclear was how long it would take and what price the Iraqis and others would have to pay to get there.

A few years ago an article appeared in The Independent (left wing British newspaper) claiming the U.S had selected a legal team to rig the Iraqi constitution and cripple their government's control of oil contracts. What we have seen since is quite the opposite- an independent hard bargaining Iraqi government. Is it time to bury the "no blood for oil" argument once and for all?

Yes. There was a lot of unfounded comment and criticism about the Iraqi constitution and foreign interference. Frankly I think it is insulting to the Iraqi people to suggest they were somehow in the pockets of the west. As we have seen, the process of Iraqi reconstruction and

increasing prosperity and independence has been Iraqi-led all the way. That was self-evident for any who sat in on the proceedings of the Ministerial Committee on National Security during its meetings in 2007.

Events surrounding the abduction of Peter Moore and the cold blooded murder of his associates are well documented, as are allegations of Iranian collusion or alleged involvement of members of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior at the time. Jawad Al Bulani, who then ran the MOI, has been credited with purging it of corruption and sectarianism. But he'd been in charge a full year at the time of the abduction. He stayed on during the U.S/ British MOI transition team that re-invigorated the MOI, but how did Britain know whom to trust at the time?

In my experience of post-conflict situations such as that which existed in Iraq in 2007, it is always difficult for outsiders to know who can be trusted and precisely what deals and discussions may be going on. But that uncertainty cannot be used as an excuse for keeping one's distance or not getting involved. You just have to manage the risks as best you can. I saw quite a bit of Jawad Al Bulani, but his English was limited and I don't speak Arabic, so cannot claim to have known him well. He had a very difficult task in reforming the Iraqi police and appeared to be fully committed. But it is quite possible that events such as the abduction of Peter Moore and his security guards could still have happened even if the Iraqi police and Interior Ministry had been in better shape than they were in mid-2007.

Moqtada Al Sadr: his latest public statements show he's still the firebrand. But it strikes me his deal with Maliki has got him on a leash and that it's better to have him in politics than on the fringes, which in my view could swell the ranks of the real dissidents- groups like The Swords of Righteousness. What do you think?

Moqtada Al Sadr attracted a huge amount of comment in 2007, and still does today. Many have observed how, for much of the difficult period Al Sadr was actually in Iran rather than Iraq. Others have commented on how he enjoyed an occasionally difficult relationship with Grand Ayatollah Sistani and seemed at times to have questionable influence over his "followers". But, whatever the truth, Al Sadr seems to remain a totemic figure whose name exerts some considerable influence. As such, I think a policy of engagement and bringing him into the political "tent" is probably wise.

David Petraeus and others have talked about a "whole nation" approach to fighting terrorists and insurgents, i.e that everyone from border police, diplomats and politicians across the world to the troops on the ground have a unity of effort. When you think about the troops who were in Basra or the S.A.S in Baghdad, did you feel a part of that effort, or does it seem strange to think of it in those terms?

Coming myself from a military background, I am a firm believer in what NATO calls the "Comprehensive Approach" which aims to bring to bear the sort of whole nation effort you describe. But I think one needs to be clear that that comprehensive approach may, and arguably should, mean unity of purpose, a common effort and a consistent, complementary approach. But it does not necessarily mean unity of command as the military might see it. In some circumstances, important civilian actors need to enjoy a degree of separation from the military and security effort, and vice versa. For my part, working in an Embassy of 200 people including other foreign diplomatic missions, EU rule of law advisers, and UK civilian, government, development and military personnel, that collective comprehensive approach seemed both

wholly natural and logical, and also extremely important. We also worked hard to ensure that what we were doing in Baghdad complemented what colleagues were doing in Basra, Erbil or, for that matter, London. And I think we generally succeeded.

Matthew Lodge is currently Britain's Ambassador to Finland.

Robert Tollast is an English Literature Graduate from Royal Holloway University of London and has published articles for the finance publication AccountingWEB. He became interested in events in Iraq through his late father, who was a Military Intelligence Officer in Iraq with General Sir Maitland Willson's Persia/ Iraq force (Paiforce) in 1942. He is currently learning Arabic and would be interested one day to visit Iraq, although he concedes this is currently quite an eccentric ambition.

All opinions in this article are those of private citizens and do not necessarily reflect the policies of either the British or American Governments either now or during the times in question.