



Transcript

What's Next in Iraq? A Summer of Government Formation and Transition

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Christopher Hill:

Thank you very much, and I can't tell you what a great pleasure it is to be here in London today. Alas I won't be here very long, but I'll be heading back to Baghdad early tomorrow.

Chatham House has such a storied reputation in the United States, it goes right back to the Treaty of Versailles, when it was founded in 1920 as I recall. For those of us that have read through the Treaty of Versailles and all of the ideas that emanated from that, it's a reminder that the history that we all studied in school has now become political science, and the political science that we studied in school (like the Soviet economic system) has all become history.

That is to say that being born of the Treaty of Versailles, I think it's a very honoured position and it speaks to the position of Chatham House as its continued relevance in this difficult world that we live in.

What I'd like to do is talk about where we are in Iraq. I won't talk very much about how we got there, because, well, there are strong opinions about that. I'd rather talk about where we are and where we'll go from here.

Iraq had a pretty important and impressive election on March 7th. Notwithstanding what the press said at the time, no one had to dodge borders or rockets to get to the polls. It was actually a pretty peaceful period. It was organised by the Iraqis. They organised the actual elections; they organised the security for the election. The United States was there to support them, but it was very much something that the Iraqis put together.

Not unlike some other elections in recent years, it turned out to be very close indeed. Now, not saying that it descended to the chaos of the Florida recount, but in many respects, no one expected the election to be this close. After all, there's the Iraqiya coalition, which involves several different parties, but it is a coalition in which most if Iraq's Sunnis reside. That coalition received 91 votes.

Then there were two major Shi'a coalitions, one called the State of Law coalition, whose main ingredient there is the Dawa party. State of Law received 89 votes. The difference between 91 and 89.

Then there's another Shi'a coalition, which is a somewhat unhappy marriage of the Sadrists and ISCI, and they form the Iraqi National Alliance, and they receive something like 70 votes. And the Kurds, when you put all the various Kurdish parties together in what's called the Kurdish Alliance, they receive some 50 seats.

So, there are some other parties, but to get to forming a government, you need one seat more than half of 325. In short, you need 163 in order to form the party. So when you look at those four coalitions, you see that no one's got enough votes to do it, and all of them are going to have to reach out to other coalition partners if they're going to reach the 163.

By the way, when they get to 163 they will then go to... others will join in. I don't think there's a strong tradition in Iraq of wanting to stay in opposition. I suspect you'll end up with a government that has many of the seats, if not all of the seats.

So where as the British took about five hours to do all this, it looks like the Iraqis will take some five plus months to get it all done.

I must say, notwithstanding the difficulties of this process, I speak to you with a certain degree of optimism because the Iraqis will get to the point where they form a government.

You always have to judge an election not necessarily by the behaviour of the winners but by the behaviour of the losers. And I think they have gone through this difficult process without really expressions of political violence, which is not to say there's not a lot of violence in Iraq, but the violence we see in Iraq is of a kind that is well outside the political process.

So when Al Qaeda blows up innocent people standing in line next to a bank and kills 18 people, as they did just yesterday, and another 15 a week before... Al Qaeda doesn't do that because they'd like to see a ruling coalition giving them a ministry, Ministry of Culture or something. They are quite outside the political process and look to destroy the political process.

We're not seeing too many signs of that. On the contrary, the real competition in Iraq is not in the streets, it's not in this type of violence where it was four or five years ago, it's very much in the political realm.

Here is the problem. You have Iraqiya, which is a mainly Sunni coalition. They would argue that it's very sectarian. From the Shi'a point of view, it looks very Sunni. Iraqiya will point out that the head is of course Iyad Allawi, who's a secular Shi'a, and therefore Iraqiya sees itself as a cross-sectarian or secular party. Unfortunately that's not necessarily how the Shi'a parties see it; they see it as a Sunni party.

And so they've had, the Iraqiya, even though it has 91 seats and is the largest of the coalition so far, have been hard pressed to expand on that number to gain other strategic allies. Many of the Shi'a do not want to see the government put together by a large Sunni party.

At the same time, the Shi'a have tried to take their two main coalitions- the State of Law coalition with Prime Minister Malaki, with its 89 seats, and combine that with the Iraqi National Alliance of ISCI and the Sadrists- if you take 89 plus 70 you have pretty close to the majority right there. The trouble is that those two large Shi'a coalitions have not been able to agree on a common candidate.

State of Law's current Prime Minister Malaki has not so far been acceptable to the other Shi'a, so there are a lot of internal discussions within the Shi'a community about whether they can agree a candidate. If not, how are they going to agree? There are a lot of ideas put forward about how they'll propose a single candidate. So far, it hasn't gotten done.

As the process continues to churn on, about a week ago an interesting thing happened which was that the State of Law people, under Malaki, had a meeting with Iraqiya. That was the first time that we saw Iraqiya, a Sunni based party, having a meeting with the largely Shi'a party.

Of course, State of Law's other Shi'as, who are trying to form a coalition with State of Law, those in INA, were a little concerned that State of Law was actually talking to the Sunnis without involving them. Similarly though, we know that Iraqiya has been having meetings with the INA people as well and not talking to the SOL.

So why do I bring up all this? Because this is politics. This is very much the political season. The question is not whether there's politics in Iraq. There's politics in Iraq, it's dominating the landscape there now rather than security problems. The question is whether the politics that they have are going to be sufficient to find a solution to the problem.

I would also argue that people who express concern about the fact that Iraqiya has sectarianism, that lo and behold people have an identity as Shi'a or Sunni or Kurds, that of course there is such sectarianism. Our task is not to try to get rid of something that has been there for centuries. Our job is to try to work with the Iraqis and make sure they have a system that can involve and bring all these different parties and coalitions into a process where no one feels disenfranchised.

I'm pleased to say that that is definitely a trend, that every senior politician you talk to in Iraq- whether from Iraqiya, State of Law or INA or the Kurds- they all believe that they should have an inclusive system. They all understand that. The problem will be in how to divvy up these positions. As I said, the British managed to do this in five hours. They won't be the case in Iraq.

What is our job? How can the international community handle this? A lot of people have said 'what are you doing, Americans? What don't you just go in and tell them?' I wish I could just go in and say 'you do x and y and that will be the end of it'. Unfortunately that's not the reality. People say 'well, it used to be the reality'.

Actually, if you go back and look at what happened in '05 and '06 you'd be hard pressed to say that was the reality. After all, it took almost six months just to get the Malaki government. So this was a time in '06 when the US was allegedly able to tell everybody what to do and when to do it, but it never happened in '06. So it's rather mystifying to me as to why people think I can go in and tell Prime Minister Malaki 'you either make a coalition with him or you get out'. It's not going to work.

It's not as if I'm saying 'well it would be better to let them work it out and we'll stand by'. There is no other option but for them to work it out. A lot of people have said 'look at Iraq, they're not ready for this situation, the international community needs to step in'. I've seen something about how we need to form some kind of international contact group. By the way, I was there during the Balkans. I'm not sure I want to be there again.

Frankly, there's a certain point at which the Iraqis are going to have to understand that with their regaining of sovereignty that they wanted (and there's a great deal of nationalistic pride in their country), they are going to have to figure out their way forward. We will be there; we will do all we can to help; we will provide suggestions and do everything we appropriately can do. But we cannot tell the Iraqis how to form their own government.

I think the Iraqis very much understand that. As they went through this very difficult process this spring, we saw their challenges to many of the voting, the challenges were dealt with by the High Electoral Commission. Many of the challenges were addressed in the courts. In fact there was a recount in Baghdad. Lo and behold when you recounted the votes, frankly just like in Florida, it came out pretty much as it was before.

I think the Iraqis have really tested the limits of their institutions. Their institutions have really passed these stress tests. I think there's something to be taken heart of in that.

Now, in the last couple weeks, a couple of things have happened. First of all, they finally constituted the parliament. There was no parliament for some four months. It was a very healthy sign when the parliament met just last Monday and they were all sworn in. By the way, sworn in in Arabic but also in the Kurdish language.

Parliament has now taken its seat, and you can bet that the Iraqis who elected these people... and by the way, this is the first time the Iraq parliament was elected with open lists. When people voted, they knew who they were voting for, they weren't just voting for a party, not knowing who the individuals are. These are known individuals.

This new parliament, which is some 325 seats, only 60 people from the previous parliament are the same. These are a lot of new faces, faces that people have put there for the purpose of making sure they get services out of those people.

I think they are expecting their parliament to really pressure the senior political figures in Iraq to move ahead and get a government formed. In the last couple of days, Iraq has been beset by a pretty bad heat wave. I must tell you when it gets to be 120, I don't know the difference between 120 and 130 but I probably would know it if I didn't have air conditioning, and indeed there are a lot of people who don't. You see a lot of people in the streets right now demanding that their government get on with it.

So for the first time, people are beginning to link some of their problems with services with the fact that they haven't had a government put in place in the last three, going on four months.

I think the pressure will be brought on the Iraqis. How this turns out is hard to say. There are those that feel that at the end of the day the prime minister will be either from the State of Law or the INA, the two main Shi'a coalitions, and they will put forward a new prime minister. The Iraqiya which got that plurality of votes but has not been able to expand that 91 seat total to anything more, has put forward the idea of Iyad Allawi, but there's a lot of resistance to that. Somehow, they're going to have to work this through.

It's a process that will play out over many years. The United States is certainly there to support them. There's a lot of discussion, not in Iraq so much, about how the US works with armed forces. We have some 86,000 troops there which will go to 50,000. A lot of people feel that this somehow means that the US influence is dwindling. Well, first of all, whether we have 80,000 or 50,000 troops doesn't help a lot when you're sitting in a meeting, trying to convince politician x to work with politician y.

There's a limit to what one can do with military force. Our military has been out of the cities and towns since June 30th 2009. Most of the security operations today, counter-terrorism operations, are primarily done by an increasingly capable Iraqi army that's receiving training from NATO.

We believe that it is time to reduce forces. We will have it down to 50,000 by the end of 2011. It's very important that Iraqis understand that we signed a security agreement and we will live up to that security agreement 100 per cent. We're not going to say 'well can we leave a few soldiers in the cities?' That would be in violation of the June 30th 2009 requirement. We felt it was very important to live up to that. We will continue to live up to our obligations.

One of the reasons we do this is that we have reached with the Iraqis other agreements, including agreements on culture, agriculture, economy, and what we want to do is establish a very clear record with the Iraqis that when we agree to something we'll live up to it.

We look forward to a long-term relationship with Iraq. We look forward to working with them on regional issues and working with them on their economy. We certainly look forward to a stronger political relationship and the way we get that is to live up to our obligations.

We hope that as Iraq forms a government that its neighbours will understand that there is not some new game forming about Iraq. There's not some country adrift where neighbours need to all join in and see if they can have the most influence. We hope that countries will understand that Iraq is going to be a strong country; it's going to be a peaceful country; it's going to be an element of stability in the region. We hope that countries understand that it's important to work with Iraq.

Finally, I would say that Iraq has gone through I think about as traumatic a period since 2003 as any country has gone through, and yet it remains territorially intact. Its politicians are capable of talking to each other. There are no rifts such that you can't get person x to talk to person y. They all are prepared to talk to each other, they all understand their responsibilities. They have a tough duty ahead but I am very convinced that they'll make it.

I'm convinced that in time we'll see that Iraq has emerged in a way that it hasn't in many decades- that Iraq will be the stable element that we've all wanted. Thank you very much.