

Iraq: A Decade of Missed Opportunities

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Mina Al-Oraibi

Good afternoon and thank you for joining us today to speak about Iraq. And the title of today's discussion is 'A Decade of Missed Opportunities', which makes many Iraqis feel quite sad, but it's probably the best title to reflect what has happened in Iraq from 2003 onwards. Whenever we speak about Iraq, at least in the last... well, as far as I can remember, it's always, 'This is a particularly difficult time, however it could lead to a better phase.' Unfortunately until now, it hasn't happened.

Of course this morning, before you came, you probably all read in the newspapers and on TV stations what's happening in Ramadi in Iraq. The idea that the capital of Iraq's largest province in terms of geography is under control of ISIS or whatever this grouping of militants can be called, comes as we approach the first year anniversary of Mosul, the second city of Iraq, falling to ISIS control, and my hometown, without any real clarity on the strategy not only to defeat ISIS, but also to get Iraq moving to a functioning country. And so hopefully today we'll be able to tackle some of these issues in an hour, which will be difficult, but we're hoping not only to speak about the past and everything that happened from 2003 onwards and shed some light on that, but also possible ideas and solutions for the country to move forward.

Now this discussion is on the record and because event organizers have given up on asking people to switch off their phones, they ask you to put them on silent and if you are so inclined to be on Twitter you can tweet about the event with hashtag #CHEvents. To be honest if you follow Iraq, you don't really need to introduce Emma Sky and Hayder al-Khoei so I will just give you their titles as they are both quite well-known in circles that care about Iraq and are interested in the politics of Iraq.

We have Emma Sky here who is Senior Fellow at the Jackson Institute for International Affairs at Yale and author of the book *The Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*, which is lined up there and is worth reading. And you also have Hayder al-Khoei who is Associate Fellow for the Middle East and North Africa Programme here at Chatham House and a very well known Iraqi. And so I will start with Emma. She will speak for about 10 minutes, then we will hear also from Hayder about... Emma will give us some background as to why we are facing so many crises in Iraq today, and then Hayder will speak more about the current dynamics inside the country but also the regional and international actors at play. And then we hope to hear from you and have your questions. So, without further ado, Emma please.

Emma Sky

Thank you very much. I just want to start off by explaining why I wrote this book. When I left Iraq, I struggled to come to terms with what I'd experienced and what all the sacrifice had been for, and I felt I'd witnessed so many key events that I had a duty to record them. I believe that we honour the lives that were lost by trying to learn the right lessons from this war. We lost 100-150,000 Iraqi lives, we're not sure of the number, 179 British soldiers were killed there, 4,500 Americans lost their lives there. So I wanted to acknowledge the efforts of those who had strived to give Iraq hope for a better future, and I wanted to pay tribute to Iraq as a country that I came very much to love.

So the book is written as a memoir. It's my personal odyssey, but it's also the story of Iraqis and the stories in particular of US soldiers. And the book covers quite... I suppose quite a... almost a decade. It starts with 2003-2004 when the British government asked for volunteers to go out to Iraq to administer the country for three months before we handed it back to the Iraqis, and I was one of those people who was against the war but I thought I'm going to volunteer to go out and help rebuild the country. I'd spent a decade working in Israel Palestine so I had skills in conflict mediation and institutional development. But when I volunteered, when I went out to Iraq, I had no idea what my job was going to be.

I got one phone call from the British government. The phone call said get to RAF Brize Norton, take a flight to Basra. When you arrive you'll be met by somebody holding a sign with your name on it and taken to the nearest hotel. So, I did. I got to RAF Brize Norton, I arrived in Basra, there was nobody expecting me, nobody to meet me and, as I found out, no hotels. So I sort of wandered around looking for a job. I went to Baghdad, spent a week there, and they said, 'We've got people here. Try Mosul,' your hometown. So I went up to Mosul. They said, 'Oh no, we've got somebody here, keep going.'

So I went to Erbil, then I went to Kirkuk, and in Kirkuk they said, 'Oh great! You're now in charge of the province. You're the government coordinator. In effect, you're the colonial administrator.' And this was like slightly embarrassing, I don't really come from that background, but I thought, 'Hey, it's only supposed to be for three months.' But in my first week I got blown up, obviously survived, thank God. But that's just indicative of the lack of post-war planning.

I came back again in 2007 at the request of General Odierno. So he'd been put in charge of the ground forces for the search, and he asked me would I come and be his political advisor. And I thought, 'What on earth does he want me for?' I'd met him in 2003-2004 and he told me he'd learnt from that first tour, he'd learnt the limitations of military force and he really... he'd seen the impact that had had working with his brigade. He said, 'You've got a very different perspective, and I need someone to tell me when I'm screwing up.' I thought, 'That's a great job. I don't have to bite my tongue. My sole purpose is to speak my mind,' so that was great.

So I worked with him doing research, and that was all about changing the mind-set of the US troops, get them back out among the people to protect Iraqi people, to protect the Iraqi people from insurgents and he also got me involved in negotiating with armed groups to try and get them to give up using violence to come out of the fight. And during that period I built up a very close relationship with the military adviser to Prime Minister Maliki. His military adviser happened to be a woman with a PhD in rocket science. Nothing about Iraq should surprise you.

I came back again for the draw down, so this was from 2008 to 2010, and this was again a very interesting period. Perhaps the most contentious part happened in 2010 after the Iraqi national elections. So General Odierno believed in the right... believed that the US should uphold the right of the winning block, Iraqiyya, to have first go at trying to form the government. He didn't think that Ayad Allawi would be able to succeed with himself as prime minister, but he thought it could lead to an agreement between Allawi and

Malaki... power sharing agreement between them, or the selection of a third person to be prime minister, such as Adel Abdul Mahdi.

So there was a big dispute within the US system, and he lost the argument. I left with him end of August, early September 2010, but since then I've been a regular visitor back to Iraq. In fact, the last time I went back was in July when the Islamic State had taken over Mosul, and I met with insurgents. They were nationalist insurgents who told me this is a broad scale Sunni uprising and I asked them about the Islamic State. They said, 'The Islamic State, that's only a tiny, tiny fraction. That's just seven per cent. We're going to overthrow the regime in Baghdad and then we're going to get rid of the Islamic State.' To which my response was, 'Are you guys deluded? Have you not been following what's going on inside Syria?'

So, what lessons should we learn from this war? And I just want to reiterate that nothing that happened in Iraq after 2003 was preordained. Iraq could have had many different potential futures. There was hope of a world without Saddam Husseins, and the missed opportunities to create a better order. We've seen the unintended consequences of action as well as non-action of Bush's efforts to impose democracy and of Obama's detachment. So we need to learn the lessons or the limitations of external actors in foreign lands, but also where it is that we can have influence.

Secondly, it's all about their politics. In the West, we tended to frame things in terms of good guys and bad guys, when really it was all about their internal power struggles, and those that we excluded from power sought to bring down the new order, and those that we put in order, they took the resources of the state for their own purposes, they subverted the nascent democratic institutions and they used the security forces that we'd spent so long training and equipping to go after their political rivals and totally politicized the security forces.

So a lot of Iraqis accuse Americans and Brits of destroying their country, but they fail to acknowledge their own contributions to Iraq's unravelling. It's certainly that we, the coalition, there's certainly much more that we could have done to broker an inclusive agreement among Iraqi elites to try and create a better balance in Iraq and in the region. And the last lesson, which is what I'll end on, is how we as the West need to much better formulate an overall national strategy so how to use military means to deliver political outcomes. We need to set realistic goals and assumptions which are realistic, because it's important that military means is only seen as a tool to achieve political outcomes and not as an end in itself. Thank you.

Mina Al-Oraibi

Well, that was very well timed at 10 minutes. Before I turn to Hayder, I wanted to ask you, Emma, one of the quotes in your book is General Odierno saying, 'My greatest fear is that we stabilise Iraq and hand it to the Iranians.' Do you think that's what's happened in Iraq now? Definitely not stabilised, but in terms of the roles of the US handing over influence to Iran.

Emma Sky

So he made this comment at the beginning of 2010 and he'd just watched Charlie Wilson's War, and he had this premonition that suddenly America was just going to leg it out of Iraq. So in the period prior to this, so 2007–2009, the US influence during the surge really went up. After all the initial mistakes with the occupation, suddenly the US was seen as the player that had saved Iraq from the abyss. What happened in 2010 when the US failed to uphold the election results and failed to broker government formation was Iran stepped in, and Iran brokered the formation of the government, that then the prime minister went much, much closer to Iran. The US was all about exiting, and Iran saw an opportunity. It was mainly to do with Iraq's weakness, a very contested political space, but Iran certainly is the predominant power in Iraq today, there's no question about that.

Mina Al-Oraibi

Okay, so Iraq today. Hayder, if you can take us through Iraq today.

Hayder al-Khoei

Thank you, Mina. I want to focus my remarks on more recent events in Iraq, especially given the worrying developments in Ramadi over the weekend. I'll try to cover three broad themes: Sunni-Shia dynamics, US-Iran dynamics and Iraq-Iran dynamics. The fall of Ramadi of course was a major defeat for the security forces even as they've made a number of victories elsewhere in the country, in the north and in the east, in Salahuddin and in Diyala, and for a start it will officially crush all dreams of a Mosul campaign at the end of this year. Instead, Baghdad will focus its attention on Ramadi which is much closer and much more strategic, not just because it's next to the capital but because it shares a border with Karbala which is not just a Shia dominated city but home to a holy Shia shrine.

As with the fall of Mosul last year, the circumstances surrounding the fall of Ramadi remain murky. A Baghdad-based scholar, Dr [indiscernible] yesterday said that corrupt Iraqi Security Forces actually sold battle plans and logistical information to ISIS, and ISIS activated sleeper cells within Ramadi and mobilized locals to retake the city. And if this is confirmed, it will explain why yet again the Iraqi Security Forces collapsed and were forced to withdraw from the city. Ahmed Ali, a leading DC-based Iraq analyst, commented that the fall of Ramadi is a reflection point but it does not mean the fall of Anbar province. I think this is key to bear in mind. Yes, it's a major setback to the Iraqi government and Iraqi Security Forces, but the government still controls key defence nodes across the province, and ISIS do not have an open route to Baghdad.

Difficult decisions are being made on all sides of this conflict. Prime Minister Abadi's approval to send in the mainly Shia [indiscernible] paramilitary forces to the Sunni-dominated Anbar region will concern many observers, but I think it's important to remember that this comes at the request of local Sunnis themselves who have called for the Shia forces to come in to Ramadi and help them defeat ISIS. And I think local Sunnis understand their situation and dilemma much better than those Sunnis who live in five star hotels and villas in Erbil and elsewhere in the region who claim to represent those Sunnis.

We have the Anbar governor, the Anbar provincial council and Anbar tribes who have publicly called for the Shia forces to enter battle. They simply can't do it alone and the Iraqi security forces aren't capable. Also, unlike in Tikrit, several Sunni tribes in Ramadi have already been resisting ISIS for years, even as 3,000 Shia fighters have mobilized to the east of Anbar, 4,000 anti-ISIS Sunni tribes have mobilized to the west. I think this Sunni-Shia cooperation, aside from the fact we already have Shia-Sunni cooperation within the Iraqi Security Forces who are mixed, I think it will be a crucial element in this campaign. And now we have Sunni fighters who don't just fight alongside the Hashid, but they are officially part of the Hashid. In other words, the Hashid Shaabi is no longer an exclusively Shia force.

I do think this is a war between the Iraqi government and ISIS and not the dominant narrative which is it's between Shias and Sunnis. The realities on the ground simply don't support the reductionist, sectarian narrative that has come to define much of the conflict so far. And I say this as someone who believes that sectarianism didn't start in 2003 with the overthrow of Saddam, and that Iraq has a very long history of sectarian conflict and violence. But when the complexity of Iraq is boiled down to simple Shia versus Sunni analysis, and let's be honest it's easy analysis, I think this obscures more than it explains the reality. Yes the fall of Ramadi is a tragedy, but why has it taken ISIS so long to take the city?

It's mainly due to fierce local Sunni resistance and this is what's going to make ISIS control much more difficult to consolidate. And on top of this, I think both intra-Sunni and intra-Shia dynamics are going to play a massive role in the failure or success of this campaign. Sunni tribes are bitterly split in Anbar. We have clans from the same tribes, and indeed families, who have brothers and cousins on both sides of this conflict. And I think as the conflict in Anbar develops this tribal revenge attacks and restoring tribal honour, I think it will be bloody whichever way this ends.

And we've already seen ISIS publicly executing anti-ISIS local Sunnis. Also, we have to remember Prime Minister Abadi has extremist Shia that he has to deal with, especially those elements that are still loyal to the former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, who are constantly trying to undermine Abadi at every turn. And as he balances against Iran and the US, he has to deal with powerful militia commanders that are going to resist the attempts of the Iraqi state to reassert control and assert its control over these paramilitary forces.

On US-Iran relations, I think we've seen a very remarkable shift in terms of during the occupation, there was a period of open warfare. The United States and Iran were at war with each other. As the ISIS threat became more real, this shifted to a period which military experts in America refer to as coordinated deconfliction. Coordinated, but just so they both stay out of each other's way. But I think even that... that may have been the case from June up until about September, October last year, but this deconfliction turned to very tacit military cooperation when we saw in [indiscernible], in Tikrit, and today in Ramadi, the US air force taking out ISIS defences, paving the way for Iran-backed forces, with of course the Iraqi Security Forces to route ISIS.

And I think this trend will continue. And of course now the US are saying, 'We would approve the deployment of the Hashid if they are under the command of the Iraqi

Security Forces,' and even this is a big difference in the language and the rhetoric of the Americans even months ago when they outright rejected the involvement of the Hashid. In other words, I think the US is accepting the reality that the Hashid Shaabi is an effective fighting force and it's needed on the ground, but at the same time they'll try to contain Iran's influence.

I think Iraq is in a tough spot in a sense. Both Iran and the US are strategic allies, and Iraq needs both America and Iran to defeat ISIS in Iraq, but those two will never publicly acknowledge each other. Even as they tacitly cooperate and coordinate in Iraq, I think we'll see a continuation of the American and Iranian PR campaigns to undermine the other and claim credit for helping Iraq turn the tide against ISIS. But the campaign in Tikrit clearly demonstrated is that the US alone cannot defeat ISIS. Iran alone cannot defeat ISIS. And certainly Iraq alone cannot defeat ISIS. They do need to come together what is a common threat, and it is this common threat that has led to a convergence of interests in Iraq, which is very different to Syria.

Finally, on Iran-Iraq relations, I just want to start with a disclaimer, is essentially where Mina and Emma left off. Let no one be under the illusion that Iran was already the most powerful external actor in Iraq before June 2014, but still, it's important to remember how Iran's influence in Iraq increased exponentially as a result of how the Americans dealt with ISIS. In June 2014, the US made a tactical decision to refuse military support to the Iraqi government when ISIS were literally at the gates of Baghdad and threatening the capital. Iran mobilized immediately and helped Iraq defend its capital and defend the government.

But having said that, there has been a backlash from Iran's aggressive policies in Iraq, even from Shia quarters. Now some will say the Sunnis will always complain, the Americans will always complain, but I think when we hear and see Iraqi Shias frustrated and concerned with Iran, I believe the Iranians should pay close attention. And I just want to give three quick examples before I finish. At a grassroots societal level backlash, at the highest political level and the highest religious level, during the Arbaeen pilgrimage, which is a Shia pilgrimage in which over one million Iranians came into Iraq, there was a very aggressive, and I think systematic, campaign to publicize Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, and to plaster his pictures all over the streets and public buildings from Najaf all the way to Karbala.

And often they would post these pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini over the pictures of Iraq-based ayatollahs, and there was actually a picture that went viral and it was sent by the Shia themselves and the title was [indiscernible], which in English is, 'Oh stranger, behave yourself.' In other words, when you're in another country, respect this country's culture, norms and values. So just to reiterate, Shia Iraqis telling Shia Iranians to behave themselves. At the highest political level, Prime Minister Abadi condemned and was livid at the Persian writing we saw in Tikrit after the ISF and Hashid Shaabi defeat of ISIS. I can't remember the exact quote, but it was something along the lines of 'Khomeini's army was here and defeated ISIS.'

And he was angry... the prime minister was angry about IRGC General Qassem Suleimani's very public role in Iraq and the PR campaign. He was a shadow for a decade and all of a sudden he's taking selfies with Iraqi forces and drinking tea on the outskirts of

Tikrit. And finally at the highest, and this is where I'll end, at the highest religious level, Sistani recently remarked, and I quote, 'While Iraq welcomes the help from its friends, this does not mean turning a blind eye to its independence and identity.' And Sistani's remarks were in response to an advice of the Iranian president, who called for a union and said Iraq is part of our identity, part of our culture, part of our capital.

Now why Sistani's remarks here are very significant is it's very hard to provoke Sistani. George W. Bush provoked Sistani. ISIS provoked Sistani. Maliki provoked Sistani. And yet, Sistani publicly issued this statement, and that he's issuing this statement clearly directed at the Iranians even though he didn't mention them by name. Younis is a very low level official in Iran. With all due respect, he's a nobody. But that Sistani had to respond publicly should signal to the Iranians that Sistani's actually speaking in a much broader context about an issue that is worrying many in Iraq. And I'll conclude with that.

Mina Al-Oraibi

Thank you. Well, the fact that so many people see, and we've seen on the ground also, that the Hashid Shaabi popular mobilization units are able to come in, fight ISIS, push back, what the Iraqi Security Forces failed to do. Is it a matter of command? Is it a matter of they have better weapons? Is it a matter of religion? What is it that shows this difference? Or, is it a political move?

Hayder al-Khoei

Okay, this is a tough question. I remember last year when Hashid was first set up, even in Najaf, and I was in Najaf at the time. People were saying, 'Why separately? Why mobilize as a separate force? Why not just organize everybody into the official Iraqi Security Forces?'

Mina Al-Oraibi

Or have constrictions?

Hayder al-Khoei

But the corruption and the way that Mosul fell was frightening for many, and one Najaf-based Shia cleric actually said, 'We're not going to send our boys for them to die under the command of corrupt ISF commanders.' In Mosul we heard there was corruption and bribes being taken. In Ramadi, yesterday, we heard bribes were being taken. I don't know how much religion and ideology plays a part in making them a more effective force, but undoubtedly they are more willing to fight, and that's what's made the Hashid Shaabi such a potent, powerful force that even a couple of days ago the Americans recognized their effect on the ground now.