

Chapter nine

The situation in Iraq

Plenary session No.4



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SPEAKERS

Jawad Al Bolani

Minister of Interior, Iraq

Mehmet Vecdi Gönül

Minister of Defence, Turkey

Carl Bildt

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sweden

Delegates heard a sober assessment of the violence and instability that had come to dominate Iraq. All three speakers agreed that the situation was far from ideal, and that possible solutions to the problems were intimately linked to the larger troubles faced by the region as a whole. There was agreement that failure in Iraq would destabilise the Middle East, and that negative effects would be felt well beyond the region. Beyond this unanimity of pessimism there was at times sharp disagreement about the best policies for the Iraqi government to pursue as it sought stability and domestic peace. But in spite of clear differences of emphasis both from the podium and among delegates, the plenary highlighted a common understanding of the profound problems faced by Iraq after regime change. The prevailing instability and violence had clearly given rise to acute regional and international anxiety about Iraq's future, if not consensus about the way forward.

Jawad Al Bolani, Iraq's Interior Minister, used his address to stress that the volatility in Iraq posed a serious threat to 'the stability and security of the region'. The issue of security could not be treated in isolation but was part of a much wider set of problems. Stability could only be achieved when these problems were treated as 'an integral whole'.

Iraq was in the midst of a profound and regionally unique process of transformation: it was a nascent democracy beginning to build the foundations of a new state. This process of construction was clearly not straightforward but it should not be seen as impossible. Iraqis were making great sacrifices but they were certainly in the process of 'building a modern state'. However they were simultaneously combating international and regional terrorism 'on behalf of the nations of the region and the nations of the entire world'.

The minister identified al-Qaeda as the main source of this terrorism. It organised itself in Iraq by deploying 'blind extremism' and false charges of apostasy. Al-Qaeda had targeted the very structures of Iraqi society and in doing so had

‘sown the seeds of sectarian sedition’ and ‘clannish strife’. In order to combat this political violence, he called on regional governments and the international community to redouble their efforts to monitor the funds flowing into Iraq. Although this money might claim to be supporting the reconstruction effort, without proper monitoring, it could end up in the hands of ‘terrorists, militias, and gangs and contribute to the killing of civilians and innocent people and set aglow political and sectarian struggles’.

Against this fraught background Al Bolani made an appeal for progress in Iraq not to be assessed in comparison to ‘stable prosperous states that enjoy security’. Instead he urged the conference to judge Iraq in comparison to countries that had experienced the troubled and destabilising political transformation from dictatorship to democracy. Only then could the magnitude of Iraq’s struggle for stability be understood and its progress assessed. Al Bolani argued that Iraq’s situation was unique in the Middle East. It was a pluralist, parliamentary system in which all the institutions of the state, including those trying to deliver law and order, were subject to the constraints of the constitution.

In short, the minister was asking for continued support but also a realistic understanding of the mammoth task the Iraqi government faced. Any sustainable success was going to require time and the deployment of greater resources.

Mehmet Vecdi Gönül, Minister of Defence, Turkey, agreed the security problems in Iraq and the country’s future were the main challenges facing the international community. In spite of three successful elections in 2005, violence had got worse over the last 12 months. The sheer number of people that had lost their lives was deeply worrying but beyond this the cause of the violence was even more disturbing. The instability engulfing Iraq was driven by myriad groups, international terrorist organisations, sectarian militia-based killings, rampant criminality and ethnic violence.

Gönül argued that the policies of the Iraqi government were the only thing that could stop this conflagration developing into a fully fledged civil war. The Turkish government’s assessment was that ‘the overall situation is not promising’. The minister listed the issues and government policies he saw as contributing to this very pessimistic assessment. The first was the process designed to amend the Iraqi constitution. If successful, this would secure ‘a broad national



Jawad Al Bolani, Interior Minister, Iraq



Mehmet Vecdi Gönül, Minister of Defence,
Turkey

consensus towards a viable democracy'. However, in spite of the importance of this initiative it 'has been basically kept on hold'.

Discussing Kirkuk, a city in northern Iraq with a large Turkmen population, Gönül stressed the need for a lasting, 'consensus-based' formula for deciding its future status within a federally governed Iraq. He linked the issue of Kirkuk to the wider problem of managing the country's natural resources, specifically oil. For Iraq, this was the 'real cause of the serious tensions among groups'. Kirkuk's natural resources should 'be fairly used by the people of Iraq without making a discrimination against any particular group'.

The referendum on the new federal constitution had highlighted the fundamental differences dividing political organisations in Iraq on state governance. He was worried that some political groups, alluding to the two dominant Kurdish political parties, would exploit federalism to pursue their separatist ambitions. Kirkuk, which the minister described as 'the collective property of Iraq', was a key issue in the arguments surrounding the nature and extent of federalism.



Carl Bildt, Foreign Minister, Sweden

The minister summed up the concerns of the Turkish government by stating ‘the key issue to be addressed at this stage in Iraq is to put an end to the fragmentation of the country along ethnic and sectarian lines. The key task here, we believe, is re-instating the identity of “Iraqiness”.’ If this were not achieved, he argued, and if Iraq’s political parties continued to pursue policies that only appealed to their ethnic or sectarian electorates, then the Turkish government would ‘come to regard the future with less hope, as opportunities will turn into irreparable fault lines’. Every Iraqi should bear in mind that the idea of splitting the country into sectarian parts was not a viable option. ‘It will be the beginning of a disaster, which will engulf the whole region.’

Gönül concluded with a reaffirmation of Turkish help and support for the Maliki government. This tempered his overt warnings about government policy towards Kirkuk and his dire predictions about the consequences of ethno-sectarian politics and federalism.

Carl Bildt, Swedish Foreign Minister, struck a decidedly multilateral tone: ‘We all have a huge stake. We are all dependent upon success of the endeavours in Iraq.’ The



Hoshiyar Zebari, Foreign Minister, Iraq

main thrust of his analysis was the connection between Iraq and the European Union. He keenly supported Turkey's accession to the European Union. Although this process was not going to be easy or fast, it would eventually happen. 'In the future the European Union will extend to the northern reaches of the plains of Mesopotamia.'

Bildt went on to discuss what he termed the 'post-Ottoman issues' that had been placed high on the European Union agenda over the previous years. This region could be defined as stretching from Bihac in Bosnia to Basra in the Persian Gulf – an area that featured several Herculean tasks of state building.

The most pressing and interrelated state building tasks were to be found in Iraq and Palestine. These two could not be separated. 'If one of them fails, it will have a detrimental impact, to put it mildly, also on success in the other. We need to see in shaping our policies the inter-relationship that is there, the need to be successful on both of these efforts.'

Bildt agreed with Gönül that the 'territorial integrity of Iraq is obviously of paramount importance'. With this in mind he was deeply worried about debates in the US that regarded the partition of Iraq as an easy solution to the problem that the country was causing the American government. Bildt did not pull his punches on this issue: 'Let me state very clearly that in my opinion there are no soft partitions. Every partition is a partition written in blood. And the carnage we see today is only the beginning, if we start to talk



about partition scenarios which we believe will be soft but will be exceedingly hard to the people that will be affected on the ground.'

The Swedish minister, addressing the issue of how to bring Iraq back from the brink of bloody civil war, called for a compromise on the constitution to be agreed without delay. 'Too many critical issues have been left open for far too long and that had invited a discord that has been detrimental to efforts to achieving security.' He argued that before the regions of Iraq could be given greater autonomy, a functioning central authority needed to be re-established. Domestic security was primarily a question of building a coherent and reliable police force. The army was simply a backup for the police force. The mistake made after the invasion of 2003 had been to focus on the problem as a military matter and to neglect the domestic security angle.

Bildt concluded with a plea for 'an abundance of strategic patience'. Much greater manpower and money was needed if Iraq was to be stabilised. In the longer term, he called for a much better balance between the machineries of destruction and those of construction.

Questions and answers

The tension between the new Iraqi government and its neighbouring states was highlighted by the intervention during questions of the Iraqi Foreign Minister, **Hoshiyar Zebari**. He recognised the legitimate concerns of the Turkish govern-



Toby Dodge, IISS Senior Consulting Fellow for the Middle East





William Hague, chief parliamentary spokesman on foreign affairs for the UK opposition Conservative Party



Ellen Laipson, President and Chief Executive Officer, the Henry L. Stimson Center

ment. However, ‘these are purely matters for the people of Iraq to decide or determine what kind of a country they want to live in, what’s the best relationship they can seek for each other’. In a similar vein, Zebari criticised the Turkish Minister of Defence, saying: ‘You speak about Kirkuk as if Kirkuk is a Turkish city: while it’s part of Iraq, it’s an Iraqi city. There are constitutional procedures to normalise the situation without inflicting any damage on the interests of any other groups or ethnic groups living there or coexisting together.’ This was also the case with the hydrocarbon law. Gönül responded by agreeing that Kirkuk was a domestic problem. It was clearly a ‘national decision’. However, ‘there are going to be some international results of these decisions’.

A series of questions highlighted the conference’s concern about the capacity and future policy of the Iraqi government. **Abdulaziz Sager**, Chairman of the Gulf Research Center, Dubai, asked about the numbers and strength of the militias operating in Iraq as well as cross-border security. **Toby Dodge**, IISS Senior Consulting Fellow for the Middle East, asked Al Bolani to expand on his attempts to reform his own ministry. **William Hague**, chief parliamentary spokesman on foreign affairs for the UK opposition Conservative Party, asked about the government’s commitment to national reconciliation. Al Bolani replied that the government was working very hard to improve the state’s law-and-order capacity. He also stressed its deep commitment to national reconciliation.

Abdulaziz Sager asked Gönül how Turkey was going to deal with the potential problems posed by the threat of Iranian nuclear proliferation. Gönül replied that at the present time the Turkish government respected the Iranian government’s declaration that their nuclear research was only for civil energy purposes. **Ellen Laipson**, President and Chief Executive Officer, the Henry L. Stimson Center, Washington DC, asked about the historical lessons to be drawn from the role that the Turkish army had played in Turkish nation-building. Gönül replied that Turkey worked very hard to build national unity and national identity and was more than ready to share the lessons learnt from its experience.