

Statement by FCO Research Analysts

How would you characterise the FCO's knowledge of the internal political, social and economic picture in Iraq from early 2001 to March 2003?

During 2001 to March 2003 the FCO drew on a range of sources. These included Iraqi politicians and exiles from both Iraqi Kurdistan and the rest of the country, contact with whom was one of the core tasks of Research Analysts during this period. Amongst those were individuals who visited either Saddam-controlled Iraq or Northern Iraq (where Saddam had withdrawn his administration and which was under de facto control of the two main Kurdish parties) and those who had links to family or contacts within the country. Though the majority of those with whom we were in contact were opposed to Saddam Hussein's regime, their analysis was far from homogenous - religious organisations and NGOs in particular offering more nuanced analysis. Of course we were aware that many of these individuals had their own particular agenda - especially when it came to the question of what levels of political support their parties or ideologies had within Iraq, and this was hard to assess independently. In addition there were many Iraqis who shied away from contact with the British government, either fearful of reprisals against family members in Iraq or because of their opposition to UK policy on sanctions.

As well as Iraqis themselves, the FCO was in contact with academics and journalists with contacts in Iraq and with individuals who had visited Baghdad as part of anti-sanctions campaigns groups and with NGOs accredited with the Iraqi government or working with the oil for food programme. UNSCOM's activities and the working of the oil for food programme provided other information.

Our network of Embassies in the region and elsewhere kept in touch with local officials and opinion formers. The quality and frankness of the information about what these countries thought was going on in Iraq and their advice to us obviously depended on the wider political relationship that we had with these countries, and their relationships with Saddam Hussein's regime - some of Iraq's neighbours in particular relied on concessionary deals on Iraqi oil exports and for trade both within and outside of the Oil for Food programme.

There was a Second Secretary in Amman throughout the pre-conflict period who visited Baghdad around once every two months to look after the Embassy premises and had both (minimal) official contacts and a chance to observe life there at first hand. This officer also followed Iraqi affairs closely from Amman. At the same time there was a First Secretary based in Ankara who regularly visited Northern Iraq (the part outside Iraqi government control) and had contact with senior political leaders there and with those working on DfID-funded and other projects.

Because of our lack of direct contact with senior members of the regime and because many of our international allies who did have contacts with the regime

mainly heard set-piece political presentations, we relied on intelligence and our contacts to give us a picture of internal regime dynamics and thinking, something which was inevitably incomplete. From outside sources we got more information about internal dissent and protest but it was not always clear how much of this was political and directly anti-regime in nature and how much was related to local tribal or smuggling disputes. We had a good knowledge of the dynamics of Iraqi Kurdish politics because of our regular visits there and our contacts with the senior political leadership and civil society. From our contacts with the Iraqi opposition we had a good sense of which political and constitutional issues would be important in rebuilding any post-Saddam political system.

On the social dynamics, the decline of the middle class during the 1990s and the extent to which Ba'thism had influenced all strata of society and social interactions were well-documented. We had some knowledge from academic and other sources about tribal and religious dynamics within the country and how these had been moulded and used by the Ba'thist regime, but a sense of which community leaders – religious, tribal or others – were the most respected or likely to be the most important post-Saddam was sketchy, though some thinking on this was done in 2002 and 2003 in conjunction with the US State Department's Future of Iraq project and then the setting up of ORHA. The potential dangers of sectarianism were downplayed by many in the Iraqi opposition in exile, a danger which could have been flagged up and analysed in more detail

On the economic side, the politicisation by all sides of the debate of the Oil For Food programme - whether it catered adequately for the needs of the Iraqi population and if it did not whose fault that was - meant that there were few reliable statistics on the level of Iraqi need, though the visits by our officer in Amman and contacts with NGOs and others gave us anecdotal impressions. Because of the fear of being seen to be planning too deliberately for the end of the Saddam regime, not enough attention was paid by the FCO and elsewhere in Whitehall to how the civil functions of the state might be affected by the collapse of the Ba'thists and what specific problems and deficiencies there might be in trying to reconstruct a post-sanctions society. More effort could have been done in this field to bring in analysis and expertise from other post-conflict reconstruction efforts.

Martin Hetherington with input from Dr Robert Wilson