

Letter from Erbil, Baghdad and Blaydon

Gary Kent

In the last two years I have been lucky enough to participate in three fact-finding delegations to Iraq. We travelled twice to the Kurdistan Region (each time for a week), first as a guest of its trade union movement and then of the government, and once to Baghdad as guests of the Iraqi Prime Minister, Nouri al Malaki.

Each trip sought to understand Iraq ‘warts and all.’ We didn’t want to return pronouncing false progress – like Sidney and Beatrice Webb fresh from the USSR – and instantly become patsies. We probably only scratched the surface but none of our interlocutors seemed to be hiding anything from us.

Iraqi Kurdistan

The Kurds are a distinct non-Arab people in the Middle East and the largest group of people without their own nation state. The Kurds in Iraq feel the injustice of this and voted overwhelmingly in an informal referendum for independence from Iraq, but their leaders play a pivotal role in stabilising Iraq as a whole, providing key federal personnel (President and Foreign Minister for example) and have accepted the reality of autonomy within Iraq.

This is astonishing given their traumatic treatment by some Iraqi Arabs. I have twice visited the Red House in Sulymaniya, the region’s second and fairly cosmopolitan city in the south near the Iranian border. The Red House was a notorious Ba’athist torture centre and prison smack-bang in the middle of the city. Its small and dank cells held scores of people and thousands were tortured and murdered there. It’s now a museum dedicated to the Anfal – the genocidal campaign waged by Saddam against the Kurds in which some 182,000 people were killed, including in the infamous chemical gas attack on Halabja in 1988.

The curator was imprisoned there and showed us a bloody noose as well as the batteries and leads used to interrogate people. We saw how people were suspended by their hands. We later had dinner with the Governor whose fingers still showed the signs of torture. A journalist asked him to describe life in the Red House but he modestly demurred – he wasn’t keen on personalising such a typical story.

KENT | Letter from Baghdad

We also visited the Binaslawa ‘obligatory collective village’ – the Orwellian term used by the Ba’athists to describe a detention centre – on the outskirts of the capital. This was one of many such facilities established by Saddam as he rounded up Kurds from the countryside and herded them into the cities where he could best control them and snatch victims for execution whilst destroying the agricultural assets of the region. Originally, detainees simply had the land. In time, makeshift tents became a permanent concrete suburb. There was a distinct shortage of men in Binaslawa and one woman told us she was still waiting for her husband to return. It’s more likely that his body is in one of the mass graves being regularly uncovered.

The Iraqi Kurds have every reason to be bitter but we found an extraordinarily open, affable and generous people determined to overcome their history. We visited the Red House as the guards watched the televised trial of Saddam, but the Anfal Minister insisted that she didn’t want him to be executed, and certainly not in Halabja which was then being mooted. The Iraqi Kurds have been free of Saddam for a decade longer than the rest of Iraq and they have made the most of this. They know that ‘Freedom isn’t free’ – the epitaph on a memorial at the vast new park opposite the Kurdistan National Assembly to Kurdish leaders killed in two bombs in 2004.

My first visit in 2006 was just three years on from what most call the ‘liberation,’ and the mood was hopeful. The second visit in 2008 was more muted. There were delays in negotiating the full federal settlement for sharing oil revenues (now established as 17 percent) and in resolving the status of Kirkuk and other disputed territories. And yet, despite the political pessimism, substantial economic progress was evidenced by brand new retail and housing developments – part of a vast construction boom in the region. We were going through detailed plans with one minister when she casually asked if we wanted to see the new airport in Erbil. We raced the dusk to see it, picked our way through the half-finished terminal building and then stood on the massive runway which stretched nearly 5km into the horizon and spanned 75m. Once completed, this will be the fifth largest runway in the world.

This multi-million project symbolises much about the region. First, it is a collaboration between British designers and Turkish contractors. The region’s political relations with Turkey are fraught because of the terrorist PKK problem and Turkish incursions into the region. But even when these were happening trade took place as normal. The hope is that such trade – and there are hundreds of

Democratiya 14 | Autumn 2008

Turkish firms with large contracts in the region – will stabilise political relations. Since then Iraq and Turkey have agreed a high-level strategic partnership.

The airport affords the region open access to the outside world for freight and people. The region is in a tough neighbourhood – the Kurds have a saying, ‘we have no friends but the mountains’ – and the runway is vital for this land-locked region.

Iraqi Kurdistan is a very young polity, run by people who have either fought together (and against each other) or returned from exile, but it is building the basics of a market economy including a generous investment law with tax breaks, free land and security guarantees to foreign investors. On our first trip to Kurdistan, as guests of the trade union movement, we were initially taken back by the constant appeals for foreign investment. It wasn't then part of our thinking. One old communist, however, put it very neatly – and I paraphrase ever so slightly – ‘we don't have a bourgeoisie, can we borrow yours.’ It became obvious that the economic legacies of Saddam – genocide, deliberate destruction of villages and agriculture which forcibly urbanised the peasantry – can only be overcome in large part by injections of foreign investment and management expertise.

An American businessman told us that corruption was common. He refused to play the game because he could be jailed in America for so doing. We regularly asked people about the scale of corruption, but whether this is more or less than other countries in the Middle East is impossible to say. The government knows, however, that this is an obstacle to business and tackling it must be a priority.

The other contentious issue is media freedom. We insisted on meeting independent journalists. ‘Independent’ here means that they don't work for either of the main parties which have their own papers and television and radio channels. I am a member of the NUJ myself so was keen to hear their stories. One told us that he had been arbitrarily arrested by the security forces and held overnight for criticising the Iraqi President, which is unacceptable.

However, some of them betrayed a deep naiveté. One said that he had published an article alleging high-level corruption by two named politicians just ‘to convey information.’ This led to an exchange which involved discussion of libel laws and the rights and responsibilities of a free press.

KENT | Letter from Baghdad

Women's rights is another contentious issue. Hijabs were a fairly common sight in the universities we visited whilst burkhas were more widespread in some of the smaller towns and villages we passed through. However, the region is fairly secular and boasts many women in senior positions. Its Assembly, like the Iraqi Parliament, actually has more female deputies than we have in the UK.

We visited a women's outreach project in the capital with its own radio station which broadcasts advice and helps women in domestic violence cases. The manager had long been a primary school teacher in west London but had returned some seven years before. She told us that initially she risked having acid thrown in her face for wearing trousers. She now opined that women were 'almost equal' but told us of the daily so-called honour attacks and self-immolation as well as, in some small villages, the practice of female genital mutilation which had been reintroduced by Islamic mullahs in the early 90s.

Their radio station is vital to reaching women and equipping them with the wherewithal to stand up for their own rights. Radio is the main medium of communication in the region. A few hundred thousand pounds would enable them to reach the whole of the region and we are determined to get them this money.

Baghdad

The journey to Baghdad included a brief but, to be honest, exhilarating, low and fast chopper ride to the Green Zone.

Security was paramount and we soon discovered why we had been issued with flak jackets and helmets. Our first day in the Green Zone saw a major sandstorm which allowed the Mahdi Army to fire a dozen mortars into the zone which houses most government buildings and key embassies. 'Incoming' and 'take cover' punctuated that day which turned out to be the last day on which mortars rained down on Baghdad (a few have been launched since then).

We had been invited to Baghdad by the Islamic Dawa Party of the Prime Minister, Nouri Al-Malaki as part of the continuing dialogue between LFIQ and Dawa – between social democracy and moderate Islam. The Dawa Party is one of the oldest parties in Iraq, having played a central role in opposing Saddam at great cost to their members.

Democratiya 14 | Autumn 2008

In our meeting with the PM, the translator inadvertently referred to him as General Secretary of the Ba'ath party to which he instantly interjected 'Dawa' and then quipped that such a gaffe would in the past have led to execution.

Jokes aside, we had a good session with the PM and then with his colleagues. One key issue for us is the continuing restrictions on the trade unions. One of the largely unsung success stories of the past few years has been the revival of a movement that was once very powerful but was liquidated by Saddam. The unions seek to be social partners in the new Iraq. There are fears that they could be used by some to rebuild Ba'athist powerbases, but union leaders are themselves victims of Saddam and are wholly opposed to this. But the old ban on public sector organisation remains in place – a hefty obstacle given that over 80 percent of the economy remains in public hands. And the previous PM froze all union assets in 2005. We strongly urged the new PM to reverse these restrictions and were promised progress. This, we hope, is in the pipeline.

I was impressed with the PM. He spoke very directly about his administration's success in wresting control of Basra back from the Mahdi Army and the arms and oil smugglers. He, and later his Defence Minister, told us that Sadr City – the base of the mortars going off around us – would be next and then Mosul and Diyala. The insurgencies are being broken by Iraqis who are now liberating themselves with their own surges.

We formed the impression of growing confidence in the government and its security forces. So much so that it's possible to talk of a withdrawal of foreign troops within a foreseeable future and the striking of a bargain between a confident and sovereign government and foreign forces. All this makes a mockery of the regular sneers by some about the so-called 'Green Zone government' and about America's desire to turn it into a 'vassal state' under permanent occupation.

Improved security is obviously the key to political and economic progress. The liberation of Basra from the militias and oil smugglers, for instance, now enables ambitious plans for a new container port, employing, they say, 500,000 people to be realised.

There is in Baghdad, and most certainly in the Kurdistan region, a large reservoir of support for the UK. After three trips and regular contacts with Iraqis, I concluded

KENT | Letter from Baghdad

that it wasn't flannel but genuine, reflecting the large number of opinion-formers who had been exiled in the UK and the widespread use of English, which is the second language throughout Iraq.

I have even had some conversations in Kurdistan and in the Iraqi Parliament about the possibility of Iraq joining the Commonwealth. It is not on the cards in the near future but I think that, as long as imperial myths associated with it are disproved, it is a runner in the next few years. I would make a strong case for Iraq being admitted to an organisation which has a foot in every continent, with all sorts of different constitutional systems and religions and races. There would be tangible educational and sporting benefits and less quantifiable benefits such as increased trade that could come from regular contact with over 50 countries in different blocs.

Whether that becomes possible, it is crystal clear that all Iraqi policy-makers seek to engage much more fully with the outside world. Their country has been raped and pillaged for decades and has lagged behind in every single field of human activity. It has been a tremendous privilege to be present, if only briefly, as a new Iraq is built from the ground up.

Blaydon

Some time after the trip, some of those whom we saw in Iraq and who are based in the UK with the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Dawa Party, visited Blaydon, the constituency of LFIQ Joint President Dave Anderson MP. We went to encourage businesses to invest in Iraq. We also took time out to see the work of the Red Kite Project which has successfully reintroduced this beautiful bird of prey back into Blaydon and is a powerful local symbol of our interconnectedness with the environment. We discussed how such a project might be taken up in Iraq and if it should be the eagle or the Ibex mountain goat that could spearhead a campaign for a green Iraq.

Much of what I have written here is positive, which makes it different from the often negative views many have, but I don't want to be Panglossian. History and geography lie very heavily on Iraq: there are conflicting versions of Iraqi nationalism; there are still tensions between Baghdad and the Kurds, not least over Kirkuk; there are still regular bombs and assassinations though at a much reduced rate; there are millions of displaced people within and outside Iraq; the region is a very dangerous place

Democratiya 14 | Autumn 2008

and many neighbours are deeply hostile to a strong Iraqi Kurdistan and a revived Iraq, though some Arab countries are now establishing embassies in Baghdad.

Increasingly, however, Iraqi forces are in the driving seat and are fighting to build a federal and democratic country. Iraq is not a lost cause. It may often be out of the news these days, and the progress is fragile, but its civil society and reformers deserve widespread understanding and support.

Gary Kent is Director of Labour Friends of Iraq. He writes in a personal capacity.