



TRANSCRIPT

“Iraq in Transition: Post-Conflict Challenges and Possibilities”

Featuring Ad Melkert

Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Iraq

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Terje Rød-Larsen: Good afternoon, everybody. It is a great pleasure indeed to welcome to Trygve Lie Center and to IPI to this SRSG event focusing on transitional and post-conflict challenges in Iraq.

As you all know, our guest today is Ad Melkert, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, also known as UNAMI.

The purpose of this SRSG series is to offer a platform for key UN leaders in the field--and you certainly are one of them--to interact with yourselves, namely, the diplomatic and policy community here in New York at headquarters. Since the start of the series, we've featured a number of SRSGs and field missions across the globe. Only last week we were pleased to host SRSG Ibrahim Gambari on the peace process in Darfur. The month before, we featured SRSG Ellen Margrethe Løj on UN peace building efforts in Liberia.

This week, we are turning our attention to the Middle East and to the role of the UN in Iraq. Actually, we are very Middle Eastern this way. These days, we had the President of Israel, Shimon Peres, in these very premises this morning, and yesterday evening, the day before yesterday, we hosted the Prime Minister of the Qatar, also for an IPI event, so it's very Middle East these days. And not without reason, if I may say so.

UNAMI was established following Security Council Resolution 1500 of August 14th, 2003, and I think we all remember the tragic events that unfolded just a few days later. The suicide attack that demolished the UN

headquarters at the Canal Hotel in Baghdad extinguished the life of Sérgio Vieira de Mello and twenty-one other UN staff, including my special assistant over many, many years, Rick Hooper, who was killed together with Sérgio--he was his special assistant at the time--and wounded another 100 people. In the aftermath of this devastating and traumatic experience, the UN temporarily scaled back its presence in Iraq. It also reassessed its rules and regulations concerning safety and security for UN personnel.

However, over time, and since 2007, the UN mission in Iraq has grown in strength and capacity. Today, UNAMI maintains a staff of approximately 350 international and more than 480 national staff. UNAMI is tasked with supporting the Iraqi government in a number of areas that are crucial for Iraq's transition. These include elections, reconciliation, human rights and humanitarian concerns, the resolution of disputed boundaries, and development and economic reform. So you can understand the SRSG has its hands full.

To help address these various challenges, the UN Country Team is comprised of no fewer than, believe it or not, sixteen UN agencies, funds and programs. And that is indeed a pretty impressive number, and I'm sure that you, Ad, can name every single of them, including their UN acronyms. We might actually test you on this later today.

On a more serious note, the presence of such a large UN family necessitates the need for strategic and may be one UN approach to mission planning. Ultimately, I believe, it's only when the UN speaks with one voice that we can truly contribute in a meaningful way to Iraq's recovery.

On that note, I feel very fortunate to have Ad Melkert with us today to share his views on mission management, and also to give us views on the situation on the ground in Iraq in a now very, very tumultuous and, I'd say, unpredictable, region. He has led the UN efforts there since 2009, and he continues to work relentlessly for a more stable and peaceful future.

Prior to his current position, he served as Under-Secretary-General and the Associate Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, UNDP, and before that he gained extensive insight on economic and development issues as an Executive Director for the World Bank. And before that, he has had a very distinguished career as a politician in his home country, being both for a number of years a member of Parliament and also a cabinet minister. As a result, I think he brings solid understanding, experience and insights to the challenges ahead, the challenges which are facing Iraq's post-conflict transitions.

And with these few words, it is now my very great pleasure to give him the floor. Ad, the floor is yours.

Ad Melkert:

Well, thanks very much, Terje, and I first of all would wholeheartedly like to thank you all in this great number this afternoon, because working for Iraq these days means working in almost complete isolation from international media attention, or discussions in public setting or whatever nature because the attention is elsewhere.

This is not to say that we should look for ways--because that's not too difficult--to get back into the picture. Maybe it's a good sign, actually, that there's less attention for Iraq. As the Ambassador also says, it's the result of your work, maybe Hamid, but there's, there are many reasons why it is necessary to keep attention. And that is what basically makes me happy with this opportunity.

I'd like briefly to mention four points that are key to understand what's going on and what, from the UNAMI perspective, our position is and our possible contribution. So, first on the regional context, then on recent policy developments in Iraq, thirdly on the security profile and trends, and finally on the role of the UN and the international community more generally.

We have to start with the regional context for all the reasons that are well-known to this audience, but maybe to be a bit more specific to which extent it impacts developments in a country that has been very much on its own for the past three decades or so, starting with the Iraq-Iran War, the Gulf War, the sanctions, the 2003 War--three decades long, Iraq has actually been in an isolated position in the region and in the world, and all of a sudden, things have changed, first of all, because of developments in Iraq itself. Their effect of reintegrating in the region-- normalizing relations with the international community, including with the Security Council, and developing a new system of governance, with a constitution, with elections, and with a functioning state on the basis of different principles-- has brought back Iraq closer to a mainstream, initially not the mainstream in the region, but that's of course is changing right now, as the very experience of drafting a constitution, organizing elections, having an elected government in place has now become very relevant for other parts of the region, and one doesn't know at this moment what the impact of that will be. But clearly it's different than what it was.

One of the clear impacts of the turmoil in other parts of the region has been the manifold demonstrations, the multitude of demonstrations that we have seen. Since mid-February, we have counted between 50 and 100 bigger or smaller demonstrations. Demonstrations that are everywhere in the country, very much focusing on the three key issues that one sees elsewhere as well: better services; more jobs, particularly for young people; and fighting against the corruption that is endemic also in Iraq. And it brings people together across the lines of community, sex, political affiliation, and that is something that is a new phenomenon in a country that, as a consequence, not only has now a constitutional system, but also sees the other sides, the expression by civil society, by citizens in a rather unorganized and here and there quite suppressed way.

But nevertheless, that genie is out of the bottle. And the government knows and acknowledges that it will have to deal with it.

When I mentioned government, I referred to the government in Baghdad, but I should also mention the regional government in Erbil as in the Kurdistan region. Also, substantial movement is being seen on an almost daily basis, particularly in the area of Sulaimaniya, where protests are ongoing, not only for the three objectives that I mentioned, but also as an expression of frustration on the more dynastic dimensions of leadership in the Kurdistan region, and that certainly has also brought the Kurdistan Parliament into action, as well as President Barzani.

As much as the Parliament in Baghdad is also playing its role in trying to absorb, one could say, some of the concerns that are being expressed by demonstrators, the net impact of all of this is that it adds, basically, to the unpredictability of what is going on in Iraq, because it adds to the sources of tension that have been there ever since 2003 that are often leading to expressions of violence. And it means that governing the country, managing the country has become an ever more challenging task for the government, although I should underscore that the government has acknowledged the need to respond to the demonstrators, and I will come back to that.

Before doing that, I should mention another aspect of the regional context that has its impact on Iraq—although, here again, it is very difficult to say what it will lead to, and that is what we see wider in the region in terms of shifts in position, in spheres of influence, in the role of countries trying to have their influence in other places. It would be nobody's surprise that I could refer to the long period of government formation, where we saw the phenomenon of many Iraqi leaders very often traveling to all capitals in the region, or the neighboring states and Cairo.

So that was clearly an expression of the interaction between Iraq and the region, and that, again, comes as no surprise for students of Iraq's history, because I think that is a constant phenomenon ever since the creation of the modern state of Iraq in the 1920s. But now the balance of forces in the region is, of course, under pressure, is changing, nobody can tell what it exactly will look like, sometime from now, but that it will have an impact in Iraq is clear.

And one of the most recent and most visible expressions of that and of the potential behind is the high sensitivity in Iraq derived from the developments in Bahrain. Many people have taken to the streets, many expressions of solidarity have come forward with the people in Bahrain. Many tend to translate it into a Shiite solidarity expression. I would argue that it's not only about the Shiite side, but really also about the rights issue that is underlying what we see in Bahrain. Not only for political correctness reasons, but really also for more analytical reasons, I'd like to warn against two easy translations of confrontation that one sees into, say, sectarian schemes, because Iraq is not as simple as it looks like from

that perspective. Neither is the wider region. I think we should take that into account.

Nevertheless, the impact is clear, and how that's going to play out in the near future. Also of course, with the Iranian influence on the other side is unpredictable, but it should be mentioned in order to try to understand some of the relevant dimensions of what's going on in the region in the context of Iraq's development.

Secondly, on policy development in the country itself. First and foremost is that since early January there is a government in place which, for all practical purposes and intents, was a successful outcome of a very long period of elections and government formation, and I think the most important thing to know there is the historic nature of the fact that for the first time in Iraq's history there was a peaceful transition from one elected government to the other. So we can of course look at all the wheelings and dealings that were necessary for that and all the obstacles that needed to be removed, and some of the obstacles that are still there, but at the end of the day, there was a new government, and it was inaugurated on the basis of the rules that have been established some years ago, and that is extremely important to note.

There is still unfinished business, which is important to mention, because there is a potential of instability and setback in that unfinished business. One is the appointment of ministers in the key security ministries: Minister of Defense, Minister of Interior, Minister of National Security, which is still part of a lot of political wrangling going on.

And secondly, and not unconnected to this point, is the formal establishment of the so-called National Council for Higher Policies, which was essentially a platform to find a place also for the Iraqi leader, Ayad Allawi, who was supposed to be the chair of that council that would have the task to define more, the more strategic policies, basically bringing the party block leaders together in parallel to the responsibility of the government. Allawi has made known that he does not want to assume that position any longer and ever since there is now unclarity as to whether this council will be established at all, and if it would, what role it could play, and that is still important unfinished business.

I may mention a third element of unfinished business, although it is not from a formal sense, but that is really the key challenge to the government right now, and that is to start to govern. And starting to govern means starting to govern also in response, in particular, to the high expectations of the electorate, people that turned out with more than 60 percent, which was really a success in the elections on 7th March, but we're talking 7th March 2010. So really some time has passed since.

And in response of course to the demonstrations, particularly the 25th of February demonstrations, with a big turnout, very clearly articulated expectations, especially in the field of services, service provision, electricity first and foremost, anticipating the 120 degrees heat that will

soon come over us again, and it's... the government has already made clear that it will not be possible to meet all those expectations in this particular area this year, although they're working hard and seriously to improve the situation substantially as from next year.

But it's of course about more than electricity, it's also about water, education, health, general infrastructure and, most of all, jobs, and the development of the economy. So this is the big challenge for the government. Mr. Maliki, Prime Minister Maliki has announced a 100 Days Plan, and the clock is ticking for that. The Sadrists have announced that they will assess the performance of the government after six months, which coincides with the period after Ramadan, September-October, coinciding with the bulk of the withdrawal of the US forces.

So there are inbuilt procedures and mechanisms now that will ensure that in the coming six to nine months, the social and economic policy agenda will be very high in everybody's priority and will also be translated into political positions in the Parliament, in the interaction between the government and society, and in the end in the sustainability of this government of national unity. It's a big moment from that perspective from Iraq, although even with the outside pressures, very relevant, because this is the only way to consolidate the gains of the recent years that the people that went out to vote will see that their vote mattered in order to improve their living conditions.

My third point is on security. Of course, much of what a government could do is defined by the circumstances under which it has to work, and that explains why in 2009 and a good part of 2010, it was really very difficult to deliver as most of the priority was needed for ensuring security, a certain basic level of stability. We see different trends. I don't guarantee how it looks tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but I do think that we see over the past six months or so a generally decreasing trend of the number of incidents, although that trend is sometimes dramatically interrupted by big and, as it is called in jargon, complex attacks like last week on the Provincial Council in Tikrit, with more than 60 people killed, scores of people injured, and really also a very political agenda that was presented there through that attack, trying to undercut the development towards stability, challenging the government quite clearly.

Also the US forces are increasingly under attack, and what we see on a more or less continuous basis is targeted assassinations, particularly of government officials, security forces officials, police in particular, which is basically targeting also at the future pillars of a more stable state, suggesting that there is an agenda out there, and that there are forces behind that that still have not given up, that they could derail developments in Iraq. Yet the Iraqi security forces have strengthened their position, they are better trained, better equipped than before, and I think it would be fair to say that this overall decreasing trend is also due to increased performance of a large part of the Iraqi security forces, although there are differences from location to location.

So it's a mixed picture that we see, and again of course it's unpredictable to which extent there will be spillover of unrest from other places, and here I should unfortunately also refer to the recent events with regards to the Koran and what we have seen as UN in Afghanistan, and we are of course very much concerned that this would be an issue in the wider region.

Fourthly, on the UN. Where are we in the context of all of this? First of all, we are there still on the basis of the mandates that Terje referred to, and that is under discussion every year, early August. It was extended last year unchanged. It will certainly be reviewed in the next few years again, but there are good reasons to believe that the Iraqi government is of the opinion that the mandate of UNAMI should be prolonged for the time being. It is important to know that because it's an explicit reference in our mandates that we should operate at the request of the government of Iraq, and at times the government is also so kind as to remind us of that, and of course we have to listen to that, and also be very kind in the way that we accept that point.

But the good reasons to continue to work with the special political mission in Iraq are the following. One, and probably highest on the political side of the agenda in the near future, is working in the area of the so-called disputed territories, so that is Kirkuk and the other disputed territories that are mentioned in the Constitution, and where basically the boundaries are not yet agreed upon for fifteen districts and sub-districts between Arabs, Kurds and also with the Turkmen, playing their role, and other minorities as well.

I am happy to say that we had very recently a very good meeting with representatives of all the political blocks representing the political leaders where agreement in principle was established that UNAMI is requested to bring parties together on an agenda that would address the outstanding issues with regard to the disputed territories, and we have identified four in particular, and we will start negotiation processes on each of those four in four different settings. One is on the future of Kirkuk, starting with the delayed elections for the province, including the possibility of agreeing on power-sharing formulas, and in the end, also addressing the status of Kirkuk, which obviously is the most sensitive part.

Secondly is the situation in Ninawa, where already for more than a year we are involved in trying to normalize the cooperation within the provincial council of Ninawa, where the Kurdish side is boycotting the provincial council in absence of the Arab majority, allowing them to take up certain key positions, and the context is very much defined by issues on the security arrangements, including the presence of Kurdish peshmerga in a part of the province. I am relatively optimistic that we could find their solutions towards normalization, but this is then a second track of negotiations that we will try to open in the coming period.

The third issue is very urgent, is the future of the combined security mechanism that was put in place in the triangular cooperation between

the Iraqi Army on the one hand, the Kurdish peshmerga forces on the other hand, sponsored, one could say, or overseen by the US forces, and it led to an infrastructure of a number of principles that have been agreed between the three parties as to how to manage joint checkpoints along the disputed boundaries, and how to deal with that in joint coordination centers. And obviously in view of the scheduled withdrawal of the US forces, there is a need to see how the gains--because there have been gains on that--could be consolidated, could be elaborated, possibly also with the role of the UN.

And fourthly, there is an outstanding issue on holding a census, a national census in Iraq, which is very important in order to have policies based on the reality of who is living where, but for all the political sensitivities, particularly in Ninawa and Kirkuk, it has been very difficult to find agreement on that to date, and we will try to find a basis in order to make that happen rather sooner than later.

Very briefly--because I have been more elaborate on this particular issue where I think the role of the UN could be very significant--we are also very actively engaged in normalization of relations between Kuwait and Iraq, going back to the Gulf War and Resolution 833 of 1993, that stipulated the land and sea border between both countries. Without going into further detail now, I believe that we are quite close to finding the necessary agreement between the two countries, and it's just important to note that both countries have been very constructive in meeting each other; Prime Minister of Kuwait in January coming to Baghdad, Prime Minister of Iraq in February visiting Kuwait recently, in bilateral ministerial committee headed by the two foreign ministers with a very elaborate agenda, and working really towards specific points of agreement, and we have facilitated that process. Of course, I know that the last inches may be still the most difficult, but I believe that there is reason to be cautiously optimistic.

A third area for our work is the election and constitutional evolution. There will be elections probably for the municipal councils also in the provinces, in the Kurdistan region and as the government formation has taken a long period of time, not too long from now we will have to start to think of the next election round. But the role of the UN is changing because a lot of capacity has been built now in Iraq, and Iraqi ownership in my view is really in place for organizing those processes. Still, the role of a trusted adviser from the side of the UN can be very essential in order to add to stability and credibility.

The fourth area that is of ongoing attention and concern is human rights. Together with the High Commission on Human Rights, UNAMI is working on regular reporting and follow-up with the government on a range of human rights issues. Most importantly, we are assisting now the Parliament in establishing an independent commission on human rights, which again would put into Iraqi hands the monitoring of human rights developments in the country, and it would be a big step forward if that were to happen.

Finally, in a co-production between the political mission, but increasingly with the UN Country Team, everything that is now related to the government program in the social and economic policy areas that I mentioned will be key in the interaction between UN and Iraq in the near future. It is connected with the UN Development Assistance framework that has been signed with the government, and we are basically... while still working within the parameters of the special political mission, laying the foundation for a quote-unquote "normal role" of the UN country team working with the Iraqi government in the foreseeable future and operating from what is still called the current compound, but which basically is the foundation for a one-UN house in the future in Iraq, because that's how we should anticipate as UN our future role.

So, Terje, let me stop here. It is a very big list of things that we are involved with.

Maybe with one last remark that we are entering now a stage with a lot unknown. It's truly uncharted territory that we're entering now, as the US forces that have been important in logistic and security support will be leaving in a couple of months from now. We will only work with our own security on the basis, also, of an increased budget envelope that we received from the Fifth Committee, of course after some back and forth, but we can work with that. But more importantly, we will work as a matter of principle with the Iraqi security forces and with the Iraqi government, as it should be in any host country situation.

Needless to say that there are still a number of challenges that need to be addressed in that context, and this puts really a big burden on our mission, and a tremendous need for support from headquarters. You asked me, "How do you deal with headquarters?" given also certain experiences from your side in the past. I'm generally--and that's not because there's some people in the room here--I'm generally positive about that, but at the same time, you know, the general procedures with regard to recruitment, human resources policies, procurement, they're really not designed for working in a context like in Iraq, and in that sense it is an ongoing challenge for us to make it happen on the ground. But we are there, and we are there to stay. Thank you.

Rød-Larsen:

Thank you very much, Ad, for that, I'd say, very comprehensive overview on the situation on the ground, and I'd say also an impressively systematic narrative on how the situation is, not only on the ground in Iraq, but also in the regional context.

And actually, listening to you, before I open the floor, I planned to ask you two questions. One was about the last bit, namely on the management of the mission and its relations to the UN Country Team and the other UN entities there and also to headquarters, but you already answered that question, so I will stay with only one of the two questions I was planning to ask you.

You, in an intriguing way, you described how Iraq is embedded into a, if I put it in my way, in a regional power play, but both as concerns the, so to speak, inspirational effects on the changes going on in the region, so to speak, inspirations to the ground, but also the other aspects, namely the, if I may say so, the transactional aspect on how countries and states in the region are impacting not only to the ground but on the ground.

And I'd like to be a bit explicit there, because in a neighborhood, you have Syria, you have Iran, you have Turkey, you have Jordan, you have, a bit more at a distance but nevertheless players, you have the Gulf countries, and of course you have the Americans. Could you give us in a nutshell an overview on who you see the regional power play in, and I might put it in a more, in a less careful way than you might have to, on how the quest for influence from key players in the region is playing out in Iraq in a quest for shaping and forming not only Iraq itself but also its place in the region for the longer term? Could you elaborate a little bit on that?

Melkert:

Well, thank you for asking this question, which is almost an impossible one in the context of a meeting like this because I would like to declare it now a closed meeting, but I'm not sure it is going to work. I like very much your terminology. I was just thinking about an explosion here or there, and you call it an expression of transactional interest.

But I think that one important point is really to understand the longer history of Iraq. That's why I mentioned going back to the foundations of the modern state in the 1920s. Iraq has never been without its immediate neighbors, with historic links, with economic links, and with direct political interests back and forth, I mean it's not only to Iraq, also from Iraq to other places in the region. I don't think that it's essentially different today. Although clearly, because of the internal shifts in Iraq as a consequence of the 2003 events, the interaction with the neighboring states has become different, and the balance of power has shifted, and I think everybody, and particularly in the US, is very much aware of that.

Still, what I have observed, particularly in this time of elections and government formation, when it was very visible and tangible, what you saw and what you heard and most of the rumors that you heard were true, is that as everybody was playing their role, at the end of the day, it still left space for relatively autonomous decision in the hands of the Iraqi players themselves.

So in other words, I have not observed that one of external, one of the external actors was or is capable of directly imposing its agenda on the Iraqi government or political leaders. So it is in the end very much an Iraqi decision-making process that we see, but obviously it's influenced, and the balance or the outcome will of course be influenced also by relative weights of the influence that's being sought by the external actors.

Now to turn it around, I would hope that actually, we as UNAMI but not necessarily through UNAMI, could come back closer to what was one of the ideas also underpinning the UNAMI mandate, namely that proactive

work would be undertaken to embed Iraq in the region and really to look to a kind of enhanced neighborhood cooperation framework. And, I mean, with my own background from Europe, one could of course have a lot of fantasy as to how that could work.

And I believe that we see some potential there, particularly when I look at the very intensive interaction, economically in the first place, between Turkey and Iraq and also some of the Gulf States and Iraq, and maybe in the near future Kuwait also, now that the relations are improving a lot. Because then it would become, say, a more balanced picture of not only looking at influence from maybe sometimes the more negative side--there is of course impact in what happens on the ground, there are political agendas out there--but you could also translate it into a more positive economic agenda, and what potentially is there, because Ministers of Interior meet every year, really trying to have a common approach on security that in the end would be in the interest of all, one could argue.

The only problem I have--not the only problem, there's a lot of problems with this idea--but certainly one of the problems is as we see now so many changes in the region, although it is very much a regional phenomenon, the paradoxical side of that is that every country seems to be more busy with itself than ever before. And to illustrate this, in March, the Arab League summit in Baghdad was scheduled. A big thing actually for the Iraqis to basically, also in that sense get back to normalcy, assume the presidency of the Arab League and that meeting. There were, of course, reasons why this was postponed, there is now reference to May, possibly, but it's still difficult to see how this would exactly shape up.

So, in other words, the interaction with Iraq and the neighbors and the wider region is now actually more unpredictable than before, except for the prediction that there will be a lot of stakeholders on a permanent basis that one has to factor in, and maybe the UN could help to create some of the basic political infrastructure in order to have that, say, more transparent instead of being part of different agendas that are playing out in ways that are not the type of constructive engagement that one would like to look for.

Terje Rød-Larsen: Thank you very much for those remarks. They were, I think, insight-giving, though carefully phrased and I can see how your background as a politician is serving you very well even today.

May I now open the floor. Would you please state your name and your affiliation? Maybe I would start with the Ambassador first.

Hamid Al-Bayati: Yes, thank you very much. My name is Hamid Al-Bayati. I'm Ambassador of Iraq to the United Nations.

I would add my voice about the region. I think these days, everybody's talking about the whole Middle East rather than one country, specific country. Iraq in 2003 had the problems almost everybody in the region and the world, who are sitting in New York and the UN, Saddam regime

challenged the UN, challenged the teams you know, UNMOVIC, et cetera, et cetera. He had a war with Iran for eight years, invasion of Kuwait and a good example recently, Abdel-Rahman Shalgam, the former Ambassador of Libya, said, "After 2003, we managed to by some documents, we discovered that Saddam was conspiring against Libya." I said, "Tell me any country in the region against which Saddam didn't conspire." So now really we manage to come very, very long way, although we still have long way to go.

Our relation with the region is good, and Kuwait is the best example. After the invasion of Kuwait, really, the whole region was in problem because the whole Arab world divided. So now, really, I mean we had 73 resolutions under Chapter 7 on the Security Council. Now, after lifting the sanction last December, we're left with three resolutions about relation of Kuwait. And the visits of the Prime Minister of Kuwait to Iraq, and our Prime Minister to Kuwait was really a precedent in the history of the relation between the two countries.

I have to say this, but Ad Melkert, with his coolness, it helps a lot in the hot atmosphere in Iraq. I keep telling him we need that kind of wisdom and leadership. Honestly, he plays an important role in bringing different groups together. And the team in New York, and in Baghdad of UNAMI are excellent. I keep telling them I feel they are sympathized with Iraq, and the Iraqi people. They are not doing a job, but they are trying to help, and I feel it when I talk to them, whenever there is a need.

On the other side, Iraq position towards the UN has changed dramatically. As Ad mentioned, the government of Iraq feel the need for the UN. They always emphasize the need to renew their mandate while we, of course for example the mandate of UNMOVIC, we managed to terminate that. So regionally I think we manage, and even internationally we have good relation with the UN, with the international community.

That doesn't mean we don't have problems, but at least the demonstrations in Iraq now, they are not asking to change the regime or to topple the Prime Minister, because he's an elected person and could be not re-elected.

But they, as Ad mentioned, they need service. I agree with them. We still lack of electricity, water, sewage and all kinds of services. The problem we're focusing on security issues in the last four years. I was in Baghdad between December 23rd and January 13th. I went around different provinces, I went to Baghdad during the night, and it was much, much better than I left Iraq in 2006, much, much better than even when I went back several times.

So now security is much better, and the US forces are going to leave by the end of the year. We hope that the government will focus on services and reconstruction, but we still need the help of the international community. I think we need foreign investment, foreign companies. Iraq is rich with oil, gas, minerals and water. We can rebuild Iraq to go back to

the golden time where we have it in the '50s, '60s until the '70s when I live in Iraq which was much different than Saddam regime time. But thank you very much.

Rød-Larsen: Thank you very much, and I think it's fitting on behalf of the SRSG, I was going to say to thank you for those heartwarming and encouraging words to the SRSG. May I proceed to the left-hand side. Name and affiliation.

Stephen Schlesinger: Steven Schlesinger from the Century Foundation. You mentioned that the American troops were under... there are more incidents these days than recently as far as being attacks on US troops. I wasn't clear exactly on what that reference was.

And secondly, was there any chance from your point of view, that US troops, some US troops will remain in Iraq after the official departure date has been met? I know there's been some speculation that there may be a way of continuing some US troop presence for an extended period.

Rød-Larsen: Shall we take a couple of more questions before we revert to the SRSG? Do I see any hands? I see a hand in the back on my left-hand side there. In the back, here, right.

Andrew Cunningham: Andrew Cunningham from Darien Middle East. Could you comment on the long-term trend that you see in relations between Baghdad and Kurdistan, and whether you see greater convergence or greater Kurdish exceptionalism, in a constitutional framework?

Rød-Larsen: Maybe we should stop there before we take some more questions. Would you like to respond?

Melkert: Thank you. First, on the USF-I. I mean they have always been for the US--even after the announcement of the withdrawal plans-- there have been regularly attacks that goes, it's a bit ups and downs that one sees, not very predictable, but definitely the pressure is kept on the US, so to speak, by some of the forces that use, by some of the insurgents that apparently have their agenda there.

On the future of US, this is not something for me to speculate about because clearly this is a matter purely bilateral between the US side and the Iraqi side. One sees, both in Washington and Baghdad, and certainly also in Erbil, that there are different views on this of what would be desirable, but I cannot say anything that is specific at this moment. So our working hypothesis has to be, particularly looking at this joint security architecture in the north, that the US forces will withdraw, and this is the basis for our interaction with the Iraqi government, with the government in Erbil, and also with the US Ambassador in Baghdad for that matter.

The long-term trend on the relation between Baghdad and the Kurdistan region. It is of course bit of a crystal ball but I have, I have tried in the past period to have also some really very informal exchanges with leadership at both sides in order to try to grasp what are really the expectations,

what are the real agendas, and I like to think that the Kurdistan region has really achieved a high degree of autonomy with at the same time still a privileged position in Baghdad, in the government. And not only privileged position, but also an influential position.

And that there is a general feeling, I would say, that this is probably a very good balance in order at the same time to meet many--I don't say all--but many of the aspirations of the Kurds, that for a very long period of time, of course, were strongly advocated by them, but also to be part of a increasingly stable and established structure which would not necessarily be the case if further steps would be sought away from the constitutional framework.

On top of that, there is one very, very important thing happening as we speak, and that is the size of the investments in the Kurdistan region. I mean, every one of you arriving in Erbil would really be impressed by what you see in terms of development, construction and increasingly also more productive economic investment with a very modern airport and, obviously, that decreases the interests to put that into jeopardy by pursuing political ambitions that would be challenged from the other side. And this is not only Baghdad, but this is of course also in the wider region.

Look, we see, we have seen, actually, in my view, very positive, very interesting development of the interaction between the Turkish government and both the government in Baghdad, with last week Prime Minister Erdoğan visiting, but also in Erbil. It's not very long ago that it was almost unthinkable that the Turkish government at that level would be there. And this is not just one of incidents, this is now part of a pattern, and but it has two sides, of course. It strengthens the interaction, but at the same time also strengthens the status quo, and those two sides are definitely also part of considerations of the Turkish side, but I believe those considerations are matched in Erbil and in Baghdad. There are no problems with that, as long as it is within this framework I try to indicate.

Rød-Larsen: Thank you very much. Do I see any more hands? I see a hand at the very back.

Shamina De Gonzaga: Hi, Shamina de Gonzaga, World Council of Peoples for the UN. I am wondering if you could inform about the situation of the Iraqi refugees. Are people returning to Iraq? What has happened and how many people are we talking about who might have the desire to return?

Rød-Larsen: Any more questions? We have two on the right-hand side there.

Gabrielle Juen: Gabrielle Juen, Mission of Austria. Also in relation to what Ambassador Al-Bayati said in terms of investment, we are aware that UNAMI in the past has been trying to facilitate also progress in the area of hydrocarbon regulation, which we deem very important for strengthening investment in that sector. We were wondering if you could elaborate on the state of play and how you see the potential of getting this issue settled in the future. Thank you very much.

Rød-Larsen: Thank you so much. I saw another hand there. Please do go ahead.

Doug Hostetter: Doug Hostetter with the Mennonite Central Committee. The Mennonite Central Committee has been working in Iraq for almost 20 years. We don't do policy work. We do more relief and development work at the very grass roots. But I would like to kind of offer two observations from the ground. About a month ago I met with an Iraqi community leader from the Baghdad area, who told about how excited and overjoyed they were when the Americans and the UN overthrew the Arab strongman in Baghdad, and now they yearn for the days of Saddam Hussein. And when we asked why, they said simple things like security, personal security, education, health care, water, sanitation, electricity. They found it impossible that the most powerful nations on Earth destroyed an Arab strongman and have done a less-well job of bringing things to the local bases.

The other was from an Iraqi Christian leader who was talking about how Iraqi Christians had lived in Iraq for 2,000 years and had comfortable relations with their Arab neighbors for fourteen centuries, and for the first time in their history, they're worried about their survival in Iraq. Almost half the Iraqi Christian community has fled, and many communities, and they are very worried about losing the rest. I'd be interested in your comments.

Rød-Larsen: Thank you. Maybe we should go back to the podium and respond and then we'll have a very brief last round of questions after Ad has responded to the questions and comments. Ad, the floor is yours.

Melkert: Well, definitely, let me start with the last question. Definitely what we see around these demonstrations--and we saw that already around the elections--is that there is deep, potential of deep frustration, a reality also of deep frustration, with many Iraqis that are living through poverty, at a level of poverty that has not been seen before in that country, and that is also absolutely unacceptable given the resources and the potential capacity of the country to address such issues. So this is, in that sense, a very defining time also for Iraq under, say, the new system, and with Iraqi politicians responsible to deliver.

The good thing is that they really know that, and acknowledge that themselves. Prime Minister Maliki, in the first place, and also the Parliament, is playing more and more its role in defining the priorities, allocating resources and trying to create conditions for delivery.

But as we know, what happened after the invasion was during several years, of course, not contributing at all to the future. First, there was a lot of destruction of infrastructure before the reconstruction started, and still today much of the impact of the absence of planning and utterly wrong decisions of that time are visible. We see it, but many Iraqis feel it, and that's your point, and that's what the government has to cope with in the first place, and they know. And it will also define the success, say, of the new, of the system that is now in place, and there we are as UN also to

try to support it as much as we can, but of course we cannot be decisive in that. This is in the end an Iraqi responsibility.

On the Christians, well, you know, no doubt, that we have been very strongly involved also in setting up some mechanisms for protection of minorities, in particular also Christians, but other minorities as well, and here again I should say that the government itself--I spoke at length about this with Prime Minister Maliki--is very recognizant of the need to keep Iraq as a country where everyone is welcome, and minorities should have a place to live and to try to put in place a security infrastructure that would guarantee that. Although that's of course not that easy against the reckless kind of violence that is put in place by some of the insurgent groups.

Hydrocarbon legislation. I'm afraid to say that although different parties have said to us that they intend to take it up now, rapidly, with the new Parliament in place after a long period where the draft legislation was in fact shelved, that we still see that there are substantial differences of opinion, particularly between the Kurdistan regional government and the oil ministry in Baghdad, and I would not be able to predict at what point it would be possible to overcome those obstacles.

It's even an issue, of course, in the wider context of how to deal with the disputed territories, whether one should first resolve all outstanding oil production and oil-revenue-sharing issues, or whether it's possible to let that to parties, and to move forward along more political lines. Some argue that is an inseparable agenda. Others say, well, don't load your cart too heavily with everything at the same time, so I cannot predict anything on that, save from saying that we are trying also to find a point of entry to encourage Iraqi parties to adopt that legislation, because it would be a very strong signal to the outer world, and also provide more confidence to investors in case this would happen.

On refugees, difficult to give general picture. Many refugees that are in Jordan or Syria are not, or not immediately, intending to return. Some do, but not in very great numbers. We know, of course, the issues in some European countries with regard to returning and also forcing return refugees. Let me here just, in order to keep my own skin intact, refer to António Guterres, the High Commissioner for Refugees who visited Iraq in January and who made a very strong call on countries, particularly in Europe, to look at each individual case before taking decisions, and in other words, not to take group decisions, as each individual case should be considered in the specific context of the person on the one hand, and the location of return on the other hand. But, as I see here the Dutch Ambassador, I should stop here, because otherwise it will be headlines in the Dutch newspapers tomorrow.

Just to add here that apart from the refugees, we as UN are actually specially involved with the internally displaced. There are many of them, they are belonging to the most poor, and without providing them with a future, there will be a source of considerable instability potentially in Iraq

in the future. So many of our resources and efforts go in the first place to them, of course, not to substitute for returning refugees but simply because that is a more complicated matter.

Rød-Larsen: Thank you very much. I think I will allow...shall we take one or two very quick questions before we start something up? I see a hand there from a stranger on the right-hand side there.

Pim Valdre: Thank you, Pim from IPI. You spoke about the recent tragic retaliation against UNAMI in Afghanistan only a few days ago, and you also mentioned the increase in the number of popular demonstrations in response to the convergence in the region. Given the tragic history of the UN in Iraq and the quite sizable number of staff in Iraq, how confident do you feel of the security and protection of UN personnel in the period to come, also in light of the drawback from US security forces?

Rød-Larsen: I think that will be the concluding question. Ad. Famous last words?

Melkert: Well, it is no doubt an enormous challenge. I do believe that we have made some progress in reassuring, I should say, the Iraqi people that the UN is there to serve them. Because, let's not forget, apart from everything, what happened after 2003, the reputation of the UN was of course very much linked with 'oil for food', and the tremendous suffering of many people in Iraq.

We had to operate, there was no alternative in recent years, visibly, in close connection with the US forces, and we're also grateful for the support that they provided us. But obviously, as UN, you want to be, stand alone, autonomous in the way that you organize yourself and the way that you present yourself and, certainly, but that's what we've been doing all along, in the way that we interact at all levels of society. The forthcoming period is particularly challenging because of the transition, so we will have to be cautious, and there's really a tension there, because, at the same time, the demand for our support--whether it's the 100 Days program of the government, or whether it's the disputed boundaries issues--is getting up. So, more demand, and quite some challenges in the supply, so to speak, from a logistic and security point of view. We'll try to handle it as much as we can. We still cannot have as many UN staff in the country as we want, although we have increased a lot over time, including the Country Team.

The good thing here is that we are working very well with the Iraqi government. There is a joint committee now in place, including the Foreign Ministry, the Prime Minister's office, and the Operational Command Centers that we need to work with, and we believe that, at the policy level, there is every intention to enable the UN to do its work. On the ground and at different operational levels, we, of course, have to differentiate between situations, conditions, capacities, and also use the necessary intelligence to understand what's going on. And that will define how much room to maneuver we basically have to do our work. I don't

think I can add more to this. It's really an everyday, case-by-case judgment that is required.

Rød-Larsen:

Thank you very much, Ad. I think we are lucky to have Ad with us today, a person who is serving the UN, the Iraqi people and the international community in an extremely important mission for international peace and security, an extremely challenging mission, and I think in the future it might be even more challenging. And I'd also like to say a very dangerous mission.

And I'm very pleased to say that I think our SRSG in Iraq has the wisdom, he has the courage, and has also shown over the last two years the persistence to do that job in the very best way. It's very rarely, I think, that I would say that I feel very confident that we actually have the right man at the right place, and I think we are very lucky to have you there in Iraq.

And all that remains then is to say thank you to you, wish you good luck for the future, and I think I have everybody in this room with me when I say that. And thank you to you all. Thank you.