
WHERE TO NOW FOR IRAQ?

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KIM LANDERS: In the past weeks in Iraq, thousands of protestors have ransacked parliament and taken to the streets of the capital Baghdad to protest against a government that they regard as incompetent and corrupt.

Basic services are sporadic and 13 years after the US-led invasion, security remains a concern with the rise of Islamic State.

Someone who's watched Iraq closely all this time is Emma Sky. She's a British woman who was once a senior political advisor in Iraq to US General Ray Odierno.

Emma Sky is now a senior fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute and she spoke to me earlier from Melbourne.

Emma Sky, in Iraq at the moment there's a divided parliament, there's deep frustration among Iraqis about the inability to tackle corruption and poor economic management. Is Iraq unravelling?

EMMA SKY: I think most of the attention in the West has really been on the Islamic State, but actually in Iraq, Iraqis themselves are getting angrier and angrier at the parliaments and all their attention is focused on the corruption of those in the parliament.

You hear Iraqis shouting you know, "You are all thieves" and they just feel years and years have going on. The invasion was in 2003 and the same elites have been ruling Iraq since then, and instead of delivering services and security to the population they've been stealing the wealth of the country. So the problem really is this kleptocratic elite that the people are very unhappy with.

KIM LANDERS: So what's the solution?

EMMA SKY: It's very hard because the problems of Iraq relate to the elites who have been in power since 2003 being incapable of forming a vision for the country, to agree on the nature of the state and how the country should be governed. All they do agree on is that the oil wealth of the country will be divided up between them. They sit in the green zone, they pass a lot of money and services don't get delivered.

KIM LANDERS: From the perspective of the West, do you think that this means that this would weaken efforts to defeat the Islamic State group?

EMMA SKY: Islamic State is a symptom of a problem. So the bigger issue is the regime and until across Iraq and Syria you get better regimes more representative of their peoples, delivering services to their peoples it creates a space for chaos and it creates a space in which extremist groups such as the Islamic State can claim to provide a better alternative.

KIM LANDERS: The number of US troops in Iraq seems to be mushrooming. A couple of years ago it was just a few hundred, now it's up to between 4,000 and 5,000. Is Iraq going to be a foreign policy plot on President Barack Obama's record?

EMMA SKY: I think it will be. When President Obama became President, Iraq was actually in a relatively good place. From 2007 to 2009 is the only time in the whole war that the US had the right strategy, the right leadership and the right resources. So when President Obama took over, the levels of violence were down, there was optimism in the country that everything was heading in the right direction.

And after the 2010 elections which were a tightly contested election, but a good election, the US didn't uphold the election results and the US quickly drew down its forces. That enabled basically Maliki, who lost the election, to consolidate more and more power and go after his rivals, to arrest Sunni's en masse, which created the space for Islamic State to rise up and created the problems that we see today.

So I think Iraq will go down as a blot of President Obama's record. Particularly, as his administration was claiming Iraq to be a great success.

KIM LANDERS: What is life like for ordinary Iraqis these days?

EMMA SKY: I think it really depends where in Iraq that you live, because it's different in different places. The Kurds in the north have good levels of security. But the drop in the price of oil has really affected the Kurds as well. So civil servants are not being paid and people are getting frustrated at the lack of income. So across Iraq there's an economic problem because salaries have been cut drastically, those in the public sector pay roll their salaries have been cut drastically. If you live in Mosul, then life is really grim under the Islamic State. So it's very different in different places.

KIM LANDERS: You gave evidence to the UK's Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq war and while that report still hasn't been published, it is likely to contain a damning critique of military effort there, British prime minister Tony Blair, former ministers, intelligence officers, top officials. What do you think the effect of it will be?

EMMA SKY: So the Chilcot inquiry I believe is due to come out in June or July. They've said it's definitely coming out this summer, and as you said, it will bring criticism on very senior people.

In terms of the impact, I think at least the public will feel there's been some form of accountability. And I think it will put down a marker, if you like, so that in future when we think about going to wars lessons have been learnt so there's much better planning, there's much better look at the assumptions and so we won't plunder ignorantly in like we did in Iraq in 2003.

KIM LANDERS: And that was Emma Sky, a senior fellow at Yale University's Jackson Institute. She's the author of *The Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq*, speaking to me from Melbourne

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