



Middle East Programme Roundtable Meeting

'Iraq, Lebanon and Israel: The Triangle of Interference'
Charles Glass

Thursday 19 April 2007, 10:30-11:30am
Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

Speaker: Charles Glass, Journalist

Chair: Nadim Shehadi, Associate Fellow, Middle East Programme, Chatham House

Chair's Opening Remarks:

Mr Shehadi opened the meeting by thanking Mr Glass for visiting Chatham House. He recalled that they had first met in 1986 and that it was a great pleasure to welcome Charles Glass to Chatham House during his stay in London. Whilst Mr Glass needed no introduction, Mr Shehadi noted that he had recently published two new books, one on Iraq entitled 'The Northern Front' and a second entitled 'The Tribes Triumphant'. Mr Shehadi concluded by noting that Mr Glass had been in Lebanon during the summer covering the Israeli war.

Speaker:

Mr Glass thanked the chair and began by saying that he would make his comments brief in order to allow plenty of time for discussion. He began by asking why the Iraqis had not welcomed the invading forces, as expected, with open arms but rather with snipers and car-bombs. He suggested that this was the result of a lengthy history of Western interference in the region dating back to the imperial 'benefactors' who had been responsible for the creation of a number of Middle Eastern states, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. Mr Glass suggested that the West should look at the 2003 invasion of Iraq through the eyes of the native Iraqi population: in 2003, the majority of Iraqis knew the history of US involvement in the region only too well. They were aware of the US support of Saddam during his exile in Cairo, when he had been introduced by the MI6 chief in Cairo as a 'charming young man'.

Prior experience of the US had made Iraqis extremely wary of increased US involvement in the region. During the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, in which 1,000,000 people died, although the Soviets sold arms to Iraq, the US approved the sale of chemical and other weapons to Saddam by European countries, including France and Germany. The US also supplied Saddam with satellite reconnaissance photographs and protected Iraqi shipping in the Gulf. When Saddam gassed the Kurds in 1988 in Halabja, the US had denied that he was responsible, and had tried to blame the Iranians. When Saddam invaded Kuwait in 1990, the US was prepared to admit the true extent of his crimes – since now he had made it onto their bad list.

During the war over Kuwait, the Iraqi people had suffered brutally as a result of yet further US intervention: President Bush had called on the Iraqi people to rise up against their dictator and during the ensuing uprising, those who rebelled gained control of more provinces than US currently holds today. The uprising very nearly succeeded but General Schwarzkopf pulled the plug on the uprising at the command of President Bush. The US gave the Iraqi regime the use of helicopters to use against the rebels: those involved in the uprising

were terrified by the helicopters, fearing the use of gas. In the resulting rout, tens of thousands of Iraqis were killed in the south of Iraq. During the years that followed, approximately 500,000 Iraqi children died as a result of malnutrition under the international sanctions regime which decimated Iraqi economy and society.

Against this backdrop of US interference in Iraqi affairs, the suspicion of the Iraqi people of US motives in toppling Saddam is understandable. Viewed in such a manner, it was unimaginable that the US forces should be welcomed by Iraqis in 2003. The US was effectively *persona non grata* so the success of the invasion was not undermined by subsequent events but rather was prejudiced from the outset by the memory of Western intervention. Simply put, the United States and Britain were unacceptable to the Iraqi people because of their history of imperial intervention.

In 1982, Israel took a similar approach in Lebanon in trying to bring in a regime that was to their liking by expelling the PLO and ushering in a new Christian dominated regime under Pierre Gemayel and the Phalangists. Such a government would have been unacceptable to some 75% of the Lebanese population and yet Israel was apparently surprised that the Lebanese were not willing to accept this. Mr Glass suggested that very little had changed since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, quoting an extract from *Islam in Modern History* by Wilfred Cantwell-Smith (1956):

'The second great point in today's Arabism is the degree to which the modern world has conspired to undermine its confidence. The attack has been relentless upon the very citadels of Arab life. The most overt instance of this attack is the sheer and massive onslaught of Western imperialism. The guns of British warships in Alexandria harbour, 1882, shelling into suppressed submission the first major Egyptian attempt under 'Arabi Pasha, to redress internal misrule; the bombing planes of French colonialism, wrecking Damascus in 1925...the tanks of British armies crushing the gates of 'Abidin Palace, Cairo, 1942, to buttress a 'suggestion' that would force upon the country a government agreeable to the Allies; these and many another might have burned deep into the Arab soul.'

Mr Glass asked how many more invasions had been conducted by Western powers in the Middle East since Cantwell-Smith had written these words: 1956, 1967, 1973, the Lebanese Civil War and so on. He said that even as this current meeting was being held the US and Saudi Arabia were pouring money into Lebanon to assist in the fight against Hizbullah, to let the Lebanese know that they could fight if Hizbullah decided to re-arm. Similarly the US is currently transferring arms into Gaza to equip Fateh to fight Hamas and yet, he noted, the West wonders why the Middle East does not welcome American intervention to promote democracy. He suggested that this resistance to US intervention stemmed not from a loathing of democracy but rather from a loathing of aggression and the aggressor which found expression in rebellion using the weapons at hand. This rebellion was unlikely to produce anything better than that which it rejected but was a function of desperation after years of being the subject of the studies of external powers.

Question: a member of the audience asked whether, as a US citizen, the speaker had come across any influential people such as those in the State Department who understood this?

Mr Glass replied that this was effectively one way of losing one's job. He said that he had encountered some individuals who were prepared to criticise certain aspects of US policy in the region but he had not encountered anyone in the establishment who saw the situation in precisely such terms.

Question: a member of the audience suggested that Mr Glass' description had oversimplified the situation in giving the impression that these countries were little oases of tranquillity which had been subject to external intervention. She suggested that the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon had initially been welcomed by those in southern Lebanon but

the Israeli presence had provoked a backlash after remaining there too long. The situation in Iraq was very different: whilst the legacy of the 1991 uprising was undoubtedly a key factor, surely the situation and the nature of the triangle of interference were much more complicated.

Mr Glass responded by reading a quotation from Samir Kassir's *Being Arab*, which addressed the manner in which Western dominance of the region has forced a certain dynamic upon people that has stopped development:

'How can you quantify what the social sphere has lost to the cause of political mobilization? How can you express the sacrifice the Individual has to make in the People's debilitating struggle? The Arab world is clearly not the only region that has been forced to fall behind in its development because its liberation struggle took priority (how could it not?). But of the entire colonial world, only the Arabs have been exposed throughout the twentieth century – and into the twenty-first – to the strategems of power that their geography seems permanently to invite. The end of the colonial era did not signify an end to the imperial threat for them.'

Mr Glass continued by saying that he believed that it was a myth that the Israeli invasion had been welcomed in southern Lebanon: the Israeli headquarters in Tyre had been blown up in 1983. By November, 10,000 Lebanese Shi'a had been imprisoned. It had not taken two years for relations to sour, it had taken two months.

Question: Mr Shehadi asked the speaker where he felt that his analysis placed him on the political map; whether he thought that now he might be defined as a Neo-con? By way of explanation, Mr Shehadi said that the Realists had messed up: they had made deals and collaborated with regional dictators such as President Asad, Saddam Hussein and so on. Mr Shehadi said that the Neo-cons felt that their mission was to change the region. The recommendations of the Baker-Hamilton report had suggested that the Neo-realists be 'parachuted in' to suggest making deals with the dictators. In light of this schism, Mr Shehadi asked Mr Glass where he stood.

Mr Glass responded by saying that he didn't think that the distinction was as significant as one might think since both groups wanted to dominate in policy-making circles and were keen to see the US play a dominant role in the region. He added that he was not in support of the Baker-Hamilton report as he thought it represented a terrible way of managing regional foreign policy.

Question: a members of the audience said that Mr Glass' analysis pointed to a systemic failure of West to deal with the Middle East. He suggested that there were a number of lessons to be learned from Iraq: firstly that it might be beneficial to take the decision-making process back to the Foreign Office and away from the office of the Prime Minister. Secondly he suggested that experience of Iraq indicated that it would be beneficial if the foreign policy machine were more receptive to the views of informed outsiders, such as academics and journalists. He suggested that it was possible that such suggestions might be heeded since the present Cabinet Secretary had said similar things but wondered what the prospect was for similar reform in the US system.

Mr Glass responded that he was not sure that the US system would permit such reform, suggested that no-one would come forward with such suggestions because they wouldn't be able to raise money or be elected. It might be easier to effect such reform in the UK because the system is more flexible.

Question: a member of the audience asked Mr Glass how he saw the impact of the Arab peace initiative?

He responded that Israel was unlikely to accept it and without US intervention to compel Israel's compliance the initiative was effectively dead. He noted that West Bank colonization continued apace and that the US was happy with the status quo.

The questioner suggested that there might be the potential for a different response given that the situation had altered considerably since the initiative was last discussed in 2002 during the intifada and shortly after 9/11. Now twenty-two Arab countries are signifying their acceptance of Israel: surely this merited a different response?

Mr Glass suggested that it was easier for Israeli policy-makers to say no than to say yes but said that he thought it would be wonderful if there was acceptance of the situation: it would be a better situation for the Arabs, for Israel and for international peace and security.

Question: a member of the audience asked whether the international community was witnessing the collapse of the US imperial project? He noted that there was increasing support for the traditional realists who seemed to want to retreat into isolation: he asked whether this was good news and whether it was possible that there could be another response such as a last ditch effort to rescue the US project in the region, possibly a strike on Iran. He suggested that to take such a step would be nothing short of further madness but noted this might be a possibility during the latter days of the current administration.

Mr Glass responded by saying that during the fall of Saigon in April 1976, although there had been much discussion of the end of the US empire and everyone had been talking about defeat, however it had not happened: instead the US had simply sealed the country off. Mr Glass said that in his opinion, the US would simply go on and the Iraqis would suffer terribly. With regard to the question of Iran, he said that the US might well bomb Iran, noting that the US carriers were already in place in the Gulf. Mr Glass expressed the hope that cooler heads might prevail since the consequences of such a strike would be unimaginably awful: the hardline mullahs would undoubtedly grow in influence whilst the reformists would be hard hit. The repercussions of such a strike would be felt throughout the region. Mr Glass said that his only hope was that some individuals of influence could counsel caution.

Question: a member of the audience asked Mr Glass to expand upon his comment on Saudi arms being sent to Lebanon.

Mr Glass responded that Saudi Arabia had been sending arms to supply an 'internal security force' composed of Sunnis and Druze Christians in order to counteract Hizbullah. Even Walid Jumblatt is taking the money and sending his forces to re-train: he is reluctant to do so but he feels compelled by circumstances. Mr Glass said that by interfering in Lebanese affairs in this manner, the West was effectively pouring oil all over Lebanon and just waiting for a spark to light it.

Question: a member of the audience asked Mr Glass whether he thought that there would be another war following the summer war of 2006?

Mr Glass suggested that Israel might need to prove that it is not as feeble as it has looked since the summer conflict. Since 1967, Israel has positioned itself as a strategic asset to the United States, representing US interests in the Middle East. The summer war was a failure for Israel: the IDF's image of invincibility was tarnished by its performance in this conflict. The IDF ran out of water, suffered a number of logistical failures and even mistakenly kidnapped a grocer who shared the name of the Hizbullah leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Mr Glass suggested that the priority for Israel was to prove that its performance in the summer war had been an exception not the rule. He suggested that if there was to be another conflict, Israel would have to ensure that they managed the campaign better. Mr Glass suggested that this might be a considerable challenge, noting that Israel had been unable to defeat Hizbullah during their occupation of Lebanon (1982-2000) when they had had all their

troops on the ground, so it was difficult to see how they would be able to achieve this in the current circumstances.

Question: a member of the audience commented that the lack of mention of Iran in the discussion so far had been surprising given the salience of Iran on the Middle Eastern stage today. He asked whether the exercise of Iranian influence via organisations such as Hizbullah was considered more legitimate than external intervention by non-regional powers such as the US and UK?

Mr Glass responded by saying that the brief answer was that he didn't know. He said that he suspected that when the interference represented a positive contribution, then yes regional interference was considered more legitimate than external interference. However he suggested that re-arming Lebanon now, so long after the war, could only be detrimental. Iran is playing a very negative role in regional terms: although Iranian assistance had played a positive role in helping Hizbullah drive the Israelis out of southern Lebanon, few today are prepared to go to war for the Shebaa farms. He suggested that Iran was prepared to allow Lebanon to be destroyed for something as small as this. Mr Glass also noted the role of other regional powers in heightening regional concerns over the myth of a Shi'a arc, thereby raising tensions with the Sunni community and in particular, concern over Iran's regional influence. In this respect, the Saudis and others were not standing on the sidelines but were actively pushing the United States to attack Iran.

Question: a member of the audience asked Mr Glass what he would say if he had the opportunity to devise his own Iraq Study Group report?

Mr Glass responded by saying that he would advise the US to get out now. Having already suffered heavy losses, with 3,300 US servicemen and many, many more Iraqis dead, the choice was between getting out now having sustained the current losses, or to leave in ten years time with many thousands more. He stressed that the continuation of the US presence in Iraq would bring about many more Iraqi deaths and cause further damage to Iraq. He said that the presence of coalition forces had already destroyed Iraqi civil society. He suggested that any regional solution for the Middle East would have to centre on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, since a solution on this front (most likely something based on the Taba plan of 2000) would allow certain nationalist states like Syria to lose their *raison d'être*.

Question: a member of the audience asked Mr Glass what impact he thought a US withdrawal would have on the situation in Iraq?

Mr Glass responded by saying that he thought the most likely scenario would be that a US withdrawal would create a vacuum which would draw in other regional players. He said that he thought that the bloodshed would continue whether the US remained in Iraq or withdrew so the US should pull out sooner rather than later – it would not help the situation if the US remained in Iraq.

Question: a member of the audience asked Mr Glass how likely is a US attack on Iranian nuclear facilities?

He responded that he thought the likelihood of a US attack was on a knife-edge and that developments could go either way. He stressed that in his opinion the consequences of any attack would be incredibly detrimental to regional stability, would be unlikely to knock out Iranian military capabilities and would almost certainly cause Hizbullah to be unleashed on Israel.

Question: a member of the audience asked what the situation would have been if Saddam hadn't been toppled and whether there was a net benefit from the occupation?

Mr Glass responded that by now even Iraqi opposition groups were convinced that this had been a terrible idea and even the people who had hated Saddam would have preferred this not to have happened. Four million Iraqis had been displaced. He noted that the US had had many opportunities to topple Saddam in the past: there had been pressure to indict him for war crimes but the US hadn't wanted him to face a war crimes tribunal since US personnel would have been called as witnesses. He suggested that it would have been better to have indicted Saddam, frozen out the regime and given support to other elements of the opposition.

Question: a member of the audience said that in the past, the US had used Israel to spy on and destroy Iraqi nuclear facilities: she asked whether they had similar capabilities regarding Iran and whether Iran's would attack Israel?

The speaker responded that this would undoubtedly be Iran's first response but if Iran attacked Israel first directly, Israel would undoubtedly respond.

Question: a member of the audience said that US policy in Iraq was currently to do with the durability of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the broader region. He asked the speaker how he saw the US containing Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the broader region?

Mr Glass said that Al-Qaeda's best ally is currently the US since prior to the 2003 invasion, Al-Qaeda had not existed in Iraq. He suggested that when the US left the region, the last people that Iraqis would want to harbour would be groups such as Al-Qaeda, pointing out that Zarqawi had been handed over. He said that the Iraqis couldn't build a state with Al-Qaeda at large in Iraq since they would act as a destabilising force and would limit Iraq's potential for constructive engagement on an international level. Furthermore he stressed that with the US out of Iraq, Al-Qaeda's recruiting would go down and there would be no reason to join up. He suggested that since the US had not done a good job of tackling Al-Qaeda, they should let the Iraqis control them.

Question: a member of the audience asked the speaker what perspective he was approaching this analysis from? If the US leaves Iraq tomorrow it would undoubtedly be better for US citizens, since their young people would no longer be dying in Iraq. But wouldn't a US withdrawal simply serve to strengthen Iran, through the Shi'a arc, leading to greater loss of life in regional terms? On a related note, he asked whether the opposition groups were unhappy with the removal of Saddam or about the incompetent way that the US has dealt with the situation? He stressed that these were two distinct issues.

Mr Glass responded that, speaking as an American, he would like to see a more responsible approach to US foreign policy, noting the history of episodes in Columbia, the Philippines and so on. He said that it seemed as though wherever the US put its hand, people had died. The history of Western intervention in Iraq suggested that nothing had changed from episode to episode.

Question: a member of the audience said that 5,000 Iraqis had died under sanctions but the numbers of those killed since the invasion were lower (this was disputed by others present at the meeting). If Iraqis had been dying before the invasion and were dying now, what was the speaker's motivation in calling for a US withdrawal: was the speaker saying that US troops shouldn't die?

The speaker responded by saying that the continued US presence in Iraq was leading to loss of life, and that he believed that a US withdrawal would lead to a gradual diminution in the numbers of Iraqi dead. If the US presence continued, the situation would escalate and the situation would be more bloody. He suggested that the implication of the question was that the US should stay in Iraq forever.

The questioner responded that if the Iranian situation changed, there might be some change of the situation in Iraq. If US were to leave at a time when the potential for Iranian interference was less, then there would be a better prognosis for the future of Iraq and less potential for the influence of Iran to exacerbate the situation.

Mr Glass responded that he thought it would be better for all concerned if the US left. It would certainly be better for the Iranian opposition if the US left as, since the 2003 invasion, they had been crushed. The presence of the enemy at the gate had been taken by the Iranian authorities as a good reason to crush the opposition groups. He suggested that whilst many would like to see regime change in Iran it should not be brought about illegitimately through US interference.

Question: a member of the audience asked whether a US withdrawal from Iraq would not be inviting a Sunni-Shi'a war? Whilst the tensions between the two were currently under control (this was disputed by other members of the audience) he appealed to the speaker to imagine what would happen in regional terms if the US forces pulled out of Iraq.

The speaker replied that the invasion had brought the Iranians into Iraq: SCIRI had been brought in with the US; the Badr forces were negligible in comparison with those of Moqtada al-Sadr, who had gained importance because of the US invasion; Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim had also been to Washington and so on.

Question: a member of the audience noted that prior to the invasion, Iraqi society had been characterised by complex power relations and intermarriage. She asked the speaker what he thought the likelihood would be of Iraq splitting into three if the US pulled out and whether this scenario would be disastrous?

Mr Glass replied that Iraq was effectively already split into two: since the Kurds had long since enjoyed *de facto* independence. With four million displaced people and so much bloodshed, reconstituting Iraqi society would be very difficult indeed. However he said that he would end on a note of possible optimism, pointing out that the Former Republic of Yugoslavia had made major strides since the conclusion of hostilities, as had Lebanon. He suggested that once conflicts end, societies reconstitute themselves surprisingly quickly.