



## Security situation in Iraq remains "extremely sensitive" - Struan Stevenson

Four MEPs visited Iraq 26-29 April to meet President Talabani, the Council of Representatives and other political leaders. British Conservative Struan Stevenson led the delegation and he spoke to us about the security challenges in Iraq. He also called for an independent inquiry into the recent massacre in Camp Ashraf, as well as better representation of different political forces in government.

**Mr Stevenson, you're just back from Iraq. What was the aim of your visit?**

We've been asking to go to Iraq for two years and it has been refused twice (by the EP) for security reasons. We kept up a lot of noise about it because we had no credibility. The first question any visitor from Iraq asks is "Have you been there?" Our inability to give a positive answer was really reducing our credibility.

**What is the security situation there?**

It is still extremely sensitive. We were taken from the airport in a convoy of heavily armed vehicles, wearing body armour with armed security guards in the car with sub-machine guns and pistols. Every half mile, you have to stop for check points, sniffer dogs sniff your bags, security forces look under the car for explosives...

Recently Al-Qaeda has changed its tactics. It has taken delivery of a large shipment of pistols with silencers. Terrorists now join the queues of cars at the checkpoints, and when a policeman comes forward and taps on the window to ask for your ID, they open the window and shoot the policeman in the face, because the policemen are wearing body armour and helmets. They have killed 81 policemen in the last two weeks. So the police and military were extremely nervous.

When we were heading to the Polish embassy to meet the EU countries' ambassadors, there was an incoming rocket fired by Al-Qaeda. It's a daily occurrence. They are usually aimed at the American embassy. This time it landed in the river Tigris.

The compound in which we stayed was a kind of bunker with heavily armed guards at the gates. In our rooms we all had body armour and helmets and a notice behind the door which said: "The signal for a missile/mortar attack will be a continuous warbling siren and flashing red lights". After that you don't sleep so well...

**You also went to the autonomous region of Kurdistan...**

Kurdistan is completely different. It's a very secure area, not least because they have around 100,000 Peshmerga (armed Kurdish fighters), their own army, who have sealed the border to stop any Al Qaeda terrorists. The economy is growing 10% a year. They have a lot of oil and gas. It's a dynamic place but that has brought other problems. The Christian minority, for instance, who has been oppressed and attacked by terrorists elsewhere in Iraq, has fled for safety to Kurdistan. Twelve thousand of them are now taking refuge there, but they have no housing, no schooling, no sanitation, healthcare... We should help the Kurdish government. It has so far been generous in giving safe haven to Christians and also 20,000 Arabs, Turkmens and various other minorities. The uprisings in Syria may also displace thousands of Kurds.

## What is the main political message you bring back from your visit in Iraq?

On the political front, the agreement that set up the government of national unity has not been fulfilled. The pledges included giving key ministry posts (defence, security, interior) to some of the major political factions. These posts have not been filled so far and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has taken all this power to his own office. It undermines the whole concept of national unity that this government was supposed to provide.

The other problem that dominated our discussions last week was last month's massacre in Camp Ashraf (the Iraq-based seat of Iranian opposition group the "People's Mujahedin of Iran"). This Parliament has passed two major resolutions on Camp Ashraf, calling on the Iraqi government to treat the 3,400 unarmed Iranian dissidents in a non-violent, humane manner. They've been there for 20 years. But on 8 April, five divisions of the Iraqi army attacked the camp and 35 innocent people were killed.

It was an international crime and we have demanded a fully independent inquiry into the circumstances surrounding this massacre. We want the perpetrators to be brought to international justice.

In the long term, these people can not stay in Camp Ashraf, which is sovereign Iraqi territory. We're in favour of a negotiated solution but first of all the Iraqi army has to withdraw from Ashraf. These people could be repatriated to the 27 Member states because many of them came from Europe. I've been asked by the UN Secretary General's personal representative in Baghdad to speak with the Paris-based leadership of the Mujahedin who occupy the camp, to broker the initial negotiations. I go to Paris on Wednesday. We're also seeking to put an emergency resolution on the plenary agenda next Thursday (12 May).

## You mentioned the role of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. What might the death of Osama Bin Laden mean for the country?

His death is very good news for the world. He was a monster and the death of a monster has to be welcomed. I hate violence but when you're dealing with a monster that's the only way: he was never going to be taken alive. His death is a great victory for freedom and democracy and free-thinking people.

But it will not make any difference. Al-Qaeda is extremely active in Baghdad and in other cities in Iraq. It's like cutting of the head of the hydra: whenever you cut off one head, four more heads grow.

*Members of the delegation: Struan Stevenson (ECR, UK), John Attard-Montalto (S&D, MT), Jelko Kacin (ALDE, SL), Mario Mauro (EPP, IT)*

« Bin Laden's death is very good news for the world...but it will not make any difference. »

Struan Stevenson, head of the EPs Iraq delegation