



**U.S. EMBASSY – BAGHDAD**  
**Transcript**

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**AMBASSADOR CHRISTOPHER HILL**  
**INTERVIEW WITH BBC HARDTALK**

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Baghdad, Iraq

**QUESTION:** Ambassador Christopher Hill, welcome to HARDtalk.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Thank you.

**QUESTION:** It's three months since the elections in Iraq. And what we see in Baghdad is political paralysis. Would you agree that this is a major problem for America's objectives in Iraq?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Paralysis implies nothing is moving, and things are moving.

**QUESTION:** Things are moving?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, for example, they seated the Parliament just the other day.

**QUESTION:** Well, yes, but then they suspended it immediately. Their first session started –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, actually –

**QUESTION:** – and they said, “You know what? We can't even appoint a speaker, so we will use this technicality of suspending it,” straightaway.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Actually, they used the technicality of keeping it open. The Parliament –

**QUESTION:** But, of course, keeping it open by suspending it.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** No, Parliament hasn't been in session in four months. They were without a Parliament for four months. Now they have a Parliament, the Parliament is capable of passing laws. So that's a good thing. I mean, we count our mileage in inches there, and that's definitely a good thing.

**QUESTION:** Well, I appreciate you have to gauge it in inches. But when the – one of the vice presidents, Adil Abdul-Mahdi says the process, political process, is at a standstill, that is surely worrying.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes. Well, they've got to form a government. They have got to form a government sooner rather than later. And, to be sure, we would like to see them form it as fast as, for example, the British Government formed it, which, I think, took you about five hours or something. Well, it's going to take them a little longer.

**QUESTION:** Yes. I wonder who you're talking to at the moment. You know, you have Mr. –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** We are talking to everybody.

**QUESTION:** Everybody?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** We are talking to everybody – boy, we –

**QUESTION:** And what is your message to Mr. Allawi and to Mr. Maliki? Mr. Allawi, who just, it seems, has the largest number of seats, but Mr. Maliki, who appears to want to hang on to power? What are you saying to them?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** We are telling them, "You've got to sit down, you've got to work this out. You have a lot of people who went to the polls that day. They didn't go to the polls so that you all would spend five months arguing about who is going to be prime minister." We are telling them to get on with it.

**QUESTION:** So, evidently, at the moment, they are not listening to you.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, they met. They met. Their teams met. Their teams are going to meet again. So they have had about three meetings. Let's hope they're going to make some progress. But our message is to get on with it, and that people expect that.

**QUESTION:** It seems, looking at the arithmetic of the Iraqi Parliament, that whoever assumes power will have to do some sort of a deal with the Shia religious parties, including Muqtada al-Sadr's party. They won, actually, quite a number of seats in the election. How do you feel about that?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, not necessarily. You have four main groups, right? So you have the Iraqiya Party, which is Allawi's party, mainly Sunni. Then you have Maliki's party, which is mainly – which is almost all Shia. So, just Allawi and Maliki's party would almost be a majority right there, adding in the Kurds. So you don't necessarily –

**QUESTION:** Sure, but you are assuming they want to work together. I am assuming they may not want to work together. And if they don't, then al-Sadr's seats become very important.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I think, you know, he – al-Sadr – has some 38 seats, pretty comparable, in terms of percentage, to the last Parliament, about 11 or 12 percent. So I think they could form it with him, or they could definitely form it without him.

And, by the way, no one is too anxious to deal with the Sadrists.

**QUESTION:** But we see that Nouri al-Maliki appears to believe his best route to power is to do a deal with the Shia religious parties, which would include Mr. al-Sadr. You say you're talking to him. Is your message to him that he should not and must not do that?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Our message to all of them is to get a government formed.

Now, whether he needs to deal with other Shia parties, or whether he reaches over to Allawi, he has got to work that out. And he is trying a couple of different things. You know, like a lot of good politicians, he is looking to the Sunnis, he is looking the other way, seeing what he can do.

**QUESTION:** We speak in a week in which there has been more terrible violence in Iraq, bombs in Baghdad. In the recent past we have seen huge bombs in the city which have killed, in one occasion in May, more than 100 people in one go. We have seen coordinated attacks on ministries, on the central bank. The insurgency, far from dying, is still very active. Do you believe that's partly because there is a political vacuum?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** No. First of all, I agree with you, it's still very active. It's a small fraction of what it was a couple of years ago, but that doesn't help anyone who has just been killed in one of these senseless bombings. There is a lot of that. But I wouldn't say this is a result of "political paralysis," to use your term. This is a result of these people who have absolutely no interest in the political process, and they are trying to make themselves relevant.

I mean, what is their political goal? They want to make Iraq a caliphate. Well, there is nobody in Iraq who wants to be a caliphate.

**QUESTION:** But, Ambassador, you make the point that the insurgents have no real political support. I would say to you it's not a question of whether they have political support. What they are able to do, if they build up insecurity, fear, and then hatred between communities, is they can pick away at the very foundations of Iraqi society. We saw it in 2006, 2007. It could happen again.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** You know, I think that's their strategy, to do exactly as you laid out. But I think the Iraqi people have shown that they can manage this.

Now, I must say when you see these things in Washington, when you see these things in London, it's utterly horrific. But, you know, you talk to people in Baghdad, they say it's horrible, they sweep it up, they move on. So they have a threshold for that kind of thing that I think for you and I would be very difficult to manage.

**QUESTION:** Let me ask you this. Is there a contingency plan in the United States to deal with the fact that you may not be able to end your combat operations as you wish in August, 2010?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** First of all, we are going to end combat operations on August 31.

**QUESTION:** Come what may?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** We are going to end combat operations. We monitor the situation there very closely. We –

**QUESTION:** So there is no contingency plan. However bad the violence might get in the next couple of months, however much the political vacuum may be worrying people in Washington, there will be no change of plan?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I am telling you that we assess the situation very closely, and we are proceeding to do as the President has directed us to do. So that is continuing.

**QUESTION:** But my point is that the situation is fluid. You can't really know what the situation is going to be by August.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** You know, one never knows what is going to happen tomorrow. But I can assure you we monitor the situation very closely. And we believe that we are on track to fulfill what the President has told us to do.

**QUESTION:** I just noticed, looking through the record, that back in February, General Ray Odierno, who is the senior commander in – responsible for Iraqi forces, said, "The credibility of the democratic process is key. And over the next few months," he said, "it is going to be tested. The worst case scenario is that people lose faith in the system." How close do you think you are to that in Iraq?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I don't think anyone is losing faith in the system. If they were losing faith in the system, they wouldn't really care. And they care almost too much about who is going to have which ministry. By the way, everyone knows –

**QUESTION:** Well, you are talking about the politicians. I am talking about the public, who –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I think –

**QUESTION:** – look at what the politicians are doing, and the in-fighting that they see.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** If you look at some of the angry demonstrations, just in recent days in Basra, you will see that people are really looking to their government to deal with the electricity problems, for example. And so, they really expect the government to get going on that, and they are looking to see them form the government.

So, I think you are seeing some growing impatience from the public, to say to their politicians, “Get on with it. Put your personal views aside, put your personal ambitions aside, and get on with it.” And I think that’s a healthy sign.

**QUESTION:** You talk about frustration amongst the Iraqi public, and you say that they simply want their politicians to get on with it. I just wonder whether frustration is now the sense you have, and whether you too are saying to the key politicians they *must* get on with it, the clock is ticking, and America will not tolerate further delay in forming a government.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, first of all, we want a long-term relationship with Iraq. So telling them to get on with it is not about our timetable, it’s about their timetable. It’s about how they respond to their public’s needs.

We are going to be in Iraq for the long term. So, I think it’s very important that when we convey that message to the Iraqis, we do it with a sense of, you know, we’re trying to be helpful here, we’re not trying to say you need to do it because we’re on a timetable.

**QUESTION:** We are going to be in Iraq for the long term, you say. But, of course, militarily, that’s not the case. Combat operations end the end of August 2010, but Mr. Obama wants all forces out by the end of 2011. Do you believe that’s realistic?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I do, indeed. I mean, first of all, we reached an agreement with the Iraqi Government. The whole legal basis of our troops in Iraq expires at the end of 2011. So you bet we will get our troops out at the end of 2011, because that was a legal –

**QUESTION:** Sure, but Mr. Allawi, for one, in a recent HARDtalk interview, indicated that these things need to be looked at again in the light of circumstance. I mean, if the security situation in Iraq through the next year is deteriorating, Iraqis may not want you to leave.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, first of all, I don’t accept the premise that it’s deteriorating. And it’s actually improved substantially, notwithstanding the horrific examples of bombings that we have been discussing. But it is improving. The Iraqi capacity to deal with these issues is very much improving.

And, you know, at the end of the day we have to have a country that can stand up and take care of its issues.

**QUESTION:** Well, you say we have to have, but just saying we have to have it doesn't deliver it, does it?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** No, it doesn't deliver it, but –

**QUESTION:** Well, I just wonder what the United States can do to help it happen if you no longer have troops on the ground.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, first of all, after August 31 of this summer of 2010, we will have 50,000 American troops. That is a very, very robust force that should be able to respond to any problems on the ground –

**QUESTION:** But they won't be responding, will they? They will be in their permanent bases, they will be doing a bit of training, but they won't be involved in combat –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I can assure you, if our forces are attacked, if there are – you know, terrorism operations that need to be conducted with Iraqi forces, we will be there with them. We will be advise-and-assist brigades. We will be there to assist the Iraqis. And we will do that.

**QUESTION:** I notice that you now have the biggest embassy in the world, that it's your domain in Baghdad. It's also probably the most heavily fortified U.S. embassy in the world. You have just – the State Department – requested 24 Black Hawk helicopters, a large number of armored vehicles. What kind of diplomacy is this going to be?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** We are doing police training in a number of remote sites. We are also going to keep our people out in the field in a number of areas, so that when the military leaves we will still be there. So we're –

**QUESTION:** And this won't be – just sticking with these Black Hawk helicopters and the armored vehicles and everything else – these won't be run by the Pentagon, these will be run by the State Department?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** These will be run –

**QUESTION:** Which, in effect, means they will be run by contractors. Because I am not aware that you or anybody in your embassy probably knows how to fly a Black Hawk helicopter.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** No, I haven't learned that, yet. But we will have – we have some contractors, but we also have a professional diplomatic security. And they go on all our movements. Every single movement in Iraq is accompanied by a professional Department of State security officer.

So, we will continue to do that. And what we are planning for is really – we hope we won't need this type of security. We hope the situation will continue to improve. But

you cannot base your needs on your hopes. You have to be prepared for every eventuality, and we will be –

**QUESTION:** Sure, you do. But again, I turn to the words of General Odierno who says, “We have a real problem in the U.S.” You know, you talk about the desire for the U.S. to be involved in the rebuilding and reconstruction – of a civilian effort – that will continue. You say, “We’re not leaving Iraq.” But he says, General Odierno says, “Our civilian agencies are not built to be expeditionary,” and that’s a big problem in Iraq, where the security situation is still very difficult.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** The security situation is tough, and the State Department needs to measure up. And we can do it. We have done it in other countries, albeit not at this scale. But we will do it. We have a lot of smart people dealing with this issue. We work every day with Congress on the funding requirements. We will get it done. And we will get it done because it’s important.

**QUESTION:** Let’s now look at the Iraqi Government that you are working with, and that you want to hand full security responsibility to, and that you want to believe can run an effective government in Iraq.

Ryan Crocker, who used to do your job, former U.S. ambassador in Iraq, says, “What I am worried about is an elitist authoritarianism that basically ignores the people.” That’s what he sees in the Iraqi Government, a culture in which the governors do not care about the governed. Do you see that, too?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, with due respect, he hasn’t been there in quite a while. Worrying is not a basis for a strategy. What I try to do is deal with strategy. And strategy is to try to make sure that Iraq has a police force that deals with problems, has an anti-corruption mentality that deals with the corruption that has been seen among some of their political elites in the past. I worry about making sure that we have the elements in place to deal with these issues.

**QUESTION:** Let’s talk about –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** And that’s what we are trying to strategize.

**QUESTION:** Sure. Let’s talk about corruption for a moment. You mentioned it. I see that one Iraqi MP who sits on the Parliamentary anti-corruption committee says billions of dollars are being stolen. You work with the top people in the Iraqi Government. Do you agree that billions of dollars are being stolen?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, again, I don’t know the quote that you’re referring to, but what I can assure you is –

**QUESTION:** Well, it comes from Alia Nusaif who is on that committee.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes. When we have allegations of corruption, we have an obligation to follow up that money trail, and we do. We have a tremendous interest in making sure that is –

**QUESTION:** How bad is the corruption in Iraq, in your view?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** It certainly is one of the countries that has [one of] the worst problem[s]. The good news is they understand they have a problem. But certainly they have a problem.

**QUESTION:** When you say they understand they have a problem, the anti-corruption watchdog committee in the Parliament has filed thousands of different complaints. But when one looks at who has actually been brought to book at the very top of government, there is virtually nobody.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I think this has – this is an issue the Iraqis need to deal with. Believe me, it's not for lack of our raising it with them. We have people at the embassy who deal full time with this. We have helped them form this integrity commission. We have done seminars all over the country. We have tried to work with rule of law –

**QUESTION:** But this suggests to me, Ambassador, they're not listening. If –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, it suggests that this is a tough problem. But I think the first step in this problem is the fact that Iraqis understand they have a problem.

**QUESTION:** You see, Iraqis would probably say that part of the problem appears to be American money, you know. One of the reasons why there is so much corruption is that America, over the last few years, has poured – and I'm being conservative here – tens of billions of dollars into Iraq, reconstruction money as well as military money.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** And a lot of that money has gone nowhere near where it was supposed to go.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I think any time you spend money fast – and there has been a lot of that, there has been a lot of spending money fast – you have a problem to make sure that it is properly absorbed and properly taken care of.

So, indeed, there are issues. But the point is there are institutions that have been formed to deal with this, and people are prosecuted, especially Americans –

**QUESTION:** Well, when you say people are prosecuted, I noticed that the Inspector General for Iraq reconstruction in the United States has filed more cases already this year

than he filed in the whole of last year, which suggests under your watch last year and a bit you've been ambassador, things are getting worse.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I'm not sure you could say that. I think what you can say is that they have been able to uncover some cases. But these cases often stretch way back. It's tough to come up with the goods on some of these people. But we have very adequate watch dogs, and we go after this.

**QUESTION:** It is extraordinary, isn't it? I mean, I'm sure you feel this, as the top U.S. official on the ground in Baghdad, that we have U.S. civilian contractors, we have U.S. military personnel, and on occasion we have other civilian government personnel who have been found with suitcases full of money leaving Iraq. They have been found with secret bank accounts in Switzerland, the UK, Holland, and even Ghana. They have been found buying luxury cars, they have been found paying off casino debts, all with money that was actually U.S. Government money supposed to go to Iraqi reconstruction. How could this happen?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I think any time you have a project this massive – that is, Iraq – and you have efforts and assets being brought to bear so quickly, you have problems of internal controls. So, again, the question is, do we have the means to follow up on these things? Do we have the means to assure that if somebody is engaged in this sort of thing – as you say, suitcases of cash – does that person have a reasonable – stand a reasonable chance of being caught? And I think the answer is “Yes.”

**QUESTION:** With a record budget deficit in the U.S., with a Congress that believe Barack Obama was getting America out of Iraq, certainly militarily, do you think politically it's viable for you to talk about a sustained and financially expensive effort in Iraq on the part of the United States going forward through 2011, 2012, and beyond? Is that really politically viable?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I think it's politically viable to talk about it through 2011 and 2012. It is not politically viable to talk about it for the rest of history. That is, Iraq is going to have to step up and pay its bills.

Now, Iraq can do that, because when you look at the oil that they have begun to lease out to major international companies, they are looking in the next 10 years – next 10 years, which is not a lot of time, in historical terms – of trebling, maybe quadrupling the amount of oil. They will have the means to deal with their problems.

**QUESTION:** A lot of frustration, also deep concern among some Iraqis, and many in the outside world as well, about one thing that the Iraqi Government does appear to be determined to deliver, and that is imprisonment, detention without trial in some situations, according to Amnesty International, routine use of torture, and impunity for security forces, some of them employed by the Interior Ministry and the Defense Ministry, who are under the control of the military. A very, very disturbing picture of human rights abuse.

How do you, as America's ambassador in Baghdad, treat those reports?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** With the utmost concern. And, in fact, in one case there was a prison which we did not know about and which came to light, and we pressed very hard. We got the thing opened up, first of all, to international inspection –

**QUESTION:** This is the Muthanna –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Muthanna, yes.

**QUESTION:** – secret detention center. More than 400 detainees, imprisoned with no sort of trial, apparently in terrible conditions, all sorts of reports of torture from inside that center. Apparently, this place operated directly under the control of the Prime Minister's office. Now, this is a man that you worked alongside the last year. Does that give you pause, as to his credibility as a partner?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** First of all, the issue of Muthanna, as soon as we found out about it – we found out about it, actually, at the time the Human Rights Minister found out about it, and she went to the Prime Minister and he shut it down. So it's actually an example of a system working.

Now, if you're asking –

**QUESTION:** But let's get back to my question.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Whoa, whoa. No, let me finish my thought here. Because if you're asking me what do I think of torture, what do I think of human rights abuses, obviously, obviously, this is a great concern. But the question is, is it going in the right direction? Are there more examples of torture? Are human rights abuses on the rise? And the answer is no, it's quite in the opposite. Those issues are being addressed in a way that was unimaginable just a few years ago.

So, it is going in the right direction. But if you are asking me has the problem been completely eliminated, of course not.

**QUESTION:** But that isn't what I am asking you. I am asking you whether you are happy to work with a partner, Nouri al-Maliki, who was Prime Minister – suppose still is interim leader of the country – and who you have indicated you see as part of the solution, part of the next government, because of the number of seats his party has got.

Are you happy to countenance him as a partner when, as we have just discussed, his office was running a secret detention center which was egregiously abusing human rights?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Again, when we addressed this issue with him, he took action, and took action –

**QUESTION:** Precisely. When it was exposed, he took action.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Yes, yes –

**QUESTION:** He knew about it, because it was being run from the Prime Minister's office.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** How do you know he knew about it? I mean –

**QUESTION:** Well, one has to assume, if he is any sort of competent prime minister –

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** First of all –

**QUESTION:** – he knows what his office is doing.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Well, I would not assume it was his office. They have a lot of security forces there, they are dealing with security situations all over the place. They have detention facilities. And our view is any such detention facility ought to be shut down. And when we brought it to his attention, he looked into it and immediately shut it down.

**QUESTION:** I will ask you directly. Do you believe that Nouri al-Maliki is a man who is prepared to abuse human rights?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** I –

**QUESTION:** In power in Iraq?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Again, I am not going to sit here and get into discussions of personalities or the personas of Iraqi politicians. We are prepared to work with elected governments in Iraq. We are prepared to work with politicians who abide by the law and abide by the constitution. So, we will work with those people.

But I am not going to get into discussions of whether I would like Politician X to be this or that.

**QUESTION:** A final thought, series of thoughts. It's about the time line again. Barack Obama won election with a message to the American people that Iraq was coming to an end, as far as America is concerned. Is it not the truth that, however many concerns there are about human rights, or the state of the economy, or the state of the political parties and the security situation, you are on a mission to get America out of Iraq, come what may?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Wrong. What the President said was the Iraq *War* was coming to an end. He did not say our relationship with Iraq is coming to an end. On the contrary, we look forward to a long-term, civilian-based relationship. And we are getting on with that. And that doesn't mean that we don't have an interest in their security, but they can

manage their security. They will be able to manage it with the fewer troops that we have there until 2011. They will be able to manage their security after we leave. And we look forward to this long-term relationship.

**QUESTION:** And what if they can't?

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** You know, there are a lot of "what if" questions that are hard to imagine. But I can assure you that we believe they can manage it, because, you know, Iraq has been around for a long, long time. I suspect it's going to be around for a long time in the future.

**QUESTION:** Ambassador Christopher Hill, thank you very much for being on HARDtalk.

**AMBASSADOR HILL:** Thank you.

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