

IRM Annual Lecture 2008

Frank Gardner OBE
BBC's security correspondent
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Blood, oil and sand: Reflections on risk and reality in the Middle East

In the wild lands of the Yemen, BBC Security Correspondent Frank Gardner was interviewing a man who had not only kidnapped westerners in the past but who was also looking for new victims as a bargaining counter with the country's government over a promised road building programme that had not materialised.

In retrospect, it might not have been entirely wise, he told the audience at the IRM Annual Lecture 2008, but he succeeded in getting the interview without being abducted himself "I am not a big risk taker. I take calculated risks. I am not a war junkie," he commented.

Frank Gardner's lecture covered his career reporting on the Middle East, but his stories dealt with issues which would be familiar to risk professionals in other contexts. Take, for example, the fundamental issue of communication. The story which had drawn him into the Yemeni wilds involved the kidnapping of a British Council official and his family; the kidnappers really wanted the British consul, but as Arabic speakers, they did not hear a difference in sound of the two, similar words and got, in their eyes, the wrong person.

Another example of the risks of poor communication was President George Bush's use of the word 'crusade' to describe the fight against terrorism in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. It played into the hands of the Jihadists, for whom the medieval crusades were as only yesterday and not hundreds of years ago. It allowed them to portray the West as trying to take back the Middle East. He also disliked the expression 'war on terror' as self-defeating. For the extremists, it justified their view that western governments were waging war on Muslims when they sent troops into the region.

Language, therefore, was a recurring element of the lecture. Mr Gardner studied Arabic and Islamic studies at Exeter University. As part of his course, he spent a year in Cairo studying the language during which time he fell in love with the Egyptian sense of humour which enabled them to survive in their over-crowded and over-stretched city.

After finishing university and discovering that being able to speak Arabic was not the unique selling point for UK employers he hoped it would be, he drifted into the City and went to work for Robert Fleming, then an independent merchant bank. Yet, once in the Middle East as a representative of the bank, he found his communication skills took him a long way with the Gulf Arabs, "who haven't forgotten conversation."

His news broadcaster's ability to cope with the unexpected also meant that he was not disturbed when a faulty smoke detector in the building set off an alarm that interrupted the lecture for several minutes.

Risk assessment



The bank dispatched Mr Gardner to the Gulf soon after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Japanese bankers, who had dominated international banking, were on their way out. Mr Gardner said once the United States had committed itself to defend any attack on Saudi Arabia, there was no question of Saddam taking control of the oil fields. "Lots of people did not assess the risks. For us, it was a great time."

He would stay put in the Gulf during Ramadan when all the other western businessmen left the region. A great deal of socialising took place in the evening after the daily fast was over, and a call might come at 1 am to visit someone and perhaps do a deal. "Being the only western banker in Saudi Arabia at the time, they would remember me."

Brought back by the bank to a managerial role in London – "over-promoted" was how he described it - Mr Gardner changed careers, followed a long held ambition to become a broadcast news journalist and joined the BBC.

His next topic was the failure of the United States and United Kingdom to anticipate the consequences of some of their policies after the invasion of Iraq and deposal of Saddam Hussein. "It is quite depressing to see that in the years since 9/11, sympathy for the United States has evaporated in large part because of the invasion of Iraq, and the mistakes followed it. The United States and United Kingdom might have got away with the invasion if the occupation had gone all right, but there were incredible mistakes that made the occupation far worse than it needed to be," he said.

One of the worst of which, he said, was disbanding the Iraqi Army, but allowing the troops keep their weapons. They re-emerged as the core of the insurgency. Another was banning all members of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party from holding any official post. Anyone who held a responsible job under Saddam's regime had to be a party member. "It did not mean that they loved Saddam," Mr Gardner commented.

The mistakes, the chaos which followed and scandals, such as the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, fuelled conspiracy theories that the United States and its allies had deliberately made a mess of Iraq for their own purposes. "It plays very well on the internet," he said.

At home

In response to a question which drew a parallel between conventional risk management and that of dealing with the risks of terrorism in the United Kingdom, Mr Gardner said the response of the UK government had been belated, but its current four stage policy of protect, prepare, pursue and prevent did include building contacts with the community and trying to head off vulnerable people who might be drawn into extremist circles.

Lee Coppack
Editor of InfoRM