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Transcript

Iraq Ten Years On: Keynote Address

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Claire Spencer:

I'm delighted to be chairing our keynote speaker this afternoon, who of course needs no introduction to an audience like this but will get one anyway. Emeritus Professor Sami Zubaida is what I like to think of as the doyen of all that is political sociology – politics and sociology – of the Middle East in London. I don't think anyone who has studied this region is without a copy, maybe in the first, second or third edition, of his book *Islam: The People and the State*, which is well-read – and the very fact that it keeps being reprinted and republished shows how pertinent it is to what's happening in the region.

Professor Zubaida, as is also well-known, was born and brought up in Baghdad but, very much to our favour, came over here in 1963 and studied in the UK, and indeed is one of the founder members of the Department of Politics and Sociology at Birkbeck College of the University of London, of which he is now emeritus professor – and I believe also still an associate fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies here in London.

So that's enough from me. Over to Sami, who will have time briefly at the end for a few questions.

Sami Zubaida:

Thank you, Claire.

In 2002, I wrote an article entitled 'The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq'. It was about the various elements that came to constitute the emerging public sphere: from Ottoman reforms to the Mandate, then the independent state, and the successive periods of turbulence and contention.

The elements that emerged in the nation – the modern, educated, reform-minded middle classes – they were resisting the pull and the confines of sectarian, regional and tribal identities, of communal ghettos and of religious authority, in a thrust of what they saw as modernity, progress and the creation of a nation. Represented perhaps by many key figures but notably the poets, who have had such an important role in the development of the cultural history and the national history of Iraq. Notable in the earlier 20th century were Marouf al-Rusafi – we usually say Rusafi in Iraq – and Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi, who were both members of the Ottoman parliament of 1912, committed to the Young Turks' agenda of reform and progress – soon to be shattered. Then they transferred their aspirations to the new Iraq. Mohammed

Mehdi Jawahiri, a little later, came from the other location of Iraqi culture and letters: the city of Najaf and its Shiite heritage.

But they all converged on the modernist, secular – what they considered progressive – aspirations, including the advocacy of the liberation of women. I was amazed all day today, in all the learned and expert discussions, not a word was said about gender issues or women or personal liberties, family law, the imposition of religious authority, the repression and the harassment of so many elements in Iraqi society at the personal level. Nothing was said. But these people were very concerned about these issues especially, and the whole question of secularism, from which they got into a great deal of trouble.

Zahawi fancied himself as a scientist and developed his own theory of evolution which followed on from Darwin – he championed Darwin's theory. It's related that one day while he was sitting in the cafe in Baghdad which bore his name subsequently, a very angry man came to him after he wrote an article about evolution in the newspaper and said, 'Are you the one who said that my grandfather is a monkey?' He said, 'No, no, no, my good man. It wasn't your grandfather, it was my grandfather.'

The other major figure there, Marouf al-Rusafi, was known for his outspoken critique of authority, of religious authority, of the monarchy and so on. Indeed, he still had to hide the book that he wrote, a very long and extensive book called the *al-Shakhsiyya al-Muhammadiyya* – 'The Life of the Prophet Muhammad and Early Islam' – which was an entirely secular study in which he devalued all the supernatural elements and presented it as a kind of national resurgence. He had to hide that because he would have gotten into a great deal of trouble. Jawahiri was campaigning against the authorities of his native Najaf, including his own relations, when they tried to stop the institution of a girls' school. He wrote a famous poem called *al-Raj'iyyun* – 'The Backward People' – in which he abuses the religious authorities, and again got into trouble.

So all these were campaigns – I'm only giving them as examples, because they were prominent – of people who were struggling for basic liberties, for progress, for secularism, for science, for rationality. These ideals and quests for common citizenship also were carried in the associational life of the emerging civil society, amid some repression and much contention into the 1970s, reaching their apogee under the Qassem regime of 1958–63. They were carried by the educated sectors of the new middle classes – professionals, educationists, journalism, arts – as well as the modern business classes. Yes, there was even nascent 'real' capitalism, of buying

and selling and even producing things, as against the later crony-capitalism of the rentier state.

It is precisely these classes that bore the brunt of the successive waves of repression, persecution and humiliation that marked the latter 20th century and into the present. After the Ba'athist massacres of 1963, cultural life revived in the later 1960s. A notable movement in imagining the nation was what was called the Kirkuk Group – *Jamaat Kirkuk* – of writers and artists, who comprised people like Sargon Boulus, the poet of Assyrian descent; Fadhil al-Azzawi, the poet and novelist; and Fouad al-Tikerly, a major novelist.

They idealized the melting pot of their native city of Kirkuk, which comprised Turkomans, Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians and, at one point, Jews. As a melting pot, they idealized it as a desirable prototype for Iraq.

They were, of course, to be disappointed after the waves of conflict and devastations. Those who survived did so in exile, mostly in Germany. I have recently written a study of Azzawi's novel *The Last of the Angels*, published in Germany in 1992, a partly autobiographical novel starting with an affectionate, satirical, magic-realism picture of Kirkuk in the 1940s and 1950s, and ending in a dark apocalypse of destruction that followed the successive revolutions and wars, as seen by the brief return of its son, the author, from German exile.

The wave of Ba'athist repressive violence in 1968 was followed in the 1970s – and the oil bonanza – with a relatively benign regime toward the educated middle classes and their institutions, providing they were totally assimilated into the party and the state. Those who survived the earlier persecutions were the beneficiaries of official largesse in salaries, housing, institutional development, and spending on education, culture and the media. It all came to an end in the 1980s, with state resources absorbed in the successive wars, intensified security and repression, and UN sanctions.

Our educated middle classes were increasingly impoverished into penury, further subordinated to petty controls and humiliations. The national vision and imagination which seemed to be carried on by the 1970s Ba'ath was reversed: tribalism was revived by state policy and religious authority was empowered in a faith campaign. With the thorough repression, imprisonment, execution and exiles of the left, the political opposition too was nourished in the communalist and sectarian locations of the country. What seemed like progressive policies on women and gender in the earlier decades were drastically reversed in the advancing darkness.

Their attacks on the middle classes were exacerbated in the events which followed the 2003 invasion and into the present. The chaos, violence and militia wars targeted the institutions and personnel of the intelligentsia – the universities, the media, the arts, the professions – in assassinations, intimidation, and direct militia and religious controls over education and cultural expression. Many more were displaced and driven into exile.

Despite these waves of persecution and subordination, the presence and influence of those national classes beyond sectarian, communalist and religious control was felt most recently in the 2010 elections, when a considerable body of the electorate voted outside the sectarian boxes. Let's hope that the political aspirations of these elements will not be similarly bypassed in the future. Thank you.