

## From law student to president, Jalal Talabani refuses to abandon the moral high ground

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### Interview

*The following are excerpts of an interview with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani conducted by Chibli Mallat in Suleimaniyya on May 15-16, 2009*

Q. What explains your command of Arabic?

A: I studied in Kurdish in elementary school, then in Arabic. I admired the poetry of Jawahiri [Mohammad Mehdi al-Jawahiri, celebrated Iraqi poet, died 1997], and was a subscriber to the Ahali journal [leftist paper of the group al-Ahali, "the people," prominent in the 1940s and 1950s] since I joined the sixth grade. I couldn't understand it at the beginning, but used to ask for the meaning of this or that word, so I learned very gradually. My references for learning Arabic at the time at home were first the Koran, then for me it was Jawahiri, then the writings of Mohammad Hussein Haykal [Egyptian man of letters and politician, d.1956]. These sources I always cherished for the quality of their style, then in intermediate and high school I was taught also in Arabic. We also studied law in Arabic, I then lived for 10 years in Baghdad while going to the law college, it wasn't a university then. I entertained of course many friendships with Arabs in college, and in Baghdad, and with politicians, so I learned Arabic slowly.

Q. Did you grow up in Suleimaniyya?

A: No I was born in a village called Kilkan near Kosrat mountain, in the vicinity of Dukan. It is now part of the Suleimaniyya region. My father was the leader of the Talibani tekkiyye [place of worship often associated with a Sufi order], to which he was elected after the death of my uncle. So he became the leader of the Talibani tekkiyye in Koysinjek, and we moved to that city and I finished my elementary and intermediary schooling in Koysinjek.

Q. In Kurdish ?

A: In Kurdish in elementary school and Arabic for intermediate school.

Q. President Talabani, you studied law, and I heard that you were a brilliant student, can you tell us about that period when law schools had far more superior standards?

A: I finished high school in the scientific section, and I was hoping to enter medical school. But I was prevented from joining medical school because I could not get the permission of the criminal investigation branch, the General Security. They had to give the candidates a certificate of good behavior, which I couldn't get. This was the same with the law school, but one of the Talibani MPs knew the law college dean well, and the dean met with me and kindly admitted me, so long as I would be prepared to get the required bureaucratic papers later. I needed then to get in addition Iraqi identity papers, which I eventually got being Iraqi, but I couldn't get the certificate of good behavior. So I entered law school and completed my years to the last, which was the fourth year. In fourth year, I was dismissed twice. The first time when I went to Eastern Europe to participate in a youth congress in Warsaw, and visited China and the Soviet Union. I was dismissed because of diminished attendance. In 1956 when I went back to resume my studies, I was dismissed after the tripartite aggression against Egypt [The Suez war] because I participated in the demonstrations and I was then dismissed for good. There were three professors in the committee [for discipline], but one refused to sign the dismissal: your friend Dr, Hassan Chalabi.

Q. Professor Hassan?

A: Yes, Hassan Chalabi refused to sign my dismissal. He said this is a good student, that he had nothing against him, that I was courteous. He therefore refused to dismiss me, but the majority held against me and rule for irrevocable dismissal. An arrest warrant was also issued, and I refused to appear before the tribunal because it was an emergency tribunal, so I went "underground" [in English] until the 14th of August Revolution, and I came out and completed my law degree in 1959. I refused to crawl, the people in charge of the Revolution had allowed the students to get their degrees by crawling, without exam. I refused. I did not want to be a crawling lawyer, so I went back to school, took the exams and succeeded.

Q. Did you practice as a lawyer ?

A: Yes. When I graduated, I registered at the bar and worked as lawyer for an Iraqi company whose owner was the later Rashid Aref, the well-known Kurdish businessman. I went to court twice.

The first occasion was when 17 workers brought a case against the company which I was representing, so I went to court and admitted, I said yes these workers were right. Then I waited for a while, until the statute of limitation ran out on the right of appeal and the decision became final.

When I asked the company owner to pay compensation to the workers, he was naturally upset and called after me. He told me: Efendi, are you the lawyer of the proletariat or the lawyer of the company? So I said "I am your lawyer," and said a few nice things to him, "you're a well known progressive [liberal] man, and an old friend of Jaafar Abu al-Timman and Kamel Chadirchi [nationalist leaders known for their left-of-center liberalism.

Abu al-Timman, d. 1945, was a wealthy merchant opposed to sectarianism. Chadirchi was upon his death in 1968 the most prominent Iraqi democrat]. Could

I abandon you against petty money so that your name comes up as one opposed to the workers and the poor? I did it to defend your name.” So he said, “Alright my son, you can go.”

The second time was when Ibrahim Ahmad [a prominent Kurdish politician and jurist, d. 2000, Talibani is married to his daughter Hero] was taken to court, he was the editor in chief of the Hamat newspaper, and I was among 17 lawyers who volunteered to defend him. That was all my life in legal practice. After that, I never was in court again.