

Talabani, Barzani and institution-building in Iraq

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Friday, September 25, 2009



Prominent Kurdish journalist Namo Abdalla asks Chibli Mallat about Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, President of the Kurdistan Regional Government Masoud Barzani, and institution-building

Namo Abdalla: What is specific, do you think, about Talabani and Barzani in terms of their characteristics to be leaders? What are their strong points and weak points?

Chibli Mallat: I have got to know President Talabani over the years better than President Barzani, although my first “strong” Kurdish contact was Hoshiyar Zebari in London in late 1990. I wrote in my *The Middle East into the 21st Century* (1996) a short portrait of the two leaders, who are extraordinarily different in temperament.

Jalal Talabani is an expansive, larger-than-life character, comfortable as we say in Arabic with both *umm al-’arus wa bayy al-’aris* (the mother of the bride and the father of the groom). I attribute to him the coming together of the Iraqi opposition in Vienna in June 1992, where I recall my friend the great Iraqi poet Jawdat al-Qazwini predicted he would be the president of Iraq.

As for Kaka Mas’ud, I was recently invited to spend some time with him in Irbil to refresh our friendship, but his chief of staff seems a bit disorganized, so it did not happen. President Barzani is far more reserved in public, although extremely congenial in private. He is also a particularly tragic figure. Without appreciating the legacy of Mullah Mustafa, and the losses of the Barzanis in the immense repression since 1974, it is hard to understand some of the political positions Mas’ud Barzani took over the years, for instance the alliance with Saddam Hussein in 1995-6.

Barzani, like many figures of the modern Middle East, is a Greek-style tragic character of epic proportions, thrown into the storms of a history that is unkind to all Iraqis, and to the Barzanis in particular. One should read Jonathan Randal’s book on contemporary Kurdistan.

Namo Abdalla: To what extent do you think Talabani fits his position as President of Iraq?

Chibli Mallat: Perfectly. I can’t think of another Iraqi to whom it is better suited. This is because his ease with the Arab side of Iraq is equal to his ease with the Kurds. He

represents for non-Kurdish Iraqis the image of an Iraq where all can be proud of his leadership. For Iraqi Kurds, his success is similar to what US President Obama probably represents for the African-American community in the US: the ultimate political achievement.

Namo Abdalla: Would you say that Talabani is charismatic?

Chibli Mallat: Yes, no doubt. I unfortunately do not speak Kurdish, so it's difficult to appreciate his appeal to Kurdish Iraqis, where he no doubt excels. But I have seen him speak to small and larger groups, within his leadership council, within the larger Iraqi community, and on a private level.

He comes out endearing at every turn, sometimes perhaps a bit too endearing. He knows how to please, but he can also be firm, not to say ruthless. Fortunately, I have never had to face that latter aspect, but I suspect some must have tasted it. All this combines into charisma, although I am attracted in political leadership to content as much as style. I like Talabani's nuances and purposefulness, more than his charisma.

Namo Abdalla: You wrote that Talabani supports Palestine's case, can you explain that more? How?

Chibli Mallat: Actually I did not know of this side of his political life and commitment until our discussion in Suleymaniyyeh. It's interesting that we never discussed it before, but Iraq offers little luxury to other issues, and in the battle against dictatorship, there was little room for other topics, including the Palestinian cause. I will write more about that side of the discussion in Suleymaniyyeh, because we had an extensive exchange over federalism in Iraq and in Israel-Palestine. It deserves an article of its own.

Namo Abdalla: Talabani is considered by many to be a successful Iraqi, but not long ago, this leader fought a 3-year long civil war with Barzani? What do you make of that?

Chibli Mallat: This was one of the lowest points in modern Iraqi history. I can tell you my own recollections, which are narrow but expressive, at least for me, when looking back at the long road of the opposition to the dictatorship. It must have been late April 1994 when I hosted for the third or fourth time Talabani at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the University in London where I used to teach.

Things were going extremely well for the Iraqi opposition, and I have somewhere a picture in SOAS with the leadership of the Iraq National Congress (INC): Talabani, Ahmad Chalabi, Muhammad Bahr al-Ulum, Hasan Naqib, together with Edward Mortimer, an extraordinary man in his own right who helped Iraqis through thick and thin. They had I think just met the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, thanks to an invitation that I passed on from the late David Gore-Booth, who was in charge of the Middle East at the Foreign Office.

So it was going well, and the INC was a remarkably united front that was honored in the major capitals of the world over a program advocating democracy and federalism. More importantly, the INC was not an exile group, because it was established in the

free area of Iraq, Kurdistan. Suddenly, the whole edifice collapsed over a land dispute in the region of Qal'at Desai in which the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan took sides. This was early May 1994, and Talabani had just left London for Japan.

I saw how grave the developments were, and called him in Rome, insisting that he should go back immediately to resolve the situation. He thought it was less dramatic than I was suggesting. Well this developed into three years of civil war, which destroyed the INC as alternative to the dictatorship and led to the deaths of some 3000 Kurds and over 100 non-Kurdish members of the INC, massacred by Saddam Hussein. I still think some truth and justice commission should be established to reckon with this ugly blot of Kurdish-Iraqi history.

Retrospectively, I regret not to have continued to be involved more directly with the opposition after the formation of the INC, for there had been other grave mistakes within the leadership, but there is so much an outsider, however friendly, can do. In any case, the next significant occasion for me was a hosting in the US of a meeting between Hoshiyar Zebari, Barham Saleh, and Ahmad Chalabi.

This was October 1996, thanks to Richard Murphy, at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. The meeting broke some of the ice, but very little. Eventually, again from my own very narrow perspective, the rapprochement took place over two initiatives: a call to bring Saddam Hussein to trial, which brought together everyone, including the KDP but in a less enthusiastic mode; and the appointment of a US coordinator for the Iraqi opposition, Frank Ricciardone.

Namo Abdalla: What do you think made Barzani and Talabani fight each other, as a presidential scholar?

Chibli Mallat: There is in any decent society a fight for leadership. This is absolutely normal. A country with a ruling party and without opposition cannot function well. What is important is that the modes of fight for leadership remain non-violent, this is why it is crucial to develop institutions to regulate them: a constitution, elections, the judiciary.

During the days of resistance to Saddam Hussein, you couldn't really have a functioning constitution, which would have been perceived as separatist. So you had the INC emerging in June 1992, following on the Kurdish elections of May 1992.

A powerful group called the International Committee for a Free Iraq that was formed in 1991 with the Iraqi oppositional leaders and such prominent figures as John McCain, David Howell and the late Claiborne Pell, had supported the elections and indeed sent the largest group to monitor them in Kurdish Iraq.

By and large, the elections were successful, but there were also severe shortcomings in part due to the defective ink that some German state had donated. One of the most severe shortcomings was the presidential dimension of the elections, which was also part of the electoral exercise.

When the results came very close, both parties got worried of the second turn for the presidential elections which had to be held a couple of weeks later, so no president emerged. This was a major failure of the new institutional system. Another failure was the judiciary: in a petty disagreement like the one at Qal'at Desai, the judges should have adjudicated the dispute, not the political parties. But a judiciary takes a long time to get built.

As for now, the matter is of course profoundly different, because the contest is operating within the context of Iraq, not only of Kurdistan. A division of roles like the current one, Barzani as president of Kurdistan, Talabani as president of Iraq, seems to be working. What matters, however, is that this translates institutionally beyond them. It is not easy.

Namo Abdalla: The Turks consider Barzani to be more aggressive than Talabani, why is that? Do you think so?

Chibli Mallat: Part of the response is geopolitical. Barzani's KDP is physically closer to Turkey, so frictions, especially because of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), are more severe. Some of it is historical: there is no denying that the Kurdish minority in Turkey had a hard time, and it is impossible for the Iraqi Kurdish leaders to ignore it. Barzani will have a harder time with Turkey, and Talabani with Iran. Then of course, it is complicated by the nature of the political regimes in the adjacent countries: Iran, Turkey and Syria are ruled very differently.

I should also say that the personal factor also plays a role: Barzani has chosen to take more of a nationalist Kurdish position, which is expressed in his presidency of Iraqi Kurdistan. Ankara is not comfortable with this, and translates it as "aggressivity." It would better consider ways to remedy the historical mistreatment of Kurdish Turks, including by considering a federal constitutional model in Turkey.

I do not closely follow Kaka Mas'ud's positions on Turkey and the PKK, but I know him to be cautious and wise. Rather than a safe haven for PKK violence, he should perhaps consider articulating a more public position on the institutional protection of the Kurdish minority in Turkey.

Namo Abdalla: Both Barzani and Talabani have been criticized of nepotism Does not this undermine their democratic character?

Chibli Mallat: Yes. This family business is a plague of politics the world over, and in the Middle East in particular. The question is how to lessen it, since we cannot get rid of it altogether. It is up to the leaders to appreciate the damage to their image in a democracy, and to act accordingly.

I must say that a comforting aspect of Iraqi politics is that you do not have relatives in power at the top in the national institutions, but there are also troubling news of financial deals of close family members, let alone prominent executive positions both in Baghdad and in Irbil. This is a very hard issue to solve, it may perhaps be time to adopt some sort of a worldwide charter on 'family connections and democracy.' It would be great if the Iraqi Kurds start it.

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