

## Jalal Talabani: from Kurdish villager to Iraqi president

*The student who refused to be a crawling lawyer*

By Chibli Mallat

Daily Star staff

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Jalal Talabani, 76, is a larger-than-life character. I met him for the first time back in January 1991 at the London Russell Hotel with my friend Edward Mortimer, who had helped Iraqis of all hues break the barrier of silence since his coverage for the London Times of the 1973 Kurdish uprising against the regime of Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein. Five months after the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Talabani could still not get a meeting with a lower level diplomat in the State department, courtesy of a US presidential directive issued in 1987 or 1988 to forbid American diplomats from meeting with members of the Iraqi opposition.

Jalal Talabani now meets any president in the world on a par, and is better known than 90 percent of world leaders. He is the only democratically elected president in the Arab world, I would even argue in the Middle East. This is quite a trajectory, worth a solid biography: how did the Kurdish-only speaking kid of a forlorn village in the Suleimaniyya region of Iraq become the elected president of a country with a massive Arab majority?

Language is the least of Talabani's problems. Back in 1991, at the Russell Hotel, we spoke in Arabic, but he was not shy from arguing in his then-halting English. Two decades or so later, he is comfortable with rare English turns-of-phrases, and peppers his meetings with trans-linguistic puns. Talabani's Arabic is remarkable, very much in the vein of Deleuze's "littérature mineure," in which the French philosopher showed how Franz Kafka and Joseph Conrad, respectively non-native German and English denizens, compensated for their "minority" status by the excellence of their literary language in German and English. I had actually read Talabani, years before meeting him, in an impressive Arabic book that had been published in a leftist Beirut publishing house, al-Talia. It is entitled "Kurdistan wal-haraka al-qawmiyya al-kurdiyya" ("Kurdistan and the Kurdish national movement"), and remains one of the best works about the history of Kurdish nationalism in the 20th century. This is a book written by a convinced secular leftist. Talabani is proud of his vice-presidency of the Socialist International and says he remains convinced by its principles.

In Suleimaniyya over two days and five hours of conversation at lunch and dinner on May 15-16, I sought the Iraqi president's views on a number of issues of historic importance, central among them Talabani the lawyer and the ways

law colored his vision. We talked about the Iraqi Constitution, which is undergoing a revision, about federalism in Iraq, about persisting differences over Iraq's oil and gas. We also discussed the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Talabani remains proud of his active support of Palestinians, and fondly recalls his work in the late 1960s with the radical Palestinian leader Wadiah Haddad.

These are current topics which deserve a fuller, separate treatment. I just want to convey here some of the flavor of Talabani the lawyer. I knew he had studied law, and I was keen to get some of his recollections on that professional dimension. One striking recollection was his years at law school, and his early apprenticeship. Already committed to the wider political world, a leftist one which took him in the late 1950s to China and Soviet Russia, he refused to be "a crawling lawyer" to get "the certificate of good behavior" then needed for graduation. His professor Hassan Chalabi, who currently presides over the Islamic University of Lebanon, allowed him to dispense with it. Talabani remains grateful to this day.

Talabani is a wordsmith who does not get lost in unnecessary word-parsing. In one of our many meetings during the hard years of the opposition, at the Iraqi National Congress founding in Vienna in June 1992, I could see how he could get impatient with side issues like the number of delegates that the INC chose to enlist for its inevitably ineffectual legislative branch of the exile group. When we talked in Suleimaniyya about the Iraqi Constitution, it was different: on my suggestion that the present text risked undermining the election of the next president of Iraq, because of an elastic timetable for the president's choice by the Council of Representatives (CoR), Talabani was adamant. It did not happen for his election – he was readily elected because of his immense popularity across the board in Iraq – but he said procrastination would not happen either for a less consensual successor. The Constitution plans a two-tier process in Article 70, whereby the president is elected by a two-third majority of the CoR in a first ballot, otherwise by majority. That was sufficient, he explained, and did not need to be revised. I was swayed.

On the more controversial three-member Presidency Council (PC) (with him as president and two vice-presidents, Adel Abdel-Mehdi and Tareq al-Hashimi) which was appended to the 2005 Constitution, we agreed that it would be beneficial for the country to keep it: while the veto power of the PC, occasionally exercised by a sole member of the triumvirate, unduly complicated the legislative process, the PC was a strong guarantor of Iraqi unity. The relevant constitutional article is temporary in nature, and will not be effective after the next election in January. Responding to my concern about the disappearance of the PC, Talabani was philosophical: if the Iraqis decide not to extend it, he said, "then this is part of democracy, and we must accept it."

In our farewell dinner meeting, I was at the president's house with a close friend, Andrew Allen. Andrew is a leading British barrister who chose to spend a year in Iraq to help the judiciary and the legislative branch on the difficult route to the rule of law, in the Global Justice Project: Iraq which the University of Utah established in Baghdad with a grant of the US government. Andrew is not fluent

in Arabic, and toward the end of the conversation, the Iraqi president turned to him to express a heartfelt apology: "I am extremely sorry," he said, "for shutting you off from our conversation." To Andrew's polite demurrer, he added: "I understand so intimately how you feel, for so many of my Kurdish compatriots were as helpless in Saddam Hussein's Iraq." For me, it had been a long time I had not felt so miffed. God knows that I never had much sympathy for the Arab dictators, but this goes well beyond to a deeper problem of the travails of Arab nationalism. I still shudder at the terror of a Kurdish citizen at the checkpoint, arrested and ordered around, in a language he does not understand, by suspicious security members of an Arab-dominated Iraq. Andrew was the guest of the Iraqi president, and I suddenly felt profoundly sorry for not providing the translation needed throughout those long hours of a unique encounter. Talibani's closing remark goes to his unique sensitivity to structural injustice. A Kurdish lawyer president of a federal Iraq, this is a symbol of hope for a different Arab world, and a different Middle East. But the contrarian odds are heavy.

***Chibli Mallat*** presidential professor at the University of Utah, and EU Jean Monnet chair at St Joseph's University, edits ***The Daily Star*** law page.