

IRAQ

Since the mid-1980s, you have been interested in Iraq, and wrote your PhD in London on Muhammad Baqer al-Sadr. Tell us about this book and its impact.

The story of my interest in Iraq is a long one. In essence, I was interested in the renewal of Islamic law. This was my PhD, started at the University of London in 1986 and completed in 1988. It came out as a book in 1993 as *The Renewal of Islamic Law: Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr, Najaf and the Shi'i International*. It has been translated in several languages and showed the extraordinary talents of Sadr and his colleagues in Najaf and the wider Shi'i world.

You supported the Iraqi opposition actively after the invasion of Kuwait in 1991. Why and how?

When I was doing my research in London, many Iraqi exiles, especially Shi'is and Kurds, lived there. I met some of them for my PhD, like Sayyed Mahdi al-Hakim and Muhammad Bahr al-'Ulum. When Sayyed Mahdi was assassinated in the Sudan in 1988, I was shocked and saddened, and I started helping the Iraqi opposition. It took several months and a considerable campaign in London and in Washington to start the process to remove Saddam from power in 1991 through the International Committee for a Free Iraq, which included US senators and members of the UK parliament, as well as all the Iraqi leaders who mattered. But it took twelve years and 9/11 to remove Saddam.

In 2003, you opposed the US invasion of Iraq while defending the legitimacy of ending the dictatorship? Is there not an impossible contradiction here in your position?

Yes, this was my position from the beginning. The Iraqi people, by and large, were the main victims of Saddam. Saddam was finally considered in the West as the most ruthless and unstable leader in the Middle East. The objective should therefore be the same for both, which is his removal. There is no contradiction there. But I believed there were better ways to end his brutal rule without a full scale invasion.

You were invited by the Iraqi leadership to preside over the trial of Saddam Hussein and declined. Why?

When Saddam was finally caught, Prof Hasan Chalabi told me that the Iraqi Governing Council was proposing that I head the tribunal that would try him. I declined. I thought that having started an international campaign to bring him to trial (it was called INDICT), I would not be neutral enough as a judge.

In 2010 you were the main advisor of the Iraqi committee to revise the constitution. What happened?

Together with Professor (and now Dean) Haider Hammoudi, I was invited in 2010 by the Constitutional reform committee to review with them the Constitution of 2005. We completed the work, but it was not implemented by the executive, despite being approved in Parliament.

You have visited Najaf several times. What is your interest in the city?

Having written on Najaf at a time when it would have been lethal for me to visit, I was of course keen to discover it as soon as it was possible. It was very moving to visit the shrine of Imam Ali, to meet with the maraje', to sit in bahth al-kharej classes at the hawza and experience at first hand the tremendous intellectual quality there. I also lectured in Najaf and Kufa.

How is your relationship with the leadership of Iraq after Saddam?

It now has been some time since the Saddam regime was removed. Most of my close friends from the old generation are alas gone: Jalal Talabani, Ahmad Chalabi, Muhammad Bahr al-Ulum. I keep in touch with others, such as former president Fuad Masum and ambassador Jaafar al-Sadr. One of the closest leaders is President Latif Rashid, whom I saw regularly in Beirut. Recently Sheikh Abu Haydar, Muhammad al-Majm, came to Lebanon and I enjoyed meeting him after all these years.