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Transcript Q&A

Iraq Ten Years On: Keynote Address

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Claire Spencer:

I think we have time for one or two reactions. I'm sitting here musing on your description of a gradual and progressive decline and I really wanted to ask you: beyond the hope you expressed at the end for an electorate that remains aware and intelligent, what will it take for that kind of intelligentsia, for that kind of creativity, to return to Iraq?

Sami Zubaida:

I think you'll find that the Iraqi intelligentsia are dispersed throughout the West and the Gulf. Many of them are very creative, and indeed all these literary movements and the wave of publication of novels and poetry and reviews are thriving in Western centres, by Iraqis. There is also a great deal going on in Iraq, in spite of everything, in terms of cultural production. In spite of the censorship and the intimidation, what have you, you've still got artistic movements, art exhibitions, theatre, plays, music and so on. So the nucleus is there. The question is, will it have – in all the discussions that we had earlier today about the possibilities of the rule of law and so on, which seem remote at the moment – if they were to be fulfilled even in small part, then yes, it's there.

Claire Spencer:

So there is room for optimism. Would anyone like to intervene at this stage? Please.

Question 1:

There's a distinction between people returning to Iraq and a new intelligentsia emerging from the wreckage of what we have now. What would you consider to be the principal challenges for a new intelligentsia to emerge today, in comparison to the circumstances that the previous one had to endure in the past?

In order for a new intelligentsia to emerge, what would be the principal challenges they would face, in comparison to challenges that existed in the past?

Sami Zubaida:

One of the things that you see, for instance in the fiction that's being written now, is the disillusion. What you had in earlier decades, in the 20th century, was this kind of optimism – things are pretty bad now but there is progress, we are going to get better. I think what you get now is these kind of dark sentiments – satire, magic realism and so on – which is a kind of despair or pessimism about the prospects. So I think people are now perhaps much more realistic, much wiser. But as I said in response to Claire, for these movements to flourish, for artistic and literary work and cultural work to proceed, you need some kind of stability and guarantee of safety, which you haven't got at the moment.

Claire Spencer:

I don't know how we end a discussion like this, because it's brief and I would love us to end on a positive note. Would you like to say something about the diaspora? Jane and I were in the Kurdish areas in the north last week and we were struck by the dynamism of the youth there, and also the strength, still, of the affiliation with the UK. We found a lot of dual nationals, particularly among the younger generation, but all over the place.

Most amusingly, the concierge in our hotel, when he realized we were British, said, 'I'm a London bus driver.' He lives in Tottenham. He started listing all the bus routes. He was so enthusiastic to talk and engage with us. I do wonder whether that British-Iraqi connection, particularly with this younger generation that doesn't necessarily have all the baggage of Britain's colonial past and dear old Sykes–Picot at the front of their minds, whether there's something that can be done there – that the dynamism of the diaspora, who are very mobile and very energetic and have the choice in fact whether they live in Iraq or whether they live here, whether something couldn't come out of that.

Sami Zubaida:

I'm surprised that your bus driver didn't ask you about Arsenal. Yes, I think perhaps – I don't know the situation very well now but I get the impression that at least in the Kurdish region you have so many new universities, mostly in the English language, recruiting Iraqis and Kurds from Europe who are encouraged to return and come back, who are sort of cultivating this new generation. I am not sure how much of that is there in the Arab part of Iraq. We'll see.

Claire Spencer:

We'll need to investigate. I think we will end on what sounds like a reasonably optimistic note. Hope springs eternal – education, which we were reminded in earlier sessions being a key to this, and a new generation. I think personally the younger generational panel we saw today was an example of that and an exemplar of what could be done. Thank you to those who were part of that. I think we will move seamlessly now to the next session, but please join me in thanking Sami very much.