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<sup>1</sup> For the "Technical resources and innovation" seminar

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(liste at march 1, 2011)

## **TRIBES AND THE AMERICAN ARMY IN IRAQ**

by

**Hosham Dawod**

Anthropologist, CNRS (IAC-LAIOS)  
Scientist in charge of the Near and Middle East programme,  
Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme

October 4th, 2010

Report by Hosham Dawod

Based on a draft by Pascal Lefebvre

Translation by Rachel Marlin

### **Overview**

For the past twenty years, Hosham Dawod has been carrying out research into multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups, and problems associated with power and kinship in Iraq. His studies have led him to assess the adaptability of tribes in general and their role in certain Arab-Muslim societies. Whereas traditionally Iraq was precipitately given the label of being a secular, Arab country following rapid modernisation, it is now presented – equally rapidly – as a 'tribal society', and one incapable of producing a State which can represent the entire Iraqi population in all its diversity. Wars, the embargo, the dictatorship and occupation by foreign armies are undoubtedly the reasons for this. However, this problem -which also exists in other divided countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, other countries in central Asia, East and sub-Saharan Africa, Sudan and a number of other non-Muslim societies – is not a secondary phenomenon : it is simply because tribes today are being caught up in today's political problems.

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## **TALK : Hosham Dawod**

It may be helpful if I begin by explaining my intellectual ‘journey’ and the research I have conducted over the past twenty years. I am an anthropologist. When I arrived in Europe in the 1980s, I began studying tribes and ethnic groups in Iraq and south east Turkey (Turkish Kurdistan). My friends and particularly some of my colleagues were surprised by this as they considered that Iraq was well on the road to a modern society, and that my research into tribes and kinship was a remnant of Iraq’s outdated past. I was particularly interested in the question of power and kinship, not only relating to the highest positions within the State, but in the intermediary bodies as well.

However, carrying out research into Iraqi society – even someone who was born in Iraq – is not easy. One should not forget that in 1980 Iraq was at war with Iran, a country which, at that time, was regarded by the West as a radical, Islamic country, predominantly Shiite, led by Ayatollah Khomeini. Unsurprisingly, Iraq became an ally of the Soviet Union and the West. Ten years later, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, the situation was reversed. Iraq was an occupying force faced with an international coalition whose objective was to free Kuwait from the army of a regime which then was seen to be dictatorial and predatory and, above all, held in contempt by the majority of its own population. From 1990 to 2003, Iraq was put under a severe embargo, the magnitude of which had rarely been seen before, and it effectively cut itself off from the rest of the world. The government and population attempted to maintain the status quo as best they could : the government tried to get around the embargo by smuggling and trafficking all sorts of goods, resorting to mafia-style tactics, whereas the population sank inexorably deeper into a culture based on staying alive/survival. It is impossible to understand Iraqi society of today fully without appreciating this history of radical change.

In 2003, two years after 9/11, George W. Bush, with the support of an American administration which was impervious to any form of contradiction, took a decision which led to a third Gulf War and the occupation of Iraq.

From 2005, and especially after 2006, the US found itself in deep trouble because of the explosive reality of Iraq which was regulated by conflicts which they were unable to control. In February 2006, the bomb attacks in Samara on two Shiite mausoleums sparked the civil war in various regions throughout the country. As far as the American administration was concerned, this was the signal that a deep-rooted, strategic change was necessary. David Petraeus was appointed Commanding General of the American forces. He was an atypical four-star general. As well as his military studies and experience, he studied social science at Princeton, and wrote a thesis on international relations. When he became Commanding General in Iraq, he decided to call in teams of anthropologists. This was not considered an unusual approach for American and Western armies as this practice dated back to the 1920s. However, it had never been carried out in Iraq. The majority of these anthropologists were Americans. A budget of approximately 40 million dollars per year was deployed to finance a precise mission : they had to ‘deconstruct’ local social relations, find ways to establish communication with the population, and advise military command on how to contain insurgency.

### **The tribal problem**

As I mentioned earlier, I was interested in the tribe as a scientific entity. It functions like a mini-society, varies in size, and consists of tens of thousands of people on average. It is made up of descendants of people who come from the same region, share the same origin (real or fictitious), language and dialect, and the same blood (the ideology of consanguinity). In the East, as elsewhere, parenthood carries obligations and useful and efficient forms of solidarity in order to regulate conflict or to impose sanctions. As a result, legal procedures

are designated or imposed by force within the tribe. The somewhat less than idyllic and romantic image that sometimes exists in Europe of the tribal Arab world needs to change because it is also a hierarchical social group which sometimes resorts to violence, is heavily dominated by men, and so on. The management of the tribe is based on politics which makes it different from ethnic groups which do not have this implicit political dimension.

Until the 1950s tribes in the countryside and in small and medium-sized towns were characterised by emphasis on territory, power, social solidarity (*'asabiyya*) and abusing one's position because of kinship relations. Once the State had established and imposed itself, tribes had to adapt themselves accordingly, and negotiate part of the economic and social management of their territory with the State. Sovereignty and citizen representation have since become core issues in the legitimacy of the State. Historically, several types of tribes prevailed. Some have changed through time and have even become important tribal confederations with chiefdoms in which there was a key house. One of the best examples of this is Saudi Arabia. The ancestors of the house of Al Saoud who made an alliance with the religious preacher Mohammad Ben Abd Al Wahhab and unified the Arab countries three times, lived in this country. Their influence changed the name of the country from Arabia to Saudi Arabia. This is a typical change, and other similar examples exist.

In a second form of evolution, the tribe may advance with the State without necessarily taking its place. However, with time, the tribe naturally weakens as the State grows stronger. Nowadays, the State does not easily accept meeting competition regarding sovereignty and the right to represent citizens or subjects and, being unable to eradicate the tribe, it will attempt to subordinate it.

According to a third form of evolution, the State tries to eradicate the tribe either by using military force or simply as a result of the effect of the normal progressive evolution of society which undermines the material and ideological foundation which was the basis of growth of the tribe.

Of these three models, it is the second which the Iraqi State follows most closely. The tribe transformed itself in terms of political and territorial events, and now survives in terms of cultural and social reality. It may sometimes emerge politically when the State is weak, or when the State asks or encourages it to help, or with the emergence of a global force (such as the American army today). In the case of Iraq, at least modernisation has not broken up the tribe !

### **Tribes adapt**

Tribes are able to adapt in spite of impressions that the public may have which suggest that they are rooted in the past, and portray them as being under-developed or that modernisation has not been achieved. When the Americans arrived in 2003, they were looking for a potential statesman : the person they found was Ghazi Al Yawer, the nephew of the head of the important Shammar tribe. This tribe inhabits an area from north west Iraq to near Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, and comprises between two and three million people. When one reads Ghazi Al Yawer's CV, one might be surprised to find that he is not at all what one might imagine a traditional tribal head to be according to the 'romantic' image of tribal chiefs that Europeans have. He studied at Georgetown, he speaks several languages, and he is a shrewd businessman who owns a computer company in eastern Saudi Arabia. He is nothing like a tribal warrior sitting astride his horse with his gun in his hand, known as much for his ferocity to his enemies as for his generosity to his own people.

Secondly, the individuals who make up the tribe – after many evolutions of the society and the State – no longer feel indebted to the tribe, and the only true functional links which remain to unite them are those on a lower tribal level (that of clans and large families). However, if a necessity arises, for example when there is a conflict (within or outside the tribe), or if one needs to access the administration, the individual does not hesitate to use the tribal network which one might imagine is completely out-of-date.

As an example, I will explain the research that I conducted with an Iraqi team which was in the field when the local and provincial elections were taking place in January 2009. We had noticed the influence and the involvement in local and national politics of one of the most important tribal heads in southern Iraq, Sheikh Mzahim Al Tamimi (Sheik Beni Tamim). It should not be forgotten that this tribal confederation settled in Iraqi territory more than three centuries ago. It has nearly 800,000 members and is primarily based in the area around Basra. This sheikh has had a remarkable career. He was the former head of the Iraqi national Marines, he was a student at the Kiev military academy, he studied theology and philosophy in Baghdad, and he speaks Ukrainian, English and, of course, Arabic. When the British troops entered Iraq in 2003, he was appointed mayor of Basra for a short period before the Shiite Islamists and their militia became a political force, and established themselves for so-called 'security' reasons, events which largely weakened the political role of this sheikh, as of others. However, after four years of catastrophic management on both a local and a national level, both Sunni and Shiite Islamists were blamed. A number of tribal heads came to the conclusion that the time had come to return to the political stage. A certain number were eager to stand as candidates, first in local elections (in 2009) and then in national elections (in 2010). There was every reason to believe that, if tribal solidarities were of any influence, they would become city mayors, and if not, elected representatives. Sheikh Mzahim Al Tamimi thought that he was among the favourites because of the size of his tribal confederation and his title, not to mention his military and political past. However, he only received 538 votes out of a total of one million !

These are important subjects which require lengthy field study, a shrewd knowledge of the social fabric, and the influence of global change on a local level. This prompts questions about the role of the individual in a tribe today, his margin of decision, his degree of autonomy when making choices and voting, the influence of the State, modernisation, openness, how close he is to the group, the constraints (imposed or chosen) which weigh on him, and so on.

### **Transformations of tribes**

I have explained that the tribe is capable of transforming itself and adapting to modern life. How does this work in the different areas of Iraq ? In Iraq, as elsewhere, the different regions of the country did not experience socio-economic development in the same way or at the same time. In the southern part, for example, the most important tribal confederations lived in large agricultural areas and, from the 19th century onwards, they were faced with a greater emphasis on private property which, until then, had been, for the most part, a regime of public property. This evolution advanced more rapidly with the British occupation of Mesopotamia which marked the first important political change and the birth of modern Iraq.

This new element changed not only the political structures of that time, but as a result it also transformed the regime of land ownership and the socio-political relationships. Between 1920 and 1958, most of the land became privatised : the tribal heads became wealthy, and were the key political people in the State. Economic relations in the countryside were based on money, and the majority of small farmers were forcibly dominated by new masters who, a few decades earlier, had merely been tribal chiefs of a local society which was partially egalitarian. Following of this century (1860-1960) of major transformations, nomadism started to decline to the point of almost ceasing to exist today. Politically speaking, the second most important change in modern Iraq was the fall of the monarchy in 1958 (still referred to today by a majority of Iraqis as the 'revolution'), which led to the distribution of land to farmers, and the nationalisation of banks and most of the national economy.

Sociologically speaking, in this period of rapid change (which took place over less than a century), Iraqi society transformed itself from a largely tribal and rural society to a different type of society with a strong, urban influence where the role of the individual is more prominent and commercial relations now dominate. The material base of tribal solidarity was

irreversibly transformed, but still remains. This encouraged the emergence of a population of small farmers which formed a reservoir of a 'gentlemen' farmers within the state, using the recently discovered and abundant sources of oil to free themselves from immediate economic constraints and social pressure.

Change took place differently in Saddam Hussein's homeland, in west and northwest Iraq. These are contrasting regions, the majority of which are arid and even desert, in which the tribes are smaller than those in the south, and internal solidarity is much stronger. These are agricultural areas, but farming is much more fragmented. The sorts of activity open to people living in small and medium-sized towns are small urban businesses, smuggling, or the civil service (the army or education). In towns in western Iraq, this form of cooptation has been preserved as a means of socio-political promotion thus regenerating tribal strengthening and solidarity as well as other types of inherited solidarities such as Arabic as an ethnic identity, Islam as a religion, and Sunnism as a faith. Fitting into these identities from a political point of view strengthened and cemented the function of the group once it came to power. This is how Saddam's power evolved, and then functioned for a long period of time.

People were wrong to say that this power was because the ruling people were Sunni rather than Shiite. This may have seemed to be the case, but when one looks at the evidence it is clear that the situation is more complex. In the 1970s, Saddam Hussein never admitted to any specific denomination or tribal ideals. He aspired to become the new Nasser of the Arab world. He had the financial means and opportunities to do so, and at that time he was supported not only by the Soviet regime but also by the West. The ideological basis of the Iraqi Ba'ath party was a pan-Arab nationalism derived from a local model (Iraq) which stemmed from modernist views. One must not forget that in the 1970s under Saddam's regime Iraq was the second State in the Middle East – after Israel – to have eliminated illiteracy. However, in modernising the country, Saddam Hussein always feared losing control of political power. He was very well aware that the first *coup d'état* in the Middle East took place in Iraq in 1936, and that there had been subsequent coups in this region. Modernising the country was necessary of course, but the Ba'ath party was obsessed by the threat of losing power. Saddam Hussein summed up this complex situation perfectly in the following quotation : 'There are two sorts of people : those who have experience and those that one can trust. The former manage the state, and the latter end up with the control and the management of power'.

People, therefore, can be divided into two categories : those who play a major role in political decision-making, are very close to the most important people in government, and are linked to leaders by family ties and/or because they share the same denomination, come from the same geographical area or tribe, and so on ; and then there is everyone else. As I explained earlier, Saddam Hussein's supporters came primarily from the same region and therefore shared the same characteristics (Arabs, Muslims, Sunnis, descendants from some of the same tribes). As a result, there was naturally a kind of intense, clan solidarity (*'asabiyya* in the Khaldounian sense). However, this created the illusion, even in the 1970s, that Saddam Hussein governed exclusively on a denominational and/or tribal basis. Everything changed after 1990-1991 when power changed radically, and became a coercive apparatus fundamentally controlled by a tri-partite of ethnic, denominational and tribal identity.

At the end of the Kuwait war and the harsh embargo which followed, the social base of the Iraqi State diminished. A large part of society was left to its own devices in a culture based on survival, and individuals tried to find ways in which they could protect themselves or establish themselves. As a result, there was a return to the tribal system which this time operated in a protective rather than a political way.

### **The initial American project**

In 2003, the Americans arrived with a purely ideological project. Regardless of what was rumoured at the time, I did not think that they came to exploit the oil. The irony of the situation is that it was under the protection of the American army that the Chinese, Russian,

Turkish and even French companies snapped up the largest oil contracts (in other words, the countries which were not only against the war but the occupation of Iraq itself) ! As for the Americans, they only got one oil-producing field with a capacity of 12 billion barrels (the Qurna-1 field) out of about twelve. This volume is considerable, but not nearly as enormous as was claimed in the beginning. What mattered more to the Americans was to have the ability to control the countries for whom this oil was intended, and to be able to stop the flow to them if it was judged to be strategically necessary.

From a political and ideological point of view, the American priority was to create a democratic model in the Middle East, a region which had been judged until then to be sheltered from all the major changes which had rocked the world since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the wave of democracy which swept across eastern Europe. American reaction to 9/11 put an end to this enthusiasm instead of encouraging it. The consequences of the Iraq war for the Iraqi population were dreadful but they were not wonderful for the United States either. Up to this point, the war had cost approximately one trillion dollars, had caused nearly 4,500 deaths and had left 35,000 people injured. However, one of the most harmful effects of this war is that, in spite of all the institutions which were demolished (the State, the army and other reference points for the population), no solid replacement has taken shape since the end of the war. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise to learn that some Iraqis have expressed the desire, explicitly or implicitly, for some American troops to remain in Iraq. The real question is then raised of how to protect this country from the appetite of those with whom it shares borders.

The difficulties which the American army encountered in Iraq divided the American administration into two groups ; the State department and the Pentagon. In 2003, the Pentagon had an almost 'limitless' budget to finance various think tanks whose aim was to find the means of bringing democracy to Iraq. On the other hand, the State department, led by Colin Powell, warned those who were prepared to listen about the dangers of being faced with a crippled population of thirty million people who had urgent needs which needed to be met immediately. The intervention, which neoconservatives in Washington saw as a liberation, was quickly changed into an occupation, attracting the greed of all the Islamic and Jihad groups in the country and the region, including Al Qaeda.

### **Change of strategy**

After 2006, when the situation had become untenable, General David Petraeus was appointed and American strategy changed radically. The question of tribes was reopened and debated in terms of internal organisation, negotiations, and the choice of people whom one could trust in order to maintain a local security force. It took one year for the implementation of this new strategy to work in the field. The idea was simple but daring : in an asymmetrical war, it is useless to attack terrorism head-on. Of course, one should employ special forces and a good network of security intelligence when one can, but the priority is to look after the social aspects. General Petraeus said 'Al Qaeda is volatile but the population is stable'. It is pointless if one is chasing a Jihadist when, in the night, ten doors open and offer him safety. One can only safely say that one has succeeded when no door – or almost no door – opens any more to take him in.

This was the challenge left to the American army. Firstly, the Americans created autonomous political forces in towns by increasing decentralisation. Then they created national police forces which also operated on a local scale. They recruited young people, particularly from ex-soldiers, in order to train a paramilitary militia (the '*Sahwa*' or 'Awakening Councils') who were paid between 200 and 300 dollars per month to control their neighbourhood, village or even their region.

The Americans exploited the differences between chief Jihadists and local tribal chiefs. They discovered something remarkable : between 2003 and 2004, chief Jihadists were often militants and foreigners whose ideology was based on radical Islamic values, as preached by

Sunni Islam which is ideologically far from reality. They tried to establish themselves in the name of God. Under these conditions, it was not easy for the population to reject Al Qaeda immediately in the name of religion. However, when these Jihadists wanted to change social structures and to force tribal chiefs to follow radical Jihadism because the Jihadists claimed they were superior to the rest of the population, a rift was then opened into which the Americans were able to position themselves. Since then, the Americans have skilfully continued to praise the merits – real or fictitious – of the tribes. Nevertheless, this remains one of the few apparent successes of the Americans in Iraq, and one which they are strongly tempted to repeat in Afghanistan.

Let me finish with a remark which I think is important. Despite renewed interest in the role of tribes, one cannot say that Iraqi society is reverting to tribalism. There is a certain degree of confusion because there are tribes in Iraq, but Iraqi society does not function on the basis of tribes. Ultimately, tribes in Iraq lost the sovereignty they had over their members and over the areas they covered a long time ago. Nevertheless, tribes have a socio-cultural function which makes them able to spread information. They are involved, but subordinate to the state which is much more all-encompassing than the tribe. This is why sovereignty over people and territories has long been the privilege of the state. If this was not the case, it would be difficult to understand why the majority of members of tribes in Iraq did not vote for their chiefs or members of their tribe in the recent local and national elections.

## DISCUSSION

### A change of paradigm

**Question :** *Did the arrival of General Petraeus signal a change of paradigm ? Instead of pursuing a neoconservative, ideological model the Americans decided to try to understand the local situation. How did that take happen ?*

**Hosham Dawod :** As I said before in relation to General Petraeus' intellectual and military rationale when he returned to Iraq in 2006, he was surrounded by a group of experts, some of whom he had known for a long time and others who were new to him. Perhaps the most interesting and unusual of these was David Kilcullen, an ex-Lieutenant Colonel in the Australian army who had a PhD in anthropology and who, with Montgomery McFate, was the key person in this team. He first served with the Australian army in East Timor, and later in Afghanistan and Somalia, before becoming a contractual analyst in the State Department in Washington. He finally joined General Petraeus' team when he came back to Iraq in 2006. This team of 'embedded' anthropologists reviewed what had previously been studied about tribes in a rather primitive fashion by American army officers (notably by Colonel Alan King) which included locating them, checking information, and so on. e By the way, we should not forget that these anthropologists who chose to work with the American army in Iraq were essentially disowned by the overriding majority of their peers in the United States.

Due to their inability to make headway in the field, the Americans made radical changes to their military strategy from 2006 onwards, and developed the following approach : on the one hand, they decided to mix with the local population and to understand as much as possible about their way of life, and to strengthen or even to recreate the legitimacy of local governance (notables, area chiefs, tribal chiefs, local elite, and so on) ; on the other hand, the aim was to strengthen the operational capacity of the intelligence service and special forces. This is the context in which the activities of the infamous General Stanley McChrystal, who had already made a name for himself in Iraq by being at the head of a first-rate military group, took place. It was one of these groups which tracked and then captured Saddam Hussein. Similarly, it was men from these teams who found Abou Mousa'ab Al Zarkaoui, the Jordanian head of Al Qaeda in Iraq, and who was eliminated by the American Air Force. General Petraeus' strategy was based on three interconnecting aims : to be open to local society, to consolidate the legitimacy of centralised power, and then to track and make

strikes on factions from any insurgents which Petraeus considered to be strongly anti-American and 'irrecoverable' but to also leave the door open for some Islamic rebels whom he judged to be 'less dangerous'. Today, the General is trying to apply this strategy which has recently proved to be successful in Iraq, to the situation in Afghanistan. However, as Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher said, 'one never bathes twice in the same river'. One should remember that the principal mission in Iraq was to reconstruct a rich state. Shiites and Kurds, who represent more than 75% of the population, all agree on this. In Afghanistan, however, it is a question of constructing a State which will always remain poor and lack economic resources. By contrast with Iraq, most of the Afghan population – the Pashtuns – has not cut itself off completely from the Taliban.

Perhaps the most fundamental change in terms of the political philosophy enforced by General Petraeus in Iraq is that American strategy in Iraq until 2006 was based on a simplistic idea, imposed by neoconservatives. It proposed reducing the power of the central state by attempting to make the country move towards a status of ethnic, denominational and regional confederation, encouraging the emergence of a local political class, and implementing all possible means to promote the materialisation of a civil society and a privatised economy. None of this worked, apart from the collapse of what remained of the state and the break-up of a society which was torn between two warlike entities.

However, contrary to the situation envisaged by the neoconservatives, when General Petraeus arrived he immediately recognised and understood the influence of the historic, centralist tradition of the State in Iraq (as is the case elsewhere in the East), and he began by attempting to pacify each element, starting with the core. This process involved re-evaluating a deep-rooted strategy which consisted of consolidating centralised power and legitimising the status of chiefs.

Without taking anything away from the personal merits of Nouri al Maliki, in 2006 he was still relatively unknown by most of the population. He was at the head of a weak power and his authority was contested by armed groups and the militia. Apart from the Green Zone, the government did not have total control of the capital, and Baghdad was divided : the left bank was under the domination of Al Qaeda and its allies, and the right bank was controlled by the Sadr militia, the Al-Mahdi Army. This division of the capital, which was potentially dangerous, was a painful experience for its population, which explains why it was more than ready to change the situation and do away with the armed groups and militia which were a source of fear and terror. The Iraqi Prime Minister's determination played a considerable role in the re-emergence of a State and the partial transformation of the image of the chief (the '*rais*') in the collective imagination. It is also true that there were other factors apart from the aspirations of the population and the Prime Minister's determination, which prompted the turning point in 2007 and 2008. Additional military, political and economic means implemented by the American army on a grand scale at the end of 2006 were also important factors !

The complexity of the implementation of this new strategy (called the 'Surge') led to hitherto unexpected changes among the population, for example, how the people judged their Prime Minister before and after the Surge. Before the Surge, Nouri Al Maliki was seen as a rigid Shiite leader from the Da'awa party, originally from a region close to Karbala (Twerij), and a member of the Albou Ali tribe in the village of Jnajeh. Afterwards, he was seen as a) an Iraqi Shiite leader, b) a Muslim, c) an Arab, d) a member of the Da'awa party, e) from the region of Twerij, and f) a member of the Albou Ali tribe in the village of Jnajeh. This is not just a simple classification and reclassification without any political effect : the way he was seen was a manifestation of his legitimacy which either diminished or increased depending on whether or not the population agreed with his politics.

Nonetheless, as a good political strategist, Nouri Al Maliki remains a Shiite leader. According to his vision, Iraq is based on three relevant ethnic, denominational identities : Shiite, Sunni and Kurd. He stated that a majority of Iraqis, like a large part of the international community, agreed that after 2003 Iraq should continue to be governed by the Shiite majority of the country. As a result, there were important consequences for the country. Firstly, even though they were divided with their dispersed electoral lists guaranteeing them third place in the most recent legislative elections on March 7th 2010, the Shiites were assured of governing the country. Secondly, once this first idea was agreed upon, Nouri Al Maliki established

himself as an undisputed Shiite leader both because of his electoral results and because of the power which the country had given him. The third consequence, which was unexpected, was the emergence of a bizarre collusion between the Americans and the Iranians in their agreement about Nouri Al Maliki's candidacy. The Americans support him because they think that he has gained experience, and that he proved his determination particularly during the confrontations with armed groups and the militia. They are also grateful to him for signing the strategic outline agreement which organised the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq without completely ending their presence in the country. Iranian support for Nouri Al Maliki can be explained primarily by his Shiite identity, and the fact that he was rejected by neighbouring Arab countries, which for the Iranians is a considerable bonus point. However, the Iranians realise that Nouri Al Maliki, a Shiite leader and a Muslim, is still an Iraqi, with Arab culture. Consequently, he will be a difficult ally for Teheran.

**Q. :** *This enterprise led by General Petraeus which you describe as very complex, is a radical change from the ideology and American military logic between 2003 and 2006 under the presidency of George W. Bush. What will happen with Barack Obama ? Will he really withdraw troops from Iraq in a year's time as he has said ?*

**H. D. :** The Americans announced that, in accordance with the agreement made with the Iraqi government, all their military forces would leave Iraq in June 2010. Today there are still 50,000 American soldiers in Iraq... I do not know the exact figure for contract employees sent by private security companies, but on the basis of data from previous years (there were several tens of thousands of bodyguards in the country between 2003 and 2008), the situation is that thousands of men belonging to paramilitary forces are still in Iraq. The current US Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, recently talked about the creation of a force of 9,000 military who will stay on in Iraq after 2011 and whose main purpose will be to protect the huge American embassy in Baghdad and its staff.

The bottom line is what are American soldiers, be they combatant or non-combatant, doing in Iraq ? Military experts have classified the Iraqi conflict since 2004 as a war of low intensity which does not require the presence on the ground of huge Abrams tanks and frequent overflying of the capital by F16 fighter aircraft in order to control these neighbourhoods ! On the other hand, the special forces are essential in Iraq as they are multifunctional. They train people, take action, fight and kill people when needed. It is clear that part of the special forces is doomed or damned to stay after 2011.

If a glance at the geopolitical map of the Middle East region and the immediate surrounding area makes us, ordinary citizens, giddy, what would the president of the world's leading economic power, the United States think ? Today, nobody can ignore the local and global nature of the Afghan conflict, the dangers of an unstable Pakistan or an ambitious and dominating Iran or an unstable Yemen in the midst of chaos, separatist movements and Al Qaeda threats, an indefinable Somalia, a Sudan heading towards partition, not to mention Lebanon and Palestine. Iraq is situated right in the middle of all this. Does Washington really think it is possible to leave this rich country without any real protection almost immediately ? Realpolitik will ensure that the Americans stay in one form or another, probably turning to the international community to ask for help. To stay in Iraq is expensive, but leaving the country suddenly would undoubtedly lead to further damage. President Obama, like all leaders of democratic countries, is torn by this dilemma : how should one respect one's electoral commitments while at the same time take into account the strategic importance of one's country in the Arabian/Persian Gulf area which is an extremely sensitive part of the world ? It is certainly more reasonable to leave the Iraqis to govern and to protect their country themselves, but how ? And with what means ? The Americans took years to deconstruct what remained of Iraq. Is President Obama capable of establishing and leaving behind a pluralist and legally constituted state in just the space of a year ? That is the question !

**Q. :** *What was John Negroponte's role ?*

**H. D. :** During the Reagan years, John Negroponte was a 'star' ambassador in Central America, a region exposed to far-left revolutionary movements. At that time, Robert Gates was director of the CIA. Years later, when John Negroponte was put in charge of co-

ordination between various spying and security operations in the United States, and was subsequently appointed 'star' ambassador to Iraq between 2004 and 2005, by curious coincidence, Robert Gates was made Defence Secretary in charge of the Iraq dossier shortly afterwards. Even though John Negroponte hardly spent more than a year in Iraq, his appointment makes one think that the United States immediately tried to apply solutions to Iraq which had been tested a few years earlier in Central America. The Americans had to find a rapid and tough solution for this turbulent situation which brought the organisation and rise of insurgency in the Sunni zone, and the troubles caused by the Sadr Shiite militia. John Negroponte determinedly attempted to eliminate Jihad radicals by combining information gleaned by the intelligence services, and ordering heavy military strikes by the special forces. The diplomatic career of John Negroponte in the Bush administration ended with his appointment in 2007 as deputy Secretary of State to Condoleezza Rice. This policy of using a small carrot and a very big stick by successive US ambassadors continued until the arrival of Ryan Crocker in 2007 about whom very little is said. He served a number of years in Pakistan, Iran and Lebanon and speaks several Middle Eastern languages such as Urdu, Pashto, Persian and Arabic. Together with General Petraeus, he formed an unusual, high-performance double act which succeeded in rescuing George W. Bush's policy in Iraq which inexorably descended into deadlock.

**Q. :** *Was the American army trained to cope with tribes ?*

**H. D. :** No. They were not trained to cope with the tribes, but some directives were modified and certain behaviour was ruled out. But the wrong was already done ; their image was severely tarnished in the eyes of the population. I had the opportunity in 2003 to ask a group of Iraqis the following question : 'What do you most dislike about the American army in Iraq ?' Their answer was almost unanimous : 'They have no respect whatsoever for our way of life, and yet they invited themselves into our country.' On the sides of armoured vehicles which patrolled in Iraqi towns, even those with a Shiite majority (and therefore not necessarily hostile), was written 'Keep away, Danger of death'. This inability to understand local customs has caused a great deal of trouble for the Americans, so much so that their own Western allies in the field have avoided being identified with them. The Italians wrote on their armoured vehicles which criss-crossed southern Iraqi towns 'We are Italian !'

From 2006 onwards, there was less tactlessness or even aggression. It must be said that most Iraqis were delighted to get rid of Saddam Hussein. For them, the story stopped there, but for the Americans, their mission had only just begun. All the misunderstanding stems from this point.

**Q. :** *People have always marvelled at the British troops' know-how in Basra. What is the origin of this ?*

**H. D. :** We got the impression that the British understood Iraq because of their colonial presence in the country until the 1950s, despite the fact that the Iraqi society and culture of today does not resemble that of the 1950s at all ! Let me tell you an anecdote which speaks volumes. As far as Arabs are concerned, regardless of whether they are believers or not, dogs are considered impure. When a British patrol which was looking for weapons entered a tribal chief's house with sniffer dogs, it was making two mistakes : in this part of Iraq where the gun symbolises virility and authority, one does not take arms away from a tribal chief in a humiliating way in front of the rest of the tribe ; and if there are also dogs present, it is even worse ! This mistake ended in three deaths on the Iraqi side and six dead British soldiers.

The British have a different way of working to the Americans. They delegate more, and are not pretentious enough to force a universal model on people. Their different behaviour in the field sometimes leads them to conclude tacit agreements with armed groups and militia which are frankly cynical. They prefer to make agreements with local chiefs whom they allow to exercise their power as they wish in exchange for peaceful cohabitation. This was the case in Basra until 2008. When the British troops withdrew in 2009, the Americans were left with a population which had got used to various British practices, and this has made life difficult for the Americans.

## **The religious question and the middle class**

**Q. :** *The religious problem in a country which is mostly Shiite and which is led by Sunni minorities is very interesting. Do the past and the tradition of a strong state in Iraq still have any meaning ?*

**H. D. :** The religious question is clearly central. However, it is only from the 1990s onwards and the collapse following the withdrawal from Kuwait that the Iraqis started to define themselves according to their denominational affiliation. At the time, the primary concern of Saddam Hussein's regime was political survival which he achieved by relying exclusively on his ethnic (Arab), denominational (Sunni) and tribal base. As for the opposition, it mainly defined itself according to its denominational identity (Shiite) and its distinct ethnic affiliation (Kurd). For the majority of the population, its only concern was to manage to survive the embargo. As a result, the population withdrew into its shell. From that moment onwards, Saddam's power base started resembling a Russian set of dolls : from the outside, a leader may be an Iraqi, but when one starts to dig a little deeper, one discovers that he is also an Arab, then a Muslim, then a Sunni, and finally the member of a loyal tribe. Power has become concentrated in this last, smallest Russian doll. Thereafter, the political and functional fragmentation of society has been completely changed.

Secondly, from the 1990s onwards and from the period which the Iraqis refer to as the uprising to overturn the regime of Saddam Hussein in 1991, there was a very hostile reaction to the governing power from populations in southern Iraq. One must not forget that even today, a city as rich as Basra, which is located on oil fields capable of producing more than fifty billion barrels, does not have enough drinking water, or electricity, or public roads, or a police force. The inhabitants saw this as some sort of punishment, and asked Iran for aid. As a result, many groups were formed, based on political and denominational affinity.

**Q. :** *All the same, Saddam Hussein created a middle class...*

**H. D. :** This middle class, made up of executives, civil servants and shopkeepers, was completely ruined at the end of the 1980s, and those who were able to, left the country. Shortly afterwards, politics took on a radical dimension by incorporating religion. One gets the impression that when he saw the map of the geography of Iraq's natural resources, rightly or wrongly Saddam Hussein based his strategy on denominational criteria which had not been the case before.

When the Americans arrived in Iraq, their aim was to create an advanced model of Shiite civilisation, starting in Iraq. One must realise the context of these events and not forget that the invasion of Iraq took place less than two years after 9/11, a time when the US was shocked to discover that 15 of the 19 kamikaze terrorists were Saudi (and therefore, according to the Americans, radical Sunni Wahabis). Therefore, their policy was two-fold : to transform Iraq, which had a Shiite majority, from a hostile country into an ally which, with Western help, would not only face up to the Sunnite tribal chiefs but also create a model in opposition to the radical Iranian Shiite model.

However, Iraq had never experienced any political pluralism, and had never had an institutional democratic culture, nor had it had peaceful changes in power. From 2004 and 2005 onwards, the Americans were faced with local variations and internal conflicts both of which are real-life, but uncontrollable situations, and which did not come close to their preconceived ideological programme. This is why the machinery became derailed.

## **The fate of Kurdistan**

**Q. :** *How will the Kurdish problem be resolved ?*

**H. D. :** France was responsible for two international decisions regarding the Kurdish case. The first was taken in 1989 at the Paris conference which led to the banning of chemical weapons following the bombing of the Kurdish city of Halabja. The second was taken in 1991 when there was a massive exodus of Kurds into Turkey after the defeat of the Iraqi uprising

when France suggested that the UN introduce what has since been called the ‘right to humanitarian interference’. Western countries, with approval from the international community, oversaw the aerial protection of the Kurdish zone which forced the withdrawal of government forces. Thus, from 1991 onwards, the Kurds created their prototype state under international protection.

Since then, we have seen the emergence of a generation of young people educated only in the Kurdish language and not speaking a word of Arabic, who have institutions and chiefs who only recognise Baghdad as an *alter ego* at best. Officially, the Kurds are still part of Iraq, but an Iraq whose state-like structure still needs to be defined. I think that we should talk about confederalism rather than federalism in view of what is happening. We are in the same country, but with different economies, international relations, armies, flags and symbols and, in the case of a conflict between the state and the Kurdish region, international mediation could be used which would not be possible in a federal state.

The Kurdish problem is therefore still worrying. The Kirkuk region, which is multi-ethnic and includes Turkmen, Arabs and Kurds, contains 15 % of all Iraq’s oil reserves. In order to construct an economy and a state, the Kurds consider this region to be absolutely vital to them if Iraq ever collapsed. Currently, the Kurds are relatively rich in comparison with the rest of Iraq, but Kurdistan is full of contradictions and frailties, and certain countries in the region are openly hostile. Kurdistan is standing on a carpet which certain regional or international powers could pull from under its feet in order to bring it down ! There are also internal rivalries between Jalal Talabani (a Kurd but also the President of Iraq) and Massoud Barzani (also a Kurd and President of the autonomous Kurdish region). This is a rivalry between two generations, two cultures, and two histories. What is important is how the Kurds can use all these different identities and religious and denominational diversities without forgetting Sufism, which is highly developed in this region, in order to consolidate and cement their national identity.

Presentation of the speaker :

Hosham Dawod is an anthropologist at the CNRS. His area of specialisation is Iraq. He has published work on several aspects such as ethnicity, tribalism, power and kinship including ‘Tribus et pouvoirs en terre d’Islam’ (pub. Armand Colin, 2004) by Faleh A. Jabar & Hosham Dawod & others ; ‘Strategic Conflict Assessment of Iraq’ (pub. DFID, London, 2005), translated and published recently in Arabic by IIST – Beirut, 2007 ; Hosham Dawod & Faleh A. Jabar (Eds), ‘The Kurds, Nationalism and politics’ (pub. Saqi Books, London, 2006), translated and published in Arabic and Kurdish (Beyrouth, Bagdad et Erbil, 2006). He is the editor of the 6th issue of the ‘Moyen-Orient’ review entitled ‘Chiisme, spécificités, revendications et réformes’ (pub. Paris, 2010). The book ‘Tribus et pouvoirs en Irak : de Saddam Hussein à David Petraeus’ (pub. Paris) will be published soon.

Translation by Rachel Marlin (rjmarlin@gmail.com)