

Interview - Nadim Shehadi

Written by E-International Relations

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Nadim Shehadi is director of the Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies at The Fletcher School at Tufts University. He is also an associate fellow of Chatham House where he directs a programme on the regional dimension of the Palestinian refugee issue in the Middle East Peace Process, and a senior member of St Antony's College Oxford where he was director of the Centre for Lebanese Studies from 1986 to 2005.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

The most exciting and dynamic conversation is happening on social media, it is spontaneous, continuous and instant. It is quite sophisticated and with unwritten rules. I don't think that 'retweets are not endorsements' really stands, people generally stick to a narrative and spread what is in line with their version of events or discredit what is not. Eventually they form closed circles and interact with like-minded people. There is a whole battle being fought there and it is fascinating to watch that live on your device, you can learn so much from it and you have access to people's inner thoughts.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I am a repentant economist; I lost the faith in the discipline and eventually in the whole concept of social 'science' and shifted to history of ideas. I studied economics in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was a time of deep crisis in the discipline. I went back to the debates in the 1930s between economists at Cambridge and the LSE which was formative for the post WWII system of ideas that were then being questioned. But maybe this was also an escape for me, this was during the Lebanese civil war, I was an exile in the UK and ignored what was happening in my country taking refuge in these questions. The Israeli invasion of 1982 changed all that and subsequent events kept drawing me back to the region. I think the combination of these two interests were formative; they gave me a century wide perspective on events and skepticism about the apparent rationality of the 20th century. I also had the immense luck of interacting with several inspiring people, some were economists and others historians and each one taught me something. Albert Hourani in Oxford was a great influence because of his kindness, openness and eagerness to learn. I have seen him listening intently to conversations with graduate students who felt empowered just by being given such importance, he very gently and subtly influenced their ideas. Kamal Salibi taught me that the world is very complex but needs to be explained in simple language, like a cryptic crossword puzzle. Leila Fawaz made me aware that history is about people, not just ideas, leaders and grand schemes. Some people influence you without being aware of it, like my colleagues at Chatham House. We were a very close group formed by Rosemary Hollis who brought out the best in all of us and we had amazing conversations.

You have been calling for a revisiting of the lessons of Iraq, why is this important?

I have been calling for a revision of the lessons of Iraq mainly because of Syria. The US Syrian policy is dominated by the ghosts of past conflicts, including the US experience in Iraq. The West is making so many mistakes in Syria, which are inspired by the wrong lessons from the Iraq experience. You can see this in every statement made by politicians. Most the time while they are talking about Syria, they are in reality talking about Iraq.

Interview - Nadim Shehadi

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Much has been written about how Iraq was destabilized as a result of the 2003 military intervention. How would you describe Iraq's socio-political environment prior to the invasion?

A future historian who will look back on the invasion will look at it from a much broader perspective than many are today. It is important to refer to the debates in 2013, ten years after Iraq and the Americans had withdrawn. There were a whole series of articles regarding the lessons learned from the Iraqi experience. Most of these articles ignored the period before 2003. I think a more useful prism would be to look at 1991 to 2003, or even 1980 onward the 1980s was an important time period in Iraq. The monsters that we are dealing with now or that we are not able to deal with now, are products of 1980s Iran-Iraq war. By that I mean ISIS and the IRGC. Saddam Hussein managed to consolidate his regime, get rid of his opponents, commit unspeakable acts, including against Sunnis, because of the war. When you have war, leaders become dictators. Saddam Hussein was already a dictator, he became even worse.

Similarly in Iran, the extremists took control. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) took control so both countries Iran and Iraq, became governed by extremism. This evolved in the 1990s. Saddam Hussein started developed an Islamist narrative based on Taqfiri ideology, in order to make his army fight the Shias better, ISIS is partly a product of that.

The damage done to Iraq prior to the invasion was far worse than anything that happened after 2003. Therefore, it is important to look at Iraq not just from the point of invasion but also since the 1980s and 1990s. Most of what you see after 2003, in a way is a consequence of that period. What we saw and what we are seeing is a consequence of having kept Saddam for so long and not only that of removing him.

In 1991, there was an uprising in Iraq where the central government lost control of 14 out of 18 provinces. People went out into the streets, took control of Baath party headquarters, of security services buildings, and declared themselves liberated. Instead of helping them, the US allowed Saddam Hussein to massacre them and to crush the rebellion; helicopters were flying within sight of American troops. Then instead of helping them remove Saddam, we punished the people with sanctions. And then Saddam went on a rampage. He went town to town publicly executing the leaders of the revolt and their families in order to re-establish power.

During this time period, when Marsh Arabs revolted against Saddam, he drained the marshes and launched a campaign against them. There were about a half a million people, they had their own culture, way of life. There were probably about 30 to 50 thousand left after the massacres, displacement, etc. Saddam also had a lot of policies that involved forced displacement of people. For example, whole sections of Arabs were moved to Kurdish areas and vice versa, Shias were moved to Sunni areas and Sunnis to Shia areas.

Western policy during that time was equally damaging, because it imposed the sanctions that resulted in people suffering instead of helping them when they needed it. In addition, the oil for food programme gave Saddam a huge boost in power. Nobody could buy any food or medicine without going through the Baath party, not even an aspirin, because everything went through the central government.

So it's a combination of western policies and allowing Saddam a free hand to suppress his population. That existed between 1991 and 2003. Concrete examples of what Iraq experienced included: wide scale sectarianism, the eradication of the middle classes, professors were selling their books in the streets to get by, and anyone who could leave the country did. This all played to strengthen Saddam's hand.

Transition after the removal of Saddam is influenced by all of these events. If one wants to speculate about how transition would have looked like if it happened in 1991 instead of 2003, look at Kurdistan. Kurdistan was very damaged. But because of the protection it received it could recover. So this is why many Iraqis call it liberation in 2003, rather than an invasion.

After Saddam was kicked out of Kuwait he could have been removed easily and he wasn't. He was allowed to crush the revolt in the south. He was allowed to massacre a lot of Shia and Kurds. He also kept the world busy with removal

Interview - Nadim Shehadi

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of his Chemical Weapons same tricks as used by Assad now.

In your opinion what are the lessons for Syria?

There is an established or received wisdom from Iraq that paralyzes our decision making towards Syria. We are simply too afraid to do anything in case the mistakes of Iraq are repeated. The result is that Western governments are actually repeating the Iraq experience by keeping a dictatorship in power that is destroying the country in a similar way to Iraq from 1991 to 2003.

Perceived wisdom from Iraq is that we should not engage in regime change, diplomacy should be used and that removing Saddam was a mistake that resulted in US defeat. These notions should be revisited and revised.

Are you advocating intervention in Syria?

Advocating intervention is against the law. It's immoral. And it's impractical. We cannot advocate intervention wherever there are dictators. It is not the role of the west to become the world's policeman and to decide if Assad should be removed; that is not what I am advocating. However, people who live under these dictatorships sometimes need help and if they don't receive help we see the horrors that happen. It is similar to the responsibility to protect, but it's a little bit more complicated. Let me explain why: The question is not why the Syrians revolted in 2011, which is what most people ask. What I would ask is why did they not revolt before that? If the Assad regime is so bad why did they not revolt before that? People who live under a dictatorship know it is suicide to go out and protest in the streets. The only time they will do it is when they believe there is a chance of success or that they will get external support.

This is what happened in 1991, people revolted in Iraq firmly believing that they would get protection from the United States. Instead they were abandoned and were massacred. In 2011, people in Syria also believed they had a chance of success. They were encouraged by what happened in Tunisia, Egypt and the revolt as well as the intervention in Libya. They thought they would get support and they did not, that is why they were massacred. The message the world gave to the Assad regime in 2011, made the regime believe that it had a license to kill. So that's why I think that in 2011 there was very firm moral ground to protect the population and there still is.

It is an outrage that the regime is allowed to kill hundreds of people every week using barrel bombs, and that the international community is not helping them or allowing them to have anti-aircraft arms to protect themselves. It is very clear that it is the United States is putting a veto on the supply of anti-aircraft for the opposition. So what is happening in Syria is not purely the responsibility of the regime. It is a collective international responsibility.

I think that people in Syria have decided they want change. They have taken the step to go out into the streets and we are letting them down if we don't help them. The regime is very well equipped to crush a revolt and that is what it is doing. Furthermore, I think in the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran, the Basij and the Pasdaran were successful in stopping the revolt through terror. In Syria the regime forces were not; the more they used terror and force, the more the revolt grew and it got out of hand. In Iran, we should have helped the Iranians and the regime would not have dared to do as much as they did. In Iran the suppression was successful. In Syria the suppression of the revolt failed and it resulted in the growth of the revolt and now the regime is exterminating and starving its own population.

Power is more like an idea; it is abstract and intangible, enforced by a narrative. When Assad had absolute power in Syria there was stability and there was no need to exercise power. But when he lost power and could not regain it no matter what the level of suppression and force, things went out of control. It is then there is a moral duty to intervene and the morality of non-intervention is questionable. A future historian will look at the legality, the morality, and the consequences of intervention and non-intervention and make a different judgment. For example, looking at 1991, the non-removal of Saddam; non-intervention was legal. Removal of Saddam would have been illegal in 1991, but looking at it now one sees that it was immoral to deliberately keep him in power and we are paying the price of that.

One has to bear in mind that there are consequences for intervention and non-intervention. So people speak about

Interview - Nadim Shehadi

Written by E-International Relations

unintended consequences of action there are also unintended consequences of inactions. The west does not have the luxury of inaction at this point.

The Iraq War is seen by some as a defeat for the US which has allowed Iran greater control over the country. What are your thoughts?

When the US intervened in 2003 to remove Saddam, it upset a regional order that was stagnant. The region was controlled by regimes that ruled by terror, and seemed to be invulnerable. People had given up on revolt and were submissive.

When the invasion removed Saddam it shook the region and disturbed that stagnation. The removal of Saddam was a threat to every single regime in the region and was opposed by every regime: the Gulf countries, Syria, even by US allies, such as Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, everyone opposed it and felt threatened. This was due to two reasons. Firstly, they confused stagnation and stability. Secondly, some of them felt that the removal of Saddam would encourage their own populations to rise. Had the American project succeeded in Iraq, it would have been even more of a threat and the regimes did all that they could to get in the way of US success in Iraq.

When we saw the anti-American protests across the Muslim world, they were mainly orchestrated demonstrations. These regimes are very good at organizing mass popular demonstrations. These were part of their strategy to upset and sabotage the US project in Iraq. These were to show that the Muslim world rejected the US policy. We all know that these regimes do not allow demonstrations. So when you had this type of demonstrations they were pushed for by their governments.

During the Arab springs, there were no anti-American or anti-Israeli slogans or flag burning because the governments were not organizing them. So, one has to revise all of these conclusions about defeat, about the invasion causing more anti-American feeling in the region. The US successfully removed Saddam from power. There is no question about it. What happened later was a counter attack against the US which the US interpreted as a result of its own mistakes. For example, the Al Qaeda attacks in the north, were part of a counter attack by former Baathists, and terrorist organizations with full support of the Syrian regime.

That's in the north. In the south, the Shia militias were supported by the IRGC. So American presence in Iraq was attacked by both Iran and Syria and instead of fighting back, and helping the Iraqis fight back and reestablishing their country, they declared defeat and left mainly for internal political reasons. I think a more careful examination of casualty figures should be done: how many of the casualties were caused by US actions, Syria actions, or Iranian actions?.

In the summer of 2006 you had regional counter offensives against all US interests in the Middle East; a regional destabilization which started on the 25th of June with Gaza exploding after the kidnap of an Israeli soldier. Then on the 12th of July, you have Lebanon exploding. And then throughout August, September and October you have terrorist operations in Iraq multiplying exponentially. If you look at the casualty figures in Iraq that is when they went up. These were mainly caused by Syrian and Iranian actions. Faced with this regional destabilization the US had the choice of either escalating and confronting the attack(s) or capitulating and withdrawing. The US capitulated and withdrew. There was an attempt to fix this situation with the surge, but then the US withdrawal reversed any gains brought by the surge. The Iraqis that assisted in getting rid of Al Qaeda felt totally abandoned by the United States.

This is where internal politics played a very dirty and negative game – let me finish with that. I think that the best indication for understanding the internal political game is to look at the congressional hearing when General Petraeus was presenting the idea of a surge to congress; the idea was to increase the number of troops in Iraq rather than decrease them in order to destabilize the situation. This idea was vehemently opposed, with the four best speeches being made by a) Nancy Pelosi b) John Kerry c) Hillary Clinton d) most brilliant speaker of all called Barack Obama. They opposed the surge. Watching this from London I felt that they were not taking the interests of Iraq into account. The opposition to the surge was not taking US interests into account. Instead, they were looking at certain domestic factors and interests.

Interview - Nadim Shehadi

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George Bush was in deep trouble and his political rivals did not want to support something that would support his reputation. They wanted Iraq to look like a disaster and effectively sold defeat in Iraq to the public in order to gain popular support and win elections. The democrats defined themselves as “we are not George Bush”.

Unfortunately and tragically for the Syrian people, the Democrats used Assad to demonstrate that they are right. When Assad was actively fighting American presence in Iraq and supporting al Qaeda Pelosi went to Damascus in defiance of George Bush’s policies. She was followed by John Kerry who went again with his wife had a highly publicized dinner with Assad and his wife. Damascus was flooded with democratic delegations, congressional delegations, academic, local government, students, just for local political reasons and to show that you can do engagement and make a deal.

This is one of the main factors that prevents the US from intervening and helping the Syrian people, because if at any time they intervened and advocated regime change in Syria, it would be the equivalent of admitting that George bush was right and vindicating his policies. The reason the Iran deal was so important, to this administration, is a continuation of this – to show that engagement works in support of their narrative.

So the US keeps saying that it does not have a strategy in the Middle East. What is your opinion?

My answer to this is simple. It is that the US plays a different game in the Middle East than that of its opponents such as Russia and Iran. Russia and Iran play the region like a long chess game, where every move has an impact on the next, and where there is a clear objective that defines success or failure. Whereas the US plays poker: in a poker game every hand is different, you win some and lose some and you can withdraw and cut your losses, there is no clearly defined objective or enemy. The only problem is that even though the US is playing poker, it is playing with its cards exposed. It is unable to bluff. After the US backtracked, after Obama backtracked from the red line in Syria no one takes it seriously.

So, my final comment is about US power. The US has a lot of instruments of power and force at its disposal, but it has lost power because people do not believe in US power anymore. Its opponents think it is weak and its allies think it is unreliable. This makes its opponents feel that they can challenge it with impunity. This is what Russia is doing in Crimea and Syria, and this is what Iran is doing in almost all contexts in the region.

So what about ISIS? What about ISIS and the fight against ISIS?

The strategy against ISIS is self-defeating, and the reason is also simple to understand. The US is fighting ISIS with the help of the IRGC, the result of this is that it is empowering both ISIS and the IRGC. ISIS and the IRGC are the two monsters that are part of the ripple effect of the Iran-Iraq war, they represent the worst of the region.

If one is to look at the best case scenario for the region, it is a future that is free of ISIS, where main stream Sunnis dominate rather than the radicals, and the IRGC is also weakened. These two groups reinforce each other by fighting each other, because they define each other by their opposition to each other. The reason why ISIS can walk unopposed into Ramadi, Mosul, etc. is because of the bigger threat to these areas from the IRGC and the Iraqi government who have committed atrocities against the populations of these regions.

On the other hand, the IRGC is also gaining ground in Iraq, at the expense of the mainstream Shias that follow Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf. The reason why it is gaining ground is because of its fight against ISIS. So the worst possible strategy, which defeats the US’s objectives, is the one that it is pursuing now. By fighting ISIS with the IRGC they are in essence empowering both at the expense of their mainstream populations. ISIS and the IRGC are winning, not against each other, but against their own mainstream.

American declared objectives are to defeat ISIS on the one hand and to empower the moderates in Iran through the nuclear deal. The American strategy of fighting ISIS in alliance with the IRGC defeats both of these objectives.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Interview - Nadim Shehadi

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Only one: that the most difficult challenge to our understanding of what is going on in the world today is the intellectual legacy of the 20th century, everything we took for granted and were taught needs to be questioned. There is a very different pace of change between ideas, values and institutions. It's like performing a 'reboot' on a PC ctrl+alt+del and clearing the cache and browsing history.

I would like to stress that there is a lot more to the region than the current obsession with ISIS indicates and much of it is positive. Scholars should resist succumbing to the lure of ISIS and look beyond it.

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This interview was conducted by Satgin Hamrah. Satgin is an Editor-at-Large at E-IR