Interview - Mohammed Ihsan

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Professor Mohammed Ihsan is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at Kings College London and teaches at the University for Peace in Costa Rica. Prior to this, Ihsan held cabinet posts in the Kurdistan Regional Government from 2000-2014, including Minister for Extra Regional Affairs and Minister for Human Rights and other positions including President of the General Board for Disputed Areas in Iraq, International Investigator for Genocide crimes in Iraq from 2001 to 2005, Kurdistan Representative to the Federal Government in Iraq and President of the International University of Erbil. Ihsan has authored numerous books, newspaper contributions and academic articles, primarily concerning the Kurdish question in Iraq, Iran and Turkey and more recently, investigations into genocide. He holds two PhDs, in International Law and Arab and Islamic Studies.

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

If you are engaged in international relations or international law, then every day you encounter exciting papers on different issues, rather than on one specific topic. It is fascinating to hear or read different research, new ideas and debates on a daily basis. Recently, everyone was focused on the American withdrawal from Afghanistan – why it happened, how it happened and whether history is repeating itself. Then there are the implications for Iraq, Kurdistan, Iran and elsewhere. But my main fields of interest are genocide, human rights, war crimes and crimes against humanity. I follow these issues constantly and they take up a lot of energy, both mental and emotional. In addition to being a visiting professor at Kings College London, I teach at the University for Peace in Costa Rica, the only United Nations affiliated university in the world. This means I also have a lot of access to interesting materials relating to South America, including on human rights, reconciliation, drug trafficking and human trafficking.

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

I left Iraq in 1989 as a refugee, crossing the mountains into Turkey and ending up in the UK. I had previously achieved a BA in English Literature in Iraq, but after leaving Iraq my thoughts were increasingly about international law, because I wanted to be able to help my nation. I completed a BA in international law at SOAS and started to read a lot about Joseph Nye. He opened my eyes to a wider knowledge of the world and greatly affected by life. I then moved more towards international relations and politics. The occupation of Iraq in 2003 was one of the most significant developments in international relations since the end of the Cold War in 1989. It was the starting point for a lot of changes including the Arab Spring. Ultimately, a lot of dreams failed and given the amount energy spent on Iraq and the outcome, this was a disaster for the international community.

In terms of my predictions, with the coronavirus pandemic and withdrawal from Afghanistan, we seem to be entering a new phase in international relations. Most states are only thinking about themselves and state security, rather than collective security, so we are moving from a more liberal approach to a more realist one. Despite the contrary diplomatic language, this is evidenced by the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the same will happen in Iraq. Another major change which is going to occur will be the declining direct involvement of superpowers in many regions and a growing role for regional powers. I predict this will happen in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Central Asia and Central America. For example, rather than spending $9 trillion in Iraq, the US may delegate Turkey to perform more of a role in that country. Similarly, to Japan in Southeast Asia, to Pakistan in Afghanistan, to Mexico in Central

America and so on.

Prior to your current academic career, you had extensive direct experience of the political and legal system in Kurdistan and Iraq. However, in some cases, your insights are either recorded as unpublished personal notes or information which remains restricted. To what extent have these factors posed an obstacle to your subsequent academic work?

This issue as has had a serious effect on my academic life. Unusually, I was someone who moved from a political career to an academic once. People normally move in the opposite direction, especially in the Middle East. Over the course of eighteen years, I held five cabinet positions in Kurdistan prior to entering academia, while most people try to gain a university degree in order to move into a higher position in the government. Sometimes, holding political positions restricted how I could express myself, because people would often mistakenly think that my personal ideas were government or party standpoints. My personal expectations, knowledge or analysis would often be interpreted as showing that Iraq or the Kurdistan Regional Government were going to pursue a particular course of action. I do not advise other politicians to move into academic life. It is very hard and better to stay where you are or to recognise that moving from academic life into political life is far more preferable.

You have written about the de-Baathification process which was adopted in Iraq following the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003, including the mass dismissal of state employees ranging from civil servants to doctors. What were the implications of this on transitional justice and the rebuilding of state institutions?

I worked as a legal advisor for the South African government after the end of apartheid in 1994, preparing myself for a future transitional justice and reconciliation process in Iraq, which we expected would happen one day. I was involved in de-Baathification at the beginning of the process but not its implementation. We classified Baathists into three categories. There were the true believers, then those who were Baathists because you needed to be in order to progress in life and finally Baathists who could more accurately be understood as 'Saddamists'.

I believe there should be a general amnesty for the first two categories. Those in the third group committed crimes against others – genocide – but they are usually protected from going to court for legal reasons. There should be a legal way to take action against them, should their victims wish to pursue that course. If it is not possible to deal with such a major issue, then the outcome will be a disaster. I remember in 1991, when I and many other Kurds came down from sheltering in the mountains, I was totally against the idea of a general amnesty. But as one grows up, you get a better idea of what amnesty means. We have to stop the circle of blood. This was the position of the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, Masoud Barzani, even in 1992 before the transformation in South Africa.

The Shias used the de-Baathification process in a very bad way which paved the way for a sectarian war against the Sunnis. It is often overlooked that a majority of Baathists had been Shias, but nevertheless the de-Baathification process predominately targeted Sunni Baathists. Even today, some of the top members of the Iraqi army are former Baathists who have remained simply because they are Shia, whereas the Sunnis have been removed. This is why I think the implementation was wrong. If you are not fair in your approach, then you will end up with a problematic situation rather than genuine transitional justice. The Americans failed to understand this, thinking that the Shia leadership were more liberal and needed to be listened too. The result today is that 4 million well-educated Iraqis are no longer in the country. Iraq has the worst example of transitional justice in the world.

Underpinning the flawed transitional justice process is the fact that there is something wrong with identity in Iraq and that a sense of citizenship does not exist. Although Iraq has reached a centenary since its foundation, it is still an Iraq without Iraqis. People identify primarily as Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians or Turkmen. Unfortunately, the poorly implemented de-Baathification process was the main cause of economic collapse, a lack of human resources, civil war, the chasm between Baghdad and Erbil and the rise of ISIS. You now find the best Iraqi doctors in London rather than Baghdad.

Can any comparisons be drawn between the de-Baathification process and the approach taken by the

Iraqi government more recently towards territory liberated from ISIS? To what extent has progress towards reconciliation been hindered by exclusion and collective punishments?

In 2003 Iraqis were more hostile towards Baathists than they are today towards ISIS. The political mentality of most Iraqis is not objective and does not lend itself towards nation-building. If you look at ISIS members in liberated territory, the numbers who have been killed or captured are minimal. The implausible impression is that the ISIS membership must have just been a couple of hundred, who were somehow able to seize 60% of the country. Today, people are shocked for similar reasons about the Taliban retaking Afghanistan, but the earlier example of ISIS seizing much of Iraq is worse. American loses in the Iraqi example were higher than the recent events in Afghanistan and ISIS is still operating and planning from Iraqi territory. There is a large security vacuum particularly in the west of the country bordering Syria. Despite all this, the de-Baathification process was even worse than the 'de-ISIS' process.

Iraqis do not have a good history of reconciliation. When Iraq became independent from the Ottoman Empire, there was a 'de-Ottomanisation' process which led to most of those who had worked for the Ottomans being killed. The same thing happened later to those Iraqis who worked for the British in the 1930s; to the pro-Nazi Iraqis during the Second World War; to the royalist Iraqis, the king and all his family members in 1958 and those Iraqis who had killed the king were in turn killed when the Baathists took over in 1964. There is a history of bloodshed rather than reconciliation. In 2003, those who came to power could not do quite the same because the Americans were present. Furthermore, people have become tired of this pattern and I believe it is necessary for all Iraqis, including Kurds, to accept that they have unjust pasts.

We need to look forward and focus on reconciliation. The first lines of the South African constitution state that all the nations of South Africa must accept that they have an unjust past. Iraqis are slowly moving towards this concept, but they require mediators and brokers. Across the Middle East as a whole, people often lack the ability to negotiate for themselves and sort out their problems. They are slaves of their pasts and do not have clear visions of the future. To be a slave of your past is a psychological sickness. The problem is that the recent American brokers were in a rush, winning a battle but losing a war. The chance for reconciliation remains but it will be very slow and it is occurring at the social level more than the political level.

You have argued that "sectarianism [in Iraq] is one of the main obstacles to a national reconciliation that cannot occur unless all parties face their own past and reflect on a common future". Is such a reconciliation possible? Are there examples of national reconciliation elsewhere which could be a source of optimism?

Each society has its own characteristics and even weather and geography can affect reconciliation processes. For example, reaching agreements in Mosul in a July is very difficult as people are so hot and this affects temperament. On the level of religion, conditions are terrible in Iraq, with each religious group blaming another.

In South Africa, when groups reconcile with each other they can put some of their problems behind them, for example by one family providing cattle for another. In Iraq the picture tends to be different. Intragroup reconciliation started to happen, but intergroup reconciliation between Sunnis, Shia and Kurds did not work. This means that national reconciliation as a whole has been a disaster and progress will be very slow. The role of the economy is important. Unlike Mandela's approach in South Africa, the approach in Iraq has been to pay salaries to former prisoners of war but cut them for perpetrators. This paves the way for more conflict. Instead, it is better if you give both of them some money in order for all parties to survive. If a general who committed crimes subsequently has their pension removed, why should their innocent children be deprived of an income?

Another equation in Iraq relates to the three characters present at all crimes: victims, perpetrators and bystanders. Yesterday's victims are today's perpetrators and today's perpetrators will be the victims in future. This shift can happen almost every ten years in some Middle East countries and there are always bystanders who remain silent. There are not many active intervening bystanders like there were in South Africa. Bystanders can have a major role in reconciliation processes, whether the bystanders be local, national or international. In Iraq they all failed, due to

being too weak, divided or unable to intervene successfully. Ultimately reconciliation will work, but only in a very slow way.

Looking to the wider Middle East, you have argued that there is a widespread culture of blaming outside powers rather than assessing one's problems objectively. This has been most notable with frustrations following the 'Arab Spring'. How significant is this focus on external interference pose an obstacle to progress?

When you look at most problems in the Middle East, you need to look at it at three levels – national, regional and international. This is the case whether you are looking to solve or for that matter create problems. The national level is the most challenging factor. I worked in military intelligence in 1991 during the military operations of coalition countries to provide protection to Kurdish refugees, known as Operation Provide Comfort, and then in the Second Gulf War. From these experiences observed that the Middle East is totally different to any other part of the world. When external intelligence organisations want to intervene in other parts of the world, they need to look for agents, sources and people to work for them or pass on information. In the Middle East, it is almost the opposite. People will actually come to them asking for intervention. Iraqis have gone to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Europe asking for foreign involvement.

All the while, there is regional competition in the Middle East between Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel. Thankfully, there are fewer tensions today between Israel and other regional powers, although they have largely forgotten about Israel because they are fighting each other. At the national level, actors tend to blame international powers rather than acknowledge their own role in their problems. If more Middle East countries were able to separate state from religion and tackle corrupt, then they would stop solely blaming external factors and instead be able to fix their problems, leading to more peace and development. I am against the idea of blaming external powers for problems in order to avoid holding oneself to account.

We seem to have a cycle of Arab Springs, but followed by Summers, Autumns and Winters. The reason for the cycle is because in the Middle East the ideas necessary for building nations and developing effective governance largely do not exist. Whoever is in power tends to view others as their servants rather than viewing themselves as servants to the public. Unless you can look at the causes of issues objectively, then they will continue. All of the problems which led to the Arab Spring in 2011 still exist today and similarly all of the factors which led to the rise of ISIS in Iraq are still there. This phenomenon is seen in Afghanistan, where despite an American presence for twenty years, all of the factors which led to Taliban rule in the first place were obviously still there. If you continue to have the same bacteria, it is only a matter of time before the same diseases re-emerge. History repeats itself and we are going to witness more Arab Springs in future, even in the Gulf States.

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

My advice is to always be objective and get lessons from history. In your writing, never be emotional. Because if you become emotional, you are going to create more enemies for yourself and harm any causes you believe in. Be calm and always look forward while listening to the mistakes of history, regardless of your area of research in international relations. Be aware of the unexpected and never say that something is impossible. We have seen a lot of supposedly impossible events occur and missions which were once deemed impossible have become possible within our lives.