

Putting Cruelty First: An Interview with Kanan Makiya (Part 2)

Kanan Makiya is the Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Brandeis University, and the President of The Iraq Memory Foundation. His books, *The Republic of Fear: Inside Saddam's Iraq* (1989, written as Samir al-Khalil) and *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World* (1993) are classic texts on the nature of totalitarianism. Makiya has also collaborated on films for television. The award-winning film, *Saddam's Killing Fields*, exposed the Anfal, the campaign of mass murder conducted by the Ba'ath regime in northern Iraq in 1988. In October 1992, he acted as the convenor of the Human Rights Committee of the Iraqi National Congress. He was part of the Iraqi Opposition in the run-up to the Iraq War, which he supported as a war of liberation. The interview took place on December 16 2005. Part 1 appeared in *Democratiya* 3.

The Iraq War

Alan Johnson: In the run-up to the Iraq war few radical democrats were as close to the centres of decision-making as you, or more privy to the crucial debates. Few are in a better position to draw lessons. Can we begin in June 2002 when you are approached by the State Department and asked to participate in the Future of Iraq project? Initially you had a big clash with the State Department over the very terms of the project and of your involvement, right? What was at stake?

Kanan Makiya: When I was approached I was aware events were heading towards war. The State Department was actively preparing for it, and had invited a series of former Iraqi military officers over. The implication was that they were being groomed for leadership and that the Department of State was seeking change from within the Ba'ath regime, not from without by means of the organised Iraqi opposition. Regime change led by former Ba'athists was their way to the future and I would have none of that. I objected vigorously and refused to participate in the Future of Iraq project unless it was clearly and unambiguously about bringing democracy to Iraq. In its origins, and I am talking about the period between May and August 2002, the Future of Iraq project was clearly not conceived by the State Department as a project for building democracy in Iraq. It was about regime change without democracy. Letters went backwards and forwards between myself and United States government officials on these issues between May 2002 and August 2002.

After it became the American position to democratise Iraq (around August 2002) I agreed to participate in the Future of Iraq workshops. I had a meeting at the highest levels of the State Department and formulated a set of conditions regarding my participation. I participated in the Democratic Principles Workshop (it was called the Political Principles Workshop but the title changed after democratisation became the goal, and on the insistence of the US Congress, as I recall). My idea, as put to the Department of State prior to my involvement, was that a plan for the transition in Iraq would emerge from the discussions of the 32 Iraqis they had already chosen for the workshop. The Americans said they would not participate in the discussions, only host them. It was a tumultuous experience but in the end a document of several hundred pages was produced. *The Transition to Democracy in Iraq* is still available on the internet. I was intensively involved in the writing with four or five other leading figures, as is in the nature of these things; but it was discussed thoroughly and finally approved by all thirty two members of the workshop.

But we soon realised that the State Department had a totally different vision of the workshop. In their eyes it was about learning democracy, 101-style. They thought Iraqis would benefit from the process of sitting around a table and airing their views. I found this very condescending and wanted instead a position paper on the transition to be produced that would provide, in a crude sort of way, a joint Iraqi-American blueprint for the transition. They did concede to me that the document could be put to a vote at a conference of the Iraqi Opposition in London in December 2002, but they did not tell me before the workshop that they were not going to tie their hands in any way by its conclusions. In fact they took distance from it the moment it was produced, especially after they realised the document was arguing strongly for a transitional provisional Iraqi government as the way forward, not American military occupation. That was a source of a lot of tensions in the run-up to the war.

Iraq and the Inter-Agency Process

Alan Johnson: You have called the inter-agency process – the co-ordinated efforts of the White House, State Department, Department of Defence, and CIA – ‘the great albatross of our lives.’ In your opinion ‘Many of our problems afterwards in Iraq are a consequence of ... squabbling within the U.S. administration.’ You said to one journalist that ‘[t]he enemies of a democratic Iraq lie within the State Department and the CIA, who have consistently thwarted the president’s genuine

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attempt ... to do something very dramatic in this country. Fortunately they have not totally succeeded.' What was the basis of these inter-agency disputes and what were their consequences?

Kanan Makiya: The little story of the Future of Iraq project unfolded against the backdrop of a much larger problem in the preparations for war. There was tension – I would even call it warfare – between the different branches of the US government. This has still not been written about properly. Deep internal American conflicts hobbled the whole enterprise from the outset. Matters reached the level of hatred between and among Americans. Iraqis were portioned off by different agencies. Some were close to the Department of Defence, some to the CIA, some to State, and so on. The warfare at the heart of the Bush administration was shaping the agenda rather than any positive plan.

The change in the United States government's position that brought about such tensions *within* the administration goes back to September 11 – a transforming moment in American political culture. From that day a small minority of influential people in the United States government emerged who said that the way forward was democratic change in the region, starting with Iraq. They argued that US foreign policy towards the Middle East had rested for 50 years on support of autocratic regimes (like Saudi Arabia, like Saddam in the 1980s, like Mubarak's Egypt) in the interests of securing oil supplies, or whatever it might be. This policy had led to a level of anger at the United States inside the Arab world that provided fertile breeding ground for organisations like al-Qaeda.

So, at the strategic level, what needed to happen was a dramatic change in US policy. The US should reach out to peoples not governments, to focus on democratisation as opposed to stability, and so on. That school of thought emerged in the Pentagon, led by people like Paul Wolfowitz. It ran headlong against the State Department's traditional accommodationist policies. The conflict was between those agencies that were wedded to the policies of the past and those breaking new ground. The former were often in the State Department – people who knew that part of the world in a very particular way. They had been Ambassadors, they had hobnobbed with the Saudi ruling families, and they had developed certain preconceptions about how the Arab world worked. By contrast those who were pushing for a dramatically new policy, like Paul Wolfowitz, were not shackled by such a past, nor burdened by the weight of those prejudices. But they did not necessarily know

the Middle East as well. They were not Arab linguists, and these people tended to reside in the Pentagon and in parts of the White House.

In this struggle the CIA was close to the State Department. The Pentagon was close to the White House (though the White House had no single view). The struggle could have been a healthy one resulting in a plan of action for post-2003 had there been sufficient control of these divisions from the top. There wasn't. Bush just laid down a policy and was not a man for the details. And the National Security Council did not opt clearly for this or that way forward. Instead they set up something called the 'inter-agency process.' This involved representatives from the different warring agencies who would sit down and compromise over every single decision. The result was not that there were no plans, as people say, but that there were too many plans that were no longer coherent because they were picked apart in this inter-agency process until they were a little bit of this and a little bit of that. For instance, the Pentagon was for a provisional Iraqi transitional authority rooted in and stemming from the Iraqi opposition. The State Department was dead set against that. And its intense dislike of the Iraqi opposition drove them to support what I think was the worst possible strategic formula for the transition: an American military occupation of Iraq with all that that entailed in terms of responsibilities for the minutest of details in the post war period.

Alan Johnson: You have complained bitterly about 'this distinction that was created between the inauthentic externals and the authentic internals.' Did the State Department think the exiles had no base and could not be trusted?

Kanan Makiya: The State Department didn't think the Iraqi opposition was up to it. It wanted Iraqis who were from 'the inside.' We were very suspicious about that formulation because at the outset it was clear they did not mean the broad mass of Iraqis. They meant the former elements of the regime. They invented this great big artificial wall between the exiles on the 'outside' and the Iraqis on the 'inside.' The exiles were portrayed as Rolex-wearing opportunists or dreamers (or, worse, even Kurds) who didn't know their own country. Ironically the State Department, which was against the war in the first place, ended up being for the most dramatic form of transformation: military occupation. But having agreed military occupation as the way forward, which agency was going to supervise the plan of occupation? It turned out to be the Defence Department, which... favoured a transitional provisional government! So it ends up a little bit of this, and a little bit of that, and I think we ended up with the worst of all worlds as a consequence.

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Iraqis and the Liberation of Iraq

Alan Johnson: So we end up with a war that was a stunning military success – in terms of the rapidity with which the coalition reached Baghdad – but which was an unfolding political failure?

Kanan Makiya: Yes. You have put your finger on the central problem. The formula that was chosen by the United States government for the transition – occupation – by its very nature did not involve Iraqis in their own liberation. A huge number of American troops entered Iraq but – and this is really an important statistic – only 63 Iraqis were part of that American army. 63 people who knew the language, the mores, and who could interact with Iraqis. By all accounts they performed brilliantly. But there should have been *thousands* of those Iraqis trained in the months running up to the war to go in with every American unit so that the necessary bridges of trust and understanding could be built. Then you could have put your hand on your heart and said Iraqis had participated. Where else could you draw these Iraqis from other than the organisations of the opposition and from the Kurds, the Shiites, and from the millions of Iraqis in exile? Had that been done you would have had the nucleus of something Iraqi even as you arrived in Iraq.

The Iraqi opposition *wanted* to be involved in the fighting but it was excluded from it. This was a tension that continued right through January and February of 2003. Finally, there were scenes between the opposition and the US representative sent to the meeting of the opposition in Salahadin in Northern Iraq. At that meeting structures were set up to discuss Ministries, Security, and so on, but the Americans totally bypassed them, another missed opportunity.

The moment the United States government turned Iraqis into spectators in this transformation they set in motion a dynamic that was to last a very long time, until the Americans realised the error of their ways and transferred sovereignty to an interim government in June 2004. One consequence was that there was a constant tension between the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), which had many former exiles in it, and Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). This paralysed things. The Iraqis were sitting there with no authority or responsibility over anything, so naturally they could irresponsibly discuss irrelevant little details in exactly the way they used to in opposition. They were not, after all, responsible for delivering things on the ground. Bremer and his CPA staff were. So very quickly it became armchair discussions on the one hand and Bremer on the other. The exception, by the way, was the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) which was the precursor to the

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current constitution. That was drafted by Iraqis working with Americans. That's the kind of working relationship we needed throughout.

Alan Johnson: Instead we had tank columns racing up towards Baghdad, leaving behind Fedayeen thugs on every street corner...

Kanan Makiya: And confused Iraqi people...

Alan Johnson: Who desperately needed to feel confident about what exactly what was happening....

Kanan Makiya: Absolutely. And look, I admit, we in the opposition got many things wrong as well. I personally, in retrospect, realise that I underestimated the wounds in the population left by the betrayal of the Iraqi intifada in 1991. People didn't trust the Americans after they were let down in 1991. 'I don't believe they are going to do it,' was the dominant feeling amongst Iraqis inside the country. Even after the coalition had taken half the country the people remained sceptical of American intentions to see the thing through. 'Are the Americans going to let us down again? They did it to us once before,' was the prevailing mood. In 1991 more Iraqis died in the crushing of the uprising than in the war itself. Frankly, I underestimated the degree of residual hostility. The presence of Iraqis with that army, Iraqis who could have talked to the sceptical people on the ground, could have helped meliorate that hostility.

Alan Johnson: Were the Americans taking their distance from Chalabi specifically? You have been a supporter of the Iraqi National Congress since 1992 and you will know that the one thing the far left, the CIA, and the State Department agree on is, as the saying goes, 'ABC – Anyone But Chalabi.'

Kanan Makiya: He was certainly the lightning rod for the hostility toward the opposition on the part of the CIA and the State Department. There's simply no doubt that his personality, and so on, played an important role. But there were other factors. For instance, the State Department – which has never really been sympathetic or understanding towards Kurdish aspirations in Iraq – was very worried that disproportionately large numbers of Kurds would be involved in the liberation. The Kurds had run their own affairs for a very long time and had a huge number of very well trained fighters organised in the Peshmerga. I understand why there was the resistance to the idea of involving the Kurds in the liberation of Iraq.

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It was thought the Arabs would be deeply hostile. I don't think that was true. And it would have been infinitely better than not having anyone there who spoke Arabic and was part of the country.

State worried the Kurds would become too strong and create an overly-Kurdish government, which would be very negative for the rest of the Arab world. In fact after three years we can see just how important and positive the role of the Kurds has been. They have been one of the most moderating and stable forces in the Iraqi interim government. They've behaved very responsibly compared with some of the Arab parties, quite frankly. Without them the state would be a total shambles. Some of that maturity is because they had ten years of experience of running their own affairs, and because their political organisations had some historical depth and weight to them, something entirely lacking in the thoroughly atomised Arab parties of the opposition.

The Bremer Model

Alan Johnson: What were the consequences in your view of adopting the pro-consul model of running Iraq in 2003-4?

Kanan Makiya: There are many things you can say about his style: overbearing, and so on. But the main thing about the model is that for the first year, at least, it further increased the sense Iraqis had of not being involved in decision-making about their own affairs. It continued the policy that we talked about earlier, designed before the war and carried through in the conduct of the war, of not involving Iraqis. But, to be fair, Bremer and the US administration realised the error of their ways and changed plans – the occupation was originally going to be much longer than one year. But we paid a price for this change. You either do an occupation and you do it well, or you don't do it in the first place. But you don't do it in a half-assed way, with inadequate troop levels to boot!

The United States government never deployed enough troops. It opted for an occupation but didn't provide the wherewithal to do the job properly. Here again is this tension between the Pentagon and the Department of State. State wants an occupation, but Rumsfeld – who has theories about how to conduct warfare in the modern age with less and less troops – never wanted an occupation. In fact, he may never even have been for Iraqi democratisation. He was just an in-and-out kind of a guy. It was the other people within the defence department, in particularly

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the really extraordinary figure of Paul Wolfowitz, who argued the political case for democracy.

After 9/11 an enormous change takes place in the way the US thinks about this part of the world, but the problem is this. It's all happening so fast, not everybody has caught up with everybody else, and so we have different levels of understanding, and these are tearing apart the administration. We have old ways of thinking interwoven with radically new ways of thinking and we have strange mixtures in between. And to cap it all no decisive decision-maker at the top. That, I think, is the mix that went so wrong.

Eventually there was an about-face on the question of the period of occupation and on the training of the Iraqi police and army. Many people ask why the Iraqi security forces are not up to the job yet. Well, you know, training didn't really begin in earnest until the summer of 2004! Bremer acted against advice from the Pentagon in his slowness in beginning the training programmes of the Iraqi police and army. So we have only a year and a half track record of training.

The dissolution of the Iraqi Army

Alan Johnson: As war approached you and the Iraqi National Congress warned President Bush, Vice President Cheney and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice against any reliance on the Iraqi army. The Iraqi National Accord, with CIA help, were working to keep the Iraqi army intact to the last minute. Many have said that the dissolution of the army, right down to the last rank and file, was a catastrophe that made the insurgency all but inevitable. What do you say to that? Was that kind of total demobilisation what you had in mind anyway?

Kanan Makiya: We argued very strongly for dissolving the army, but over stages. And we never argued for not paying them their pensions and their salaries! We argued for a staged dissolution of the army, not this sudden abrupt abolition. But, yes, part of the responsibility for what happened must also lie on the opposition and on people like me in particular. I was a strong and relentless advocate of demilitarisation. I had the terrible history of Iraq's military coups during the 1960s before my mind and the example of Pakistan looming as a possible outcome. I suspect Bremer listened to us or had read parts of the Democratic Principles document.

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However there are two things that need to be said and they are somewhat contradictory. Number one is, in a very important sense, the army was *already* dissolved before Bremer formalised the matter. The army hardly existed, we discovered, after the war in 2003. It had been bled dry. It was corrupt. The salaries of soldiers were barely enough to allow them to visit their families. The army was in horrific shape, we discovered, *afterwards*. Whether we should have known that that was the state of the army is an interesting question. But the fact is we did not know how truly fallen-apart the army already was by 2003. In fact when the war came the army did not fight. There was no Iraqi defeat in 2003 in the sense there was a defeat of the Nazis or the Japanese armies in World War Two. The army just disintegrated. There was no war of liberation in that sense. Our liberation and our civil war are occurring now, *simultaneously*, so to speak. Eventually the old order does fight the new order, but that fight didn't really happen in March/April of 2003 as the rhetoric of the Bush administration would have us believe.

Second, our great fear was that the enemy of democracy would be the army, as it always has been in Iraq. But our fears, as democrats, that the army could step in were perhaps not well grounded. It had become by now (in the wake of the Iraq-Iran war and 1991 especially) a hated institution, a far cry from the 1940s and 1950s when the army presented itself as a vanguard of modernity and espoused nationalist values. By the end of the Iraq-Iran war, after 8 gruelling years and hundreds of thousands dead, the Army was a creature of the Ba'ath party. And after the debacle of the first Gulf War the army had lost all prestige.

We should not have alienated *that* army so quickly. It could have been purged and transformed from within over a number of years rather than make a great big political issue out of something that was not a threat. So looking back on it I think we were wrong because it gave the insurgency a cause. It gave them many thousands of disillusioned potential recruits. And that was all unnecessary. So I look back critically on some of my positions dating back to before the war.

Losing control of the borders

Alan Johnson: I have an Iraqi friend who suspects that the US has deliberately left the borders porous. He suspects the US is applying a fly-paper strategy: draw the terrorists to Iraq and kill them. His complaint is that Iraq is a country not a piece of fly-paper. You have reported that 'I had to go and bang the doors in Washington and say, "Close those ***** borders." ... everybody was telling me to say that. I

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mean, sheiks, clerics, everybody was saying, “Tell them to close the borders. They’re pumping people in here. We’re going to have trouble here.” Yet the borders remain porous to this day. What are the obstacles to closing the borders? Troop numbers?

Kanan Makiya: Yes. I know of the theory that the United States is deliberately inviting the terrorists in so as to fight them in Iraq rather than anywhere else. I honestly don’t think that’s the case. I’ve been too close to this. There is *nothing* that has hurt the United States as much as its apparent inability to maintain security and make the Iraqi experiment work. The conspiracy theory completely fails to see that. It is in American interests to make a success of Iraq. At bottom the problem is inadequate troop levels, yes. The coalition never had enough troops to police those borders and we are back to the question of pre-war planning. They can take the insurgents out, anywhere, but then they have to move on and the insurgents come back. But now they’re changing strategy. Iraqi troops are settling in and they are not just taking places but holding them. And they are working on the borders much better. The inadequate troop levels go back to the inter-agency process. The fact is Rumsfeld never wanted to be in Iraq this long anyway, as I said.

Presiding over a security vacuum

Alan Johnson: You have described a meeting in Baghdad, on April 28 2003, at which you and about 400 other Iraqis tried to persuade the US that the immediate restoration of law and order was the priority. This is how you described the reaction of the US officials present:

[there] was again this incredible, very American, embarrassment at being what you are – in authority, in a position of power, in a position to determine government ... somebody [said] ‘You mean you don’t have a plan for the government?’ He [Garner] says, ‘No, we are here to meet to discuss that. This is your government, not our government. We don’t want to impose this government on you.’ It all sounds so ridiculous. (...) There was nobody in charge who understood that democracy [i]s not some sort of instant switch. It’s institutions that have to be built over time.

Kanan Makiya: There was a very naive attitude on the part of at least some of the Americans responsible for decisions during the first months after the war. This attitude was that democracy is freedom. People now can express themselves and do what they want. It’s total nonsense. Democracy is a process and it requires

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authority. You don't lift the lid of authority on a population that has been ruled so dictatorially for so long and expect it to immediately act responsibly. Responsibility and democracy are very closely aligned, and responsibility doesn't come without authority. The idea that democracy is not about authority is an anarchist pipe dream. In Iraq political authority was absent after the Americans took out the old authority and then stepped back. They should have assumed authority, enforced curfews, held people back, shot looters, protected key strategic sites, and so on. The anarchy that broke out has accompanied this experiment down to this very day, creating a sense that the Americans are not in control. For example, there was a no-shoot policy towards looters. Why? The fear was that if Al-Jazeera filmed an American soldier shooting or intimidating potential looters, this would play badly. That is a new reality of global life. But it's a fact that every Iraqi wanted them to shoot the looters. Iraqis were puzzled why soldiers gave the impression they were licensing this looting.

Transforming Iraq in a democratic direction requires the replacement of one authority with another. Somebody once called the Americans 'the reluctant superpower.' This is completely contrary to the view the left takes but I think there is a large element of truth in it, having seen them at work in Iraq. Mind you, at the ground level I worked with American soldiers, colonels and lieutenants, and so on, who are just *magnificent* people. They are building projects, maybe as small as a school, or a neighbourhood playground, and I witnessed the energy and the spirit of these young American men and women who didn't know this part of the world but who genuinely threw themselves into reconstruction and democracy building as they saw it. I feel they were let down by their leaders. The initiative, the will, the drive and the spirit was all there and all that was felt at the local level. But American and Iraqi leadership failed to translate it to the political superstructure.

The Torture at Abu Ghraib

Alan Johnson: Around the world – and I bracket the question of whether this is fair or not – the dominant image of an American soldier is not the hero rebuilding a school but the tormentor at Abu Ghraib. From an Iraqi perspective how damaging to the whole venture has it been that some Americans have had such a fast and loose relationship to the Geneva Convention?

Kanan Makiya: Look, I have no doubt that a fast and loose relationship with fundamental human rights is going on in the prisons of Iraq. The abuse is torture

and it is totally and morally unacceptable. For the people inside Abu Ghraib, and their families, there is justifiable fury. But the curious fact is that Abu Ghraib didn't have the same impact on American credibility in Iraq that it had on the rest of the world. I am not trying to gloss over anything. But remember, those very same prison cells have witnessed infinitely worse forms of torture, over the decades of Saddam's rule. Often, you hear expressions from people on the street such as, 'They call these pictures torture? You should see what I went through, my uncle went through, my cousin went through. This is peanuts.' That's a typical Iraqi reaction as I heard it on the streets of Baghdad when the scandal broke out. Not that we are not horrified by what the Americans did inside Abu Ghraib. And globally it's another matter – a punch in the solar plexus for the United States' whole effort in Iraq.

The USA, the democratic left, and democracy-promotion

Alan Johnson: You met with President Bush twice. First, on 10 January 2003. About that meeting you have said, 'He left me with the very clear impression that he was deadly serious about it [democracy promotion], that this was not just rhetoric, and he was committed to it personally and in some emotional way.' Do you still think that?

Kanan Makiya: It's not about Bush as a person. The Bush administration has a very black and white view of the world but maybe that was a good thing for Iraq, maybe that's what made possible the ambition to bring about regime change and attempt democratisation. The argument for a democratic Iraq was genuinely convincing to Bush. He became passionately wedded to it. How deeply did he understand all the implications? That's not really for me to say. I don't know the man. But the administration has genuinely pushed for this democratisation line. It isn't just a façade. I've seen it at work on the ground. I've seen Bremer and his staff try to make it happen. I've seen the committees. I've seen the support given to women's organisations and NGOs. That it was done amateurishly and naively is all true. But the notion that it was not happening or was not genuine is just patent nonsense.

Unfortunately, it may no longer be there. The insurgency and the setbacks mean democracy-promotion is no longer the driving force of American policy. But it was the driving force in 2003/2004. Now there is a retreat and an attempt to get the troops back home. Now there is a pulling back very quickly. And the people of Iraq are the big losers. Now it is up to them to do the work, in a sense all by themselves. Maybe that is how it should have been all along. But regime change

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from the outside was the necessary condition. How much groundwork been laid? That's a good question.

Alan Johnson: Is it possible for the democratic left to retain its independence while critically supporting democracy-promotion efforts led by the USA?

Kanan Makiya: Of course democracy promotion as we saw it in Iraq stemmed in good part from a view of American national security interests. Consider the argument being made, especially after 9/11. It went like this: 'Our national security requires a spread of our values and democracy in other parts of the world. We reject the view that these people are not capable of democracy because they're Arabs or they're Muslims. We say it's possible and we should stop supporting autocracies. Monsters have been born in our midst as a consequence of that policy. We didn't protect ourselves by virtue of supporting Saudi Arabia. No, we nurtured in our bosom the kind of creature that brought such monsters into the world as the 19 hijackers of 9/11.' That was how the argument was put: our national security requires a spread of our democratic values elsewhere to bridge the civilisational divide.

Now, that argument is not a bad argument. I, for one, support it. *But I don't look at it from an American national security point of view.* That's their particular way of looking at it. I look at it from an Iraqi point of view. My interest as an Iraqi patriot coincides with that view of American national security at this particular moment in time. Obviously, from the point of view of the Arab/Muslim peoples of the region, it's far better to embrace this point of view and move forward. Hence you have what's happening in Lebanon and Syria and so on and the tentative steps that many Arab countries are now taking towards reform and political participation.

I just hope Iraq does not end being the price paid for bringing democracy to the rest of the Middle East. We thought we were going to be the beachhead of democracy but we may turn out to be the people who paid the biggest price of all for it. In any case it is all up to us now, not the Americans.

Towards a new democratic political architecture for Iraq

Alan Johnson: Let's move on from the problems of occupation and reconstruction to the new political architecture of Iraq. I read that you think the new constitution is 'a fundamentally destabilising document.' What are your concerns?

Kanan Makiya: The constitution is the founding document of the new state. Getting it right, or at least not getting it too wrong, is crucial. The particular constitution that was voted in place last year throws the baby out with the bath water. Yes, we all argued for federalism as a solution to the problems of the Iraqi state. The diversity of Iraq is such that the devolution of power, by granting a measure of autonomy to the regions, is necessary to deal with this mosaic. Iraq can't work as a centralised state in which all power emanates from Baghdad while the regions are sacrificed to the centre. That formula has produced endless death and destruction. However, the secret of federalism is that there must still be a strong central state able to act as the glue that holds the separate autonomous law-making regions together. But in their understandable reaction to the history of centralised dictatorship, *Iraqis have overly weakened the central state*. That's the central point I made in my op-ed in *the New York Times* (December 11, 2005). We need to write the central state back into the formula for federalism. We have a powerful insurgency to fight. We have a country to rebuild. We have a whole series of tasks that require the central state; let's not throw the baby out with the bath water.

The poverty of the politics of victimhood

Once the Pandora's Box of Saddam's regime was lifted the furies came rushing out. That was natural. But when people have been oppressed on the basis of their identity (for their Kurdishness, for their Shiiteness) and then have a chance to discover and express those identities for the first time in many years, these identities become powerful *political* forces. My fear is that no-one is speaking for the country *as a whole* across confessional and ethnic identities. Identity politics becomes too powerful at the expense of democratic politics. We need somebody to speak for Iraq as a whole, for the federal union. We need leaders for whom the victimhood of his or her sect or ethnic group is not the be-all and end-all of politics. I repeat, the competition over victimhood – 'we suffered, you suffered, I suffered, I suffered more than you so I should get more' – is *a natural organic outgrowth of Saddam's tyranny*. The politics of victimhood is one of the diseases that tyrannies leave behind within terrorised populations. And everybody truly is a victim in Iraq. Moreover, everybody *feels* themselves a victim. But forging a politics out of being a victim, subsuming yourself in that condition of victimhood, is a debilitating thing. It's not a good thing to be a victim. It's a terrible thing. It's not a quality but a *condition*. Victimhood is something you have to overcome rather than something you should wave as a flag, or carry as a banner. A great deal of politics, not only in Iraq but

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the Middle East as a whole, and across the left for that matter, is about elevating victimhood. This is a legacy we have to overcome.

Think of the Palestinians. They have done this to excess, to the point of self-destruction, so many times. Their rhetoric rests on the fact that they were victimised. It is a fact they were victimised, but it isn't enough to be political *on that basis*. You have to go *beyond* victimhood. People cannot bow and genuflect before you solely because you are a victim. You have to lift yourself up by your own bootstraps and not be a victim. Don't think like a victim even if you are one. Nelson Mandela was able to do that. He was able to don a rugby sweater, the game of white South Africans, because he recognised he had to be a leader of white South Africans and black South Africans. He was able to rise above black victimhood and that is true leadership. The Iraqi constitution and politics hasn't yet risen to that level.

The Iraq Memory Foundation

Alan Johnson: You have argued that the new Iraq needs people whose identity is based 'not on bombastic rhetoric [but] a different way of defining who one is and what one is and who one wants to be in the world.' The future Iraqi citizen 'must grow up deeply cognizant and aware of what took place in his country' and be possessed of a 'humility and a sense of their frailty, and a knowledge of what they did to one another during this terrible period, 1968-2003.' For these reasons you have established the Iraq Memory Foundation and serve as its President. How did it get started? What are its purposes? How is it progressing?

Kanan Makiya: I had been working at Harvard University on documents of the Ba'ath regime since the 1991 Gulf war when the Kurds captured large quantities. On entering Iraq in 2003 we discovered much more important documents in the basement of the Ba'ath Party regime headquarters. The Iraq Memory Foundation became a magnet for documents that other individuals and groups collected, and now has holdings of over 11 million pages of documents of the Ba'ath Party, Ba'ath party intelligence, the Mukhabarat, and various other documents.

The IMF rests on the premise that we're not going to be able to overcome our own victimhood unless we acknowledge what happened to us in the past. But this acknowledgement is not a question of who suffered most. The beginning of wisdom in Iraq is the realisation that the regime victimised *everyone*. In fact the regime *implicated* everyone in its own criminality (they were really artists at doing that). If

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you start from there you have a humbler sense of who you are, as opposed to waving the flag of your own victimhood and assuming that that gives you entitlements in politics. Acknowledging our own victimhood as Iraqis of every sect and every national group is the beginning of wisdom because it creates a humbler and more realistic sense of who we are and what, in certain conditions, we are all capable of doing to one another.

Democracy is an answer to the question of our deeply fragile nature as human beings. John Stuart Mill pointed out that we are always going to be different from one another and that is beautiful. It's what makes us human beings. Once we accept *that* then we need a system that builds difference into its ways of working. We need a system that acknowledges our capacity to be wrong and which allows the clash of different points of view to be resolved in non-violent ways. If you accept elections as a process then you have implicitly accepted your frailty as a human being. No one man, woman, party, organisation, or sect can ever know exactly what's best for everyone. So we need some system that sifts through people's firmly held opinions and works them out somehow and is acceptable to everyone.

That sense of identity built upon our intrinsically frail nature as human beings is new in Arab political culture. We have lived through the bombastic rhetoric and the heroic mythology of Arab nationalism, Ba'athism, and Islamism. The Islamists offer a different set of references and heroes but offer the same romanticised heroic sense of the past and who one is. This is exactly what a democratic culture cannot be built upon. Of course there will always be organisations, ideas, individuals with those views. But it is crucial that society, by and large and as a whole, believes that theirs is not the way forward. The war going on in Iraq is, at one very important level, about that.

And that is where the Iraq Memory Foundation finds its role. We want to help Iraqis to look at ourselves and to make it impossible to think, study, and write about the last 35 years in Iraq without passing through this mountain of documents that reveal all the microscopic ways in which power was wielded to control and terrorise people. The IMF also makes films of the testimony of victims which air on Iraqi television. We produce DVDs. We have an English language version with six of our interviews. Documents are hard for the public at large to access, and need scholars to sift, turn, summarise, synthesise, index, analyse; and all that takes an enormous amount of time. The televised testimonies and DVDs are much more immediate and accessible. We conduct long interviews with individuals and create

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two formats. One is the 10 minute format which is aired on TV on a daily basis. These are very 'popular' – that is they win large viewing audiences. The second is a four-hour version that represents the archival/scholarly version that will one day be accessible and searchable through the same database as the millions of pages of documents that we have already digitised. This version, we hope, will eventually be cross-indexed against the documents.

The dream is that there will be a place in central Baghdad where a citizen could walk in and find anything we have in this digital archive. We also have a website at www.iraqmemory.org. And we've been deeded a huge site in central Baghdad (about which, by the way, I wrote a book 15 years ago titled *The Monument*). We're trying to come up with an idea for the transformation of that site into a museum, an archive, a library, with offices for NGOs dealing with similar issues, and so on. The IMF is very much a long term project dealing with culture; it is not about political polemics in the present.

Alan Johnson: One critic has worried that the IMF archives, which include intelligence files, are 'outside the purview of either the outside authorities or the Iraqi government.' Is it a problem that a private foundation holds intelligence documents?

Kanan Makiya: First, we've been arguing for a law that governs access to these documents which I agree should not be made available in an irresponsible way, or simply thrown on the web. There are huge privacy considerations. Think of the Stasi documents in Berlin. We've tried to work with the Gauck commission, as it's called, that holds these files in Berlin. That was started as an NGO. A Pastor and his flock occupied the offices of the Stasi and saved the documents. Because there was a stable federal republic of Germany the documents were controlled by a commission of the German government and the head of this commission is voted by parliament once every five years. We don't have that kind of political stability in Iraq at the moment. Instead we function through a government order that gives us permission to do what we're doing. We're seeking an order from within the parliament to legitimise our work. Unlike the political parties that took these documents illegally and kept them, we took ours with permissions along the way: CPA permission, Interim Iraqi Government's permission, the lease with the Mayoralty of Baghdad, and so on. We've been absolutely transparent about all this throughout.

Second, it is wiser at this point in time for this activity to be outside the hurly burly of Iraqi politics, at least until the structures of democracy and law are set in place. Then, yes, perhaps they will pass on, or perhaps there will be a special law that will govern the relation of the government to such an NGO-like organisation. But we have been leading in this debate while no-one else is even aware of the problem. We have identified the problem, held conferences with experts about it, talked to the Europeans who have similar experiences to ours, and so on.

Some Critics

Alan Johnson: The late Edward Said and Noam Chomsky have alleged that you are a philosopher king to the neoconservatives. You are a fig-leaf used to cover up Bush's real intentions: grabbing oil, defending Israel, getting revenge for his dad, the new imperialism, and so on. In a nutshell you are a shill for imperialism. How do you reply to that charge?

Kanan Makiya: I've reached a point where I don't even bother to reply to such critics. They are just not serious people any more; they are expressions of failure, inactivity, and irresponsibility, rather than critics of substance and with serious ideas. My case has always rested on an Iraqi perspective, on what is in the best interests of the 25 million or so people of Iraq. That's very important and something that people don't often see. It was the best thing that ever happened to me when I shed those kinds of abstract rubrics which for so many years enabled me to hide from the defence of Iraqi interests as I saw them. Abstract categories like 'anti-imperialism' and 'anti-Zionism' concealed behind them a cover-up for terrible things that were taking place inside Iraq, things that are implicitly condoned by people like Chomsky and Said. I can't engage in that kind of obfuscation any more. The be-all and end-all of politics for me is tyranny and totalitarian dictatorship. That was the theme of *Republic of Fear* and it was the main theme of *Cruelty and Silence*.

When there is abuse of human beings, there is no longer any philosophical or political argument that I can tolerate listening to if it justifies or somehow legitimates the continuation of that abuse. If there is any course of action that can diminish or eradicate the sources of that abuse from the world it seems to me that the high moral ground of politics is to call for it. And the left, by no longer doing so, has really lost its place in the world, and that is a sad thing and something I deplore. These accusations about Bush and the so-called neo-cons (a phrase, by the way, that I don't think has any clear meaning) conceal a failure on the part

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of people like Chomsky and Said to understand that human suffering is orders of magnitude more important than how much they like or dislike the US or the person of Bush, or even whether one likes this or that position of the United States. If I can reduce the amount of human suffering in the world by even a jot, if it is possible to demonstrate that overall suffering has been reduced, then the right position in politics is always to be for that reduction.

Alan Johnson: And are you still confident that a 'cost benefit analysis' would show a reduction of suffering in Iraq?

Kanan Makiya: Yes. Ask Iraqis themselves. 14 million people voted [in the December 2005 poll]. Everyday the media inundates us with images of terrorist attacks and gore. But in a whole slew of polls 70-80 percent of Iraqis are still shown to be 'optimistic' about the future! That's a remarkable statistic. One needs to ask what it means. What does it say *about what they came out of* to be so optimistic about the future at this moment?

Things may very well continue to go wrong in Iraq, and they are. But the beginning of wisdom is to realise that today there is hope, and there is a possibility of a future, where there was none before. Hope is a very real thing. It means you have a chance to change yourself for the better. You are now acting upon your own world and trying to shape it. That it's complicated and difficult, that you're like a child who doesn't know how to walk, that you're inexperienced in this because you've not been allowed to do it for 35 years, yes, all of this is true. You will stumble and make many mistakes as a consequence. This is also true. But you are a human being again precisely because the world of politics has in some small way begun to be reclaimed by you.

Alan Johnson: The historian Simon Schama has argued that you ignore the power and reach of religious fundamentalism and, as a consequence, have been consistently overly optimistic about Iraq. He said, 'I was moved by Makiya's crucial point where he said it's patronising to the Arabs to say they're not ready for democracy. But there was one little big word missing, and that was religion. He didn't talk about it at all.' Bill Moyers quipped that '[Makiya] really does believe we're about to have a drive-through war on the road to democracy.' Schama argued democracy was not going to happen in Iraq because, after all, 'how many Makiyas are there?' Knowing what you know now, would you concede the force of some of these criticisms?

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Kanan Makiya: Let me answer that on several levels. First, if you look at a book like *Republic of Fear* carefully, it is actually a pessimistic account of Iraqi society and polity. I talk about the damage done to society in such a way that it's hard to emerge from it as a rosy idealist...

Alan Johnson: ... I re-read the book before the interview. I was struck forcibly by the portrait of an entire society degraded by the totalitarian experience at the cultural and psychological, as well as political, levels. That terrible legacy is going to take many years to overcome.

Kanan Makiya: Yes. So perhaps when I turned from writing that book to political action, I said things that were not strictly speaking the right sort of formulations...

Alan Johnson: ...when you said the troops would be greeted with 'sweets and flowers?'

Kanan Makiya: Yes. That is a good example. But look, democracy is not made because there are an awful lot of people with Makiya-type education. It's made by ordinary men and women with their little purple fingers. And they don't go to vote on the basis of abstract texts. It's ordinary men and women who make everything possible. Had there been a hundred Makiyas or one Makiya it wouldn't have made a vast amount of difference.

But in one sense I can accept a grain of truth in what Schama and Moyers say. In moments of great historic change, which is obviously what Iraq has been through, the leadership question becomes all important. Trotsky used to call it 'the subjective factor' in politics. So much hinges upon the emergence of a leadership able to draw together large numbers of people with a language that enables them to rise above their particular self-interest. Leadership is different from democracy in the broad sense. People like me were arguing for such a leadership to emerge. But Schama is right. It didn't emerge, or rather, it has not emerged yet. Our leaders are not total failures but they are certainly not up to the challenge of the historical moment. They have bent and played with sectarian politics, for instance, as shown by recent events.

But Schama, of all people, should know that even religion is capable of change. Perhaps, here or there, I underestimated the strength of the confessional forces and the identity politics that emerged. I accept that criticism. But Islam is in motion

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and in flux. And surely he is not saying I should not have opposed Saddam and wanted him overthrown just because there was a danger of religious forces rising to the surface? The fact of the liberation of Iraq from Saddam Hussein by the United States is of such enormous importance for the politics of the region that it is not possible to judge today whether or not democratic reforms will take root in the Arab world. At least there is a chance where there was not before. Perhaps there will even begin to emerge among Muslim thinkers and activists a new sense of what religion is, or what it ought to be. This might not happen overnight. It might not even happen in five years. But the fact is that the beginning of politics in Iraq was made possible through this act of another country, and that is something bound to register in Iraqi political consciousness and amongst politicians of every religious stripe down the line.

Alan Johnson: What you are working on at the moment?

Kanan Makiya: I am working on three things. First, a continuing critique of the constitution, with a view to help influence its redrafting. Second, I am going to write a book about post-2003 Iraq. It will be an attempt to think through some of the big political questions that have been posed by this transformation. Third, most of my effort is still directed to building the Iraqi Memory Foundation and making sure it survives despite the hurly burly of politics in Iraq in the coming years.

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