

Putting Cruelty First: An Interview with Kanan Makiya (Part 1)

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 1988 campaign of mass murder conducted by the Ba'ath regime in northern Iraq. In October 1992, he acted as the convenor of the Human Rights Committee of the Iraqi National Congress. He was closely involved in 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.

Alan Johnson: Can you tell me about your family background in Iraq?

Kanan Makiya: I was born and brought up in a middle upper class family in Baghdad. I recall a very liberal outlook at home. My mother is of English origin but she cut all her ties with England when her family refused to acknowledge her marriage to my father. I've never known anybody from the English side of my family, the rejection was so great. My father's mother accepted my mother and she integrated in Iraq. So I grew up as an insider with an outsider's perspective, reading English from a very early age, especially fiction that others of my generation might not have read.

Alan Johnson: Such as?

Kanan Makiya: One of the most important books I read when I was 17 or 18, just on the edge of becoming political, was Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I also read Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. And Thomas Hardy, a writer I admired very greatly, and who was not available in Arabic. I also read Arabic fiction, of course.

My father was Head of the Department of Architecture at Baghdad University, so we had circles of architects and artists in and out of the house all the time. I sort of grew up with them. I drew on that background when I wrote *The Monument* (1991.)

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The first political event of my life was the 1967 Arab/Israeli war. Although I had no political background, I started to listen to the BBC during the war. In Baghdad we were getting triumphalist speeches from the Arab Nationalist Regime (that preceded the Ba'athist takeover in '68) telling us the Arabs were winning, and that the Israelis were on the run. All lies and bullshit. And I remember knowing that it was bullshit at the time. I had my first political discussion with young men and women of my age in Baghdad, at a public swimming pool where we gathered. I said, 'it's lies, it's lies, it's not true.' The Arab world was losing the war, superfast, but there was this denial. And ordinary people only had what the regular news was saying. I remember being infuriated by that obvious lie.

Radical Politics

In the summer of 1967 Iraq cut all its relations with the United States and Britain. But I won an acceptance to study architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT.) The great old Iraqi 'wasta' came into play, the practice of turning to people of influence to go around bureaucratic procedure. My father called in favours. 'My son just got his acceptance...', and so on. Finally he managed to swing it. People say I must have been the only one who left the summer of '67 to go and study in the United States.

At first, I pushed politics away and threw myself into a whole new world. I had never been in the United States before, and I was alone. The next formative event was Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968. Everyone dropped everything. Students started making an exhibition. I did not know much about him, but I remember throwing myself into it heart and soul. That was really the beginning.

Soon I had these two lives. I became very active in the anti-war movement, which was burgeoning in the United States. And I was very active in supporting the emerging Palestinian Resistance Movement. I passed through the Nationalist Palestinian groups and I ended up in the Marxist one. All of this happened very rapidly. Within a span of a year I became a Marxist and was attracted to Trotskyist politics. The great influence on me was Emmanuel Farjoun, a member of the Israeli Socialist Organisation, Matzpen. He was also a student at MIT, much older than I. He had enjoyed a socialist training from day dot having grown up in a left socialist kibbutz. It was a revelation for me to meet an Israeli who was critical of his own society. He explained a) basic socialist principles which, of course, were completely new to me, and b) the nature of Israeli society, which was also a revelation for me.

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We became very, very close friends, almost brothers, for the next twenty-five years. (We fell out over the Iraq war but that's another story. That's sad, very sad.)

I started to soak up books and I became active in the Socialist Workers' Party, the American section of the (Trotskyist) 4th International. I moved to Britain in 1974 and I became active in the International Marxist Group (IMG.) I recall there was a Lebanese Trotskyist organisation, remnants of an Iraqi Trotskyist organisation, and some Egyptian and Tunisian Trotskyists. I spent a lot of time in those countries meeting those people, going backwards and forwards to Lebanon. I was a full time political activist.

Lebanese Civil War

The Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975 between the so-called 'progressive' and 'reactionary' forces. That's how we tended to view it. There were those who were on the side of the class struggle and those who were against. But that form of classification was really at odds with the way the war was unfolding. Sectarian and communitarian tensions were at work in the so-called 'left' front of forces, which was really nationalist and radical-nationalist and sometimes capable of the same sorts of atrocities as the Christian forces, or 'reactionary' forces as we insisted on calling them.

The left insisted it was not a sectarian war. That was troubling to me but I had no other set of categories. In fact, the Palestinians were now behaving very badly, like little Mafia's inside Lebanon. I used to write in the journal called *Khamsin*, which was a journal of Middle Eastern socialist revolutionaries, edited by Moshe Machover in those days. And there were Arabs involved, like the Syrian philosopher Sadiq al-Azm, and others. I used to write articles critical of the Palestinians, even though I was basically working with them. I wrote under a pseudonym, Muhammad Ja'far, in those days. A tension was building up between the way the Middle Eastern world *was*, to my eyes, and the way our categories *described* it. The two didn't match.

The Iranian Revolution

I stayed in this contradictory position for three or four years, until the Iranian revolution. My wife was an Iranian and a student at Harvard. She had quit and joined revolutionary politics. The line of the 4th International was that the Iranian revolution was a progressive thing. We were all supposed to think that. Everyone was working against the Shah and his secret police. But, as the clerics became

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stronger and stronger, even before the revolution itself, I started to become deeply critical. My wife had returned to Iran and was fighting the good fight from inside Iran. So, was my criticism based on personal impulses? Maybe I thought I had lost this person that I loved. Maybe that was driving me. Or maybe it was just a political assessment of the situation. Probably the biggest lesson you can learn in politics is that you can never completely separate these two things. It's better to be frank and recognise this. Anyway, I launched a big criticism of the Iranian revolution at a time when the left was celebrating it as one in a long line of great historic revolutions.

My wife returned broken. The left had been smashed. The Iran-Iraq war broke out. Our former comrades were being imprisoned or killed in Iran. We both left organised Trotskyist politics around that time on the issue of the Iraq-Iran war. The left was saying it was a war with a good side and a bad side. We were saying a plague on both your houses because this is an ugly, nasty war that is not going to lead to progress for anyone, so victory for either side would be a step backward.

Alan Johnson: Did you find any support for that view among your comrades?

Kanan Makiya: There were individuals. Bob Langston, I remember, from the Socialist Workers' Party. Jon Rothschild and others were very sympathetic. But their sympathy was not shared by the leadership. Afsaneh and I resigned over it. We wrote a huge document that explained the whole thing, in the usual fashion.

I was now totally alienated from my previous world view. I thought it didn't describe the world I was now in. These had been seminal events: the Lebanese civil war, and the behaviour of the Palestinians, when they lost their halo entirely from my point of view, the Iranian revolution and the Iraq-Iran war.

Writing *The Republic of Fear*

Alan Johnson: To me, the greatness of your first book, *The Republic of Fear*, is three-fold: your description of totalitarian violence and the unveiling of its true role in Saddam's Iraq; your tracing of the genealogy of that totalitarianism across the generations, and its seepage into intellectual, political and military milieus; and the suggestiveness – prescience, maybe - about the legacy of that appalling political and intellectual culture at a psychic as well as institutional level, a legacy that weighs down on the effort to build a new Iraq today. Can you tell me how you came to write *Republic of Fear*?

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Kanan Makiya: Stories were coming out of Iraq from family and friends of the horrific things that were going on. I had blocked Iraq out of my mind. A whole generation of Arabs of my age threw themselves into supporting the Palestinians post-1967 at the expense of facing the degradation of politics going on in their own countries. But as these stories started to filter out I had the idea of writing a book about Iraq. I threw myself into it and that was the turning point.

The writing of what became *The Republic of Fear* took six years. I had returned to England. It was probably the 6 most wonderful years of my life, in some senses. Nobody knew I was writing this book, except 4 or 5 friends. My parents didn't know until they discovered by accident, but that's a long story. I discovered writers I'd never read before, above all Hannah Arendt. Also Isaiah Berlin, John Stuart Mill, Hobbes: very basic texts that I'd never read. I had spent weeks and months studying *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus Value* but I had never read John Stuart Mill! This was the lopsided education that we all had. These basic texts I discovered, as I was writing *Republic of Fear*, became very important to me. They changed my whole way of thinking about politics, though they didn't change certain underlying values. I discovered liberal politics. Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, in particular, gave me a model of how to understand, for instance, the Ba'ath front organisations. She analyses the nature of those front organisations, how they work, how power was exercised through them. She had studied how networks of informers functioned in society and how states operate through networks of informers to exercise power. I understood power and political authority in a wholly new way through Arendt.

I now understood far better the independence of the political from the economic and the social, which, of course, I had previously refused to accept. My first outlines of *Republic of Fear* always involved a kind of genuflection to the economic level. The first chapter would be on the economy and the forces of production. The second chapter would be social classes and only then would follow the politics. Now what I *really* wanted to write about were the horrific stories about how the secret police was behaving. I wanted to write about the experiences reflected in those stories - of the different kinds and levels of violence, of people informing on one another, of a break up and an atomisation of Iraqi society that had nothing to do with how the forces of production were going. But, for some time, I couldn't let go of those categories. So the very first outlines always had those perfunctory things. But, as I worked and worked on the book, and as it went through many transformations in the six years it took to write, those chapters [on the productive forces, etc] would

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go down in the outline, while the things I wanted to write about—violence, cruelty, the politics of fear, intimidation etc—came up, Finally I realised, ‘My God, I don’t want to write about this. It’s interesting but it’s not what is driving this book.’ So I dropped them altogether. I remember that was my big sin when the book went to Verso Books to be published.

Alan Johnson: Verso turned it down?

Kanan Makiya: Yes, Verso turned it down for that very reason. So I went hunting for a publisher. This was 1986. I had over 70 rejections before anybody would take up the book. But I was ‘on a roll’ as they say. I had been buoyed up by that feeling that I was changing and doing something new, and perhaps important. I started writing another book even before the first one found a publisher!

I was circulating a manuscript under a pseudonym and nobody knew who I was. My first wife, Afsaneh Najmabadi, who is now an academic in the States at Harvard, vouched that I existed! In the end the California University Press came to the rescue when they took on *The Republic of Fear* and the book was finally published in 1989. I will never forget the courage of the editor at the University of California Press, Lyne Withey, who took the book on. She never saw me, she never met me, and she never talked to me. University of California Press had never published an anonymous book before, let alone a book written under a pseudonym. It took great courage and a special decision at the level of the board of directors of the press.

Alan Johnson: What do you remember of the reception of the book?

Kanan Makiya: Until Saddam Hussein went into Kuwait only Iraqi exiles were interested in the book. It sold 300 or 400 copies at most. It was about to die a death as many books do. But when Saddam Hussein entered Kuwait it started selling in great numbers and overnight I found myself in a whole new world. I finally went public about my identity in March 1991, at a public event at the Centre for Middle East Studies at Harvard University, with other Iraqi oppositionists. Bahr al-Uloom, who was a cleric, Hoshyar Zebari, who is Iraq’s Foreign Minister today, Ahmed Chalabi, and myself, had been invited by Roy Mottahedeh, the Director of the Center.

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1991: Towards Cruelty and Silence

The talk I gave at that meeting was expanded into an article that appeared in the *New York Review of Books*. I argued that the war should be finished by going all the way to Baghdad. That was a very controversial position.

Alan Johnson: Did a storm break at that point?

Kanan Makiya: Yes. The previous good wishes that had been passed in my direction from the left ended. I was viewed as a complete traitor. I was called a ‘quisling.’ But my position [that the uprisings should be supported and Saddam should be deposed] was a logical continuation of the changes that had taken place in my thinking during the course of the writing of *The Republic of Fear*. The be-all-and-end-all of politics was removing this dictatorship in Iraq. Abstract considerations—such as the categories ‘imperialism’ and ‘Zionism’—became totally secondary in importance to the removal of dictatorship. I had written in *The Republic of Fear* that the legitimization of this dictatorship had taken place on the grounds of Zionism and the threat the Zionists represented to the Arab world. In throwing away that rhetoric and the whole political language associated with Arab Nationalist politics it was the internationalist spirit—present in my early formation in the Trotskyist movement—that was very much present. The fact was that I had seen anti-Zionist activists from inside Israel meant that Israel, did not exist, in my mind, as the font of all evil. I discarded all that baggage. I have a sort of single minded and obsessive track of mind and I just went straight for what was crucial and what was essential: getting rid of this evil dictatorship. Everything else was subordinate.

The Arab left had essentially become a moribund force. It was locked into old categories. All through the 1980s it could go nowhere. There was nothing new coming out of the political culture. We were locked in the dynamic and the language of the Lebanese civil war. Issues of human rights, of building civil society, of dictatorship, of our own responsibility for our own ills, were all constantly being subordinated by the old language of anti-Zionism and anti-Imperialism. I had come along with *Republic of Fear* and said the most important thing is what we have done to ourselves. I was bending the stick, as we say. Many Arabs, and people on the left who identify as ‘pro-Arab’, objected. Why? Well, the moment one passes from analysis and description to political action a boundary is crossed.

Writing Cruelty and Silence

Alan Johnson: In the preface to *Republic of Fear* you noted ‘the terrible silence of the intelligentsia.’ You asked ‘Where are the Arab Vaclav Havel’s and Christa Wolf’s who will call Saddam to account?’ In your next book *Cruelty and Silence* (1993) you exposed, indicted and explained this silence of the intellectuals. Faced with the cruelty of the Iraqi regime towards its people, parts of the Arab intelligentsia, and the western, often ‘left’, intelligentsia, had offered up a catalogue of evasions: silence, exculpation, complicity, rationalisation, subject changing, denial, avoidance. How did you come to write *Cruelty and Silence*?

Kanan Makiya: It was born in the tumultuous last moments of the 1991 Gulf war and was filled with the anger and energy of somebody caught up in that moment. It was a cry for elevating cruelty, violence, and abuse over any other consideration.

The first Gulf war had suddenly opened up this enormous reservoir of Iraqis who wanted to tell their horrific stories of the Anfal, of being in prison, of being crushed during the uprising, and of daily life under Saddam’s regime. The people’s testimonies were the driving force of *Cruelty and Silence*.

The book is divided into two parts, *cruelty and silence*. Part one gives a platform to the words of victims. It’s almost two thirds of the length of the book. I spent days taping interviews with these individuals. Each individual victim stood for a lot of others with similar experiences. I wove a larger story around these individuals. Around Khalid, the Kuwaiti, I wove the story of the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. Abu Hayder, the Shiite officer who accompanied Majid al-Khoei when he went to beg for help from the American forces, symbolised the uprising that followed the first Gulf War. The story of Umar, the Sunni Arab, stood for all the people who had gone into Ba’athist prisons for no reason at all. (In his case somebody told a joke in a party. He entered hell and came out again to tell the tale.) The story of the Kurds was told through two other individuals, Mustafa and a young boy called Taimour.

In the second part of the book, called Silence, I pit the words of Arab and western intellectuals of my generation, many of the left, against all these Iraqi words about violence and cruelty. The point was that between the two sets of words there was a chasm. The intellectuals offered rhetoric about ‘nationalism’, ‘Imperialism’, ‘the Crusades’, and so on. The focus of the book was about the rhetoric that the war had generated and the chasm between that rhetoric and the reality. Between these

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two realities - the words of the intellectuals and the words of the victims – was a yawning gap.

Putting Cruelty First

The cry of the book was for ‘putting cruelty first’, as I put it. I took this phrase from a person who had begun to influence me greatly. Judith Shklar’s *Ordinary Vices* (Belknap Press, 1985) is a wonderful book. It contains an essay that is almost my Bible. It’s called *Putting Cruelty First*. *Cruelty and Silence* was not a very complicated book at all. It was about the importance of putting cruelty first.

Alan Johnson: *Cruelty and Silence* was met on parts of the left with a quite extraordinary hostility. Edward Said wrote, ‘Most of what Makiya wrote in the book was, in my opinion, revolting, based as it was on cowardly innuendo and false interpretation, but the book, of course, enjoyed a popular moment or two since it confirmed the view in the West that Arabs were villainous and shabby conformists.’ Unwittingly, by invoking the reaction of the West as the prism through which to read and judge the book, and by his use of this figure of ‘the West’ as a means to exculpate the Arab intellectual, he kind of proved your case.

Kanan Makiya: In writing that book, I was naïve. I had thought that I would simulate a debate in the circles I had come from. There was no debate or dialogue. I thought that the weight of the words of the victims would make the case. All you had to do was read the first half of the book. As it turned out, most of these intellectuals only read the *second* part of the book and the references to themselves. I was naming names, you see. I couldn’t just write general abstractions. I was pitting words against words. Two sets of words had to clash with one another. So I named names. That upset people no end, and there was a huge backlash. The book was blasted by the very people I thought I was opening a dialogue with. I realise now how naive that whole approach was.

Alan Johnson: And there was character assassination. You were personally attacked.

Kanan Makiya: Oh, it was the beginning of a terrible period. After that book came out in 1993 I was actually depressed for a couple of years. I couldn’t write anything. But this hostile reaction was not an Iraqi reaction. I was buoyed up by that fact. A chasm had opened up between the way Iraqis viewed politics and the way the rest of the Arab world, and the left, did. Among the latter there were only individuals —

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I have in mind people like Fran Hazleton, Peter Sluglett, David Hirst, and, of course, the CARDRI people (The Campaign Against Repression and for Democratic Rights in Iraq)—who really faced the nature of this regime.

Alan Johnson: Peter Sluglett is reviewing the reprint of Hanna Batatu's monumental book on Iraqi politics and society in *Democratiya 4*. The excellent Saqi Books have republished it.

Kanan Makiya: Oh good! Peter's wonderful.

The Death of A Left

Alan Johnson: How do we make sense of the left-intellectuals denial? How do we account for their refusal to engage with the first part of Cruelty and Silence? Given the expressed values of the left one would expect them to have tended to it very closely, and to have cared very deeply. But that's not what happened. How do we explain that?

Kanan Makiya: You are putting your finger on the central issue of what's happened to the left since the fall of the former Soviet Union. There is a vacuum at the moral centre of the left which is what makes it so ineffective today. How did that come about? There are many forces at work.

The left retreated into a politics of cultural relativism during the 1980s. The activist generation, that entered politics for the anti-Vietnam war campaign and the civil rights movement, retreated into academia and began theorising outside of having any active role in politics. Increasingly the language of being against the Vietnam War underwent a subtle transformation. It became a form of cultural relativism that deep down, through such movements as deconstructionism, became antithetical to the original values upon which the internationalist left had been founded.

Look back at the Spanish civil war and think of the brigades of volunteers who went to fight. Think of George Orwell. That's the spirit of the traditional left. The language of human rights comes naturally to it as an extension of its internationalism and its universalism. Yes, perhaps culture was not studied enough by that older left. But it was right to subordinate culture to that which we had in common as human beings. Increasingly, by the 1980s, that is no longer the case. That which makes us different began to be posited as a positive value in itself. The internationalist

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concern with those universals that human beings have in common declined in importance. Now, any form of intervention began to be seen as immoral, not just a particular intervention, at a particular time. There is a generalisation against all intervention that takes place from Vietnam onwards. And, in the Arab case, all this mixed with the moribund state of our political culture.

I feel the left that I came from has almost become nationalist. This language of relativism has translated itself into, 'Well, even if the regime of Saddam Hussein is so nasty, why should we go and liberate it?' Now that is something you would have got from an American isolationist, back in the old days. You would never have got it from somebody on the left. The positive element which I carried from the Trotskyist movement, from the writings of Trotsky himself, was an internationalist spirit. It was more alive in me, I think, than in many of those who claimed Trotsky's mantle, but did not practice that internationalism. It is a very sad state of affairs. The left has turned against its own internationalist traditions and thrown away its own universal values. The older left was able to cross boundaries and think across boundaries. That was its strength and its weakness.

I am not saying that intervention is always a good thing. I argued for intervention in Iraq because of particular circumstances. First, the exceptional nature of the Saddam Hussein regime. Second, the world owed the people of Iraq after putting them in the straightjacket of sanctions for 12 years and giving them no way out. The country was rotting. Society was rotting. Sanctions weren't working. The regime was not toppling from within. You either remove the regime or you re-legitimise the regime. Continuing with the status quo was morally unacceptable. The price being paid inside Iraq was too high. The case for war, the case for regime change, can be made on many levels in the Iraqi case. These don't necessarily apply elsewhere. They certainly don't apply for Syria or Iran today. Everything has to be looked at in terms of the concrete circumstances.

The 'Civilisational Challenge'

Alan Johnson: Your work has been distinguished by its criticism of Arab and Muslim political culture. That culture, you say, is 'continuing to wallow in the sense of victimhood to the point of losing the essentially universal idea of human dignity and worth that is the only true measure of civility.' After 9/11, you warned that, 'The Arab and Muslim worlds suddenly find themselves facing a civilisational challenge such as they have not had to face since the fall of the Ottoman Empire.'

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Can you say what you mean by this notion of a ‘civilisational challenge’?

Kanan Makiya: On a simple level, I mean there is a culture of not taking responsibility for the state of one’s house. The culture of constantly shunting that responsibility to others—‘imperialism’, ‘Zionism’, and so on—has become a break on moving forward across the Middle East. Look at Muslim societies today. They are relatively backward in terms of income levels. They have been unable to create democracies. They are stuck in a language and a rhetoric that is patently unmodern. The defensive wall that exists between Islam (at least as it is currently constructed) and the necessary changes needed is, above all, the idea that others are responsible for what we’ve done, and that everything bad that happened to us has happened because of others. The answer to the question ‘what is wrong?’ is always ‘it’s somebody else’s fault.’

The future transformation of Islam

Now, why is Islam in that position, and is it changing? The ‘civilisational challenge’ is this: can the Arab Islamic world come to terms with the fact that it is responsible for its own ills, and for pulling itself up by your own bootstraps in order to get into the world, rather than keep finding ways of staying out of it? This is not an easy thing. For a religion to undertake that kind of internal self-critique means it has to accept a real reformation of itself. Christianity was able to do that. Judaism was, in a completely different way, more or less able to do that (not as completely.) But Islam hasn’t even begun to do that. And in the meantime there is a kind of rot. We don’t live in a world that allows long periods of time for making this kind of internal reformation of oneself. In the meantime the rot represented by the rise of Salafi Islam, Jihadi Islam, etc is so great, so palpable, that it is threatening us all, and is threatening Islam itself, above all.

Islam is largely at war with itself. The greatest numbers of people who are dying on the battlefields are Muslims. Muslims are fighting Muslims. Think of Algeria. Think of the struggle inside Egypt. Think of the Lebanese civil war. The greatest number of casualties so far, 9/11 notwithstanding, is Muslims fighting Muslims. But we don’t have a properly focussed debate, with those trying to reform and transform the religion leading one side and those trying to hold it back leading the other.

However, there are very important changes starting to take place, new voices are being heard. Cruelty and Silence is everywhere. That was impossible in 1993.

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There are Muslims critiquing Islam itself. These voices are starting to emerge. This reformation may be beginning. But they haven't yet cohered into a clear movement with an agenda that is tackling the other side, the Jihadi view of Islam, the obscurantist and fundamentalist side of Islam. So while there are reasons for optimism, there are also reasons to worry. Because, as yet, these new voices aren't anywhere near as strong as they need to be. Moreover, Jihadi Islam now has a substantial social base it didn't have ten years ago. One could even say we look like we're losing the battle at the moment. I certainly hope that's not the case. But we are in the throws of a deep convulsion that is taking place within Islam itself, among Muslims, and we have no way of clearly predicting how this is going to turn out. I call that a civilisational crisis of the first order.

Islam and Democracy

Alan Johnson: On the one hand, you have pointed out that 'Islam has a relation to politics, which is very different from Christianity and Judaism.' On the other hand, you have made this appeal: 'it's very important that Arabs and Muslims believe in your heart of hearts that fundamentally it's both important and necessary to break the stereotype that just because someone's a Muslim or an Arab, there's somehow an antithetical relationship to democratic values.' Is there a tension between your insight into Islam's unique attitude to politics and your fervent hope that Islam comes to terms with democracy?

Kanan Makiya: It's a tension only in the sense that every great religion has to find its own way of freeing itself and moving forward in the world. Islam will find a way that is different to that of Christianity. The same formulas—separation of church and state, etc—may not play themselves out, in the convulsions that take place within Islam, in exactly the same way they played out in Christianity. We should not look for a straight line between the European experience and the Islamic experience. But can it in principle be resolved? Absolutely, I think it can.

Yes, Islam's relation to politics - it's insistence that it legislates for day to day life - can cause problems when you try to separate it from politics (quite different from Christianity where you can start to put religion and politics into two separate boxes.) However we negotiate this reformation-transition, we know it is going to be *different*. But that it can take place is a proposition I completely believe. It hasn't taken place this far simply because the individuals, the subjective factor able to make it take place, have not yet emerged strongly enough from within Islam.

It's not the same thing for a person like me to write from a secular point of view about these issues, and for a cleric, breaking with his own traditions, to write about these issues. In Iraq today there are such clerics. Think of Sayyid Ayyad, a remarkable man in his mid-forties, who has arrived at a series of conclusions utterly from within the Shiite tradition of Islam, which accept the separation of church and state. He's on the lists, he's up for elections, he's on TV, and he's a real firebrand. He is a new kind of force speaking a new kind of language, shocking traditional Muslim audiences. He has a very high opinion, for instance, of the American constitution and the Bill of Rights. Many more people like him need to engage in the debate, as well as people like myself. I and others like me can't break through that wall by themselves; we need help from inside the fortress of Islam. Missing, at the moment, are the clerics who will fight from within and make their argument not in the way I make my argument (from western texts, general texts of human rights or from someone like Hannah Arendt), but from within the religion itself. This is, after all, how the reformation came about. It was largely by very religious, pious men constructing arguments for human rights from within their own tradition. *That this can be done in Islam I have not the slightest shadow of a doubt.* The nature of scriptural texts is that they are infinitely malleable. It is what you chose to put forward that counts. In fact, it is really quite remarkable how the growing Salafi, or Jihadi, trend of Islam rests on a *tiny* body of text. It represents a very small minority position within Islam. It has succeeded largely through the strength, vigour and energy of its own militancy, which it has used to capture a whole section of the tradition. That's never happened before. There is, in principle, a huge body of texts and many traditions with which to create an alternative version of Islam. I haven't a shadow of a doubt that it can be done. It just needs the men and women from within to do it.

The European Silence

Alan Johnson: The western left has responsibilities here. When the left shouts that 'Bush is engaged in a war on Muslims' it isn't just factually wrong. It's politically dangerous. It echoes the message of the Salafi or Jihadi groups, it boosts them, and it leaves the Muslim democrats and reformers isolated from a left that should be its natural ally.

Kanan Makiya: You're right. And Alan, I'd go even further. It's not just the left. People like myself, those of us who went into Iraq after April and March 2003 as part of the effort to transform this country, have *felt betrayed by Europe as a whole.* We were attacked by the media of all the surrounding countries, countries utterly

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hostile to the sort of values on which Europe rests. Satellite stations distorted what was going on. The silence in Europe at *that* moment gave enormous sustenance to all those forces struggling against the transformation of Iraq. It enabled the Jihadis, the Ba'athists, the extreme Arab nationalists, and the Arab regimes, to say 'Look at the hostility of Europe to what the United States has done!' Europe made it possible to isolate not just the United States but *everything that is represented by the west*. Europe gave strength to the argument that it was a traditional colonist land grab or oil grab, which was nonsense, of course.

I would say that much of the strength of the hostility of the Jihadi movement, and of the forces that have made life so horrible in Iraq, came from the silence of Europe. Europe has a lot to answer for. It's not even that it was half-hearted. They fell in completely with the language of the non-democratic Arab regimes. They bought their line and they seemed to stand for the same things. They undermined entirely the values of the operation. Europeans knew that the United States was not going to permanently occupy Iraq. Deep down the smarter Europeans must have known it wasn't just about oil. It was - rightly or wrongly - a way of changing the traditional western attitude towards the Arab Muslim world. It was an end to the support for autocratic and repressive governments. It was a new view that if we are going to succeed in this war against terror then we are going to have to be viewed by the populations of this part of the world in a totally different way. Now Europe might not have thought it was the right time. Europe might have thought it should be done differently. But Europe should never have been seen to be undermining *the argument itself*.

Europe was justifying and supporting the foundations on which these repressive regimes stood. It had acquiesced so fully in that relativist language *it had no views of its own that it thought could be shared*. More: it looked *racist* because it looked like the democratic values it enjoyed were not possible for Arabs and Muslims to enjoy. All of a sudden the shoe was on the other foot entirely. It was not the Americans who were the imperialists or racists. It was the Europeans who, by sitting back, were saying 'you Arabs and you Muslims really can't do any better than this, so why mess around with this thing in the first place?'

The Arab Silence

Alan Johnson: Alongside this European silence, you have written about an Arab silence. A gulf opened up between Iraq and the Arab world in 1991. What caused this gulf?

Kanan Makiya: In a nutshell it was a gulf between Iraqis, who began basing their politics on their own experience of tyranny, and the Arab world, which carried on thinking politics amounted to the Palestinian question, the national question as it was called. It was not that we Iraqis didn't think Palestinians needed rights, a state, and so on. We totally support that. But we had a huge problem of our own. Deep down, the debate between Edward Said and myself was about that tension inside Arab politics.

Iraqi people are angry that for the last three years the Arab world has not supported them. In fact the Arab world seems to support the terrorists, in the name of 'Arab solidarity' or 'Arab unity.' There is a real fury about this. Take the case of the Jordanian suicide bomber, Raed Mansour al-Banna, who killed 125 Iraqis in Hilla when he blew himself up on 28 February 2005. When his body was flown to Jordan instead of a funeral there was a party, a giant celebration of the hero's return! They said he had sacrificed himself for God and for the holy struggle against the Americans. This was not organised by the family itself. Often, as in the Palestinian case, families of suicide bombers are forced into these things. They want to mourn the young man who was their son. Instead they are forced by the organisation around them to treat it as a wonderful thing and a great sacrifice. They are kissed and told that they are so fortunate their son is now in Paradise. When Iraqis heard about this Jordanian celebration there was such a popular fury! The Jordanian government had to officially apologise. And, to show you the worlds of ignorance we live in here, the parents of the suicide bomber asked reporters, 'didn't he kill Americans?' The reporters informed the parents, 'No, actually it was 120 Iraqis who were killed.' Again we have the gulf between rhetoric and reality that was at the heart of *Cruelty and Silence*.

Hope

But in spite of the European silence, and the Arab silence and complicity, we now see the ripple effects from what has happened in Iraq. Think of the reaction to Rafiki Hariri's assassination in Lebanon! Think of the isolation of Syria. Think of the civil society movement in Lebanon. I was almost a pariah in Lebanon for ten years, because of *Cruelty and Silence*. Suddenly, all these Lebanese NGOs appear, interested in memory, and in what happened during the civil war. They are digging up mass graves and inviting me over to speak. Hostility to Syria is now the predominant tenor of Lebanese politics (with the exception of Hezbollah, which is still supposedly fighting the good fight, and waiting for the good struggle against

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Israel.) And there is opposition inside Syria itself. The Syrian regime is in its final stages. Lebanon was one of the bastions of the old rhetoric, and it is changing as we speak. The overwhelming majority of people are angry, and they know exactly who is behind these assassinations and bombings. The attempt of the Syrians to pretend there is some greater plot to isolate Syria in the world (they haven't yet managed to specify exactly how Israel is behind it) is not persuading anybody. There's not a single Lebanese who thinks anybody but Syria was behind the assassination. So you have change taking place in spite of everything.

Part 2 of the interview, in which Kanan Makiya discusses the Iraq War, will appear in *Democratiya* 4 (March-April 2006).

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