

Teatro Series – America, Iraq and the Middle East

The 1st annual speakers series, held in Calgary at Teatro Restaurant, explores the key issues in the US role in the Middle East

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There is hope in Iraq and the Middle East

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The following is an edited transcript of Fouad Ajami's talk at the Teatro Lecture. Ajami is the director of Middle Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins University and an author of a number of books about the Arab world.

I've spent the last five years of my life preoccupied with Iraq. I have gone to Iraq nine times. I've spent months of my life in Iraq. I have chased this Iraqi project. I believe in this Iraqi project. And maybe I'll just say a word or two about it before having it opened up for discussion.

Ryan Crocker, our ambassador in Baghdad, a very decent diplomat, who knows the ways of the region, said something that I truly believe. He said, "In the end, how we leave and what we leave behind will be much more important than how we came." The debate thus far has been about how we came. Bush lied. People died. There were no weapons of mass destruction. There was no connection between Al Qaeda, which is religious, and the regime of Saddam Hussein, which was secular. We spent five years and we are now in year six of this debate about the origins of the war and the rationale behind the war. We are done with this.

We have acted as the midwife of this American project in Iraq.

Many Arabs many cannot forgive us the fact that the US midwived the Shia state. We came to this country, we smashed the Sunni-Tikriti hegemony and we created the Shia-led government. We hadn't really intended to create the Shia-led government. The war wasn't about this. But once you destroy the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, then, of course, the Shia and the Kurds were bound to come into power, because in the end, this was a Shia country in terms of numbers, with a vast Kurdish minority in the north.

In the middle of the unbelievably difficult landscape of the Arab world, we've installed what, in many ways, is a bi-national government. Here were the Kurds -- the most betrayed of people, all the great powers had betrayed the Kurds -- now with a decent government in Kurdistan. I serve on the board of trustees of the American University of Iraq in Sulaimaniya. It's a new university, in the little hill town of Sulaimaniya, in northern Iraq. And to see the hope invested in that little university, to see the faith that the Kurds have in this new order, is really touching.

From the Sunni point of view, the Americans came and stole their country, because the Sunnis believe that Iraq was their patrimony. The Sunnis have an expression: for us power, and for you, meaning for the Shia, a lot of self-flagellation. It refers to the mourning rituals of the Shia. So the Sunnis were secure in this possession. Iraq was theirs and it was going to be theirs forever.

Now, whenever I spend time with the Shia in Iraq, I feel that I know them, one and all -- from Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani to humble drivers and simple people who take care of me when I'm there. And whenever I'm

there, I remind the Iraqis that there was no way, there was no way this tyranny in Iraq could be overthrown internally. Let's be completely honest. This was a reich of a thousand years. This Tikriti tyranny was there to stay. It was decapitated in 2003, and we've been watching the pain of Iraq, the disappointments of Iraq. And Iraq has been a great American disappointment. When we go back to the prelude to the war, something like 75 percent of the American people favoured the war in Iraq. It's very important to remember that. It was not this Iraqi project. I mean now many people disown it. But this was the most popular of wars. And so America decapitated this regime, and has created this order.

Whenever I travel to Iraq, I try to ask myself, does any man own Iraq? When I go to Egypt I know I am in Hosni Mubarak's country. When I am in Jordan I know I am traveling to King Abdullah's country. Who owns Iraq? Is it Jalal Talabani, the Kurdish president? Not particularly. Is it Nouri al-Maliki, a son of the Shia middle class from the middle Euphrates? Not particularly. Is it Iraq's Kurdish deputy prime minister, Barham Salih? No, not exactly. Is it the Shia vice-president, the Sunni vice-president? So we have created this order in Iraq. And I think President Bush deserves immense credit for both launching this war with the approval of his country and the approval of the Congress, and then for doubling down and staying with this war in January 2007, when the project was in the wind and was threatened.

Now, if only President Bush had the gift of oratory. But as we well know, he doesn't have that gift. It's unfortunate, because there are things he should say. Along those lines, I wrote a piece in the Wall Street Journal about Pericles speaking to the Athenians. This is the famous oration of Pericles. Pericles is speaking to the Athenians and he says to them, "I am

the same man and don't alter. I am the same man, and don't change. It's you who change, since in fact you took my advice while unheard, and waited for misfortune to repent of it. But you must not be seduced by citizens like these, nor be angry with me, who if I voted for war, did only as you did yourselves."

If I voted for war, I did only as you did yourselves. So, some people would like to disown this war but they wanted the war. The American public understood instinctively the connection between their security, between 9/11, and the bogus argument that because Al Qaeda was religious and Saddam's regime secular, they therefore wouldn't work together. It's a distinction without a difference. These are terrorists. There is no organizational chart. There is no human resources department that says, oh, you know, I'm religious, you're secular. We can't work together. This wasn't really about that. So I think that's where this war now stands. I believe in the principle that every person sweeps in front of his own door. You take care of your own mess, in many ways.

Now, the Sunnis who brought and imported the jihadists from as far away as Algeria and Tunisia and Morocco and Egypt and Saudi Arabia and Yemen, have broken with Al Qaeda. They no longer want them in their provinces. They have turned on them. And this Awakening Council of the tribes has broken with Al Qaeda and has now begun cooperating with the American army and with the Iraqi government.

We always worry about the Shia, because as the King of Jordan reminds us, there's a Shia crescent that stretches from Iran to Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. That is a compelling image. And you say, Your Majesty, there are no Shia in Syria. So the crescent breaks. But even after

9/11, and even after the attacks of Al Qaeda -- which were Sunni attacks, from Sunni fundamentalists -- we still believe it and we still fear the Shia. We see them as kind of soul mates of the Iranian theocracy next door. When in truth, if you know Iraq and you know the traditions of Iraqi Shi'ism, there's a big difference between that and Iranian Shi'ism. And the Arab-Persian divide is deep and integral to the way Iraqis think about Shia Islam and about themselves.

So now, just as the Sunnis have broken with Al Qaeda, the Maliki government is being underrated and ridiculed by everyone. It's obligatory for all American politicians to make a visit to the Green Zone in Baghdad and then come back and say what a fool Maliki is. He has no power, he has no will. Well, look at what he has done. He has taken the war to Muqtada al-Sadr and to the Shia extremists, and he has fought them to a standstill in Basra.

As for the Kurds, they love America, and are grateful for this war, and they are grateful for the liberty given to them. And I think they understand that there can be no Kurdish state. They understand that America will not countenance a Kurdish state, but will support Kurdish autonomy. So I think the Iraqi project is coming together reasonably well.

In November 2006, the public was disappointed in Iraq and voted for the Democrats in the congressional, off-year elections. Now Iraq will be on the ballot, directly, because you have John McCain running on this platform. And again, I see McCain depending on two men. His presidential prospects hinge on the performance of the Maliki government and on the performance of this remarkable soldier, General David Petraeus, who is,

finally, the right man in the right place. We now have the right commander.

And anyone who has read my book on Iraq, *The Foreigner's Gift*, knows that the hero of this book is none other than David Petraeus. We made our share of mistakes. We didn't know the land. We didn't know the country. We didn't have the linguists. We didn't know Arabic. Why didn't we have the linguists? Well, because, in the nineties, we didn't care. This was the NASDAQ era. As someone said, who would want to run the Hijaz when you can run a hedge fund?

The American public will decide whether this Bush project of supporting liberty in the Islamic world is really worth it, or whether it is really a fool's errand to take liberty to strangers. But make no mistake. Bush has made this historic decision that the Arabs have the possibility of freedom in their DNA. And that's the message he has taken to them. And that's the message to which he has remained true. And that's the message he will leave with, on January 20, 2009.

This belief that democracy is not just an attribute of Western people is a noble ideal. This assertion that liberty can stick on Arab soil is really a gift that Bush brought to the Arabs.