

Iraqi American Viewpoint

An Interview with Adil Shamoo

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Welcome to a production of the Center for Emerging Media. I'm Marc Steiner.

The fifth anniversary of the US lead invasion into Iraq is upon us. Almost 4000 US troops have been killed. Who knows how many tens or hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians are also dead. Iraq has been transformed from a country where in cities like Baghdad, 70% of all marriages were mixed marriages between Sunni and Shia Muslims, to a place that has been ethnically cleansed. Since the invasion, Iraq Americans living in the states have had an interesting viewpoint of the war from the beginning. Many of them fled Iraq because of their dislike of the policies of Saddam and the Ba'thist regime. But they mourn the death of the vibrant Iraq they loved, where they still have family, where they remember growing up. I sat down with one such Iraqi American, Adil Shamoo, for a conversation to look back at the past five years, and how the US invasion and the occupation of Iraq has changed the place they come from. Enjoy the conversation.

Adil Shamoo, welcome.

Thank you, Marc, for having me back.

Good to have you at the Center for Emerging Media, and um, you have been thinking of writing about Iraq for a long time, and well, let's just start it this way, Adil, I mean, for those who may be hearing you for the first time, um, you were born in Iraq.

Yes. August 1941. [laughter]

And that gives your age, that's fine too.

That's fine.

That's good. And, so, you're a bioethicist by trade, right?

That's correct. Yeah.

And, uh, you grew up though in a, in a Christian community in Iraq.

That's right. Chaldea. Christian Chaldea. And, and my mother is, is Kurdish.

And your mother's Kurdish.

Yes.

Kurdish Christian?

Yes, yes.

And, and the Chaldeans are of course one of the, one of the most ancient communities.

That's correct. They're mentioned in the Bible thirty times as a matter of fact—as the Golden Age.

[laughs] And so—but—and you came here early, back in the 60's.

Yes. I came to study my master's degree in Physics, and later on I finished my PhD in Biophysics, and later on I became a chairman of Biochemistry in University of Maryland's School of Medicine. And then I, after many years I changed to Bioethics, so I keep changing, and I don't know what next. [laughs]

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Changing is good!

Isn't it?

Yes. So, but, now, as an American, you're an American citizen, and have been for a long, long time.

Long time. 35 years, almost.

But as we do in America, we hyphenate things, and as an Iraqi-American, as we do here.

That's right, yeah.

But talk—take us back to five years ago, since we're talking about what's happened in the last five years since the invasion and occupation of Iraq—your old country, by your new country.

Yes. Well. In, in the fall of 2002, uh, I usually uh, give a party for about fifty, sixty people in December, or sometimes before that. And there were people in my house, and there was a woman you may know, Aviva Kempner she was the producer for Hank Greenberg, as the first Jewish baseball—

Oh yes, I've interviewed her.

Yes. Well, Aviva was in my house. And she's, you know, anti-war, etc. And she asked me, "Are we gonna invade Iraq, Adil?" and I said, "Yes, we are, I think the president has made the decision to invade Iraq, and these are only means and methods to justify."

As a man who was born in Iraq and whose family and friends lived under the oppression and dictatorship of Saddam Hussein for a long time, and other Ba'thist leaders in Iraq, why were you opposed to the invasion? I mean, the idea that was pushed forth in America obviously was, pushed forward in America was A, that we're going to end this [] of vast destruction, that we have in Iraq, and that it's oppressive—we're going to liberate the Iraqis from this oppressive society.

Prior to that, Fall 2--2002, I opposed Saddam Hussein for 25 years, while unfortunately our government supported it, Saddam Hussein, by weapons, intelligence information, and collaboration. It's really fascinating how the change occurred. So to me, it would have been natural to say, yeah, let's invade him, but I really knew the Iraqis better than a lot of people, and that is, they are fiercely independent and nationalist. And I knew any foreign troops, and I have said that before, even if they were Egyptian troops, insurgency would evolve in Iraq against them. They do not like any foreign invader to tell them what to do. And no one does! I all the time make the analogy would we, in this country, accept Russian troops to occupy us. I know it's almost delusional to think that, but it's really no different. Whether it's 25 million people or 250 million people.

I mean, Adil, even before the 9/11 attacks on the United States of America, there were people who wanted to attack Iraq. I mean it was the project for a new American century. Which some of the great thinkers of the Bush administration worked like Richard Pearl. Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and many others.,

Bill Kristol.

They all came from that foundation in Britain numerous articles in journals about, uh, about why it was important to take over Iraq.

Yes. They, they—

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Even before that, twenty years ago they were saying this.

That's correct. In '91. That was their first manifesto signed by I think Iran, 13 of them. It's on their website. They really believed they have the right, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the power, and the historic opportunity to change the world the way they see it, and—and I'm not going to ascribe to them only evil, uh, intentions, and maybe—for quote-unquote—for the better—and Saddam to be already on us was a very ready-made—as a rotten apple, as a dictator, hated by everyone, his own people and others, so they thought this is a good opportunity to start accomplishing their strategic goals. Strategic goals were to control major areas which are important geographically, politically, and economically. And Iraq was really made to order for, for that.

But even now, when, when, uh, it's five years later and whether people who opposed the war, people who supported, a lot of people are arguing now that it's working. That the surge is working, that the violence is down. Uh, that things are more under control than they ever were before.

This is really such a fallacious argument. First, we broke Iraq, we destroyed Iraq, there are 5 million refugees, half internal and half external. A half million children are practically homeless, the healthcare infrastructure destroyed. Most of Iraq is now ethnically cleansed, especially Baghdad.

What do you mean by “ethnically cleansed?”

Well, there are areas of pure Shiite and pure Sunnis, now. That didn't exist, especially in Iraq, was an intermixed city. Very cosmopolitan.

Yeah, especially Baghdad.

Especially in Baghdad, yes. And so when you “ethnically cleanse,” and you have an extra 20, 30 thousand troops, yeah, the violence goes down, especially when you don't count how many Iraqi have died. We never count Iraqis, you know. Official, this is an official policy of ours. So we really don't know if the violence has gone down towards the Iraqi. I would, I will grant you I think the violence overall—but the violence overall has gone down, for ethnically cleansed area—walls, there are literally, you know, sixteen feet tall walls, second we have made deals with the Sunni's insurgency, we are paying them millions of dollars to keep them quiet and we have a made the deal, which I think is a good idea to make such a deal with Muqtada al-Sadr. Now, however, Muqtada al-Sadr has made it very clear that he is against the occupation. And there are a lot of nationalistic feelings and following which unfortunately where major media do not cover. They only cover the Al-Qaeda, the terrorists, the insurgency, who's doing suicide bombing. They don't cover that there are tens of thousands of not sometimes even hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in a peaceful means, or other means, demanding the troops withdraw. So here it is: we are a great nation. We are, no doubt, the most superior force in the world. What are we trying to achieve in Iraq?

What do you think we—I'll change the question, you said [laughs]

Well, do we really, do we morally, do the American people will support colonizing and making Iraqi populace, the 25 million submissive to our will? Basically, their throat under our boot. That's really what, what the only way Iraq is going to become peaceful. We could do it, we could bomb and kill—and we have been doing that. With drones, we shoot rockets and missiles in highly densely populated area in Iraq, and if we kill civilians and innocent people and children, we say sorry, these are all, quote unquote, “collateral damage.”

When we were talking together before we started taping you were talking about, you were

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talking about the original reasons to go to war, that people talked about, that everybody said, no no no, those are not the reasons. But then you were commenting on how, in today's world, people are actually admitting to without saying that they did anything wrong.

Well, yeah, as you know the, the Bush administration, the New York Times, the excuse they use, number one was WMD, and that turned out to be fallacious. Then the freedom of the Iraqis, no—before that was the nuclear relo—the nuclear bomb they were acquiring, and then the basically—freedom of the Iraqis, all these turn out to be not true, and, and now really there admitting, they are actually admitting, Karl Rove, Dick Cheney and other new comers, they're saying basically, do we really want the Al-Qaeda to control the oil? So they're admitting the oil. Carl Rove just few weeks ago on, on the Sunday talk show, he said "Do you know if we withdraw, do you know what's going to happen to the price of a barrel of oil?" So the oil, blood for oil, which were a demonstration by hundreds of thousands all across the world, they were denied. They were thought of, then, as a bunch of nuts, to be very honest. It's true. I mean, we went to Iraq for three primary reason. One and most important one is strategic, is to shape the world the way we want and middle east is a very important region. And second was the oil, I don't mean Iraqi oil only, that's whole area which contains 70% of the world's oil, and that's extremely vital for the national security of the United States and the west. And the third reason is the safety and security of our allies. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, etc.

So the consequence is what, now? I mean, we're there, it's a surge, uh, the occupation will continue, uh, we see the presidential candidate McCain saying we'll be there for some time to come—he agrees to the invasion, he agrees to the war. You have Senator Obama and Senator Clinton, both who have pretensions to say they are against the war, but also admit that they're, that we're going to be there, that we're not leaving.

I think the only way we stay in Iraq and fulfill the dreams of George Bush's administration or John McCain's, heaven forbids, administration, it would be really to wear off the insurgency or the nationalists and make the Iraqis submissive to our will. And we are such a powerful country that I don't necessarily say will never happen. That could actually happen, but the Iraqis and the Arab world and the Muslim world will all the time fester with hatred to us, with insurgency against us, and with suicide bombing against us. And we will never be truly in peace in, in the Middle East if our troops by the hundreds of thousands are going to be present on Muslim and Arab soil. It, it confirms all those who hate us in the Middle East, what we are doing. It's terrible, terrible for us in the long run.

You said earlier, before I come back to what you just said, you said earlier to me when we started talking together that you see part of this as the Green Zoning of Iraq.

Yes.

So that's taking place, now.

Yes. Green Zoning and helicoptering of Iraq, because all the cabinet members, all the important officials, whether they're American or Iraqis, the only way they travel is by helicopter, because they're afraid of suicide bombings and IEDs, you know, improvised explosives. And everybody important lives in the Green Zone, that's why you see these Iraqis who live in the Green Zone, their English improved, because they eat at the same Pizza Hut and play and swim in the same swimming pools, etc. And interact with our American soldiers which is wonderful for their English advancement. But that's not how to run a country: to make enclaves of basically military bases.

So, so but, Adil, then, what do you do? Clearly your politics and your viewpoint of America and of world politics is on the progressive end of the spectrum.

Yes.

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There's no—attempt—

No, I say it even.

Absolutely. So that you're—Adil Shamoo is being asked to advise what comes next. Alright, we have a disaster, can anybody figure out a way to get us out of this disaster?

In my view, yeah, if, if somebody was listening to me, yeah, I would say, and I've all the time maintained somewhere between 12 months to 24 month plan to withdraw our troops peaceful, uh, safe withdrawal of our troops, and if we need troops to help Iraq maintain resemblance of peaceful co-existence among the different factions, we should use United Nations troops or maybe some neighboring countries. But should be transitory and temporary rather than as a long range. Now, I have no illusion about the fact that there may be a spasm of violence in Iraq. But then, a lot of nations go through that, and I think it will subside. The presence of foreign troops makes that violence worse rather than better. And that is really what the Iraqis need to see—that we are leaving. If you look at them when they, when John McCain was visiting, what these insurgent leaders and even those members of the parliament who do not want us as occupiers, they are all ready angry and mad at the fact that John McCain's idea is to stay there forever and that's what they are talking about. That is the most distressing.

But when you, when you take in a country, let's just say, when you look what's happened in Yugoslavia, Sarajevo and the major cities or cosmopolitan areas were Muslims and Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics intermarried and live one another and the same thing that was in Baghdad between Christians, Jews, Muslims, Shia, Sunni, and that's over. Everything is separated. So how do you put that back together?

I'm not going to say it's going to be easy, I'm not going to say even it is even possible. But the presence of foreign troops is not going to make it any better. It just is going to exasperate it more. Plus there will be resistance to us. The Iraqis would be willing to die to make us leave. And to me, it's not in our national interests. How could that be in our national interests? Forget about the Iraqis. Let's talk about Americans. It's not going to be in our national interests to have 50 to 100 thousand troops in Iraq on a continuing basis. That's really what is going to require, and there will be all the time violence. The level of violence may be 50 a day, or 5000 a day, there will be violence against us. And what that will do, the 1.7 billion Muslims that will be fomented to oppose us all the time. Look what's happened since we've invaded Iraq and Pakistan, or even in Afghanistan. There used to be no suicide bombing in those two countries. Guess what? We see it every day, every week, right?

So when you, how do you put that at the feet of American foreign policy as opposed to putting it, in the hands of the folks who would be allied with Al-Qaeda?

We won't be putting it, the Iraqis and I have all the time said that the Iraqis will not tolerate in the long run these nihilistic two thousand, backward, [laughs] mentality of of Al-Qaeda. These thugs will not thrive in Iraq. And they haven't, really. As you saw, as the Sunni turned on them, and got rid of them, wasn't really—we helped, is true—but they are the one who turned around, because the Al-Qaeda the Iraqis what to do, whom their children should marry. That is the resentment everybody agreed to it, that the Iraqis are not a fertile ground for Al-Qaeda mentality. Iraq is highly westernized, especially in urban centers. These, if these people who want to put the hijab and veil and everything, it's really an effort to many, many Iraqis. Now, of course, no woman can walk in Baghdad without it—out of fear. Not because they really want it. These same Muslim women will go in Europe, and they don't wear a hijab and a veil. The same person.

Uh-huh. Uh-huh. When you write about this, and I've been reading your recent articles, and I wonder how hopeful you are about where we're going to go.

Well, I am by nature and eternal optimist.

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You are.

Otherwise, I'd be very depressed. [laughter] And I'm hoping that cooler heads and wiser heads than the Bush administration or John McCain can prevail. And someone like Senator Obama plans to concentrate on our fight against our true enemy which is Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Iraq has never been an Al-Qaeda haven, and will return to be a not Al-Qaeda haven. And we could all the time keep a striking force within an hour from where it is and we go in and disrupt their plans, or have the Iraqis as equals, help us in destroying their bases there. And that would be much better and also we could really help Iraq in reconstruction. We still have the talent, the business, the management, the education, the technology to help the Iraqis reconstruct their country and they would be very, very grateful to us. They would become more pro-America that way rather than having twenty year old foot soldier who doesn't know what the heck he's sometimes doing, they're really, they're not, they're good people, but they don't know how to do reconstruction. They don't know how to run a country. They're taught only to conquer an enemy, and Iraq is not that enemy.

Do you have family left in Iraq?

I have, yeah. Not my parents, have passed away long time, but I have three sisters and I have probably a hundred and fifty second and third and fourth level relationships.

You have three sisters left in Iraq.

Oh yes. And their siblings, and they're all married them, and their children, and they're all married. And I have cousins.

So you stay in touch with them?

Not very well, really. Yeah, I stay through Detroit [laughs], because there's a lot of Iraqis, as you know, over hundred thousand Iraqis,

Well, with the Chaldeans and—

Yes, yes. Over a hundred thousand, it's like and they have their own TV, their own radio, and their own churches.

So you haven't been communicating with your family about the conditions that they're living under or what's going on—

I do, plus—but, but I also read heavily the websites in Arabic and in English, and, and keep in touch there all the time. As a matter of fact, now reporters from Middle East actually ask me [laugh] my views about the Middle East.

Well, what's the condition of the Chaldean community in Iraq now?

Oh, it's horrible there. Our bishop just got killed. Highest Chaldean religious leader has been killed. That is—never to happen. He used to be highly respected by Muslims and Christians. He was killed, he was kidnapped, and he was killed. It's awful. Churches bombed. Many, many, several dozen churches been bombed. People, priests have been killed. This is the oldest Christian community in the world, over 2000 years old. Since birth of Christ. They are—they are original. And an awful lot of people know who the Chaldeans are, the Chaldeans actually control that whole area all the way to Jerusalem for a hundred—nearly a hundred years.

Well, what's become of the Chaldean community in Iraq?

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It's shrinking, Used to be one and a half million, and then one million, and now, I think, is down to a little over a half a million.

'Cause people are fleeing.

Of course, of course they're fleeing. Your safety, your life. Life is very important, so they're fleeing. And they're starving, a lot of them. Very proud community. The villages, nothing but Chaldeans in the north.

And, so, when was the last time you were able to communicate with your family?

Oh, I would say a year ago through, through England.

That must be very frustrating and frightening for you.

Of course it is, of course it is. I'm frightened to go. I would love to go. But I'm frightened. I don't have the security our vice president has, or John McCain has, 50 to 100 troops.

People I know who are Iraqi who've gone back, they said to me that after they left that uh, one man I know who comes from an even older community than you do, I mean, the old Zoroastrian community there,

Mm-hmm.

That he made the mistake of going back and when he left, his family was kidnapped and held for random—

Because they know they have a rich relative. So called rich—

Right. They say you're rich—

Exactly. The minute, the minute they are in the west, exactly. The minute you are in the west, western or especially live in America, everybody thinks you are a, it's sad.

That is sad. Thank you, Adil Shamoo. It's been—always a pleasure to talk to you.

My pleasure, Marc, and thank you for having me.

You're listening to a production for the Center for Emerging Media. Our producers are Justin Levy and Jessica Philips. Engineering assistance from Liz Buckel. And thanks to Clean Cut Music and Sound design for studio space. To hear more and learn more, visit us on the web, at marcsteinerblog.wordpress.com or just Google Marc Steiner blog. And for the Center for Emerging Media, I'm Marc Steiner. Take care.

-Transcript by Judith Lloyd