

After the Fall of the Regime: Orientation and Motivation of Young Adults in Baghdad

Anja Wollenberg

Introduction

From April 2004, on behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, the *streamminister* company has been conducting cooperative media projects with local partners in Iraq. So far three projects have been run where German-Iraqi teams have produced and broadcasted a radio shows covering cultural and political issues. The partners and target group of the programmes are young adults in Iraq aged between 18 and 35. The long-term goal of the cooperation is to establish and maintain participative, impartial media services in Iraq and to foster qualification and networking among Iraqi journalists. All projects were funded by the German Foreign Office.

In order to go beyond the scope of these projects and address the question of values, motives, and attitudes of young adults in Iraq, *streamminister* undertook an analysis of 28 interviews from the first radio project, *TELEPHONE FM*, trying to identify influences and constraints that shape individual biographical narratives after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Empirical Material and Research Object

The Radio Show

TELEPHONE FM was an Arabic language radio show. It was produced partly in Berlin and partly in Baghdad by an Arab/German team and was broadcasted on a Baghdad youth radio station over a period of three-and-a-half-month in the summer and autumn of 2004.

The 70 broadcasts in total focused on concerns such as how people conceived their lives in present and future, what aims they had, both personally and career-wise, and what projects young people had in Baghdad eighteen months after the Saddam Hussein regime fell. One of the project's goals was to elaborate a comprehensive picture of the attitudes, interests, and activities as well as the fears and hopes of the listeners; in fact, what emerged was a public platform for presentation, inspiration, and critical debate.

Streamminister started the project in early 2004, initially intending to produce and broadcast a radio show in Baghdad. However, as the security situation deteriorated, one was forced to give up plans of moving there. Instead, Iraqi journalists and radio presenters were invited to Berlin to produce the show here. A total of four Iraqis came to Berlin for two production phases where, together with German and Arab colleagues, they developed, designed and produced the show; a 90-minutes programme was then delivered on a daily basis to a FM-radio station in Baghdad where it was included in the daily broadcasting schedule.

Since then a number of follow-up projects have been initiated, such as:

- a radio show monitoring the political process in Iraq, respectively the elections in January and the ongoing constitutional process (running from December 2004 to December 2005)
- a show on cultural issues planned for autumn 2005 including reports about the state of contemporary art and culture in Iraq's neighbouring countries (named: Iraq 360°)
- a website providing a civil society discussion forum on the political process in Iraq and the drafting of the new Iraqi constitution (www.niqash.org)

The Interviews and the Interviewees

During the production of the *TELEPHONE FM* broadcasts, the editorial team conducted over 100 interviews on a variety of subjects, primarily with young Iraqi adults living in Iraq. These interviews were conducted either by correspondents in Baghdad or via phone by the Iraqi journalists in the Berlin studio (hence the name – *TELEPHONE FM*). The process of finding interviewees was taken up by the entire team and by project partners supporting the research. They were specifically looking for interviewees drawn from two groups of people: experts on a specific topic – for example, media, education, culture, etc. –, and young people working on interesting projects or topics who were willing to talk about themselves and their work.

In order to attain well-founded and meaningful statements in the project evaluation about the interviewees' attitudes and opinions, a series of interviews were translated and evaluated and an additional number of in-depth interviews were carried out with Iraqi project partners in Berlin. In the following, some of the findings from this extended evaluation is presented, based on interviews with 28 Iraqi men¹ aged 18-35 living in Baghdad. The material comprises:

- 13 short ten-minute interviews
- 12 long interviews (of around 20 minutes each)
- 3 discussions lasting approximately 2 hours each

The research focused on the issue of how biographies are constructed and the factors that influence this process, looking specifically for answers to the following questions:

- What are our interviewees' jobs and how do they do them?
- What motives and interests play a role in their work?
- How important is the world outside Iraq in their work?
- How do they evaluate the future of Iraq as playing a part in their own plans for their personal future?

Procedure

In terms of methodology, the analysis has been conducted as a backwards-moving process: in contrast to standard research where one begins with the research question to generate the according data, we found ourselves first confronting the data before specific issues could be identified. To clarify the concerns, all interview passages were divided up into the categories of 'description', 'explanation', and 'evaluation', which then allowed the team, in a second step, to identify issues – what was being described, explained, or evaluated? This, in turn, led to the key questions listed above.

On the basis of these key questions, a structured collection of answers could be generated that were then analysed in regard to similarities, differences, and patterns among the statements. As a result of these procedures, tentative theses and interpretations were formulated, which are presented and illustrated by excerpts from the interviews shown in section "Presentation of the Findings."

In adopting this method, we are following Mayring's content analysis (1990), a qualitative approach aimed at identifying subjective patterns of action and reasoning to make action understandable. This phase of the research was not striving to ensure the findings were generalisable or representative for the group as a whole. (On the validity of the findings, see "Conclusion").

Social Background

Just prior to the Gulf War, the U.N. described Iraq as a high middle-income country with a modern social infrastructure. In comparison to other Arab states, religion played a minor role in public life and was seen as a private mat-

ter. Gender equality was relatively advanced in the training and job sectors, while the level of general education, enjoyed an excellent reputation in the Arab world. The Iraqi self-image, even today, is coined by the notion of belonging to the vanguard of modernity in the Arab world. In fact, however, Saddam Hussein's aggressive and authoritarian domestic and foreign policy and the embargo in place since 1990 has reversed the successful start to modernization and the formerly high level of cultural development. The 1990s were a step backwards into pre-modern times and a return to pre-modern values: tribes and *shuyukh* have gained influence, religion has gained in importance, and everyday life has become dominated by the quest for provisions, with the society marked by social injustice (Al-Ali 2003).

Political Conditions

Roughly speaking, our interviewees were born in the 1970s, at a time when the Socialist Baath Party was already in power. In 1979, Saddam Hussein took over from al-Bakr as President. The political environment this generation grew up in can be characterized as authoritarian: despite the modernization in the 1970s mentioned above, civil society neither had chances to engage in political participation nor was there a freedom of opinion, press, or information. Violence was an omnipresent instrument of asserting political power, the regime persecuted and killed large numbers of Kurds, Shiites and communists. The general population was under surveillance from a number of secret service organisations and was systematically brainwashed by the regime's propaganda machine (Farouk-Sluglett, Sluglett 1990). In this spirit, Iraqi media production was controlled by Saddam Hussein's son Uday, who also was the head of the Iraqi Journalist Union. Satellite television and the Internet were banned. Contrary to their intended goals, the sanctions imposed on Iraq under UNSC Resolution 661 in 1990 did not lead to changing power relations within Iraq but instead further buttressed Saddam Hussein's regime. As the principal distributor of foodstuffs and medicine, the government was not only provided with further control mechanisms over the population, but also regained legitimacy within Iraq.

Economic Development

In this period, economic development is marked by extreme contrasts and a progressive downward spiral. During the 1970s, the centralized economy found itself in the middle of an upswing. Oil production had been nationa-

lised and benefited from output nearly tripling between 1965-1979, with a parallel rise in oil prices. Between 1973 and 1979 alone, the revenues from oil rose tenfold (Farouk-Sluglett, Sluglett 2003). The economic decline began in the mid-1980s as the spiralling costs for the war with Iran and the war damage began to bite. In the medium term, the UN imposed embargo resulted in the majority of Iraqis living below the poverty line – causing significant damage to the integrity of the society in the health, social, and cultural spheres. Since 1990, infant mortality rates (4,000-5,000 per month), and cases of malnutrition, leukaemia and cancer have all been steadily rising (Al-Ali 2003).

Education and Professional Life

Since the economic crisis began, salaries paid in state-run institutions and factories have increasingly taken on a symbolic character. For example, by the mid-1990s a teacher's monthly salary amounted to somewhere between \$ 5-10 – one reason why a person's education and training and the job they were doing frequently bore very little relation to earning a living. The average family made ends meet through food stamps and trading on the unofficial markets. Although compulsory school attendance was introduced in Iraq in 1976, a Ministry of Planning survey in the summer of 2004 found that 20% of young Iraqis under the age of 24 had not received any schooling at all, 15% had not even finished primary school, and only 11% had completed a secondary school education.² After the initial successes scored in the fight against illiteracy when compulsory schooling was introduced, by 2003 the illiteracy rate had again risen to 30% among men and 55% among women (UNESCO 2003).

The Gulf Wars

Our interviewees witnessed three wars fought under Saddam Hussein's regime: the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the Second Gulf War 1990/91, and now the invasion and occupation of Iraq by the allied forces led by the U.S. Everyone who has lived through these years can recount their own traumatic experiences of war and list friends or family who were among the casualties. From their 16th birthday on, all young men were constantly accompanied by the fear of being drafted into the military at anytime and without any warning.

The interviews providing the material for this analysis were conducted in the summer and autumn of 2004, one-and-a-half year after the invasion of the American-led Coalition Forces. In the following section a brief overview is provided of the central features of the situation in Baghdad at that time.

Iraq in Summer 2004

Dissolution of Structures

Under the occupation, state structures were dissolved and replaced by improvised interim institutions with an authority and jurisdiction that initially remained opaque. In a parallel movement, triggered by this power shift, the entire society became gripped by a heated debate on personal and collective identities, where religious, political, ethnic, and regional affiliations were taken as points of departure for new identity constructs. In this situation, radical preachers (like Muqtada al-Sadr), proved able to attract a following, especially among young adults, by pitting the clarity of religious dogma against growing social chaos. On 28 June an interim government was appointed under Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, a leader regarded as having authoritarian leanings. This move was connected with a hope for a quick clarification of the situation.

The sudden loss of any semblance of security in the public sphere may well be the feature that most characterised the situation in 2004. Iraqi citizens faced a variety of threats from different areas. Firstly, the occupying forces represented a constant source of potential violence and a possible provocation to violence; secondly, the number of criminals ready to plunder property, kidnap children, or work as hired contract killers steadily grew; thirdly, the summer of 2004 saw a significant increase in religiously and politically motivated assassins, that became a constant source of worry and concern as such attacks occurred with increasing frequency and began not only targeting the occupation forces but also those collaborating with them. At that time, the battles in Fal-lujah became a symbol of the occupation forces' inability to curb resistance.

The freedom generated by the fall of the regime is extensive and radical. Innumerable new radio stations and newspapers, freed from state control, have begun disseminating their own – usually politically bound – positions. Numerous Internet cafes have sprung up providing uncensored access to information on the Internet. Satellite TV is also freely available, providing one can afford to buy a satellite dish. Political parties have been founded and political views can be freely expressed in public. Since the fall of the regime more than 700 NGOs have been founded in Iraq, frequently with the support of exile Iraqis who have now returned to their home country (in June 2005, there were around 6,000 NGOs).

The supply situation in Iraq was already serious before the invasion and the war had only made it more severe. Recurrent power cuts at temperatures of

around 55 degrees fuelled the general population's anger and desperation; the hygienic conditions in hospitals, the state of the roads and provision of water were all noticeably worsening. The massive army lay-offs and dismissals in the wake of the peace settlement and in the process of 'de-Baathification' resulted in an already high unemployment rate rocketing to approximately 50%. Figures from late 2004 revealed 43% of all families living below the poverty line, with a further 44% of families barely above it, and only 2% able to enjoy a reasonable or even prosperous standard of living.³

The roadmap imposed by US politicians not only held out the promise of elections in January 2005 but also that of Iraq's democratisation. The roadmap provides for elections and a provisional government, a constitution designed by 15 August 2005, a referendum on the constitution and, finally, at the end of 2005, parliamentary elections held on the basis of the new constitution. The public debate in Iraq on the project's chances of success showed a certain ambivalence, with the question of whether democracy can be created through war and outside coercion constituting a main element in the debate. In real terms, from the perspective of the civilian population, although the elections in January 2005 remain an abstract plan, the term 'democracy' is filled with hope.

Presentation of the Findings

As mentioned at the beginning, the interview analysis focused on the question of how biographies get shaped. Beyond this core concern, the aim was to gain a greater understanding of the values, motives and attitudes of the project partners and target groups. The concrete questions detailed in the section on the interviews and the interviewees are used here to structure the presentation.

What are our Interviewees' Jobs and how do they do them?

The majority of the interviewees are self-employed, freelancers, or develop their own projects; only 6 out of 28 are salaried employees while 12 work in the cultural sector, e.g., film makers, writers, sculptors, dancers, or musicians. A further six own shops or workshops, in jobs ranging from lute-builder to antiques dealer, Internet Café owner or tattoo shop proprietor. Six interviewees are mainly working as full-time journalists, with the remainder of the group made up of software programmers and sportsmen, and people working for NGOs or at universities.

Patchwork Biographies and Non-Institutional Learning

Since many interviewees follow more than one career path, either consecutively or simultaneously, this initial categorization into occupational groups is only roughly applicable. For example, the poet and writer was previously trained as an electrician but is now working as a journalist; the dpa correspondent also owns an Internet Café; another journalist is not only a businessman and farmer, but also busy writing his doctorate; the NGO founder is also an author, and so on. Most of the biographies we came to know are marked by frequent changes of work areas and multiple jobs in different occupations.

Undoubtedly, such non-linear biographies are more likely to occur given a centralised distribution of university places in line with school grades, as was the case in Iraq under the Saddam Hussein regime. Here, a training path was not selected on the basis of interest and talent but imposed by a state-defined mechanism where specific grades inevitably led to specific educational paths. In the case of our interviewees, this had often resulted in a situation where they had both completed the prescribed training but also pursued their own interests and talents, combining both of these strands into a career patchwork.

This kind of non-linear career-pathing is also associated with self-taught acquisition of the competencies needed in one's work. The expertise and skills required are often learned outside the state's educational institutions, most commonly with the help of friends and books and, since 2000, also with the help of the Internet as an information resource. The following two examples illustrate this way of learning.

Not only did the owner of a tattoo parlour teach himself how to tattoo but he also built his own tools when he was first starting out: "I started in 1996 and since I could already draw rather well, the two things were an optimal fit. In the beginning, I had to build the tattoo equipment myself but after a while things started to develop further [...] Of course, it's mainly a question of talent. I learnt the basic skills and created a foundation on which I could then build. I've kept on working on those skills – and kept on learning, for example, from western specialist magazines and catalogues."

The film maker O. left film school after one year and learnt how to make films on his own: "Every student had to submit a short film as a part of their final exams. Most of them weren't capable of making a film. They simply hadn't learnt how to do it. One day a student asked me to make a film he could submit for his finals. He offered to pay me for it. I shot the film and suddenly I was snowed under by similar requests. From then on, I shot one

film after another for these students. It was a great way to learn about the art of filmmaking – I could try everything out.”

Confident Decision-Making, Quick Realization

What emerges in trying to identify factors, institutions, and persons influencing the interviewees’ biographies is, first and foremost, their impressive readiness to aplomb. Without giving any great consideration to risks or potential disadvantages, or taking steps to establish long-term safeguards, most of our interviewees quickly put projects and plans into action. And they take these decisions themselves, almost entirely alone without making any noticeable allowances for intervention or support from state institutions, family members, or others. A few examples will illustrate this approach in more detail:

Journalist and doctoral student S. is working for a number of agencies and newspapers, writing his thesis at the university and, in addition, running a smallholding outside Baghdad. When he talks about his attitude to life, he says: “My advice to anyone striving to be successful is to set yourself a goal and forget about everything else. Don’t think of anything else but your goal and how you can achieve it. In my view, you only have to keep that goal right in front of your eyes and never let yourself be distracted by the problems and difficulties there are in Iraq at present. [...] If you want to be successful, then you’ll also enjoy the risk contained in any challenge [...] I can risk everything and challenge any power in this world.”

R. runs a successful Internet Café in Baghdad: “I opened my Internet café after the war, helped by friends who lent me computers. Before the war, I was studying in Baghdad in a college for mass media. I’ve got the only Internet café in this part of the town. [...] In my life up until now, I’ve only ever done the right things. I trust myself and my intuition. Lots of people think they can do great things but they never do. That doesn’t happen to me.”

O. is a filmmaker from Baghdad who shot a feature film there shortly after the war ended. For his film, he used old looted film material that he bought on the black market: “None of the people putting up the money for the film knew whether they’d ever actually get to see anything on the screen. None of them knew if it would ever really result in anything at all. But still we sold our cars, my brother and I, to make our work possible.”

In the course of a conversation, J. had taken the decision to make a career in journalism: “One or two days after the fall of the regime an American journalist visited me at home. At that time I was working as a baker and earning

about \$ 2 a day. After first having described my home as a place where not even mice would want to live, the journalist then asked me some questions. I spontaneously replied that now after the system had changed, my situation would also change and, at that very moment, I decided to become a journalist.”

Many of these narratives are marked by the readiness to take radical decisions and imbued by a feeling of self-confidence and courage. The interviewees present themselves as sovereign actors who react to the shift in the overall situation not with helplessness but with activism. They do not ask for institutional support; however they do rely on the help of friends and relatives.

Naturally, though, there were also other approaches to life where, for example, the interviewee pursuing a sports career with his potential actions limited by the official sports organisation. Other cases, for instance the lute-builder and antiques trader, revealed a continuation of family traditions, where sons had taken over the jobs and businesses of their fathers. However, in our series of interviews, this mode of a determined life adapting to external restraints was lower-ranking compared to the autonomous, action-directed, and self-determined approach related to the tendency to acquire self-taught skills and realise patchwork biographies.

Comment

If these observations are now placed in relation to the societal structures and conditions in summer 2004 it would seem that acting confident, quick and self-determined might well be an appropriate response to the dissolution of structures, state, and order that characterised the situation so strongly. Apparently our interviewees are handling the sudden disappearance of structures, security, and order in a rather competent and self-assured way, which raises the question of when and how they acquired the according skills. All our interviewees grew up during the Baath regime and, hence, under societal structures oriented along and towards regulation, supervision, and control. But how can young people in an authoritarian and repressive society develop competencies that turn them into experts in dealing with chaos and disorientation?

One thesis, though needing to be verified, relates to the state's inability to maintain supply in the education and work sectors under the conditions created by the embargo. The inability to provide the civilian with institutional promotion and institutionalized securities leads at the same time to the loss of institutionalized supervision and control over this civilian. As a result, the poli-

tical culture obviously no longer penetrates and structures the space of individual professional activities, which are (or have to be) organised outside institutional structures. Paradoxically this disintegration can be combined with an increased legitimacy of the regime as pointed out in chapter 3. Within society autonomous cultural spaces may develop with their own values and maxims of action. To put it somewhat pointedly - within the context of this structural aspect, the transition from dictatorship to anarchy may not be that much of a change. This is a point I will return to in the conclusion.

Family and Gender

The assumption that the interviewees in Iraq also act in a sphere outside family influence is not suggested here. For every individual, the family plays a large role in self-image, future plans, and everyday life and, moreover, is more important than loyalty to the state. In Iraqi society, the extended family is the fundamental social unit. Nonetheless, in assessing family influence, one needs to differentiate between plans in the work and private sphere and between men and women. Although certain decisions in the private sphere, for example, place of residence and choice of spouse – which are not part of this research – are definitely regarded as a family concern and under family control, this does not apply to such an extent to work-related decisions taken by young men. While our interviewees and colleagues reported family support and encouragement in their professional lives, they described the attitude of their families towards private or possible love relationships as restrictive and controlling. The question of whether this approach is similarly differentiated in the lives of young women, though, goes beyond the scope of this research. It is known, however, that women in general are subject to more stringent familial and societal controls than men and that, since the mid-1990s, the restrictions on, and social marginalisation of, women have been steadily increasing.

What Motives and Interests Play a Role in Their Work?

In the second step of the analysis, motives for work-related decisions and the interests underlying them were investigated. The following motives are prominent in the narratives.

Market and Customers

In explaining work-related decisions, many of our interviewees refer to the needs and interests of customers and the market. Just as everywhere else in the

world, when making products available, business people orientate themselves towards customer demand. Also artists align their production with their audience's anticipated or real interests, whereby one specific feature of such 'customer orientation' shall be addressed here in more detail:

Many of the artists interviewed are passionately involved in rehabilitating art in society. They deplore the collaboration between art and the previous regime as well as the misuse of art for propaganda purposes which has culminated in the destruction of art and its function in society. The artists view the loss of culture's credibility among the general population as the loss of their means of existence. The people have turned away from art so much so that even art that is oppositional in character and non-regime affiliated has lost both its audience and its legitimacy. Our interviewees rejected the artists-in-exile, removed from the people, and similarly rejected regime-affiliated artists who worked against the people. Instead, they are striving to recover an audience by addressing the issues that directly affect the people.

For example, the poet A. commented: "I grew up at a time when poets enjoyed hardly any widespread public acceptance and, at that time, it really hurt me. This was because poets wrote poems of praise to the people in power, and took their money too. Only a very small group of poets avoided that route, going down a different road, working out of the public eye. But because this went on for decades, people learnt to treat poets with contempt since they were writing things about Saddam and events in Iraq that had little or nothing to do with ordinary people's reality. These poets inhabited a different world from the world of truth and the world of the Iraqi people. [...] Now we need poets in Iraq who show that what was disseminated as poetry in those days was simply a lie and not poetry at all. We have to offer the broad mass of people poems bound to their own joy and suffering, and far removed from the government and the rulers."

Presentation Abroad

We find here a second motif, closely related to the notion of revitalising art by turning to the audience: the motif of rehabilitating the Iraqi people in the way it is perceived through the media by the rest of the world. Many interviewees justify their actions with the desire to correct the sensationalist media image of the underdeveloped, violence-loving Arab and replace it with the reality of the educated, confident and cosmopolitan Iraqi, an image vanished from the media since the fall of the regime.

This desire plays a key role among Iraqi bloggers, as the blogger F. explains: “We drew our motivation for writing from the vast discrepancy between international media reports and commentaries and what we were experiencing ourselves everyday. In many of their reports, the international media seemed to have little idea of what was happening – and I can’t say whether that was deliberate or not. But it simply created a false picture of what was happening. And that’s why we are following all the everyday events.”

H., a sculptor, puts it even more directly: “My friends’ help enabled us to disseminate a different picture from the one usually seen in the media or broadcast via satellite TV as news, no matter whether it was couched in black or white terms. Actually, you know yourself the news in those days only ever portrayed a dark likeness of the city, the shadowy side, the robberies and murders. We just wanted to make Iraqi voices a part of this change too, so we could say: We are there, we are thinking, we are dreaming, and we are doing our work, and this reveals more of our civilized state than just the degeneration that’s taking place in front of the cameras, all too keen to capture it on film to fill the satellite TV stations’ programmes.” Another variation of this concern is found among some journalists who are calling for the reintroduction of truth in the Iraqi media as a key journalistic standard and goal. From this standpoint, journalism is less a professional skill than, first and foremost, a moral task: “The thing I really hope for in my job [as a journalist] is that I can portray the truth, precisely and without bias, regardless of whether it is about oppressing some ordinary person, describing rights previously withheld or exposing the things politicians want to hide from the people.”

Passion

We found that together with, and complementary to, the externally directed drive of customer/market/image, career decisions are taken on an emotional basis. Passion is an essential source of motivation in work activities – despite, and perhaps because of, the hostile conditions in which these activities take place. This was most clearly expressed by S., the lute-builder, who has been making *ouds* since he was 18: “Making an Oud is not particularly lucrative since the details involved in the work are very time-consuming and complex [...] No-one can really make an Oud if they don’t love the instrument too. It also takes a while before you master the skills you need but then you’re really proud of your work. [Question: What kind of skills do you need to become a lute maker?] First of all, you have to love the instrument.”

The journalist O. too is driven by the enjoyment of his job: “Afterwards I started as an announcer at a local radio station. I also enjoyed that more and more, my media competency increased and my best times were when I was in the studio.”

Comment

In comparing the motives and interests outlined here with the living conditions at the time of the interviews, one is confronted by an apparent contradiction: the interviewees do not act defensively or out of despair, as might be suggested by the hostile conditions in occupied Baghdad; instead, they are pursuing motives one could describe as idealistic. Rather than underscoring their powerlessness and despair, the interviewees emphasize the scope and impact of their possibilities. In their narratives, the ideal of freedom takes precedence over material shortages and existential problems, which rarely appear as reasons for their actions.

How Important is the World Outside Iraq in Their Work?

Since the fall of the regime, contacts abroad have significantly increased although, looked at objectively, trade conditions have actually worsened due to the risks on the ground (bringing visits from abroad to a near total standstill), the severe damage caused to the infrastructure, with the related difficulty of reaching anyone by phone, and the invalidity of travel documents previously authorized. Nevertheless, contacts have not only multiplied vastly but have also become more interactive, i.e., rather than just a consumption of Western culture, commercial and cultural exchanges are taking place.

Cooperation

Most of our interviewees are successfully looking for contacts to Western institutions to utilize their production and distribution capacities to enter international markets, communities, and discourses:

- a guitarist we interviewed told us the band he was in had found a producer in London who was going to produce their new album there and launch it on the international market
- one of the film makers had worked together with a German film production company to produce and distribute his movie shot on location in Baghdad. In the course of realising this project, he had travelled to Germany with some of his Iraqi colleagues to spend several months there. The film is currently being shown at international film festivals

- many Iraqi journalists have applied for IWPR, CNN, or BBC training and, in this way, have become correspondents working for international agencies. *Streamminister* is in touch with at least 30 Iraqis – of course, apart from those mentioned here – who have participated in the *streamminister*-media-projects mentioned earlier.
- one programmer is a member of the international Linux community, viewing himself as a bridge-head for that community in Iraq. He hopes that he can help Iraq become a place with more Linux than Microsoft users.
- Iraqi track and field athletes held their pre-Olympic training in Cologne, since the conditions there were better and also prepared there for the Arab Games in Algeria.
- both (!) antiques dealers buy their goods in Italy, Austria, Russia, and from all of the Arab countries.

At the time of the interviews, the vast majority of interviewees had active work-related contacts abroad - a surprising finding when one takes into account how extremely difficult conditions were then to establish and maintain contacts. The main criticism of the West was directed to its media coverage. As one can see in some of the quotes above, Iraqis primarily criticise the choice of images broadcast by a violence-loving media focusing, as the core of their coverage, on shots of armed Iraqi perpetrators and injured Iraqi victims. They fear – and rightly so – that the media will damage the image of Iraq abroad and they attempt to use their own activities and work to counter such developments. In particular, the Iraqi blogger community is active here and has managed to attain worldwide popularity (e.g., www.riverbend.blogspot.com).

Emigration

As has been illustrated (section “Cooperation”) contacts abroad are being sought generally and, in particular, to the West and the inspiration from abroad is being welcomed; the increased exchange with the world abroad is viewed positively and the opportunities to make money through cooperation are being utilized. In contrast, however, the decision to leave Iraq to live abroad is viewed unfavourably. Many of our interviewees disparage and reject emigration, or at least deny it as a possibility in their own lives. In this sense, the pop group we interviewed is an exception, since they have collectively decided to emigrate to England. The others who commented on this issue all view emigration – frequently not explicitly but between the lines - as a betrayal or an act of weakness. As the following quote from the writer O. illustrates,

emigrants are seen as turning their back on the people, just as the regime-affiliated artists are considered to have turned from the people towards Iraq's despotic ruler:

“Two types of Iraqi lyrical poetry are no longer readable at all – and mostly for psychological reasons. I'm talking about those types, those ideological contradictions, whose shadows still lie across Iraqi culture, and one of them comprises the chauvinists – and the other their counterpart, the emigrants. Neither of these types is seen as representing Iraqi culture any longer and they are no longer read. [...] And now lots of people are asking themselves why isn't Muza'ffar al-Nauwab here – in Iraq? [...] He is presently living in Syria – and accepts a system there that in a certain sense is also a dictatorship. So why isn't he here? Or Saadi Youssef, who's living in London – and at the cost of the people there, since he's receiving financial support from their government. So he's living in a country occupying his own homeland. These are contradictions I simply can't understand!”

Emigration is rejected as a biographical option, as is illustrated in the following quote from the film maker R:

“My second film was about the end of the hippie culture in Iraq. The film was nine minutes long and rather good. It was shown at a film festival in Amsterdam. I didn't go there even though I would have had the chance. It wasn't forbidden to visit Europe and I could have got a visa. For example, my uncle lives in California. He was always inviting me to visit him but I didn't want to go. I had the feeling that some major changes would be taking place in Iraq and I wanted to witness these events first-hand. It was a decision that wasn't easy to make and meant I had to give up a mass of chances I would have had. But I think it was the right thing to do. I've experienced the events of the last year and I've made this film and received a lot of recognition from people who are important to me. I only left Iraq for the first time this year to visit the Berlin Film Festival.”

Comment

Many interviewees have successfully set up cooperations with foreign institutions, ending the painful isolation imposed during the embargo era. In doing so, the Iraqis have positioned themselves in these evolving relationships as, on the one hand, recipients of benefits and support – for example, in the case of the athletes invited to Cologne by the Olympic Committee to provide them with better training facilities or the many journalists invited to training courses

run by Western media such as the BBC, CNN and Deutsche Welle. A significantly larger number of contacts, however, are of a business nature, where the actors from 'the West' are not perceived primarily as helpers but as business partners.

As it becomes clear from the examples (see "Cooperation") many relationships evolving here are relationships of partners who pursue transparent interests. This entry into cross-border cooperative relationships may also help effectively establish a middle class and develop civil society into a self-confident and modern partner for the state – especially since, as the quotes on the issue of emigration show, the interest of young Iraqis in staying in their country appears to be greater than any desire to leave it.

The passionate rejection of emigration by those staunchly determined to stay is more easily understood when one bears in mind the intellectual and financial resources lost in each wave of emigration – since the occupation of Iraq in April 2003 more than 600,000 Iraqis have left the country, including many physicians, academics, and experts. In this sense, emigration is not just an act of betrayal, of turning one's back, but also something that increases the desolation in one's home country.

How are Iraq's Present and Future Evaluated as Part of One's Own Life Plans?

The characteristic features of the situation in Baghdad in summer/autumn 2004 can be summarized as, on the one hand, the increased freedoms in the wake of the fall of the regime and, on the other, the loss of security and the worsening supply of material goods (for details see section "Iraq in Summer 2004"). Unsurprisingly, then, our interviewees all referred to the severe shortages and poor security situation in Baghdad as 'tough', 'hard', 'difficult', and 'painful'. In the interviews, they did not go into detail about the generally poor situation and their comments remained brief and general; similarly, American policies were also not discussed in depth.

But rather than there being no evaluation offered at all, it was transposed and transmitted via the issue of Iraq's future and democratisation. In contrast to the anticipated negative assessment of the present situation in normal life, Iraq's future perspectives were largely viewed positively – even if the majority of interviewees admitted an indefinite period of learning, effort, and change lay between the unappealing present and a future seen in glowing colours. As the following quotes show, the basis for such an optimistic assessment proved

to be an unfaltering faith in the Iraqi people, its power and intelligence, and its capacity to overcome crises and find solutions for the problems it is facing: “I expect I will see many beautiful things in future – and even if it’s only because I’m one of those working towards creating them. Our city is now in our own hands and we have to make most of the effort ourselves. I’m absolutely convinced this generation will experience more work than joy but, on the other hand, the effort we have to make is itself a reason for joy – and a very honourable one too. I sincerely hope we’ll be successful. And even if we aren’t able to enjoy that success ourselves, there will certainly be someone coming after us who can. Nowadays, it’s enough to plant a flower – after all, only thorn bushes were planted in the past...”

K. takes a far more critical stance but believes in a similar end result: “I’m not optimistic in the short term but I believe, given time, things will get better. Young people in Iraq are open and ready for new ideas. The reason why there are still problems in educating the youth politically is largely down to a tense and troubled situation, poor economic development and lack of security. But this will change too in the medium term and the political education of young people will then bear more fruit. Then we will find young Iraqi people actively involved in building their own country and participating in the process of creating political will. I can well imagine that, perhaps in 10 years time, young people may be demonstrating here, out on the streets, demonstrating about issues in other, far distant countries!”

In this case, rather than being sceptical, the blogger S. is full of enthusiasm: “And despite the terrible situation here and the awful picture the world is given of Iraq – even if much of it is true - we are totally convinced that the Iraq of the future will provide a model, and very likely even an international model. After all, all the necessary conditions are there: people *want* changes, they want fundamental reforms in all areas of life; what’s more, the country has lots of resources and opportunities, it has intellectuals and talented and capable people. And the mistakes we made in the past ought to prevent us from repeating them in the future. Above all, that’s why we are predestined to change and evolve and offer a successful model for the entire region. For that reason, I believe Iraq will be the key to these changes and reforms. And, in saying that, I mean those Iraqi people who are motivated and interested in change and development.”

The journalist R. goes even further: “I am very optimistic about Iraq’s future. It will prove to the whole world that it is the cradle of civilization and

culture. [...] My people will live in democracy and peace, and we will fight against terrorism to the death.”

I would like to follow up on S.’s quote by pointing out the following context: the overall positive assessment of the future is extensively deduced from a very positive evaluation of the problem-solving abilities of the ‘Iraqi people’, into whose hands the fate of Iraq is now placed, i.e., the country’s fate will not be decided by God or any leader, but only by the people themselves. Fortunately, they appear to be the source of hope and self-confidence and yet, at the same time, they are, in my view, unrealistic idealised as the country’s saviour.

For example, when Z. says: “These people [the terrorists] mostly take other ethnic groups or faiths as their targets – but, in reality, I think they aren’t bothered with that. Instead, they just want to be provocative and cause further conflicts. Thank God our people are clever enough not to let themselves be drawn into something like that...” He is voicing an idealized splitting of ‘evil’ from the Iraqi people, which also makes them immune to criticism. This ignores the fact that those involved in conflicts, violence and negative developments do not only come from external groups but also from the Iraqi people themselves.⁴ A similar misconception underlies the frequently cited Iraqi argument that the conflicts between Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis are actually Western media constructs and projections.

Conclusion

The theses presented here on the shaping of biographies of young adults in Iraq cannot simply be generalized. If we had set ourselves the goal of generalisability, for instance, for ‘the group of Iraqis in Baghdad aged between 18-35 years’, we would have selected the interviewees differently, had to interview substantially larger numbers and, above all, formalise the procedures.⁵ Given the framework of a qualitative procedure, the validity of the findings can be measured by the plausibility and reasonableness of the arguments presented, whereby the recipient has to decide whether to endorse them or not. Furthermore, validity is also measured by the usefulness of the recommendations that the findings generate.

This research project set out to gain a deeper understanding of the patterns of action, evaluation, and motivation among young adults in Baghdad and, in this way, grasp the processes by which they subjectively construct meaning and plan their lives. Generalisability could only be established in further verification of the theses through application of quantitative methods.

The conversations were held as public interviews, which undoubtedly led to a stronger expression of idealized images of the self, the people, the culture, etc. The tendency to give answers that are not unconditionally truthful but instead reflect a certain 'social desirability' is not a concern specific to this present investigation but a general methodological problem in social research where one has to rely on interviewing people as a means of gathering data. In interpreting the data presented here, one should assume though that, as a result of the public broadcast of the interviews, this tendency is present in an extended form. In the interviews, we encountered, on the one hand, an energetic, goal-oriented and emancipated group of young people who, as individual bearers of the civil society, clearly give grounds for hope since they do not only have or develop interests, but also follow up on them confidently and passionately (Section "What motivates and interests play a role in their work?"). Moreover, one also perceives a distinct willingness to shoulder social responsibility as an individual and, in the same breath, assign the responsibility for the country's future development to 'the people'. Civil society commitment and participation would not be realizable without these capabilities and attitudes.

The approach to arranging one's life that was characterized as "confident, quick and self-determined", facilitating swift responses and courageous decision-taking, simultaneously suggests an egotism that seems to exclude any binding and long-term interaction with state institutions. The explicit 'turning towards' the people – as the addressee of professional activities and bearer of political hopes – also contains in itself a 'turning away' from the state, and continuing a way of life removed from state institutions.⁶ From the perspective of political science research, this disintegration of state structures and individual life designs, represents a development problem since "the level of development of a society is to be gauged by the degree to which intermediary units are capable of channelling the interaction between individual/company and the state" (Fein, Matzke 1997: 41). Obviously, the dynamic in Iraq will depend on both: the development of the civil society and the question if the interaction between state and civil society/civilian can be revitalised by implementing institutions that operate as a mutual and reciprocal axis of communication.

Notes

- 1 In Iraq, men and women have different conditions, motives, and goals shaping their lives. To ensure the findings were meaningful, the interviews with women were analyzed separately from those with men. In this paper I intend only to present an analysis of the interviews with men.
- 2 Figures given by Abd al-Zahar al-Hindawi, then spokesperson of the Ministry of Planning, in a radio-interview, summer 2004.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Uncritically idealising the 'people' might also put at risk any efforts to confront the past and the necessary processes of reconciliation.
- 5 The research presented here was conducted during the standard project evaluation and not as an independent research project with its own funding. Hence, the extent of the project had to be correspondingly limited.
- 6 The family here is thought of as an extended self, although it seems likely that the family bonds too become eroded under the pressure of economic crises, and the individual then acts as an independent unit.