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AMERICAN SOFT POWER IN IRAQI KURDISTAN: A QUALITATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: A constructivist IR approach is blended with a Grounded Theory-based analysis of in-depth interviews in an interpretive discussion of the US's 2003 invasion of Iraq, its later soft power approach in country, and the responses of young Kurdish participants in an American program in that sphere. The invasion of Iraq is argued to have been the outcome of ideational and cultural as well as realist factors within American society. Analysis of interviews with Kurdish students reveals a) strengths and weaknesses of the American soft power approach, and b) their thoughts on their homeland, its culture, and its future.

INTRODUCTION

The article blends constructivist IR principles with a Grounded Theory-based analysis of in-depth interviews to offer an interpretive discussion of the US's 2003 invasion of Iraq, its subsequent development of soft power approaches in its dealings with the Middle East, and the experience of a group of students, most of them Kurdish, who spent time in the USA as part of the American initiative IYLEP (Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program). It is contended that constructivism is an appropriate approach

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to the analysis of the strongly neoconservative Bush Doctrine in foreign policy that was dominant at the time of the invasion, as this was framed to a significant degree by ideational as well as realist factors, including the establishment of a two-way emotional consensus between the political elite and a large section of the American voting public in terms of shared beliefs, values and geopolitical preferences. It is further suggested that some of the soft power approaches to US-Iraqi relations, and more broadly the sphere of Global Civil Society pioneered by the US in the aftermath of the invasion and the chaos it caused in Iraq, have been partially successful in raising the confidence and capabilities of young Kurdish potential leaders, while at the same time being primarily instrumental, in the American self-interest. The close qualitative examination of the thoughts on and aspirations for their homeland of the young people involved, as offered by the article, is intended to help fill the gap in detailed empirical research and scholarship on the Middle East in general, which there is a serious lack of at present (Cammett, Kendall, 2021, p. 448–455; Deina, 2019, p. 515–525; Lewicka, Dahl, 2021; Sardar, 2023; Mtani et al., 2023, p. 17–35).

CONSTRUCTIVIST IR, THE BUSH DOCTRINE, AND THE 2003 INVASION OF IRAQ

From the constructivist position it is argued that state interests and activities are significantly influenced by ideas, ideology, social norms and identities, language and culture, religion etc. Norms and cultural background shape the thinking and understanding of political elites and policy makers. The structure and patterns of international politics are strongly influenced and often constructed by things that are often difficult to see and comprehend. Norms are learned and internalized and humans are deeply socially embedded and embodied. Knowledge is socially constructed and identities are formed on the basis of shared experience and inter-subjectivity. Because of this identities, interests and state behaviors are always interacting with each other and constantly reproducing themselves in different ways than other states. As Wendt wrote famously,

“Anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1992, p. 391–425), meaning that states put together their own interpretation of the realist idea of an inherently anarchic international system. This construction of understandings includes bringing in and being influenced by ideas and actions coming from other states, and the people in them. Whether the international system is anarchic or not is a judgement made through observing the interactions of people, states and the international environment. States can determine whether others are friends, rivals or enemies because all these things are or can be inter-subjectively constructed. Anarchy is therefore a relative concept for constructivists, as an increase in the interaction of different social groups or other actors brings about an exchange of ideas and mutual understanding.

On this basis ‘security’ is also an issue of inter-subjectivity, in situations formed by ideas, norms, and values in the historical context. Collective identity formation contributes to understandings based on oppositions like inside/outside, self/other, particularity/universality, and identity/difference (Wendt, 1992, p. 391–425; Marszałek-Kawa, Plecka, Hołub, 2018). One of the main stated aims of the Bush Doctrine was to deliver freedom and democracy to people ‘over the heads’ of oppressive regimes like that of Saddam Hussein. This argument was even more idealistic – and unrealistic – than the ones liberals usually promote. The neoconservative architects of the Project for the New American Century, which underpinned the Bush Doctrine (Kristol, Kagan, 1996, p. 18–32; Albanese, 2012), were too naïve when that they argued the people of Iraq would thank them for liberalizing their culture somehow, and later they understood – and this was when the issue of using soft power became more discussed – that you cannot simply force Middle Easterners to act ‘democratically’, as if they were all Western liberal individualists. But constructivism can explain this motivation on the basis of the way an ideological position (with hidden longer-term geopolitical and corporate motivations beneath it) could persuade a population into supporting the use of force. From this position, one can argue that the Bush administration’s War on Terror was made possible by very non-realist discursive techniques and manipulative language – ‘war on terror’, ‘weapons of mass destruction’, ‘America is a moral country’, and ‘coalition of the willing’ – all put inside a ‘good/evil’, ‘dark/

light,'civilized/barbaric' framework of binary oppositions (Fiske, 1990, p. 116; Lacey, 1998, p. 69–70). The US administration used speech acts to persuade the American people to its side by emphasizing that the values adhered to in the US could and should be transferred to nondemocratic states so as to civilize them. In this way the Bush administration was doing nothing new, especially when it comes to what the constructivist IR scholar Martha Finnemore calls 'unipoles':

Usually this articulation of values is not simply a strategic ploy. Decision makers and publics in the unipole actually hold these values and believe their own rhetoric to some significant degree. Unipole states, like all states, are social creatures. They are composed of domestic societies that cohere around some set of national beliefs. Their leaders are products of those societies and often share those beliefs. Even where leaders may be skeptical, they likely became leaders by virtue of their abilities to rally publics around shared goals and to construct foreign and domestic policies that reflect domestic values. Even authoritarian (and certainly totalitarian) regimes articulate shared goals and function only because of the web of social ties that knit people together (Finnemore, 2011, p. 74–75).

It can be argued on this basis that the Bush administration picked up and exaggerated the values and beliefs that did represent the views of a large part of the American people; rather than simply trying to 'brainwash' the public to accept its arguments, the government connected emotionally with people on the basis of a shared sense of beliefs and priorities:

Even "national interest" as most people and states conceive of it involves some broader vision of social good beyond mere self-aggrandizement. Americans like to see democracy spread around the world in part for instrumental reasons – they believe a world of democracies is a safer, more prosperous world for Americans – and also for normative ones – they believe in the virtues of democracy for all. Likewise, Americans like to see markets open in part for instrumental reasons – they believe a world of markets will make Americans richer – and also for normative ones – they believe that markets are the ticket out of poverty (Finnemore, 2011, p. 75).

We can therefore argue that neoconservatism and the post 9/11 foreign policy of the US picked up on real social currents; the alternative explanation is to argue that a small minority of political actors somehow managed to ‘trick’ or ‘bully’ a very large proportion of the world’s leading democratic society to support it, as if they were mindless sheep. In other words, the Bush Administration and its partners wanted to use the attack on Iraq to bind Americans together and reassert the Christian culture of America against barbaric Islam – in what Callahan more recently called the concept of the ‘East/West dyad’ in Western political hegemony (Callahan, 2020, p. 51).

Three points can be made here. First, neoconservative ideas justified an expansion American power and hegemony globally – by ‘making an example’ of Saddam Hussein as a first step.

Second, the securing of American oil and corporate interests (Domhoff, 1998) played an important role; ‘private sector’ money power and the government have always been closely linked, and the protection of American businesses has played a significant part in the shaping of foreign policy and ‘regime change’ practices: as Stephen Kinzer put it:

Giant American corporations stood to make huge profits from this war and its aftermath. Among the greatest beneficiaries was Halliburton, the oil and infrastructure company that [Vice President] Cheney formerly headed, which was awarded billions of dollars in no-bid contracts for projects ranging from rebuilding Iraq’s oil refineries to constructing jails for war prisoners. Two other behemoths tied closely to the Republican Party, Bechtel and the Carlyle Group, also profited handsomely. So did American companies that make missiles, combat jets, and other weapons of war, especially the three biggest, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and McDonnell-Douglas-which among them were awarded \$41 billion in Pentagon contracts in 2002 alone. These companies were major contributors to Bush’s presidential campaigns, and he named their senior officers to key positions in the Pentagon and elsewhere. In these men’s minds, corporate interest and national interest meshed perfectly (Kinzer, 2006, p. 291–292).

Going further into the idea of the ‘carpet bagging’ aspects of the American intervention, van de Pijl argues that

the occupation of Iraq by the US and Britain is part of a privatisation strategy. In September 2003, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Paul Bremer, issued Order 39, which announced that 200 Iraqi state enterprises were to be privatised, with foreign firms entitled to 100 per cent ownership and to 100 per cent repatriation of profits (Van Der Pijl, 2006, p. 367–378).

Third, there is the argument made by many commentators about the significance of the USA-Israel ‘special relationship’. The story of this relationship is too complex to go into fully here, but we should observe the fact that Richard Perle, one of the authors of the ‘Project for the New American Century’ was the co-author of a policy document prepared for then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This was called “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm”; it argued for the aggressive removal of Saddam Hussein and regime change in Syria through a proxy war. Journalist Jason Vest described this document as “a blueprint for a mini-cold war in the Middle East, advocating the use of proxy armies for regime changes, destabilization, and containment. Indeed, it even goes so far as to articulate a way to advance right-wing Zionism by melding it with missile-defense advocacy” (Vest, 2002).

Twenty years on from the 2003 invasion, a number of commentators have been evaluating the fallout from the invasion, and the legacy of the intervention as it is now felt in the Middle East, and especially Iraq. Sean L Yom of the Foreign Policy Research Institute presents a bleak picture:

The Iraq conflict sullied the image of Western democracy promotion, because it tied the universal issue of freedom to the particular violence of an American conquest. Since then, advocates of democratization across the region—grassroots movements, civic activists, professional associations, youth groups, and others—have not trusted the United States and its Western allies to serve as credible sponsors for democracy (Yom, 2023).

Yom puts this legacy into its wider context. In its short period of post-Cold War political “primacy” in the unipolar moment, the Middle East became the region where neoconservative America could attempt to enforce its vision of a new global order. At the time this effort seemed worth making to an American policy system, and population, that ‘crossed the aisle’ – which is evidence of the part in international relations that can be played by ideational factors. This strategy for promoting democracy “required new diplomatic and economic commitments, such as pressuring governments to curtail repression, ramping up assistance to civil society, and conditioning aid on democratic reforms – with the ever-present threat of hard power hanging in the background.” If a new democratic Iraq could be made after Saddam was gone, the country could be seen across the region as “a shining exemplar of US-built democracy, then every future call for freedom would carry an interminable clause: Democratize, *or else we will do it for you.*” Unsurprisingly, looking back from 2023,

...the Freedom Agenda ended with a whimper. By the end of the Bush administration, the previous appetite to remake regional order on a grandiose scale had been replaced with resigned acceptance that Iraq was mired in carnage and corruption... Yet even as the Obama administration began to scale down American interventionism—beginning a process of withdrawal from the Middle East that continues today—the damage was done. Across the Arab world, many people not only reviled the Iraq War but associated *any* democratic advocacy by the United States and its Western allies as inherently tainted (Yom, 2023).

Even worse, contemporary Iraq has been made more sectarian in a way that does not make it look like an ideal type of democracy, because it is based on old social and cultural patterns and not modern democratic thinking. As Tallha Abdulrazaq writes:

The sectarianism that has become an unavoidable fact of modern Iraq’s socio-political fabric has kept Iraqis from the polls, even if regular Iraqis disapprove of it as it is systemic rather than a social predisposition. What came to be known as *muhasasa*—a power-sharing system among Iraq’s

different sects—was hard-wired into the nascent political process. The high seats of public office were divided up along ethno-sectarian lines... Rather than reducing interreligious tensions, the structure had the adverse effect of deepening them (Yom, 2023).

The condition that Iraq is in now can therefore be seen as the result of: an American regime change operation to pursue its own geopolitical and economic interests and status as a global hegemon; a neoconservative narrative of ‘extending democracy’ which was naïve and simplistic, and based on no real understanding of the society it was confronting; a narrative of culture change but based on awesome ‘shock and awe’ fire power and the threat of it; and a poor understanding of what soft power could do in this situation. The next section examines the character and outcomes of one of the more sophisticated programs that have emerged in this sphere in recent years.

AMERICAN SOFT POWER IN ACTION: IYLEP (IRAQI YOUNG LEADERS EXCHANGE PROGRAM)

This is a free, four-to-six week exchange program for the talented high school and undergraduate Iraqi students who demonstrated leadership skills in their communities. In the program students engage in workshops, field trips, community service, leadership training, conflict resolution and cultural exchange. Students have an ‘orientation’ stay in a US host city, in a family home, and time in Washington DC. The main idea is that participants leave from the program with a better understanding and practice of leadership, as well as an increased commitment to engaging in civil society activities and volunteering in general. The aim is to promote mutual understanding between young people from different countries. And, most important, the focus is on how the students can apply what they learn in Iraq, as leaders of community groups or as entrepreneurs starting business initiatives (Meridan International Center Team, 2023).

The program was established in 2007 and funded by the US Embassy, Baghdad and US Department of State, Bureau of Educational and Cultural

Affairs, Youth Programs Division, and implemented by World Learning, a global development and exchange organization. Over 3,000 Iraqi students have participated (IYLEP, 2023).

As Irene Gibson puts it in her study of IYLEP and other similar programs,

exchanges effectively target and select opinion leaders, bring together participants from across the Middle East, conduct measurement of their programs' impact on participants, produce leaders with positive impressions of the U.S., and enable participants to enact small initiatives in their home countries. However, ultimately external factors, such as security in the case of Iraq, definitively limit participant impact (Gibson, 2015, p. 2).

In the case of the young people returning from the program to Iraqi Kurdistan, this limited impact is also caused, in their words, by the cultural constraints and mistrust of individualism in conservative-traditional settings, a local mistrust of the US's intentions, and the lack of opportunities for and respect given to youngsters as capable people who can be taken seriously.

THE INTERVIEWS – ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Sixteen former IYLEP participants were interviewed in Summer 2022. Except for two, they all spent time on the program in the US between 2012 and 2021. Two were unable to travel during the COVID-19 pandemic and did an online version of the program. Fifteen of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and one was done online. Ten of the interviewees were high school students at the time they were involved with the program, and six were undergraduates. Eight are male, and eight are female. All of the interviews were done in English. All of the interviewees were assured of their anonymity and gave informed consent.

The Grounded Theory method was used in the analysis of the interviews (Glaser, Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2001). They were coded line-by-line

to identify the underlying beliefs, values and opinions of the interviewees. These codes were collected, when the patterns in them were visible, into a smaller number of 'concepts' that appeared across the interviews. On this basis five main 'categories' emerging from the data for analysis were identified: 1) *Stereotypes on Both Sides*; 2) *Positives and Negatives of American Society*; 3) *Diversity Personal Growth*; 4) *Getting Back Home*; 5) *How Much Can, and Should, Iraqi Kurdistan Change?*

Stereotypes on Both Sides. The students were exposed before they went to the US to a lot of stereotypes about America and Americans. Though some of the negative ones continued in many members of the group as a whole, others were changed by the experiences they had there. One strong theme in the data was that of having fantasies and dreams about life in the US corrected by actually being there:

The America that we have always dreamed about led to these expectations; we would always think that Americans were wealthy and every one had two to three cars but in reality it was the opposite. When you go there you would see someone that do not have a house, people work really hard and long hours in order to get something... [the program] forced us to see the real America (Interviewee [Int.] 12).

Other ideas taken from exposure to the media versions of American reality was that violence and aggression were everywhere and that Americans were basically hostile:

We all have this that the American people were so bad and that they will treat you so bad... So you have this stereotype of people, but when you go there it's pretty different, you do realize that they are just normal humans like you, trying to live... There is mutual respect, it is not like so disrespectful like in the media or everyone else who taught us said (Int. 10).

In fact a number of the respondents had experiences which made them see the American people they met as more open and interested in them personally than they would have expected to find with strangers at home:

OK so basically, before the program started and before I went to the program, I was a different person, my point of view was different, my personality was different even my language was different. It was really hard for me to make friends and it wasn't really hard for me to communicate with people to speak English. But when I went, they made me feel loved, they made me feel safe, they showed me the right things, the right way to do things, and they taught me the best so of course, I loved it (Int. 11).

Many of the respondents had negative experiences with people in America when it came to stereotypes about people from the Middle East – usually people who were not connected to the management of the program directly, who they felt had little or no idea about the world outside America in general and Iraq/Kurdistan in particular:

I would say that they do not really care about Iraq, the only thing that I know about Iraq is that when they went to war in 2003 and the Iraqis killed many of them and then they returned, this was the only thing that I have observed there. They do not have any information about the culture and history of Iraq and not just only Iraq but many other countries as well. I would say that the young American people do not have the sufficient general information (Int. 12).

One stereotype, accepted by a majority of the respondents, was that the US was weak in culture – or, as a third of the students said, has no culture at all. In this context the students were making comparisons between American popular culture and the country's looser social and family and community structures and a traditionalist idea of 'culture' rooted in the pre-modern world. A sense of the superiority of the civilizational importance of their region, and the older and more integrated social structure they were familiar with, came across very strongly. Given this somewhat 'superior' attitude when it came to their idea of culture, many of the students were surprised to find that their own legacy was practically unknown to most of the people they met:

They had little knowledge about Iraq and the Iraqi people; this has occurred many times. They would ask us questions like do you have cars

over there? Do you guys have Google? Do you use it? Do you guys do these certain activities? Their perspective and point of view on Iraq it is very incorrect. Almost 95% of the people I met, their point of view on Iraq was incorrect or wrong (Int. 3).

Many surprises came our way when we were there, we got a bit of cultural shock as we were taking some taxis the drivers still think that we are riding camels till now and all of our transportation means are by animals, they did not know what Iraq is. Generally speaking, the American people did not know what this Iraq is and where it is located (Int. 7).

This feeling among many of the students was made worse by the feeling they got that Americans thought they were 'backward' people from a primitive part of the world:

I think that in their point of view, they saw us more as close-minded and more constricted. For example, when we talked about Iraq and the things that are in Iraq so you would be stunned to know that we have restaurants, cinemas, and other things. It was like they thought we lived in caves. (Int. 2)

Positives and negatives of the American society. Two things in particular come across strongly in the data as positives: *respect for the rule of law* and *tolerance*. Many of the respondents were clear that beneath the surface stereotype concerning violence, aggression and excessive freedom, they saw the US as a place in which people mostly control themselves, obey the law and have some goodwill and consideration for others. For some of the students this was a big contrast with their experience at home:

Firstly, the thing that I like about Americans is that they respect the law. For example, if you go to a hospital here and there is a queue for taking medical examinations, and it happened to me two to three months ago, I was in a queue, two people were in front of me and two people were behind me and we were waiting next to a window and everybody is waiting for his turn, somebody came and cut all five of us and went to the front of the line right to the window, I have never seen such thing in America (Int. 6).

There is a massive difference in the case of law in America and here, in America people will not cross the road until it turns green and if you cross the road and the light is still red people will yell at you... Indeed, their law is very different from what we have here. We still have a long road ahead because many people here in Kurdistan think they are above the law (Int. 13).

Some of the students emphasized this, that in America tolerance towards strangers was much stronger than at home. Some of the limits on behavior, which seemed to them to be connected to the law (and also to the rules of social interaction based more on individualism), were part of the American model of tolerance:

There was a big difference between the idea of tolerance here and in America. For example if some stranger comes and lives in this society everyone would look at them like they came from space or they are aliens. I would say that my experience when I was in America was that there was a big difference in the way that people interacted with us, they interacted in a completely normal way as if we were not strangers, even though they knew that we came from Iraq... I do not think there's much tolerance here in Iraq (Int. 13).

Following on from the above, another strong positive about America, as well as a lot of things being well-regulated, was what the students saw as the respects and opportunities given to young people:

The things that I like about America is their lifestyle and their approach to freedom of business. They make everything easier for small businesses to be created and prosper and I think this is an excellent thing for them; if every country followed this figure, they would succeed. If they make way for the youth to establish a small business, company, or office to create something new, I think this is a very successful thing (Int. 12).

Negatives. Here the students tended to talk about what they saw as *excessive individualism* and the *weak family and community ties* in the United

States. There is a strong contrast in many of the interviews between this and the strong Kurdish/Iraqi values and social bonds. In this comparison, the majority of the interviewees who spoke about these things described themselves as ‘conservative’:

What I really did not like about the American culture was [the lack of] respect for the family, which is the building block for a community... Everyone was only taking care of himself. Another thing that happened to my host family is that my host’s mother passed away two days before she knew, but here if someone passes away, even his third-degree relatives know about it immediately. That is why you kind of knew that the families are kind of dismantled, this was one of the disadvantages of being an American (Int. 6).

This position is also found in comments on the freedom and liberty given to individuals in the American society:

The Americans are way too open for some things, look for example, the sexuality thing. I am proud of my culture and society because we do not have these things or it is a very low percentage, but in America, that is a lot more... I see that a lot of the young adults or teenagers, I think that they are really materialistic... Personally, I do not like this (Int. 15).

America hasn’t left any borders or lines to this topic [LGBTQ], and this is something wrong. It is true that there is freedom but even freedom needs to have some lines drawn... It becomes like cancer. Cancer is the uncontrollable growth of human cells, so there are no limits or lines it will grow uncontrollably and there will be very detrimental complications. This is the same thing that is slowly growing and nobody is drawing a line, add eventually it will explode in their face (Int. 6).

Also, a small number of the students made a surprising but interesting point – that even with all the freedom people have or seem to have in the US, their lives are more ‘routine’ than what they experience at home. This would be an interesting topic for further research. One person put it this

way: “I am not too fond of their lifestyle because it is so routine, but here in Kurdistan, it is very random, and I like it” (Int. 3).

Diversity and personal growth. Interestingly, the largest number of respondents focused on how being in the US on the program helped them understand other ethnic groups from inside Iraq better, as this was something they do not have many opportunities to do when they are at home. Another important theme was the changes in how most students saw the world, and themselves, after meeting so many kinds of different people. The two things most mentioned were ‘having your eyes opened’ when you were young, and being changed permanently by being able to start seeing the world from other people’s perspectives:

In my opinion, the program’s strong point is diversity. I was the only person from Dandok in our group, so you had to interact with other cultures and nationalities with other religions. I think that this diversity was really important, I think that also in America, you see a different culture and people with different backgrounds, I would say that this is a strong point for the program as it widens your perspective when you get to know them and through them you would get to know more about yourself as well. Through diversity you would know yourself even more... I think diversity makes you to be yourself (Int. 8).

The program managed to help many of its participants learn new ‘soft’ skills and make long-lasting changes not only for themselves, but for their society and community at home as active citizens and aspiring leaders. The important thing to notice here is the deep and long-term change of perspective and, over longer time, self-development that many of the respondents in this research got started with as students, as well as the wide scale of the contacts some of them made:

I am friends with all 60 participants of the program. It was a great thing for us to happen, we also had another program which was called ‘Global Youth Village’... The primary purpose that they wanted for us to do is to create a good bond and a good connection with people from different

countries, and how to interact with other people. The first thing that we did was a training on how to interact, introduce yourself and no other people without talking to them, this was one of the most remarkable points of the program that I really liked (Int. 13).

This experience began for many of the students ‘close to home’ – because they were forced to deal with individuals from other groups from inside Iraq across the sectarian divisions they know at home. This was maybe the most powerful part of the experience for many people:

I was really close-minded person before I went to America. I did not accept Arabs, extremely despised them, even when someone was talking in Arabic I would really get irritated... I will always keep saying that when I went to America to strengthen my English, I strengthened my Arabic. I never imagined that I would be having friends from Basra and Baghdad (Int. 12).

Despite the barrier of communicating with the Arab students, even with the Kurds who spoke Sorani, I sense some kind of gap between us, they will all sit in groups so the first week was very unenjoyable for me, as I wasn't able to speak ...but afterwards, I found out that we have a lot in common. They found out that I am really closer to the Arab students than the Sorani Kurds, this was very enjoyable for me (Int. 5).

In fact, it would be a mistake to think that all the ‘Inter-Iraqi’ relationships went well and made all the problems go away. Some of the respondents were very clear about this:

Personally speaking, as I told you before on your question about tolerance. When we arrived in America, it only took me 1-2 days for me to adapt with everyone, but there was still that tension between Kurds and Arabs. Even in the program, the Kurds and Arabs would only join there Arabic or Kurdish group and they would go out accordingly (Int. 13).

One suspicious respondent even suggested that the program itself was interested in highlighting sectarian tensions, maybe as a way of bringing

them 'out in the open' – the interviewee does not really provide a clear interpretation:

Iraqis and Kurds have problems with each other and the program brings it, up lights it up...The tension between Kurds and Iraqis and Kurds and Arabs was constantly brought up and I think that is something the program wants...If Americans do not like something they would not let it happen, but they open up the topic and they let it happen (Int. 11).

Getting Back Home/Reflections on Iraq. Two main points of interest, in the form of narratives, emerged here: 1) students' feeling that people believed that they might have been 'brainwashed' in America and could no longer be trusted; and 2) the social, cultural and economic constraints, especially for young people, returning students felt around them.

The 'brainwashing' issue, and the feeling like the people at home did not completely trust them anymore because they had changed, was mentioned by a number of the respondents, and was connected to them being young:

Actually the challenge was to accept yourself among the people that you lived with for so long and now they are thinking that you're whitewashed and brainwashed there, you came back with new ideas and a new personality, even my family it was the hardest. So I guess that is the hardest part of our culture shock (Int. 10).

So their idea was that they would say to us that you are promoting a program even though we would not mention anything about the program, but they would still say to us that we are promoting a program to brainwash people, so they say that they would not let us do our project (Int. 8).

I am still the same person, but I have shown off the skills that have been hidden in me. The only thing I struggled with was that I wanted to do a lot of projects, but nobody would support me because here in our society, they do not believe in the youth. So when I came back, I was 16 years old, and whomever I talked with did not believe or trust us (Int. 3).

In some cases the feeling of being constrained by the older generation, and blocked in the attempt to build something new, led to very serious frustration and disappointment – as if going to IYLEP was a waste of time:

Generally speaking I would say the obstacles are those who are above us...I mean all of them, our parents, the society, and the government all of them are obstacles, all of them combined do not help the youth in order to for them to show their potential. Generally speaking, most of our young adults and youth do have a lot of potentials, for example, you can pick a lot of young people from Duhok and it is going to be really bizarre as they have tremendous skills but they themselves are hidden (Int. 13).

Of course, for some of the students the IYLEP experience, and then the contrast with it they saw when they got home, caused strong and confusing emotions that took a long time to process:

So when I returned from the program, my hatred for this place became even more remarkable, so for two months I was not myself. I would get angry at everything, for example, when I went shopping with my mother, I would get angry just by looking at the streets and wondering why are our streets so bad and not like in America, so when I went to my school I would look at my teachers and I would say to myself why aren't they like the American teachers kind, soft talking, and respectful, So I was comparing everything with America. Even when I came back I was still angry and hated it here, so whatever you would do people will gossip about it behind your back. I stayed in this mindset even after I came back for a whole year ... my turning point was when I started comparing myself, putting myself in their shoes little by little this hatred became empathy but not sympathy, and I started to wonder why this place has become like this, finally I came to the conclusion that it is all Americans' doing, America came to Iraq and destroyed Iraq and Kurdistan, Iraq was a very flourishing an advanced country back in the day...So I tried to understand why the situation is like this here in Kurdistan, why people act like they do, so now I feel sorry for it (Int. 5).

This sort of inner conflict tells us a lot about how many of the IYLEP graduates feel, and how they must try to balance ideas about American freedoms and life opportunities with loyalty to a place and culture with which they mostly identify strongly and are proud to belong. Modern can-do individualism, rationality and well-regulated institutions come up against belonging and cultural integrity, as they think through and try to understand how they can advance the cause of social development in their homeland while at the same time preserving the deeper elements of the culture that made them, and make their people distinctive.

HOW MUCH CAN, AND SHOULD, IRAQI KURDISTAN/IRAQ CHANGE?

Another strong theme coming from the data was that the majority of the respondents felt that things had to change, but not in the direction of becoming more like America at a basic level. A constant message was that the practical lessons people had learned, along with some of the changes of attitudes towards thinking in a positive way, for example, could be brought into the Kurdistan/Iraq situation for the better. For this interviewee,

No, I do not want you to think that I am happy with the way things are... Honestly, no community is perfect but do I think that we are the best and American statehood is not our perfect version. I just prefer that Kurdistan or Iraq, Kurdistan specifically to get the best version of itself, I do not want us to be like America, never (Int. 11).

Most of the other interviewees made similar points:

Our own culture is very rich and has deep roots, I do not want to see the Americans or British or anyone else come here and teach us their culture and make us follow their culture, we will still have our culture, but maybe you will change a few of our thoughts (Int. 15).

I am against implementing foreign ideas without contextualizing it. Our culture is not 100% negative... We have a lot of positive things in our culture.... I would say that you will learn from differences in cultures but not to the extent that you dissolve in that culture, and you lose your identity (Int. 16).

A point that usually went along with this view was that the things people brought home from America with them were the important things to focus on:

The difference between our cultures it is like day and night they are very different but I still do not think that our society is obligated to change their community to be like the American one... Each community has its positive and negative points, I can say that we might import or learn the good points of American Society and I would also say they can do the same as well (Int. 15).

Culturally, I think I was closer to my culture after I saw their culture because I realized the good points that we have in our culture as I did not realize it before... When I went there and came back I would see the world in a more Kurdish perspective, how to serve my community, and how to serve my own country (Int. 8).

Ultimately, none of the people interviewed had been 'star-struck' by being in America. They liked some things and disliked others, but many returned home as people who had learned to appreciate their own place and by comparison – and in many cases were more committed to living in and doing something for their homeland without having become 'Americanized'. For some, the IYELP experience involved an exchange, in which they got a better understanding of a bigger world and different ways of doing things, while the US soft power approach to 'assisting' the region was seen as instrumental:

We hear a lot America does not do anything for free, but in the case of America, I think it is creating a new generation in Iraq to be their friends

and accept America and be friendly, you can see after 2003 they are trying to do that. Also, the program is trying to connect all of the people in Iraq Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurds. So they are just creating friends for themselves and for their future, in my opinion (Int. 4).

But this situation does not mean that the IYLEP program and other American initiatives like it cannot have a helpful impact of the social and economic development of the Middle East – on the basis of helping enthusiastic young people who would like to make a contribution to find a deep a transformative change in themselves:

For me, it was a more personal experience because it was the first time that my self-esteem was higher in America and also my confidence, it gave me a sort of hope in order to do something...I really benefited from it, also when you come back, you will believe in yourself, and you will be more confident. Another thing is, it also gives you the perspective that you could make a change and it gives you this hope maybe I can do something, maybe I can do something for myself or maybe I can do something for my city, for my country. I think that they encouraged me to serve my city and my country, totally opposite to the beliefs that people had, which was that they make us hate our culture. It was really beneficial (Int. 8).

CONCLUSION

Chaos, social division and political corruption came after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the removal of the Saddam Hussein regime. It took a long time for some of these problems to be confronted, and many of them are still unresolved. Some progress has been made in stabilizing and balancing the country in recent years, but the society is still very divided. Interestingly, participation in the IYLEP program gave many young people their first chance to meet and try to come to terms with people from other groups than their own from within in their own country. Though this did not always go smoothly in IYLEP sessions and meetings in the US, as individuals most of the interviewees in this research were changed

by this experience. Most of them described a process of becoming more open-minded, self-aware and empathetic because of their 'forced' contact with people they would probably not have met at home. Also, many of the respondents were surprised by the informal decency and considerateness towards strangers of many people in the US, which they do not find at home, as well as the new experience of being taken seriously as young people and being shown new approaches to leadership, well-regulated institutions and social development. Some of them changed their stereotyped views of America and Americans, others did not. The most common response to these experiences was to want to 'import' their new 'soft' skills and understandings and make a contribution to the development of their own society. Despite this, there was little enthusiasm in this group for a serious transformation or Americanization/Westernization of the more traditional and conservative society and situations they live in. So, in the end most of the interviewees were skeptical about America in a lot of ways, while they liked and benefited from the good things they saw there and from the skills and positive attitude IYLEP gave them, and most of them were energized and optimistic about getting home to start new projects but found many constraints there. Still, very few wanted Iraqi Kurdistan/Iraq to change to become more like the US, as they felt they belonged to stronger families and communities than Americans do and found that preserving the strengths of their home culture depended on not allowing Western style individualism to get out of control. Almost none of them spoke about the US 'democracy' campaign in the way the authors of the Project for the New American Century and the Bush Doctrine predicted they would.

In the end, we can make two main points on the basis of these interviews: 1) the American soft power approach in programs like IYLEP is successful to some extent, especially by influencing members of a possible future elite that could be sympathetic to the US by showing young people the potential of leadership attitudes, social and business skills, and a more 'cosmopolitan' kind of personal development and self-esteem in a practical way, and 2) most of the respondents wanted to bring what they learned to their home area in a similar practical way, but were caught in a paradox – they wanted things to change, but not to the extent that the deeper

culture and identity of their homeland would be less stable or changed dramatically. So, in the end we have a kind of paradox of globalization – but in a very sharp version when we consider the problem of the absence of a fully independent Kurdish nation state. When there is no sovereign nation state, the culture, identity and language of a people must be preserved over time by the people themselves if they are going to survive as a group and their culture is going to persist. This, in the end, makes a limitation on how far most of the young people quoted here are ready to go in the direction of serious cultural transformation along liberal-individualist lines, as collective memory and the memorialization of history and heritage are very important now in all the Kurdish areas (Eccarius-Kelly, 2015, p. 172–191; Karim, Baser, 2023, p. 1–17; Halbwachs, 1952).

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