

The Caucasus is on the outskirts of three empires and the empires don't have borders but fronts

Gaïdz Minassian

of strength with the conflict in Ukraine which occupied Russian forces' Baku decided to block the corridor while Moscow had to 'guarantee passage'. Quickly, 'the Azeri soldiers, under the supervision or laissez-faire of the Russians, set up a checkpoint and tightened the noose'. The expert specified that 'during the last three months, no one could pass through'. On 19 September, 'after ten months, faced with weakened forces and a starving population, the attack was launched and the enclave fell in 24 hours'. In addition to hundreds of military and civilian deaths, 'numerous testimonies of abuses and war crimes' were reported, preceding a massive exodus since '100,000 of the 120,000 inhabitants fled Nagorno-Karabakh, or 90% of the population'. Anita Khachaturova also stressed that President Aliyev has always expressed this 'intention of ethnic cleansing' without any reaction from international players.

Gaïdz Minassian endeavoured to demonstrate the international scale of this local conflict since 'the Caucasus is on the outskirts of three empires and the empires don't have borders but fronts'. The two countries are in fact between Turkey, Russia and Iran, 'heirs of three empires which still think of themselves as imperial powers, which each consist of one country and play out rivalries'. Whether it's Georgia and

Russia, Armenia and Turkey or Azerbaijan and Iran, each relationship maintained is 'equivocal' assures the political scientist. But the neo-imperial powers aren't the only ones looking closely at the Caucasus, he continued. European Union, United States, China and India have interests there. Europe is also eyeing 'Baku hydrocarbons', while the Americans seek to weaken Russia, and China and India to expand their zone of influence. 'Two approaches to resolving the conflict are on the table', explained Gaïdz Minassian: 'Western peace and Russian peace' but in both cases 'the blind spot remains Nagorno-Karabakh'. While Yerevan wants 'a peace of law, respecting territorial integrity and minorities', Baku advocates a 'peace of punishment to take revenge on 1994', he lamented, and 'the international community is still caught up in the war in Ukraine'.



Régis Genté

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Following this presentation, during the discussion with the public, an Armenian refugee from Nagorno-Karabakh who had arrived in France a year earlier asked to speak to describe her traumatic experience. In Armenian, the woman recounted her birth during the 1988-1994 war, her difficult childhood and the loss of her home in 2020 which forced her into exile. 'We survived by helping each other', she said. 'My grandparents told me that they had already experienced this, that it was a second genocide under the gaze of the international community', before showing photos of her family, survivors of this genocide who were still in Nagorno-Karabakh.



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DEBATE

IRAQ: BEYOND THE WAR

29 September, 4:30 p.m. – 6 p.m., Azur Room



Feurat Alani, Zoubida Debbagh, Adél Bakawan and Nagham Hasan

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A country and an identity to rebuild

While 2023 marks the commemoration of the 20th anniversary of the American invasion of Iraq, taking stock of contemporary issues in Iraqi society seemed essential to Zoubida Debbagh, the moderator of this debate. The war and US occupation, justified by the lies of the Bush administration, left a failed Iraqi state, dysfunctional institutions and rampant corruption, she said.

The Franco-Iraqi sociologist, Adél Bakawan, first provided a summary of the thousand-year-old history of Iraq. The current Iraqi territory corresponds to Mesopotamia, he noted – the cradle of civilization, religion, writing and even the first constitution. When Baghdad was founded by the Abbasid dynasty in the 8th century, the city was as central as the American capital is today. The region was invaded and occupied by the Ottomans in the fol-

lowing centuries, becoming part of their empire until the arrival of the British during the First World War. The latter then founded the first modern Iraqi state, the Hashemite monarchy of Iraq. This would then be overthrown by the coup d'état of General Abdel Karim Kassem in 1958, who proclaimed the Republic of Iraq and distanced himself from the pan-Arabism promoted by Egyptian leader Nasser. Coming to power a few years later, Saddam Hussein succeeded in building a strong Iraqi state, equipped with a robust social and educational system, dynamic economic infrastructures and a competent army, while consolidating a harsh dictatorial regime. However, the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) completely destroyed the country, its infrastructure and its economy. The beginning of the end of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship began with the failed 1991 invasion of Kuwait.

MODERATOR:

Zoubida Debbagh, Meetings, debates and publications programme coordinator, Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA)

SPEAKERS:

Feurat Alani, reporter and director

Adel Bakawan, director of the French Research Centre on Iraq (CFRI)

Nagham Hasan, doctor, general director of the Hope Maker's Organisation for Women

He thought that the United States would stand aside, but they formed an international coalition to repel him.



Zoubida Debbagh and Adel Bakawan

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Iraqis have demonstrated every year since 2003

Feurat Alani

In 2003, the Americans decided to overthrow the Iraqi dictator, relying on lies that the Bush administration would only admit to after the fact: the possession of weapons of mass destruction and the links between Hussein and Al Qaeda. The figures put forward by the sociologist regarding the consequences of the war were unequivocal: in the 1990s, 49% of Iraqi doctors were women, while 80% of Iraqi women cannot work today; in the 1970s, 95% of the Iraqi population was literate while today 59% of them are illiterate. Current Iraqi society is completely at odds with corrupt elites. Daesh was able to emerge and prosper because of the American occupation and demographic growth, while the desertification of the country is ongoing. Iraq has become the territory of confrontation between the great powers, from Iran to Turkey and the Gulf States, not to

mention the presence of the Islamic State and the Kurdish armed forces.

The Franco-Iraqi journalist and director, Feurat Alani, looked back on the major demonstrations which swept across the country in 2019, triggered by the sheer precariousness of the population, continuous power cuts, the absence of running water and significant unemployment. Iraqis have demonstrated every year since 2003, he emphasised, but in 2019, it was the Shiite youth, in particular, who were taking to the streets to express their desire to rediscover an Iraqi identity and distance themselves from Iran. According to the journalist, the Americans have forcibly imposed new identities on Iraqis, who are now divided between Arabs, Kurds, Shiites, Sunnis, Muslims or Christians, thus destroying the notion of being Iraqi. As well as access to food and electricity, young Iraqis are now asking the government to return to



Watch the full debate on YouTube

this common identity. Although the movement has almost disappeared due to violent repression, these mentalities are still present in 2023. Iraq is a 'mosaic country' recalls Feurat Alani, united by its different components and histories, and must take up the challenge of reconstruction, both of its infrastructure and its identity.

Of the 1.25 million Yazidis in the world, 700,000 are in Iraq

Nagham Hasan

The rise of Daesh in Iraq, facilitated by the American occupation, has had devastating consequences on the Yazidi ethnic minority, announced the moderator, as she gave the floor to Dr Nagham Hasan. The Yazidi gynaecologist explained that her people have been victims of 74 genocidal campaigns in their history, the last carried out by Islamic State in 2014. Of the 1.25 million Yazidis in the world, 700,000 are in Iraq, she went on to specify. Daesh, which has targeted them with numerous Islamist car bomb attacks since 2007, triggered a serious humanitarian catastrophe in 2014 by occupying the Yazidi region of Sinjar, executing more than 6,000 men and reducing 6,500 women and girls to sexual slavery. The doctor has worked with these women for nine years to ease their suffering. With the help of the UN and the German government, she was able to set up a medical centre for Yazidi survivors. These women have lost everything, she insisted, and today they live in squalid and unsanitary camps in Iraqi Kurdistan but the crimes of Daesh are still not punished and the Iraqi government refuses to recognise the term genocide.



Nagham Hasan

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In this system plagued by corruption, Feurat Alani believes that hope lies in the young Iraqi generation, who are proud and capable of demanding a rule of law, protection of Iraq's mosaic of identity and a strong constitution. Adel Bakawan reminded us that 'Iraqiness' is a political construction and that it can and must include the religious and ethnic micro-identities that make up Iraq's diversity. 'To establish a new social contract, we must support Iraq and not invade it,' he added, 'and remain optimistic.' 'The gates of hell opened in the Middle East in 2003 with the American invasion,' insisted Feurat Alani, 'and it is in the interest of the international community to understand this, because without closing them, the world will never be at peace.' Rather than stabilising Iraq in order to do business there, which seems to be the current priority of the international community, it is absolutely necessary to help open a dialogue between all the components of Iraqi society, concludes Adel Bakawan.