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**TITOLO/TITLE:** Deconstructing Chaos in Iraqi Studies:

What Research Paths Beyond Essentialisation and its Counter-Narrative?

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**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

If the Middle East and North Africa are often portrayed as a region of disconcerting chaos both in the media and academic literature, Iraq is frequently seen as the epicentre of this chaos. Since the 2003 US-led invasion, the country has often been depicted as unspeakable chaos and ungovernable violence (Bashkin 2015; Harling 2012; Visser 2008). The long history of coups and wars in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st has undoubtedly facilitated the entrenchment of this vision. Starting from the first Gulf War and moving on with the invasion of Kuwait, the second Gulf War, the heavy UN sanctions during the 1990s, the 2003 US-led invasion and the following 18 years of unrest have crafted a situation that seemed impossible to unravel and describe, if not through overreaching generalisations (Hinnebusch 2003). Wars, migrations and local mobilisations paved the way for a context that seemed to escape rational explanations. At the same time, the political interests enmeshed in knowledge production about Iraq have contributed to the diffusion of simplistic and essentialistic approaches to the study of this country.

Contrary to these simplistic and essentialistic narrations, the present panel aims at investigating the political, social or cultural phenomena that emerged in Iraq in recent years, providing reflections and analysis that can help us go beyond the double notion of chaos and crisis. To counter essentialisation, this panel intends to approach Iraq from different perspectives and fields of study. Our aim is to focus on social actors, the context they are formed and operate in, and the power relations they are involved in. In doing so, the contributors are invited to deconstruct the notions of chaos and crisis and propose possible models of analysis based on this deconstruction and the trajectories of the actors and phenomena they analyse. Moreover, they are encouraged to investigate and deconstruct the duality between chaos and order, often opposed as totally negative or positive forces and frequently used to maintain the political status quo. In this sense, the panel also welcomes contributors reconsidering the notion of crisis as a creative force and not only as a destructive one.

The panel calls on contributions from different fields, including anthropology, history, literature, and political science, starting from these broad questions. Contributions should focus on a vast period of Iraqi history, encompassing the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. They should focus on political actors, social movements, activists, writers, artists, thinkers and philosophers and analyse their paths beyond the notions of chaos and crisis. These notions could be explored by focusing on the ideas and theories produced by the actors themselves, which may be seen not only as an object of study, or “afterthought” as stated by El Shakry (2021), but also as systems capable of producing frameworks of analysis. The panel also welcomes contributions adopting bottom-up perspectives and approaches to answer these questions.

Furthermore, the actors and phenomena of the Iraqi crises should be analysed within their context. Contributions should explore the field of action of these actors, understanding how it shapes them and how, at the same time, they shape their field(s). In Arab cultural studies, the concept of “field” has been fruitfully applied to the Egyptian, Lebanese and Algerian literary milieus by eminent scholars such as Richard Jacquemond (2003, 2008), Felix Lang (2016) and Tristan Leperlier (2018). Moreover, the “cultural turn” that has recently taken place in the study of Arabic literary texts has allowed us to pay unprecedented attention to the context of production and reception of the latter, contributing “to demystifying the literary terrain” and “rendering often excluded and marginalized practices more important” (Pacifico 2020). In political studies, the “interpretative work” of actors in describing their fields has recently been explored by Jasper and Volpi (2018). They, for instance, argue that social actors create their fields of action by shaping them with an interpretative work of external events. In this way, political opportunities are transformed from objective situations into perceived ones, paving the way for a conception of the field shaped by the actors themselves.

By setting actors in their relative field or more fields at once, the analysis can look at subjects as embedded and formed by the context, overcoming all those approaches that see the actors and their cultural, political or philosophical productions as abstract objects of study. This perspective has been explored, among others, by Beinin and Vaire (2013, 8-9), who proposed a “relational approach” to social actors, emphasising the subject’s perception of opportunity and threat in relation to its environment and thus developing its discourse and actions in relation to it.

The actors should also be considered within the web of power relations they are entangled with. Since they are part of a specific context, they are also part of a web of relations that determine their background, trajectory, and struggles in their respective field(s) as well as their actions and productions.

By focusing on actors within their contexts and the power relations they shape and are shaped by, this panel hopes to concentrate on their creativity. This creativity is expressed both in confronting the crisis they face and casting themselves as more than mere subjects or witnesses of these crises, but as players in the different fields of the Iraqi context. The notion of “creativity” is explored by John Chalcraft in his work on popular politics in the Middle East, arguing for its problematic interpretation as well as its central role in bringing new social actors into the political arena (Chalcraft 2016). The idea of creativity, proposing new ways of shaping power relations by introducing new groups and new repertoires of contentions to the political field, can help contributions explore actors’ perspectives on the notion of crisis and themselves. Drawing on these notions, contributions could try to answer several questions: Who are these actors? How are they formed and how do they create their fields of action? Or, also, how do they conceptualise the notion of crisis, if they do at all? And if they do, how do they overcome this notion?

Finally, the panel also aims at addressing some methodological and theoretical issues. Looking at the actors’ multiple histories, political ideas, or cultural productions with a specific focus on the context and power relations, contributions could also try to answer the following questions: What research paths can we build beyond the constant need to provide a counter-narrative to the aforementioned forms of essentialisation and simplification? How do Iraqi actors position themselves within their social space? Moreover, what is their role and impact in the Iraqi crises?

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### **The Iraqi losers of globalization and the neoliberal origins of the 1991 uprising.**

**Amir Taha (The University of Amsterdam)**

Significant historical changes in Iraqi politics during the Baath Party led government (1968-2003) were often explained by scholars as internal developments linked with Saddam's idiosyncrasies. Moreover, elite politics and the perspective of western foreign policy are often used as a lens to describe political chaos and crisis in Iraq. This paper has two arguments, firstly that without studying Iraq within global developments and de-exceptionalizing Iraq, renders the country as unexplainably self-destructive and plagued by primordial communal conflict. Secondly that chaos or crisis have a subjective dimension defined by a person's historical perceptions. As Doug McAdam famously argued political mobilization and the political process in a country often than not relies on the cognitive framing of crisis rather than supposed objective parameters of crisis. Bottom-up subjective understandings of recent history are therefore important to qualify crisis or chaos in a country. This paper wants to elaborate on four global developments during the 1980s and contrast them with both top down and bottom-up perspectives of both chaos and crisis. Firstly, in the 1980s there was a stronger imposition of global agendas on nation-state systems. Secondly, privatization, deregulation, and transnational labor replaced public healthcare, education, employment, and other guarantees of public provisions. Thirdly, the developmental bureaucracy of the state was heavily outpaced by an expansion of the state's coercion apparatus. Lastly, the dissemination, rearticulation, and creation of political ideologies began to encompass larger components of nativism, culture/heritage, and religion, as opposed to material dialectics. Based on 45 interviews in Iraq with mostly ordinary Iraqis, on their life and views during and on the 1980s and their ideas of historical linearity, chaos, disorder, social and political conflict. Moreover, unstudied weekly publications of the Iraqi ministry of justice will be dissected to understand how daily governance was used to make -especially- socio economic conflicts intelligible in the 1980s.

### **Iraq and Nonviolence in Islam: the case of imam Shirazi**

**Viviana Schiavo (Università di Napoli "L'Orientale")**

Especially since 2003 U.S. led coalition attack, the media coverage of Iraq "has emphasized the disorder and chaos found on the streets" (Isahkhan 2011, p.191). However, despite the Western representation of a country constantly and inherently characterized by violence, chaos and lack of democracy (Ishakan 2011), the political and social Iraqi situation is far more complex and "defies oversimplified reductionist concepts" (Jabar 2003, p.31). More specifically, among the different discursive traditions (Asad 1986) characterizing the Islamic component of the society, we can find a number of reflections on Nonviolence. This paper aims to explore the complexity and effervescence of the Iraqi religious panorama through the analysis of the nonviolent theology of the Iraqi-Iranian *marǧa' al-taqlid* (source of emulation) and Islamist political theorist Muhammad al-Husayni al-Shirazi (Muhammad al-Hussaynī al-Širāzī, d. 2001), widely known as imam Shirazi. He was a fixture of Shiite political activism in Iraq and abroad (Scharbrodt 2020). His extensive theoretical production includes works on different issues, such as ethics, sociology, philosophy, human rights, and Nonviolence in Islam. The contribution will rotate around Shirazi's writing about Nonviolence, trying to highlight the dimensions of Nonviolence he dealt with and the sources he employed to support his ideas. More broadly, I will present an overview of the author, giving relevance to his historical and cultural context of origin, his social impact, and his positioning in the Iraqi panorama, with a special focus on the debate about violence and nonviolence.

### **You said Gypsies? A case study of the Dom community in Kurdistan**

**Kahina Guillard (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales - EHESS)**

Among the several exonyms used to describe the Dom community in the Middle East, one may hear in colloquial Arabic *ǧaǧar*, *nawar*, *kawliyye* or in Kurdish *qereçî* which all refer to a gypsy social status with blurred boundaries. Although Doms are often labeled by the majority groups as "thieves", "pimps", "beggars", "bad muslims" and so on, they share multiple common features with the majority group in terms of social structure, religion, language. In 2021, I conducted a fieldwork among a small *muǧamma'* ("subdivision") near Duhok, Iraqi Kurdistan. As a proof of their integration to Kurdistan, the inhabitants mentioned, during interviews, their affiliation to a Kurdish *'ašira* ("tribe") as much as their Dom identity. Not immune to forced displacements, trauma, violence but also political participation since the after-effects of the Syrian revolution, this *muǧamma'* is a rich place of encounter with different interpretations of identities among the "hill peoples" (James C. Scott 2009 : 13). The challenge here is not to fall in the trap of ethnic and cultural stereotypes, which in the context of prolonged contact between different populations would lack depth. To this end, attention will be paid to the process of identity's construction within this community, where identity is understood as fluid, plural and open to renegotiation. With an anthropological approach, the representation of Doms as helpless victims will be nuanced and the role of decisions made by individual actors, specified. To reinforce this point, I will present, through this paper, a particular *artefact*, a tattoo of a particular actor, a *muḥtar* ("mayor") in a particular space,

Kurdistan. My conclusions will serve as a starting point to think Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq in general from a different perspective and attempt to build a counter-analysis of the margins.

**Escaping the Testimonial Voice: Gimmick Narration and Failure of *ta'lif* in Two Novels by Murtaḍā Gzār  
Federico Pozzoli (Università degli Studi di Milano / University of St Andrews)**

The literary work of Murtaḍā Gzār has been read as a continuation of the 'Basra school' of contemporary Iraqi literature, a current that is usually characterised in terms of non-novelistic forms, magical realism, and reliance on *turāth*. In her reading of Gzār's third novel, *al-Sayyid Aṣghar Akbar*, Yasmeen Hannoosh (2013:146) focuses on the ways in which the text 'accomplishes a rupture in linear accounts of the past through narrative strangeness'. Yet, while during the Baathist period such anti-mimetic poetics could be understood as 'escap[ing] both the threatening reality of post-independence regimes and the Eurocentric tendencies of postcolonial theory' (Caiani & Cobham 2019), the rise of traumatic fiction in the post-2003 period, with its inherent suspicion of linear accounts, raises further questions about the nature and aims of such 'strangeness'. The paper will look at the issue of estrangement in Gzār's fiction through a close reading of the author's latest novels, *Ṭā'ifatī al-jamīla* ('My Beautiful Sect', 2016), and *al-'Ilmāwī* ('The Scientist', 2018). To deconstruct the binaries introduced by categories such as magical realism and non-naturalness, we will look at the defamiliarizing features of Gzār's narrative as gimmicks. Sianne Ngai (2020) defines the gimmick as an aesthetic object that is 'simultaneously overperforming and underperforming', that 'strike us as working too little [...], but also as working too hard'. Both *Ṭā'ifatī* and *al-'Ilmāwī* are constellated by extravagant devices that strike the reader as untimely and useless. Such narrative objects point to the overall paradox of Gzār's narrative voice, the very complexity of which 'puts any person seeking to analyze it at a comical disadvantage' (Ngai 2020:9) and ultimately declares the failure of *ta'lif* 'composition/familiarization'. The discussion of Gzār's narrative style will provide an opportunity to address broader issues of mediacy in post-2003 fiction: the construction of 'underperforming' narrative structures both reflects and reacts against the tensions of the Iraqi literary field, escaping the emphasis on testimonial narration of traumatic fiction.

**PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS**

Pietro Menghini is a PhD candidate at the Scuola Superiore Meridionale in Naples. His research interests include Contemporary Islamic Thought, Contemporary History of the Arab World, with a focus on Iraqi History. In particular, his project focuses on the History of the Sadrist Trend in the 1990s, providing a Social Movement Theory approach to the history of the Trend and a new bottom-up perspective.

Antonio Pacifico is a PhD candidate at the Jean Moulin University of Lyon III. He obtained his MA degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Naples "L'Orientale". In his project, he focuses from a sociological perspective on the (re)writing of national history carried out by a number of Iraqi novelists, playwrights, and poets since the 1990s. His research interests include contemporary Iraqi literature, the relation between literary and historical narratives as well as Arab intellectual and cultural history.

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