

“This is our daily life...”

Bombs against peace – the perversion of a culture of violence

It took nearly 10 years from the conception of the idea to its realization: on the 10th of December, the International Day of Human Rights, the conference “Ethnic Victimization in Kirkuk” as a first step became a reality. Organized as a cooperative effort of the University of Kirkuk’s College of Law, the Christ IKV Pax Netherlands and the Felsberger Institute of Education and Science (FIBW), academics gathered with representatives of ethnic and religious groups to discuss the situation in Kirkuk, in particular the existing problems for minority groups and the human rights violations which individual communities are subjected to. The conference was recognized on a national level and resulted in the initiation of a joint-effort municipal project in Kirkuk, in which representatives from various social groups would take part. The overall success of the event would leave us contemplating further steps in the direction of internationalization.

The idea existed to hold a conference addressing “violence” in Iraq. Its goal would be to bring academics and representatives from civil-social institutions together to discuss all aspects of the existing violence in Iraq. This time, representatives and academics would be joined by international experts and students, who would contribute to the discussion of an appropriate course of action for the country. The principle challenge for international guests would be to provide a critical outsiders’ view of the situation in Iraq. In addition, international guests would present case studies of various other countries that have experienced a phenomenon of violence, and would be brought into a discussion with Iraqi participants to seek possibilities for breaking down Iraq’s existent culture of violence and replacing it with one of peace.

No other city was better suited to the conference than Kirkuk. As a mosaic of nearly all existent social and religious groups present in Iraq, the city holds an enormous potential for conflict – both within and outside of its limits; Kirkuk is characterized by the fact that political parties continually struggle to capture power in the city. More than 3500 explosions in the past 5 years, 500 kidnappings and 1000 deaths in the security forces illustrate the fact that Kirkuk is in a state of emergency. Moreover, it was feared that the situation would only worsen following the withdrawal of American troops.

The conference finally took place on 15-16 April, carrying the title “From Violence to Non-Violence: Analysis, Dialogue and Societal Participation in Kirkuk.” For the foreign delegates and guests – a total of 15 people – the University of Kirkuk had organized an extensive visit program for the 14 April, through which participants would be given the opportunity to get to know the city.

At a first glance, Kirkuk is a city similar to many others in the Middle East: fairly peaceful, no obvious signs of destruction. The streets are busy, yet nothing would blatantly point to the fact that Kirkuk takes a top place among Iraqi cities that experience the highest number of violent attacks. Nevertheless presence of security forces in the city is enormous. A contributing factor is the presence of foreign delegates within the city – our own escort is “high profile.” On the visitor’s itinerary is a trip to the oil

fields, the visit of the citadel of Kirkuk with its Muslim Pilgrim sites and a trip to the ruin of a Chaldean church. The program is accompanied by a Turkmen feast, and to conclude, visitors are invited to a Sufi order. We come to quickly understand: the expectations surrounding the conference have become enormous. The conference is a pioneering work in the area of addressing violence! It appears as though the entire city of Kirkuk has been waiting for this for years - waiting for some sort of action.



Visit of the International Delegation to Kirkuk's citadel

The evening before the conference, the international delegation met with Iraqi guests, who were coming from Zakho to Basra in the University of Kirkuk's Conference Center: altogether 64 representatives from universities throughout Iraq were expected to attend. Such numbers speak to the significance and magnitude of this event.

During the arrivals, the conference hall was checked one last time. The College of Law at the University of Kirkuk and the Iraq Desk Officer of the FIBW performed excellent organizational work. The single unresolved problem was the arrangement for interpretation: there was a shortage of headsets and the equipment was difficult to handle. Various solutions were considered, and a last-minute decision would

have to be made. Only on the next day, only a few hours before the conference, were we able to decide how translation would be accomplished. Meantime, the scope of the event was shaping up to exceed all expectations. Original estimations for attendance had stood at roughly 100 guests, half of whom we had expected would be professors and students from the University of Kirkuk. However, in the weeks leading up to the conference, it became clear that the event had taken on a greater national significance; registrations indicated that we should be expecting more than 300 guests.



View of Kirkuk

However, with the first meeting between the delegation and Iraqi professors, it had become clear that linguistic proficiency would pose a problem. Though communication in English showed itself to be possible to some degree, the absence of translators presented a barrier for topical, academic discussion: the academic globalization of the last decades seem to have bypassed Iraq almost completely. This fact can be considered an inherited aspect of the culture of violence, which has taken a firm hold in Iraq.

For safety reasons, the international delegates are accommodated at a hotel in Erbil in the part of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), an hour's drive from Kirkuk. The final evening of the delegation's briefing is accompanied by excitement and expectancy for what the next two days will offer.

The next day begins with Kurdish security and armed escorts awaiting us at the hotel entrance. We pass the first checkpoint. On the provincial border the security is changed out, and we are required to pass a second checkpoint. Finally, we pass through the city centre to reach the location of the new Conference Hall at the Presidency of the University of Kirkuk.

Upon our arrival, hectic activity prevails. The registration of participants has already begun, and the hall begins to fill.



On the way to the conference

Equipment additionally ordered for the translation arrives from Erbil. It is decided to translate the Arabian contributions into English over the headsets, and the consecutive English contributions to broadcast over the hall microphone.

It quickly becomes clear that participation will far exceed our expectations. The day before the conference, news reaches us that UNAMI will take part with a large contingent, likewise NGOs from throughout Iraq will also attend. CNN, AFP, Reuters and DPA are all to be expected, and all important

local and national news stations are already present. We must now make provision for nearly 500 guests: 3 times more than planned. The hall itself has only 350 seats.

The conference had developed a certain auto-dynamics and grown steadily of its own accord. It is overwhelming to see how the idea of holding an event addressing violence in Iraq has resonated with present concerns and has hit such a nerve with the people. The time is right to place this subject at the forefront and to initiate a dialogue addressing the issues. The results of the conference's continuing growth became apparent: the announcement that participation had extended to include top representatives for all confessions resident in Kirkuk, as well as the governor of the province of Kirkuk and a representative from the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education, demanded a great increase in security expenditure. That we received "high profile" attention is not necessarily seen as positive.

And the program was overcapacity: a total of ten panels each with 6-7 speakers. Combined with such numbers, the fact that English contributions must be interpreted over loud speaker entails that the time allotted will scarcely be enough. Explanatory power will suffer and there will remain little time for discussion. We must reduce our demands, requiring that we keep informal discussions outside of the panels. For the translation, networking comes into play; we are able to ask four colleagues to be available as interpreters for the informal talks, should language proficiency be lacking. The experiences in the meeting the night before had made clear to us that this was an urgent need that would have to be addressed.

The conference is opened with a recitation from the Koran. The hall is so full that there is no place left to stand, let alone sit, and some who are attending have to listen from the foyer. The representative of the Ministry has cancelled at the last minute. The greeting words come from the President of the University of Kirkuk, from the Provincial Governor and from the President of the Kirkuk Province Council. Both organizers of the conference open with this resolution: "Today, violence is a global truth. But we should not accept this. We will have to work hard in order to make a culture of non-violence to become a global truth." This is to be the key note for the coming two days.

The first day of the conference provides for 2 panel sections, each of which will be addressed by international experts. The main focus of the Morning Panel will be to present foreign viewpoints of the internal situation in Iraq. Iraqi conference organizer and Dean of the College of Law, Dr. Fareed Jasim Hamoud, will speak of his fieldwork in his principle area of research and interest "Domestic Violence in Kirkuk." Dr. Daniel Rezene Mekonnen from Eritrea, Fellow Researcher at the FIBW, will report on the subject of "Transitional Justice"; Prof. Dr. Fredy Carte of the Universidad del Rosario in Columbia on the subject "The role of voice in the transition from violence to non-violence"; and Dr. Willemijn Verkoren on the Radboud University in Nijmegen in the Netherlands on the NGO's Role in Iraq: "Driver's for Peace? Civil Society, Peace Building and the Legitimacy Dilemma." Four different referees from four different continents.



View over the conference hall

The afternoon section will present international case studies of transformation processes, as well as a “lessons learned” discussion, the aim being to stimulate consideration of the parallels to the situation in Iraq. Prof. Dr. Helmut Bley of the University of Hannover’s presentation of his article “Civil Society against the threat of Civil War” will speak to the example of South Africa. Dr. Gerd Hankel of the Hamburg Institute of Social Research will treat the case of Rwanda in his lecture “On the Difficulty of Acknowledging the Suffering of Others,” and Prof. Dr. Henk van Houten, head of the Center of Border Research at the University of Nijmegen, will relate the cases of Belfast and Nicosia to the situation in Kirkuk: “Geopolitics of Border and Identities – the Cases of the Divided Cities of Belfast and Nicosia.”

During the morning, the work with the interpreters is time-consuming, and constantly having to reset equipment provides an additional aggravation. Some television broadcasting stations must be asked to leave the hall, having tried to conduct interviews with participants during times in which panels were running. There are many questions from the plenary sitting following the talks, but as foreseen, only a small fraction of these can be addressed.

For me, two things became clear: first of all, for most conference members, this form of exchange is unusual. Individuals are eager to know how foreign academics and experts view the situation in Iraq, but

are however undecided whether these outsider perceptions should be interpreted as enrichment or rather as an interference in internal affairs. Secondly, addressing the issues as a cooperative effort as opposed to discussing the issues within one's own group also seems to be a new experience. Questions from the plenary sitting as well as during the discussions illustrate how closely the subject of violence is related to religion, which seems to be viewed as a basis of civilization and culture. This is a truth independent of the confession of the speaker – whether Christian or Muslim, Chaldear, Shi'it or Sunnit.

The beginning is promising. But the journey to forming routine in the dialogue of international academics will be long and rocky. The first panel round comes to an end shortly after 2 p.m. In front of the hall we are informed that there has been a program modification: the lunch will not take place on campus, as had been intended, but rather in a restaurant in the city center. This goes against the original plan for the program, but has apparently already been agreed upon, as Iraqi participants are already boarding the provided coach and the security convoy is already awaiting the international delegates.

There is a short discussion, after which the party sets out: the private carriage of the dean; two minibuses carrying the delegates; several personnel carriers with Asayesh, the security forces; and a civil vehicle carrying the Kurdish security officer, his driver and two professors from the University of Kirkuk. We leave the campus. The restaurant is in the opposite direction, requiring us to take a U-turn approximately 500 meters away.



After the bomb attack

Partway through the U-turn we hear the detonation. A massive black mushroom cloud rises up, after which heavy gunfire is to be heard. We stop at the edge of the roadway – still unsure of which vehicle has been hit – while panic breaks out on the street, cars pressing in the opposite direction or disappearing into side streets.

Within a matter of seconds Kirkuk has lost its superficially peaceful appearance. Security forces close the street and hectically attempt to clear passers-by and vehicles into the side streets. By way of a detour we are able to reach the restaurant. Already the district has been almost completely closed off. About half of the conference company is present at the restaurant. The rest, it appears, have scattered. Only piece by piece does news of their whereabouts arrive.

After a short lunch break we return to the conference hall. At a hastily adjourned crisis meeting called by the University President, it is decided to cancel the conference for the afternoon. It is planned to continue with the second day as planned – at the Department of Agriculture which lies in the Kurdish part of the city, close to the checkpoint and which is considered to be a safer location. A discussion of details and analysis of the situation lasts until the evening, followed by the journey to Erbil. There at the hotel international delegates meet to further discuss the situation. In the meantime, news about the detonation has taken shape: a mobile-activated car bomb had been detonated in the vicinity of the main



Workshop with Prof. Fredy Cante

entrance to Kirkuk University's Presidency. Of the procession, the carriage of the Kurdish security officer

was hit. Two dead, four seriously injured, further victims not yet known. In spite of this news, the general consensus is to proceed further. The decision to continue rests with each individual, and the majority have a resolve to continue with the conference in Kirkuk as scheduled.

The transfer to the second-day conference location runs smoothly. Organizationally, the University of Kirkuk has accomplished a small masterpiece: the spare rooms are completely ready and equipped, the workshop halls improvised. For students from the College of Law as well as from other faculties, a driving service has been arranged. All in all, approximately 300-400 students are present. Nearly half of the conference company has decided for a second day of participation. Most of the Iraqi panels planned for the second day take place, this time, however, with a significantly lower rate of attendance.



Workshop with Dr. Gerd Hankel

Gerd Hankel and Fredy Cante hold the planned workshop sessions with the Iraqi students – it is oriented towards practical application. The sessions are a full success, and could not have been better for either lecturer or participant. The hunger of the students for the exchange of ideas with international lecturers and their thirst for knowledge are perceptible. Moreover, there exists an unexpected openness to questions and to discussion, as well as an admirable readiness to support one another when linguistic proficiency is not always sufficient. Some can speak excellent English, others not a word, yet everyone is eager to hear what the others have to say: the subject of violence is relevant to their daily lives. This generation of students is eager to move.

It is difficult to finish the workshops. The students do not want to go, and the lecturers want to leave no question unanswered. They are all eager to come again.

Within the sphere of the conference, the informal conversations were able to go forth as hoped, in spite of the incident. Over and over again the question was asked whether this kind of event could be offered in other towns in Iraq, in cooperation with other universities. Mosul, Diyala, Basra and others.



Open Air Performance on Campus: Eastern Democratic Syndrome

The day finishes with the theatrical performance of the “Eastern Democratic Syndrome” – Training Space Workshop from Baghdad. The subject of course: violence. As there is no room at the Department of Agriculture capable of accommodating the play, improvisations have to be made. Within one hour a part of the campus has been turned into an open air theatre. The play: direct, critical, provocative. And moving. The audience is delighted by the performance, standing to applaud director and manager Haytham Abdulrazaq and his troop.

The final evaluation follows in a small circle session. Two of the injured persons are lecturers from at the University. A bomb attack made at a conference that endeavours to contribute to a process for peace: this is one of the results stemming from what is a perverse present-day culture of violence in Iraq.

“This is our daily life here, which we have become accustomed to...” commented one of the organizers. One is resolved to go on working: a subsequent event next year, maybe in another form. Carefully, slowly, plans originate. The first mark was made, others must follow. The key idea of the conference is relevant and true today more than ever: “Today, violence is a global truth. But we should not accept this. We will have to work hard in order to make a culture of non-violence become a global truth.”

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