

Transcript: Preserving Cultural Heritage in a War Zone - Mehiyar Kathem interviews Rene Teijgeler about his experience in Iraq

Mehiyar Kathem 0:04 Welcome to the Nahrein Network. Today we're with Rene Teijgeler, from Netherlands, a friend and a colleague who has worked in Iraq in the early years of 2004. Rene has a background in book conservation, bookbinding, degrees in anthropology and sociology, social psychology. Hello, Rene, how are you today?

Rene Teijgeler 0:40 Thank you, I'm fine.

Mehiyar Kathem 0:43 Why did you go to Iraq in the first place?

Rene Teijgeler 0:47 Well, um, it started, actually, with me joining the Simek unit in the Dutch army. Simek is the civil affairs unit in the army. I was at conference here in the Netherlands. And the commander of the unit approached me after I gave a lecture, if I wouldn't like to join the Simek unit. I have a bit of a leftist background, been protesting against the army in general, actually. I didn't join the army when I had to, still in the times of conscription. So all the same, I started the discussion with him. And it took to me that the Simek unit was a really fair unit. And if you want to change something, or at least contribute something, from my perspective, as an inheritance expert, you might as well do it during the war. Now, many other people are working during the war, a lot of NGOs, civil servants. But we were always absent, we meaning heritage experts, we were trying to do something before a conflict started. But actually, mainly, we were concentrating on post conflict periods. And I thought, This is ridiculous. Why don't we do something during a conflict? Then the unit, the Civic unit, seems very well prepared. It was the first unit, it was sort of a breakthrough in the Dutch army. And I decided to join it. I became an officer. And I must admit that the first time I was shooting a gun or pistol, it sort of hit me. It wasn't easy to be introduced to such kind of violence. But it was sort of part of the deal. And actually, before I knew it, they wanted me to go to Iraq, as a senior advisor for the Ministry of Culture in Baghdad, attached to the American Embassy. So I met my predecessor, Zainab Bahrani, in a conference in Istanbul. And I decided to take on the job. Because I thought that I could contribute something, during, during a conflict in safeguarding a cultural heritage, especially an important country, as in Iraq.

Mehiyar Kathem 3:39 And this was the Iraqi Reconstruction Management Office, which was part of the US Embassy?

Rene Teijgeler 3:44 It was yes.

Mehiyar Kathem 3:44 And more. What was its role specifically?

Rene Teijgeler 3:50 Well, it was the follow up of the CPA, the Coalition Provisional Authority. And actually, it sounds- it sounds very arrogant. But everybody knows that the US was running the country. They took over the entire administration of Iraq, all the political institutions, including the main mistakes that everybody knows today is, firing the, or dissolving the army and dissolving the Ba'ath Party and firing everybody who was a member of the Ba'ath Party, including all civil servants, set administrators, etc. So within the CPA, they started with sort of a government, but the people in that provisional government only could be, uh, could be there when Bremmer, the ambassador at the time, the US Embassy, was approving these positions. Then in IRMO, the government, the Iraqi government was a little bit, had a little bit more power. And every ministry within the IRMO, at the

embassy because we were part of the Embassy of the United States, every Ministry had a senior adviser, and I was the one for the Ministry of Culture.

Mehiyar Kathem 5:22 What was the role of the senior advisors?

Rene Teijgeler 5:26 Well, that wasn't quite clear. We sort of filled it in yourself. So I made a plan. But the plan was, didn't really get approved or anything. Nobody did anything with that. Because I wanted an advisor for archaeological site, I wanted an advisor for the museums, I wanted an advisor for the library and archives, etc. -somebody who would run finances. That never went through. So I was there all by myself with an Iraqi secretary. And that was it.

Mehiyar Kathem 6:06 So, so before we get into your role as a senior advisor for the Ministry of Culture, of the Iraqi Reconstruction Management Office, could you tell us a bit about the background, the, the environment in which you were working in? I mean, this is post, acute post invasion. So the early years- we're speaking here about two thousand and ...the summer of 2004?

Rene Teijgeler 6:31 Yes, that's correct.

Mehiyar Kathem 6:33 And so I guess that that period was, why not?

Rene Teijgeler 6:37 Well, yeah, it was a period when the- should I say that the war more or less started. I mean, you had the invasion with the American, the UK, and they prefer to call the coalition parties. Which there wasn't very much to do about it, because it was a preemptive war, and the leadership of UK, US, and only afterwards, do the UN approve the war. So because of the two horrible measures, Bremmer took, a lot of people started getting irritated with the occupation, meaning that more and more people protested, and not only the Sunnis because they were out of power. But also, Shiite people, you had the Battle of Najaf and Nasiriyah, and of course, Tikrit, etc, etc, Fallujah. So, I was in the middle of the war. And I had a very high position. My military rank was a major. But my actual rank was equivalent to a two star general. And I took part in the daily, early morning meetings, where all the senior advisors were present, together with the deputy chief of mission. And I had my own, well, when I went out, I had to, you know, a protection unit. Sometimes, it was a private unit from DynCorp, or from Blackwater, or it was a military unit, I could not get out without protection. In the end, it looked like I was on a list to be killed, just like many other VIPs. So the protection was necessary.

Mehiyar Kathem 6:53 This is an, an insurgency at the time- there was a growing insurgency.

Rene Teijgeler 8:50 Yeah, well, using the word insurgent, I ran into a conflict, or at least a discussion with a French colleague of mine, who said you shouldn't use that word because who is the terrorist in Iraq? And in the end, I think I agree with him. But at least there were parties and non government parties using violence. So violent groups, but there are several of them, of course. Yeah, and then there was one thing that was interesting because I was not American. And there were not that many foreigners at the US Embassy who had similar kinds of positions. The British were the senior consultants or the senior advisors for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State Department. Some of them were military, some of them were non military. But of course, 90% were American- Americans. My position as a Dutchman made that I was not really that interesting for the US, for the US staff. I was more or less fully supported by the Dutch military command. Well, maybe I should rephrase it. They didn't pay much attention to me being there, although I met a Dutch ambassador and he knew I was there. And I met a Dutch commander of the Dutch troops in the south, he knew I was there. I know, I knew that there were one or two people of Dutch intelligence, military intelligence watching me. But they were never problems. That was okay. Next to me, nobody was interested in culture.

Mehiyar Kathem 10:42 They were to a point after the Iraq museum was looted, or allowed to be looted. Rene Teijgeler 10:49 Well, you know, I had good contact with the PR section. For them, it was more like it would damage the reputation of the United States and the US troops in Iraq. I had actually a discussion at one point, and I think it was on the event when the Dutch, when the coalition troops, American troops mainly, were entering Najaf, or was it Nasiriyah where the main shrine of Imam Ali is? Najaf, right. And there were pictures published, American boots walking on the graveyards. Now the graveyards I knew were very important because there's a lot of Shiite people from all over the world get buried there as close as possible to the tomb for Imam Ali. So there you have these American boots walking on the graves. I say you cannot do that. And this was in the morning meeting with the ambassador. And we had a sort of a heated discussion on that. And he felt insulted, more or less, at least, definitely irritated. Because I brought up the subject and wouldn't let go. He said, I have experience in the Middle East, etc. I said, Well, that is fine. But still you have a problem there. And I told him if you want war, and if you want to, you know, to last a war longer than you should, you know, do these kinds of things, because you're enticing the conflict, you're promoting the conflict by doing this. And he said, Well, who needs culture. So that was the end of discussion. So nobody really cared until of course, the whole thing with Babylon blew up, and then later Sumatra [Samarra], etc. And then it became a different story.

Mehiyar Kathem 12:44 We'll get to those, um, those issues. When you say no one cared, you mean within the formal, what became formal institutions, US occupation authorities, and the international organizations in Iraq? Rene Teijgeler 13:04 No, it was the US staff. Including the three ambassadors, one of the ambassadors was my direct boss. He didn't bother with me anyway, he'd say you're doing a good job. And that was it. So I was more or less completely independent. Then, of course, the role or the, let's say, the power role of the Ministry of Culture within the Provisional Government was very little. Nobody cared. When a minister tried to get money, to stop the looting, or to do anything- on libraries or museums, archaeological sites to protect them, you just didn't get money.

Mehiyar Kathem 13:48 Why was the case- Why was that the case?

Rene Teijgeler 13:51 Well, first of all, the Ministry of Culture did not have their own budget, like the other ministries didn't. They were completely dependent on getting money from the Ministry of Finance, which is, of course, a very weak government structure. So they always had to ask for money at the Ministry of Finance. And they wanted to do things themselves, but they didn't get enough money, which is a very strange situation. Then we all knew that Bremmer started (actually, you know, like Saddam did in the past), he chose people in the government or he approved people in the government according to their religion or ethnic background. So he started this, this kind of division already. So within the government, I think it was at that time the Prime Minister Allawi, you had a very conflicting interest of the different different parties represented within the government. And the Ministry of Culture was led by the minister with a combination Kurdish background. So that didn't help either. So the Ministry of Culture was, was within that structure, a weak ministry.

Mehiyar Kathem 15:06 But we're speaking about the immediacy of the period of post invasion. So 2003, 2004, 2005. But then, and this is before the elections of January 2005, national...

Rene Teijgeler 15:20 Yeah, yeah, yeah, the elections of January.

Mehiyar Kathem 15:22 But that period, this period you're speaking about, there wasn't any money in, for any of the ministries?

Rene Teijgeler 15:32 No.

Mehiyar Kathem 15:32 I mean, the money was locked. The international money was controlled by the US occupation authority, the US Embassy, so none of the ministries had any money. I mean, they didn't...

Rene Teijgeler 15:44 Not that I know of. Well, you know, they applied for money. And the US sometimes gave them money, actually, the ministry was financed to some extent by the US government. But, of course, that was not enough. And again, as we probably know, from our own countries, at least my country, you know, culture is at the bottom of any kind of government. The interim government, which was there when I worked in Baghdad, did have access to the Oil for Food program surplus funds. And that's because the Central Bank of Iraq Development, Central Iraq DFI (that is actually the proper name) effort, defense. Still, you had left, which was actually about 28 billion in the year after the invasion, so a lot of money. And they used to finance that for civil administration, humanitarian needs, and infrastructure, repairs, etc. But the CPA, of course, the predecessor of the interim government, still had a lot to say, on how to spend that money. And about the individual budgets, the ministers did have individual budgets, and some of them was financed by the US interim authorities at that time. The budget was very small, and was only about actually renovating the ministries, meaning equipment, etc. So the Minister of Culture did not have any budget for putting up projects, or financing, the INLA, the National Library and Archives. So all the funds for renovation, for example, at the Iraqi Museum, and the national libraries and archives, they were funds coming from outside sources, in the sense that not from the Ministry of Culture, because they simply did not have that money. They couldn't afford it. Another problem was, which I think I mentioned before, too, is, um, they not only had the money to fund projects, but it was also very difficult to receive money and give it directly to the Ministry of Culture. For example, I had the ideas of selling off the four heads of Saddam, which were on the rooftops of the palace, in Baghdad, where the US Embassy was situated at the time. Because if I would have sold them off, the money would go to the Ministry of Finance. The same goes with all the material that was in the vaults, which I had access to. And that needed to be (the vault was in the in the palace) and that needed to be returned to the proper authorities, Iraqi authorities, you know, the hundreds and maybe thousands of bottles of alcohol. Now- Well, the first idea was selling them off. And then the minister said, Yeah, well, you can do that. But then the funds have to go to the Ministry of Finance, I cannot receive that money. The same with all the cars we confiscate or that were already confiscated, like the Rolls Royce, is from Hitler times, that was worth over a million dollars. And my idea was to put it on sale in the United States. But then again, the minister said, Well, you know, and all the money would go to the Ministry of Finance. So there was only one thing for me left is to return everything to the Ministry of Culture in this case, to Donny George [Youkhanna] and the SBAH [Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage]. So everything was parked or transported to the Iraqi museum actually. Actually just so much that George told me at one time "Please, please stop giving me all those things. I have no storage for it anymore." Yeah.

Mehiyar Kathem 17:27 So, and then, what are your main priorities as a senior advisor for the Ministry of Culture? What were you working on specifically?

Rene Teijgeler 20:23 Well, the priorities came by practice. Dependent on, you know, what was going I had to, of course, get- get acquainted with everybody. Actually, the Minister of Culture didn't really like me, or at least I was the, the fourth, or the fifth advisor, after two Italian ambassadors and John Russell, from the United States. So he wasn't really waiting for another advisor. And actually, he told me that. And so he was sort of, you know, very aloof. And I thought, Well, I'm not on vacation here. So if nobody wants me, I'll go home. So I went over to the Minister, I said, you know, the Dutch are very, very direct and very upfront. So please take that into consideration when I'm telling you that, I

want to know whether you want to work with me or not. Because this is not a vacation. It's a danger zone. And if you don't feel you, you want to work with me? Then of course, it's your right. But please tell me then I'll pack my bags and go home. Well, then he laughed, and he said "Okay, tamam, tamam, let's work together". So that was the first hobble I had to take. So the first things that came to me, and especially also for Donny George, who was at that time, already, I think, the DG, the general director, of the SBAH antiquities department, a lot of things from the, from the possessions of Saddam, were more or less bundled around, or in the Green Zone. And, to some extent, also, within the embassy, we had a room there, a vault actually. And I had the key to it. Later on, I noticed that the CIA was duplicating all kinds of documents within the vault, which I was supposed to have the only key to it, but that's a different story. So there were a lot of things that needed to go back to, to the museum, because I didn't know anybody else, you know, to give the things to. So there were these famous carriage from Saddam. We transported them at night on the trolley in secret. There were cars, about 20 or 30, or probably even more cars, including a Rolls Royce that was given to the former king of Iraq by Hitler, a Mercedes Benz, which must have been worth at least a million dollars. I wanted to sell it but, you know, then the ministry- then the money would go to, to the Ministry of Finance. So the minister said "No, no use." Cadillacs, pink Porsches, actually, before that the staff of the embassy was driving those kinds of cars. So that was a thing. So we transported, again, in secret, to an underground garage near the town hall. And the mayor could drive in a white Mercedes that was an armored car as well. So those kinds of things. And, actually, there were all kinds of things. There was about, uh, thousands of bottles of spirits, alcohol, I couldn't get rid of it. And, you know, what are you supposed to do with it? Then the Americans came to me and he said, the Marine he said, "Well, we can auction them off here at the Embassy. And then we put the money into the orphanage fund." And I said, "No, it's not, not- everything has to go back to the Iraqis. It's not our deal. It's not, you know, it's not ours. So that was anything that, that people came to me that was from Saddam, in my honest opinion, should be returned, whatever it was, should be returned to the proper Iraqi authorities. Which was in practice, actually the poor Donny George, because at one time at the museum, and one time he said "Rene, how much more do you want to give me I mean, this you know, I don't have any storage for it anymore." So, and of course, this is just one story, of course, things were stolen.

Mehiyar Kathem 25:07 Like what was stolen? .

Rene Teijgeler 25:08 Well, there were, I got a message from the office of the Premier, Allawi, I think, that there were twelve carpets. And I mean, huge carpets, like, you know, 20 by 30 meters, Persian carpets at the embassy, the former palace of Saddam. And he wanted them back. You know, what can I do? I should, what he does with it, it's not, you know, it is not my responsibility. So I got ahold of two or three, the rest were gone. Then a member of the staff saw that I was collecting these carpets. And he said, "Well, I know a couple of more." And he said the others you have to go to Washington, because the generals took them on the planes back home. They were plainly stolen. So I recovered, probably three or four. And I put them outside the embassy, outside the rooms, in order to transport them to the Premier's office the next day, and when I wanted to transport them, and the lorry was ready, the carpets were gone. You know, many things happened like this.

Mehiyar Kathem 26:20 And of course, these are not. I mean, these were the property of the palaces and Saddam Hussein before 2003. But by- when you were there, they are the property of the state.

Rene Teijgeler 26:36 What do you mean, which state?

Mehiyar Kathem 26:37 The Iraqi state?

Rene Teijgeler 26:38 Yes, of course, in my opinion, it was yes.

Mehiyar Kathem 26:41 So it wasn't I mean, you can't say that it was a property of an individual, which is what often is said, and then, and then, and then appropriate them. On that basis?

Rene Teijgeler 26:54 No, I mean, no. Most of it was, was some kind of art or heritage, of course, not the cars. Although the old car, the Mercedes Benz, definitely was heritage. But it was very clear, according to the antiquities law, you know, the older one, I think- Well, anyway, everything found on the Iraqi soil is, belongs to the state, very simple. We had the same problem with the so called Jewish icons, well, that's a different story. So, you know, whatever was found, whether it was Saddam or Uday, his son, or whatever, was not ours in the sense, it was not the Americans, was not Dutch, it was nothing of the coalition troops, it had to be returned to the Iraqis.

Mehiyar Kathem 27:45 Do we know what happened to those items, those cultural objects in particular, or the collection that you saw, or had keys to?

Rene Teijgeler 27:55 Well, many were stolen. I never knew what happened to the alcohol and the spirits. I turned over everything to a member of the staff of the embassy, because I did not have a successor. So I let them sign for it. And in the end, that was very, very wise, or, because I could prove that it did not end up in the Netherlands, whatever. So? Yeah.

Mehiyar Kathem 28:33 Before we get to speak about Babel, I mean, you worked with Donny George. So he was the director of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage.

Rene Teijgeler 28:44 And his staff. Yeah.

Mehiyar Kathem 28:46 And his staff, I mean, which is part of what is now Ministry of Culture. Can you just tell us about your experience working with him? What were the challenges that he was experiencing and that you were helping him with or you were learning about through his work?

Rene Teijgeler 29:02 Well, Donny was an amazing guy. First of all, he spoke English very well, which for a person who never went abroad at that time, was amazing. He had a very good background, very good schooling, very good education. He was the one actually, who called the British Museum when the National Museum in Baghdad was being looted, and through his contacts everything, you know, developed of saving the museum and after a couple of days, the museum was protected by tanks. Too late, of course, the looting was already over. But it was Donny who did that. And we had regular contact. When I went to museums- to the museum, I had to be, you know, I'd had a military or private company come by with me. But Donny George often went up to the gates of the Green Zone, just by himself, and was waiting for me. That was dangerous, because you knew the gates were being watched by all kinds of people who wanted to do something to you. But we planned it very carefully. He gave me a call when he was there. And I was standing at the gate, nobody could see me. [I] received the call, I said, "I'm here, where are you?" and he would point to me where his car was, then I went through, and then everything went very smoothly, but it was dangerous. So we had frequent contact. Seeing that the international community was very upset about the looting and destruction of the museum, money was flowing in. And Donny was the right person to do so, to handle everything. So he didn't really need my advice. I decided that the library, the libraries were forgotten, and that nobody was taking care of the libraries. So I was spending quite a few times at the National Library, and archives, the INLA, with the director general, to help them out. Then later on, I got more involved in the protection of archaeological sites and the old Babylon project, etc. The Deputy Minister of Culture, Dr. Maysoon Al-Damluji, now she got an degree in architecture in London. And actually, after she, afterwards she returned to London, to become an architect again.

We worked very intensively in a very good contact. She was a very kind person. And she confided in me in some of the plans and asked my advice, for example, there were plans to build a new museum in the marshes. She wrote out a competition. And she asked me to have a look at the plans. That was during the gathering of all the presentation of those plans, including, you know, where the architects present. And I noticed that some of the plans were really totally useless. For example, one of the buildings consisted of aluminum sheetings on the building just outside, you know, covered with aluminum sheetings, that, in my opinion, in a hot and wet climate, especially in the summer, that just didn't make any sense. Because then the inside would become hot again, or would be hot, too. So that just doesn't make any sense. There's another plan, which looks pretty okay. But the point was that they imported oak from Norway. Now, everybody knows that you start building, the best is to use local materials. Now, oak is very well. It's a good material to use in the northern and northern countries of Europe and Central Europe, and in cold climates, but certainly not in hot climates, that will crack you know, within- within a couple of months. So, you know, I told them, so, that was after- that was neglected. I mean, that was not accepted, that plan. And I also remember, I gave a lecture to the architects, probably afterwards, I'm not quite sure. And I told them to make use of local materials as much as possible and I told them why. And in fact later the Canadian architect won the competition that was in 2005. And if you look at the present Museum in the marshes now, it also became not only a museum but also a research center, which I think is a very good idea, especially to promote traditional knowledge. If you look at the building, it's built on what we call the idea of green architecture. So a lot of roofs are covered by earth, etc. It's a very interesting project. And it's also integrated in the rehabilitation of the marshes, the area, because as you know, in order to fight the insurgents, or the uprising in the 90s, Saddam just... how do you say that? The whole, the whole marshes were sort of dammed in and became very dry. The trick was for the military to get then easily access to the insurgents, which were hiding there. So it was a very dry area instead of a, you know, paradise as a confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. So, that was one of the things and also together with Maysoon, we organized a celebration of the Women's Day. And for that, I went over to the German Embassy and got money to do that. And actually also organize the fashion show for women wearing scarves. So, now she came up with very interesting ideas, and I supported her all the way.

Mehiyar Kathem 35:52 And Maysoon's role exactly, what was her role, then?

Rene Teijgeler 35:58 Well, she belonged to the Iraqi elite. Her brother was the Minister of Housing at the time. But, you know, that was, well, she was also chosen by the CPA at that time, to start it, you know, and to put the government together with all the most influential people in Iraq, so there was a lot of clientism going on as well. And according to ethnic religious divisions, her role was not as strong, of course, because she was a deputy minister as the minister himself. But I think she did have quite a lot of influence in policies that ... were written out by the, by the ministry. Besides that, just like in my position, there were no clear rules in division of what to do and what not to do. You know, what, what your role was in the government, or what my role was in the embassy, so you make up the rules yourself, and take the space, the room and the liberties, you think you need to work and under that circumstances, and in that sense, Maysoon definitely did her best to put the programs and stimulate. Well, yeah, stimulate the positive projects for the Ministry of Culture. So I would not underestimate her influence within the Ministry of Culture. Mehiyar Kathem 37:55 And just another question on on working with Donny George. I mean, he went through a great, you know, a period of stress, he was threatened several times. Do you remember that period?

Rene Teijgeler 38:09 Oh, yeah. Mehiyar Kathem 38:10 Tell us a bit about that.

Rene Teiggeler 38:13 Well, he wasn't afraid, really. Um, but at one point, it was too much when he received in an envelope with a bullet in it. I mean, you also have to see he was Christian, right. So that was not a very popular religion at that time. And his son was threatened, his oldest son. And that was actually when he took the decision to leave the country and go to Damascus, which was for me, very unfortunate, because we trusted each other. And through him, I also had a better relation with the, with the Ministry of Culture, for example, I knew more or less what was going on at the Ministry of Culture, because he was there in many discussions. So he was for my work, not only personal but also for my work, a very important person. And actually, the moment that he went, we were very close to have, to finishing a deal with the Americans on the so called Jewish archives. Now, the Jewish archives, it's actually not archives there were quite a few manuscripts there as well. Those were found in the in the cellar of the Mukhabarat, the Secret Service. Most of the Jews were already driven out of Iraq before, especially in the 90s was the last exodus. And there were a couple of Jews left in Baghdad, but they didn't want any contact with anybody. I tried at one particular time, but to no avail. Then the US civil affairs unit saw those, that particular Jewish archive and decided after agreement with the then Director General at the SBAH and the government to transport them to the United States because they were all wet. And they started getting molded. And they give them to the National Archives, the NARA in the United States to be treated. But there was an agreement, and the agreement was only for one year. And then we got into trouble. Because especially the librarian, the general director of the INLA wanted those documents back-

Mehiyar Kathem 40:52 Are we speaking about Saad [Dr. Saad Eskander] here?

Rene Teiggeler 40:54 Yeah, Saad Eskander, yeah, yeah. And the Minister agreed with Saad Eskander and said, "Yeah, well, you know, the period is over, we need them back." And now to talk about Hebrew manuscripts. Anything that was referring to Jews was always very sensitive, not only in Iraq, but definitely outside. At the beginning of the invasion, there was this rumor that Israelis were supporting the coalition forces, some kind of secret units and stuff like that, which in the end wasn't true, actually. Then, how do you get the, these Hebrew, I prefer the word Hebrew, manuscripts and archives back from the United States, where there is such a strong Jewish lobby. Actually, the money for the conservation of the manuscripts was brought up by the Jewish community in the United States, and especially from Washington and New York. So actually, the person I was talking to at the NARA was Jewish herself. So what to do? Then, I went to Donny. And I said, you know, what, why do you need these manuscripts back? I'm not quite sure why I went to Donny George, instead of the DG of the INLA, the National Library and Archives, but this sort of, [was] sort of the way it worked. They said, "Well, we want them back." I said, "Yeah, okay, why? Why do you want them back?" "Because it's Iraqi." I said, Yeah, but that's not enough. Why do you want them back? Why don't you want copies or something like that? Well, I said, "Do you have any problems with making copies of it digital copies in this case?" He said, "No, not really. So we just want them back because it's ours." I said, "Okay." Then later on, I had a tour, which was actually after I left Iraq already. I had a lecture tour in the United States. And I went to the National Archives, spoke to the person who was responsible for that. And I said, you know, the contract is over, you need to return them. This was already a big discussion in the United States. And they said, "Well, that's gonna be difficult." I said, "Why?" "Well, you know, we're storing them, blah, blah, blah." Then I said, "Why do you need them?" Well, he said, "We need to study them." I said, "Well, why don't you make digital copies of them, and send back the physical manuscripts and archives back where they, where they belong, which is the Iraqi state." Now, you have to realize that the Jewish community, not all of them, but but the big part, thinks that every Jewish object, document all over the world belongs to the Jewish people, and to the Israeli state. Now, I think differently. We had the same discussion in the Netherlands with the Portuguese synagogue here and the manuscripts that were found, etc. I think that any document whether

religious or not, belongs to the state, where it is found or housed. So they are the legal owners, especially of course, if the community is on the country itself. Now there is a Babylon, Babylon-Jewish Babylon Museum, it's called differently in Israel for example. So that, that makes the discussion very difficult and complicated. Anyway, which the- I invited her [NARA representative] to- but it was difficult to talk to the Americans because they always have lawyers. And in the Netherlands, when you negotiate, you need start to negotiating informally. We call it that 'let's have a coffee', without anybody present, you know, let's sort of sound each other out and see what you want and I will tell you what I want, or at least I represent the Iraqi Government or the SBAH. And, of course, this was all transparent with Donny George. I mean, I did not represent, of course, the Iraqi state, just facilitated and mediated. So we had a meeting, when I had an ICC Babylon meeting in Berlin. I invited her, she said, "Well, I cannot come." but she did come. We had breakfast to get it, Donny was there too. And I said, "Well, it's very easy. We thank you very much for restoring and conserving these documents, because they needed it very much. Definitely. But the, the SBAH and the MoC, the Ministry of Culture, does agree and has no problem with it, to- if you want to make copies of the materials, so you can study them. That is definitely not a problem. Then, during the process of conservation, the Iraqis would like to be invited to be part of the conservation process and can follow courses, are being taught how to do it properly. So everybody benefits from it. Because there's not much knowledge in Iraq anymore about Jewish or Hebrew manuscripts, etc. They're religious manuscripts, so they need some kind of special conservation. Only think if they're being kosher, you know." So. And actually, we agreed. So I drew up a memorandum of understanding (one of the other ones, yeah) sent it back to the United States, of course, you know, after Donny agreed with it. And it came back with some legal issues. It took another month. And just when we were about to close a deal, as the Americans say, Donny had to flee to Damascus. And that was the end of the story. They actually, they only got returned last year. Yeah.

Mehiyar Kathem 47:47 The Jewish Archives weren't returned to Iraq. That was, what is called the Baathist archives.

Rene Teijgeler 47:54 Yeah. Mehiyar Kathem 47:54 The Jewish archives were still in the US. And sometimes they also-

Rene Teijgeler 47:59 They go on tour, yeah. Mehiyar Kathem 48:00 Yeah, on tour. But can I just ask you about the the Jewish archives, what is called the Jewish archives?

Rene Teijgeler 48:05 Yeah.

Mehiyar Kathem 48:07 What do you think the long term impact is on Iraq, on and on the memory of Jewish Hebrew history? If parts of its history and its cultural objects, I know these were the the objects, also the items of community members that had left Iraq, or forced out of the country, depending on the time period-

Rene Teijgeler 48:37 It's very clear. I mean, it's part of history. Look at the influence of the Jewish citizens of Babylon on Baghdad, on the music, Baghdad music. It's a big influence. So think of Babylon itself. I mean, you know, so the, the Jewish community, at different times in history is important for the history of Iraq, of course. So if part of their history is held in, outside the country, in a foreign country, it doesn't make sense. And the Iraqis will lose that, their knowledge. It's specific knowledge, especially if you think of, well, you know, their religious traditions and stuff like that, also, in part of, you know, in the light of conservation, so it's a bad thing. But then again, like you said, the Baath archive just, just returned, that was stolen already in the in the 90s in the Iran-Iraq War. But also think of the other archives of Ma-makana what's his name?

Mehiyar Kathem 49:55 Makiya.

Rene Teijgeler 49:56 Yeah, Makiya. And I've, I've seen them too. They're big ledges from the Mukhabarat, from the Secret Service, I saw the names of all kinds of students, their brothers, their mothers, etc, the whole family, what kind of political affiliation they had. And they were actually photographed in a house, which was within the premise of the Green Zone with a digital camera, which is rather amateuristic I must say. They disappeared too. And actually-

Mehiyar Kathem 50:26 They're the ones in the US. They're the ones in part in the US, and then part of it is in Iraq and they're the ones that=

Rene Teijgeler 50:31 Yeah-

Mehiyar Kathem 50:32 -as far as I know, were at least part or fully returned to Iraq recently.

Rene Teijgeler 50:38 Okay, so that point, yeah, yeah, yeah-

Mehiyar Kathem 50:39 The Makiya archive, yeah, if you like, yeah. Ones that he helps spirit out of the country with the support of the US authorities.

Rene Teijgeler 50:50 Yeah. Well, actually, when I was on my tour, a lecture tour in the United States, which I referred to earlier. I got invited by the, by committee in Harvard, I had a lecture in Harvard University. And the committee wanted to know, they got offered, I think, the, these, these archives, we just, I forgot the name, but what's the name again? Makiya.

Mehiyar Kathem 51:19 Yeah. Kanan Makiya, Rene Teijgeler 51:20 Oh yeah, Kanan Makiya.

Mehiyar Kathem 51:22 What is called the Baathist archives.

Rene Teijgeler 51:24 Oh, yeah. Anyway, so they invited me because they were offered these Kanan Makiya archives, the Baathist archives, and they wanted my opinion, you know, on that. And I said, "Well, it's very simple, it's not yours, don't accept them. It's property of the Iraqi state and they should stay in the Iraqi state." That was very clear. So we discussed it. And I said, "If you will accept them I'm sure legal measures will be taken. And I would advise the Iraqis to go to the US court because of illegal possession of the state property of a foreign country." That shook them up a little. And they said, "Thank you very much, Mr. Teijgeler." And they didn't accept them. So later one day, I think there was a university in California that did accept, Stanford I think. Yeah.

Mehiyar Kathem 52:29 I mean, why do you think the US were interested in all of these archives? I mean, obviously, with the, with the Jewish archives, obviously, there's a Jewish community, an Iraqi Jewish community in Europe, in Australia, in the US that are concerned with, let's call them the community archives of their ancestors and grandparents and parents and so on. But why would they be interested in the Baathist archives for instance?

Rene Teijgeler 53:00 I think to- not quite sure. Can only guess actually. They, they were interested in the Baath party, how it came about, in the history of it. You know, the Baath party, not only in Iraq, but in general, in other countries as well. I think for historical reasons. And that translated into intelligence. Actually, it's information that could be useful for US intelligence services. I think that is the only reason I could come up with.

Mehiyar Kathem 53:39 Ottoman Archives. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

Rene Teijgeler 53:43 Well, it's also a strange name like the Jewish archives, but that's what they're sort of called. The National Library and Archives, the National Archives, in this case, had a collection

that went back to the Ottoman times when, you know, before 1920s, before the king was installed in Iraq. And that was archives, old books written in Ottoman style. Anyway, they tried to protect that. Much of the collections were saved, actually, but other collections like the newspaper collections and photograph collections were almost completely destroyed. And one of the collections here, so called Ottoman Archives collections, were stored in the officers' club- well actually a military area and one of the house's has that officer's club, very famous within, in Baghdad, and they were stored in the so called cool storage of the kitchen. The former kitchen. Now that complex was guarded by, I don't know, local guards. And actually the offices or the, the area where the officer's club were, actually, that's where the Americans wanted to build a new library. Which, after discussions with Saad Eskander, we decided is totally ridiculous, which is another story anyway. But we had somebody called in to give us a report on the physical structure of the library after the plunder and the fires. That was okay, so we decided you know, it's a recognize- a recognizable location so let's stay here and we started a library. Now, the Americans had already set quite a lot of money aside for the new library. So we asked for them, well, we'd rather put it in the building that's already there. And they refused. Very strange, don't ask me why. Well anyway, the Ottoman archives were then stored, it was time to get them back. So the DG, the general director, sent some of his people over to that area to get the archives back to the, on the premises of the library and National Library and Archives. And then the guards wanted money, they didn't allow them to come in. So, you know, Saad called me and he said, "What am I going to do?" I said, "Okay." And this is one of the examples of being a military officer and a cultural adviser at the same time. So I called up the army and I said, "I need a platoon then at that time, and I want you to do nothing. Just, you know, go with the staff of the library, sit outside, put out your guns and smoke cigarettes, that's all you do." I told them, you know, we wanted to retrieve it and that the guards, were making trouble. That's what happened. So we took them out. Nobody was in our way, and got in our way. And we took them out. And then I found out that they were in coolers, although the saying was that they were in, they were in freezers, but they were not in freezers. Then again, they were in coolers. But as you know, there are a lot of black blackouts and brownouts in Baghdad at a time. So the worst thing that can happen to something that is frozen or cooled, at least as conservation is concerned with objects, is that the temperature drops and then, you know, goes high again and drops and goes high again. So you have to imagine like, you know, you're pulling at a manuscript and you're pushing it back and you're pulling and you're pushing it back. So that was the worst circumstances than ever. So we took them out. And meanwhile, I organized a grant of \$100,000 from the so called CERP money. I mean, there are all kinds of funds going around within the Army, within the staff and I don't know. Anyway, I got- I met several contractors to do the job. My first reaction was to give it to an Iraqi business. But that didn't work because they were giving me money under the table and I didn't accept that. So I went through with an American I trusted, uh, company. He did a very good job. He took the freezer truck, we put it on the premises of the INLA. We protected it from the outside so that bullets and shells would not enter the the freezer truck. We put in, how do you say that? Uh, electricity machine, but I forgot the word-generator. Yeah, we put a generator there. And we gave them money for a year of diesel to keep the, to keep the generator going. And the best is actually minus 22 degrees and the truck could handle that. Also have, have everything repacked in acid free boxes that was also done. Not to make the stacks too high. So what sounded like a perfect project until later I noticed that the director criticized the project because he didn't have the money to continue to pay for the diesel for the generator, which was not my fault.

Mehiyar Kathem 1:00:07 The money, I mean, you mentioned CERP, which is the Commander's Emergency Response Program-

Rene Teijgeler 1:00:14 True.

Mehiyar Kathem 1:00:14 I mean, this was money confiscated from the State of Iraq in part, money that was frozen outside the country. And, but, also US money, it was a combination of the two. And it was obviously stabilization. So short term, and so they wouldn't have money for, for for the kinds of things you're speaking about, you know, long term planning and salaries. And I guess that became a problem. I mean, that became a problem over time, because there was just simply an absence of any kind of planning. The money was within the military itself, the US military.

Rene Teiggeler 1:00:55 True, well later on, because the minister lived for a long time in the Czechoslovak Republic, and he had contacts there, actually he was a radio journalist there. And there were contacts with the National Archives in Prague. So later on, I understood but probably too late actually, the whole Ottoman Archives were transferred for conservation to Prague, and then returned of course.