

## **Transcript: The Mandaean in Iraq - Zainab Mahdi interviews Dhiaa Kareem Ali, lecturer at the University of Kufa**

Zainab 0:05 Welcome to the Nahrein Network podcast where we delve into the captivating world of Iraqi history and heritage. I'm Zainab Mahdi, Nahrein Network's communications officer. And I'm taking over the reins from Dr Mehiyar Kathem our Deputy Director. My guest today is Dr. Dhiaa Kareem, lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Kufa. Dr. Dhiaa was also Nahrein Network and British Institute for the Study of Iraq visiting scholar and his host institution was University of Exeter at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies. Hello, it is a pleasure to have you here today. And thank you for taking the time to talk to me.

Dhiaa 0:41 Thank you very much indeed. And I would like to take a moment to express my thanks to the Nahrein Network, for inviting me to participate in this podcast. Thank you again.

Zainab 0:50 So before we really get started, I was hoping you could introduce yourself and tell us more about your academic background and the work you do at University of Kufa.

Dhiaa 1:01 I'm a lecturer at the Department of English University of Kufa. So my research interests basically, I'm researching the intersection of discourse, society and politics. And my research interests are centered on critical discourses studies, language, racism, discrimination, self and other representations. I'm also an Honorary Associate Fellow at the University of Exeter till 2024. I think it's ending the last month and also I was awarded the project to the post ISIS by the Nahrein Network before and engaged in several project now nowadays. And also I completed my PhD from Newcastle University.

Zainab 1:46 That was going to be my next question. So you actually did your PhD here in the UK? Can you tell me more about that experience?

Dhiaa 1:53 So yeah, it was good. I spent nearly five years four years and six months after doing the. And also I wrote about it's basically about Iraq, so discourses on wars on conflicts, and its discursive construction of Iraq in the US . So this was my study. So I took several years, and I studied them historically, how Iraq was an Iraqpeople were presented in different tiers. So in during the Iraq, Iraq time and during the US invasion, and after the ISIS. So to see the fluctuation in terms of reporting Iraq

Zainab 2:30 and then when you did your Nahrein network BISI visiting scholarship at Exeter University, could you maybe tell us the subject of that scholarship?

Dhiaa 2:41 yeah, basically, it was about the Mandaens and Iraq today, this is the was the title, perception, stereotypes, prejudice and exclusion. I studied the situation upon Monday nowadays on in the past, and it was it was concentrating on the interview the attributes with the right with them and dine who those who are living in Iraq, on the people who are living in the diaspora. And I've actually because of that, because of the existing scholarship, I had many good relationships with them. And so still, still now we are communicating with each other and they asked me and they invited me for their occasions and events, whether religious, or other community events. So it was it was actually good, because to feel they I feel and they feel they we are close to each other.

Zainab 3:35 Why did you choose this topic specifically? Are you part of the Mandaen community or do you have any ties with Mandaean

Dhiaa 3:42 Before I was not actually, but I felt that it is under researched and not a lot of people wrote about this particular community. And I checked the literature and fortunately, I found Christine Robins she was my supervisor and at the Haas University and Big City University, she also had a project on the Mandaeans. So she was very beneficial on she was I mean, her advice was great. From there I interact with the Mandaeans and I did a lot of interviews outside and inside Iraq. Sheikh Abdul Sattar AlHilu, who is their leader in Iraq on the whole world. So we are from now on we have a good relationship and we were communicating sending messages greetings. Two days ago. Yes it whether we're in Islamic or the Mandaean events on occasion, we keep exchanging messages. So which is good.

Zainab 4:54 I was wondering is that why you chose Exeter University to be the host because Professor Christine Robins was already working on a project with the Mandaeans.

Dhiaa 5:04 I benefited from her supervision. And I mean, the conversation with her. And we were planning to do something in the future, but we haven't yet and, and she introduced me to many religious people, okay, from this community. And because of her, I'm working on a project with Dr. Qais. And we were able to author a book about the Mandaean

Zainab 5:30 Tell us more about this book.

Dhiaa 5:32 it's it first, the outcome of the, of the visiting scholarship, and it was a published paper, it's an article, the name of it, it was the Mandaeans in Iraq, today, perceptions through prejudice, and exclusion, it is published in the Journal of the University of Babylon. And it is it is, it is posted publicly, for the access, so anyone can download it now. It's about their situation in Iraq and their number, their challenges and their memory, their history and interms. I also talked about their language and kind of seclusion and inclusion. Inside and outside Iraq. And how do you feel? I mean, do they feel about their home country, which is Iraq.

Zainab 6:22 That's very interesting. And we could talk more about the Mandaean community and their numbers, right? How many were they before the 2003 War? And could you tell us more about the

Dhiaa 6:33 The number of the men dying before was approximately 100,000 people who were left before 2003, but you know, because of wars and the embargo or US sanctions, they start to, to leave Iraq and emigrate to different countries. And nowadays, as I understand their number is about 4000. People. So the sad thing that I was talking to Dr. Qais before when I was working with me, one of the projects, he said, Just imagine that one family to gather in one religious occasion, they come from different, and the sad thing that they're kids, they they do not have a common language, there is no lingua franca where they can for example, they cannot speak the same language. So when from example come from France, one from the UK and other one speaks Arabic. So he said, so it's like eid from different countries. So it was difficult, this is a challenge and there are many challenges are so on face them, that you know, the the start leaving the religion, especially the younger generation, because they are not allowed to marry someone outside of outside of religion. And, you know, because they live abroad and they dont get to know different people, so they get married and if someone married for someone outside of their religions, they lose as well. So it's like that and beside they have also challenges with regard to their religion, because they their religious basically depends on the water. Okay, so to do with baptism etcetera. So, it is one of the essential things.

Zainab 8:25 They live on the rivers mostly right. Could you tell us where they're usually concentrated?

Dhiaa 8:30 They are concentrated for example, in Baghdad and Qaddisyah on the Euphrates? Okay, so they have also the, their, their own land, to do their ritual practices. And they also they live in Amara and they live in Nasriyah and Basrah so, so whatever it is that you've if you find them means they live near the river, okay. So they cannot be separated Zainab 8:52 when they leave that the Diaspora, do they still try to live near water?

Dhiaa 8:57 Yes, they face some challenges because they said we find difficulty to live. And even if they live there, they have to remain establish a place and they have to talk to the authorities and they have to get permissions. And it because of their few numbers and low numbers. So it is difficult for them. So for one family lives in one city, another in another city and another another city, another country. So they have to gather so they gather in ritual practices, but it was also a difficulty for them. Now they tried to figure something out to put some communities live close to each other, etc. But they still some of them are waiting in Jordan and Syria. So they get for example, the permission or their visa to live in to travel to Australia or Canada or France. So they get a call it's waiting country. Okay, so they move from Iraq to waiting country, and they have to get their permission or visa to move to another country where they set up.

Zainab 9:56 So are they mostly based in Australia and Canada? The diaspora

Dhiaa 10:02 And some in German

Zainab 10:05 Do they think about coming back to Iraq or moving back to Iraq?

Dhiaa 10:09 they wish and they would come. They, they talked about Iraq several times, but the longer they stay there, it becomes very difficult for them to come back because it's not about their elder generation they because they it's about also not nowadays younger generation, because the younger generation, they don't have this affiliation or their association with their with Iraqi land. So what they know, just here say, the stories about Iraq, okay, they haven't traveled before nowadays to Iraq. So the distance they hear stories from their fathers and grandfathers. So, yes, this is also a challenge for them. So, they want to come and they want to, they come in to visit okay to Iraq. And the last event we did that was on a Friday some I met some people from Canada, okay and Australia, where they attended the event, we called it the Mandaean Day they were very happy about that. So, actually, so, these are some of the challenges besides they do not speak the Mandaean language it is, it has gone some religious people who speak that language and it has become limited to the religious practice rather than rather than day one.

Zainab 11:29 This is an Iraq you're talking about the language in the Mandaean language in Iraq has not even been spoken.

Dhiaa 11:35 Yeah it basically all they speak Arabic. So when they come together, they speak in Arabic language, not the Mandaen language.

Zainab 11:43 It is considered the oldest monotheistic religion, Mandaean. So tell me more about the awareness of this religion within the Iraqi community in Iraq.

Dhiaa 11:55 We did some interviews with those who are living around the mundane. They do appreciate them living around them. When they say we cannot imagine our community without them. So because they live together, and they, they ate together, but they say because of certain circumstances that even us I mean, they're normal Iraqis, I mean, the experience because of you know, the embargo, the killing and discrimination and sectarianism. So, so all these affected, I mean, the everyone in Iraq, but the more impact that happened to Mandaean in particular, so, so everyone suffered from this, okay, so. So they wish they stay there. And they say we protect them and, and

said, We cannot also imagine that they are all because this is history. This is heritage. And this is one of Iraqi colors and assets. And it's a mosaic. So they cannot see this, this but this important sector or community, to travel all of Iraq and leave it.

Zainab 13:10 For our listeners who don't know, I just wanted to mention that we did host two seminars with you on the Mandaean community, especially in the diaspora. And I just want to mention that they're available on our YouTube channel, they're recorded for anyone who's interested. Are you still in touch with people that we had interviewed at the time?

Dhiaa 13:29 Yes, yes. And want to say that it's because of this project, okay. Because of my relationship with them, I established so many relationships. So they asked me whether they be we can do something together. So we applied for for a grant and we secured a grant from the University of Birmingham, okay, which is through the foundation with that we are going to talk later on. And we did a lot of activities actually. And so I'm still in touch with them.

Zainab 13:59 Actually, let's talk about the organization that you've just set up by Yeah, tell me more about that.

Dhiaa 14:06 It's called al Rawaq Okay. Alrawaq it means its like this is an old name in Islamic civilization AlRawaq especially that was a landmark architectural elements. In Arabic the word AlRawaq is used to for several donations, it refers to a study area, in a mosque or a temple. It also refers to a corner an event such as conference seminar organisation for meeting so it's that's why the name is derived from this one, it is a place for people and academics who gather okay to define solution for for societal issues and or to talk about something and to find for example, solutions. So, so therefore, it was named after this. So after working on some projects with the group of academics or those who are Interested in heritage and culture we decided to establish an a foundation that brings us as academic and non academic together and gather all those interested and willing to join to achieve some shared knowledge, sharing knowledge and goals Okay? Toward societal issues and problems. So some of our aims are to raise community awareness regarding Iraqi culture and popular heritage, and also to preserve undocumented the tangible and intangible cultural and historical heritage. And also to shed some light on this social and cultural problems evolved through research and academic activities. Also, under the aim to develop solution and proposal to address the social and cultural and environmental problems faced by the country's diverse ethnicities and religion, and to develop and support the capacities of Iraqi researcher and academics working in Iraq institutions, and forced our societal cohesion, the most diverse component of Iraqi society promote cultural and mutual respect, and showcase the word societal diversity in Iraq. And on the lastly, Iraqi institutions by facilitating communication with international organization to help achieve some of the objectives. So these are basically some of our aims that we are working on or try to achieve.

Zainab 16:31 You've already I think, took on a couple of projects, could you tell us more about the projects you're working on?

Dhiaa 16:37 So one of the projects that we did with through the AlRawq Foundation It's like an extension of the Mandaean project with the one I did was through the visiting scholarship. So it was basically during my visiting scholarship with a Nahrein Network and the British Institute Institute for the Study of Iraq and I was working with the project I had the opportunity to closely interact with the Mandaean and learn about their challenges, heritage and history would inspire me to initiate a project aimed at documenting their heritage and history and shedding light on some community, their community. Fortunately, we secured funding from University of Birmingham, which is a new

network called advice for time at the University of Birmingham and this project basically aimed to document the customs tradition resulting which one of the outputs was a 300 page book we copied hundreds copy and we distributed or to the universities on central libraries and to those who are interested and also in the in the Mandaen Day we we did give some copies to the to the Mandaean community. Also, we had we have been asked by the community by their by their Sheikh Abdul Sattar, the main sheikh of the Mandaean to print some brochures like informative brochures about their community, we did one in Arabic and in English and we printed also 2000 copies Arabic and English because they needed to give to some visitors without any from Iraq on outside arrive on or some they have some politicians that will come to their place. So it will be towards actually good outcome. And also we we did we are planning we are we have we are working on an interactive website page that where we have like a mural, okay. And that resembles their assemble okay, like for example, their symbol, okay. And the boat and some certain of I mean animals, it's these represent something to their community. So we did like a mural for them and it is an interactive way you can press this you can hear for example a story or pop out would come out to the reader and can read a story or a memory or a voice or a song. This is another outcome and we did also an exhibition, okay and which I will send you a copy of it it is on a YouTube okay for it is for al Rawaq Foundation, YouTube channel, I will send you a link. And we did also the Mandaean Day and they hope they keep doing it in the future because we did we call it a Mandaean where it was the last Friday. It's all 100 people gathered in this community from the Mandaean community and those who are not Mandaean community some politicians came at some minority people came, it was like actually a very good place for people to interact was like platform and networking, they start introducing each other. And also we have been approached by different people. Okay. There were, for example from Kazkazani minority and from the Bahaii and Shabaki so it was different with covering most of the people

Zainab 20:24 Sounds wonderful the things you're doing with the mandate and community both in and outside Iraq. I was wondering what are your goals going forward? What are your plans for the near future?

Dhiaa 20:36 Yeah, I'd also like to take the opportunity to talk about our our second project, which is called untold stories. So as you know, this is our second project, which is untold stories. It's basically about those who the people who were displaced during the ISIS threat. So as you know, that ISIS, to some cities, in Iraq, particularly in the three key cities, Mosul and Anbar, because so much damage and occupational of these cities resulted in the displacement of 1000s of families, destruction of their homes, while many lives were lost people on the inside and outside of the city are still experiencing the in the aftermath of the war. And the harm was not only been inflicted on the inhabitants of these cities, but it extended to the South of Iraq, because those who fought ISIS and the family lost also their kids. And so it's not just in the, in the north, or in the in the West of Iraq, it's also extended to the South of Iraq. So, each of these family comes an untold story or stories as a result of the ISIS occupation, and yet these stories remain hidden from and not shared with the public. So, so, the aim of the project is to have people from these three cities or many cities that cannot fly to Anbar and Mosul so on, they share their stories to recounting memory of communal life and before and after, what happened to contribute to recording their history, while there are still people who can remember that, as you know, this generation die, Oh, gets older the then the bit that the other generation just depend on heresay and maybe not the truth or know what's what has been transferred from the media. So, it is important to document this, this this period. So to do so, we use the forms different forms of documentation, documentation like storytelling utilizing to use and oral accounts of of I mean, their accounts or their stories and photography, recording and then translating the artistic form. So, we had some also some of the outputs like you did the exhibition and we we

had also theatrical performance and more than 200 people attended the University of Kufa in the theater. And also some some people who were academic and non-academic came from outside the university to participate in this in this event. So also we are proud of that and we are still working on some, like stories, we are working on the graphic, we are trying to to create like a web for this project.

Zainab 23:34 So this is a collaboration with the University of Kufa?

Dhiaa 23:38 This is a Kufa we did it in collaboration with the University of Kufa and University of Exeter. So, we had the two projects one with Birmingham and one University of Exeter So, we did a we can not do that unless we we have the University of cocoa with us, right this is to also to raise the community awareness and to add like the academic side of it. And we have also we have also some, because we think it's important to to reach out for universities and all academic and non academic institutions. So, we reached out to some universities and we have good relationship with them. So, also we have done Mostaqbal University we are where we are we have upcoming some activities with them, it is Academy and we also want to Baghdad we have like a cooperation with them to do some academic course activity. So it is it is exchanging ideas and we are trying to connect them together. And we are working now in the conference to do with the two university where and we are the third party to say that it's also about Iraq discourses on Iraq that we are hosting some people who are experts from outside Iraq to do is transferr their knowledge to those who are in Iraq . So we are, we can see we, its anniversary was last the previous month. Okay, so we are just the age of the foundation Yeah, we are open to all volunteers and everyone who is interested to work and join with us because it's a network and we all worked together, it's open to anyone. And sometimes we open, like training opportunities and where we volunteer to train other people. And we find also another people from different disciplines where he or she continued and other people so it is that we are helping each other.

Zainab 25:41 Yeah, it's like a small community that you've already built and established. That's amazing to hear. Thank you so much Dr Dhiaa for telling us about all this great work that you're I will definitely be sharing the website and your social media accounts on our social media. So if anyone's interested just follow Nahrein and I will post those links there. Thank you that Dr. Dhiaa and I hope to talk to you soon.

Dhiaa 26:08 Thank you very much indeed. Thank you for everyone in the Nahrein Network that was the first thing we start with. Exactly. So we went then we we gathered and we decided to establish and formulate the foundation we and we will take the next step in the future inshallah. Thank you very much indeed. Thank you.