

# Transcript: Policy and Cultural Heritage in Iraq: A Conversation with Renad Mansour

Mehiyar 0:00 Welcome to the Nahrein Network podcast series. Today we're with Dr. Renad Mansour senior research fellow at Chatham House. Hello, Renad

Renad 0:08 Hello Mehiyar

Mehiyar 0:09 Thank you for joining us today. Today's subject is cultural heritage, Iraq and policy. Could you tell us a bit about what you do?

Renad 0:17 Sure. Thanks for having me. It's great to be on this podcast. And I look forward to the discussion. So my primary role is a research fellow at Chatham House, where I direct the Iraq Initiative. So most of my work looks at Iraq, the challenges of the State, building the state and sort of post 2003 More generally, of in that country. And as I say, it's policy based research. So what we do primarily is trying to understand what are the key policy relevant questions? And how can our research, you know, the data we collect the people we speak to cross the country help inform better policy strategies for international governments primarily, but also at times, Iraqi Government on issues from politics, economics, security, and such.

Mehiyar 1:13 Could you define what policy is?

Renad 1:16 I don't know if there is a agreed upon definition, but maybe what I could say on policy is governments have to enact their strategies, their goals, their aims in a country like Iraq, and developing these strategies, developing these ideas, these programs often fit under this umbrella policy. So policy makers, or those who are speaking specifically about Iraq, policy makers, or those who work to set up to develop their governments strategies for engagement on Iraq, from everything from development, to aid to political relations, and everything else all fits under this big umbrella policy.

Mehiyar 2:03 And policy is, in large part a reflection of politics. And so it's also a lens about state and society relations and society in general. Are those the kind of things you're interested in? In terms of your own research? How do you look at them? What kind of activities do you have at Chatham House?

Renad 2:21 Well, I think our role is, in a way kind of sitting in between. So you have in academia at universities, very sort of robust, intense debate happening, big debates on state on society, on state society relations, academics, trying to understand what are the core issues? What are the core problems, very, very long term perspective. And on

the other side, you have policymakers who often are recycled into these jobs for just a year or two have to very quickly come to speed with, you know, come to terms with who the actors are there, what society is in a country like Iraq, often not even having the languages needed Arabic or other languages to Iraq to work. And so our role is to kind of have one foot into those academic debates, but also one foot into the kind of policy debates, right, trying to tell policymakers what is important, right, because every two or three years, it'll be someone else we're engaging with, whether it's the new ambassador of a country to Iraq, or the new head of within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Iran, so on. So our role is to say, not just sort of this as Iraq, but these are big conceptual problems that are important, what is the state in Iraq, right? There are assumptions held about what our state should look like, or what society should look like. And we try and challenge those assumptions in a way to try and come up with solutions that might be more realistic. Iraq offers an example of policy gone wrong. It's almost the 20 year anniversary. And if you look at strategies of policy in Iraq since 2003, over the 20 years, whether it's in the security space, or the political space, or the economic space, or you know, as you work on in the cultural space, you just see the same problems being repeated over and over again, hundreds of billions spent on policy without much sort of building, let's say, of coherent state structures. And so what our role is, is to try and unpick some of that, and try and rethink what could actually be better approaches for those policymakers who are coming in and out very quickly on country but how leaving a lasting impact on the country and its people

Mehiyar 4:45 and in terms of your experience. You've mentioned the 20 year anniversary, if we call it that of the Iraq War, you've been working on Iraq all this time, we'd be good to have an understanding of the kind of experience you've had in relation to the country

Renad 5:01 I've been really lucky to have worked with some very good Iraqi academics and thinkers and continue to work with Iraqis around the country, as well as outside who focus on Iran to try and understand what are the big problems of today of the last 20 years looking at what went wrong, looking at what continues to go wrong, and trying to understand the why, but also trying to push back on narratives. And to at this point, I think, revisit some of the you know, what happened in the last 20 years, not as current affairs or journalism, but as history with hindsight, and whether we can draw lessons that could help Iraq moving forward

Mehiyar 5:48 you provide a level of continuity in terms of looking at Iraq of many years, in large part the policy world, or politicians and lawmakers come and go, How important is that when it comes to analyzing policy or proposing solutions, interventions in relation to improve in situation in Iraq,

Renad 6:09 it's important, and it's important that we continue to do the research and, and collect the data and speak to people in Iraq and have an understanding of Iraq and the lessons learned because when a new policymaker comes in, he or she immediately

has, in most cases of fresh kind of slate, right? They have no idea that who is who or what is want. And so it's our role, to do these briefings, where we try and bring them up to speed, as I mentioned, with the realities, but also the narratives and the ways to think of a country like Iraq, to push really and to be provocative in a way to push them against their assumptions, because they might be coming from another country where they previously worked, they might have certain understandings of big concepts like a stake very early on, we need to reach out to them to say, Listen, you are now going to be responsible for this policy in Iraq, you will have this budget, you will spend this money, these are all things you need to have an understanding of these dynamics of status, it relations, a political economy, understanding and understanding of aid and development and the security say all of us have culture. And so that's our role. Our role is as you say, we have the continuity, but we have the continuing research as well, to be able to back up some of these claims that we have. But we also want to hear from them, right? Because it's through our interactions with policymakers that we begin to see their challenges and the kinds of difficulties they face with incoherent strategies, or inconsistent strategies. And so when we on our side are trying to come up with solutions, we are in regular engagement with policymakers because we want these solutions to be realistic in a way. And of course, its policy recommendations are often unrealistic, really, because of all the different challenges but I think as Chatham House and as the Iraq initiative, what we're trying to do is sort of have a continued dialogue to try and understand where there are channels or avenues to focus on to change some of the policies.

Mehiyar 8:21 You lead the Iraq initiative, as Director, according to the Chatham House website, is the field work based policy project that attempts to look at or tackle the root causes of state failure?

Renad 8:32 That's right. So obviously, a country like Iraq has been very important to many international policymakers for many years. But it often only comes back into the spotlight when you see such spectacular conflict, whether it's the rise of ISIS Daesh, or civil war, sectarian civil war, there are certain sorts of Iraq will come to the attention at those moments, then you have these military victories, right. And every US President has had some kind of mission accomplished, beginning with George W. Bush, you know, six weeks or so after the initial invasion, what our job is, is to say, what does post conflict actually mean? So when we began the initiative, it was around this time when people were celebrating the end of ISIS, right? This this Salafi jihadist organization that took over large parts of Iraq's territory and brought Iraq back into the attention of policymakers in Europe, North America and elsewhere. Our job is to say although ISIS no longer holds territory, in Iraq, as it did in 2014, and 15. post conflict isn't as rosy as some would would think. In fact, Iraqis every day continue to struggle the state continues to struggle to provide the basic services electricity, water, many Iraqis are just left this illusion and disenfranchised and harmed by the political systems. So although you know, we talk about post ISIS, our job is to say there are roots, there are political, socio social economic roots that have not been addressed since the

destruction of the state in 2003. And these routes, we shouldn't just focus on them, when something spectacular kind of emerges and violence that to a very big degree. But we should continue that focus, because these are the core questions that can begin to explain why Iraq continues to fall under the cycles of conflict.

Mehiyar 10:38 And most recently, you've ventured into the field of cultural heritage within the Nahrein Network as a partnership that you've been working on produced a report within the Nahrein Network called Culture Heritage Predation in Iraq, could you tell us a bit how that report was received, it was released in March, and why cultural heritage is important in terms of policy?

Renad 11:01 I thank you for your work on it. And I've learned a lot working with you and the Nahrein Network with Eleanor and others on this issue. We've been talking about policymakers coming in, they have only two years to deal with the complexities of Iraq, before they go on to another country, what they often look for are okay, what are the politics? Who are the politicians? What are the economics, what's the security situation, they don't feel it's important to sometimes get into something like heritage, cultural heritage of this country, right? They're interested in okay, we need to learn what's the government who is in there who didn't talk to you, we have these programs, let's do dialogue, let's do this, and that kind of thing. But what we decided and what we thought was very important, you know, as I say, in our role at the Iraq initiative of trying to guide policy on Iraq, was to add an element on heritage, it's very important, it's very important for Iraqi people, it's very important for the Iraqi states, you know, you can't talk about state building without addressing some of these core themes and findings that come out of the paper, the predation, tells you everything you need to know about State Society relations in Iraq after 2003. And it also shows you how it impacts people. And I think that's very important in our work. We don't just want to analyze, for example, corruption for the sake of it in the country, we want to show how it impacts the everyday lives of people living in that country. And we think that policymakers should know that should realize the impact, right? It's not just names and numbers being stolen from this ministry. The end result is everyday Iraqi suffering. And this includes the heritage space, I suppose we thought this would be different because in the work, it's always security, politics, economics, not really heritage, not really culture. And we thought maybe there wouldn't be much interest, you know, as I say, policymakers have their own sort of agendas and priorities. But we are happily surprised, and I think also expected that the paper did well, the launch, there were many people at the launch, I've had many policymakers send me messages saying thank you for doing this work. They, you know, they want the work to continue. They want this type of material, because they need to also push from their side policies on Iraq. And they want those policies to be guided by some of the themes coming out of this paper on heritage, right. They want to know, what are the political economy, issues of heritage? Where is there access or help that could come by from a country like the UK or other European countries in Iraq on this issue. So it has been widely received, I think, in a positive way. And I think it's part of the conversation that wasn't happening

before that, let's not just look at one type of policy or just security, for example, when we're trying to understand the state and its struggle. Let's look at Heritage, let's look at cultural heritage, because we don't just understand what the state is. But we also get a better sense of society. And I think that's why policymakers really do appreciate the kind of relationship that we have between the Nahrein Network and the Iraq initiative, having conferences, having panels discussing heritage, you know, with senior policymakers, I think is something that has been a very positive impact on our work at Chatham House

Mehiyar 14:30 The period after Daesh Islamic group, a growing interest from donors in the field of cultural heritage, do you think they've increasingly realizing that culture heritage isn't just about the past, it's really about the type of society the type of future that people or politicians also aspire to have?

Renad 14:49 I think that's right. And I think you know, when we talk about this, the work that we've been doing with the Nahrein Network, it's not just to bring culture and cultural heritage as an important issue to policymakers in the policy world, but it's also to bring policy and that world into the world of cultural heritage. And I think that's very important, right? Because it's trying to, to not, you know, not look, as you say, at cultural heritage or something that's of the past, that's academic, but actually to look at it that's not just relevant and up today, but also part of politics, part of the state, part of State Society relations, part of security, it's connected to all of these other issues, which often get much more light than it does, you know, what we've tried to do is not just have cultural heritage as its own section or siphoned into its own category, but how do we bring it into discussions on all of the different topics that policymakers are faced with? So when they go to Iraq, it's not just let's have a dialogue or a meeting, bringing together cultural heritage, but let's talk about cultural heritage in a security sector reform meeting, for example, or in a corruption program, for example. And that's I think the key the key is to how do we bring cultural heritage into the spotlight of these questions that are important for setting policies in Iraq?

Mehiyar 16:14 Would you say that culture heritage is something that is important to policymakers? Because it directly is associated with people on committees that other fields of policy, have had difficulty engaging with in terms of understanding the wishes, the aspirations of older people? Could you think that culture heritage can be framed in a way where there is greater engagement of people and communities and society?

Renad 16:43 The larger project, which we're hoping to do is exactly that. How can we understand not just weather how cultural heritage can be used in different ways to understand questions. But how does us looking at something like corruption, as I said, or the security sector, the fragmentation or even fragmentation with elite? How can we make it closer to heal the human level? How can we understand that not just as names and some and politics and such as high level? But how can we bring in the human element the people into those discussions, and I think, then they make the case much

stronger, right. So as I say, with some of the work that we do on corruption, we don't want to just understand the mechanisms of corruption, and how much is being taken and how that money is being taken by the elite. We also want to know how it affects people. Because at the end of the day, this is really why we should be doing this. Because these systems, yes, it's good to analyze them and how they work. But they harm people every day. And it's only through looking at a topic like cultural heritage, or another one that we've been looking at, which is health and health care, where we begin to see the everyday struggle of people. So we can do both right, we can still analyze the politics, the economics, the security, we can we can still kind of understand the processes of how the state functions. But we can add that important element to it. And to me, that's the somewhat. Right, the Somewhat is these issues are harming Iraqis every day, and therefore need to be addressed, analyzed and scrutinized and new processes and new ideas need to come out of how to tackle these big questions.

Mehiyar 18:37 On that note, thank you Renad, for what was a very informative discussion about policy and cultural heritage. It would be good to do this again in a year's time where we can better understand the trajectories of cultural heritage in relation to Iraq.

Renad 18:53 Thank you for having me here, and I look forward to continuing our conversation.

Mehiyar 18:58 Thank you very much.