

Vicious circles closing in

Interview mit Thomas von der Osten-Sacken aus der Haaretz

von Micha Odenheimer

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A journalist, human rights activist and intellectual, Thomas von der Osten-Sacken is considered one of Germany's leading authorities on human rights in Iraq. He began traveling to Iraq in 1991, when he spent eight months doing humanitarian work in the southern part of the country just after Saddam Hussein crushed the Shi'ite uprising there. In 1992, Von der Osten-Sacken co-founded an aid and advocacy organization called Wadi, operating in Iraqi Kurdistan - the semi-autonomous safe haven carved out for Kurdish refugees after the Gulf War - and on behalf of Iraqi refugees in Germany. He spends part of each year in Kurdistan where Wadi has founded the first shelter there for women in distress and is also involved in helping the local government reform the prison system that has been left over from Iraqi rule. In Germany, Wadi advises Iraqi opposition groups and works closely with the Coalition for a Democratic Iraq.

Von der Osten-Sacken, 34, publishes articles in German magazines such as Jungle World and Konkret, and has co-edited a book on Iraq called "Saddam's Last Battle?", which is due to be published next month. He is one of the relatively few contemporary German writers and thinkers on the left who consider themselves pro-Israel and have developed a left-wing critique of the anti-globalization left in today's Europe.

When did you first realize that the Iraqi regime was not just another Middle East dictatorship?

When I first came to Iraq, I very quickly realized that I could not compare the situation there to other Middle Eastern countries I had been in, like Syria, Jordan or Egypt. This country was hell. We were the only Europeans in a city called Amara in the Shi'ite area of southern Iraq near Basra, and we arrived just a few weeks after the uprising had been crushed. There was a belt of tanks around the city. The majority of buildings were burned out. There was no food in the market. There was also a terrible degree of malnourishment there. People in Iraq won't talk freely, because they are terrified that their friends are working for one of Saddam's nine horrible security services. Because of this atmosphere, it took us three or four months to learn some details about the uprising. The Iraqis made people lie down in the streets and then buried them alive under asphalt. They killed everyone who looked a little religious, because this was a Shi'ite area. It was forbidden to take the corpses from the street. All in all, 60,000 or 70,000 people were killed in this area in 1991. The first thing that was done after the uprising was crushed was to repaint the pictures of Saddam Hussein. People had riddled them with bullets. Not one had been left. We were shocked at how neglected the south was, with open sewage systems, even though it is rich in oil. Saddam said before smashing the uprising that these Shi'ites were dirty people, not really Iraqis. We left there in October '91 when we felt we could not continue our work without unintentionally helping the government.

What was the atmosphere like in Baghdad then?

Baghdad was 300 kilometers away, and we went quite often - for a good dinner, to have a meeting with another organization or even to make a phone call to Germany. The fear in Iraq, a BBC reporter said recently, is so palpable you can eat it. It's really indescribable. Syria is a dictatorship, but the fear and control in Iraq reaches into your living room. If there is no

picture of Saddam Hussein in your living room, you might be arrested. There is no privacy. The Iraqi government considers everything political. In Syria, as long as you are not a member of the opposition, you can relax. You know you will not be harmed. But in Iraq, if you are in the wrong place at the wrong time, you may be arrested, tortured, killed. When I was in southern Iraq in '91, we had a lot of conversations with a very nice, very sophisticated doctor. One day, he was watching television and the Iraqi army was being praised for having won the second part of the Gulf War [after the initial U.S. attack aimed at driving Iraq out of Kuwait]. The doctor just said, 'Well, it is a strange victory if daily children are dying of hunger.' That was enough. Someone heard him. He was taken, tortured for three weeks and brought back a broken person. Letting one sentence slip is cause enough for a person to vanish into an Iraqi prison or even to be killed.

You have said that estimates are that Saddam has killed approximately one million of his own citizens since 1979.

Yes, that would include Kurds, Shi'ites, Christians and Sunnis. There were two huge massacres. There was the so-called Anfal campaign against the Kurds at the end of the 1980s when 4,000 villages were destroyed, and about 100,000 to 150,000 persons were killed, some with poison gas. Up to a million people were sent into internal exile. The other big massacre was in the south in the 1990s, where the regime has killed about 300,000 Shi'ites in the last 10 years. In addition, there have been enormous massacres against communists over the past two decades. The estimate of one million killed only includes civilians. A million Iraqi soldiers were killed in the Iran-Iraq war. A half-million Iraqis died of hunger or disease because of sanctions on Iraq, and more were killed in the Gulf War. Some 1.5 to two million people have been internally displaced, and 4.5 million Iraqi refugees are scattered across the globe. Ten percent of the Iraqi population has been killed or deported during the rule of Saddam Hussein. That is the essence of his regime. It is not an accident. It is systematic.

What is the ideology behind Saddam Hussein's regime?

The Ba'ath ideology mixes pan-Arabism with admiration of Mussolini and Hitler, some ideas of state socialism and the notion of an Arab supremacy which will be realized after the Arabs have liberated themselves from foreign - that means mainly Jewish - influence and British and American imperialism. Ba'athism is strongly anti-communist and anti-imperialist, and it is anti-Semitic from its beginning. Everything in Iraq is explained through this huge conspiracy theory against the Arabs, in general, and Iraq, in particular. Iraq is thought to be the greatest Arab nation and the natural leader of Arab unity.

So Iraq sees itself as the center of the Arab world?

Yes, the leader of Arab unity. Saddam Hussein dreams of ruling a united Arab nation that would become a superpower confronting East and West. Iraqi children are taught in kindergarten that they have to be strong Arab fighters.

Is Iraqi Ba'athism Islamist?

Pan-Arabism has always said that Mohammed is the forefather of pan-Arabism and that Islam was spoiled when it crossed the borders of the Arab world to Iran and Turkey. The task now is to 're-animate' the real Islam that was taught by Mohammed as an Arab ideology. Especially during the Iran-Iraq war, when Iraq had to face the Iranian revolution, they loaded their own ideology with Islamic content. The Iranians and the Zionists, they said, are part of a 2,000-

year-old plot to smash Iraq and divide the Arabs. 'We are fighting for the real Islam' the regime said, not the kind of spoiled Islam that Iran represents. I think it was a mistake for the Americans to believe, as they did, that Iraq was a stronghold against Islam.

Is it conceivable that Al Qaeda and Iraq have cooperated?

Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden share the same enemies, the same conspiracy theories. They share the claim that they are fighting in the name of the Arab masses. Both these men grew up in the same poisoned climate of Arab dictatorships. Their ideologies are quite close, even if Saddam is not an Islamist. And since he has been supporting many terror organizations, I would not be surprised if there are close ties on the ground between Iraq and Al Qaeda. I think that Osama bin Laden is trying to walk in the footsteps of Saddam Hussein. At the same time, Saddam Hussein in the 1990s was trying to strengthen the ties between Iraq and the Islamic movements. He put 'Allah Akhbar' ['God is great'] into the flag of Iraq and also financed different Islamic groups in Palestine and other places in the Arab world. There is a terrorist education center in Baghdad called Salmanpak and according to the Iraqi opposition, in the mid-'90s, terrorists from other countries were being trained there in such skills as how to hijack planes and use chemical weapons. They may be cooperating and even if they are not, these are two trees growing in the same soil.

So you would not agree with the idea that the war on Iraq is a distraction from the war against terror that President George Bush has proclaimed.

American policy in Iraq is a series of huge mistakes. Firstly, it was a mistake to support that horrible regime in the 1980s knowing, for example, about the massacres against the Kurds. Secondly, it was a huge mistake not to let the Iraqi people topple Saddam in '91. The Americans feared democracy in the Middle East, they feared the breakup of Iraq because it would strengthen Iran, so they allowed Saddam to crush the uprising. With regimes like the Iraqi one, there will be no peace in the Middle East. You cannot contain a regime like Saddam Hussein's. That was a mistake of the West. So the question is: Is America ready to face up to the mistakes it made in '91 and in the '80s? Are the Americans ready to support democracy? Because people like Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden grew out of the Middle East. They are not products of Afghanistan.

What kind of influence does Saddam have in the Arab street, and what kind of affect could it have to topple him?

The most regressive and dangerous elements in the Arab and Islamic world depend on Saddam Hussein. Really toppling Saddam Hussein means uprooting the Ba'ath regime, with the help of the Iraqi people. This would give the final blow to pan-Arabism in the Middle East. Syria and a lot of very radical factions in Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt and the Gulf states would be affected. These factions look up to Saddam Hussein as a pan-Arabist, anti-imperialist hero - although he is anti-imperialist in the tradition of the Nazis, not the left. Also, Saddam is financing organizations like the Arab Liberation Front in Palestine, which is a Ba'ath organization. He is paying the families of suicide attackers. He is directly and indirectly responsible for a lot of terrorism in the Middle East.

What is his relationship with Yasser Arafat and the PLO?

Part of the Palestinian establishment has very close ties to Iraq since 1991 when the Palestinians decided to support Saddam, which was a huge mistake. This includes some quite

influential figures within the security apparatus of Yasser Arafat and the PLO. There is a struggle within the Palestinian establishment right now over whether these elements should be isolated. I think that certain people like Abu Mazen and some of the security forces who were trained by the CIA are struggling against others who have very close ties to Baghdad, and who still want to join Iraq in the next battle with terrorist attacks, or worse - with chemical or biological attacks on Israel or somewhere else in the world. That, I think, would be another terrible mistake for the Palestinians to make.

What will have to be done, the day after Saddam is gone, to make the distinction between merely switching Iraqi regimes and starting something completely new and democratic?

In 1991, the Americans feared the results of a public uprising. They hoped to find someone within the military who could topple Saddam Hussein and rule Iraq with some cosmetic changes, but with the same security apparatus. This hope proved a failure because for 25 years, Saddam has been trying to get rid of anyone that might pose a threat to him. Every influential general has been killed. Yearly cleansing campaigns are carried out against high-ranking members of the Ba'ath Party so that no one can threaten the position of his family, which is more or less ruling Iraq. The hawks in the U.S., people like Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney or Richard Perle, analyzed the situation and realized that they cannot just change someone at the top. It is not like a South American dictatorship. If they really want change, they have to create a new Iraq. Iraq is so ruthless and cruel against any opposition that people cannot rise up without an outside trigger. But the moment a possibility is created, the vast majority of the Iraqi people will rise up. They will uproot the Ba'ath Party and even take personal revenge on the ruling regime; you won't have any Ba'ath Party anymore. So you really have to think about what to do afterward. The only alternative is creating a democracy, which is a real experiment because nothing like this exists in the region. Iraq considers itself an Arab country, but actually contains nearly all the different minority and ethnic groups of the Middle East. So, if it is really done with heart, it is the first step to creating a new Middle East. A democracy in the region will very much affect other countries. It is a huge challenge and experiment. The question is: Do the Americans know what they are going to do there? Because Turkey, Iran and Europe will all try to impose their own policy. Iraq is an oil-rich country and you don't know if this great game will not lead to catastrophe.

Does Iraq have a national identity that could come together as a democracy? Or are these fears that the Shi'ites and Kurds will split off legitimate?

Iraq is very unique in the Arab world. First of all, you already have a very long tradition of opposition to the central regime. And you have a tradition of a national identity. Even the Kurds in Iraq never wanted to split off, unlike their brethren in Turkey. They want a federal Iraq with strong Kurdish autonomy. I don't think the Shi'ites want to split off. Usually the minority is the one that wants to split off. The Shi'ite are the majority in Iraq. What they want is more influence in Baghdad. From my experience from living there, I don't think the Shi'ites are attracted by the mullah regime of Iran. You also have a strong leftist tradition, mainly in places like Basra and Amara, and Iraq has one of the oldest and strongest communist parties in the Middle East. This tradition has been strongly repressed by the Ba'ath Party, but it still exists. I think the Kurdish autonomy is a positive example for Iraq. Kurdistan has horrible conditions. It's not recognized internationally. It is more or less under double embargo: the international sanctions against Iraq and some internal sanctions from the central government. Turkey, Iran and Syria are all trying to destabilize the Kurds. But even under these dire circumstances, the Kurds have been able to build up what is not really a democracy, but a

place which is, except for Israel, the most liberal and free in the Middle East. There are a lot of newspapers, freedom of speech, up to a limit -you are not allowed to insult the Kurdish political leaders - but in comparison with central Iraq, you can really call it paradise. And there is to a certain extent democracy. If the Kurds are able to do it, why shouldn't the Iraqis, with assistance from abroad?

Are you in favor of waging war against Iraq?

Let me say first that I am not in favor of war, especially until we know how the Americans want to conduct the war. But one also has to consider that what the Lebanese intellectual Fouad Ajami has said: that for 30 years, Iraq has been conducting a war against its own society. Saddam Hussein is conducting a war against his own people and it must be stopped. It is hard to think of another people who have suffered in the last 20 years like the Iraqi people have suffered at the hands of Saddam Hussein and because of international policy aimed at containing him. If Americans are really ready to topple him, it might be very good for the Iraqi people and very good for the region. If the Americans start just another stupid war like the one in 1991, then I am against it, too. At this very moment there is a huge Arabization campaign against Kurds living in Karkuk. People are systematically deported because the regime wants to change a Kurdish city into an Arab one. Just now there are tremendous prison cleansing campaigns. Every Wednesday, the security forces come into the largest prison in Baghdad and say: You, you, you and you. Five hundred people are taken out to be killed just because the prisons are overcrowded. The Iraqi National Congress says that there are 600,000 to 700,000 political prisoners in Iraqi detention camps at present. So the question is: Are they really ready to support democracy in the Middle East? In that case, I think the war is necessary and good. Or do they just want to put some horrible general in instead of Saddam? Then I oppose this war very much.

During the Gulf War in 1991, Israel refrained from retaliating after the Scud missile attacks. How should Israel respond if it is attacked this time?

Seventy percent of the Iraqi people are allies of the Americans. If the war is waged correctly, it will focus on the regime, on the leaders, on the security apparatus and on this horrible Ba'ath Party, but not on the Iraqi people. So if Israel is attacked, it should consider this point: This is a war against the regime, and the Iraqi people are allies in fighting Saddam Hussein. So it is very important to refrain from attacking civilians. There has been a debate about Israel nuking Iraq if attacked with weapons of mass destruction. That would be a disaster - the end of the democratization of the Middle East. Everyone would be against the Iraqi opposition and against Israel. If there is a need for Israel to strike back, it should only be against military targets. Israel should openly declare that it is not conducting a war against the Iraqi people, and that it is ready to support a multi-ethnic democracy in Iraq, friendly to the Iraqi people and only hostile to this government.

What is the attitude toward Israel and the United States in liberated Kurdistan?

The United States created the safe haven in 1991 not for the Kurds, but to protect Iran and Turkey from the influx of refugees. Still, people know that they are protected by the U.S. and they have a positive attitude toward it. I spent September 11, 2001 in Kurdistan in front of the television and the next day, I crossed through Syria to Jordan. In Syria, people told me that it was a conspiracy against the Arabs, but in Kurdistan, people were deeply shocked and sorry for the victims of the World Trade Center attack.

In regard to Israel, it's astonishing: The Kurds were all taught in Iraqi schools that the Jews and Israel are the main enemy, blood-suckers, part of a huge conspiracy, but I did not find any real anti-Israel sentiments. Critics of the occupation, of the settlements, yes, there are some, and I think that is legitimate, but no anti-Semitic conspiracy theory. In fact, people in Kurdistan are now starting to reflect on the mass immigration of Kurdish Jews in the 1950s when 99 percent of the Jewish community left mostly to Israel. Many times, I heard Kurds saying that it was sad that this living together with Jews had stopped, and that the Jewish heritage of Kurdistan should be kept alive. Also, you have to understand the dynamic. Nearly every week, Saddam Hussein or a leading Ba'ath member declares that Iraqi Kurdistan is the Israel of Iraq, or accuses the Kurds of being Zionists agents. The same thing is said about every opposition party - be they Islamists, nationalists, communists or Christians. People who are anti-Zionist themselves, such as Iraqi communists, are put into prison, tortured and killed as Zionist spies. That forces people to have a different attitude toward the whole Middle East conspiracy theory. I think this is why intellectual Iraqis abroad are much less likely to be anti-Israel than other Arab intellectuals. Iraqis oppose pan-Arabism and Ba'athism much more than they oppose Israel. So, it may be more possible to find a way to work with a future Iraqi government than with any other government in the region. If the Kurds are strong in Baghdad, the Jews will not face this irrational anti-Jewish sentiment.

What do you think drives German policy against U.S. intervention in Iraq?

Germany gains very good material benefit from Iraq. One should not forget that German technology enabled Iraq to enlarge the range of the Scud missiles so that they could reach Israel, that without German assistance, Iraq would not have been able to gas Iranian soldiers or its own people in Kurdistan or to threaten Israel. So there are deep relations. Iran, Libya and Syria, but especially Iraq, have this relationship with Germany. German policy has always put its eggs in Saddam's basket and gained from trade with Iraq, especially after '91 when America and England were out of Iraq. Also, ideology is important, especially at such times as during the last election campaign when the Social Democrats start to play on the anti-American piano. There are very close ties between a certain German ideology dating back to the 19th century, running through World War I and escalating in World War II with the Nazis and continuing afterward, which has close ties to pan-Arabism. One that shares the same enemies: America, the Jews, Israel. Anti-American and anti-Israel resentments are very strong in Germany and they have become stronger since 1989. Saddam Hussein is not usually seen in Germany as a horrible dictator murdering his own people. People blame the sanctions and not him, and people blame the Israeli occupation for the whole situation in the Middle East, not Palestinian terrorists or Saddam for continually destabilizing the region. Also, since 1945, many Germans have very strong anti-war feelings, especially if these wars are conducted by the United States. The majority of people opposed the second part of the Gulf War; there were tremendous demonstrations against it. Now this opposition is stronger, because Germany is stronger. Germany is now conducting its own independent foreign policy, which in the last two to four years, has become simply to contrast itself to the U.S. If the U.S. is supporting a government, we should support the opposition to this government. In the Middle East, there is an attempt to tighten relations with Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinians and Iraq. Also, the Germans are quite afraid of the archives in Baghdad and what they tell about the poison gas and other weapons deals that were made between Iraq and a lot of German enterprises.

So both the left and the right in Germany have strong anti-American feeling?

Anti-American and anti-Israeli-anti-Semitic. At the moment, you can hardly distinguish between the very far right wing and the very far left wing. The far right openly supports

Saddam Hussein, saying that he is fighting the Jews and the Americans and thus supporting the German battle. And certain left-wingers from an orthodox left-wing tradition think that Saddam Hussein is anti-imperialist, anti-globalization, that he is fighting for the rights of the Arabs to self-determination. Others on the left say that Saddam may be horrible, but another American war will not solve any problems. The war will just help Israel's interest, so we should oppose it. This is also the governmental policy at the moment.

The European and Third World left have developed an ideology that unites anti-globalization, anti-Americanism, anti-Israel feeling and, to a certain extent, anti-Semitism. What is the internal logic behind this combination?

This is not a very new phenomenon. In the German left, these attitudes existed during the 1920s with the idea of 'a shortened anti-capitalism' that distinguished very sharply between financial capital and productive capital, and demonized financial capital. This idea was later adapted by the Nazis, and is in itself anti-Semitic because Jews are identified with the circulation sphere - with banks. Whoever does not criticize capitalism in a Marxist way, but criticizes only the surface [aspects] of capitalism - the huge banks or the monopoly capitalists - is automatically using an anti-Semitic phraseology, even if he is not speaking about Jews or Israel. This is what some of the anti-globalization rhetoric is about. These associations are so deeply written inside European and especially German history, that you can be anti-Semitic without even mentioning Jews. This way of thinking was kept alive in certain Leninist groups and in the far right wing in the '60s and '70s, and now it is more or less unfolding in the mainstream movements. It is always a question of whether these resentments, which are quite common, are taboo or whether the government is signaling that they can be voiced. Until 1989, anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism were taboo in Germany. These views found space on the left and on the far right. In the middle of society, they were hidden in the signals and phrases communicated in the subtext. Now, due to the new international constellation, the taboo has broken down and these ideas can be found in the mainstream. So you have more or less the same idea that you had since the '20s: There is a global struggle pitting the 'good' people who are fighting against colonialization against a conspiracy between the huge American trusts, banks and the Jews, which wants to force the world to adapt a universal capitalism. The Jews were also accused then of being the purveyors of the global communist principle, but since 1989, that has been forgotten. These old ideas were re-animated now due to the ethnic conflicts in the Balkans and the conflict in the Middle East, and especially since September 11, when the focus has been on the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel, and the conflict between Iraq on one side and the U.S. and Britain on the other.

Leaving aside the overt anti-Semitism, what do you, as a Marxist, see as the primary mistake of this ideology that is attacking the U.S. as the purveyor of global capitalism?

The moment this anti-globalization ideology brings together Hamas, Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, nationalistic movements in the Balkans, the Zapatists in Mexico, and the neo-Nazi right wing, which is very active in the anti-globalization movement, it means they are not fighting for universal freedom, liberation and emancipation, but are reproducing anti-universalist, anti-Semitic stereotypes that are only leading to barbarism. Rosa Luxemburg once said that the question is socialism or barbarism, and that question is still valid. But at the moment, I think the fight is to defend the Western world against those who would like to be its successors. These people are also, dialectically, the products of the Western, capitalistic world. Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden grew out of the bad politics of the U.S. and Europe in the Middle East. They didn't fall from the moon. But at the moment, I think one has to support the West, which means in this case America, Britain and Israel, in its battle against

its own creations. Then you can think again of how to create a much better world. The questions the anti-globalization movement raises are very important - issues like the environment, world hunger and the enrichment of a very small minority of people while the vast majority become poorer. But with the Ba'ath Party and Hamas as your actors, you will not change anything. They are not the historical subjects who are carrying the idea of emancipation. In extremis, you have a constellation that reminds one of the '30s. On the one hand, you have Britain, the U.S. and Israel - the Jews are always in the metaphysical center of these conflicts. This side is fighting for a capitalistic Western ideology. Then you have these National Socialist, self-determination ideas, which are always led by the Germans. In 1939, the Germans said that they were fighting universal capitalism and for self-determination in the Third World. They had a very anti-colonialist phraseology. You can find the same words and the same phrases as are being used today in the '40s when the Germans were supporting India's and the Arabs' revolt against the British. Even France is again in the same position - supporting Britain and the U.S. half-heartedly. Ten years ago, everyone thought Germany was a close ally of the U.S., supporting its policy. But no. In this conflict, Germany is signaling that it is standing on the other side. Everywhere in the Middle East, in the Syrian press, in the Hezbollah press, in the Baghdadi press, Germany is being praised for taking the same side they did 50 years ago. So people understand what the Germans are doing. And I think that that is quite interesting - and quite horrifying.