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OBITUARY

**In memoriam: Faleh Abdul Jabar
(1946-2018)**

Michiel Leezenberg [‡]

Abstract

This obituary sketches life and work of the prominent Iraqi social scientist Faleh Abdul Jabar with a focus on his relevance for Kurdish studies. The article briefly discusses his major publications and his continuing dialogue with Marxist social theory.

Keywords: Faleh Abdul Jabar; obituary; Iraq.

ABSTRACT IN KURMANJI

Ji bo bîweriya Faleh Abdul Cebâr (1946-2018)

Ev yadname wêneyê jîyan û xebata zanyarê Iraqî yê navdar Faleh Abdul Cebâr dikêşe, bi taybetî berê xwe dide ser girîngiya wî bo lêkolînên kurdî. Gotar bi kurtî behsa berhemên wî yên sereke û diyaloga wî ya berdewam li gel teoriya civakî ya marksîst dîke.

ABSTRACT IN SORANI

Le yadawerî da: Felaħ 'Ebdul Cebâr (1946-2018)

Em pirsnameyê wêneyê jîyan û berhemî twêjerî komellayetiya diyari 'Eraqî Felaħ 'Ebdul Cebâr dekêşet legell terkizkirdine ser peywendiyê ew be diraseyê kurdîyewe. Babeteke be kurtî giftugo le ser billawkirawe serekîyekanî dekat we dayelogî berdewamî ew legell tîyorî komellayetiya marksîstî.

Introduction

The sudden but not entirely unexpected death of Faleh Abdul Jabar in Beirut, on February 26, 2018, deprived Iraq of one of its most prominent intellectuals, and the academic world of a leading scholar of contemporary Iraqi society. Although he had been having health problems, Faleh continued with his academic work, media appearances, and political activism until the end.

Born into a poor Shi'ite family, Faleh grew up in the Bab al-Shaykh quarter in Central Baghdad. Like so many highly educated Iraqis of his generation, he joined the Iraqi Communist Party. Looking back on his student years, he once told me how he and other communist students would discuss Hegel's

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philosophy of right as a way of showing off their intellectual brilliance. In his more self-critical moments, he would proclaim that he and many of his generation had wasted their lives on communism; that view, however, did not discourage him from continuing to use Marxist-inspired concepts and approaches in his analyses. Initially sympathising with the Palestinian cause, Faleh subsequently worked for the Iraqi Communist Party, and left for the mountains in 1980. More than many other Middle Eastern intellectuals, however, Faleh always showed a pronounced political sympathy for Kurdish aspirations, and an active and enduring intellectual interest in matters Kurdish.

In private, he was a wonderful host, with a great sense of humor and a seemingly unlimited supply of popular Iraqi jokes. In public, both as a scholar and as a politically engaged intellectual, he was invariably critical but generous. For example, he roundly criticised Edward Said for ignoring the ‘horrible reality of Iraqi totalitarianism,’ and for his publicly expressed skepticism concerning the cruelty of Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime (and specifically concerning Iraq’s responsibility for the 1988 chemical attack on Halabja); but he praised Said for joining a call for Saddam Hussein to step down in the runup to the 2003 war against Iraq.¹

Eventually, Faleh would become a social scientist of Iraq of almost the same standing as precursors like Hanna Batatu and Ali al-Wardi, but he always remained an activist as much as he was an academic. Although he did not shy away from meeting with government officials and policy makers, he always saw his research as ultimately standing at the service of the people. Accordingly, he continued to maintain close contacts with politicians, policymakers and protesters alike, both in Iraq and abroad. For a number of years, he was loosely affiliated with Birkbeck College in London; after the 2003 war, he got to set up his own research institute in Beirut, the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies. Based in this center, he would publish numerous original Arabic-language works and translations and hold seminars for students from Iraq. Few scholars have been as active, and as successful, in training a new generation of social scientists living and working in Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region. The translations he published have made some of the classics of social theory available to an Arabic-speaking public. Undoubtedly, his crowning achievement in this respect, published just a few months before his death, was a completely new Arabic translation of Marx’s *Capital*, based on a careful study not only of the published German original text but also the manuscript variants.

¹ See ‘We Arabs and the West,’ Open Democracy, September 29, 2003; available on <https://www.opendemocracy.net/node/1510> (accessed August 13, 2018). For Said’s comments casting doubt on Saddam’s use of chemical weapons, see Barbara Harlow, ‘The Intellectuals and the War: An Interview with Edward Said,’ *Middle East Report* 171 (Summer 1991). The passage was tacitly deleted from the reprint of this interview, in Gauri Viswanathan (ed.), *Power, Politics and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said* (Bloomsbury 2005); it doesn’t feature in the digital version of the interview, either; cf. <https://www.merip.org/mer/mer171/intellectuals-war> (accessed August 13, 2018).

Some of the most important of Faleh's own writings are available in Arabic only, or have not yet been published. When I last met him, he told me he had recently finished a study on the actual effects of the land reforms in early republican Iraq, which he hoped to publish someday. His published research has focused on Iraq, and in particular on Iraq's Shi'ites; his 2003 *The Shi'ites of Iraq* is a classic, exploring the origins, ideologies, and recruitment patterns of the country's various Shi'ite groups. In other works, he has also explored questions of a more general character, like tribalism and the state, the demise of Marxism as a major political and intellectual factor in the Middle East, and patterns of urban protest.

Of particular importance to Kurdish scholars is a 2006 edited volume on the Kurds and the state. More recently, he acquired funding for an ambitious multi-volume, multi-author book project on the future of the Kurds in the Middle East. At the time of writing, the first, introductory volume in this series has not been published, being scheduled for publication in early 2019; subsequent volumes, a series of country-by-country case studies, should follow soon afterwards. This final research project initiated by Faleh, entitled 'Governing the Kurds in the Middle East,' sets out to explore, on the one hand, the general issue of governing diversity, and on the other, the problem of political representation. Hence, the series aims at exploring the different strategies of the Kurds and in particular their leaders, in their quest for self-representation. In his introduction to the first (theoretical) volume, Faleh traces the failure of the unitary nation state as a way of governing diversity: Political analysis or historiography usually links these new trends to the defeat of the Ba'ath regime in the 1991 war... or the arrest of the historical leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan." Since the 1990s, the tactics of rural guerrilla warfare have largely been replaced by urban protest, and by civilian politics both at the national and at the regional level. Faleh, however, tries to go beyond the usual political explanations of this shift, which, he writes, : "has to do with profound socio-economic, cultural and demographic change, which weakened the very pillars of the old wisdom of peasant-backed, mountain-harbored guerrilla fighting. And this has not in the least been analyzed.

Crucially, that is, this project explores the enormous social changes underlying recent political developments in the region – a topic that has, indeed, remained sorely underinvestigated. Once published, Faleh's last research project should and will encourage further study of aspects of Kurdish society and culture that have for too long been neglected. There can be no more fitting memorial to his contribution to the study both of Iraq and of the Kurds.

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- Faleh A. Jabar. (2003). *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*. London: Saqi Books.
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- Faleh A. Jabar (2008). *Totalitarianism: Theory and Aftermath*. Beirut-Baghdad: IIST.
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