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Abstract of paper to be presented at the conference.

For details of the conference programme go to [www.iraqistudies.org](http://www.iraqistudies.org)

Speaker: Hala Fattah

Title: The difficulties of writing the history the Royalist Era in Iraq after 2003

Abstract:

In 2005, I began a project on the oral history of the monarchy period in Iraq (1921-1958). To date, I have interviewed 42 men and women, most of them octogenarians who participated in one way or another in shaping the last decade of the royalist years. To begin with, it must be acknowledged that the influence of the last thirty-five years of Baathist rule has deeply impinged on history and memory in Iraq, so much so that any re-reading of the past must necessarily come to grips with "a multitemporal concept of history where past and present commingle and coalesce, capturing simultaneously different and opposing narratives and privileging topics of representation interpreted in terms of experience, negotiation, agency, and shifting relationship."<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, the difficulties in researching and writing the oral history of this period can be posed in this way:

- a) On the one hand, and in the eyes of some but certainly not all respondents contributing to the project, the royalist era is largely seen as an anomaly that remains outside of Iraqi history because it is considered unrepresentative of Iraqi experience. For these interviewees, it is either a secularizing, modernizing, urbanizing period that wasn't given time to flower (and therefore had little impact on post-1958 politics and society) or an artificial construct that was grafted on by force. Either way, the consensus is that it was a unique period in time, ultimately contributing almost nothing to the onset of the Republic, or to republican institutions, party politics, urban versus rural dichotomies, military systems, economic structures and social frameworks. By virtue of their *sui generis* status, the 37-years of the royalist era are considered to have left little by way of a socio-political model that could be replicated in the future.
- b) On the other hand, the royalist period is seen by other respondents as an archetype of the good life that was actualized on earth but was wiped away with the coming of the second Baathist regime. For interviewees with this perspective, the era of the monarchy functions as a moral watchword for the present. Here, the comparative aspects of the royalist period are juxtaposed to that of the republican era, with the earlier period winning hands down. And yet, the corollary to this remembrance is that

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<sup>1</sup> Alon Confino, "Introduction" in *History & Memory* 17.1/2 (2005) 5-11.

fifty years after the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy, the present intrudes on the past with such a vengeance that most of the 42 respondents interviewed for the oral history project invariably begin their reflections with long preambles on Saddam Hussein's brutalities and are only very reluctantly nudged back to the subject by the interviewer. The era of the monarchy is seen as an interlude in time where art, literature and civic values permeated society and created an example for all Arab countries to follow. But it is a curiously ahistorical example; it serves as an ethical prism for the present but it does not really explain the past *historically*. For this group of respondents, then, the era of the monarchy can be seen as a didactic principle that is fading away, whereas the rule of Saddam Hussein is viewed as a still-present burden on the historic memory of Iraqis everywhere.

- c) Finally, there is a third group of largely activist Iraqis who do link the era of the monarchy to that of the present day. Whether in describing agriculture, education, women's associations or political movements, they make a cogent argument for the still-pervasive influence of royalist institutions and personalities on the latter-day republican regimes. This group, however, is a distinct minority among the respondents interviewed for this project, largely because the notion of an isolated royalist regime is still all-encompassing in the historical memory of present-day Iraqis.

Ahistorical perspectives or no, the royalist era demands attention simply because it was a time of beginnings. Many of the informants in the oral history project understood that very well. On one level, of course, their perspectives were directly influenced by the last thirty-five years of Baathist rule, the ever-present present that is perpetually being reconstructed and re-fabricated as we speak. But there was also a subtext to the oral interviews that hewed closely to the specificities of the era itself, of its early promise as well as its ultimate breakdown. For the historian of the royalist era, the saving grace of the project is to try and capture the many narratives that the period gave rise to in a meaningful way, while not attributing greater value or significance to them in functionalist terms than they deserve.