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## Interview: Poul Rasmussen

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# Iraq wants to be part of the world again

*Poul Rasmussen, head of EIR's international bureau in Copenhagen, recently visited Iraq. He was interviewed by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach.*

**EIR:** Poul, this was your first trip to Iraq. What struck you most?

**Rasmussen:** What struck me most was that the Arab world is a world with its own roots and traditions. It's an old culture, and a distinct culture. Things appear very exotic, but people relate to one another in a very warm, affectionate way. It seems to be that people talk to one another more, they socialize a lot. I never saw a situation, in which people did not talk to each other, as may be the case in the West. When you go into a store, in Baghdad, or even in the desert, you see that people greet one another; if they know each other, they embrace. This struck me.



**EIR:** What was the occasion of your visit?

**Rasmussen:** I received an invitation from the College of Administration and Economics of Baghdad University, to give a lecture on the extent and impact of the Asian crisis, and Lyndon LaRouche's proposals for a New Bretton Woods.

**EIR:** Can you tell us about this university?

**Rasmussen:** It is the Baghdad University, but the College of Administration and Economics is part of it. It has 4,700 students, of whom 300 are from foreign countries, mainly in the Arab world. There were 200 graduate and post-graduate students and faculty members who attended the lecture.

**EIR:** What was their response? Are they aware of what's going on in Asia?

**Rasmussen:** One of the tragic effects of the embargo against Iraq, is an unimaginable isolation from news about world events, an isolation I felt just being there one week. Therefore, although they were aware of the Asian financial crisis, they had not had access to any discussion of solutions or in-depth data on the extent of the crisis itself. For that reason, I had to

devote the first half of my introduction, to a blow-by-blow account of the crisis from July to the present. From there, I went into a presentation of the discussion on a reorganization of the monetary and financial system, including LaRouche's proposal for a New Bretton Woods, and the Senate Appropriations bill for convoking such a conference.

The first question was, will the process of globalization continue, after implementation of LaRouche's proposal? This led to a discussion of whether the process of globalization were good or bad. It was clear that they fear this; they are worried about it. There is a fear of what the impact of globalization will be on the Iraqi economy, after the sanctions are lifted. There is a fear, that Iraq will be negatively impacted, if they are forced to accept globalization.

**EIR:** What was your impression of the state of the Iraqi economy now, after eight years of sanctions, and how the government and the population are dealing with it?

**Rasmussen:** The effects of the sanctions are visible for anyone who visits Baghdad. Take the cars, for example. The streets of Baghdad look like an auto junkyard. The impact on individual families, which may not be so visible, is immense. People have sold anything they could, for example, the doors from their homes, heirlooms, furniture. There is a huge black market everywhere. You can find anything, like shoes, foreign-made clothing, but at horrendous prices. But what I want to stress, is how well people are dealing with this situation. They are obviously a proud people, who have taken eight years of tremendous suffering, but have held up under the strain. They have maintained their dignity, in a way that many other societies and cultures most likely would not be able to. In many ways, they had to draw upon their ancient culture. Obviously, it is a people who have been through many ordeals over the past 3,000 years, and they are clearly determined to overcome their experience with George Bush as well. This made the biggest impression on me: People are poor, but they are proud.

**EIR:** Did you note any signs of anti-Americanism? How do people react to the recent confrontation over the inspections of the UN?

**Rasmussen:** The picture of George Bush is still at the entrance of Al Rashid Hotel, so everyone steps on his face, who enters the hotel. But in none of the numerous discussions I had, or meetings I attended, was I confronted with the kind of anti-Americanism one could expect after the war and the continuing sanctions, where the United States had been cast in the role of the main adversary. There was a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of the recent confrontation which was averted at the last moment.

**EIR:** How do they view the confrontation?

**Rasmussen:** My impression was that they understood that the whole crisis in many ways was also a trap for the United States, that even in Baghdad, they could see the difference

between the Gulf War of 1990-91 and the orchestrated crisis of 1997-98. The Iraqis are definitely capable of differentiating between former President George Bush and President Bill Clinton. The question that I was constantly asked, was: When will the sanctions end? In all meetings, everywhere, this was the question: When will the sanctions end? However, what they expressed was not impotent rage; rather, after the visit of Kofi Annan, most Iraqis had the sense that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. So, the question is not asked from the standpoint of despair, but expresses the fact that they are anxious for the embargo to be lifted. Not only from the standpoint of alleviating the suffering, but Iraq wants to be part of the rest of the world again. This a clear commitment.

They are preparing themselves to deal with the economic problems of rebuilding the country after the sanctions, in a dirigistic way.

**EIR:** What do you mean, in terms of policy?

**Rasmussen:** Iraq has a substantial private sector, and it is their intention to keep it and have it grow and thrive. But they are conscious of the danger or threat, that a lifting of the sanctions in an uncontrolled manner, could ignite an explosion of imports of consumer goods. Obviously, there will be pressure, from family households who have endless lists of things that they need to have replaced or repaired; eventually all of that will be done, but they are aware of the fact that it cannot be done all at once.

**EIR:** This reminds me of what happened in eastern Germany, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, when there was a rush into consumer goods.

**Rasmussen:** Yes, exactly, that is what it is. The Iraqis are fully conscious of this danger. So they asked the question, will they be allowed by the international community to maintain a tight control over import and export, in the transitional period. In other words, they are aware that they could be faced by pressure from international financial institutions not to maintain control over imports and exports, and son on. They are afraid of the prospect that they may go from being victims of the sanctions, to being victims of globalization.

**EIR:** What was going on with the inspections, which were proceeding while you were there?

**Rasmussen:** They all went well. The inspection teams that were staying in the hotel where I was, were treated well, there was no sign of tension. There is a clear commitment on the Iraqis' part, that they want to do whatever has to be done, to overcome this crisis.

**EIR:** How is *EIR* received in Iraq?

**Rasmussen:** *EIR* is very famous in Iraq. It is looked upon as a journal of authority. I could see from discussions with some graduate students, that *EIR* is actually an instrument of education; people study it.

**EIR:** You talked to a lot of students. What is your sense of their cultural outlook? Are they responsive? Are they attentive? Do they have problems with concentration, as students do here?

**Rasmussen:** Over all, my first encounter with Baghdad and the Iraqi people was overwhelmingly positive, but what made the biggest impression on me, was being among the students of the College of Administration and Economics. They were full of energy, it was focussed, the entire college was bustling with discussion. It reminded me of a visit I made to a university in Los Angeles in 1996, the University of Southern California, which is mainly attended by students of Asian descent. There, too, the students were focussed on thinking.

What I noted was that I could see this concentration, and thinking, simply by looking into their eyes. There was a lot of loud music and talking, but these students were very serious. I had the distinct impression, there was someone home. I was extremely grateful for the opportunity to have private meetings with a number of the graduate students. It is impressive that a country under such difficult circumstances, can produce youth and an intelligentsia of this quality. It gives a sense of hope, for the nation of Iraq, that given normal circumstances, when normal circumstances are finally reestablished, the nation will thrive and develop.

**EIR:** Did you note what specific problems students have as a result of the embargo?

**Rasmussen:** Can you imagine writing a thesis with hardly any access to any source since 1990? They have to spend a significant part of their time, which they should use for thinking and conceptualizing, in searching for sources abroad, often in vain. Requests for material remain unanswered, for example. There was no one at the university I met, who had seen the Internet. All the universities in the world are hooked up to this. At Baghdad University, they are acutely aware of the need to join the rest of the world. As would be the case of someone who had been in the desert for years, they are acutely thirsty for knowledge.

For example, I got a lot of requests from professors and students, for textbooks in English. They don't have textbooks, and would appreciate any study aids that might be contributed. The situation of the universities is a reminder, that people do not live on bread alone, but from ideas. For instance, I spoke with a member of the Baghdad Astronomical Society, and was amazed to find out that he had not heard about the finding of water at the poles of the Moon, and he could not believe his ears when I told him about it. Because he was aware of the discussion years ago of this prospect. He had not seen a single picture from the exciting Pathfinder mission to Mars last summer, and had heard absolutely nothing of the spectacular Schumaker-Levy comet encounter with the Jupiter atmosphere of 1993. But, he told me they had the most incredible pictures of the Hale-Bopp comet, which no embargo could keep out of the Iraqi desert night sky.