

“The Invasion of Iraq and the Destruction of Culture”

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Introduction

Eight years passed since the US invaded Iraq, during which, major aspects of Iraq's social and economic structure have been reduced to dangerously low levels. In late 2002 and early 2003 President George W. Bush and his administration, hoorayed by British Prim Minister Tony Blair and other beneficiaries' worldwide, drummed up for invading Iraq. A false case for the invasion was fabricated claiming that Iraq developed and stockpiled Weapon of Mass Destruction; that Iraq was connected to the 9/11 attacks; and Iraq and Saddam's regime was threat to the United States and the World. These claims proved false quickly but the case was imposed on the entire international community by pressure and intimidation. President Gorge W. Bush abused the resources and superior military power of the United States and its people to invade, destroy and appropriate Iraq's resources for the interest of the big corporate associated with his circle. First he named his war **Operation Iraqi Liberation** but was advised to change it to Operation Iraqi Freedom because the acronym of the former spells (**OIL**), which is the real incentive besides occupying Iraq and turning it to an American military base. To facilitate that plan Mr. Bush contracted many Iraqis, who, because of their bitter relationship with the former regime agreed to be vessels and auxiliaries to the invasion. These Iraqis assume that they helped liberating Iraq, but people look at them as traitors who betrayed their own country and collaborated with the invaders.

Eight years after the invasion and life in Iraq is marching backward. Sectarianism has been on the rise; the quota system introduced by the invasion policy makers has deeply wounded the social fabrics of Iraq; corruption has reached an unprecedented level on international scale; the quality of education has deteriorated; health care and social services have been reduced to substandard; unemployment continues to rise; ignorance is flourishing; water, gas, and electricity have become precious commodity unavailable to the majority of the population; and security is almost non-existing. In the north, Kurdistan is practically a separate country where the government there does not recognize or honor the Iraqi flag or Iraqi sovereignty. The Iraqi government – both in Kurdistan and in Baghdad- is but hostage in the hands of the US occupying forces. They have to endorse and approve what the occupier's dictate, for their survival depends on the occupier support and protection. Eight years after the invasion and the US has built the largest “American embassy” in the world- the size of 80 football fields in Baghdad. There are currently 121 US military bases in Iraq with the most advanced equipments and facilities. In other words Iraq became a regional American military base that seems unrealistically possible to evacuate and leave by the end of 2011 as has been announced.

The most detrimental destruction was the human toll that Iraq has suffered and still is enduring. The occupiers snatched the country in a bandit style and dismantled it; reconfigured Iraqis society on the base of ethnic and sectarian divisions, recruited all

factions, and political parties of Iraqis- including prominent members of the main Shi'i groups, Sunnis, the two Kurdish factions, Communists, and Ba'athists; established a quota system, and appointed these figures as custodians to run the country on the occupation blue print. What the invaders inflicted on Iraq is a historic crime that Mr. Bush, Blair, and everyone collaborated with them should be held accountable. Iraq was a functioning country headed by a totalitarian regime, similar to many neighboring regimes in the region. Now Iraq is a fragmented country that is going backward, run by a corrupt government and corrupt parliament, with its wealth to the advantage of the officials, foreign companies, but not the Iraqi people.



The Destruction of Culture

During the early phase of the destructive campaign, Iraq's culture became a direct casualty. Besides the looting of the Iraqi museum of antiquities in Baghdad there was a wide spread looting of art galleries, libraries, and other cultural entities throughout Iraq with most damage being recorded in Baghdad. As time passes, and the occupier's agenda continued to be applied, a new culture was imposed on Iraq that reflects the narrow definition of ethnic and sectarian entity. Erasing Iraq's cultural memory was and still is a catalyst goal in that campaign. The mechanism of materializing the process of erasing the cultural memory takes multiple folds including the looting and wasting of antiquities, artworks, and cultural objects, burning libraries, and burning and looting governmental archives. The looting included the Iraqi museum of Antiquities, the Military museum, the folklore museum, Ba'th museum, Private museums of Saddam, the cultural objects of Dar al-Azya' al-Iraqiyyah (Iraqi Fashion House), and many other collections. The Iraqi museum of antiquities was without protection and looters were actively at work day and night under the watchful eyes of the American invading forces that refused to protect the museum. Thousands of priceless pieces were stolen, smashed, or damaged in the chaos of the looting. Most of the stolen pieces have been smuggled to neighboring countries and some have surfaced in the showcases of antiquity dealers worldwide.

The Iraqi Jewish Archive

The Iraqi Jewish archive was also confiscated in May 2003 in a fabricated scenario involved the US military, Iraqis opposition, the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (ISBAH). The collection includes books, administrative documents relating to the Iraqi Jewish community and parchment scrolls,

and religious books and records covering a long span of history extending from rare 16th-century books printed in Venice to manuscripts and records from early twentieth century. The collection was stored in the basement of “*al-Mukhabarat*” - the headquarter of the Iraqi secret police in Baghdad. The US bombing of that building destroyed the pipeline causing the basement to be flooded along with its content. Later on the whole collection was transported to Washington DC where it was in the custody of NARA National Archives and Records Administration and the Center for Jewish History in the US. Some of these precious objects have been given to synagogues in New York City.¹ This is not the first time that Iraqi Jewish cultural objects smuggled outside Iraq for in 1999 tens of precious Iraqi Jewish objects including an eighteenth century Torah were smuggled from Baghdad Synagogue through Jordan to Israel.² Other early twentieth century Torahs were smuggled from Hilla to Israel and the Iraqi government has claimed them back in despair.³ In Iraq there are precious religious manuscripts, sacred texts, relics, and ritualistic objects of Judaic tradition, Mandaean, Zoroastrian, Christian, Yazidis, and Muslim of Shi’i, Sunni, and other Sufi traditions. There are also magnificent shrines, synagogues, churches, mosques, and monasteries throughout Iraq and have existed among Iraqis for the last two millenniums. They reflect the rich, diverse and pluralistic culture of Iraq, and they should stay in Iraq.



Archeological Sites & Antiquities

Although many stolen antiquity pieces have been returned to Iraq via Jordan, Syria, Turkey, the United states and other countries but thousands pieces are still missing, and the Iraqi government is claiming them officially. Recent reports state that some high ranking figures in the government are involved in the smuggling of Iraqi antiquities and stolen antiquities intercepted by the Kurdish authorities in north Iraq were confiscated and there museum stamp was changed from the Arabic initials MI (Iraqi Museum) to MS (Sulaymaniyah Museum).⁴ Archeological sites in Iraq witnessed widespread abuse and

¹ See <http://safecorner.savingantiquities.org/2008/06/stuff-happens-us-torah-rescue-from-iraq.html>. See also http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2007-10-28/news/0710280005_1_torah-jewish-history-temple-isaiah

² See Jewish Weekly.com e-news, Friday, December 3, 1999

³ See JewishJournal.com, August 30, 2010

⁴ See the detailed article published by Iraq Green website at: <http://www.iraqgreen.org/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=23013>; See also <http://www.aliraqi.org/forums/archive/index.php/t-33799.html>; United States of Kurdistan News & Views, Wednesday, November 25, 2009; See also the interview with Donny George at <http://www.iraq10.com/report.php?id=1672&rate=3>

looting by both the occupying forces and thieves. There is the abuse and destruction caused by the US and Polish troops in the historic site of Babylon, and the abuse caused to the site of the Sumerian ziggurat of Ur by the US troops who used the site as a military camp. With the absence of police protection, hundreds of archeological sites especially in the south were subject to daily digging, looting, and smuggling. Illicit antiquities are out there in the custody of thieves and looters.

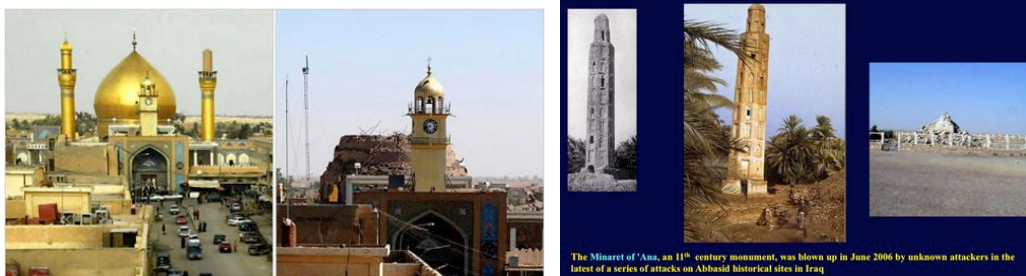


The Abuse of Historic Sites & Public Monuments

The US occupying forces appropriated major public monuments and other military and governmental structures and turned them to military camps since the early days of the invasion in such places as the Martyr monument complex, the Unknown Soldier monument complex, and the Victory monument complex in Baghdad. Archeological sites and historical building were abused and damaged due to the US military activities as in the case of the ninth century Malwiyyah minaret of the Abbasid Great Mosque of Samara, where a US sniper utilized the top of the minaret as a shooting post against Iraqi resistance, who in return attacked his post and damaged part of the structure on April 1st 2005. There were also cases of religious fanaticism fueled by sectarian prejudice introduced and promoted by chaos created by the invasion, and caused damages to many religious buildings.



The bombing of the dome of Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra in February 2006 was a sad chapter in that chaotic situation. The shrine contains the tombs of the 10th and 11th Shi'i Imams Ali al-Hadi & his son al-Hasan al-Askari. The history of the building goes back to the 10th century, and was rebuilt by the Qajaris in the 19th century and enlarged with continuous rebuilding in the 20th century. After that horrible event- which was obviously aimed at escalating the tension between the Sunni and the Shi'a- a series of attempts on both Sunni and Shi'a mosques was reported throughout Iraq. The destruction of the Askari Mosque was followed by the destruction of the Minaret of 'Ana, an 11th century Abbasside monument, which was blown up in June 2006 by "unknown" attackers.

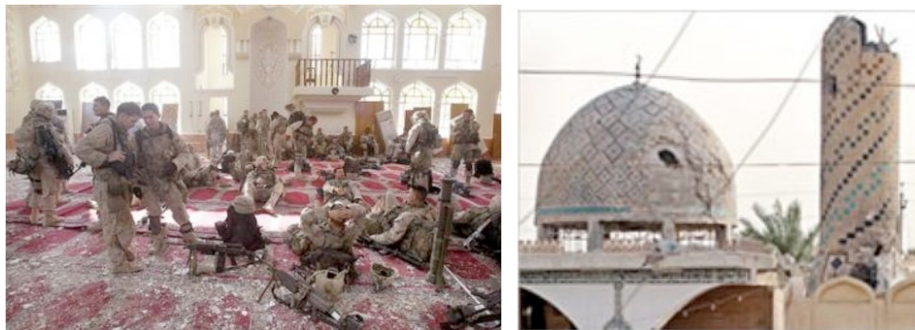


On June 14th, 2007 a second attack destroyed the minaret of the same Askari mosque in Samarra. About a month earlier a bombing of the Jami` al-Imam al-A`dham in A`dhamiyyah destroyed the Minaret and part of the main building of that Sunni mosque in Baghdad. Major mosques as well as small ones were endangered, and hundreds of people were been killed on both sides. Many small shrines of major companions of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and Islamic figures were attacked in different parts of Iraq: The 14th century tomb of Talha bin al-Zubair, one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammed, was bombed in Basra on Friday June 15, 2007. A gunmen armed with rocket-propelled grenades attacked the shrine late Thursday, partially damaging the building and returned early Friday, planting bombs inside the structure to completely destroy the building according to police.

The instigated sectarian assaults prompted a series of attacks: On June 14, 2007 two Sunni mosques bombed south of Baghdad. In Hilla, two more Sunni mosques were bombed the next day. The Al-Mustafa mosque in Iskandiriyah and the Al-Bashir mosque in Mahawil, both towns located in Babil province south of Baghdad, were bombed in the

early hours the same day. A few hours after the Samarra Askari destruction, three mosques in Iskandiriyah - the Grand Mosque, the Abdullah Jubburi mosque and the Hatteen mosque - and the Khudair al-Janabi mosque in Baghdad's Bayaa neighbourhood, were bombed. These instigated bombings were working perfectly in fueling the expected reprisal. On Tuesday, May 29, 2007 Guerrillas detonated a huge bomb in front of the shrine of Abdul Qadir al Gilani (d. 1166) mosque in central Baghdad, killing (according to Reuters) some 24 persons and wounding 90 according to late reports. The Bombing damaged the dome and base of the Minaret of the mosque. On June 16, 2007 The blast at the Al-Ashrah Al-Mubashra mosque in central Basra, the second Sunni mosque razed in as many days.

The Occupying forces attacked historic buildings that sheltered resistance hence destroying religious structures and inflicting extensive damage to mosques, mausoleums especially in Fallujah, Ramadi, and other cities. There is also the damage to historic buildings such as when the US forces blew up the historic Khan al-Dhulu'iyah near Samarra because according to the US forces it was used by the "insurgencies". The mysterious bombing of the al-Askari shrine (the dome) in Samarra in February 2006, and complimented by the toppling of the two minarets of that mosque on June 13, 2007. Then there was the toppling of the eleventh century Abbasid minaret of Ana in June 2006. Such acts cannot be carried on by sane Iraqis for these historic monuments have become part of the culture of all Iraqis since their erection. This kind of destruction may have been the work of preplanned provocations, by outsiders to activate religious sectarianism.



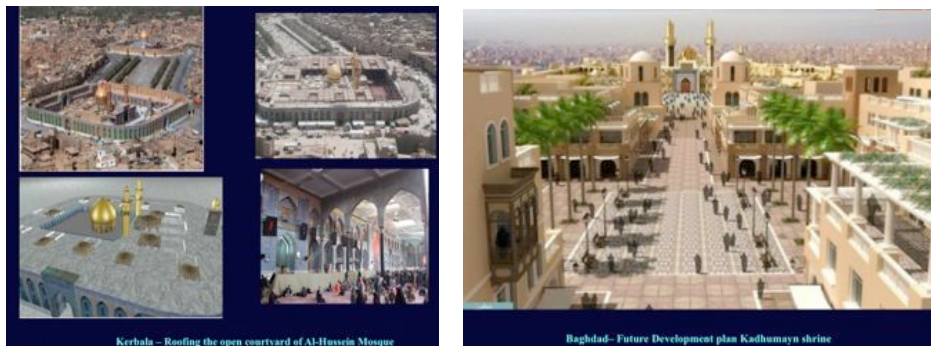
Invoking religious conflict also caused extensive damages to Christian churches in Musil, Baghdad and in the south of the country. Attack on Christian churches and Iraqi Christians is foreign behavior to all Iraqis and is the work of outsiders. On the same line the mysterious bombing of Mutanabbi Street and the damage it caused to its cultural setting in Baghdad in 2007 should also be examined in light of outsiders.

Erasing Iraq cultural memory also involved the replacement of those professionals who work in the field with new names cohesive to the new policy. Hence the introduction of new "professionals" and figures as representative of "Iraq's culture" including "new" artists reflecting "the new Iraq", and some of these new "experts" were totally non-Iraqis. This new representation also included the introduction of "professionals" and "scholars" in archeology, culture, and fine arts who are remotely connected with these fields. It also revealed the appointment of inadequate figures to run the different cultural centers, museums, galleries, and other cultural operations. The presence of such disqualified

people contributed further to the rising corruption in these areas, which resulted in smoother and faster trends of smuggling cultural materials, artworks, and antiquities outside Iraq.

The Abuse of Historic Sites: Renovation & Development

The chaos created by the invasion, and the liquidation of the professionals in different cultural fields generated a vacuum where ignorant and unqualified employees have been in charge of sensitive cultural issues especially in relation to rebuilding, renovating, and redesigning cultural and historic structures. Major damage has already been done to certain sites such as the roofing of the open courtyard “Sahan” of the shrine of Imam Hussein in Kerbala to “provide air-conditioned climate” for the visitors.⁵ There is also a major development plan to turn old Kadhumayn city center- surrounding the shrine of Al-Kadhumayn to a generic post modern suburban landscape similar to what has been created in the Arab Gulf countries.⁶ The story of rebuilding the destroyed Askari shrine is a good example of hasty, unanalyzed emotional action. The result is a bad copy of the original done by local builders.⁷



Many historic buildings- built in the first half of the 20th century- in the old sections of Baghdad have been abused, altered, badly repainted or demolished all together. Many buildings in Baghdad and other places have been victims to such mediocre treatment.⁸ The 18th century Khan Al-Takyah, located behind the Central Bank in Baghdad was demolished to give way to modern building; The minaret of Al-Kifl was altered and an Iron scaffolding has been built around the minaret; Many buildings such as Al-‘Ilwiyyah hospital, Al-Samurra’i hospital, Al-Dafterdar building, and others have been enveloped with ugly metal sheets, or painted with flat bright colors. Precious examples of traditional Iraqi- Baghdadi houses with masterwork of shanaasheels and mashrabiyyaat were demolished and gave room for ugly commercial building and warehouses. Such is the case with Khan al-Basha, also called Khan al-Nabgeh in al-Samaw’al streel are off al-Rashid st. where the entire building was demolished leaving only the façade. The other example is the “Old Red House” on the Tigris River was also completely demolished to

⁵ See images of the roofed sahan for example at <http://sweetshenu.multiply.com/journal/item/1634>

⁶ See details and illustration of the project at <http://bonah.org/news.php?extend.546>

⁷ See details at <http://www.alnasiriyah.com/forum/showthread.php?t=166> and <http://www.alrsool.org/dir65/page-30.htm>

⁸ See Khalid Al-Sultani article: “Stop this mediocre campaign, stop the defiling of architecture” in Arabic http://www.iraqwriters.com/inp/view_printer.asp?ID=2442&AUTHOR=%CF.%20%CE%C7%E1%CF%20%C7%E1%D3%E1%D8%C7%E4%ED. See also <http://www.babil.info/printVersion.php?mid=29774> ;

accommodate a commercial building. There are probably similar cases in other parts of Iraq where and in the absence of knowledgeable governmental supervision such abuse can easily be done.

The Brain Drain

This situation is connected with another effective measure of erasing Iraq's memory that is the eradication of professionals, specialists, academics, scientists, and educators with high degrees in all fields. According to the Brussels Tribunal the number of assassinated professionals since the invasion in 2003 has reached over 450, mostly academics who worked in major universities in Iraq and have solid academic records. The latest casualty were the dean of the school of dentistry in al-Mustansiriyya University and the Head of the Cancer research center at the University of Baghdad, both were assassinated between late March and early April 2011.⁹ There are reasonable indications that the occupying forces have knowledge of this systematic massacre, yet neither the occupier's nor the Iraqi government shows serious interest in investigating the matter.¹⁰

The case is similar in the field of culture and art where professional artists and archeologists have been intimidated, threatened and in some cases kidnapped. That continued intimidation caused hundreds and thousands of professionals: university professors, physicians, lawyers, scientists, poets, journalists, artists, and archeologists to flee the country and beg at the United Nation offices for refugee status. This brain drain is certainly a pre-designed chapter in the campaign of the destruction of Iraq.

Stalled Attempts to Restore Higher Education

Dr. Hadi Al-Khalili, a renowned Iraqi neurologist was kidnapped soon after the invasion and his family had to pay the ransom to set him free. In 2009 Dr. Khalili started a monumental project from his post as cultural attaché at the Iraqi embassy in Washington DC. He initiated a project aims at rebuilding Iraqi higher education with voluntary help of Iraqi American professionals, academics, and professors who work in American institutions. The response was overwhelming where hundreds of qualified Iraqi professors working in American higher education institutions responded enthusiastically and attended the two general meeting in preparation to start the work. It was a collective effort to provide FREE academic, scientific and cultural service in the form of consultation, exchanging ideas, updating teaching methodology, providing textbooks, lab equipments, workshops, seminars, and any higher education related service. The plan was to form committees in different fields of higher education and each committee would coordinate its work with a twin committee in Iraq. Over 48 Iraqi American committees were formed in 2009 but the Iraqi government- counter part failed to coordinate and support the project. The Iraqi authority did not even bother with the project and months passed without positive reaction from the authority in the Iraqi higher education. The newly formed committees started to fall apart, and after two years of desperate work the project never materialize and is still at stalemate.¹¹ It was obvious

⁹ See the list at <http://www.brussellstribunal.org/pdf/academicsBT151108.pdf>

¹⁰ See <http://mespectator.blogspot.com/2011/01/who-assassinated-iraqi-academics.html>

¹¹ For details of the project and names of the participants, volunteers and the committee please see http://iraqiculture-usa.com/i/u/10090719/f/IAC/Program_-_Final.pdf. I myself was one of the volunteers

that those in Iraq running the government were busy accomplishing political and financial positions, and restoring higher education was not a priority to them. Perhaps they never felt the need for such reform or improvement to inadequacy, irresponsibility, and lack of vision for the future.

The Liquidation of Iraq's Culture

In the field of art and culture we have seen qualified and serious Iraqi artists and professionals who left the country for different reasons but mainly the above mentioned, have been striving to survive and continue producing art while trying to make living for themselves and their families in neighboring countries and worldwide. Consequently many second and third degree artists and former art students- and opportunists were brought in to run important posts in the art and culture fields in Iraq. Their lack of experience, knowledge, and work ethic prompt them to be part of the looting and abuse of Iraqi culture, and they have been accomplices in this ongoing looting and smuggling.



These partners in the looting and smuggling crime are also networking with other “artists and dealers” working outside Iraq – mainly in the neighboring Arab countries, gulf states, and Europe to keep on this malevolent operation. Iraqi antiquities, fine art, and cultural materials became spoils in the hands of these official thieves.

Baghdad used to be the center of modern Arab art with flourishing galleries, conferences, events, and cultural activities attended by artists and intellectuals from the Arab countries and the rest of the world. Eight years after the occupation there is no serious art exhibits, or galleries in Baghdad, and most artists deserted Iraq to end up struggling for their, and their families’ well being on the doors of galleries and UN refugee offices in the neighboring countries. The scope of erasing the cultural memory of Iraq is multifaceted and each field requires a study by itself. This article is a brief account of the cultural loose that was inaugurated by the invasion, and promoted by the occupying forces, and is being maintained by the ignorance, inadequacy, and greed of the “professionals” who are overseeing the culture of Iraq at present.

and was elected as a coordinator of the Arts and Heritage Committee working with my colleagues archeologist the late Dr. Donny George, Dr. Zainab Bahrani, and Dr. Nada Shabout. After two year of desperate attempt to connect with the Iraqi committee we gave up and collectively resigned from that committee in 2010.

In March 2003 US president George W. Bush along with British Prim minister Tony Blare initiated a military campaign to invade Iraq, and on April 8, 2003 the US forces entered Baghdad, forcefully toppled the regime of president Saddam Husain, dismantled his government, the Iraqi army, police, security forces, and the whole societal structure.

Looting spread throughout major sections of the country but concentrated on governmental buildings and facilities in Baghdad except the ministry of oil which was firmly occupied and guarded by the Americans. The absence of police, and security forces instigated a lawless state of chaos further promoted by the indifference of the occupying forces to the widespread plunder and looting. Museums, libraries, cultural centers, galleries, and public places where pillaged and priceless artworks, antiquities, and manuscripts where stolen, destroyed, burned or simply wasted. The deposition of the Iraqi government resulted in the destruction of artworks and monuments symbolizing that regime. Among these symbols are public art which includes thousands of mediocre and propaganda street murals and sculpture structures glorifying the personality of the former Iraqi president and number of professional public monumental mostly in Baghdad. As mediocre as these public murals and some of the large-scale monuments might appear, they represent an era in the history of Iraq, its culture, and its politics. They have become historic evidence and archival cultural material and part of the Iraqi collective memory. Their iconography and artistic merit would serve as point of reference for future studies in the modern history of Iraq, and their perseveration would prove valuable.



Public Monuments

The following text is a short account on the subject of public monuments where information has been gathered from different sources since the early days of the invasion in 2003. The task of collecting information on this subject has been extremely difficult especially in trying to verify and confirm certain events. Nonetheless updating has been done, as much as possible and up to early May 2010- the time of finalizing this version of the account. Modern public art in Iraq- an essential part of the general visual art scene- can be traced back to the early twentieth century after the British invasion in 1914. Prior to World War I, traditional visual art forms existed in Iraq, as they did in other parts of the Ottoman world, such as Syria and Egypt, in the form of traditional religious icons among the mass Muslim population. Most common among the wide Muslim community were the conventional religious narratives: images of the precinct of the Ka'ba and the

Mosque of the Prophet in Medina. Especially interesting were portraits of Shi'i imams and narrative of the Kerbala event known as "Ashura" of 680 C.E. among the Shi'is.¹² With the colonial age, European styles and visual taste poured into Iraqi society through reproductions of nineteenth-century neoclassical and romantic works among the small circle of governmental officers, professionals, autocrats, the educated, and other elite circles in Baghdad, Musil, Basra, and a few other cities. This trend continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century. During World War II, several Polish artists arrived in Baghdad with the Allied forces and introduced variant modes of Expressionist styles that noticeably would impact Iraqi pioneer artists.

Iraq's pioneer modern artists, who studied art in Europe, were followed by succeeding generations who were trained in different parts of the world and acquired diverse experience from Europe, the Soviet Union, China, the United States, and the Arab world. They brought back multiple experiences and a wealth of literary and technical skills.¹³ They also transmitted prevalent styles along with their own interpretive individual styles. New mediums, techniques, aesthetics, and political ideologies also were introduced through their teaching. These artists, along with other artists, visiting from Europe and elsewhere, taught at Iraqi art schools and became conduits of international styles, disseminated in the newly forming modern Iraqi art scene.¹⁴

Public monuments of this time were nominal, consisting of imitation of European equestrian statues for the Iraqi monarch figures or other military leaders, such as that of the British general, Maude, known as "the conqueror of Baghdad", once stood by the British Embassy on the Tigris river in Baghdad; or the statue of King Faisal I and his son, King Ghazi, and grandson, King Faisal II. This tradition of European art continued through the secular regimes that ensued from 1958 to 2003. Monumental, realistic statues of full-size images of historic personalities, and successive presidents like General Abdul Karim Qasim, Abd al-Salam Arif, Ahmed Hassan al-Baker, and Saddam Hussein were installed in Baghdad, as well as other major cities.

Unfortunately most of these monuments were destroyed due to the turbulent political conditions in Iraq and general public ignorance since 1958 and even before. At the present sensitive and critical political situation, there is an urgent need to take every necessary measure to protect Iraq cultural patrimony because all existing monuments-ancient and modern are vulnerable. During the early years of the occupation of 2003,

¹² The annual Ashura rituals include ceremonial processions, re-enactment of the tragic event, and different public performances during the first ten days of every Muharram (the first Hijri month) in Kerbala, Najaf, Kadhumayn and other cities in Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, and other countries. Many large murals depicting details of the battlefield, narratives, and dramatic scenes of the event would be on display in public spaces and awans of major mosques, Takyas, and Husayniyyahs - buildings used for rituals, lectures, funerals, and displays of icons, and to accommodate visitors and pilgrims.

¹³ For general information on the development of Modern Iraqi visual art see for example J. Ibrahim Jabra, *Juthur al-Fan al-Iraqi*, Baghdad, 1986; Sartec and Nizar Salim, *Contemporary Iraqi Art*, Lausanne, 1977. There are also scattered articles in periodicals and magazines such as UR, Funun Arabiyyah, Al-Wasiti, and others.

¹⁴ For the subject of modern Iraqi visual art see Hashim al-Tawil, "The Formation of Identity in Modern Iraqi Visual Art: A New Perspective" Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (BRIIFS), Volumes 8, Numbers 1 & 2, 2006, PP. 98-118

multiple threats emanated from the mishandling of these monuments by the US-British occupying forces, religious fanaticism, and political interest of different groups.¹⁵

National Iraqi Modern Art

During the period of 1958-2003, a national political identity defined the country: Iraq was a founder and active member of the Arab League, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and a member of the Non-Alliance Movement (NAM). Iraq also participated in the war against the Zionist incursion in Palestine in 1948, 1963, and 1967.

With plenty of revenue generated by the nationalization of oil in the 1960s and early 1970s, a great deal of cultural and artistic interest emerged with ample financial support, and Baghdad became a center of Pan-Arab cultural and political activity.

Ba'ath art of the 70,s and 80,s did not present a defined theory or specific style, and the official authority at the Ministry of Culture and Information did not dictate strict guidelines for technical or stylistic characteristics of that concept. It was left loose to the interpretation of artists individually. Major aspects of that undeveloped concept emerged throughout the 1970s and 1980s and culminated especially after the end of the Iraq-Iran war, with mass production of mostly low quality works in all media. However, that wave of mediocre taste did not affect the work of leading artists, who continued their serious and uncompromised aesthetic research.¹⁶



Public Monuments in Baghdad (1960-1980)

A major example of public monuments from this period is the *Liberation Monument (Nasb al-Tahreer)*, located in the heart of Baghdad. The architectural design of the structure was conceived by Iraqi architect Rifat Chadirji¹⁷ and the visual sculptural composition was created by Jawad Salim, an eminent Iraqi pioneer artist and catalyst of national Iraqi identity in art. It was completed by Iraqi sculpture Mohammed Ghani Hikmet, upon Salim's untimely death in 1961. Its iconography summarizes the struggle and determination of the Iraqi people to gain their liberty and political independence in the July 14 Revolution of 1958, which ended the monarchy and British control over Iraq.

¹⁵ See the abuse and destruction of historic sites and religious buildings mentioned above.

¹⁶ While the Iraq-Iran war was waging with devastating effect major Iraqi artists were actively engaged in refined artistic activities, participating in major international exhibits and harvesting major awards and recognitions. Along this process they developed competent visual experience with clear Iraqi identity.

¹⁷ Rifat Chadirji, *Al Ukhaider and the Crystal Palace*, London 1991, pp. 93-99 .

This monument is a direct defiance to the British colonial role in Iraq, and the invading British partners would have liked to see it down. In fact, immediately after the invasion, in May, 2003, a call to take down this monument came from an astronomer, who publicly claimed that it contains “black magic” that has been emanating wickedness, and causing destruction and catastrophe in Iraq since its installation was begun in 1959.¹⁸

The second example is the *Monument of the Unknown Soldier*, originally constructed shortly after 1958, in the center of al-Firdaws Square—the same location where US troops toppled former president Saddam Hussien’s statue and was televised live on the eve of the U.S. invasion of Baghdad on April 9, 2003. The old version of this monument was designed by Rifat Chadirji who was inspired by the great Iwan or portal of the palace of Sassanian King Khusraw I at Ctesiphon in Mada’in – also known as Salman pack north of Baghdad, but also recalled the Gateway Arch of St. Louis, in the state of Missouri, USA. The monument was constructed in 1962 to commemorate Iraqis who had fallen while fighting for their country. This structure was demolished in 1982.¹⁹ In the same year a gigantic, complex *Monument to the Unknown Soldier* was designed by Iraqi sculptor Khalid al-Rahhal and constructed in what is known now as the Green Zone. It combines a falling shield with a spiral shaft, representing a lowered Iraqi flag, with its legendary Pan-Arab colors, which were inspired by the work of the fourteenth-century Iraqi poet, Safiyy al-Din al Hulli: “White are our deeds, black are our battles, green are our meadows, and red are our swords.”²⁰



The monument also contains a museum, burial space, and other ceremonial facilities. Since the invasion, this complex has been occupied by U.S. forces and is used as a military camp, similar to other facilities in the area called the Green Zone and closed to the public. This monument conveys both national and pan-Arab identity. It commemorates fallen Iraqis in all wars, including wars with Israel in 1948, 1963, and

¹⁸ The Azzaman daily newspaper published an interview with an astronomer who came on al-Iraqiyyah Satalite TV and announced his claim. See Azzaman Daily Newspaper, Thursday May 1, 2003, P.20. See also Lutfiyah al-Dilaymi notes on the event at Azzaman, Issue 1518, 5/31/2003.

¹⁹ See Chadirji, *Al Ukhaider and the Crystal Palace*, London 1991, pp. 93-99.

²⁰ See “Flags of the World Website http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/iq_evol.html;

CIA - The World Factbook -- **Flag of Iraq** at <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/flags/iz-flag.html>.

1967. As the new identity of Iraq is being molded with undermining Arab nationalism, the new attitude will probably look indifferently to such Pan-Arab symbol.

This type of secular art continued and was incorporated into official public monuments in Baghdad and other major cities in Iraq. Meanwhile, religious portable public art (icons) continued to be displayed in public spaces especially in the streets of Kerbala and Najaf during the month of Muharram. These icons also were displayed at major Shi'i shrines in Kerbala, Najaf, Baghdad, and other cities.²¹

The Height of the Ba'th Era (1979-2003)

In 1978, the Iranian Shi'i leader Imam Ayat Allah Kohmaini assumed rule of Iran, putting an end to the monarchical, secular regime of Mohammed Ridha Pahlawi. The "Islamic revolution" also ended U.S. political and military presence in Iran. Almost immediately, Saddam Hussein came to power in Iraq and, months later, war broke out between Iraq and Iran, and lasted for eight years. During that period, many public monuments and major works of art were installed in Iraq, some of which were reflections of the war. On both sides of the border, propagandistic art was being produced for the masses. Murals were installed in plazas and intersections, and at the entrances of cities in Iraq and Iran.

Both countries constructed war monuments—the *Blood Fountains* in Tehran and the *Shaheed (Martyr) Monument*, by Ismail Fattah, in Baghdad. Both countries commemorated their fallen ones: the Iranian memorial was direct, emotional, graphic, and dramatic, while the Iraqi monument was aesthetically mature, well developed by eminent Iraqi artist- the late Isma'il Fattah al-Turk and constructed on a grand scale. The *Shaheed (Martyr) Monument* is located in the eastern part of Baghdad (Rasafa), near Qanat Street and Palestine Street. Opened in 1983, it commemorates Iraqi soldiers killed in the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran. The complex comprises the monument, exhibition spaces, museum, a library, a cafeteria, lecture hall, and support facilities, as well as green areas, children's playground, parking lots, walkways, and bridges over a vast, artificial lake. In the middle of the lake is an island of two circular platforms—one above the other (190 meters in diameter)—on which the monument is set.²²

²¹ See note 12.

²² Details of the monument was provided by the artist Isma'il al-Turk during a meeting with the author in 1990 in Baghdad and also published in different literature. See the official brief publication on the project *Al-Shaheed Monument and Museum*, published in Baghdad by the ministry of Information and Mitsubishi Corp, Tokyo, Japan. Since the invasion much details and images on the US military activities in Iraq have been published on line by globalsecurity.org. The site and many others contain basic information and images of the monument. See also archnet.org.



The giant turquoise-tiled dome interprets an ancient Iraqi, Arab, and Islamic architectural form and is meant to enclose the soul of the martyr. The dome is split into two halves, each shifted slightly off center, and sheltering an eternal flame -representing the ever-living martyr wrapped in the Iraqi flag in the first half, and the Spring as a symbol of unselfish giving in the second half.²³ The structure is built on two levels under the platform and comprises a circular wall displayed the names of the more than half-million who died in or are missing from the war. Names are engraved on massive marble walls forming a rotunda. Since the invasion, this compound has been used as a U.S. military base, and the rotunda has been used for several functions, including parking for US military vehicles. The whole complex was sealed off to the public since the invasion in 2003. In 2006 the whole complex was converted to serve as the “Establishment of Martyrs. On the website of this new establishment it says: “the only establishment in Iraq which cares the martyr’s family the victims of the extinct Baath”.²⁴

This monument is both a national and a pan-Arab symbol of those killed in the Iraq-Iran war that the former regime in Iraq identified as Qadisiyyat Saddam—in tribute to the historic early Islamic victory over the Persians and the end of the Sassanian Empire in 646 C.E. This event also is known as Qadisiyyat Sa’d in reference to the Muslim General Sa’d ibn abi Waqqas, who led the relatively small Arab army, compared to the formidable Sassanian military armada. The definition of the new “Establishment of Martyrs” is problematic for it contradicts the original definition of commemorating Iraqi martyrs who died in the Iraq-Iran war with their names engraved inside the complex. The monument is equally problematic to the anti-Arab movement that is slowly emerging in Iraq.

The *Qaws al-Nasr (Victory Monument)* is located in Baghdad near the former palace of Saddam Hussein, in the so-called Green Zone. It was conceived and designed by Khalid al-Rahhal in 1985 and constructed after the war with Iran ended in 1988. It also was completed by Iraqi sculptor Mohammed Ghani Hikmet. Its arches are formed by two pairs of swords that meet 40 meters above the ground. The double arch marks the far end of a processional axis. The Arabian sword is held by fists that are said to be modeled on Saddam’s own hands –with his actual enlarged fingerprint on the thump. At the base of the monument are 5000 helmets of killed Iranian soldiers. The guns of Iraqi soldiers

²³ See *Al-Shaheed Monument and Museum* mentioned above p.2.

²⁴ After 2006 the monument site and its facility was passed to the Iraqi government and promptly used as the “Establishment of Martyrs”. See the details in the site <http://www.alshuhadaa.com/en/>

killed in the that war were used to make the bronze alloy from which the arches are cast.²⁵



The Looting of Saddam's Trophies Collection

The *Victory Monument* contains many facilities, including nearby museum that was dedicated to housing the personal collection of gifts given to Saddam Hussein by different heads of state and ambassadors—including a letter from President Ronald Reagan congratulating Hussein on his re-election, and a Texas-style cowboy boot.²⁶ The museum also contains thousands of other items, including hundreds of mediocre art works and portraits of Saddam done by Iraqi and non-Iraqi artists, both professionals and amateurs. It also houses gifts from dignitaries, Arab and non-Arab delegations, and general Iraqi citizens. After the U.S. invasion, the museum and facilities of this monument were designated as headquarters to the Iraqi Memory Foundation founded by Kan'an Makkiya- an adamant collaborator with the invaders, and is overseeing the so-called de-Ba'athification Program, inspired by the European de-Nazification program.²⁷ In 2005 a plan was announced to convert the monument and its facility to a museum for the display and remembrance of “the Ba’th atrocities”, similar to the Holocaust museums,²⁸ and in 2010 a conflicting governmental orders leaked that the monument was ought to be demolished and that some parts were actually removed.²⁹

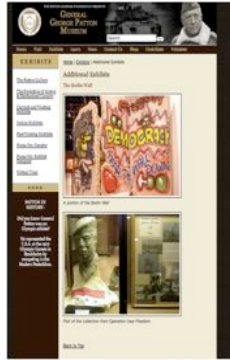
²⁵ Information on the details and measurements of the monuments are scattered throughout different media outlets and Internet sites. See for example Globalsecurity.org; Iraqi Ministry of Culture website; Iraqi Fine Arts website. See also Kanan Makiya, *The Monument*, New York 2004. Mr. Makiya was instrumental in promoting the concept of vulgarity in these monuments where he claims in several publications (*Cruelty and Silence*, *Republic of Fear*, and *The Monument*) in the 1990's that these public projects represent violence, and are done in rather vulgar taste. He was also instrumental in smuggling the Iraqi archive of the former government and provide it to the American authorities and possibly Israel.

²⁶ See the report by Jeremy Scahill published in October 23, 2002 at Iraqjournal.org

²⁷ For details on the nature and program of the Iraq Memory Foundation see the official website at www.iraqmemory.org

²⁸ See above reference.

²⁹ See Radio Free Iraq 02/05/2010 <http://www.iraqhurr.org/content/article/1949938.html>



Many of the gifts in that museum were looted by American military officers and what is known of them are on display in local military units' museums in Texas and elsewhere. Such trophies are in The Gordon Highlanders Museum in Aberdeen; The 4th Infantry Division Museum, Fort Hood, Texas; The Fort Luis Museum in Washington; General George Patton Museum; and the 82nd Airborne Museum, Fort Bragg to name few.³⁰ These stolen trophies are the property of the Iraqi people and should be returned to the Iraqi custody.

The double arch of the *Victory Monument* glorifies Saddam Hussein and has been interpreted as a vulgar and crude display.³¹ However, its visual presentation does reflect the emotions of average Arabs in the Middle East, for it carries traditional manifestations of power and allegorical triumph that harmonize with classical Arab heritage, especially that of the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods. Interestingly, this monument has had strong visual impact in few Iraqi cities where substandard version replicas were produced. It is also worth mentioning that in Doha, the capital of Qatar, a local artist constructed a smaller and less dramatic version of the same idea.³²

The concept, iconography, and physical materials of the *Victory Monument* are sensitive and present a direct insult to Iran, which has great political leverage on the Shi'i leaders in the present Iraqi government. Additionally, converting it to a museum that echoes the Holocaust model will not resonate well in a country that has been an adversary of Israel since 1948. The removal of this work seems even more likely than the removal of the other monuments described above.

Other Buildings with Artworks

The Al-Rashid Hotel is an important case in this field. This hotel was designed to be a presidential high quality facility to accommodate kings and presidents of states during conferences and international events. Built in the early eighties of the twentieth century, and furnished with original works of arts including hundreds of original prints by artists such as Rafi Nasiri, Dhiya Azzawi, Hashim Al-Tawil, Mohammed Ali Shakir, and others. These works were distributed in the different master bedrooms and suites. The hotel was

³⁰ See for instance: <http://www.toppled Saddam.org/aberdeen.html>;
<http://www.toppled Saddam.org/fort%20bragg.html>;
http://www.generalpatton.org/exhibits/patton_gallery.asp;
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/1/uk_news/england/somerset/2961266.stm;

³¹ See for instance Kanan Makiya, *The Monument*, New York 2004, pp. 49-52.

³² For details visual images of the Qatari version see <http://fr.petrophoto.net/photo-monument-137-1157.htm>

severely damaged during the bombing and invasion and the fate of those works is unknown.

A related event is worth mentioning, which shows the use of visual images in the political communication in international conflict. On June 26, 1993 President Clinton ordered air strike on al-Mukhabarat –secret police facility in Baghdad. The bombing also included the entrance of Al-Rashid Hotel and the home of Iraqi artist Layla Al-Attar who died in that bombing, and her daughter suffered terrible injuries. The media claimed that this was a mistaken target, but the fact is that both locations- the entrance of the hotel and Layla al-Attar were carefully targeted.



Back in 1991 and after the bombing of Iraq and the catastrophic evacuation of Kuwait, and in a televised speech, Saddam called G.H.W. Bush (George Herbert Walker Bush) a traitor and compared him to the Biblical Judas who betrayed Jesus Christ. Political analysts interpreted the remark, as a hint to a previous broken deal between the two figures. Soon after that Saddam ordered a mosaic portrait of Bush on the entrance of Al-Rashid Hotel with the sentence “Bush is Criminal” in Arabic and English, where members of the UN Nuclear inspection team and other international figures would stay. For years these guests would step on that mosaic portrait which according to some unconfirmed sources, may have been designed by the late Layla Al-Attar, who was at the time the director of Saddam Center for the Arts. There was also the reported attempt of assassinating former President G. H. W. Bush during his visit to Kuwait- allegedly planned by the Iraqi government- according to Kuwait, which took place shortly before the bombing of Al-Attar’s residence.³³ The mosaic was restored and guests kept on stepping on to the day of the invasion. It was removed immediately after the US army entered Baghdad in 2003.

The former Saddam International Airport – re named Bush International Airport by the US occupying forces and later Baghdad International Airport, contained many original murals paintings (1 meter x 1 meter to 3 meters x 10 meters) by major Iraqi prominent artists including Nori al-Rawi, Kadhum Haider, Ismail al-Turk, Ismail al-Shaikhly, Rafi al-Nasiri, Dhiya al-Azzawi, Hashim Al-Tawil, Walid Sheet, Salman Abbas, Mohammed Mahriddin, Salim al-Dabbagh, and many others. No account to the fate of these works has been reported.

³³ See the mosaic portrait at <http://www.hyil.com/vb/showthread.php?t=163498>. Listen to Clinton speech at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6mpWa7wNr5M>

Small-Scale Monuments

This category includes many small monuments with political and/or historical iconography, primarily mostly in sculptural form, but also in the form of murals. The life-size statue of the Abd al-Muhsin al-Sa'doun was designed by the Italian sculptor Pietro Canonica, and depicts the Iraqi prime minister who committed suicide in 1929, after failing to reconcile the British colonial agenda with the Iraqi peoples' demand for independence. Originally installed in 1933, the statue was relocated more than once, but has been at al-Nasr Plaza since 1962. The original bronze figure was dismantled and stolen on June 6, 2003, and a new fiberglass version has been installed by al-Sa'doun's family. The reason for removing the bronze statue is not clear and it is interesting to speculate on the political motivation behind it.³⁴

The *Freedom Mural* –also called al-Sha'ab (*the people*) and *Celebration of Victory* mural by prominent Iraqi pioneer artist Fa'iq Hasan is found in al-Umma Plaza in Baghdad, about one hundred meters away from Jawad Salim's *Tahreer* monument. It was erected soon after 1958 and represents the Iraqi peoples' hopes for freedom from British colonial occupation. This mural was subject to partial abuse by members of the Ba'th authority in 1963 but otherwise still stands at the original location. Its fate is tied to the *Tahreer* monument.³⁵

The fate of these public monuments and the content of related museums is very critical. Most of these monuments and museums were constructed during the Ba'th era and have direct reference to the Ba'th ideology and politics. The chaos caused by the invasion and occupation enticed rapid increase of Iranian influence on the Iraqi political scene and been coupled by the rise of anti-Arab sentiment in Iraq, demonstrated by the undermining of the historic Arabic-Islamic cultural identity of Iraq. To this sensitive situation is added the obvious ignorance of the U.S. military authority regarding the culture of Iraq. There is a fear that these monuments may suffer alteration, removal, or even destruction in due course.

³⁴ In 1923 and during PM Abd al-Muhsin al-Sadoun's term, three senior Shi'a religious leaders: Grand Ayatollahs Sayyed Abu Al-Hasan Al-Asfahani, Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Al-Na'eeni and Sheikh Mohammed Mahdi Al-Khalisi were deported to Iran for their opposition to the government. The removal of the statue may have been instigated by sympathizers with Iran, or it was simply stolen for the monetary value of the bronze.

³⁵ Many statues of general Abd al-Karim Qasim who led the 1958 revolution existed in Bagdad and other major cities but were destroyed in 1963. Other statues of president Abd al-Salam Arif and his brother Abd al-Rahman Arif who reigned in Iraq between 1963-1968 were destroyed after 1968.



Countless works representing the genre of political propaganda have been removed from the streets and public spaces of Iraq after the invasion. Thousands of mural paintings of Saddam Hussein in various propaganda poses—including riding horseback in military uniform, leading a victorious army, praying, sharing work, and mingling with people in different costumes. These mediocre works were utilized by Iraqi authorities to mobilize public support for the central government, especially during and after the war with Iran. Murals were installed at every major entrance to cities, villages and governorates, and at public places and buildings. Certain categories of artisans and professional portraitists specialized in making these images. Most of the sculptures were freestanding, but some also were sculptural relief compositions. They varied in size, quality, and theme. Most of these statues were confiscated, damaged, stolen, or dismantled, and the bronze probably was sold as scrap.³⁶

Those monuments in Baghdad include the statue of former president Ahmed Hasan al-Bakr, the sculptural monument of ‘Abd al-Wahab al-Ghrairy³⁷, group statues of May 1941 military coup attempt in al-Tayaran Square³⁸, the group statues of the Martyrs of

³⁶ The televised image of US soldiers toppling the bronze statue of Saddam in al-Firdaus plaza in Baghdad on April 9, 2003 was one of far more similar events photographed and published in different media. There were also images of US military units bulldozing small monuments with murals containing portraits of Saddam. Other published pictures show rioting Iraqi people destroying, hammering, and burning such murals and some cases defacing or dragging the remains of statues of Saddam. Hundreds of images of such were published in local Iraqi newspapers such as Azzaman, Arab media such as Al-Hayat, Asharq Alawsat, Al-Ahram, and major international media outlet such as Time, Newsweek, CNN, ABC, NBC, BBC, CBC, Reuters, Associated Press, the Guardians, France Press, Der Spiegel, and many others. Mentioned images are found throughout these publications and in the online archives of these media. The author has extensive collection of these images.

³⁷ Al-Ghrairy was killed during a failed attempt to assassinate former president Abd al-Karim Qasim in 1959. Saddam collaborated in the attempt and was injured. The statue was commissioned by Saddam as a monument to the first “Ba’th martyr” but destroyed by rioting people immediately after the invasion. In July 2005 a statue of Abd al-Karim Qasim was installed in the same location. See Asharq Alawsat Daily News, London, Issue 9726, July 15, 2005.

³⁸ This monument depicts group portraits of air force officers who led a pro-Germany military coup in 1941 against the British supported Iraqi government. See Arab Renewal.com, 7/15/2003

Um al-Tubul³⁹, the statue of Adnan Khair Allah Tilfah, Minister of Defense during the Iraq-Iran war, the “al-Maseerah Monument” created by Khalid al-Rahhal,⁴⁰ the Iraqi POW Monument, called al-‘Aseer al-‘Iraqi,⁴¹ the statue of the Iraqi pilot Abdullah al-Lu’aibi, who participated in the Iraqi-Iran war and was known for his kamikaze style attack⁴², and the Michael Aflaq Mausoleum, with a sculptural monument and a museum⁴³.



In Basra, the statues of the “Commanders of Qadisiyyat Saddam” were destroyed.⁴⁴ In Nasiriyyah a strong, but short-lived rumor claimed that the invading British forces destroyed the monumental statue of “Mohammed Sa’id al-Habbubi” the famous Shi’i leader who viciously fought the British occupation in the 1920s. The statue is still standing in the center of the city though vulnerable. Many monumental statues of Saddam and other political and historical personalities were reported to have been destroyed throughout Iraq.⁴⁵

Three other, smaller monuments in Baghdad are worth mentioning. One is at the entrance of Saddam Palace by the suspended bridge. It commemorates the Ba’thist military coupe of 14 Ramadham, 1963. Another is a monument by a Spanish artist, depicting Iraqi soldiers, found near the Ministry of Defense in al-Maydan Plaza which was demolished and removed by Governmental order in 2010.⁴⁶ The third is an abstract stone monument

³⁹ This monument depicted Ba’th members who were killed in Musil during the political clash with Iraqi communists in what is known as Um-al-Tubul event in 1959. Um al-Tubul mosque was renamed to “Ibn Taymiyyah” first and “Um al-Qura” later.

⁴⁰ This monument was destroyed by an edict by the Iraqi Memory Foundation in late 2005. The original iconography of this monument was suppose to represent the Iraqi heritage of Mesopotamian civilization, but was modified later to politically connect the ideology of the Ba’th movement with that heritage. See Salah Hasan in Al-Mada Daily News at <http://www.almadapaper.com/sub/12-552/p13.htm>

⁴¹ “Al-Maseera” and “Al-Aseer” monuments were destroyed by order of the Iraqi government in coordination with the recommendations of the “Debathification Commission.

⁴² This statue was sculpted by Mohammed Ghani Hikmet.

⁴³ This monument and the tomb of Aflaq were constructed near the palace of Saddam inside what is known now as the “Green Zone”. The monument, mausoleum, and the museum were razed to the ground in 2005 by the American military.

⁴⁴ These sixty-one statues were installed on the Basra Cornish along the Iraqi bank of Shat Al-Arab. All statues pointed to Iran direction- an iconographic gesture symbolizing accusation and blaming the start of the war on Iran.

⁴⁵ Several monumental statues of Turkmen leaders in the city of Kirkuk were destroyed, obviously reflecting the Kurdish-Turkmen tension in that city.

⁴⁶ See Radio Free Iraq 02/05/2010 <http://www.iraqhurr.org/content/article/1949938.html>

called “halat al-Liqa” the Meeting” by Ala’ Bashir, in the al-Iskan district and represents the meeting of the Iraqi people and “the leader Saddam”. This monument was also demolished by government order in 2010.⁴⁷



The Destruction of Sculptural Figures

The iconoclastic campaign did not stop at the political symbols of Saddam’s regime, but included images of historic Islamic figures, including a bust of Abu Ja’far al-Mansour, the founder of Baghdad in the eighth century;⁴⁸ and a statue of the classical tenth-century Arab poet al-Mutanabbi, in Baghdad.⁴⁹ The artist- Mohammed Ghani Hikmet has a special feeling for that statue which has been abused ignorantly.⁵⁰ In 2010 the ministry of culture announced that the statue has been repaired and will be installed in the original location. However, there has been another statue for al-Mutanabbi by another artist installed in 2010 on the shore of the Tigris River in Baghdad close by the al-Mutannabbi street. There are many more monuments representing historic figures such as al-Rasafi, al-Kindi, al-Farabi, al-Kadhimi, to name few, and they are all part of Iraq’s modern history that needs preservation.

⁴⁷ See previous note.

⁴⁸ The monumental bust of al-Mansour was blown up along with its concrete base during the early hours of 10/14/2005. Shi’a historians traditionally accuse al-Mansour of persecuting Shi’i Alawis, imprisoning Shi’i imams, and poisoning Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq. Al-Mansour also personifies the glory of Arab nationalism. Though has not been proven, but the Shi’i-Iranian political connection is hard to exclude as a motive for the destruction.

⁴⁹ Al-Mutanabbi-an Iraqi poet born in Kufa, known for his pride in Arab culture but also accused of being heretic. His monumental statue was dismantled and removed from its location in front of the National Library in Baghdad by the Iraqi authority in late 2005 or early 2006. In January 2006 a spokesperson from the Ministry of Culture announced that the removal of the statue was for the purpose of restoring and cleaning it, and that the statue will be reinstalled in its location when the work is done. See Asharq Alawsat, issue 9911, January 16, 2006.

⁵⁰ See Mohammed Ghani interview in Al-Ittihad, July 10, 2007
<http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=121832&y=2007&article=full>

Iraq's Cultural Identity

Reading through variety of sources reflecting opinions of Iraqis inside and outside the country, there is, it seems, growing belief that the destruction of public monuments in Iraq is but one chapter of a program aimed at stripping the country and its people of their historical memory and cultural identity. Other chapters include the looting of the Iraq museum and other collections of antiquities, former “Saddam Arts Center” which housed the bulk of contemporary Iraqi art, the burning of major libraries and manuscript collections, the abuse of archeological sites, and the systematic liquidation and elimination of Iraqi scholars, scientists and academics.

According to this perspective, the campaign also manifested itself in attempt to changing the national flag and constitution, removing Arabic and Islamic identity, and changing the demographic composition of the country. At work also is the removal and changing of public memory by destroying public art works.

Victims to this campaign- as mentioned above are the sizable public monuments—mostly in Baghdad but also in other major cities, as well. These usually take an architectural-sculptural form and include facilities such as museums, galleries, conference halls, service places, libraries, research centers, and other public facilities. The Martyr Monument, the Monument of the Unknown Soldier, the Parade Plaza, and the Victory Monument in Baghdad are important examples, along with many other public facilities, such as the Baghdad Theme Park (*Madinat al-Al'ab*), Baghdad Island (*Jazirat Baghdad*), and the presidential palaces. All of these have been taken over by American forces and conveniently used as military facilities.

The Rise of Sectarian and Ethnic Art

Against this cultural setback and the continued fragmentation in the geo-ethnic map of Iraq, the tendency for further cocooning became obvious, while the centrality of the state grow weak. Now there is Shi'i art and Kurdish art instead of Iraqi art. In Kerbala new public monuments have been commissioned and installed in major intersections such as “the Ship of Imam Hussein- Safinat al-Najat”, the “Sword of Imam Ali”, Al-Intifadhah monument, Al-Kawther River monument, and monumental posters portraits of Shi'i clerics beside the historic narratives of Ashura.



Similarly in Kurdistan-north of Iraq giant murals depicting Barazani and Talibani are seen, as well as statues and monuments represent Kurdish Bishmarga.



Restoration Efforts

In 2005 news from the Iraqi ministry of culture indicated that the Iraqi government has requested that the U.S. occupying forces release these facilities and open them to the public, and allow conversion of the presidential palaces to cultural facilities. The Iraqi government announced in late November, 2005, that a special committee has finished a study and evaluation of all public monuments, and that a plan with time-table has been set up to remove these monuments “except the *Liberation* and *Martyr* monuments. The announcement also indicated a plan to design and construct “20 new historic symbols to “commemorate” Iraq and replace the demolished monuments.⁵¹

In 2008 the Administration of the city of Baghdad announced a program to repair, re-install and refurbish number of public monuments including Al-Mansur statue in Mansur city, Baghdad; refurbish the statue of Motherhood by Khalid al-Rahhal; the mosaic mural of Fa’iq Hassan, and Al-Kadhimi Statue by Al-Turk where the bronze cane of the statue had been stolen. The statue of Shahrazad was repaired after losing an arm during the abuse and looting. Abu Nu’as statue by al-Turk also lost a piece (the bronze drinking goblet). Jawad Salim’s monument was due for cleaning according to that announcement. There were other bronze sculptures looted, and sold as scrap. The announcement notes that these works were removed, melted and sold as scrap bronze at cheap price (one US dollar for each kilo of bronze).⁵²

Since the invasion there has not been any systematic official inventory of Iraqi cultural losses, and the fate of many museums, archeological sites, and important cultural places is still unknown. Examples of these endangered places are the Qadisiyyat Saddam Panorama and Museum at Mada’in near Baghdad, which was looted and burned down

⁵¹ There are more details on the plans of the Debathification Commission in regard to the public monuments and their fate. See the Iraqi Memory Foundation website, and the Iraqi ministry of culture website for relevant details.

⁵² See the report of Amaanat Baghdad published on 08/15/2008 at <http://www.non14.net/display.php?id=2328>

after the invasion⁵³; the contents of the demolished Museum of Aflaq and the Ba’th Museum at the “Green Zone”; the contents of the Iraqi Military Museum, the Auja Museum, the Museum of the May Revolution, and the Museum of the July 17 Revolution in Baghdad.⁵⁴

The fate of these public monuments and the content of related museums is very critical and will be determined by many political and social factors, both internal and external. Most of these monuments and museums were constructed during the Ba’th era and have direct reference to that ideology. The alliance and power of the Kurd-Shi’i block in Iraq is coupled with rapid increase of Iranian influence on the Iraqi political scene. This internal-external pressure—observed and endorsed but not necessarily administered by the U.S. occupation has facilitated the rise of anti-Arab sentiment in Iraq, demonstrated by the undermining of historic Arabic-Islamic cultural identity of Iraq. To this sensitive situation is added the obvious ignorance of the U.S. military authority regarding the culture of Iraq. There is a fear that these monuments and many cultural facilities may suffer alteration, removal, or even destruction in due course.

Many political factors will play role in the outcome of this situation. The Iranian impact on the Iraqi Shi’i parties, which can influence decision-makers in Baghdad to remove or alter structures pertaining to the Saddam era—especially the *Victory Arch*, the *Shaheed Monument*, and the Qadisiyya Panorama and museum at Mada’in. On this line, the Kurdish block most probably will endorse such action for it undermines the Arab sentiment. A third source of power in this equation is the rise of Islamic fanaticism which will eventually and erroneously lead to sort of iconoclasm, and prohibition against figural representation. This group would not only promote the destruction of all figurative public monuments, but architectural structures and “excessive” religious buildings as well.⁵⁵ As mediocre or “vulgar” these monuments might appear, and as unsophisticated as their aesthetics might be, they represent an era in the history of Iraq, its culture, and its politics. They have become historic evidence and archival cultural material and should be preserved.

Urgent Measures

As the political situation in Iraq worsens and as the division of Iraqi society intensifies, the future of public monuments, art, and culture in general looks grim. Iraqi authorities, with the help of international cultural organizations should take proper, firm, and responsible measures to preserve and protect Iraq culture. Cultural offices, museums, galleries, and related centers should be rehabilitated with qualified and learned professionals to run the cultural scene the right way and in the right direction. Qualified and well-educated professors should teach in the Fine Art colleges and institutes. These facilities need an urgent rehabilitation, equipments, libraries, and updating.

⁵³ See previous note and reference in the mentioned report.

⁵⁴ See above notes 1 & 2.

⁵⁵ Certain fundamental Muslim groups call for the destruction of shrines and tombs of imams and shaykhs. More radical groups call for the destructions of all Shi’i shrines and religious sites. Although the destruction of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra on February 22, 2006 has not yet been confirmed to have been committed by Sunni fundamentalists, but if so, the incident marked a dangerous turn in the Iraqi civil strife.

Unqualified and inadequate people working – by the quota allocation- in the cultural offices should be dismissed and replaced by qualified knowledgeable professionals. Similar steps are needed in other sectors such as education and higher education. Sectarianism, ethnic division, quota allocation, and tribal favoritism should not be honored. In this civilized age evaluation of good citizenship and service to the country is based on the merit of personal quality, education and performance, and not on any other factor.

The damage that has been inflicted on the culture of Iraq was primarily instigated by the ill planned and ill-executed invasion of Iraq. It is very realistic that the American and British authorities admit their mistake and responsibilities in that destruction and provide their financial, and professional assistance to rebuild Iraq and especially the destroyed culture of Iraq as reparation. Similar reparation and assistance measures should be applied to other impacted fields by the illegal 2003 invasion. Such positive measures will help foster new and mutual relationship based on respect and appreciation between the people of Iraq and the people of the United States.

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