

Writing
THE MODERN
HISTORY OF IRAQ
Historiographical and Political Challenges

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**THE MODERN
HISTORY OF IRAQ**
Historiographical and Political Challenges



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WRITING THE MODERN HISTORY OF IRAQ Historiographical and Political Challenges

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In the aftermath of the American invasion of 2003, the establishment of an international commission to 're-write' contemporary Iraqi history to accompany the long-term process of national reconciliation ended in failure and the project was abandoned after a year of meetings and conferences. The idea of the conference to be held in Geneva stemmed, therefore, from the will to bring a critical spirit to bear on some of the more debated and often controversial items facing social scientists dealing with the recent history of Iraq. Peter Sluglett and Hamit Bozarslan joined the steering committee to finalize and advertise the content of the symposium. An international conference was organized on 6–8 November 2008 at the Graduate Institute in Geneva.

Bringing together thirty junior and senior researchers of different nationalities and from different disciplines (history, sociology, political science and anthropology), it was intended that the symposium should take stock of the historiography produced on and in the country over the past half century, that it should discuss the prevailing narratives and paradigms of interpretation of Iraqi politics, society, history and culture, contribute to assessing areas where research is lacking, and suggest new grids of analysis.

The meeting was made possible thanks to the financial support of the Swiss National Science Foundation, the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, the Union Pétrolière Suisse, the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, the SSMEIC and the CCDP. We are also particularly thankful to Dr. Oliver Jütersonke, head of research at CCDP, and the Centre's administrative

assistant, Ms Sandra Reimann, for having facilitated the practical organization of the event at the Graduate Institute. Finally, Ms Mimi Kirk has patiently prepared the index of this volume.

Although the publication of this volume has taken more time than forecast, the different topics approached have not lost their timeliness. Most of the conference papers have been included in the volume and a few others were commissioned in the aftermath of the symposium. We sincerely thank all the contributors to the volume for their work, their willingness to adapt and revise their texts, and above all for their patience.

The Editors
August 2012

Note on Transliteration and References

1. Transliteration has been kept as consistent and simple as possible. No diacritical marks have been used.
2. The electronic references cited in each paper can be found at the end of the paper: full titles of books and articles can be found in the Bibliography.

INTRODUCTION

Riccardo Bocco and Jordi Tejel

The official aim of the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was to put an end to Saddam Husayn's regime and establish a viable democracy that would, it was hoped, serve as a model for other Middle Eastern countries. New institutions and elites were to replace the old ones. The period of Ba'th party domination (1968–2003) was to come to an end through the “de-Ba'thification” of Iraq along the lines of the de-Nazification of Germany after the Second World War. Thus the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), led by L. Paul Bremer, issued a decree on May 16, 2003 promoting the de-Ba'thification¹ of Iraqi society in order to lay the foundations for a “new” Iraq. This process, which was abandoned in 2004, had been applied mostly to military and educational institutions.

As for the latter, the ideologues of the CPA particularly targeted history and historians, ignoring both the intellectual openness of some Iraqi historians and the existence of a dissident historical tradition.² The de-Ba'thification policy had two objectives as far as the re-writing of Iraqi history was concerned. On the one hand, CPA officials favored the production of new textbooks, complete with a USAID-approved “re-interpretation of Iraqi, Arab, and Islamic history” (Al-Takriti, 2005, p. 25). On the other hand, educational reforms were aimed at the replacement of an academic system perceived as dominated and shaped by the primacy of “ideology” with a new system, inspired by some American experiences, founded on the values and ethos of the Liberal Arts (Méténier, 2006, p. 261). In this sense, the CPA encouraged a couple of pilot efforts: The “American Liberal

¹The idea of de-Ba'thification was originally promoted by some Iraqi exiles in the United States. For an account of the evolution of de-Ba'thification policies between 2003 and 2004, see Saghieh (2007: 203–223).

²See Méténier (2006: 261–284).

Arts University of Iraq” and the “College of Democracy,” both located in Northern Iraq.

In the post-Saddam era, the writing of past and recent history was thus assigned a major role in establishing the basis for a national and state identity that would be recognized as legitimate by the majority of Iraqi citizens. In contemporary Iraq, however, where there is a significant vacuum of state power in some parts of the country, the reification of boundaries between Sunnis and Shi‘is and the continuous movement towards autonomy in the Kurdish regions, appears to correspond very little to the model of a “bourgeois democracy” (Sluglett, 2004, pp. 126–127) that would require the integration and adherence of its citizens. Furthermore, and as Charles Tripp puts it, since the very beginning of the Iraqi state in the 1920s, there have been very different, contrasting, and competing ideas about the future and nature of Iraq (Tripp, 2007, pp. 1–2).

Although many Iraqis tried to assess the idea of politics as civility (Zubaida, 2003, pp. 47–61), most political, tribal, and religious actors, even those who challenged the established order, tended to exploit existing networks of family, kin, tribe, ethnicity, or religion to assert control and eventually bring others into line with their vision for the country. This process has always been disruptive: The state has frequently been captured by distinct, usually unrepresentative groups, and it has generally been incapable of socializing the population into accepting the ruler’s vision of society and history other than by resorting to forms of coercion. Furthermore, despite the material resources available to them and their authoritarian methods, “Iraq’s rulers have had little success in forcing the histories of Iraq’s various communities to conform with their own timetables and objectives” (Tripp, 2007, p. 4). In Tripp’s view, authoritarianism combined with the habit of exploiting the fault lines among different sectors in the population has actually deepened social fragmentation. In doing so, Iraqi rulers have subverted the very idea of a “national community,” the final political goal invoked by all of them. In that sense, at least to some extent, the Iraqi case conforms to Migdal’s analysis of state/society relations, in that patrimonialism and authoritarianism in Iraq have taken their toll: “state policy implementation and the outcomes in society have ended up quite different from the state’s original blueprints” (Migdal, 2001, p. 12). In other words, like many other states in the region, the Iraqi state actually implemented a self-destructive policy in that its “practices” have often contradicted the “image” of itself that it has constructed of a dominant, integrated, and autonomous entity.

Indeed, in spite of Ba‘thist policies (e.g., purges, intellectual isolation), especially since 1979, the regime, characterized by authoritarian rule³ and the monopolization of resources by an ‘*asabiyya*, or even a “dynasty” (Bozarslan, 2003, pp. 31–46), was unable to ensure that the multiple histories of the Iraqis were subsumed into a single narrative of state power. The “long decade” of the embargo during the 1990s and the collapse of the regime in 2003 have only multiplied the number of Iraqi narratives.

The “state of violence” (Gros, 2005) into which Iraqi society has sunk since 2003 has reactivated some of the old narratives used by Iraqis to understand and to justify their political engagement over time. These narratives have an impact on their visions of life and of the world and eventually nourish both new self-perceptions and perceptions of the “Other” which in turn reinforce collective imaginaries (Ypersele, 2006, p. 38). In such a context, the uses and abuses of memory (Todorov, 1995) and history by diverse political parties, communities or groups, whether ethnic or sectarian, are a common feature. In that sense, narratives of victimhood provide particular opportunities for constructing, or reinforcing, a sense of endangered group belonging or identity.

With Iraq facing the danger of implosion, which groups — or even segments of the population with their own sub-Iraqi and trans-border references — will be able to impose their visions of history? Is Iraq facing an unavoidable “fragmentation of collective memory”? What is the experience of Iraqi Kurdistan, autonomous *de facto* since 1991? Is Iraq moving towards communalist historical accounts based on wounded memories or on discourses of victimization? Some chapters included in this volume seem to confirm this trend, especially amongst Kurds and Shi‘is, each group claiming an “incomparable” and “unique” form of suffering.

Interestingly, the discourse of victimization of some Iraqi groups must also be analyzed through the lens of a broader phenomenon. Since the 1990s, different conflicts of memory have emerged more generally amongst “minorities” (e.g., Jews, homosexuals, Afro-Americans, etc.), which have suffered

³It is clear that Saddam Husayn’s power was a complex network of patronage and association as well as of mutual dependence. Nevertheless, in the final analysis it was Saddam Husayn who decided which individuals should benefit from privileges, and “which should be reminded of his power in some exemplary way and how far competition amongst them should be encouraged as a means of fragmenting them and harnessing their ambitions to his cause” (Tripp, 2007: 260).

in the past either massive massacres⁴ or strong discrimination. This trend confirms the integration of Iraq, and the Middle East in general, into what Wolfram Eberhard has called *Weltzeit* (universal time), that is, “the time that characterizes an epoch-making context” (Reinhard, 2000, p. 3). Related to this, the claims of some Iraqi actors and the trial of Saddam Husayn place Iraq in the same “regime of historicity” (Hartog, 2003) as European countries marked by some common features: The wish for reparations for past crimes and “mistakes”; the growing intervention of justice within “historical events”; the reading of history through the lens of victimhood; and finally, the growing intervention of international institutions in the master narratives of national and regional histories (Rousso, 2009, p. 215).

What is the historian’s role in the face of a sort of “competition” between victims leading to an inevitable “abuse of memory?” Can, or should, (s)he adjudicate between competing versions of the truth (Rousso, 2009, p. 3)? In order to avoid this kind of trap, historians have underlined the necessity of a critical “re-historicization” of memory and its political as well as identity stakes (Ypersele, 2006, p. 198).⁵ Yet in the face of the “crisis” of History as a science partly due to the “democratization” of the public debate on “historical events” (Gallerano, 1995; Hartog, 2000, pp. 1–14) and to new social demands (“applied history”), the question of the relationship between societies and their past, present and future seems far from closed (Delacroix *et al.*, 2009).

On another level, is it conceivable to write a “distant” history of some Iraqi events? The memory of the present is extremely volatile and fragile. It is also deceptive, because it is saturated with emotion and passion as well as being exposed to an excess of information, to acts of disinformation or misinformation and, in the end, to a lack of meaning (Bozarslan and Harling, 2007, pp. 9–15). The challenges faced by researchers concern the analysis of the past, both in its own terms and also from the point of view of the present. In this respect, the trial and execution of Saddam Husayn raised many questions. The trial was conceived as a moment of memory, but also as an “instrument of history,” hence the necessity of recording it. But what role has been played by historians? How will it be possible from now on to discuss and write the history of the darkest pages of the Ba’thist regime, now that justice has already spoken its last word? Broadly speaking, can

⁴On some of these violent chapters through history, see the volume edited by Mark Levene and Penny Roberts (1999).

⁵See also Bédarida (1997), Chaumont (1997), Rousso (1998), and Todorov (1995).

(Iraqi) historians write a history “on line” (Hartog and Revel, 2001, p. 21)? Can they refuse to do so?

Taking into account all the elements mentioned above, it seems clear that working out a new historical narrative centered on the state is problematic at the very least. Therefore, what materials are needed to reunite plural memories? What should be the aim? After the radical redefinition, through state coercion, of categories such as “bottom,” “top,” “power,” or “society” between 1979–1991, and the devastating effects of the embargo on Iraqi society and of three wars (1980–1988, 1991, 2003) over a period of only 23 years, is it still possible to lay the foundations for a history less centered on power (*hukumat*) and more concerned with transversal dynamics? Is it possible to move in a different direction by focusing on a “History from below”? Can the Iraqi context offer opportunities for a renewed resort to subaltern studies among historians?

The material challenges are also considerable. For historians, written documents and archival materials are essential, although a very wide range of sources is commonly used today. Henri-Irénée Marrou used a very telling image to underline the importance of written materials for historians: “history is made from documents in the same way as the internal combustion engine runs on fuel” (Marrou, 1954, p. 65). In 2003, however, with the fall of the Iraqi regime, many institutions, libraries and archives — including the Baghdad Museum, the National Archives, the Awqaf Library, the Iraqi Academy of Sciences, and *Bayt al-Hikma*⁶ — were looted and/or destroyed. Some documents have been recovered, but others have disappeared for ever. While electronic archives may be available, there are difficulties with scientific control and verification. Consequently, the question arises of the multiplication of sources (written and oral, local, etc.), and of methodological approaches. In this respect, fieldwork might be able to provide a new empirical construction of objects of study and thus of categories of analysis closer to the reality of the internal dynamics of Iraqi society.

Finally, the human dimension cannot be ignored. By 2005, an estimated 10–15% of Iraq’s 16,500 instructors spread across some 20 universities had left the country (Al-Takriti, 2005, p. 24). Others resigned then and subsequently because of death threats from Islamist groups and other gangs: some three hundred have been killed. In this state of violence, what does it

⁶For a detailed account, see Watenpaugh *et al.* (2003).

mean to be a historian in Iraq today, and what meaning do Iraqi historians give to their scholarly discourse?

The history of contemporary Iraq is of course first the history of all Iraqis. Nevertheless, it is not only Iraqi actors who have left their imprint on the history of Iraq. Certainly, the British mandatory authorities transformed Iraqi society. As well as implementing a number of infrastructural projects, British policy in Iraq created a class of Iraqi clients, including former Sharifian officers, large landowners and tribal leaders. These “collaborators,” so to speak, became the elites of the Iraqi state until the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, and although they were under the influence of British advisers, politicians like Nuri al-Sa’id also left their imprint on the history of Iraq.

Likewise, the interventions of the United States, first in 1991, and more decisively in 2003, have dramatically changed the course of Iraqi history. Following the example of British policies during the mandate, US policy since 2003 has also encouraged the emergence of a new class of Iraqi clients, which in turn will leave its mark, either positively or negatively, on the history of Iraq. In this respect, what place should “the Other,” Great Britain (1914–32/1958) and the United States (since 1991/2003), occupy in Iraqi contemporary history?

Furthermore, taking into consideration that the de-Ba’thification of Iraqi history, encouraged by the United States, was one of the main ideological projects of these new Iraqi elites in 2003, how far has the process of de-Ba’thification of academic institutions, and of history, actually gone? Is it already possible to assess the emergence of a “new history” (Iraqi, Arab, and Islamic) promoted by Washington?

The history of Iraq is made up above all of successive and radical breaks (*coups d’état*, changes of regime, military invasions), whose chronological markers are easy to identify. Nevertheless, a narrative exclusively based on these disruptive moments may lead us to observe Iraqi society through the lens of political violence, making Iraqis the champions of violence in the Middle East.⁷ Ultimately, it represents a succession of tragic events, which might incline us to assume a sort of fatality in the country’s evolution

⁷For a critical insight on this grid of analysis, see Loulouwa Al-Rachid and Edouard Méténier (2008: 114–133).

towards the present.⁸ Although researchers cannot ignore these disruptions, is it not also necessary to establish a link between the moments when the breaks occur and the longer term, in order to shed light on the period under study?

After the Ba‘th party seized power, historical and political science research concentrated almost entirely on the analysis of the political system, the regime and the ruling clique (Aburish, 2000; al-Khalil, 1990; Baram, 1989, pp. 447–493). Nevertheless, as Hamit Bozarslan suggests (Bozarslan, 2007, pp. 13–29), research between the early 1990s and the American invasion of 2003 also focused on tribal and communal phenomena as new grids of analysis (Jabar, 2003, pp. 69–109; Luizard, 2002; Sakai, 2003, pp. 136–161). Yet if we accept that these categories should not be considered essential — in other words, that they are fluid and sometimes the product of constant construction by political powers as well as by researchers — ought they not to be examined critically? For the period until the late 1970s, Hanna Batatu underlined the diversity of Iraqis, not only in ethnic or sectarian terms, but also in social and economic ones (Batatu, 1978, pp. 13–36). More recently, Yitzhak Nakash has shown that the Iraqi Shi‘is are by and large recent converts to Shi‘ism, a “result of a development which took place mainly during the 19th century as the bulk of Iraq’s Arab nomadic tribes settled down and took up agriculture” (Nakash, 1996, p. 4).

Yet the fluidity of sectarian and ethnic boundaries does not imply that they are empty of meaning. As mentioned earlier, within certain contexts (e.g., war, harsh dictatorship), they have often become salient and have determined the collective belonging of individuals or groups, and, eventually, their political engagement. Therefore, instead of rejecting the validity of works focused on power, clan, tribalism and sectarianism as grids of analysis, it seems more appropriate to multiply the sites of observation and the levels of analysis (between the local, the regional and the global, and between internal and external) so that our perspectives on Iraqi or even Middle Eastern history can be renewed. In this sense, the essays assembled in this volume seek to open new avenues for research that can contribute to a fuller — albeit incomplete — understanding of the history of Iraq.

⁸Other authors explain the present situation by invoking the ‘artificial character’ of the Iraqi state. Thus the Iraqi nightmare is the result of the union of three distinct and homogeneous groups (Kurds, Sunnis, and Shi‘is). See for instance Peter Galbraith (2006). This version of Iraqi history has been contested convincingly by Reidar Visser.