

INTRODUCTION

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MÉLANGES IRAQUIENS

OF ALL THE UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES OF the Iraq war, perhaps none is as ironic as the lift it has given to the once moribund state of Iraqi studies, almost nonexistent before 2003. The academic study of Iraq, once the playground of Cold War warriors and Iraq regime apologists (whether Arab or European), has finally come into its own in the postwar era. But whether Iraq studies has flowered into a substantial field of endeavour, charting out challenges to be met and lines of enquiry to be pursued, is an altogether different subject. Far too often, the field has been overtaken by military and strategic papers of indifferent value, pop histories of Saddam Hussein, rapid (and virtually unassailable) judgements on the purportedly iron-clad “sectarian” traditions of the country and obtuse ruminations on whether Iraqis were/are ready for freedom, democracy and the American way. Slowly, however, the field is changing: a number of ground-breaking books and articles have been written or are just being completed on the role and impact of Shi‘ite majoritarian traditions on Iraq; the function of popular culture in the royalist period; the history of intellectuals, soldiers and rebels throughout the modern era and up to the present time; the invalidity of the notion of separatism as it applies to the country’s history; the genesis of Iraqi identity and its permutations in the era of the nation-state; the significance of the various coups and counter-coups that bedeviled the country in its formative period; “memories of state” and the writing of history under the Baathist regime, and the implications of persistent state and non-state violence on the Iraqi body politic from the 1930s onwards.

The contributors to this volume hope that this issue of BRIIFS will continue the trend and inject in the heated debate on Iraq a necessary (and salutary) corrective. As the majority of the articles published in this present collection show, the nuances and shades of Iraqi society are its key feature. Indeed, a thorough reading of the contributions to this issue

may well allow us to conclude that Iraqi society, in all its fabled diversity, is far more durable and resilient than is realized and that it is the very multiplicity of Iraqis from every stripe and colour that refashion and remake state edicts, while sometimes negating them altogether. Taking the articles in turn, Ṭāriq Majīd Taqī al-Uqaylī's interpretation of the new socio-economic challenges posed by the rise of the world market and its impact on Ottoman Iraq is important because it shows that, contrary to what Eurocentric historians have posited so far, Iraqi merchants worked within the parameters set down for them by Ottoman reformist governors and British trading houses to further their *own* ambitions; they were not necessarily pawns of foreign capital nor were they compliant compradors at the whim of European firms. While most of the big merchant houses were headed by Iraqi Jews, other sectors of the economy were monopolized by Muslim as well as Christian traders. Moreover, this versatility also extended to landed elements as well as to the intelligentsia and eventually the political élite. Simply put, social groups from different strata made different use of new opportunities, creating in the process a complex and variegated set of responses to the impact of world capital that has yet to be adequately studied by students of Iraqi history.

The second article by Reuven Snir draws on the rich experience of Iraqi Jews in the country. He notes that the short story was introduced to Iraqi society by Jewish writers in the 1920s and 1930s and that these same Jewish writers, using the medium of standard Arabic, then proceeded to inject aspects of modernity in their themes and story lines, thereby fusing world or, more correctly, Western culture with the literary culture of their homeland. Reuven Snir also makes the distinction between those Iraqi Jewish writers who wrote *as Iraqis* and had great pride in their country and those that left for Israel, where, even if they wrote in Arabic to a select audience, faced dwindling interest, if not indifference, to their plight as Arab Jews. Overall, the article—with its translation of two important short stories of the period tacked on as appendices—explains well the pioneering efforts of Iraqi Jews to draw on Iraqi themes and rework them into socially realistic novels and short stories devoted to uncovering the real problems of the Iraqi society of their time. At the same time, the author shows that, perhaps more than most Arab societies of the 1920s to 1940s, Iraqis clung to a vision of themselves that incorporated *all* social groups and categories, a vastly different portrayal of Iraqi society than that usually depicted by outsiders interested solely in applying sectarian discourse to the country's development.

Caecilia Pieri's article, the third in this issue, tackles "the study of domestic housing in Baghdad from 1921 (the beginning of the British mandate) to 1958 (the Iraqi Revolution and end of the monarchy)."

Much like the other contributors to this volume, the author refuses to draw a monochromatic portrait of the city, preferring instead to look at the evolutionary progress of Baghdad's urban planning policies, the historical, political, social and anthropological influences brought to bear on urban and architectural forms and the comparative nature of urban development across the Fertile Crescent as well as North Africa. Her work is very receptive to the notion of hybridization, an eclectic process fusing techniques, styles and influences native to the region with colonial and global approaches. In the end, Caecilia Pieri makes the cogent argument that there is no period in Baghdad's modern urban history that can be considered inauthentic in building styles or techniques, least of all the Hashemite era, because the city, no less than the country as a whole, had such a vast and vibrant architectural *palette* to draw from.

Hashim al-Tawil's article, the fourth in this issue, tackles both the legendary persistence of traditional motifs as well as the receptivity to new forms in Iraq's artistic heritage. Not content to ascribe the beginnings of Iraq's modern art movement to the much-ballyhooed impact of the West, the author believes that both Mesopotamian artistic traditions as well as those emanating from earlier Arabo-Islamic eras pre-dated Colonialist influence, and formed the cultural bedrock of what later came to be known as the school of modern Iraqi art. While pioneering Iraqi artists did gain valuable artistic experience in the West, especially in the fifties, a return to earlier sources was always in the cards. As the author asserts, "The experience of visual art in Iraq is justifiably the oldest and richest among all civilizations on earth," so it is not logical, much less historically correct, to obscure these native regional influences (extending all the way down to the seventeenth century tradition of portraiture and the painting of miniatures). Again, one of the contributors to this issue and a noted artist himself, writes a necessary corrective to the history of Iraq's contemporary culture.

Benjamin Isakhan's contribution, the fifth article in this issue, brings us squarely into the present. Focusing on the emergence of more than 200 newspapers in the wake of the 2003 war, the author believes that Habermas's notion of the public sphere has been realized in Iraq. While perhaps this may be too optimistic a conclusion (many of these papers serve as mouth pieces for various extremist parties, as indeed they continue to function as media outposts for ALL the governments that have been installed in power by the Occupation), Benjamin Isakhan's article is a timely review of the role of the print media in Iraq, from late Ottoman times until the present.

Stephan Milich's contribution, the sixth article in this special edition of BRIIFS, is a fascinating piece on Iraqi poets in exile. Noting that "Amongst all the recent Arabic exile literature, the Iraqi is numerically

the most extensive and can be seen as Arabic exile literature *par excellence*," the author believes that this exilic literature describes a double alienation: the one resulting from physical displacement and separation from the homeland, the other arising from a sense of existential anomie brought on by living in a foreign and anonymous urban setting. Focusing on the Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef, the author depicts the literary and personal journey that Youssef embarked on since his "forced departure" in the late 1970s. In the vein of the other contributors to this issue, Stephan Milich's article exposes the complexity of Iraqi exilic literature and its similarities with post-colonial world poetry. But he also notes that nothing that Iraqis write in exile can be seen as purely analogous to any other poetic contribution from any other country; Iraqi specificity occupies an essential role in the refugee poet's writings and it is this centrality that makes Iraqi exilic literature so compelling.

Ibrahim Aoudé's contribution, the seventh article in this issue, carries through the comparative aspect of Iraq's relations with the world further by focusing on the centrality of Iraq and Palestine to US global strategy. The author believes that "The Palestinian and Iraqi situations are tied in multiple ways. The US invasion of Iraq has strengthened those ties and made them much clearer." Reviewing the work of various neo-conservative hawks and other political hatchet men in and out of the Bush administration, he arrives at several conclusions, framed differently certainly, but virtually all making the case for strong American concern in Iraq and Palestine. From Ajami to Nakash and passing by way of Albright and Dobbins, the author shows how both interventionist and non-interventionist policy-makers have focused on regulating Iraqi and Palestinian lives even while professing a studied neglect of their plights.

The eighth article is co-authored by Nadjé al-Ali and Nicola Pratt. It delves into the theoretical debates concerning Iraqi women in the aftermath of the 2003 war. The authors tear apart the stereotypes; reconstruct the reality of women across class, ethnicity, religion and politics and describe the insidious, sometimes overt instrumentalization by American as well as Iraqi policy-makers in search of a "gendered" agenda. Briefly stated, the authors conclude that "the homogenization and dichotomization" of Iraqi women serves a political purpose that "limits women's agency," a development dissected very well in this article.

Finally, we come to the last but probably one of the most interesting articles in this issue. Fred Lawson poses the question: Why did Westphalian sovereignty come so late to Iraq? This theory posits that, as states take control in the post-independence era, they will focus on state frontiers, regulating society through laws and tariffs and focus on issues of national sovereignty to the detriment of wider pan-Arab issues. But,

as the author notes, “the nationalist leadership in Baghdad continued to pursue a multilateralist foreign policy, which was firmly rooted in advancing the principle of Arab unity. This poses a puzzle for conventional accounts of the advent of sovereign, territorial states: Why did the comparatively well-established Iraqi state take so long to adopt a posture of Westphalian sovereignty?” The author finds the answer in the nature of Iraq’s commercial interaction both with the outside world and elements of the Iraqi state and society themselves.

Complexity, diversity, hybridization, specificity and tradition—all the elements that have forged Iraq into what it is today. The contributors to this issue recognize what most other observers to Iraq have failed to recognize in the past: that Iraq and Iraqis are neither victims nor bystanders. They are active shapers of their society and state. And because that is the case, it is the Iraqis themselves that will mould, create, re-shape and, if needs be, resist whatever external influences are brought to bear on them, should their conditions of autonomy and freedom not be met.

Enjoy the volume!

