

Haig Aivazian on *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered*. Edited by Raymond W. Baker, Shereen T. Ismael and Tareq Y. Ismael (Pluto Press, 2010)

Media coverage of the looting of the National Museum of Iraq, in the early days of the U.S.-led invasion in April 2003, exposed the shortsightedness of the Bush administration's war plan. From the perspective of television-era attention spans, footage of mass lawlessness in Baghdad read much like the following coverage of the Hurricane Katrina looting in New Orleans two years later; that is to say, highly racialized and in Iraq's case, painted in a sectarian light. In both of these instances, the Bush administration, cushioned by an increasingly embedded media, represented a situation, arguably caused by its own neglect, as inextricably and naturally linked to the character of the particular "indigenous" populations in question. The images seemed to speak for themselves. The American public, and indeed much of the world, was being briefed about this war from a distance and in the language of video editing. In fact, Donald Rumsfeld himself had made such televisual parallels in a press briefing in the White House on April 11<sup>th</sup> 2003, addressing the widespread unrest as experienced through these mediated images: "Think what's happened in our cities, when we've had riots and problems and looting," he said, "Stuff happens!" Another memorable moment in the conference included Rumsfeld dismissing the images broadcast on television not as evidential proof of the chaos occurring in Baghdad, but rather as one looped image of "some person walking out of some building with a vase." In other words, according to Rumsfeld, there was essentially no war beyond these looped images.

In *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq*, Raymond W. Baker, Shereen T. Ismael and Tareq Y. Ismael address the sheer breadth of the devastation caused by the invasion, which far surpasses what has been encapsulated in evening news reports and "the[ir] mainstream failure to acknowledge that the violence of state destruction in Iraq was deliberate,"(12). Through a collection of ten essays, contributors thoroughly survey the extent of the annihilation of Iraq's museums, as well as that of its libraries, universities and academic demographic – including professors, students, lecturers, artists, archeologists, doctors, sociologists, journalists, activists, and a wide range of other professionals. The book essentially argues that if state building – a salient key term used by strategists as an umbrella policy for the war—was indeed the goal of the United States' mission in Iraq, then that goal required the destruction of an existing state. This destruction is documented from distinct, but seamlessly complimentary angles, structured into three parts: the first details the conception and implementation of the policy of cultural cleansing; the second describes "The Assault on Iraq's Incomparable History"; and finally, the third part examines the present and future of Iraq's cultural and academic landscapes.

The book overviews in some detail what we all already know in gist: Iraq was divided along sectarian lines; its national industries were auctioned off to private

entities; and its oil wells opened up to foreign control. In the introductory essay, the editors address the history of U.S. administrations' funding of paramilitary groups, pointing out that high profile policy makers involved in funding the Nicaraguan Contras in the 1980s, were now working closely on the reformation of the Interior Ministry in Iraq, which is widely known to have ties to so-called death squads.

In each of the essays, contributors make clear that the quagmire that is Iraq is not a result of poor planning by the invading forces but rather, it is a policy of deliberate and willful negligence at best; or, at worst, an organized onslaught on Iraqi culture. According to the editors, this onslaught took place, "because a strong Iraq was an impediment to American imperial designs and Israeli insistence on unimpeded regional hegemony" (22). Such statements are not foreign to individuals critical of American foreign policies, some of whom go so far as to accuse the U.S. of deliberately aggravating sectarian sentiments in Iraq for self-serving purposes. Here again, the book provides evidence supporting such theories, including how the so-called surge's success was built on the extinction of Baghdad's mixed neighborhoods, as well as the United States' internal turncoatism in terms of funding one militia and then countering its influence by arming another.

More facts: The US army had a list of twenty physical sites recommended for urgent protection and at the very top of that list was the National Museum. Yet, the only site that benefited from American protection during the looting was –not surprisingly— the Ministry of Oil. Along with the vast collections of manuscripts and artifacts that were stolen, flooded and burned, as discussed in Nabil al-Tikriti's essay "Negligent Mnemocide and the Shattering of Iraqi Collective Memory," Abbas al-Hussainy documents the innumerable archeological sites that were used by the U.S. military as bases in his survey of "The Current Status of The Archeological Heritage of Iraq." Many of those sites have consequently suffered irreparable damage.

Beyond the material destruction, the cultural artifacts and manuscripts of the past and the intellectual production of the present become among the most hotly contested fronts where nations are built and destroyed. The so-called *de-Ba'athification* of the Iraqi State played more like an aggressive mnemocide and quasi-total brain drain. Indeed, the repercussions of destroying a people's history are, as it turns out, far reaching. Coupled with the fanning of sectarian flames, the ravaging of artifacts from an era that all Iraqis identify with and express pride in, places the unity of the Iraqi state and its people on even shakier grounds, as Iraqi national identity rapidly becomes substituted with sectarian allegiances. In other words, the Mesopotamian history of Iraq has been so heavily effaced that violence between communities, which no longer identify with a common history, has spiraled out of control. Mokhtar Lamani, for instance, discusses the mass exodus of Iraq's minorities fleeing persecution in his essay, "Minorities in Iraq: The Other Victims." In this contribution, Lamani argues that minorities are usually unlikely to return to a site of persecution, even if that site is their own country and even if they had previously been a part of a complex and varied social fabric that had remained intact for centuries.

Another onslaught on the Iraqi state took place on the front of social services, mainly health and education reform. Iraq had been known for its high literacy rates and for providing one of the most advanced healthcare coverage to its citizens. Iraqis had always been among the most educated in the region, boasting some of the highest numbers of universities. After the invasion, however, literacy rates dropped dramatically. Mass exodus of various Iraqi populations contributed to this : In 2007 alone, the number of refugees surpassed a million, a large number of which were highly educated members of the middle class. There is currently no state sponsored healthcare to speak of in Iraq, and 80% of professors have vacated the country. This last statistic alone is enough to prove that there truly is a purging of Iraqi academics and intellectuals in Iraq.

*Cultural Cleansing* covers quite specifically the continued mass intimidation and mass murder of university professors, and the absolute lack of action by the Iraqi government, its security forces, and the occupation forces in responding to these offenses, identifying the perpetrators or providing protection to potential victims. In the words of one academic: "One US soldier was kidnapped and Baghdad is on full alert, but the killing of an Iraqi professor? Nothing happens,"(136).

In his essay "Killing the Intellectual Class: Academics as Targets," Dirk Adriansens documents the solidarity campaigns by Iraqi intellectuals even in the face of imminent danger. For example, Adriansens discusses the efforts of the *Brussels Tribunal*, which has published and constantly updates a list of murdered academics, with the goal of facilitating the launch of an investigation. No such investigation has taken place for even one of the nearly 500 professors murdered, close to 80 kidnapped, and more than 100 students killed. This purging also bears psychological repercussions. Faris K.O. Nadhmi for instance, outlines the anxieties plaguing Iraqis, and Iraqi academics in particular, among whom the paranoia and fear of death constitutes a constant and widespread neurosis.

The attack on Iraq's cultural identity could be said to be a clearly bi-directional cleansing: whereas the quasi effacement of academics is clearly damaging to the future of Iraq's intellectual production, the retroactive quality of the annihilation of Iraq's patrimony makes this attack particularly and profoundly damaging. The extent of this violence has not been conveyed and represented adequately to publics at large. In her essay "Archeology and the Strategies of War," Zainab Bahrani poses the following question:

At Samarra, the top of the ninth century minaret was blown off by a rocket-propelled grenade while it was in use as a US sniper post. When such acts occur in other wars (...) we have no qualms about speaking of them in terms of historical erasure and calling them crimes of war. Why do we not do the same now? (79)

Indeed, it is worth wondering about the mechanisms at play in how acts of war get classified, and circulated into language as either crimes of war or collateral damage. For example, whereas the 2001 destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha sculptures by

the Taliban was rightly viewed and portrayed as a symbol of that regime's intolerance, the same is seldom said about the United States' annihilation of Iraq's cultural patrimony.

In his now infamous 2003 press conference, Donald Rumsfeld remarked on the frequency of the looped video of artifacts being stolen: "My Goodness," he exclaimed, "were there that many vases? Is it possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?" There were, as it turns out, many vases in Iraq, each more priceless than the other, and questions remain as to how some of these artifacts made it out of restricted areas, which had been put under U.S. Military supervision.

There was an overt and distinct air of celebration among many American statesmen who described the looting of the Baghdad Museum as a creative act by Iraqis who wanted to assert a kind of cultural renewal. This event was mediated as an organic, post-traumatic rebirth of a nation wherein some of its own cultural memory was vacated in order to make room for a new iconography divorced from previous associations with Saddam. The vacuum created by the widespread annihilation and pillaging of the so-called Cradle of Civilization therefore becomes doubly charged: not only does it leave critical room for how the story of this evacuation will be represented in the future, but also foregrounded is the manner in which this patrimonial void will be filled. Contemporary Iraqi artists, writers, film-makers, and other cultural practitioners must therefore engage these two gargantuan tasks, which will undoubtedly be hugely significant for the future shaping of Iraqi identities.

In addition to offering an infuriating and alarming volley of information, *Cultural Cleansing* clearly outlines the extremely high stakes at play in such a cleansing. Completely dismissing the myth that post-occupation Iraq was an endless stream of disasters outside of American control, the book raises the de facto issues of accountability and consequences for the United States government.

Whereas it is highly improbable that any American administration will be tried, let alone held accountable for any of the crimes committed in Iraq or anywhere else for that matter, papers such as the ones collected here are, if nothing else, a small thorn of memory and clarity in the United States' dis-informing and forgetful media apparatus. In a war that revolutionized embedded reporting, this book is an independent and thoroughly documented investigation into what is undoubtedly one of the most destructive crimes against a people's cultural patrimony in our century.

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