

Destroying the Past: Targeting the Symbols of Baathist Iraq

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Executive summary

- Since 2003, Iraq has endured an extraordinary period of cultural and historical destruction.
- Little attention has been paid to what such destruction – and especially symbolic de-Baathification – might mean for national identity and social cohesion.
- Despite their tyranny, the Baath did enact a considerable nation-building campaign including symbols, monuments, and motifs. Since 2003, most of this has been torn down and destroyed.
- More work desperately needs to be done in order to understand the complex inter-relationships between national memory and identity politics in Iraq.

Since the invasion of Iraq by coalition forces in 2003, not only have the Iraqi people suffered a devastating death toll and witnessed the erosion of every aspect of their civil infrastructure, but also they have endured an extraordinary period of cultural and historical destruction. This began during the battle phase of the war, which saw untold degrees of ‘collateral damage’ done to sensitive historic and cultural sites across the nation. This was followed, in the very earliest days of the now more than seven year occupation, by a period of looting and arson in which many cultural and historical sites were destroyed. Key institutions such as the Iraq National Museum (INM) and the Iraq National Library and Archive (INLA) were targeted, as well as other sites like the Bayt Al-Hikma and the Al-Awfaq libraries, Iraq’s Museum of Modern Art, an Abbasid-era palace, an Ottoman-era mosque and the Hashemite Parliament House. In addition, many Iraqi civilians and foreigners have become involved in highly coordinated black market operations that systematically loot sensitive archaeological sites across Iraq and smuggle the antiquities out of the country and on to the highly lucrative international black market. The ongoing hostility between varying factions within Iraq also has had ruinous consequences for Iraq’s cultural heritage with artefacts, symbols and monuments so often caught in the crossfire or deliberately targeted by opposing ethno-religious sectarian groups.

By now, a host of scholarly studies on this topic exists including the work of leading Iraqi and international scholars, archaeologists, historians, cultural heritage workers, diplomats, government officials and military officers. What is curiously absent from the existing literature on the cultural and historical destruction of Iraq, however, is the contemporaneous program to symbolically de-Baathify the nation in which key monuments, state buildings, murals and statues have been damaged or destroyed. Indeed, while the consequences of what might be called the ‘bureaucratic’ or ‘militaristic’ dimensions of Iraq’s de-Baathification have been discussed in much of the literature, the symbolic dimension of de-Baathification and its consequences for national identity and social cohesion has remained a neglected and underappreciated factor.

In order to come to terms with the significance of the destruction of Baathist Iraq, it is necessary to begin by briefly detailing the role that Iraq’s cultural heritage has played in building national identity and social cohesion since the rise of the Baathist regime in 1968. Premised on their unique brand of secular nationalism, the Baath underwent an extensive and sustained cultural campaign in which the successes of the nation’s past became a symbol of Iraq’s potential as a united and prosperous state. This is particularly true of the rule of Saddam Hussein who utilised much of the nation’s oil wealth to revive Iraqi folklore and utilised the political power of popular culture to create national unity behind a distinctly ‘Iraqi’ identity, one intimately connected to the glories of Iraq’s history.

As part of their ‘Project for the Re-Writing of History’, the Baath commandeered Iraqi authors and commissioned them to write works that sought to align Iraq’s long and complex past with contemporary Baathist ideology. The Baath extended this project into the lived environment of the Iraqi people, erecting giant murals in which Hussein was situated amongst a curious pastiche of deeply nationalistic imagery including ancient Mesopotamian, classical Islamic and modern military motifs. This increased during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s when the symbolic cultivation of Iraqi nationalism included the erection of several grandiose monuments celebrating the alleged ‘victory’ of Iraq over Iran, including the Martyr’s Memorial, the Unknown Soldier’s Monument, and the Victory Arches.

It is crucial to note at this point, however, that Iraqi identity was (and is) far from monolithic and that official state narratives of ‘Iraqi’ identity were widely contested. To cite just one well known example, the Kurds adamantly resisted the ‘Arabization’ of Iraq and their perpetual marginalization by the central Sunni Arab-dominated state. Indeed, Baathist appropriation of Iraqi heritage must be understood as indicative of a tyrannical nation and a megalomaniacal leader who was desperately trying to manipulate the fabric of cultural history to build legitimacy and maintain hegemony beyond their coercive power. At the same time, however, the entire symbolic nation-building project of Baathist Iraq did engender degrees of (admittedly uneven and often resisted) national identity and social cohesion. It is important to note that every aspect of their campaign was distinctly ‘Iraqi’. In other words, none of the different symbols or monuments that were appropriated or developed throughout the rule of the Baath were specifically designed to

emphasise Sunni Arab, Kurdish, Shia Arab or another identity, but to emphasise a collective 'Iraqi' identity.

Yet, all of this was to change dramatically with the military invasion and occupation of Iraq from 2003. Here, the Coalition has set about a deliberate campaign to target the symbols of the Baathist epoch. 'Part of the directive', as one British army officer put it, 'was to destroy and dismantle anything which was part of Saddam Hussein's regime'. In fact, Coalition forces did this with a kind of marauding efficiency. An entire epoch of state-produced symbols, monuments and motifs were burnt, bullet ridden or torn asunder. Indeed, a simple "google image" search reveals thousands of photos in which Coalition soldiers can be seen ripping down statues, using sledge hammers on giant murals, vandalising billboards, using buildings for target practice, and even urinating on monuments dedicated to Saddam. There also is a great deal of evidence to suggest that Coalition soldiers have returned home with Baathist 'souvenirs' from Iraq. A most prominent example of this concerned British troops who smuggled out of Iraq a nine-foot high statue of Saddam Hussein and resurrected it in the officer's mess at their military base in Taunton, England.

The next chapter in this tragic tale is well known. In a carefully choreographed moment coordinated by the Coalition's Psychological Operations Unit, one of the first things that the Coalition forces did when they rolled into Baghdad on 9 April 2003 was to target the giant bronze statue of Saddam in Firdos Square. Apparently jubilant Iraqis and US troops seemingly worked side-by-side to climb the statue and place first a US and then an Iraqi flag over the face of Saddam. Finally, the statue was torn down and the severed head was dragged through the streets as Iraqis ostensibly continued to celebrate the fall of their former dictator. By now, however, it is widely understood that these scenes do not necessarily represent the spontaneous actions of a people's liberation, but were instead a very deliberate media stunt designed to promote the legitimacy of the war across a sceptical globe.

This was followed by an extensive project to symbolically de-Baathify post-Saddam Iraq initiated when Lewis Paul Bremer III was installed as the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) on 13 May 2003. Indeed, Bremer's first official act – written only three days after his arrival – was to issue 'Order Number 1: De-Baathification of Iraqi Society'. Predictably, the order sought to disestablish the Baath party by 'eliminating the party's structures and removing its leadership from positions of authority and responsibility in Iraqi society'. While much has been made of the consequences of such de-Baathification, what is rarely mentioned is the blatantly symbolic dimension to de-Baathification found in this order. Clause 4, for instance, decrees:

Displays in government buildings or public spaces of the image or likeness of Saddam Hussein or other readily identifiable members of the former regime or of symbols of the Baath Party or the former regime are hereby prohibited.

The effect of such de-Baathification meant that whatever elements remained of the Baathist state were now the official property of the CPA. This immediately became apparent as the Coalition began to set up a number of their key military bases at Baathist sites such as in Saddam's Palaces and various government buildings. One such example occurred in January 2004, when the Coalition used the Baghdad Martyr's Memorial as a military base. This site serves as a people's shrine dedicated to the 500,000 Iraqi soldiers who died defending their country in an unpopular, lengthy and brutal war. Comparable perhaps to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or other war memorials in Washington, as well as ANZAC memorials here in Australia, one cannot help but baulk at the insensitivity of turning such a monument into a military base for use by a foreign occupying power.

The same can be said of the Coalition's use of the mausoleum dedicated to the 'Father of Pan-Arabism' and the co-founder of the Baath Party, Michel Aflaq. This Syrian-born, French-educated Christian is widely respected across the Arab world not only for his enormous contribution to Arab political philosophy but also for his egalitarian values and deep respect for Islamic ideals. The site comprises a tomb and a statue commissioned by Saddam Hussein upon Aflaq's death in 1989. As part of their program to symbolically de-Baathify Iraq, initially the mausoleum was slated for demolition by the CPA before the decision sparked an outcry among Iraqi and international intellectuals. Today, Aflaq's mausoleum, which falls inside the Green Zone, has reportedly been turned into something of a shopping mall-cum-recreation centre-cum-makeshift barracks for Coalition soldiers. It houses a barber shop and pirate DVD stall among other retailers, as well as a 'foosball' table and gym equipment. Directly underneath Aflaq's grave, soldiers sleep in cramped plywood quarters. As with the use of the Martyr's Memorial, one only has to imagine the use of comparable historical sites in other nations – consider a foosball table in the Lincoln Memorial or a barber shop in Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance – to begin to come to terms with how such actions might offend the Iraqi people.

More recently, the democratically-elected Iraqi government took initial steps towards furthering this process of symbolically de-Baathifying Iraq. In early 2007, the Shia- and Kurdish-dominated government organised the 'Committee for Removing Symbols of the Saddam Era' and drew up extensive plans to destroy many of the symbols of their Sunni-dominated Baathist past. In fact, the dismantling of the Victory Arches began with earnest in February 2007 and ten-foot chunks were cut out of the monument and carted away, while some reports indicate that numerous US troops and Iraqi bystanders removed parts of the monument as personal souvenirs. Such events were widely contested within Iraq, with Mustafa Khadimi, the founder of the Iraq Memory Foundation, saying of the Victory Arches: 'We need to use these two swords as proof to further generations to show what happened to Iraqi people'. It was not until the US Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad challenged Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki on the decision, however, that the project was promptly brought to a halt. According to media reports, the reason for Khalilzad's intervention was 'due to concerns the dismantling of the monument might further deepen the rift between Iraq's Shiite majority and its Sunni minority'. What is

particularly interesting here is that the destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage was stopped – by the Coalition of all groups – in order to prevent the further breakdown of social cohesion and national identity in Iraq and to avoid more ethno-sectarian violence. This indicates at least tacit acknowledgement of the role such monuments have played in creating a unified Iraqi identity and that their destruction can contribute to deepening ethno-religious sectarian divides.

It is this connection between the symbolic destruction of Baathist Iraq and the consequences it may have had on the nation's socio-political order that most needs to be addressed. More work desperately needs to be done in order to understand the complex inter-relationships between national memory and identity politics in Iraq. As we have seen, most Iraqis had learned about the past through a Baathist lens, a tyrannical kaleidoscope of state propaganda, a history re-written to both justify oppression and coerce people into patriotism. This was underpinned by a very complex cultural-discursive campaign in which the ideology of the Baath was embedded into festivals, monuments, history books and state buildings. This evolving research project therefore seeks to interrogate the role that the destruction of Iraq's Baathist monuments and symbols may have played in decreasing the Iraqi brand of nationalism that the Baath had managed to promulgate to varying degrees of success since the 1970s.

Today, Iraq not only faces the enormous challenge of reconstructing its infrastructure, implementing the rule of law and enforcing security, it also faces the task of rebuilding the less tangible notions of a collective national identity and social cohesion. While this project certainly does not advocate what might be called a 're-Baathification' of Iraq or even a return to a secular nationalist government, it does argue that the Coalition and the incumbent Iraqi government have a responsibility to develop appropriate national discourses that are egalitarian and inclusive.

In doing so, Iraq could learn much from other twentieth century examples in which people have attempted to forge new versions of national identity that openly engage with both the traumas and the achievements of the past. For example, South Africa has many useful parallels to Iraq in that it was under heavy sanctions from the international community and that it was rife with cultural, religious and ethnic tensions. The symbolic nation-building campaign that followed the end of Apartheid and the nation's bold engagement with the sufferings of the past actually helped it move towards reconciliation and reconstruction. In the case of post-Soviet Russia the nation had the task of not only redefining itself politically, economically and ideologically, but also symbolically. To do this, many of the Soviet-era monuments were successfully transformed from icons of the Soviet Union to symbols of a united Russia.

With Iraq's ongoing political problems and the likely withdrawal of all US troops by the end of 2011, the Iraqi people have perhaps never been in greater need of a detailed understanding of the ongoing challenges and intractable problems they face. Much rests on Iraq's ability to deal with its past. This means that the Baathist epoch – as with every

other era in Iraq's national history – needs to be engaged with honestly and openly. The terror, coercion and violence need to be acknowledged and the guilty brought to justice. Beyond this, however, Baathist Iraq needs to be understood in its moderately successful attempts to build a vision of a united and prosperous future. The nation needs to move beyond simplistic approaches like total de-Baathification and away from reductive political ideology that emphasises schisms rather than breaking them down. Indeed, if Iraq is ever to develop a post-Baathist national identity then it must come to terms with both the failures and successes of the former regime. Such an open and critical engagement with the past could not only create avenues of intercommunity dialogue, help placate ethno-religious violence and sectarianism, and facilitate the establishment of an inclusive political order, but also it could ensure that the Iraqi people are not destined to repeat a past that largely has been torn down and destroyed.

Selected Further Reading

Emberling, G. & Hanson, K. (eds.) (2008), *Catastrophe! The Looting and Destruction of Iraq's Past*. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Polk, M. & Schuster, A. M. H. (eds.) (2005). *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Rothfield, L. (ed.) (2008). *Antiquities Under Siege: Cultural Heritage Protection After the Iraq War*. Lanham: Alta Mira

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