

Iraq's Stolen Memory

Archive of pre-invasion political and historical documents confiscated by the US

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Detailed records of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's private deliberations with his inner circle released by the Pentagon last week are raising serious questions about the right of the United States to seize Iraqi state documents and keep them under its control even after ending its eight years of occupation next month. For Iraqis, the documents and transcripts which were part of a massive state archive that American forces captured after they invaded Iraq in 2003 are considered a treasure and part of Iraq's national heritage which should be returned to Iraq.

A very small portion of the documents, which include notes and recorded meetings, were made available to a few American and British media outlets and researchers last week, raising eyebrows among many Iraqis about the morality, legal responsibility and academic honesty of keeping and re-examining foreign documents seized during occupation. What makes the matter worse is that Iraqis have had no access to these documents and no single Iraqi expert participated at the discussions co-sponsored by the National Defence University and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, though they were supposed to provide new perspectives on Iraq under Saddam.

Among the documents released were some which give a highly unusual look into Saddam's most intimate thoughts and his calculations and perceptions of foreign affairs, such as American policy, Iran, Turkey, and relations with his Arab neighbours. The records of conversations of Saddam and his government which can give historians a window into Iraq's former regime far surpass with their political and historic significance that of WikiLeaks documents which are merely diplomatic cables.

One published document reveals Saddam and his advisers discussing Iraq's decision to go to war with Iran on 16 September 1980, only a week before the start of the war that last for eight years. A second record shows Saddam gathering his most senior aides for an important strategy session on 15 November 1986, to discuss secret US supplies of weapons to Iran at a critical juncture of the war. Another transcript of a meeting between Saddam and his senior advisers shows the former Iraqi leader suggesting a speedy execution of an Iranian-born British journalist Farzad Bazoft who was arrested as a spy working for Israel and Britain.

The disclosure of these documents and the media comments that followed are sharply felt in Iraq where many Iraqis believe that available material and recollections from former government officials could have been used at the Woodrow Wilson Center's event to provide a wide variety of informed perspectives.

In addition to the records in the Pentagon's and the CIA's hold, the entire archives of Saddam's Baath Party were seized and shipped to the United States in 2006 to be kept with the Iraq Memory Foundation, a private group set by Kanan Makiya, an Iraq-born émigré, who teaches at Brandeis University. On its website the group gives its address as a suite in a Washington DC area with staff in Baghdad. A posting says the Foundation is engaged in an effort to safeguard these collections as a national patrimony.

Press reports, however, suggested that some seven million pages of personnel and membership records of the party seized by Makiya that document Saddam's regime atrocities have been consolidated at Stanford University. The foundation has long restricted full and free access to the documents to the Baath regime's victims, frustrating scholars who complained they were being deprived of access to vital historical records.

The American troops also seized the country's Jewish Archive of books, manuscripts, records and other materials and moved it the United States and Iraqis say they fear some of them might have already ended up in Israel.

Some American Jewish groups have warned that if the Iraqis were to claim the archive as their own, it would prompt the Jewish community to demand keeping them under the US control. The archives, which include Torah scrolls and ancient Judeo-Arabic manuscripts, remain in the charge of the US National Archives and Records Administration and the Center for Jewish History and it is unclear whether they will ever go back to Iraq.

The Iraqi government has repeatedly demanded the return of the historical documents held in the United States arguing that continued US possession of these documents would be of great concern. Neither the US army nor the government has disclosed plans on how to deal with the Iraqi records or say if they will be transferred to Iraq after the US troops withdraw by year end. The Society of American Archivists had said that seizing and removing the documents from Iraq was "an act of pillage" prohibited under the laws of war.

After World War II the United States kept records of the Nazi period at the Berlin Document Center under the authority of the US Army for use in war crimes. In October 1953, the Center was put under the jurisdiction of the State Department until 1994 when it was transferred to German control under an agreement that allowed the US to microfilm all the records at German expense, and transfer the microfilms to the US National Archives and Records Administration.

The Iraqi documents are expected to embody intriguing tales of politics, power, social history and human behaviour, and could provide a wealth of information to historians and social science scholars for re-examination of more than three decades of Iraq's history.

In the 1978, Hanna Batatu, a Palestinian-born scholar at the American University in Beirut and Georgetown University, published *The Old Social Classes and New Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, based on his thorough research of Iraqi security service archives from various periods of Iraqi history, up until the 1970s.

The book, which was written with the methodology of combining the records with testimonies of figures from different political movements, has been considered as one of the fundamental works on modern Iraqi history and one of the very few comprehensive, primary source-based histories of any Arab country ever written. For many Iraqis, Batatu's work and access provided by the Iraqi authorities to the secret security police records, stand as an

excellent example of cooperation to facilitate academic research.

Still, Iraqi scholars stress that the taking of the documents threatens not only the Iraqi people with the loss of their historical memory but also the academic credibility and impartiality if that archive is being treated as war spoils or colonial booty. In the case of Saddam's and the Baath archive, they argue that the analysis of the contents of such documents is critical to any final assessment of Saddam's era and they are essential for Iraqis to come to grips with their past.

Iraqi officials have demanded that the records be sent to the Iraqi National Library and Archive, a repository for government and historical documents from many periods and the key institute for researching Iraq's history. While the US government has remained aloof, a key question remains: by what right will US academia obtain and research the Iraqi records without Iraqis' consent or participation? Front Page Egypt Economy Region International Opinion Press review Readers' corner Culture Features Entertainment Heritage Encounter Living Sports People Cartoons Sky High Listings BOOKS TRAVEL Site map

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