

Iraq's 'Year Zero'

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The continuing destruction of Iraq's history – ancient and modern – of homes, lives and civil society under the watch of and at the hands of US and British troops – in defiance of a swathe of international law – is an uncanny and chilling mirror image of Pol Pot's Year Zero.

In 1975 : 'Society was to be purified ... throughout Cambodia, deadly purges were conducted to eliminate remnants of the old society: the educated, the wealthy, the (religious elders) police, doctors, lawyers, teachers, former government officials, soldiers Education, health care... was halted, cities forcibly evacuated....The country sealed off from the outside world.' History, monuments, ancient and modern, world heritage sites, were erased from the earth. Newspapers, radio and television were banned.

Secret prisons were built, Moslems 'were forced to eat pork.' 'Up to twenty thousand people were tortured into giving false confessions in a school in Phnom Penh, converted into a jail ... elsewhere suspects were often shot before being questioned.' (1) Think Abu Ghraib (and don't forget Guantanamo) and all those other centres where Iraq's disappeared are incarcerated, now admitted – but not where. Think the shootings at road blocks, the 'cleansing' of Iraq's towns and cities. Add to Pol Pot's horrific regime only the the killing of nearly eighty journalists in thirty months, the bombing of two television stations – Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, whose map grid reference had been trustingly given to the Pentagon – so any light falling on the slaughter and destruction of a nation and its heritage, becomes impossible – and the all is Iraq, writ with succinct accuracy.

Iraq's society too is being 'purified', with precisely the same categories of humanity targeted by Pol Pot being killed in their hundreds: academics to doctors, scientists to soldiers. Former US Viceroy Paul Bremer called his purification 'de-Ba'athification' and sacked just about every strata of society needed to run a civilised one – in Iraq's Year Zero, as Cambodia, their real sin was their race and its heritage, ancient and modern.

The destruction, looting of the haunting wonders of the National Museum, Mosul Museum, the two million irreplaceable books, manuscripts reduced to ashes, records of the National Library, the University of Endowment with its unique collection of ancient Q'urans, the vandalism of Babylon and Ur by the new Barbarians – US soldiers – and desecration of thousands of archeological sites – the very history of mankind – have been heart wrenchingly recorded. Not recorded is the equally illegal and ongoing, planned destruction of every vestige of Iraq's more modern history, on the orders of the Supreme Committee for de-Ba'athification – Pol Pot couldn't have bettered that tag.

In Basra, early casualties were the dead heroes of the US-driven Iran-Iraq war, whose great bronze figures lined part of the corniche, arm out, pointing toward Iran. They were controversial and subject of much debate in a nation invaded repeatedly, throughout its

history, its people utterly weary of war. But they were Iraq's sons and died in defence of their country. They are no more.

The museum up the road, commemorating more of the dead of the eight year conflagration, of whom so many on both sides were lost it has been compared to World War 1, was also destroyed and with it, the only memory for so many: their identity cards, with details and photograph, hundred upon hundred, of the silent dead, living, staring from wall after wall. Real people, mostly so young;; the date they celebrated their birthdays, for all to see, occupation, skills learned over student years, engendered by youthful aspirations, never now to be met. The last vestiges of them has now vanished. Imagine if the Imperial War Museum in London, the Vietnam Memorial Wall, Arlington Cemetery, the Holocaust Museum, the Hiroshima Memorial were raised to the ground. Unthinkable – but Iraq's grief is, it seems, simply inconsequential. That these are 'grave breaches' under Additional Protocol 1 of the expanded Geneva Convention of 1977 and happened under watch of the British Army has not been addressed. That the British Army itself looted a vast statue of Iraq's President and took it back to their Somerset, south of England, base (2) – at British tax payers' expense – has also not been addressed and Protocol 1 also applies.

The British though, had been told their first duty was to head for the oil terminal and secure it (3). Statues and museums clearly paled against of the significance of Iraq's oil..

North in Baghdad early violations by the US army, included the statue toppling and squatting in Palaces, 'using national historic buildings' as a 'command centre' is also a violation. It is incumbent in the region, for each leader to leave behind him something more magnificent than his predecessor, the Palaces are both national assets – not American ones – and tomorrow's history. National buildings too are protected, not free board and lodging for illegal invaders. Reports too numerous to cite recorded US soldiers returning home with palace 'souvenirs' they thieved and also priceless artifacts, prosecutions have been minimal or missing.

Over fifteen hundred modern paintings and sculptures disappeared from the city's Museum of Fine Arts, where to visit was to gaze in awe at the wondrous imagination which created unique beauty. In June 1993 an American missile killed the Museum's curator, Leila Al Attar in one of numerous illegal bombings. Now her legacy too, is no more. 'A cultural disaster', near unmentioned, was how UNESCO's Mounir Bouchenak described that cultural vandalism.(4) Thank goodness the troops thought to perfectly preserve the Oil Ministry.

Bit by bit, un-noticed, is the destruction of every statue, every landmark, which was the vibrant beauty, history's hallmarks, which enchanted Baghdadis and visitors, marked the passing of a personality, commemorated Gilgamesh, the Thousand and One Nights, probably the earliest great epic story; Sinbad the Sailor, Iraq's triumphs and tears.

Ironically, 'international guidelines protecting cultural property against damage and theft, date back to the American Civil War.' That carnage 'led to the 1863 Lieber Code, protecting libraries, scientific collections and works of art' and was strengthened by the '1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property.' The Nuremberg Trials after World War II, sentenced Nazi officials to death for destruction of cultural property.(5) This did not deter US soldiers from the first truly breath taking act of desecration.

Michel Aflaq was the Syrian born, French educated, Christian 'Father of Pan Arabism'. A

towering intellect, with Salah al-Din al-Bitar, a Moslem – the two met whilst studying in Paris in the 1920's and 1930's – '... created the political movement which would come to dominate Syria and Iraq in the modern world.' Thinker, philosopher, student of Nietzsche, Gide, Tolstoy, French theorist Henri Bergson, with Bitar he had founded France's Arab Student Union. Finally devoting their energies to politics, culminating in the formation of the Arab Ba'ath Party with Jalil Said, in 1947 with '.... a secular focus ' with Islam's significance acknowledged, contributing to world wide emancipation, with a central tenet being that there were Arabs before there were Muslims – thus the ideal of the Arab state. For Aflaq, 'theorist of integrity incorruptable'; a central tenet of the movement was representing : ' .. the Arab spirit ... Arab nation, emphasising culture rather than politics. (6) He survived imprisonment, high office and the region's turmoils, dying in Paris in 1989 and buried in Baghdad where his tomb, statue in his honour and dome, occupied a ten km square site. In September 2003 the US army 'levelled the all to earth', on orders of 'Viceroy' Bremer.(7) Think flattening the Lincoln Memorial and you'll be getting there.

Vandalising religious and historic monuments are also prohibited and illegal acts under the Hague Convention. Desecrating a grave is a criminal act of the lowest order, in any society.

Driving into central Baghdad from the west, in Nasr Square, Sa'doun Street, a small, resolute figure graced a plinth. He was Abdul Muhsin Al-Sa'doun. Born in Nasiriya in 1889, he became Minister of Justice, then in 1922, Minister of the Interior, then Prime Minister four times, a youthful, political shooting star. In his fourth term as Prime Minister, in 1929, he left the Parliamentary chamber, went into a side room and shot himself, rather than give in to British Colonial demands. He died of integrity, aged just forty years. His statue, made by an Italian sculpture in 1933, stands no more, razed shortly after Michel Aflaq's, and reportedly melted down. Reports differ as to who was responsible, but not disputed is that it happened under US Army's watch – even if not at their hands. Symbolism is stark: a man who died of integrity has been razed – along with integrity itself.

In January 2004 the US Army 1st Armoured Division did the unthinkable. They made a camp beneath the great turquoise dome of the Shaheed (Martyrs) Memorial to the dead of the Iran-Iraq war, where the names of over half a million dead are inscribed in marble, in memorium, that their names, at least, live on. Graffiti was sprayed on the names, the Division's motto obliterated others. The Museum where foreign dignitaries and families had brought items in honour of the fallen was, of course, looted. (Agencies, websites.) The dome is split, allowing the souls of the dead to fly heavenward. A great fountain flowed to the courtyard below – representing endless tears, or eternity as represented by the Euphrates river, depending on who one asked. A place of memory is, anyway, in the interpretation of those who visit and the solace found there.

On November 2nd the landmark statue of Abu Ja'afar Al Mansour (713-775AD) founder of Baghdad, was destroyed by a bomb.(8) No Baghdadi, Iraqi or Arab, would, arguably, blow up this revered historical figure, creator of' the city named over the centuries: 'The Paris of the Ninth Century', 'Mother of the World', 'Abode of Peace', 'Round City', 'Abode of Beauty', 'Triumph of the Gods'(9)

Since journalists are shot and Iraqis lucky to return from a domestic outing in one piece and not in a body bag containing their parts and UNESCO has gone awol, comprehensive records of every day destruction of Iraq's heritage, numerous, haunting, superb statues, sculptures, monuments is impossible. This surely barely scratches the surface. But an important and chilling plea appeared on a website (10). With the benefit of post invasion destruction, it had

horrific clarity. From 'An Iraqi Tear' (most 'liberated' Iraqis are more fearful of revealing their identities now than they ever were under Saddam) is a plea to our place in history: 'Please help us protect these monuments.'

'Tear' asserts that the Supreme Committee for de-Ba'athification has now ordered the razing of the turquoise Shaheed monument to rivers of tears and the Monument to the Unknown Soldier. The Unknown Soldier was completed in 1959, the year after the revolution which ironically, toppled the British imposed royal rule, which had opened the door to foreign monopolies plundering the country's oil wealth. It was in homage to all those, who over the centuries: 'fell in defence of the country's dignity and pride.'

'Riverbend' (11) another blogger and insightful, astute chronicler of the Barbarians returned, notes: 'The occupation has ceased to be American. It is American in face, militarily, but in essence, it has metamorphosed slowly and surely into an Iranian one.' An astute Middle East watcher remarked recently: 'Are you aware that the dominant language among those dominant in the puppet parliament is Farsi?' (Iran's main language.)

Has an unholy alliance been formed between religious fundamentalism in Washington and Whitehall and religious fundamentalism from Iran which bans 'graven images'? 'Satan lives in Falluja ..' a priest who gives God a bad name, told US troops before they used banned weapons and vapourised much of its population.

When the Taliban ordered the destruction of the ancient Bamiyan statues in Afghanistan - the world, including Britain and American governments, declared outrage. Now, from Ur to the threat to Unknown Soldier, they are guilty of crimes of historic enormity. Quite apart from those, unquantifiable, against humanity.

In June 2005, the World Monument Society named, for the first time, an entire country, Iraq, an endangered site. 'Every significant cultural site in Iraq is at risk today' It also emphasised: '... preserving 20th century structures ...'

A spokesperson for the Iraqi 'government', boasted after the illegal invasion in 2003: 'We came to power on a CIA train.' By a different route, so did Pol Pot. Spot the difference.

1. Courtesy The History Place, 1999. 'Pol Pot in Cambodia 1975-1979'.
2. Author interview with British Army spokesman.
3. 'Last Round' by Mark Nicol, pub: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2005.
4. 'Unesco lengthens list of looted art in Iraq', International Herald Tribune, 24th May 2003.
5. Crimes of War, Ed: Roy Gutman and David Rieff, Pub: W.W. Norton, 1999.
6. 'From Sumer to Saddam', Geoff Simons, Pub: Macmillan, 1994.
7. Iraq-USA Politics 10th September 2003.
8. Mohammed Alwusy, Knight Ridder, 2nd November 2005.
9. 'They came to Baghdad', Sinan Antoon, Al Ahram Weekly, April 17-23 2003.
10. www.uruknet.info 2nd November 2005.

11. [http:// riverbend.blogspot.com](http://riverbend.blogspot.com)

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Iraq's Year Zero – possible 'box'.

Baghdad's many richly evocative landmarks include:

* The great Liberty Monument in Liberation Square, depicting struggles through the ages; bronze relief figures on marble, by the late Jewad Selim.

* The golden figure of Karamana, Ali Baba's housekeeper, from the 'Arabian Nights', surrounded by the great urns where the forty thieves hid. Water, in place of the boiling oil of the story, flows from a great vessel in her hands. By Mohammed Ghani: 'the exuberant sculpture', an object of wonder.

* The Hammurabi Obelisk, in Qhatan Square, honouring the great Babylonian King and lawmaker (1792-1750 BC) by Salen Al-Karaghoul. The original Obelisk is in the Louvre, Paris.

* Al-Khalil bin Ahmad Al-Faharidi (AD 718-786) statue in Masbah Park, honouring the philologist and grammarian who wrote the first Arab dictionary and works on melody and rhythm.

* Abbas bin Firnas, ninth century philosopher, poet and inventor, is immortalised by Sculpture Badri Al-Sammarra'i, near the Airport. His theories and experiments on the possibility of human flight earned him the name of 'First Arab Flyer.'

* Hammurabi's robed statue, by Mohammed Ghani, graces central Haifa Street, utterly evocative, Babylonia's wonders revisited.

* The Arab horseman in Mansour Square, by Miran Al-Sa'adi celebrates the Arab love of horsemanship and its association with 'gallantry, courage and generosity'.

* Abu-Nasr Al-Farabi (AD 874-950) created by Ismail Fattah in 1965, one of the Arab world's greatest ancient philosophers and academics, stands in Zawra Park. He was 'The Second Teacher', the First being Aristotle.

* Yahya Al-Wasiti, painter and calligrapher, completed his extraordinary illustrations of Maqamat Al-Hariri, in 1223. An original manuscript is in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. The statue celebrating him is in Zawra Park, by Ismael Fattah.

This random selection of Baghdad's celebration of Mesopotamia's lives, ancient and modern can only fail to convey the extent of its wondrous cultural wealth. Wealth whose preservation is the duty and responsibility of the occupying forces.

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