

Iraq Outside History

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Featured image: Mustansirya University Baghdad

“Scientists Outside History” was published in the September 1996 issue of Natural History, the popular educational journal of the American Museum of Natural History. Authored by me, “Scientists Outside History” was based on research I undertook in Iraq between 1989 and 1996. The article’s subheading: “Faced with international embargo, Iraq’s most progressive community finds itself abandoned.”

Reviewing my early files on Iraq, along with this article, I found readers’ correspondence (that was the pre-digital era) which Natural History’s editor had forwarded to me. Most of these letters were from outraged readers, many of them scientists or teachers, berating and excoriating me for seeing any merits in what they viewed as the ‘vicious and tyrannical Saddam regime’. (Praise Iraq’s earlier four millennia, but not the 20th century.) How dare I claim “Iraq’s scientists and doctors had enjoyed strong government backing, enabling them to pursue their international studies”? ([p. 15](#))

Those indignant respondents didn’t object that international scientific and medical journals were freely available in Iraq up to 1990. Nor did they challenge my report of how that embargo went far beyond its mandate to include cultural and medical exchange, that even by 1996 (it would continue for another six years) it ensured Iraqis no longer received international journals, that Iraqi students were barred from post graduate studies (in U.S., Canada, and perhaps elsewhere) in fields such as physics, and that invitations to international conferences could not be extended to Iraqis. As I wrote at the time, this exclusion “proved as severe as any weapon of mass destruction”.



It was the noted sculptor, Mohammed Hikmat Ghani (image on the right), one of many Iraqi artists who, sponsored by his government, frequently traveled abroad to meet his peers,

pointed out to me in 1991, that (as a result of that vicious embargo) “Iraq is now outside history”.

Visiting Iraq earlier this year, fourteen years into its American-designed and supervised democracy, I found that, as much as during the embargo, perhaps more so today Iraq is indeed outside history. It has been plundered of both its human and historical resources.

During my 1989 tour of the resplendent Iraq National Museum, it was Mohammed Ghani who informed me how the government had secreted away and protected the entire museum’s holdings during the eight year Iraq-Iran war. That collection was returned intact and complete following the 1988 cease fire:- the same treasure which, overseen by U.S. occupation troops in 2003, was ransacked and pillaged. (This was during the early months of the American invasion.)

One need not invoke ancient eras of past millennia to acknowledge Iraq’s contributions to civilization. Modern Iraq, before that embargo, was replete with industrious, well trained, talented men and women dedicated to their arts and sciences, their efforts generously encouraged and published by the government. They advanced more by personal merit than by party membership then.

The world famous architect [Zaha Hadid](#), one of a large community of Iraqi artists and scientists, may have settled in Europe, but the foundation of her energy and imagination can be traced to her childhood within Iraq; there was early recognition of her mathematical genius and the influence of scientists in her own family.

Although not without difficulty, one can find many examples of outstanding 20th century treatises by Iraqi engineers (e.g. [Ahmed Sousa and Aliya Sousa](#)), medical specialists, linguists and artists produced within Iraq prior to the sanction regime. That exhaustive embargo targeted Iraq’s intelligentsia as much as its Baathist leadership.

You may ask: Why bring this up now? The embargo ended in 2003; Saddam is gone. Liberated from international isolation and dictatorship, Iraq’s an oil rich nation free to interact on the global stage.

In fact Iraq is still culturally marginalized, and intellectually much weakened. Many teachers, scholars and other talent who represent the high standards of the 20th century and could bridge the three decade-long wasteland created by embargo and war, have departed. Either they have been snapped up by foreign nations who recognize their abilities and fine training. Or as refugees, they’re obliged to accept jobs that do not advance or nourish their talent and imagination.

I was reminded of just how widespread the destruction of modern Iraqi civilization is today by a recent FB post from an Iraqi colleague residing abroad. Now middle aged and without economic security as a non-citizen in a nearby Arab country, following the work of theoretical physicist Michio Kaku, he recalls his own research in photon quantum physics as a young engineer. He scans world scientific developments today realizing that Iraq, 30-60 years ago, was well placed to be in the forefront of scientific discoveries, on the cusp of frontiers in medical research, physics, and archaeology. In response to his posting, colleagues in his network recalled their own attenuated and derailed careers. Many of these women and men are now exiles, snapped up by foreign companies and European and

American universities, engineering institutes and hospitals, all well aware of the high standard of Iraq's education (both before and during the Baath era). Tens of thousands of these experts are forced to take up work inferior to their level of training and without institutional support for publication and international dialogue.

When did you last see a citation of research authored by an Iraqi scientist? When have you last heard an Iraqi scientific presentation at an international conference? Their absence is indicative of their continued isolation and of their government's cultural poverty and mismanaged resources.

Inside Iraq today the main concern of citizens (and government) is security. The streets of Baghdad are channels cutting through walled in lanes. There's no civic landscape. No conferences take place here; few foreign professional colleagues visit; the government's resources are consumed by a military budget for tanks and trucks, foreign anti-terror devices, and arming check posts. (I was unable to revisit the ancient site of Ctesiphon because of military skirmishes there, but I did return to the reopened Iraq National Museum where a few retrieved items from the looted collection were on display.)

Just as there are no conferences and few gatherings of musicians or writers or researchers, there are no open playgrounds, no public football matches, no concerts, and little inter-city travel. Children and families are confined to their homes watching the world pass through television, youtube, and whatsapp.

With corruption gripping all levels of government, whatever resources are available are allocated to cronies and their families; merit is an alien concept now. Even the Ministry of Health, once the pride of Iraq, is today incapable of designing and carrying out essential research to assess the nation's basic health needs.

In response to the arrival of so many highly trained Iraqis in the West over the past 30 years, surely Americans and others could make an effort to visit Iraq and start a new dialogue with their peers there.

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BN Aziz has recently returned from a two week visit in Iraq. [Swimming up the Tigris: Real Life Encounters with Iraq](#), based on her work in Iraq between 1989 and 2003, is published by University of Florida Press, 2007.

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