Editorial

Iraq: Between the Present and the Future

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As the Arab world witnesses an unprecedented wave of uprisings, Iraq stands at a crossroads. Unlike the vast majority of Arab countries, it is no longer ruled by an authoritarian despot. Like Egypt and Tunisia, it is undergoing a challenging process of democratic transformation. Eight years since the invasion of Iraq, the country is still grappling with economic hardship, terrorist attacks, ethnic and sectarian divisions, and a degree of clientelism that still casts a shadow over its political processes. The road to democracy is a rough one, and in today’s Arab world, Iraq’s experience has been rockier than most. Iraq has also had a long and complicated journey, in which several tough questions must be asked. How does one deal with the relics of the past during periods of transition? Should they be swept under the carpet—as the Lebanese did when the civil war ended—or should they be confronted, or even integrated into the present? How has everyday life changed and what are the survival mechanisms that have remained constant at the core, but which have been adapted to fit the present? How does one express anger and alienation while also projecting the desire to live in a better future? How are people in the new Iraq, post-Saddam Hussein, working on the ground to make sure this better future actually materializes? What are their concerns, challenges, and achievements?

It is hard not to speculate on what could have been—if Saddam Hussein had not been removed by force, would Iraq also have seen protests calling for the regime to fall? Or did the fall of the Baathist regime in Iraq create a space for reformists in Syria, for example, to try to bring down the remaining Baathist regime there when the chance arose? The civil strife that Iraq has been witnessing since 2003 has been a cautionary tale about the possible effects of the overnight removal of a dictator. One could go as far as arguing that the immediate consequences of the invasion of Iraq have had a detrimental effect on processes of reform in the Arab world. Far from being a desirable model that would catalyze the rest of the Arab world to democratize, as Bush-era neoconservatives claimed, one could argue that the Iraqi style of regime fall may have stifled democratic movements in the region. No one in the Arab world would have freely chosen to have their leader removed by force and solely by foreign troops, according to the Iraq ‘model’. Given the choice, people might have opted for the stability of living under authoritarian rule over
chaos and civil war. The Arab uprisings of 2011 have now broken that wall of fear, but only because they are driven by willed change from within, and not one imposed by outside forces.

Far from lament over what could have been, Iraqis are fully engaged in building a new future. Not enough time has passed for the past to be considered truly distant. Still Iraqis recognize that looking forward, not backward, must dominate the way to deal with the present in order to escape from its shackles. And they are doing this by confronting past, present, and future challenges at once. Gone are the days when political controversies are not talked about, and when only the official regime discourse is allowed in the public sphere. As Stephan Milich shows in his article in this special issue, the Iraqi cultural sphere that used to be dominated by state rhetoric is now open to critical dissidence. In focusing on the case of the poet Abd al-Razzaq Abd al-Wahid, he highlights the contribution of this closed cultural sphere to the mechanics of the Baathist regime and critiques the role of those Arab intellectuals who were complicit in this process of closure.

Gone also are the days of living under the shadow of the leader’s egoistical self-representation. As Benjamin Isakhan shows, there has been a deliberate process of de-Baathification in Iraq since the invasion of 2003. However, this process has been a controversial one and poses tough challenges for Iraqis about what to do with the past, especially its physical manifestations in public space. Hayder Al-Mohammed shows in his article that processes of transition are not easy, and often carry with them traces of the past that are adapted to fit present challenges. His article highlights the cautious processes of accommodation that the inhabitants of Basra have had to engage in as they deal with security challenges brought about by new paramilitary forces taking over the city after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The visual representations in Basran public space may be different, but the underlying dynamics of day-to-day survival are worryingly similar.

Iraqis are also striving to adapt to the transitions of the present. Lisa Foster’s article focuses on the way heavy metal music serves multiple functions for Iraqi youth, from acting as a method of catharsis and critique of the harsh realities after the US invasion, to becoming a tool to construct a supportive community. Heavy metal also allows those youth to at once create a form of music that emerges, in both content and form, from their local lived experiences, and to become part of a transnational community. As Foster puts it, ‘Rooted in the sounds and social fabric of today’s Iraqi youth, heavy metal modalities offer a unique amalgam of personal pain, public commentary, and global cultural ties that succinctly capture the tension and struggle of a transitioning new Iraq’.

Women are also engaged in this process of self-reclamation in an environment that threatens to marginalize their voices. Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt’s
article illustrates this through a discussion of the challenges faced by Kurdish women’s movements in Iraq. Like the youth in Iraq’s heavy metal bands, Kurdish women’s groups are engaging in a process of narration of a shared identity—in the latter’s case, that of a Kurdish nation that is at once part of and at odds with the Iraqi nation.

This special issue captures a small snapshot of Iraqi public life in the post-invasion era. The articles demonstrate that the deal is not yet sealed. There are many causes for optimism, but positive developments are coupled with evolving challenges too. As the rest of the Arab world confronts similar challenges, albeit catalyzed by different causes, it is both instructive and inspiring to look at Iraq for lessons to learn.