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## Baghdad's Buried Treasure

By ERIC DAVIS

**N**EW BRUNSWICK, N.J. — Democracy in Iraq, the conventional wisdom holds, cannot work: there is no foundation to build on, no history of a civil society or a politically aware citizenry. The skepticism sounds familiar. After the 1991 gulf war, American leaders, assuming that only authoritarian rule would assure political stability in Iraq, abandoned the nearly successful uprisings against Saddam Hussein's regime.

Such arguments, then and now, ignore the traditions of civil society and cultural pluralism that existed before the Baath Party took power in 1968 and then remained dormant during 35 years of repression. Those traditions can be revived to help Iraq thrive and make a transition to democracy.

Because the Baath Party's chauvinistic pan-Arabism and totalitarianism has for decades defined Iraq's image to the world, many foreigners assume that a Western-style civil society never existed there. From the modern state's founding in 1921, when Britain imposed the Hashemite monarchy, Iraq (despite the absence of democracy) built a rich and varied society of ethnic inclusiveness, artistic freedom and civic involvement.

In fact, the roots of this society go back a century. The Baghdad College of Law, Iraq's oldest institute of higher learning, was founded in 1908 and quickly produced a distinguished legal profession. In the ensuing years, teachers, university students and professionals created associations and social clubs, like the Solidarity Club in Baghdad, formed in 1926, an intellectual salon that also organized anticolonial and antimonarchy rallies.

During this period, too, artisans and workers formed a nationwide network of labor groups that was independent of state control. This labor movement organized a general strike in 1931 that forced the British to abandon plans to raise taxes and electricity rates. This encouraged further protests, testifying to a strong solidarity among workers (many of them illiterate) until the Baathists suppressed all labor groups in the 1960's.

In the middle of the last century, writers formed literary organizations that generated the Free Verse Movement, which influenced the entire Arab world by challenging classical forms of Arabic poetry that had not changed since pre-Islamic times. Artists' salons, like the Pioneers and the Baghdad Group of the 1950's, made strides in the visual arts, producing the acclaimed Freedom Monument in Baghdad's Liberation Square. Dozens of newspapers in the largest cities presented not just the news but also a broad sampling of intellectual culture (particularly short fiction and poetry) and, despite censorship, political views. The coffeehouse, already a venerable institution in Ottoman Iraq, became the place where Iraqis of all social classes and ethnicities read the papers, discussed politics and heard poets read their work.

pan-Arabism refused to recognize ethnic diversity, their strain of nationalism was never dominant. While the bureaucratic and military elites tended to be Sunni Arab and pan-Arabist, the broad core of Iraqi nationalism insisted on the inclusion of all Iraq's ethnic groups, even as it recognized Iraq's predominantly Arab character.

Gen. Abdel Karim Kassem, who came to power after the monarchy's fall in 1958, avoided ethnic sectarianism. Whereas the Ottomans and Hashemites had favored the Sunni Arabs, under Kassem being Shiite or Kurd (or of any other ethnic group) was no longer an impediment to a state job. Kassem's regime proved that ethnic schisms were not part of some primordial Iraqi national character, as many Westerners had suggested. Although authoritarian, the Kassem government showed that xenophobia, brutality and nepotism need not be the norm of Iraqi public life. He enacted social reforms like building public housing and redistributing land more equitably. Through state-run museums, films and television programs, Kassem tried to champion Iraqi history as a story of cultural pluralism, which infuriated pan-Arabists.

Although the Baathist regime that overthrew and executed Kassem in 1963 suppressed all nationalists who supported cultural pluralism, traditions of civil society remained alive, if underground. When I was in Iraq for the first time in 1980, I was struck by the bustling Iraqi bookstores, where volumes were literally falling off the shelves. Many texts on approved subjects like ancient Mesopotamia, the Baghdad-based Abbasid Empire, pre-Islamic Arab poetry and Iraqi folklore contained within them a sort of "hidden texts" in which Iraqi intellectuals sustained a rich, if covert, political discourse. An Iraqi intellectual could, for example, criticize Nebuchadnezzar's rule in a scholarly work, but the intelligentsia could read, between the lines, an attack on Saddam Hussein.

I also noted the dignity and high quality of the writings of colleagues in Baghdad University's department of political science (which, to be sure, avoided openly discussing Iraqi politics). These traits underscored the refusal of Iraqis to desist from the life of the mind, no matter how ruthless their rulers. I soon understood the Arab proverb, "The Egyptians write, the Lebanese publish and the Iraqis read."

Indeed, Iraqi tenacity in upholding intellectual and cultural traditions made clear why Saddam Hussein had appointed himself to head the audaciously named Project for the Rewriting of History, which, while ostensibly reclaiming Iraqi heritage from colonial interpretation, actually sought to expunge any record of the strides made by Iraqi nationalists toward civil society before Baathist rule.

Even Iraqi textbooks withstood complete Baathist rewriting. References to Saddam Hussein's interpretations of history were added, but in a superficial fashion. For example, Saddam Hussein's "Qadisiya" — his name for the Iran-Iraq war, recalling the Arab victory over the Persians in 637 A.D. — was given only a short paragraph in the standard sixth-grade textbook on Iraqi history.

Indeed, one Education Ministry official who oversaw the secondary school curriculum under Saddam Hussein was Baqir al-Zujaji, whose academic study of the Iraqi novel's treatment of rural society is a covert indictment of the Baath Party in the guise of an attack on leftist intellectuals. In arguing that leftist writers treated peasants condescendingly, he actually documented and tacitly criticized the manner in which rural residents were treated by the Baathists. Today, Iraqi reformers can turn the Project for the Rewriting of History on its head by using school textbooks to document the rich tradition of cultural openness in modern Iraq that the Baathists tried to deny.

If civil society persisted covertly under Saddam Hussein, it flourished in his absence. In the

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Although imperfect, it can boast of parliamentary elections, an ideologically diverse press, new schools, advances in health care that lowered the mortality rate, and cultural and political tolerance. And these gains were made despite Saddam Hussein's economic embargo, as well as hostility from neighboring Turkey and Iran. The Kurdish experience shows that Iraqis can establish democracy when allowed to do so.

The skeptics have it wrong. Iraqis today can look to a past that offered political and cultural space for all its ethnic groups. Historical memory can be an important building block in reconstructing civil society and establishing democracy in Iraq.

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