

Eric Davis. *Memories of State - Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. 397 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-23546-5.

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Published on H-Levant (December, 2009)

Commissioned by Amy A. Elouafi

Memories, Nightmares and Hopes

This review has been a long time coming, but during this time, Davis's book has become the subject of extensive comment, achieving an almost iconic, certainly landmark, status in the field. I regard it as one of the more thought-provoking, intriguing, though sometimes exasperating, books on modern Middle Eastern history; it is immensely erudite, conceptually rigorous, and shows a profound and nuanced familiarity with a very wide range of material. It also sets out an extremely useful and sensitive periodization of the various tergiversations of Ba'athist rule between 1968 and 2003, which should become part of any "standard account" of Iraqi history.

The main thrust of the book is its analysis of the many ways in which the Iraqi regime co-opted intellectuals to create a historical master narrative, or myth, of the origins and continuity of the Iraqi state, although it says too little about what happens when such myths are patently unbelievable. Parts of the book call to mind Eric Hobsbawm's pithy dictum that "nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not so." [1] Davis's central tenet is that there are two competing models of Iraqi history, the pan-Arabist and the Iraqi nationalist; while the self-described pan-Arabists were in power from 1968 to 2003, they attempted, at least until the devastations of the 1990s, to impose their version of the past as the "official" narrative. An official Project for the Rewriting of History was in full swing after 1979; "More than simple indoctrination, the project represented an attempt to create a new public sphere, including the reconstitution of political identity, the relationship of the citizen to the state, and public understandings of national heritage" (p. 148).

The Ba'ath sought to impose a very narrow sectarian (i.e., Sunni) vision of the "Iraqi past," essentially negating or ignoring the history (and contribution) of the Kurds and the Shi'is, and vilifying the history of other nations (for example, Israel or Syria). They wanted, as Davis says, to "purify" the historical record by tying the master narrative to a glorious Sunni Arab past. Such a doctrine devaluing the contribution of four-fifths of the population had little chance of being accepted by that large majority, whose past was being so disparaged, and its reiteration led to resentment and sectarian division, from which universal education and growing secularism had largely spared Iraq until the late 1970s. Somewhat perversely, since the Iraqi nationalists were only briefly able to publicize their views, and were generally not in the business of intellectual coercion, Davis chides them for failing to provide a counter-hegemonic vision of Iraqi society (p. 14). Also, while it may have been "critical that the regime address the issue of trust among Iraqi ethnic groups and the desire of the people not to be cut off from the past" (p.

54), the regime's answer to this, namely imposing a vision of the past where Shi'is and Kurds had no real role, was not especially satisfactory. Davis acknowledges this quite explicitly: "Through association of control of the state with a small Sunni Arab elite, pan-Arabism became for many Iraqis a metaphor of the political, economic and cultural exclusion of the bulk of the populace from public life" (p. 55).

The conflicts and paradoxes between 1945 and 1958 are especially crucial in any consideration of what followed. Although the period was certainly characterized by political repression, civil society continued to flourish; political parties expanded, newspapers proliferated, and there were relatively free elections in 1954 (p. 95). One of the many interesting leitmotifs of this book is that various instances of "national unity" or "liberalism," like the 1920 revolution and the period between 1958 and 1961, serve for Davis as evidence that there *have been* occasions when Iraqis have overcome their "primordial" (my term, not his) differences, or found viable ways of communicating with one another. In some sense he sees these moments as pointing to the existence of what may be described as a sort of "bank of social merit" on whose deposits subsequent generations will always be able to draw.

The period after the overthrow of the monarchy was also crucial; Abd al-Karim Qasim's unwillingness to enter the United Arab Republic was regarded as a massive failure (deviance, *inhiraf*) by the pan-Arabists, while the Communists regarded the UAR largely as an irrelevant distraction from the task of state-building and attending to more pressing social concerns. Although this is not an area where the bar can be set very high, Davis thinks that the Qasim period, with all its muddle, inconsistency, and confusion, was one of the few bright spots in modern Iraqi history. In a way, the overthrow of Qasim in 1963 echoed the overthrow of Muhammad Musaddiq a decade or so earlier; both were potentially too left-leaning for the United States to stomach. The Project for the Rewriting of History was originally launched when the Ba'th came to power in 1968, in order to integrate pan-Arabism with an Iraq-centered nationalism, often based on the Mesopotamian heritage, to which all Iraqis could relate. The other pillar of this utterly nonsensical project was that Iraq's ancientness somehow entitled it to assume the leadership of the Arab world.

By the mid-1970s the "rewriting" had developed into a sizeable cottage industry, especially with the huge rise in Iraqi oil revenues (from about \$1 billion in 1972 to \$33 billion in 1980). Foreigners like Pierre Rossi, the former French cultural attaché in Baghdad, and the American Christine Moss Helms, were encouraged to write in praise of the regime. By the mid-1980s, Davis says, the state had lost much of the credibility it had gained in the 1970s--although I am not sure that it ever had that much credibility. As everyone knew, the fact that Iraq was better off and could spend more on social and other services had nothing to do with Ba'thist genius, but was a result of the fortuitous rise in oil prices, as became obvious when the price fell precipitately after 1984, reached its nadir in 1999, and began to move upwards again in the early 2000s. Also after 1984, the regime began to repair its fences with the West, and largely stopped its aggressive war of words against Israel.

The Iran/Iraq war of the 1980s was a heaven-sent opportunity for the rewriters of Iraqi history to rattle on about the age-old rivalries between Sunnis and Shi'is (really a kind of Persian fifth column), the perfidious Iranians, a revived *shu'ubiya* and so on--and remember that so-called historians were drafted into the project. Hatred of Iran was stepped up when Iraq began to lose, but the Iranian revolution was not especially attractive to non-religious Shi'is, and the war was actually fought between Iraqi Shi'i conscripts and Iranian Shi'i conscripts. Here and elsewhere I get slightly irritated with Davis for *not* saying (e.g., in the middle of chapter 7), what a lot of poisonous nonsense the cult of Saddam Husayn, the vicious anti-Shi'ism, and so on all was. It's difficult to be entirely convinced by Davis's "silver lining-ism"; thus he sees the war, with all its lunacy and misery, as having "important implications for the creation of a civil society." It was a time when Iraqis of all sects and ethnicities worked together, were committed to the defense of the nation state, and when "the prevailing assumption of the 1970s that prosperity and the social welfare state were givens of the Iraqi political system [was eliminated]," and that Iraqis began to realize that that the regime "could also cause tremendous human and material suffering" and began to "contemplate alternatives to Ba'thist authoritarianism" (pp. 198-99). I think most Iraqis had contemplated those alternatives long before that, and however much they may have been committed to defending Iraq, the war was very evidently not of their own choosing.

Davis's eighth chapter ("Memories of State and the Arts of Resistance") is one of the most interesting in the book; here he tries to show how "official" history was written and formulated. He shows how Ba'thist ideology (the thought of Michel 'Aflaq) never attracted much interest among Iraqi intellectuals, and that many former members of the "democratic Left" had been co-opted by the regime. A major feature of "history-writing" seems to have the privileging of Arabism (and ultimately tribalism, or the Albu Nasir) over Islam, at least until Saddam Husayn's rediscovery of Islam in the last years of his rule. This is certainly an extremely sophisticated analysis, but one would like to know how far the subversion being practiced by intellectuals through textbooks and other writings was actually perceived by their readers.

In the final chapter Davis takes us through the dismal 1990s and early 2000s. Here again, he tries to work his usual magic of making gold out of base metal, in this case criticizing the "negative and pessimistic tone" of "post-Gulf-War interpretations of Iraqi politics." Davis is particularly incensed at Samir al-Khalil/Kanan Makiya's *Republic of Fear* for playing into the hands of the Ba'th's desire to present itself as invincible, that the regime would only crumble with Saddam's death, etc., etc. Davis sees it differently (the bank of social merit again), claiming that the intifada showed that the spirit of resistance was not dead: "To counter those who point to the widespread security and military apparatus the regime developed under the 'republic of fear,' I would ask whether a gang holding hostages is exhibiting strength or power in any meaningful sense for any duration of time" (p. 282).

While I agree with Davis, Nazih Ayubi, and Joel Migdal in characterizing Iraq and similar regimes as weak rather than strong states, such statements as the one quoted above miss both an important aspect of Makiya's argument, and its inherent timeliness.

Republic of Fear was first published in 1989; only two years after the bombing of Halabja (which was still being discussed as if it was not quite clear what had happened there), when few reliable sources were available in the West except the work of such pro-Iraqi luminaries as Pierre Rossi and Christine Moss Helms, Hanna Batatu's vital but not easily accessible *Old Social Classes* (1978), the truly execrable *Socialist Iraq* (1978) by Majid Khadduri, the first edition of Phebe Marr's *Modern History of Iraq* (1985), and, I suppose, my own *Iraq since 1958* (1987). In the late 1980s many writers seem to have been unable to characterize the regime as it actually was, a kleptocracy and a cat's paw of the United States. There was often the sense, in both Arab and Western business circles, that however wicked and ruthless Saddam Husayn might be, he "got things done," somewhat in the spirit of an earlier dictator who "at least" made the trains run on time. In these circumstances the publication of *Republic of Fear* was both an act of courage and an important landmark in enabling the rest of the world to see, for the first time in such detail, what an inescapably dreadful regime this was.

Davis believes that "in spite of everything" some elements of resistance and/or civil society have not been extinguished and form reservoirs of decency and islands of hope deep within the consciousness of the population, however long and however profoundly they have been repressed. I find it difficult to share this conviction. Of course, there are many, many, decent people in Iraq who wish to set their country on the road to a better future, and to work with them on progressive projects, as Davis has very admirably done, is extremely worthwhile. It just seems important not to underestimate the obstacles that lie ahead; the fall of the tyrant did not lead to freedom and democracy but to some sort of chaotic semi-theocratic hell, and although the crassness and often wicked folly which has been characteristic of the aspects of the invasion for the past six years are not in doubt, the deeply corrosive effects of a truly terrible past cannot easily be brushed aside. I wish I could be as confident that the deposits in Davis's bank of social merit are as deep and abundant as he evidently believes them to be.

Note

[1]. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 12.

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Citation: Peter Sluglett. Review of Davis, Eric, *Memories of State - Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*. H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. December, 2009.
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