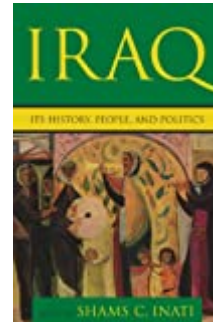




Shams C. Inati, ed. *Iraq: Its History, People, and Politics*. Amherst: Humanity Books, 2003. 322 pp. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59102-096-7.



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Writing for Iraq: Another View of Iraq's History and Society

The literature on the history and formation of modern Iraq is scarce. Apart from coverage in international newspapers triggered by the wars against Iraq and the ongoing occupation of the country and apart from some academic specialist studies, there are few works that seek to provide as comprehensive a view on Iraq's history, culture, and politics, as the volume under review claims to present. This volume comprises a diverse collection of sixteen chapters on a variety of subjects. It does not so much address students or specialists of Iraq or the Arab World, but rather a wider, not necessarily academic, readership, combining a variety of styles from the popular scientific to more proper analysis. Written by an international body of scholars and experts, and targeted mainly at an American audience whose perception and knowledge of Iraq and its history is shaped and, most often, misinformed by the U.S. media, this volume intends to provide another view of and introduction to Iraq. Thus, the authors who take an explicit stance against the previous 1991 and 2003 U.S.-led wars and the sanction regime, bring to the forefront not only the history of a country, but also treat facets of a society which is affected most tangibly by decades of wars against Iran in the 1980s and

the so-called first Gulf War of 1991 and sanctions.

Based on a symposium held in 1999 at Villanova University, most of the articles are—in light of the then immanent threat of a new war—updated versions of papers presented at this meeting. As the editor, Shams C. Inati, professor for Islamic philosophy and theology, claims in her introductory remarks, the aim of the book is to go beyond current academic and non-academic discussions about Iraq's political and economic situation and the devastating impact of the sanctions regime, to draw attention to other aspects and dimensions of Iraq and its people, which seem to be unknown to or ignored by the wider public. The editorial introduction serves as a political positioning in which the U.S. government and its politics is critically discussed, as its double standard in the Middle East (to conceal its real interests, namely to distract attention from the Israeli/Arab conflict and to assure unlimited access to Iraq's oil revenues) sets the tone for the following chapters. It is most likely the unintended result of the effort to present an alternative view that this collection of articles does not provide an all-embracing systematic introduction to the history and present con-

ditions of Iraq, nor its people and politics, but confines itself to only some, not necessarily central specific aspects. Thus, and somewhat in contradiction to the title's promise of a somewhat comprehensive overview, subjects are dealt with only selectively. For example, an analysis of twentieth-century, modern Iraq is missing, as is an analysis of Iraq under Saddam Husayn. Furthermore, the length, scope, and quality of the sixteen chapters differ greatly. While some chapters resort to standardized formulaic evocations, such as Iraq's "Golden Age," others provide more complex analysis. In some sort of a loose chronological sequence, starting with Ancient Iraq, most of the articles deal with the present day situation and portray a society and state in flux, if not altogether in dissolution. The bleak situation of Iraq before the latest war has become painfully worse since the occupation and the subsequent series of internal and external events; unfortunately, the present volume provides only marginal keys for understanding this situation.

The book is divided into five parts, beginning with the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia and Iraqi archeology, and concluding with a summary evaluation of America's wars against Iraq, 1990-2002. The five parts address the history of Iraq; culture; religious and ethnic dimensions; politics, restricted to the impact of war and sanction on Iraqi society; and regional and international questions. Part 1, entitled "History and Civilization," deals, in three chapters, with particular questions of Iraq's long history, from its ancient history to the Abbasid period to the modern era of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. It should be said that these chapters do not attempt to provide a summary account of each period but address these periods in light of current politics. Hence in the first chapter (one of the most interesting), the American archeologist McGuire Gibson combines his presentation of Iraq's ancient history with an account of the difficult conditions under which archeology and preservation occur since the sanctions were put in place. Gibson makes a strong statement regarding the devastating effects, caused by foreign policy in Iraq, on the remains of ancient history and the institutions of preservation. Years of sanctions and wars left Iraq's excavation sites and museums unprotected, and resulted in a permanent threat to the physical survival of this world heritage. Apart from these effects of the sanctions on the very material presence, the author establishes another source for the dereliction, namely the brain drain, which is affecting Iraqi society at all levels. Far from seeing it as one of the "unwanted" effects of sanction, McGuire Gibson inserts "draining away of expertise in archeology, as in all other

academic and scientific fields, seems to me to be the real, but unspoken, purpose for continuing the embargo" (p. 34). Gibson's stance, which considers the enormous effect of this brain drainage as a political strategy exercised against Iraq, is indeed a plausible, yet hitherto undocumented, argument.

Another aspect central to current debates about Iraq is raised in chapter 3 by Hala Fattah, who takes up critically some of the widespread assumptions about the formative elements of modern Iraq. In this short chapter, "The Question of the 'Artificiality' of Iraq as a Nation State," the author rightly takes issue with those suppositions that uphold the thesis that a coherent Iraqi unit as a nation state is unsustainable. This view not only prevails in some scholarship but has recently been given prominence in the domain of policy-making (and, as the reviewer would like to add, has already led to bloody results). Drawn from the argument that all nation-building is based, to a certain degree, on artificial social and geographical boundaries, Fattah develops her argument from personal contemporary records of the formative period of modern Iraq. She maintains that Iraq's history is not characterized and does not provide any more evidence for the artificiality thesis than many other modern nation-states that, if measured by the same criteria, would equally not qualify for a cohesive and quasi-naturally given form. Moreover, Fattah states that, apart from being factually questionable, this view scarcely hides the self-serving interests of those who promote the idea. In light of the present, after-war discussions about the future of Iraq as a nation and society, with frequent reference to its so-called mosaic structure, this account of the formative period of modern history of Iraq is well taken. It would, however, have been useful to the readership had the author made reference to the fact that Arab nationalist politicians and scholars alike argued permanently against the "artificiality" thesis.

Unfortunately the point raised in this article did not inform the structure of the book as a whole. Thus part 3, which deals with the question of Iraq as a multiethnic and multiconfessional society, rendered programmatically as "Unity in Diversity," would have profited from either a brief introduction to the overall composition of Iraq's society, past and present, or from a more nuanced presentation of this diversity. Thus part 3 lines up some of those sects, confessions, and ethnic groups without providing a review of the overall configuration and interplay between the various factions. For the uninformed reader, a strange picture emerges of an Iraq where there are neither Arabs nor Sunnis, at least if one follows the

structure of the book. Mysteriously, and without further explanation, the contributions presented in this volume deal with some but not all major religious confessions in Iraq (Christian, Shiites and Jews), leaving out Sunnis and Sunni Islam, as well as dealing with one of the ethnic groups, the Kurds, but not the Arabs. This kind of representation, which in all likelihood follows not only the attempt to give a human face to Iraq in the view of the uninformed, but also follows the logic of multiculturalism, overemphasizes the role of minorities and marginality, however problematic this perspective is in the Iraqi case (after all, Shiites are quantitatively in the majority). Similar to the very divergent nature of the chapters united in this part, this leads to a distorted vision and representation of the social, religious, and ethnic composition of Iraqi society and makes the book of little help as an introduction to the wider public. Whereas, for example, chapter 9, on the Jewish legacy, is based primarily on personal memory and on an explicit identitarian perspective delivered in an anecdotal fashion, the short chapter on the Christian Community intends to challenge the ignorance about the existence of Christians in the Arab World, “a major Western misconception about the Arabs” (p. 131), as Inati puts it rightly, but provides the reader with only some glimpses of the highlights of Christian existence in Iraq in their contribution to the country’s culture and history. More concerned with current issues, the contributions on the Shia community (chapter 10 by Joyce Wiley) and on the Kurdish question (chapter 11 by Edmund Ghareeb) present their themes in a more informative and summary manner.

As a welcome departure of the conventional order, culture and art are not banished to the end of the book but stand prominently as part 2 (“Cultural Dimensions”), thus reflecting the outstanding position that Iraqi artists uphold internationally, especially in the domain of the arts and music. The chapters united under this heading include the visual arts, music, and literature. May Muzaffar’s contribution on “Iraqi Contemporary Art, Roots and Development,” offers a brief though informative inventory in which she lists various domains of Iraqi artistic excellence and ends with a suggestive reflection on Iraqi art in general. Taking up the observation of the French archeologist George Roux, who claims a conspicuous continuation between the ancient and modern period in many aspects of daily life, she raises the question whether it is possible to trace a link between ancient Mesopotamian artistic skills and imagination, which were marked by “multiplicity and diversity” in style and theme (p. 65), and in Iraq’s undoubted artistic

standard of today. While Muzaffar leaves this question of the *longue durée* open, the contribution on Iraqi music by Sheherazade Qassim Hassan (chapter 5) seeks to demonstrate how the tradition and art of music in Iraq, which is primarily vocal, accommodates the changes of modern society and new modes of communication, while trying to stay in tune with the heritage. In this interesting presentation, modern Iraqi music is set in its social context, by way of setting in relation new spaces for performance offered by the state, which served official functions and exercised influence on the artistic performance such as time constraint, with modern technology, such as the radio, which was consequential for shifting public and private spaces in this artistic realm.

A strong feature of the volume is that it makes visible the lethal effects of the sanctions regime. Many of the articles trace, on more than the economic and social level, Iraq’s path from a rather prosperous nation to a Third-World-status with mass poverty; unprecedented social and economic dislocation; and outbreaks of epidemics such as typhoid and cholera, as a result of raw sewage being dumped into waterways. That the sanctions function as a device to continue the American (-Anglo) war by other means has found sad illustration. The remaining two parts of the book on the “Effect of War and Sanctions” (part 4) and “Regional and International Politics” (part 5) are in general substantively argued and well sourced. Part 5 takes up internal developments in Iraq, caused by more than ten years of sanctions regime and the effects of the wars, by addressing some of the most urgent issues that Iraq is currently facing, namely the environment, the economy and women. The chapter on “Women, Gender Relations, and Sanctions in Iraq,” by Nadjé El-Ali, provides a pessimistic account of the situation of Iraqi women under the sanctions regime whose lives have been dominated and determined by the daily need to cope with the reality left on the ground, including the impact on education, marriage, and gender relations. Rania Masri’s contribution (chapter 12), which draws largely on the vast literature on the environmental crisis in Iraq, deals with only one of those effects, the catastrophic consequences for the Iraqi people who are paying with their health and lives for the usage of Depleted Uranium. She remains within the general tenor of the book in concluding that, whether this usage is based on—criminal intent or criminal indifference—“the answer is clear, and the responsible parties are equally known” (p. 208).

Part 5 opens up the perspective of the Arab region and of American policies against Iraq. The regional di-

mension, however, focuses exclusively on the impact of water scarcity and the problem of the control over oil revenues in the region, leaving aside other political considerations that shape Iraq's relationship with neighboring countries. In chapter 15, Atif Kubursi places water scarcity and oil abundance within the wider context of the Middle East; this is the only contribution that takes up a transregional dimension. The water scarcity crisis in the Middle East is one of the most eminent problems the region faces today, and the article provides a useful and insightful introduction to a problem that has come close to a political crisis in many parts of the region, for example, the Turkish-Syria-Iraq conflict over the Euphrates, the Arab-Israeli conflict over water, and the Nile Waters. Chapter 16, on "The U.S.'s Undeclared War against Iraq," takes up the issue of sanctions in the broader context of U.S. interests in the Middle East and shares its basic assumptions with Atif Kubursi that the main goal behind U.S. interventions and interests in the Middle East is to maintain control over the oil fields, not only those of Iraq but also the Kuwaiti fields and, in light of a potential threat, Saudi oil fields. "Even though U.S. officials went out of their way to conceal their real objectives, certain statements were made which belied their efforts" (p.

271). The book ends with a review of the "America's War against Iraq, 1990-2002." Though it is unfortunate that the last chapter could not include, for reasons of publication, America's invasion of Iraq in 2003, it provides a useful detailed summary of the period between the two "Bush wars," 1991 and 2003, which was all-but-in-name a period of sanctions only. Using rich materials provided by the United Nations, whose advice was not taken into account, Naseer Aruri (in chapter 17) calls attention to the ambivalent role played by UNSCOM.

In sum, despite its title, the volume under review is, to a large extent, a reaction to a specific political and humanitarian situation of crisis and catastrophe. It is from this perspective that the book was published and it is from this perspective that the book is welcome. For the readership the editor of this book has in mind, it is a useful alternative introduction to certain features of Iraq. Herein lie both the merits and weaknesses of the book. For those who will look for a systematic and exhaustive introduction to Iraq and its history, this book will not be advisable; for those, however, who are drawn to an understanding of this history by the recent events, the book will provide sufficient material for a first acquaintance.

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