

Call for Papers

International Conference on Iraqi Studies

Writing the History of Iraq Historiographical and Political Challenges

Place and date: The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (*Institut universitaire de hautes études internationales et du développement*, IHEID), Geneva, Switzerland, 6-8 November 2008

Organisers : Swiss Society for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (*Société Suisse Moyen Orient et Civilisation Islamique*, SSMOCI) and The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (IHEID)¹

The official aim of the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was to put an end to Saddam Hussein's regime and establish a viable democracy that would constitute a model for other Middle Eastern countries. New institutions and elites were to replace the old ones. The period of Baath party domination (1968-2003) was to be wiped out through the "de-Baathification" of Iraq. This process, which sought to lay the foundations for a "new" Iraq, has mainly affected military and educational institutions. Educational reforms aimed at the replacement of an academic system perceived as dominated and shaped by the primacy of ideology with a new system founded on the values and ethos of the liberal arts. The ideologists of the Provisional Authority particularly targeted history and historians, ignoring both the intellectual openness of some Iraqi historians and the existence of a dissident historical tradition.

In the post-Saddam Iraq, the writing of past and recent history was thus assigned a major role in establishing the basis for national and state identity recognised by the majority of Iraqi citizens as legitimate. Today's Iraq, however, marked by a vacuum of state power in some parts of the country, by the essentialisation of boundaries between Sunnis and Shi'is and by the continued movement towards autonomy in the Kurdish regions, appears to correspond very little to the model of a "bourgeois democracy" that requires the integration and adherence of citizens. Likewise, the country in its present state differs greatly from the Iraq of Saddam, characterized by authoritarian rule and the monopolization of resources by an 'asabiyya, or even a "dynasty". Working out a new historical narrative centred on the

¹ From the 1st of January 2008 IHEID will replace the two existing institutions HEI (Institut universitaire de hautes études internationales) and IUED (Institut universitaire d'études du développement).

State thus seems problematic, to say the least.

The use of memory and history to establish group identities occurs in a conflict-ridden arena in which different groups seek to impose hegemonic narratives. With Iraq facing the danger of implosion, which groups – or even segments of the population with their own sub-Iraqi and transboundary references – will impose their visions of history? Is Iraq facing an unavoidable “fragmentation of collective memory”? What is the experience of Iraqi Kurdistan, a *de facto* autonomous territory since 1991? Is Iraq moving towards communitarist historical accounts based on wounded memories or on discourses of victimization? What materials are needed to reunite plural memories? With what aim? After the radical redefinition, through state coercion, of categories such as “bottom”, “top”, “power” or “society” between 1979-1991, and the devastating effects of the embargo on Iraqi society and of three wars over a period of twenty-three years, is it still possible to lay the foundations for a history less centred on power (*hukumat*) and more concerned with transversal dynamics?

On another level, is it conceivable to write a “distant” history of the conflict in Iraq? The memory of the present is extremely volatile and fragile. It is also deceptive, because saturated with emotion and passion, exposed at the same time to an excess of information, to acts of disinformation or misinformation and, in the end, to a lack of meaning. The challenges researchers must face concern the analysis of the past, both in its own terms and also from the point of view of the present context. In this respect, the trial and execution of Saddam Hussein raise many questions. The trial was conceived as a moment of memory, but also as an “instrument of history”, hence the necessity of recording it. But what exactly has been the role of historians? How will it be possible from now on to discuss and write the history of the darkest pages of the Baathist regime, now that justice has already spoken its last word? What place should “the other”, Great Britain (1918-1932/1958) and the United States (since 2003), occupy in contemporary history? Furthermore, how far has the process of de-Baathification of scientific institutions and history encouraged by the United States, actually gone? Is it already possible to assess of the “new history” (Iraqi, Arab and Islamic) promoted by Washington?

The history of Iraq is made up above all of successive and radical breaks (*coups d'état*, changes of regime, military invasions), the chronological markers of which are easy to identify. It represents a succession of tragic events which could lead us to assume a sort of fatality in the country's evolution towards the present situation. Although researchers cannot ignore these disruptions, is it not also necessary to establish a link between the moments when the breaks occur and the longer term, in order to shed light on the period under study? After the Baath party took power, historical and political science research concentrated almost entirely on the analysis of the political system, the regime and the ruling clique. From the beginning of the 90s and until the American invasion of 2003, research focussed on tribal and communal phenomena as new grids of analysis. But if we accept that these categories cannot be considered essential – in other words, that they are the product of constant construction by political powers as well as by researchers – ought they not to be examined critically? At the same time, the sites of observation and the levels of analysis (between the local, the regional and the global; between internal and external) should be multiplied so that our perspectives on Iraqi or even Middle Eastern history, can be renewed.

The material challenges are also considerable. For historians, written documents and archival material are essential. In 2003, however, with the fall of the Iraqi regime, many libraries and archives were looted and destroyed. Some documents were later recovered, but others have disappeared forever. While electronic archives may be available, there is no instance of scientific control and verification. Consequently, the question arises of the multiplication of sources (written and oral, local, etc.), as does that of methodological approaches. In this respect, fieldwork appears to be able to guarantee a new empirical

construction of objects of study and thus of categories of analysis closer to the reality of the internal dynamics of Iraqi society.

Finally, the human dimension cannot be ignored. Dozens of university teachers have left the country since 2003. Others have resigned because of death threats from Islamist groups, and some three hundred have been killed. In this state of violence, what does it mean being a historian in Iraq today, and what meaning do Iraqi historians give to their scholarly discourse?

Aims of the Conference

The conference has several complementary aims. First, it seeks to stimulate intellectual discussion among specialists – including young researchers – about what is at stake, both historiographically and politically, in working out the history of a state halfway between reconstruction and implosion. While a debate on “state building” already exists, engendered from the creation of new states in Eastern Europe as well as in Central Asia during the 1990s, that of “history-building” is much less present in academic circles.

As for an historical analysis of the past, what are the milestones that will allow for a renewed perspective on Iraqi 20th century history? Is it possible to write a history that fits into new paradigms?

Secondly, this conference aims to decompartmentalize the case of Iraq by inscribing it in a wider regional framework and in the longer-term perspective of 20th century conflicts. The subject of comparison is not the Iraqi regime as a power structure but rather the experience of societies that have laid the foundation of new political systems and consequently new discourses about their history after the fall of a regime or the end of an armed conflict. With this in mind, researchers studying other Middle Eastern countries will also be invited to take part in the conference.

Thirdly, the conference seeks to encourage cooperation and exchanges between Iraqi and Western Universities. To the extent possible, we will invite Iraqi historians or university officials to participate in the discussions. In this way, in addition to the rich reflections of academics and experts, we hope that the three days of debate may lay the foundations for a closer collaboration between institutions, on both an intellectual and a material level.

Lastly, this conference will result in a publication of a collective work.

Submissions

Please send an abstract of your contribution, in English, as well as a brief biography, by February 15th 2008 to Jordi Tejel (jtejel@vtxnet.ch). A scientific committee, made up of Riccardo Bocco (IHEID, Geneva), Hamit Bozarslan (EHESS, Paris), Anna Neubauer (SSMOCI, Bern) Peter Sluglett (University of Utah, Salt Lake City) and Jordi Tejel (SSMOCI, Bern) will select the proposals accepted for the conference. Candidates will receive a reply by the end of March 2008. For all additional information, please contact Jordi Tejel (jtejel@vtxnet.ch).

The language of the conference will be English. Please note that travel and accommodation will be covered by the organizers.



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