

*Memorandum on the workshop held at
Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute of Advanced Study:*

History Under the Sword
**Tracking Cultural Heritage Destruction, Human Migration, and the
Dynamic Nature of Conflict in the Middle East**

On 9-10 July 2015 an international group of scholars gathered at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study to confront the destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage. We convened the seminar under the knowledge that the violence engulfing Iraq today is absolute. The group's aim was thus to devise a conceptual and methodological framework for analyzing this tragedy, as well as documenting and preserving heritage amidst population. Six scholars presented on a diverse range of topics over the course of the two-day seminar, enumerating the impact of violence on Iraq's social and cultural character.

The list of presentations and scholars is as follows:

1. The destruction of Iraq's heritage and archeological sites since 1990, with particular focus on post-2014 developments as a result of incursions by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Nineveh and al-Anbar (*Abdulmir al-Hamdani, State University of New York – Stony Brook*).
2. Risks to Iraqi cultural diversity and the myriad populations it comprised, including Christians, Yezidis and Mandaeans, Shabak, Baha'is, Kaka'is and Turkmen (*Saad Salloum, MASARAT Foundation*).
3. A study of the Iraqi Jewish community, and the nature of its integration in and diaspora from Iraqi society as exemplary of contemporary diversity loss in the country (*Orit Bashkin, University of Chicago*).
4. Development of sectarianism in Iraq, proliferation of sub-identities, and the impact of this dual reality on the future of Iraq's national *character* (*Fanar Haddad, National University of Singapore*).

5. Political transformation of the legal framework around which cultural and communal groups are integrated and excluded from the national narrative (*Hosham Dawod, French National Center of Scientific Research*).
6. Considerations when developing systematic means to track, collect, and integrate field data into a comprehensive framework (*Catherine Lutz, Brown University*).

Conceptual Overview

In the land where history was first written, the complete erasure of over 8,000 years of cultural heritage, record, ethnic pluralism, and memory is underway. Today's vicious conflict has wrought near-complete destruction on the people and cultures that have survived in Mesopotamia for thousands of years. The fighting has forced millions to flee their homes in history's largest human diaspora, upsetting demographic, ethnic, political, and security balances across the region. Entire ethnic groups are at risk of destruction as living communities. These events represent a grander pivot-point in history with global implications. Millennia-old sites and communities are disappearing in just over a decade, along with the material culture, intangible culture, and recollections that sustain them.

This disappearance of history must be contextualized within the transformation of Iraqi political realities. The country is not simply losing physical and cultural heritage. Through the massive displacement of ethnically and religiously distinct communities, Iraq's diversity is under threat of erasure. Notions of Iraqi statehood and inter-communal unity are dissolving within religious and sectarian homogeneity, as confessional groups are forced to either accept or reject certain, divisive state-building narratives. We identify three broad challenges we believe Iraq must confront:

- (1) **Loss of Human Diversity:** The vicissitudes of war and internecine violence have degraded the life pathways that vivify the country's myriad provinces. Over 1,000 Yazidis flee their homes every month, heading to France, Germany, Turkey, and Iran. We estimate that this ancient community will disappear within the next five years if no steps are taken to ensure their security. Christian communities in Nineveh have evaporated since the June 2014 ISIL incursion into Mosul, with some residual groups forming their own "Babylon brigade" militias. Nearly 90,000 Sunni civilians fled their homes in al-Anbar following ISIL's advances in Ramadi and Fallujah. Initial

surveys indicate that suicide rates among these groups are rising precipitously, especially for young people. We look to the total loss of Iraq's 118,000 Jewish citizens in the 20th century as a frightening reminder of what might occur if these trends are not opposed.

(2) Loss of Physical Space: Although today's displacement presents an immediate human tragedy, the physical destruction across the country is equally devastating. It is impossible with current resources to protect Iraq's estimated 12,000-14,000 heritage sites and the people that inhabit them. The objects that impart narratives and identities to communities are under existential threat. Of the 4,000 archeological sites identified in the Nineveh area, only two percent have been excavated. In Mosul, 42 heritage buildings have been demolished, along with 12 cemeteries. Hatra, Ashur Temple, Khorsabad, Nimrod, and Nabi Younis are lost. Attacks on both Sufi and Sunni shrines in Nineveh and Tal Afar have been reported. Illicit antiquities smuggling – both by terrorist groups and others – is endemic, and represents the abrogation of tradition. For Iraq's growing diaspora communities, these sites represent the last links between displaced peoples and their homes. We understand heritage sites in terms of Islamic and pre-Islamic artifacts, although some confusion inside Iraq has hitherto handicapped protection efforts. Altogether, their removal from the country's landscape is a crime against people, their memories, and the state to which they once belonged.

(3) Exclusionary Politicization of Identity: Modern Iraqi history is defined by a culture of exile. But we do not accept this tradition as *fait accompli*. We recognize that the post-2003 US-led occupation played a devastating role in this process, and yet it still remains the responsibility of those governing Iraq today to understand, confront, and ameliorate these processes. It is critical to move beyond the straitjacket of sectarian, ethnic, or minority-majority discourse. It is far more productive for Iraqi policymakers to look to shared cultural affinities to shape the country's society and identify alliances. At present, community-based politics have divided the country along sectarian lines. Although it is folly to claim that Iraq was once free of these fault lines, it is important to note the ways in which they have been solidified by exclusionary state-building efforts of the US and the Iraqi governments it has supported since 2003.

Recommendations

To confront these interrelated tragedies it is crucial to develop infrastructures and mechanisms by which to protect people, the places they inhabit, and the political systems on which they rely for their representation and protection. We believe it crucial to address not only the physical destruction of places intrinsic to the country's myriad cultures, but also the human loss that their disappearance indicates. To this end, we suggest four main strategies to confront this loss of Iraqi diversity:

1. **Protect ethnic and religious minorities and provide concrete guarantees for safe return to their home towns once conditions permit.** To achieve this goal there is a need for adequate security force to ensure minority groups' freedom of belief and their right to manage religious sites and practice their rituals.
2. **Increase protection and raise public awareness about the Iraqi cultural heritage, both Islamic and pre-Islamic.** Relevant legal bodies might pass laws and regulations to prevent the smuggling of artifacts and antiquities. There is a need to bolster international support for protecting pieces of historical significance when authorities inside Iraq are understaffed, under-resourced, or otherwise unable to secure important heritage items. To support these "hard" efforts we recommend passage of relevant legislation formalizing the status of antiquities and historical religious sites. For example, policymakers might follow the model developed in the 2002 Law of Antiquities and Heritage No. 55. Finally, we recommend the development of a framework for presenting Iraqi heritage as representative of the Iraqi nation, deemphasizing the divide between Islamic and pre-Islamic artifacts.
3. **Develop a systematic method for documenting all losses of physical heritage as a result of violence.** Those concerned by the wholesale destruction of communities and their history may use these data to formulate and issuing a law to protect the rights of minorities to return to their hometowns and reclaim their properties, based on an identification of areas of highest need.

4. **Promote education that dissolves barriers between differing elements of Iraqi society, emphasizing controversial and cross-sectarian issues.** We recommend that relevant entities, like the Ministry of Education in cooperation with local administrations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), restructure curricula for elementary and secondary history and religion courses to reflect Iraq's cultural diversity and heritage, aiming to instill a sense of national ownership of the past. We also support the foundation of a national museum in Baghdad showcasing the country's myriad populations and cultures, and the richness of the Iraqi identity.

Seminar Conclusions

The group agreed on the following next steps further to its efforts to track the dissolution of Iraq's diversity:

1. **Immediate:** Issue this paper outlining the project and recommendations developed through two days' discussion at Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute.
2. **Medium-term:** Collaborate on an edited volume expanding the issues of constant conflict and the loss of Iraq's diversity. We aim to publish this volume within one year of the seminar date, and are currently refining a proposal to prospective publishers.
3. **Ongoing:** Develop a physical and online information base for collecting and presenting data relating to the ongoing displacement, movement, and disappearance of communities and populations across Iraq, to be made available for researchers, governments, and NGOs worldwide.

These recommendations, and the conceptual outline whence they were born, were respectfully developed by the following participants:

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