IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Iraqi Memories

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"In order to have a future, and lay the foundations of justice for the future, the people of Iraq must come to terms with the atrocities perpetrated in their name during three decades of Ba'thist rule. The ultimate rationale behind the Iraq Memory Foundation is that the truth can help heal a society that has been politically brutalized on a large scale." This is the mission statement of the Iraq Memory Foundation, the brainchild of Iraqi writer, and my former professor, Kanan Makiya. This plan needs revision in order to be productive.

The IMF needs to address three principal pressing concerns. Who should own the documents of Saddam Hussein's regime and how to legitimize their ownership in the eyes of Iraqis? How and who should process the documents, including what documents to display? And how to administer and manage the overall Foundation? Central to these concerns is my belief that the story of the history of modern Iraq cannot be limited to Hussein's brutal era and that handling of the documents should not follow a Manichean certitude that leave little latitude for morally neutral areas of human conduct. Only then could Iraq's national reconciliation begin to take roots.

Makiya believes that Iraq, by confronting the brutal legacy of Saddam Hussein's reign, will heal itself and in the process bind itself together. With that in mind, the IMF plans to construct a museum that will house, among other things, a collection of state documents showcasing the Ba'athist regime's horrific legacy from 1968 to 2003. The Coalition Provisional Authority earmarked one million dollars for the foundation, an amount that Makiya wants to raise to over $10 million through private funding to make sure his project has a decent chance of success.

On the surface, Makiya's project to help Iraqis forge a national identity based on truth and reconciliation seems commendable and auspicious. On a deeper level, however, this project, if not rightly managed to tell Iraq's complete modern historical story through the prism of Iraqi eyes, will have no legitimacy and consequently further divide Iraqis. Elizabeth A. Cole, writing in the *New York Times*, asserted that "in a fragmented society like postwar Iraq, deciding on the 'truth' about the old regime will not be easy. Not everyone in Iraq, for instance, agrees that all the country's woes were the product of Saddam Hussein's tyrannical rule; instead some point to the damage done by 13 years of economic sanctions. Nor does it seem likely that everyone would agree that Mr. Makiya, an

exile backed by an occupying power, is the right person to spearhead the nation's truth-seeking effort."

Cole's assertions are both sensible and disputable. Iraqis need to face the past and learn from its mistakes so they can create socio-political and constitutional mechanisms to prevent the country from committing past blunders and mistakes. Makiya has been the first – to my knowledge – to tackle this very sensitive issue. But this confrontation of the past needs to be legitimate in the eyes of Iraqis and encompassing in its approach, laying sturdy grounds for "truth and "reconciliation" among Iraqis. Neither "truth" nor "reconciliation" can be pursued by half measures in a country where sectarianism, tribalism and violence had been the socio-political norms. Iraq's story must be told in its entirety, affecting no less the conscience of the Shiites and Kurds than the Sunnis. Facing the past should help forge an Iraqi identity steeped in an Iraqi collective consciousness. Herein lies the importance of the Iraqi official documents. They offer a credible and insightful reading of Iraq's modern history especially under the rule of the Ba'ath regime.

Significantly, can Iraq's past, indeed Iraq's modern history, be limited to the Ba'athist rule over the country? Will facing the atrocities committed by the regime of Saddam Hussein provide the national base out of which Iraq's identity may emerge? I think not. A people who do not learn the lessons of history, it is said, are bound to repeat the mistakes it chronicles. In examining thousands of official Iraqi documents captured during the March 1991 uprising, I realized how thoroughly the Ba'ath regime had coordinated and supervised a system of oppression by procedures designed both to eliminate opposition and to turn the maximum number of Iraqis into its accomplices. The documents undoubtedly confirmed Makiya's "Republic of Fear." But at the same time, a thorough analysis of the documents showed me that Hussein was the product of Iraq's turbulent and convulsionary politics. This period, characterized by coup and counter coup d'etats, culminated in the brutal reign of Hussein.

The documents showed that Hussein was not the first ruler to attack the Kurds *en masse*, impose economic blockade and collective punishment on his people, and torture Iraqis. Hussein took the tyranny and brutality of former regimes to new heights. He excelled at learning, refining and evolving old brutal policies, including the means of achieving them by using, if necessary, weapons of mass destruction. One could even argue that some of the policies the juntas in Iraq used had been practiced thousands of years ago. For example, the Assyrians and Babylonians employed the strategy of mass displacement (forced deportation and settlement) to make revolt in their empires less likely.

Equally significant, can the focus on the atrocities of the Ba'ath regime absolve Iraq's former opposition parties, some of which are now members of Iraq's Governing Council, of their crimes? Some documents in the very same brush that detailed the atrocities committed by the Ba'ath regime described the crimes committed by the former opposition, including kidnapping, banditry and murder. No doubt, these crimes pale in comparison to those committed by Hussein, and most likely they were the result of Hussein's brutal rule. But can suffering be measured? Here, one needs to ask the question, what kind of documents will the

IMF display? By displaying only the horrors of Saddam Hussein's rule, will truth and reconciliation among Iraqis succeed? Will concentrating on Saddam Hussein's rule do justice to Iraq's modern history and historiography?

Similarly, the manner in which the IMF, and by extension the documents, is managed raise sensitive issues and questions of legitimacy that, if not addressed appropriately, will affect, and defy, the very purpose of the Foundation. As a non-Iraqi who managed the Iraq Research and Documentation Project, the forerunner of IMF and owner of over two million digital copies of Iraqi official documents, I encountered certain problems that may have a bearing on the Foundation's work as well.

The IRDP research team included members of various ethnic and religious Iraqi backgrounds and a few Lebanese-Americans. Notwithstanding the nebulous character of certain documents, due to illegible handwriting, illiteracy or coding, their reading and analysis differed markedly from one researcher to another. Problems arose when these documents were not put in their historical context. Importantly, a major problem of legitimacy arose when one researcher came across his own file, laying bare his life's very private and intimate details including those of his family members. Penetrating details ranged from the private to the political. Suddenly, the issue of who has the right to look at the documents became a burning problem. Out of this issue another emerged that questioned the rights of proprietorship of the documents. Who owned them? Who had the right to decide their fate and consequential contextual outcome? And was Makiya, given his affiliation with the Iraqi National Congress, (as Cole wrote) the "right person to spearhead the nation's truth-seeking effort"?

The issue of ownership rights poses a dangerous threat to Iraq's national reconciliation. Following the collapse of the Ba'ath regime, millions of documents found their way into the hands of private groups and political and religious parties. A significant number is under the control of the Iraq Survey Group, the US intelligence unit charged with finding Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Under the current political climate of jockeying for power, it is no idle speculation that some groups and parties would use the documents to blackmail or discredit their opponents.

An example of what could happen was reflected in the attempt to discredit and disparage a British official who opposed the war on Iraq. On April 25, 2003, the *Christian Science Monitor* ran a story about documents obtained in Iraq that alleged Saddam Hussein's regime had paid a British member of Parliament, George Galloway, $10 million over 11 years to promote its interests in the West. Creating a universal stir, the *Monitor* was forced to conduct an extensive investigation that determined the six papers detailed in the April 25 piece were indeed forgeries. Admittedly, political figures could use these documents not only to blackmail their opponents but also to advance their political ambitions. As one Iraqi recently told me, "some parties have already drawn up lists of names from the documents to either blackmail, discredit or put on the defensive."

In a system where collaboration was a mainstay of the regime's policies, many,

whose names could come up in those lists or in future lists, were compelled out of necessity to “cooperate” with the regime. Through a comprehensive and methodical system, the regime with the help of the Security Apparatus strove to deepen the population’s dependence on the state for services and employment. Central to this policy was the objective to turn Iraqis into spies and/or members of the Ba’ath party. The Coalition Provisional Authority has the responsibility to prevent any exploitation of the documents by any party or group until an official Iraqi government assumes power and decides what to do with all these documents. Meanwhile, the CPA and Iraqi authorities have to be generous in understanding that forced collaboration was one more way in which Iraqis were victimized.

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