

# Ideology, Censorship, and Literature: Iraq as a Case Study

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*In the 1970s the ruling Baath party in Iraq adopted a policy of revisionism that stressed the significance of rewriting Arab history to make it fit the Baathist ideology adopted by the regime. To implement this policy, the government established a concept and practice of intellectual "safety" that was exercised by all party and government departments and the educational system. Accordingly, censorship was used by the Baath regime as one of the effective means of achieving its political objectives. The paper discusses censorship in modern Iraqi history (from the British occupation in 1914 to the Anglo-American invasion of 2003), linking up the three rather conflicting constructs of ideology, censorship, and literature. The Baath Party's censorship is emphasized, as well as the impact it had on Iraqi literature, along with a brief account of the literary categories that were placed out of circulation during the periods described.*

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Modern Iraq was created by Britain in 1921 in the wake of the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. The prevailing defining category during Ottoman rule had been religion, so status in Iraq was determined by both tribal and religious ascendancy, while the majority of Iraqis were illiterate peasants. In the final decades of the Ottoman period, the Young Turks followed a policy of Turkification, which entailed enforcing Turkish language use and clamping down on newly imported Western-style political freedoms. These practices alienated the nascent Iraqi intelligentsia and laid the foundation for both nationalist opposition and Ottoman censorship, which was arbitrary, blind, and parochial. This went so far as to censor a chemistry textbook because the censor interpreted the chemical symbol for water (H<sub>2</sub>O) as "Abdul-Hameed II is nothing." Significantly, under Ottoman rule Iraq's ethnic, sectarian, political, and religious divisions and rivalries were gener-

ally dormant, Jews and Christians were economically and culturally active, and Kurds, Arabs, Shiites, and Sunnis lived on cordial terms.

Soon after the foundation of the Iraqi nation-state, however, secular concepts began to emerge and both communism and nationalism took root. The latter was embraced by the ruling Sunnis, who constituted only 36% of the population, while the mainly poor Shiite majority gradually leaned towards communism. However, both main Iraqi sects were Arabs and, unlike the Kurds and Turkomans, who constituted different ethnic entities, envisioned a unified Iraq. Nothing of a religious or ethnic nature was censored but, as young people started to embrace communism and books by Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and other secular “infidels” found their way into the Iraqi book market, *ideologized* Islam made a comeback in the Iraqi political arena, and the Sunni government responded by censoring communist books. In 1958 a communist government came to power in Baghdad. In response, the anti-communist, anti-nationalist Da'wa party emerged, which directed its activities against the subsequent nationalist regime that assumed power in Iraq in 1963 and again in 1968. This government could have been modelled after the fictional one in George Orwell's *1984* – from the moment it assumed power, all opposition factions, whether secular, religious, communist, or non-Baathist nationalists, were forced to escape the country or go underground (Batatu 73–70). As one would expect, censorship in general and of literature in particular was resorted to as one of the effective means of curbing opposition.

The impact of censorship on modern Iraqi literature may be divided into two periods. The first extends from the foundation of the monarchy in Iraq in 1921 to the establishment of the Republic of Iraq in 1958 (Batatu 233), which was followed by a decade of political unrest and social instability until the July 17th revolution that brought the Baath Party to power and initiated the second period of modern Iraqi literature, which continued until the Anglo-American occupation of Iraq in March 2003. Throughout the entire 20th century, Iraqi literature was greatly influenced by the political situation in Iraq and the Arab world, as well as the type of government in power. It expressed the oppositional, popular, and emotional reaction to successive government policies. Consequently, it was also the target of censorship that forced many writers and poets underground or into exile outside of Iraq. Thus, the history of Iraqi literature is by necessity also the history of censorship. However, monarchic Iraq was less despotic than revolutionary Iraq, when literature became a cultural façade for the ruling party to the extent that Baathist literature, Baathist theater, and Baathist poetry came into existence. It is useful for the purposes of comparison to discuss each period as a distinct phase.

## **Censorship and Literature during Monarchic Iraq**

The monarchic government banned all democratic freedoms and imprisoned anyone that dared express opinions counter to those held by the ruling elite and their British allies. Opposition leaders were either executed or imprisoned, and their views were considered a threat to social stability and state security. However, the press in monarchic Iraq was given a controlled margin of freedom, and some opposition journals were branded “moderate” and intermittently permitted. *Public Opinion*, edited by Muhammad Mahdi Al-Jawahiri, and *The People*, edited by Hussein Jameel, were among the journals that were put into public hands in 1932, but were confiscated soon thereafter. Literature in the 1930s was more expressive of social rather than ideological topics because class divisions were much more salient during that period of Iraqi history than ideological ones. However, in the 1940s and more clearly in the 1950s, nationalist and communist cleavages began to crystallize due to World War II, the communist revolution, and the emergence of the state of Israel in Palestine. However, the nationalists were more tolerated by the Iraqi government than the communists and, while the Iraqi parliament harboured several nationalist MPs, the communists were totally outlawed and their leaders were imprisoned, exiled, or executed. The British antagonism to communism migrated to the pro-British ruling elite in monarchic Iraq and, accordingly, all communist literature or literature expressive of the Marxist ethos was strictly censored.

However, political criticism found an outlet for the expression of implicit political views in satirical journalism, which attracted the polity and were not easily detected by censors whose educations could not match those of the writers or poets: various messages were successfully conveyed through word-games, metaphors, proverbs, and jokes. There were 31 magazines and journals countrywide specializing in satire during the early decades of monarchic Iraq. Unfortunately, only three survived after the 1958 revolution. It is also noteworthy that the number of socio-political cartoonists in monarchic Iraq exceeded 18 well-known artists but, here too, very few remained during revolutionary Iraq, and those remaining took to the habit of expressing revolutionary views blessed by the one-party regime (Al-Aibi 3–4).

Censorship, being a survival strategy for despotic governments, kept a vigilant eye on the hide-and-seek game between the authorities and free-thinkers, who found in translation an effective tool to express free thought. In this respect, La Fontaine, Hugo, Lamartine, Goethe, Thoreau, Dickens, Orwell, Lawrence, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Mayakovsky, Kafka,

de Sade, Moliere, Aragon, and Baudelaire began to appear in Arabic translations in Iraqi book markets. Consequently, liberal thoughts began to influence the Iraqi literary production of Mulla Abboud al-Karkhi, Ma'ruf ar-Rusafi, Jamil Sidqi az-Zahawi, and Badr Shakir as-Sayyab. Some of these authors escaped direct encounters with the government by putting their political views into the mouths of madmen and animals in the manner of Shakespeare and Orwell.<sup>1</sup>

## Censorship and Literature during Revolutionary Iraq

The second period of censorship that started with the Baath Party resumption of power was unprecedented in history, and the nearest analogue to it is a combination of Hitlerism, Stalinism, Maoist totalitarianism, and fictional police-states such as those portrayed in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, George Orwell's *1984*, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. In addition, Baath censorship differed in that it encompassed both diachronic and synchronic dimensions: it embraced both past and present literary production, and all domains and disciplines within its zone of influence. In order to be effective, the censorship authorities used all measures and instruments available, ranging from actual confiscation and burning of books, tactical diversions through the indictment and creation of a hypothetical enemy that no longer existed, and faith-inculcating and brainwashing, to imprisonment, deprivation of citizenship, and exile.

The rationale upon which Baathist censorship rested was the conviction, practice, and motif of rewriting Arab history, which presupposed that written Arab history was incorrect. The reason given for this was the fact that Arabic historiography was initiated by Persian historians, who had played a significant role in the writing of Arab history. However, the Baathists went too far in their counterstatement. It goes without saying that Iraq and the Arabs have substantially contributed to human culture and civilization. However, this is something that should be described, but to judge, criticize, and downgrade it is something else. The Iraqi Baathists placed themselves on the judgment seat of history. They considered all anti-Arab literature and historiography a distortion of "true" Arab history. The rewriting of history necessitated the modification or removal of other histories, particularly those written by non-Arab historians; accordingly, the writings of Orientalists such as Louis Massignon, Arent Jan Wensinck, Ignaz Goldziher, Bernard Lewis, Hamilton Gibb, and so on were handled with caution because they had their specific biases. Several events and

figures were given new narratives. Shiite, Marxist, Salafi, and anti-totalitarian literature were immediately taken out of circulation. The banning of a single book, novel, or essay also meant the banning of all other works by that author: when Orwell's *1984* was blacklisted, his other works were "taken out" as well (including "neutral" works such as *Down and Out in Paris and London*).

Moreover, the project of rewriting history did not exclude Classical, Central Asian, or North African civilizations. The result was something of a kaleidoscope in which Arab conquerors of Spain and Asia mixed with Nebuchadnezzar, Ashurbanipal, and Mahmud of Ghazna. This activity was vividly accompanied by the actual rebuilding of Nineveh, Babylon, and Assur, thus strengthening the perception of history in the Iraqi mind to an extent that history was no longer a concept but the life's blood and breath of most Iraqis. Old terms used in the time of the Prophet Muhammad and in early Abbasid reign such as *bai'aa* (the pledge of allegiance), *shuraa* (Islamic consultation), *al-'anfal* (spoils of war), *taghoot* (absolute tyrant; meaning America), *'a'da' Allah* (the enemies of God), *al-Qadisiyah* (the battle fought with the Persians in early Islam), *'al-Qa'qa'* (a Muslim warrior), *shu'ubiyah* (fidelity to non-Arabs), and so on were revived and used with their old meanings in the modern Iraqi context. In other words, the past became the future and the future became the past. The only clear idiom was the party's will and ideology.

Shiite popular poets, who found a promise of a new, free, and better life in communism and expressed Marxist ideas in their poems, adopted the role of Scheherazade, by using their heads to save their lives. They started to play the Baathist tunes to provide a living for themselves, whereas a few poets chose to go into voluntary exile. The latter category included Mudhaffar an-Nawwab, Bulund Al-Haidari, Abdul-Wahab al-Bayyati and Al-Jawahiri.<sup>2</sup>

No less significant in this context is the point that, during its reign, the Baath Party was preoccupied with hostilities, wars, and counterattacks. As a result, Iraqi literature was redirected toward war and its exploits, but not in the manner of Wilfred Owen or Stephen Spender, who criticized war as a disaster and futile waste of human lives. On the contrary, Iraqi war literature depicted war as a wedding party and martyrdom as a feast.

Women meanwhile could hardly express themselves and the very few women poets were more than happy to walk in the footsteps of their male peers, eulogizing the virtues of heroic martyrdom. In such a smoke-and-fire atmosphere it was very natural to exclude European literature as an expression of the enemy camp and as having the potential to undermine the morale of Iraqi students prior to their recruitment into the glorious

wars of defiance and liberation. It was also axiomatic in this atmosphere to brand all literature expressing anti-Arab, anti-Baathist, or pro-Persian ideas as criminal, even when it was circulated outside Iraq. All this happened during a period when access to other information channels was either completely blocked or closely watched by state intelligence. This was the state of the art of censorship and literary production when the US invaded Iraq in March 2003 and a new age of bloodshed and terror started across the country. This era proved to be far worse than even Saddam's iron-fisted management of Iraq, and even more devastating to literary production.

### **Censored Categories**

Naturally, every regime has its enemies and, in politics, an enemy today can become a friend tomorrow and vice versa. Likewise, the main censorship targets during monarchic Iraq were the press, the nationalists, and the communists. In Republican Iraq, the communists (1958–1963) and the nationalists (1963–1968) were friends, while the British and their allies were the enemies. Significantly, the first thing the British did upon entering Iraq in 1914 was to take control of Iraqi printing houses. However, because various groups had their own journals, the pro-British Iraqi government could not ban a journal without risking the dissent of the group for which that journal was a mouthpiece. It therefore depended on legislation and other intimidating and threatening tactics to suppress, hamstring, or stop opposition journals. In 1931, the Iraqi government issued the Publication Law, which it amended in 1933–1934 so as to encompass more restrictions and conditions that virtually trampled on free thought.<sup>3</sup> If a journal was too *malicious*, the government resorted to direct action by confiscating it and putting its owner in prison. The pretext it usually used was that the journal incited people to protest and undermine law and order. This happened with various journals, including *Al-Furat*, *Al-Istiqlal*, *Al-Sahafah*, *Kifah Ash-Sha'b*, and *Al-Karkeb*. The Iraqi government compliance with the British policy augmented public resentment, which found an outlet in journalism to which the government responded by intensifying preventive measures and increasing censorship to the extent of banning some 163 journals, licensing only eight in 1954.

When the Baath took over the helm in Iraq in 1968, censorship priorities dramatically shifted as the new regime imposed full control on the media and printing houses. Not one word was published without prior consent from the "Directorate of Censorship on Publications".<sup>4</sup> However,

if monarchic Iraq had few or no enemies except the powerless opposition, the Baath Party and Saddam Hussein had numerous enemies, who had to either be silenced or have their pens taken away. Moreover, the enemies of the Baath were also the enemies of God, of the New Iraq, and the enemies of the eternal mission of the Arab Nation. As a result, the censorship list certainly encompassed the widest possible kaleidoscope of ethnic, religious, literary, and political categories, in addition to all *sensitive* items written in foreign languages, whether translated into Arabic or in their native tongues.

Some of the most “dangerous” categories included communist, Persian, Israeli, and Salafi literature, women’s liberation literature, and certain permissive poems by Nizar Al-Qabbani or short stories by Yousif Idris. Historically useful works by Western Orientalists such as Theodor Noldeke, Wensinck, or Lewis, to mention a few, were locked inside metal cabinets and kept in special “limited circulation” rooms in university libraries. Astonishingly, works and biographies by fellow nationalists such as Muneef Ar-Razzaz, Jamal Abdul-Nasser, Hafiz Al-Asad, and the Syrian Baathists were also strictly banned. Particular stress was laid on annihilating works that criticized the practices of totalitarian regimes such as those by Abdul-Rahman Muneef, Hassan Al-Alawi, and Adnan Makkiyyah. The list included Iraqi and Arab poets such as Adonis, Ahmad Fuad Najim, An-Nawwab, Al-Jawahiri, Al-Bayyati, and Al-Haidari. Books on women’s liberation in connection to traditions such as those by Haider Haider, Nawwal Al-Saadawi, and Fatima Al-Marneesi were all branded corrupt and immoral. The list grew endlessly once it turned to Western and Latin American literary production; here it is enough to mention D. H. Lawrence, George Orwell, and Gabriel García Márquez. The list did not spare books by mystics such as Al-Hallaj, Al-Bistami, Al-Suhrawardi, Shamsuddin Tabriz, and Ain-’l-Qudhat Al-Hamadani, as well as their commentators such as Said Hussein Nasr, Ash-Sheebi, Abdul-Rahman Badawi, Hassan Hanafi, or Mustapha Ghaleb.

What remains in our libraries and bookshops is only the kind of literature that passes the “intellectual safety test”. It is literature that dictates but does not illuminate, describes but does not suggest, and disciplines but does not liberate. In a nutshell, it is the kind of literature that instructs people in how to be good, obedient, and empty citizens.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ahmad Shawqi, the major modern Egyptian poet, Arabized several stories by La Fontaine, and Mulla Abboud al-Karkhi pioneered this art in Iraq for the first time after the medieval work of *Kalila wa Dimna*.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Bayyati, Al-Jawahiri, and Al-Haidari died in exile, while An-Nawwab is currently suffering from several diseases in Damascus. Many other writers, artists, and critics have also died in exile.

<sup>3</sup> The Iraqi Publication Law of 1931 and its amendments in 1933 and 1934.

<sup>4</sup> The implementation of the Baath Publications Law lies within the Directorate of Publication Censorship, which is linked to the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Culture and Information, and the Ministry of Education. Thus, any published material was scrutinized before it was published.

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