Targeting the Symbolic Dimension of Baathist Iraq: Cultural Destruction, Historical Memory, and National Identity

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Abstract
This article examines the systematic efforts to dismantle or destroy the symbolic dimension of the Baathist regime in Iraq since 2003. It argues that while the Baath were undeniably cruel and oppressive, they did undertake one of the twentieth century's most robust attempts to utilize the political power of historical memory to create a unified Iraqi national identity. However, while many have examined the militaristic or bureaucratic dimensions of de-Baathification, no such attempts have been made to examine the destruction of the symbols and monuments of the Baathist state and the consequences this has had for Iraqi national identity. This article addresses this paucity and concludes that with the symbolic destruction of the Baathist state has come a near complete erosion of the Iraqi brand of nationalism that the Baath had managed to promulgate to varying degrees of success since the late 1960s.

Keywords
Iraq, de-Baathification, cultural destruction, historical memory, national identity

Introduction: Historical Memory and National Identity

Recent centuries have seen a whole host of governments—from totalitarian regimes to liberal democracies—use the cultural and historical heritage of their respective nation states to develop a unifying national memory designed to engender degrees of collective identity and cohesion via the inculcation of a shared past. In order to create this ‘imagined community’, states developed a collection of symbols and institutions such as flags, anthems, libraries, museums and monuments all loosely based around a particular national discourse/narrative concerning the historical origins of the state, its formation and its successes (Anderson 1991 [1983]; Gellner 1983). As Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger contend, underpinning this unifying national discourse/
narrative was a manipulation and selective articulation of the past which was
designed to establish the legitimacy of a nation state and its incumbent ruling
elite. They referred to this process as the ‘invention of tradition’ in which ‘a set
of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a
ritual or symbolic nature… seek to inculcate certain values and norms of
behaviours by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the
past’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992 [1983]: 1). What is particularly useful
about Hobsbawm and Ranger’s study for the purposes of this article is that
they also emphasized the fact that in order to invent traditions, ‘entirely new
symbols and devices came into existence as part of national movements and
states, such as the… personification of the “nation” in symbol or image’

More recently, this study of nationalism was extended to other disciplines,
such as human geography and cultural studies, which took on the mantle of
dissecting the complex nexus that exists between national memory and iden-
tity politics. One element of this was the study of ‘historical memory’, in
which proponents such as Craig Calhoun examined the process by which cer-
tain groups came to perceive specific past events as having directly shaped
their current ideological, economic and political status (Calhoun 1995).
Human geographers were more concerned about how such ‘historical memo-
ries’ were transformed into the lived environment of the citizen.

Following Pierre Nora’s groundbreaking investigation of French places of
memory, a rich body of literature emerged that concerned the role of monu-
ments and memorials in the formation of national identity (Nora 1996). As a
whole, these studies argued that national identity is not only developed via a
perceived connection to the past, it is also place related, and that the manipu-
lation of the built environment can shape collective memory toward specific
political goals (Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Johnson 1995; Levinson 1998;
Withers 1996). As Benjamin Forest and Juliet Johnson put it,

> Official memorials, monuments, and museums play a unique role in the creation
of national identity because they reflect how political elites choose to represent the
nation publicly. By erecting memorials in public space, states and interest groups
attempt to define the historical figures that become national heroes and establish
the historical incidents that become the formative events of a nation’s identity
(Forest and Johnson 2002: 256).

However, these studies failed to address a further question: could the destruc-
tion of the symbols and institutions of the state also destroy the nationalism
and social cohesion they were designed to promote? Although there is no
shortage of examples from history in which cultural and historical destruction
has occurred, academic attempts to address this question only seemed to
achieve any urgency following the devastating events that surrounded the Balkan conflict of the mid-1990s. For example, in Andras Riedlmayer’s extensive reports on the cultural and historical destruction across the Balkans, he frequently asserts that such devastation was in fact explicitly designed to destroy a heterogeneous and plural culture, largely founded on co-existence and cohesion (Riedlmayer 2002, 2007). The War Crimes Tribunal at The Hague concurred with Riedlmayer, seeing much of the destruction as cultural war crimes that were systematically and deliberately designed to target national identity (Cole 2008: 69). Work by Martin Coward terms such destruction ‘Urbicide’ where the targeting of the built environment is undertaken not only to eradicate collective identity, but also to encourage the idea of separate and antagonistic entities within the state, thus leading to ethno-religious sectarianism and violence (Coward 2002, 2009).

To date, however, such discussions of the consequences of cultural and historical destruction have not extended to Iraq. Indeed, since the invasion of Iraq by coalition forces in 2003 and the subsequent eight years of military occupation, the Iraqi people have not only suffered a devastating death toll and witnessed the erosion of every aspect of their civil infrastructure, they have also endured a devastating period of cultural and historical destruction. As will be briefly detailed later in this article, Iraq’s museums have been looted with devastating efficiency, its libraries have been set ablaze, its art galleries and universities ransacked and bands of smugglers have dug and smashed their way through the many archaeological sites scattered throughout the country. What is curiously absent from the existing literature on the cultural and historical destruction of Iraq is any mention of the consequences it has had for historical memory and national identity.

This article therefore seeks to address this lacuna. To do so, it focuses on the controversial topic of the former Baathist regime which, despite its tyranny and megalomania, did enact a considerable campaign to utilize Iraq’s rich cultural heritage in order to develop degrees of national identity and social cohesion since its rise in 1968. Building on earlier work by the author (Isakhan 2010), this article moves forward to catalogue some of the more significant cultural and historical destruction that has occurred in Iraq since 2003, with particular focus on the systematic project to symbolically de-Baathify the nation. Here, virtually every icon of the Baath era has been destroyed: murals defaced, statues torn down, monuments decimated and palaces have been turned into the military bases of a foreign occupying force. Indeed, while the consequences of what might be called the ‘bureaucratic’ or ‘militaristic’ dimensions of Iraq’s de-Baathification have been discussed in much of the literature, the symbolic dimension of de-Baathification and its consequences
for national identity and social cohesion has remained an understudied and underappreciated factor (Barakat 2005; El-Khawas 2008; Hatch 2005). This article therefore argues that with the destruction of Iraq’s Baathist monuments and symbols came a near complete erosion of the Iraqi brand of nationalism that the Baath had managed to promulgate to varying degrees of success since the late 1960s. In other words, the entire web of symbolic nation building and the finely fabricated political rhetoric that the Baathist regime had been spinning for decades all but completely unraveled. Finally, this article concludes by briefly drawing on other twentieth-century examples of post-conflict symbolic reconstruction and suggests that Iraq needs to openly and honestly deal with its Baathist past if it is ever to develop a new post-Baathist Iraqi national identity.


When the Arab Baath Socialist Party finally ascended to power in 1968, 1 it began an extensive and sustained cultural campaign in which the successes of the nation’s past became a symbol of Iraq’s potential as a united and prosperous state. Based on its curious ideological mix of secular nationalism, 2 anti-imperialism and socialism, the Baath used the nation’s considerable oil wealth to revive Iraqi folklore and utilize the political power of popular culture

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1 As far back as 1951 the fledgling Arab Baath Socialist Party (Hizb al-Baath al-Arabi al-Istiraki; *baath* translates to mean ‘awakening’, ‘renaissance’ or ‘renewal’ and the party will henceforth be termed the Baath) had been gathering momentum in the Iraqi armed forces. Although it originally developed in Damascus around 1940 and emigrated to Iraq in 1949, the Baathist ideology developed a loyal following in Iraq under the leadership of Faud al-Rikabi, a young Iraqi engineer from Nasiriyya (Baram 1991: 9–13). Baathism was to go on to play a crucial part in the 1958 revolution and held power briefly in 1963.

2 It is important to clarify that the Iraqi Baath party fluctuated between two overlapping visions of nationalism: Arab nationalism (and even pan-Arabism) and Iraqi nationalism. As part of the former, the Baath frequently asserted that it wanted to lead the Arab world into a new era of economic and militaristic success. However, such visions of Arab nationalism were generally premised on one key condition, that the Baath party would be the leader of this new Arab world and Iraq would be its epicenter. At the same time, however, in order to maintain domestic stability, the Baath also underwent an extensive program toward Iraqi nationalism. These two visions of nationalism were intimately intertwined and often indistinguishable throughout Baathist Iraq. In other words, the vision of Iraq as the head of a new Arab world could only be achieved if Iraqi nationalism was strong and, at the same time, the vision of a strong and united Iraq was connected to its aspirations as the leading Arab state. Although connected in this way, this article will focus mostly on the promulgation of Iraqi nationalism under the Baath.
to carry out a very symbolic nation-building exercise (Davis 2005: 149). When Saddam Hussein seized power in 1979, he hijacked Baathist ideology in order to develop his own personal dictatorship built on terror, coercion and violence. While it is by now well known that he purged the state of any opposition, that he routinely committed grievous crimes against Iraq's many religious and ethnic minorities and that he was one of the cruelest despot's of modern times, it is perhaps less well known that Hussein was also a powerful and charismatic politician, a master of a rhetoric that appealed directly to the 'everyday' Iraqi and an expert at image management (Bengio 1998; Dawisha 1999: 555–556; Mansfield 1982). He began by building and refining a particular cult of personality, developing a reputation as a political revolutionary, a brilliant strategist, a paternal figure who cared deeply about his nation and a visionary who could lead Iraq—and indeed the entire Arab world—into a modern and prosperous future. Eventually, Hussein took this cult of personality to new, almost surreal levels. His image became ubiquitous across Iraq. His larger-than-life image was unfolded across city avenues, his voice echoed across the airwaves, his portrait appeared in the daily newspapers, his story became the plot of epic novels, his speeches were shown in full on state television and giant statues of him looked out over his new Iraq.

However, to reduce Hussein's cult of personality and the dexterity with which the Baath handled state propaganda to Hussein's vanity, his megalomania, or his penchant for gaudy imagery, is to severely underestimate the ability of the Iraqi dictatorship to utilize political symbology to create a collective historical memory and degrees of national identity and social inclusion. This project was much more than the banality of tyrannical imagery that leered and watched as Iraqis went about their days. It was a concerted effort to unite the Iraqi people behind the Baathist vision of an Iraqi state that was to be a major player in the postcolonial Arab world built atop a platform of social inclusion, national unity, civic strength and military power.

To achieve such lofty goals, Hussein set about a very specifically designed politico-discursive campaign spearheaded by the unashamedly and blatantly titled ‘The Project for the Re-Writing of History’. Here, Iraqi authors and scholars were commandeered by the state in their attempt to reduce Iraq's past down to an overly simplistic narrative. ‘More than simple political indoctrination’, as Eric Davis notes, ‘the project represented an attempt to construct a new public sphere, including the reconstitution of political identity, the relationship of the citizen to the state, and public understandings of national heritage’ (Davis 2005: 148). In this project, nothing was sacred. Every epoch of Iraq's long and complex history was re-interpreted, re-written, or simply fabricated in order to align the past with contemporary Baathist ideology.
According to Saddam Hussein himself, the ‘writing of Arab history’ must ‘be from our [Baathist] point of view with an emphasis on analysis [i.e., form] and not realistic storytelling [i.e., content]’ (Hussein 1977, quoted in al-Khalil 1991: 36).

Two particular historical epochs on which the Baath focused much of its attention were ancient Mesopotamia and classical Islam. In the case of the former, the Baath simply ignored the historical inaccuracy of relating the ancient Mesopotamians to the contemporary Arabs, and radically shifted the period from that of al-jahiliyya (‘ignorance’) to that of the ‘Arabs before Islam’ (Davis and Gavrielides 1991: 134–135). To do this, the Baath reinvigorated Mesopotamian folklore, funded extensive archaeological excavations as well as grandiose reconstructions and ordered the annual re-enactment of ancient Mesopotamian spring festivals across the nation. Similarly, although Iraq under the Baath was an ostensibly secular state, the party frequently held literary festivals and published magazines dedicated to the poetry and literature of the Islamic period, such as The Thousand and One Nights. They also erected several statues and monuments dedicated to figures from Iraq’s Islamic past, including classical Islamic poets, philosophers, artists and figures from Islamic folklore (Baram 1991: 77). Each of these celebrations of the past carried with it strong Baathist undertones and was specifically engineered to encourage loyalty. This is especially true of the Iraqi armed forces, in which entire divisions or specific weapons were named after key historical figures from both Iraq’s Mesopotamian and Islamic past (al-Marashi and Salama 2008: 171–180).

To reinforce his particular cult of personality, Hussein also frequently invoked figures from both ancient Mesopotamian folklore and Islamic history. His favorite from the ancient world was King Nebuchadnezzar who is credited with having built the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and for conquering Jerusalem and sending the Jews into exile. As just one example, when Hussein ordered the reconstruction of Babylon in the 1980s, he insisted that every brick be emblazoned with the inscription ‘To King Nebuchadnezzar in the reign of Saddam Hussein’. From Iraq’s Islamic past, Hussein likened himself to a handful of key figures. He routinely celebrated the achievements of the Abbasid caliph al-Mansur, who had built the original round city of Baghdad during the eighth century, with the Baathist propaganda machine frequently asserting ‘al-Mansour Mansuran’ (‘there are two al-Mansurs’, literally, ‘There are two victors’) (Lassner 2000: 94). Another example can be found in Hussein’s ‘official’ genealogy which ‘proves’ he was a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad’s nephew, Ali, who is revered by the Sunnis as one of the first four caliphs and especially by the Shia who continue to emphasize the legitimacy of Ali’s line (Bengio 1998: 80). Hussein also
frequently invoked the famous military general, Saladin, who was conveniently born in Hussein’s hometown of Tikrit and is most famous for defeating the Christian crusaders and restoring Muslim dominion over Jerusalem. The creation of a connection between these historical figures and Hussein was very carefully harvested in order to cross ethno-religious sectarian divides; al-Mansur is claimed a Sunni Arab, Ali a Shia Arab and Saladin a Kurd. In addition, the emphasis on Iraq’s Mesopotamian heritage sought to forego such contemporary schisms in order to emphasize a common Iraqi heritage. In his study of the Baathist manipulation of Iraq’s heritage, Amatzia Baram argues that it is indicative of the degree to which the Baath understood that the ‘invention of tradition’ must be underscored by a perceived connection to the past, and that such a connection can be utilized to maintain and legitimize the hegemony of the elite (Baram 1983, 1991, 1994).

Perhaps even more fascinating are those moments in Baathist Iraq when all of these elements of the propaganda campaign converged to create a curious pastiche of evocative and deeply nationalistic imagery. For example, in perhaps the only study of the political significance of Iraq’s national stamps, Donald Reid discusses the ways in which various symbols and motifs were invoked by the Baath in the ongoing project to construct and reconstruct modern Iraqi national identity. In just one stamp, the Baath effectively encapsulates ‘five millennia of [Iraqi] history, it shows a Sumerian prince and other Mesopotamian antiquities (including an Assyrian lion), the spiral minaret of the Malwiyya mosque of Samarra, and concludes with symbols of the oil industry and a pair of arms reaching skyward from a pool of oil’ (Reid 1993: 85).

The symbolic cultivation of Iraqi nationalism became especially important during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s in which the ostensibly secular and increasingly ‘Arabized’ Iraq confronted the fundamentalist Shii Islamic regime of the ayatollahs of Iran. To maintain the support of Iraq’s majority Shii population, the Baath set out to emphasize the ethnic rather than the religious dimension of the war, positing the battle as one between Arabs and Persians, not a secular state and Shii regime. To do this, they recalled the battle in which the expanding Arab Muslim army had successfully defeated the moribund Persian Sassanid Empire in 637, the Battle of Qadisiyya, dubbing the Iran-Iraq War ‘Saddam’s Qadisiyya’.

To further emphasize the significance of the Iran-Iraq War, the Baath also erected several grandiose monuments to celebrate the alleged ‘victory’ of Iraq over Iran. Interestingly, each of these monuments was commissioned, designed and erected prior to the end of the war itself, indicating that the Baath was just as adept at symbolically manipulating the present and even the future of Iraq as it was with its past. In Baghdad alone, this ‘victory’ is celebrated by three seminal monuments: the forty-meter-high split turquoise dome and
magnificent fountain of the Martyr’s Memorial, the Unknown Soldiers Monument which represents a giant shield that had fallen from the hand of a great Iraqi warrior, and the Victory Arches which are comprised of two sets of giant bronze forearms (allegedly cast from Hussein’s own arms) holding aloft swords that intersect forty meters above a major Baghdad highway. In his extended essay on these monuments, Samir al-Khalil (a pseudonym for Iraqi scholar Kanan Makiya) argues that, all vulgarity aside, they do represent a common Iraqi memory about the tragedies and suffering endured by the people over the long years of the Iran-Iraq War. They also constitute a conscious effort by the regime to embed official state narratives of victory and power into the lived environment of the Iraqi people, ‘to translate the collective force of the Iraqi people… into symbols’ (al-Khalil 1991: 20–21).3

Following the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, the Baath undertook several new construction and reconstruction projects. They decided to reconstruct Basra, which had been largely devastated by the war, in order to celebrate the ‘heroic stand’ their citizens had made against Iranian incursions. Typically this reconstruction, as Sultan Barakat put it, was largely ‘top down, concerned with visible and highly symbolic physical reconstruction rather than social and economic regeneration and involved no local consultation, let alone participation’ (Barakat 2005: 575). The reconstruction involved the ‘Boulevard of Martyrs’ along the city’s waterfront in which 80 dead Iraqi officers pointed their fingers accusingly across the waterways to Iran (Barakat 1993). Other Baathist constructions from this era included the erection of a mausoleum dedicated to the ‘Father of Pan-Arabism’ and the co-founder of the Baath Party, Michel Aflaq. This Syrian-born, French-educated Christian is widely respected across the Arab world not only for his enormous contribution to Arab political philosophy, but also for his egalitarian values and deep respect for Islamic ideals. The site comprises a tomb and a statue built by Saddam Hussein upon Aflaq’s death in 1989.

After Iraq’s humiliating defeat in the 1991 Gulf War, the international community imposed a series of strict sanctions on Iraq. As his people starved in the streets, Hussein built grandiose palaces across the country with one report by the US State Department (1999) estimating that he spent around

3 It should be noted here that al-Khalil (Makiya) at times seems to be full of undeserved praise for Saddam Hussein, the ‘artist-President’ as he puts it. Makiya is also controversial due to his support of the 2003 invasion of Iraq on the grounds that it would free the Iraqi people from the tyranny of the Baath as outlined in his earlier Republic of Fear (al-Khalil 1991 [1989]). Such controversy aside, the point remains that the monuments referred to here, like war memorials all over the world, are both painful vigils to the fallen and symbols of a unified national identity that has fought and struggled to survive.
$2 billion USD building or extending forty-eight palaces between 1991 and 1999. One of the more opulent was al-Faw Palace in Baghdad which was built to commemorate Iraq’s re-taking of the al-Faw Peninsula from Iran in the late 1980s. It boasts marble and gold fittings in its 62 rooms and 29 bathrooms, an enormous artificial lake around which his sons had Roman-style villas and, not surprisingly, gold-encrusted Arabic calligraphy that praises the leadership of Hussein himself. Hussein also renovated the Republican Palace (or Presidential Palace) in Baghdad, which saw it triple in size. This palace, with its splendid turquoise dome, was originally built for King Faisal II prior to the 1958 revolution and became Hussein’s preferred place to meet visiting heads of state, although he rarely stayed there himself (Fayad 2009). Perhaps the most striking feature of this palace was the four matching giant bronze busts of Hussein—each around four meters in height—in which the dictator glared out over his capital wearing a stylized version of the helmet once worn by Saladin.

What is clear here is that all of the symbols and monuments developed during the Baathist epoch, and all of the histories that were re-engineered by the state, have at least two things in common. First, they are indicative of an oppressive nation and a megalomaniacal leader who was desperately trying to manipulate the fabric of cultural history to build legitimacy and maintain hegemony beyond their coercive power. At the same time, the entire symbolic nation-building project of Baathist Iraq did have a second function: it engendered degrees of admittedly uneven and often resisted national identity and social cohesion. Together, they represent one of the twentieth century’s most concerted efforts to use and abuse a nation’s history in order to create an ‘imagined community’ loyal to a distinct and state-sanctioned version of ‘Iraqi’ identity. Indeed, it is important to note that none of the different symbols or monuments that were developed throughout the rule of the Baath was specifically designed to emphasize Sunni Arab, Kurdish or Shii identity, but to emphasize a collective ‘Iraqi’ identity.

The Symbolic Destruction of Baathist Iraq, 2003–Today

However, all of this was to change dramatically following the invasion of Iraq by a US-led coalition in 2003 and the many subsequent years of foreign occupation. As is by now well documented in the existing literature, this

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4 It is worth noting here that Iraq did suffer some degree of cultural and historical destruction during the Gulf War of 1991. The war itself saw key Iraqi historical and cultural sites destroyed.
epoch has had devastating consequences for much of Iraq’s cultural landscape. Immediately after the initial phase of the war—from approximately 10 to 15 April 2003—a number of looting and arson attacks ravaged many artistic and historic institutions. The most devastating examples are those of the Iraq National Museum and the Iraq National Library and Archive. In the former, around ‘Fifteen thousand objects were stolen from the galleries and stores of the museum’ and what the looters ‘could not take they smashed and destroyed’ (George 2005: 1–2); while in the latter, ‘almost a million’ books were destroyed and about ‘ten million documents disappeared’ (Baez 2008 [2004]: 270–272). Also targeted were other smaller museums and libraries (including those which housed classical Islamic and Ottoman texts and artifacts) and art galleries, including Iraq’s Museum of Modern Art where ‘Eight thousand works of art were removed’ (Ghaidan 2008: 94). Similar destruction occurred across Iraq’s schools, universities, publishing houses, hospitals, artistic and intellectual institutions, as well as various murals and statues. Historic buildings also suffered, including the twelfth-century Abbasid palace, the sixteenth-century Saray Mosque and the Hashemite Parliament House as well as famous suqs (Ghaidan 2008: 93–94).

In addition, many Iraqi civilians have become involved in highly coordinated black market operations that systematically loot sensitive archaeological sites across Iraq such as those of Umma, Hatra, Nineveh, Ur, Nippur and Ashur. These highly sophisticated efforts, often orchestrated by foreigners, smuggle Iraq’s ancient treasures out of the country and on to the highly lucrative international black market for antiquities (Garen and Carleton 2005; Hamdani 2008; Lawler 2003a, 2003b; E. Stone 2008). The ongoing hostility between varying factions within Iraq has also had ruinous consequences for Iraq’s cultural heritage with artifacts, symbols and monuments often caught in the crossfire or deliberately targeted by opposing ethno-religious sectarian groups. Perhaps the most devastating example was the bombing of the gold-domed seventeenth-century al-Askari Mosque in Samarra in 2006, which was highly revered by the Shii Arab population and deliberately targeted by Sunni
It is worth making two key points about the cultural and historical destruction that has been conducted in Iraq since 2003. First, much of the looting, arson and smuggling should have been prevented by the occupying forces and their failure to do so represents a major contravention of international law concerning the protection of cultural heritage during times of war (Paroff 2004; Petersen 2007; Phuong 2004). Second, it is undeniable that the overwhelming majority of the destruction of Iraq's cultural heritage has been conducted by Iraqis, not by the United States and its allies. For Donny George, the former Director of Antiquities and Research at the INM, the reason for the Iraqi people's destruction of their own cultural heritage is that ‘No one was educated that what the government had was, in fact, the wealth of the people, administered and protected on their behalf’ (George 2008: 105). Despite the significance of these two key points, this article focuses on a third issue, the active destruction of Baathist symbology by the Coalition.

However, what is not often discussed in this literature is how from the very earliest days of the US-led invasion of Iraq, there was a parallel project to target the symbolic dimension of the Baathist state. This arguably began during the battle phase of the war, the now infamous ‘shock and awe’ campaign, in which more than 200 state buildings were destroyed and countless others were damaged (Baez 2008 [2004]: 268). As one British army officer put it ‘Part of the directive was to destroy and dismantle anything which was part of Saddam Hussein’s regime’ (Sky News 2003). In fact, Coalition forces did this with a kind of marauding efficiency. Within a matter of weeks, virtually every image of Hussein and the Baathist regime had been either torn down or defaced in some way. The rich catalogue of images, an entire epoch of state-produced symbols, monuments and motifs was burnt, bullet ridden or torn asunder. Indeed, a simple ‘Google image’ search reveals entire photo albums, mostly taken by Coalition soldiers as mementoes, dedicated to the active destruction of Iraq’s Baathist past. Coalition soldiers can be seen ripping down statues, using sledge hammers on giant murals, vandalizing billboards, using buildings for target practice, and even urinating on monuments dedicated to Hussein. Even less overtly Baathist monuments were not spared. One specific example is the ‘Boulevard of Martyrs’, which was destroyed by the British on the 31 March 2003. The bronze statues of the dead heroes who had fought to defend their homeland lay prostrate and dismembered by the shores of Basra.

There is also a great deal of evidence to suggest that Coalition soldiers have returned home with ‘souvenirs’ from Iraq, be they silverware stolen from one of Hussein’s palaces, museum artifacts, or objects simply removed from archaeological sites. Some of this looting has even been done ‘legally’ via official army channels. For example, US soldiers brought home a cast bronze head

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of Saddam Hussein, salvaged from a statue in his palace at Tikrit and a chrome-plated AK-47 with a pearl hand grip and a small image of Hussein next to the gun sight, both were then displayed as war trophies in Fort Lewis, Washington (Myers 2010; Surk 2010). Similarly, British troops took out of Iraq a nine-foot statue of Saddam Hussein and resurrected it in the officer’s mess at their military base in Taunton, England. When asked if he thought such actions were inappropriate or insensitive, a British army spokesperson dismissed concerns

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It should be noted that this item was returned to Iraq in 2009 and is currently under the protection of the Iraqi National Museum.
by saying that ‘mementoes’ had been brought back from military campaigns for ‘hundreds of years’ (British army spokesperson quoted in Sky News 2003).

A much more dramatic indication of Coalition attempts to symbolically de-Baathify Iraq occurred immediately after they conquered Baghdad on 9 April 2003. This was not, however, the result of looting or of ‘collateral damage’ but was instead a very deliberate and carefully choreographed moment co-ordinated by the US Army’s Psychological Operations unit. Indeed, it is indicative of the US understanding of the power of political symbols that one of the first things that the invaders did in Baghdad was to tear down the giant bronze statue of Hussein in Firdaws Square in Baghdad. As the world watched, apparently jubilant Iraqis and US troops seemed to work side by side to climb the statue and place first a US and then an Iraqi flag over the face of Hussein. Finally, the statue was torn down and the severed head was dragged through the streets as Iraqis ostensibly continued to celebrate the fall of their former dictator. However, many scholars have since expressed their doubts about these scenes and carefully documented the fact that this was a very deliberate media stunt designed to promote the legitimacy of the war around a skeptical world (Rampton 2003: 1–7).

This project to symbolically de-Baathify Iraq achieved renewed momentum and increased importance with the installment of Lewis Paul Bremer III to head the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) on 13 May 2003. Indeed, Bremer’s first official act—written only three days after his arrival—was to issue ‘Order Number 1: De-Baathification of Iraqi Society’ (Bremer 2003a). Predictably, the order sought to disestablish the Baath party by ‘eliminating the party’s structures and removing its leadership from positions of authority and responsibility in Iraqi society’ (Bremer 2003a: 1). Perhaps more interesting for the purposes of this article was the blatant symbolic dimension to de-Baathification found in this order, with Clause 4 decreeing that ‘Displays in government buildings or public spaces of the image or likeness of Saddam Hussein or other readily identifiable members of the former regime or of symbols of the Baath Party or the former regime are hereby prohibited’ (Bremer 2003a: 2). This was followed a week later by ‘Order Number 2: Dissolution of Entities’ which ordered the dismissal of thousands of Iraqis from paid employment and the disbanding of several key Baathist institutions such as important ministries, every arm of Iraq’s extensive military machine, certain bureaucratic and governmental mechanisms, and even seemingly innocuous bodies like the National Olympic Committee (Bremer 2003b: 4–5). Two days later, on 25 May 2003, Bremer issued two further edicts that supported this process of de-Baathification. The first of these, entitled ‘Order Number 4: Management of Property and Assets of the Iraqi Baath Party’ commanded that...
all of the property and assets of the Baath were to be handed over to the CPA who would hold the property ‘in trust and for the use and benefit of the people of Iraq’ (Bremer 2003c: 2). The second and more ominously titled ‘Order Number 5: Establishment of the Iraqi De-Baathification Council’ created an entity that was to be officially responsible for the unfolding of the de-Baathification of Iraq. This body was to be made up entirely of Iraqi nationals handpicked by Bremer himself, who were charged with the duty of advising the CPA about individual Baath party members as well as investigating ‘the extent, nature, locations and current status of all Iraqi Baath Party property and assets’ (Bremer 2003d: 2). In addition to the CPA’s efforts to de-Baathify Iraq, the Interim Governing Council (IGC), which served under the jurisdiction of the CPA, established the Higher National De-Baathification Commission (HNDC) in January 2004. This body served to further de-Baathify Iraq by eradicating certain organizations which had been associated with the former regime, such as trade guilds and private sector companies (Hatch 2005: 105).

The effect of such de-Baathification meant that whatever elements remained of the Baathist state were now the official property of the CPA and the IGC. This became immediately apparent as the Coalition and the Iraqi army began to set up a number of their key military bases at historically or culturally sensitive sites, such as their use—and near devastation—of one of the world’s most significant archaeological sites, the ancient city of Babylon (Babel) which was re-named ‘Camp Alpha’ from April 2003 until December 2004 (Bahrani 2005, 2008; Moussa 2008). This was followed by the use of Islamic sites, such as the 2005 use of the ninth-century Malwiyya Minaret at the Great Mosque of Samarra as a barracks and training camp for 1,500 members of the Iraqi National Police, also leading to significant damage (P. G. Stone and Bajjaly 2008: 12). Together the disregard for the key archaeological sites of ancient Mesopotamia and classical Islamic mosques indicate, at the very least, a high degree of indifference towards a wide spectrum of Iraq’s cultural heritage by the Coalition.

However, the Coalition also extended this disregard to Baathist sites, a whole collection of which were utilized by the foreign occupying forces as military bases. The al-Faw Palace and the Republican Palace both suffered little damage during the ‘shock and awe’ campaign, most probably because they were thought to contain valuable documents but also perhaps because the United States planned to use them as military bases. The al-Faw Palace complex and the surrounding area have come to house the largest of Iraq’s Coalition military bases, comprised of Camp Victory, Camp Liberty, Camp Striker, and Camp Slayer. The biggest of these, Camp Victory, which can handle around
Figure 2: Another decimated mural of Saddam Hussein at Camp Speicher (al-Sahra Air Force Base). Photo by William N. Kent, Fall 2006.

14,000 troops, was the home of the Multi-National Corps-Iraq. At its peak, the complex boasted a Pizza Hut, a Subway, a Cinnabon, a Burger King, a Taco Bell, a Green Beans café and a Turkish restaurant. In terms of recreational facilities, it included a bowling center, two basketball courts, a soccer court, table tennis, air hockey and a gymnasium. Many of the personnel slept in tents or in cramped makeshift quarters separated by plywood boards. Meanwhile, the Republican Palace was converted into the administrative capital of Iraq and the headquarters of the US occupation and the epicenter of the
Green Zone. It quickly became the home of ‘Thousands of American, British, Australian and other foreign diplomats, military personnel and contractors’ (Haynes 2008). As with the al-Faw Palace, it housed a number of recreational and catering-related outlets as well as small quarters for personnel.

Reminiscent of the decadent days of Hussein, the coalition representatives that were housed in and around the two palaces are reported to have had theme nights, such as the karaoke night described by one journalist at the Asia Times. Here,

Iraq’s latest conquerors triumphantly take to a stage… and bawl out old rock ‘n’ roll and blues anthems to their heart’s content. A few meters away, soldiers take off their shirts to play volleyball… and bikini-clad embassy workers splash in the swimming pool… It’s Saigon all over again (Athanasiadis 2006).

Other entertainment has included World Wrestling Entertainment’s annual ‘Tribute to the Troops’, complete with wrestling melodrama and scantily clad women. There have also been visits by country and western singers, popular comedians, sports stars, actors and Playboy models. There is more than a little irony in the replacement of a dictator with a reputation for debauched excesses with a military occupation that brings with it Burger King, wrestling, and soft-porn stars.

Such irony and insensitivity aside, the occupation of such state buildings has also included the symbolic destruction of the Baathist state. For example, in early December 2003, the four giant bronze heads of Hussein sporting the stylized Saladin helmet that adorned the Republican Palace were removed and melted down for scrap metal. More recently, many in Iraq have discussed the future of these palaces and whether or not they should be destroyed as symbols of the former regime. In one report an anonymous Iraqi said ‘You people in Europe have kept all the castles of your bad guys, so why shouldn’t we? We should keep them as historical artefacts’ (quoted in Freeman 2009).

Controversy has also surrounded the use of other Baathist sites by the occupation. Two examples are worth mentioning here. The first occurred in January 2004 when the Coalition used the Baghdad Martyr’s Memorial as a military base. This site serves as a people’s shrine dedicated to the 500,000 Iraqi soldiers who died defending their country in an unpopular, lengthy, and brutal war. Graffiti of US army mottos covered many of the names of the dead.

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It should be noted here that as part of the Status of Forces Agreement negotiated by the US and Iraqi governments in 2008, the Republican Palace was returned to the Iraqi presidency by the United States on 1 January 2009, although a heavy US presence remained (Fayad 2009; Londono 2009).
Damage has also been done to the Aflaq mausoleum. In fact, as part of the program to symbolically de-Baathify Iraq, the mausoleum was initially slated for demolition by the CPA before the decision sparked an outcry among Iraqi and international intellectuals. Instead, from 2003 to 2006, Aflaq’s mausoleum, which falls inside the Green Zone, was reportedly turned into something of a recreation center cum makeshift barracks for Coalition soldiers. On the ground floor, and surrounding the tomb of Aflaq, soldiers would use various exercise equipment, as well as ‘foosball’ tables. Directly underneath Aflaq’s grave, soldiers slept in cramped plywood quarters. One cannot help but balk at the insensitivity of turning such monuments into military bases for use by a foreign occupying power. Imagine the use of comparable historical sites in other nations—consider graffiti in a foreign language obscuring the names on the Vietnam memorial or a football table in the Lincoln memorial—to begin to come to terms with how such actions might offend the Iraqi people.

More recently, the democratically elected Iraqi government took initial steps towards furthering this process of de-Baathifying Iraq. In early 2007 it organized the ‘Committee for Removing Symbols of the Saddam Era’ and drew up extensive plans to dismantle around 100 monuments of the Baathist state, including the three sites dedicated to the fallen of the Iran-Iraq War: the Martyr’s Memorial, the Unknown Soldiers Monument, and the Victory Arches. In fact, the Committee has already been responsible for the demolition of two key Hussein-era sites, a monument dedicated to Iraqi prisoners of the Iran-Iraq War and a bronze mural that depicted the history of the Baath (Semple 2007). This was followed by the dismantling of the Victory Arches which began in earnest in February 2007. Ten-foot chunks were cut out of the monument and carted away while some reports indicate that numerous US troops and Iraqi bystanders removed parts of the monument as personal souvenirs (Dehghanpisheh 2007). Such events were widely contested within Iraq, with Mustafa Khadimi, a member of the Iraq Memory Foundation, stating of the Victory Arches, ‘We need to use these two swords as proof to further generations to show what happened to Iraqi people’ (Khadimi quoted in Dehghanpisheh 2007). Another prominent Iraqi, Saad al-Basri, a professor of

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8 The Iraqi Memory Foundation (IMF) is an extension of the Iraq Research and Documentation Project (IRDP) founded by controversial Iraqi scholar Kanan Makiya in 1992 (see note 2). It relocated to Iraq in 2003 and changed its name. The IMF has become a topic of much controversy and vitriolic debate among Iraqi and American intellectuals and officials. For example, when Makiya discovered a Baath Party archive of some 5 million pages in 2003, he assumed custody of the documents and transported them to the United States amid claims that such actions were not only opportunistic plundering but also highly illegal and insensitive (Eakin 2008).
sculpture in the College of Fine Arts in Baghdad agreed, ‘The monuments should be considered as part of archaeology that speak to a specific era in Iraqi history. To remove them is wrong’ (al-Basri quoted in Semple 2007). However, it was not until the US Ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, challenged Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on the decision that the project was promptly brought to a halt. According to media reports, the reason for Khalilzad’s intervention was ‘due to concerns the dismantling of the monument might further deepen the rift between Iraq’s Shiite majority and its Sunni minority’ (Dehghanpisheh 2007). What is particularly interesting here is that the destruction of Iraq’s cultural heritage was stopped—by the Coalition of all groups—in order to prevent the further breakdown of social cohesion and national identity in Iraq and to eschew more ethno-sectarian violence. This indicates at least tacit acknowledgement of the role such monuments have played in creating a unified Iraqi identity and that their destruction can contribute to deepening ethno-religious sectarian divides.

Figure 3: The beginning of the dismantling of the Victory Arches, Baghdad. Photo by William N. Kent, Spring 2007.
Conclusion: Consequences and Futures

This final example of the state-sanctioned destruction of the Victory Arches illuminates for us the complex intersections between historical memory and national identity. As we have seen, most Iraqis had learned about the past through a Baathist lens, a tyrannical kaleidoscope of state propaganda, a history rewritten to both justify oppression and coerce people into patriotism. This was underpinned by a very complex cultural-discursive campaign in which the ideology of the Baath was embedded into festivals, monuments, history books and state buildings. Admittedly, this project was accompanied by a vast network of coercive institutions that sought to oppress other visions of ‘Iraqi’ identity and force people to accept the official narratives of the state. Nonetheless, it provided Iraq with a rich and complex historical memory which went at least some way toward uniting the people behind a cohesive national identity.

However, it is undeniable that since the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent dismantling of the Baathist state, the nation has witnessed a
significant reduction in social cohesion and an unprecedented upsurge in ethno-religious sectarianism and violence. Generally, this phenomenon has been explained by a complex matrix of intersecting factors: that the systemic and desperate poverty of the Iraqi people has prompted them to resort to violence (Rice, Graff and Lewis 2006); that religious fundamentalism has grown in the absence of a secular state doctrine and is now asserting a jihad towards the goal of an Islamic caliphate (Hafez 2007); that the lack of a brutal tyrant like Hussein ruling over the recalcitrant Iraqis has given way to pre-existing sectarian tensions (Allawi 2007; Maples 2006); that the bungled occupation has spurred on a multifaceted resistance, each constituent group of which is adamantly opposed to the foreign presence (Zunes 2006); and, further still, that the violence ravaging Iraq is in fact a deliberate strategy of the United States, a modern-day ‘divide and rule’ tactic which sees foreign powers fund, empower or tacitly support sectarian militias and religious fundamentalism (Ahmad 2007; Ismael and Fuller 2009).

While many of these factors need to be considered in any balanced assessment of the complexities of post-Hussein Iraq, they each overlook the important problems associated with the destruction of the nation’s cultural heritage, including the consequences it is having on the erosion of Iraqi national identity, the rise of violence and on the country’s democratic order. As with Bosnia, the destruction of Iraq’s cultural heritage has provided fertile ground for simplistic and exclusive models of identity to be promulgated, creating a rise in ethno-religious sectarianism and violence. The combination of this absence of an Iraqi national identity and the sharp upsurge in violence has gone on to have very specific consequences for Iraq’s democracy. Indeed, since the fall of the former regime in 2003, Iraqi politics has been increasingly conducted along ethno-religious sectarian lines. That is to say, that unlike any other epoch in Iraq’s modern history, Iraqi politics of today is constituted by a variety of different and often opposing factions who are all attempting to assert their own particular vision for the future of their respective ethno-religious population, not a vision for a cohesive and unified Iraq. Indeed, the Iraqi political elite is constituted by a variety of factions, most of which pedal relatively narrow political ideologies designed to pander to the interests of their constituents and to work against, rather than toward, a united and cohesive Iraqi national identity. These issues—that of the absence of an Iraqi national identity, the rise in violence and the divided nature of Iraqi democracy—are all significant problems and do not bode well for the future of Iraq.

Today, Iraq not only faces the enormous challenge of reconstructing its infrastructure, implementing the rule of law and enforcing security, it also faces the task of rebuilding the less tangible notions of a collective historical
memory and national identity. While this article certainly does not advocate what might be called a ‘re-Baathification’ of Iraq or even a return to a secular nationalist government, it does argue that the Coalition and the Iraqi political elite have a responsibility to develop appropriate national discourses that are egalitarian and inclusive. In doing so, Iraq could learn much from other twentieth-century examples in which people have attempted to forge new versions of national identity that openly engage with both the traumas and the achievements of the past. For example, South Africa has many useful parallels to Iraq in that it was under heavy sanctions from the international community and that it was rife with cultural, religious and ethnic tensions. However, the symbolic nation-building campaign that followed the end of apartheid and the nation’s bold engagement with the suffering of the past helped it move towards reconciliation and reconstruction (Bornman 2006; Humphrey 2002). In the case of post-Soviet Russia, the nation had the task of not only redefining itself politically, economically and ideologically, but also symbolically. To do this, many of the Soviet-era monuments were successfully transformed from icons of the Soviet Union to symbols of a united Russia (Forest and Johnson 2002). In his study of Cambodia, Tim Winter has taken this a step further to argue that important historical and cultural sites were used to build a tourist economy and played a critical role in post-conflict reconstruction, nation-building, and socioeconomic rehabilitation (Winter 2007).

With Iraq’s current political impasse following the March 2010 elections and the withdrawal of all US troops likely by the end of 2011, much rests on Iraq’s ability to deal with its past. This means that the Baathist epoch—as with every other era in Iraq’s national history—needs to be engaged with honestly and openly. The terror, coercion and violence need to be acknowledged and the guilty brought to justice. Beyond this, however, Baathist Iraq needs to be understood in its moderately successful attempts to build a vision of a united and prosperous future. The nation needs to move beyond simplistic approaches like total de-Baathification and away from reductive political ideology which emphasizes schisms rather than breaks them down. Indeed, if Iraq is to ever develop a post-Baathist national identity then it must come to terms with both the failures and successes of the former regime. Such an open and critical engagement with the past could not only create avenues of intercommunity

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9 It should be mentioned here that while the South African example has been invoked regularly in discussion of truth and reconciliation in Iraq, others have been critical of its adaptability to the complexities of Iraq (al-Marashi and Keskin 2008). However, these studies generally do not discuss South Africa’s post-apartheid symbolic nation-building campaign and its useful parallels to Iraq.
dialogue, help placate ethno-religious violence and sectarianism, and facilitate
the establishment of an inclusive political order, it could also ensure that the
Iraqi people are not destined to repeat a past that has been largely torn down
and destroyed.

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