WERE THE 1950S A GOLDEN AGE IN BAGHDAD?
THE ROLE OF NOSTALGIA AND NATIONALISM

Magnus Bernhardsson*

Those who study the history of classical and medieval Islam have their golden ages. For medievalists, for example, the Baghdad of the Abbasid Caliphate is often considered the ultimate historical epoch when the city was the pivot of the universe and the epicenter of science, scholarship, and trade. [1] But do modern historians have a golden age that they could look towards and study? Does Baghdad, for example, have a modern Golden Age?

For the last 15 years, I have been asking a number of Iraqis this very question. The most typical answer that I get is that the years between 1948-1958 were distinct and a time of excitement and optimism. The consensus seems to be that if there ever was a golden age in the modern era, it would be found in the 1950s. There is a great sense of nostalgia for this era. Interestingly, people from all sides of the political spectrum have fond memories of this time whether they were communists or conservative monarchists.

Yet do people remember the 1950s accurately? What is relation between what is remembered and what actually happened? Were the 1950s a golden age for all Iraqis? The purpose of this article is not to dispute the fact that there was

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something special about these years and for many people this time period was indeed the very best years of their lives or for Iraq in general. For the historian it is often just as important to study what people believe happened as opposed to what may have actually happened.[2] Furthermore, what may be true for the individual may not be entirely accurate when the country as a whole is considered. Certainly, 1950s Baghdad looks very promising when compared other decades of the 20th or 21st century. Nevertheless, the purpose of the article is not to reach a verdict of whether or not this was a golden age but rather to think about the implications of having such a historical memory and consider why it is so widespread. It is possible that such a historical memory, even if it is not entirely accurate, could serve as an inspiration for the current generation of Iraqis who are looking towards the future and ways to rebuild their country? If the past is critically assessed, it will reveal that the mid-century was a special moment both in Iraq and in the Middle East more generally and a time when people had faith in the future.

With this in mind, there are primarily two contradictions that this article considers. The first challenge is how to reconcile the historical memory of what is almost always presented as a progressive, revolutionary, utopian 1950s Iraq, with the reality of the political violence, corruption, and unequal distribution of wealth in the same period. Secondly, the nationalist ideology of the time highlighted the inclusive nature of Iraqi society whereas in practice large segments of the population were excluded from political and economic power. The state claimed to be a strong state and to serve the needs of all of its citizens. In essence it was a very weak and inefficient state since a large majority of Iraqis had to look elsewhere for basic services such as housing, health care, and education. The bridge between these opposing poles and contradictions, I will argue, is nostalgic nationalism. In the case of Iraq, history and memories of the past are heavily influenced by nostalgic sentiments that may have little or no relation with what actually happened.

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Writing the history of modern Iraq at the beginning of the 21st century poses a number of ethical and methodological dilemmas. Some of these problems are standard issues facing most historians such as the accessibility and the quantity of primary sources, the availability of non-elite voices of the past, and the challenge of interpreting the source material on it's own terms.

In addition to these typical methodological anxieties of the profession, today's historian of Iraq also has the added burden of the immense political, economic, and military significance of Iraq. In the current environment of war-torn Iraq, how can any text on Iraq be an "objective" historical account? The power to control the past is one dimension of the current conflict in and about Iraq. In order to bring about justice, some of the injustices of the past have to be uncovered. The stakes are high and many fundamental issues have yet to be resolved. These aspects are not completely absent when prior decades such as the 1950s are examined.

The period following World War II, the "long 1950s" (roughly 1945-1960) was alive with possibilities. A new and young generation, products of the educational and cultural systems of the newly created nation states, was articulating fresh ideas and progressive policies.[3] Like in many other parts of the worlds, the Middle East was entering a period of transformation, from the old colonial relationships of the pre-war period, to a new age of independence, sovereignty, development and regional cooperation. Decolonization, the Free Officers' movement in Egypt, Ba'athism in Syria and Iraq, the transition to multi-party politics in Turkey, and growing oil wealth all seemed to indicate that politics, both in practice and in discourse, was changing and the future was brimming with potential.

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Elites and masses looked to this new age with the hope and promise of equality, justice, freedom and democracy. This was an age of creativity as the arts and sciences flourished as new art forms were forged and institutions of higher learning expanded. There was a sense of optimism – people had faith in the future – that technology, science, and development would bring prosperity. The new political elite, often from different class backgrounds than

the old elite, seemed more sensitive to the plight of the poor and to the problems of the state.

Yet the idealism and the promises of the new nationalist political elites worked at cross purposes to the geopolitical interests of the super powers. The realities of the Cold War and the continued presence of foreign interests largely curtailed what could be done in order to bring about a new nationalist "golden age". Further, the immediate post-World War II period was also a time of considerable violence, military setbacks and humanitarian crises especially for the Palestinians which severely thwarted hopes to develop thriving and open societies across the region.

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Nevertheless, the decades after the World War II, introduced new ambitious policies that were drastically different from political practice of the preceding decades. In oral histories and memoires, many people (though not all) nostalgically look back at the 1950s as a time when the atmosphere was different, when the region was brimming with potential, and when there was hope.[4] These memories stand in stark contrast to the disappointments and despair from the late 1960s onwards. Compared to later decades, therefore, the 1950s, especially in Iraq, are often evoked with nostalgic fondness.

According to David historian Lowenthal, nostalgia is a term that originally named the symptoms of homesick Swiss soldiers in the seventeenth century.[5] Today it is largely used to denote a yearning for a bygone days and an imagination of a pristine past.[6] In nostalgic nationalism, these nostalgic emotions find their way into a rational, intellectual system and worldview: nationalism. Together they provide a compelling, and safe, interpretation of the past.

These sentiments weighed heavily in the interviews I have had with Iraqis about the 1950s. In 1997, 2001, 2006-[7], and again in 2008 and 2010, I conducted oral histories with a number of Iraqis in Jordan, England and the United States about their personal history and perceptions of the past. Most of my interview subjects were male. Many of them could be considered coming from "the old social classes", to use Batatu's term, and were from families that were in the political and economic

elite of the Hashemite Monarchy. Others, on the other hand, had participated and supported the 1958 Revolution that toppled the Monarchy. I asked them about their life and politics during the Hashemite Monarchy especially during the 1950s. In many ways, these expatriates were nostalgic in both senses of word: homesick and yearning for an idyllic and peaceful past. Inevitably, the interviewees would compare the society then with what they were witnessing today. For example, a 78 year-old Iraqi woman living in Jordan (who wishes to remain anonymous) told me: "Back then [in the 1950s], we did not care who was a Sunni or Shi´i. We were just all Iraqis. So I do not understand where this sectarian violence today comes from."7A 75-year old man remembers Baghdad being a "peaceful city" that lived up to its original name - Madinat al-salaam or the city of peace – as he tearfully recounted the recent destruction of Baghdad's neighborhoods and buildings due to the ongoing war.[8]

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The more I interviewed exiled Iraqis about the past, the more I was exposed to a nostalgic depiction of the past when "we were just all Iraqis." In many of my interviews, both in the Middle East and in the United States, the Iraqis remembered the "good old days" of the 1950s when they did not categorize or classify people by religious denomination or practice. They all confirmed and ascribed to the dominant and official narrative of Iraqi history that emphasized the secular nature of Iraqi governments and the secular basis of Iraqi nationalism – where they all worked towards building up the state. Furthermore, they descriptions of Baghdad in the 1950s universally tended to be positive. The city is remembered as a cosmopolitan progressive place where people in universities, in government, in the cafes, and in the media would be self-consciously incorporating foreign ideas and influences into an Iraqi context. In the process, the literate bourgeois elite created a new aesthetic and developed novel

ideas about what it meant to be modern and what it meant to be Iraqi. It was a nationalist cosmopolitanism.

In nostalgically evoking the 1950s as a time of calm and tranquility and also a period when people were optimistic and ambitious about the future of Iraq, my interviewees tended to cling to the standard nationalist narrative of the past. As Pierre Nora has reminded us, people today have lost an embodied sense of the past so their only access to earlier periods is through dutifully followed histories. As Nora describes it, "memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists."[9]

In describing life under the Monarchy and

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in their general presentation of the trajectory of the Iraqi nation, most of my interviewees imparted a similar sort of narrative of Iraqi history. Generally speaking, the narrative described a time of state building up through World War II. In the 1950s, Iraqi society entered a golden age in which Iraqis were experiencing

new found oil wealth and were putting those resources to build up a progressive, modern society. Though my interviewees had numerous opinions about why the overthrow of the Monarchy happened or how to explain the subsequent rise of the Ba'th Party and Saddam Hussein, they overwhelmingly stressed how committed and loyal Iraqis had been to the government's articulation of Iraqi nationalism in earlier decades.

They all confirmed and ascribed to the dominant and official narrative of Iraqi history that emphasized the secular nature of Iraqi governments and the secular basis of Iraqi nationalism – where they "all" worked towards building up the state. For some this meant supporting the policies of the Monarchy. For others, it meant working actively against the Hashemites. Furthermore, their descriptions of Baghdad in the 1950s tended to be positive. The city is remembered as a cosmopolitan and progressive place where people in universities, government, the cafes, and the media would self-consciously incorporate foreign ideas and influences into an Iraqi context. It was as if "everyone" was sitting all day in the café discussing existentialism or the latest Hemingway, Laxness or Pasternak novel. "Everyone" inter-married and "all" neighborhoods were ethnically and religiously

diverse.

But the more I heard the Iraqis reiterate their interpretation of the past and the more a consensus emerged, especially about the secular character of earlier decades, the more I began to question whether their memory truly reflected the reality of 1950s Baghdad. Is it possible that the successive Iraqi governments from 1921 onwards have been so effective in developing and forging a national identity that the official presentation of history and characterization of society overwhelms people's own interpretation of their past? Or are Iraqis clinging to the conventional wisdom because the situation today is so unconventional? Perhaps when there is lack of faith in the future, it is replaced by a committed belief in a stable and unified past. This may have been particularly applicable to my interviewees who tended to be Iraqis of an elite background. Perhaps

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they were more predisposed to this secular, nationalist narrative and they took great pride in their nation's history.

The fact that so many of my interviewees had such similar interpretations of Iraqi nationalism may be because the Iraqi governments have been largely successful in inculcating a national vision that includes all Iraqis. Because of the ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity of the Iraqi nation, it proved difficult to find a compelling traditional basis for national unity such as race, religion or language. Indeed, there have been several competing visions of Iraqi society. One of the more predominant ones was the pan-Arab definition of Iraq that stressed that the roots of the modern state lie in Iraq's Semitic past, particularly in the Arabs of the pre-Islamic period and eventually during the consolidation of the 'Abbasid Caliphate.[10] This emphasis stresses that Iraq achieved greatness (such as during the 'Abbasid Caliphate) precisely because the Arabs were united. Consequently, pan-Arab unity is a necessary requirement for

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restoring glory to the Arab nations today.

No person encapsulates this ideology better than Sati' al-Husri. Al-Husri is perhaps the most influential advocate of Arab nationalism who according to historian Aziz al-Azmeh formulated "the most important statements of Arab nationalism."[11] Al-Husri was born in Yemen in 1882 to a Syrian Muslim family and learned French and Turkish before he studied Arabic.[12] In 1921, he was brought to Iraq by King Faysal I and became the Minister of Education in the early, critical years of the Iraqi state. The German theories of nationalism, particularly those of Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, deeply influenced al-Husri. His writings on the Arab nation and nationalism closely parallel Herder's and Fichte's ideals of what constitutes a nation.

In his position as Director of Education of Iraq, al-Husri was in a unique position to put some of his theories into practice. For al-Husri, those who spoke Arabic as their mother tongue were Arabs. Language was thus a critical ingredient in his views of the nation. [13] In addition, al-Husri argued, "nationalist feeling depends on historical memories more than anything else."[14] During his tenure in the Ministry of Education and later in the Department of Antiquities, he emphasized a presentation and teaching of history that would promote among the pupils and the citizens at large a sense of primordial and natural attachment to the Arab nation. For the citizens of Iraq, al-Husri contended this meant loyalty to the Iraqi state for now or until full Arab unity is achieved.

In the early years of the Hashemite Monarchy, this vision was particularly influential. Because of the obvious incongruity between the pan-Arab vision of Iraq and the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual reality of Iraqi society, a competing world-view emerged, or what political scientist Eric Davis calls

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an "Iraqist nationalist vision", especially amongst the leftist parties in Iraq.[15]

This vision incorporates Iraq's pre-Islamic civilizations into the national narrative while also emphasizing the importance of Arab culture and ties to the Arab world. According to this formulation, Iraq is thus a product of a multitude of different cultures and the culmination of the achievements of the ancient civilizations.

This cultural emphasis, especially emphasizing that the modern Iraqi nation is a successor of all the glorious civilizations and empires that have preceded the current state on Iraqi soil, defined the Iraqi citizens as markedly different from their neighbors to the west and north. In addition, the definition of this identity has been fluid and adaptive depending on the political circumstances. Thus it was possible to make modern day Iraqis the inheritors of ancient Mesopotamian culture and of the Islamic Abbasid Caliphate. [16]

In both of these visions of Iraq (the Pan-Arabist and the Iraqist Nationalist), religion

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does not play a central role in defining a national identity. Al-Husri, for example, the great proponent of Arab nationalism, did not believe that religion, unlike language and history, constituted a fundamental element of national formation.[17] In al-Husri's view, Islam is a universal phenomenon that is not tied to time and place like the nation. Therefore, by definition, Islam would be opposed to nationalism because of Islam´s international character.

The Iraqist Nationalist vision also did not emphasize religion. Many of its proponents were leftist and anti-imperialist and were therefore not consumedwith theology nor were they debating whether religious law should form a vital component in the national constitution. Between 1921 and until 1991 (when Saddam Hussein seemed to have a sudden religious conversion to Islam during the height of the Persian Gulf War), the major political leaders of Iraq have been avowed secularists.[18] Indeed, the many studies of the political and cultural history of Iraq throughout the years corroborate that secularism characterized Iraqi society and politics.[19]

In a number of the standard works on Iraqi political history, such as Hanna Batatu's monumental The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq (1978) or Charles Tripp's A History of Iraq (2000), the emphasis has been on the political and economic elite and their commitment to or adversarial relationship with the Iraqi state. In these works, religion is presented as somewhat marginal in the state-building process and in the development of Iraqi national identity. Like political histories elsewhere, the focus has been on the elite level where religion was not as paramount as in other parts of the society. Furthermore, for most of the twentieth century, many historians and political scientists, especially those consumed by class struggle and Marxist analysis, did not feel that religion could possibly be a critical factor in politics or identity formation.

During the Hashemite Monarchy, the policies adopted by the governing elite emphasized centralization and a unified, Iraqi identity irrespective of sect or religion. Through a purposeful educational policy predicated on prevailing ideas of an Arab identity, the early Iraqi state emphasized the love of country to be nurtured within the political boundaries of Iraq. The ruling parties in Iraq have generally always upheld notions of a secular Iraq where

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people of different ethnic, religious, and tribal backgrounds could work together for the common nationalist cause. Though the official policies and rhetoric portrayed an image of a unified Iraq, the monarchical ruling elites were certainly not free of ethno-sectarian bias. As is widely known, Sunni Arabs monopolized governance. They deliberately prevented various other sects, such as the Shi´i majority, from assuming central positions of power. Moreover, the Sunni minority justified many of its more controversial and violent decisions in the name of national unity. The Iraqi government was quick to demonstrate its strength when it felt threatened from within. It was certainly a strong state, but that strength was primarily in the realm of security. It was, however, weak and ineffectual in executing policies that would enable the Iraqi people to

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live in a society in which basic services such as housing and education would be available to all. While the rhetoric of the government sought to be inclusive, its actions, or in most cases its inactions, were exclusive. In other words, its rhetoric and visible manifestations of power (police, judicial system) were strong and gave the impression of a government in control. Nevertheless, the execution and deliverance of that projected power was inefficient. It was partly because of the system's frailty that Islam continued to be a part of people's lives and identity, particularly below the elite level.

But how is it possible to study the impact of religion beyond the rhetoric of the government and its related elites? It is notoriously difficult to access the voices of the majority, who generally did not formally articulate their views of identity, religion, and the nation state. How does one study the role of Islam among the majority of the Iraq's population when they generally did not leave behind a written record easily accessible today? Where are its voices?

Studying the role of religion in 1950s Iraq and its relation to Iraqi nationalism raises larger questions about how historians have

treated religion academically in their analysis of Middle Eastern societies and particularly in how nationalism has been defined. For most of the twentieth century, scholars have considered religion to be antithetical to the national project and not a vital component of Middle Eastern modernity. This interpretation of the trajectory of Middle Eastern societies is teleological and uncritically ignores how religion can become a strategic means by which members of a community define their own place in society, often in stark contrast to the ruling elite.

The development of Iraqi nationalism during the first half of the twentieth century did not replace other regional or local identities, some of which were in part religiously based. Rather, the national identity was an additional layer that worked in conjunction with the other identities. Because the public sphere was dominated by the secular language of nationalism (parliamentary and cabinet level politics, the school system and curriculum, and the government controlled press), Iraqis tended to emphasize their Iraqiness in those spheres. It is possible that in the private spheres, however, people´s familial

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relations, festivals, daily life, and festivals, religion probably entered more concretely?It is perhaps here one could see that in the future Iraq would have faith – that the roots of today's proliferation of religious ideologies in the public sphere lie in the private sphere of the 1950s. Yet it is the public sphere where most of the government's actions are obvious. And it was that sphere where the 1950s government sought to reconfigure.

Building up Society

The Iraqi governments of the 1950s had big ideas and ambitious plans. They decided it could move beyond the building of institutional foundations and embarked on the large-scale project of developing a "modern" nation. At this juncture, the Iraqi government actually could afford such ambitious plans. Like politicians elsewhere in the Americas and Asia, Iraqi officials were becoming more critical of the imperial designed world and sought to renegotiate the oil agreement with the British dominated Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC),

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which was "Iraqi" in name alone.

In the early 1950s many countries, such as Venezuela and Iran, were planning to nationalize their major industries.[20] Saudi Arabia had recently negotiated an agreement with ARAMCO which introduced a '50-50' profit-sharing formula in the Middle East. In 1952, the IPC agreed to share profits on a '50-50' basis.[21] In addition, the IPC guaranteed a minimum revenue for the Iraqi government. If the profit declared by the IPC was below a certain level, Iraq would receive up to 12.5% of net production as part of its share.

This new agreement had staggering results for the Iraqi economy. It resulted in a six fold increase in governmental revenues in a matter of a few years. For example, in 1950 revenue from oil was 5.3 million Iraqi dinars while three years later the revenue had risen to almost 50 million dinars.[22] In order to deal rationally with this newly acquired revenue, the government, through the initiative of Salih Jabr established the Iraq Development Board (IDB). The board had six members including a foreign advisor. [23] The IDB was responsible for allocating approximately 70% of the governmental revenue to go towards "development." On the surface, this was a far-sighted reaction of the government to utilize this new-found wealth.

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Political scientist James Scott has examined various episodes of failed urban planning in his book Seeing Like a State. [24] Scott is particularly interested in state-initiated social engineering in authoritarian societies that seek the administrative ordering of a society that is heavily infused with what Scott calls "high-modernist" ideology. This ideology reflects a "self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production… and the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws."[25] As Scott suggests, high modernism is "uncritical, unskeptical, and thus unscientifically optimistic about the possibilities for the comprehensive planning of human settlement and production."[26] In many ways, the experience of the IDB board fits well Scott's paradigm.

Initially the IDB Board's attention was on developing Iraq's agriculture and the natural environment. Land and agriculture were still the basis of power in the country. The board's expenditure in this area, however, benefited the landed elite tremendously and led to considerable unrest in the country-side and several peasant rebellions.[27] Foreign consultants, such as Lord Arthur Salter of Britain and experts at the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development in Washington, advised strongly against IDB's approach to land reform and development. [28] Despite the efforts and monies that were directed towards developing agriculture and making it more efficient, agricultural output actually lessened during these years, partly due to the wasteful use of irrigated water. The work of the IDB, and the economic boom that resulted from the re-negotiated oil agreement was typically one of the first things my interviewees mentioned when asked what characterized the 1950s. They expressed an admiration for the IDB. They see in their work an optimism to make grandiose plans for Iraq that Iraqis themselves were articulating. This unique ambition was very much tied to this particular time and place. In these remembrances there is also a sense of regret and speculation about what could have happened if the IDB had continued to serve

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past the 1958 revolution. What would have happened in the 1960s if these modernist plans had all been implemented and given room to develop? My interviewees were all convinced that Iraq would have become a leading economic power in Asia, rivaling South Korea, Singapore and Japan as the penultimate Asian Tiger. These are fascinating counter-factual "what-if?" questions that fuel most nostalgic speculations. They form an integral part of Iraq's nostalgic nationalism. For example, one of my interview subjects remember seeing an Iraqi film in the mid-1950s called Baladuna (Our Country) which he claimed nearly all Iraqis watched. This film showed what positive steps the government was taking in making Baghdad in particular and Iraq in general a more modern place. This was a very positive movie and had the effect, he claimed, of making Iraqis feel good about the state building project.[29]

By this time Baghdad was experiencing an exciting cultural renaissance that involved a variety of artistic societies redefined artistic articulation. In fact, the 1950s were a time when the development of a specific and unique Iraqi artistic vocabulary in the literary and visual arts – a time of exciting experimentation and artistic vigor. Jawad Salim and other Iraqi artists at the time thus made cultural and nationalistic ties to those earlier civilizations.[30] They formed the Baghdad Modern Art Group in 1951 and consciously and explicitly sought to "search for the features of the national personality in art" in order to connect and build upon earlier cultural phases.[31] Ancient and medieval civilizations became "Iraqi" and highly relevant to the modern citizens. Heritage or tradition became modernized and modernity was perceived to be based on tradition.[32]

In the immediate years after the war, the Iraqi visual arts, especially that of the Al-Ruwad group, energetically developed a conscious, distinct Iraqi style.[33] The painter and sculptor Jawad Salim in particular made deliberate attempts to incorporate ancient historical motifs in his art. Salim, who had studied in Paris (1938-9) and Rome (1939-40) and was greatly influenced by the work of Henry Moore and Pablo Picasso, often sought inspiration from the paradigms of the various

periods of Iraqi history. He had worked at the Iraqi National Museum and therefore was intimately familiar with the material objects of the past. It is therefore not surprising that he incorporated, for example, Assyrian or Babylonian reliefs or Abbasid architecture design in his works of art. He inaugurated a movement of "istilham al-turath," seeking inspiration from tradition, and developed an artistic vision that was historiocultural as well as modern.

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Art historian Nada Shabout maintains that the Baghdad Modern Art Group was the first group in the Arab world to succeed in developing a local style. As Shabout points out, their members advocated incorporating "a cultural and intellectual message as well as a philosophy within the composition of the work

of art."[37]

This artistic experimentation was not confined to the visual arts. In literature, the Iraqi free verse movement (al-shi'r al-hurr) started to make its appearance in the early 1950s. Poets such as Nazik al-Mala'ika, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, and 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayyati "radically changed the form of Arabic poetry and constituted a direct and uncompromising challenge to the rules that had formed the traditional poetic canon."[38] This was clearly a rejection of tradition and an indication of dissatisfaction with the old rigid, romantic practices. At the same time, the new form provided the artists with flexibility and tools to identify with something novel and modern. Furthermore, the Iraqi writers clearly felt they were engaged in an international language and were part of a global vernacular. As Jabra Ibrahim Jabra describes in his memoirs of 1950s Baghdad, the writers of Baghdad were preoccupied with existentialism. The writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus were extensively discussed. For example when

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Jabra's English friend Denys Johnson Davies, the famous translator of Arabic literature, visited Baghdad in the 1950s , he was "amazed at the rebellious, dashing spirit he observed in the writers and artists of Baghdad. When I showed him some of their short stories, he felt he had discovered a universe he, and his friends in Cairo, knew nothing about."[39] The poet 'Abd al-Wahhad Bayyati recounts a similar kind of spirit stating that Iraqi poets became more international in their outlook after World War II. Instead of reading Arab poets, they started reading and discussing a whole host of literature whether European, American or Latin American.[40] As with the visual artists, the poets were inspired by Iraqi historical and traditional tropes that they combined with international trends. Those paradigms came to characterize Iraqi literary production.

As these artists were experimenting with a new vocabulary and forms, they were also forging out a novel space, as members of a Baghdadi bourgeois class. They literally felt trapped between romantic and nostalgic visions of time and place and their economic and social status. The artists were very conscious of their ties to the Westernized elite of the country while at the same time that they had connections to local places and people as they painted countryside scenes and extolled the plight of the working poor in their poetry. [41] In the process, the literate bourgeois elite developed novel ideas about what it meant to be modern and what it meant to be Iraqi. For most of these intellectuals, this meant emphasizing the revolutionary character of the age and how important it was to develop and articulate a consciousness that change was necessary and inevitable. Though clearly inspired by '50s style international Marxism, it was a nationalist cosmopolitanism. For some in 1950s Baghdad, this cosmopolitanism was a way of life and was characterized by a "deracination" from traditional tribal and communal identities in which the new national and secular identity became paramount.[42]

Many of the influential intellectual and artists were critical of the policies of the government. For example, the works of the influential sociologist 'Ali Wardi were highly critical of the state.[43] My interviewees tended to be very familiar with these cultural developments and could easily explain, for

> In 1947, the population of Baghdad was around 800,000; ten years later, the inhabitants of Baghdad were more than 1.3 million or a 60% growth rate in a decade.

example, how the free verse poetry differed from the traditional canon. They saw this poetry movement as another example of how cutting-edge and progressive Iraq had become. What they did not all seem to remember or choose to recall was that some of the more prominent poets were sent into exile under the Monarchy or how critical many of the intellectual had been of the state. For example, both al-Sayyab and al-Bayyati were forced to leave the country in the mid 1950s only to return to the country once the Monarchy had been overthrown. Artists had only so much freedom to experiment under the Monarchy and the government was vigilant to repress any dissenting voices. The Government had always been vigilant about the country's cultural and intellectual life. Historian Orit Bashkin has pointed out that very early on the Hashemite Monarchy co-opted many intellectuals into the nascent state and enticed them to join government service. As Bashkin notes, this was an "effective means of influencing the activities of intellectuals and of supplying the needs of the state for trained personnel."[44]

Nevertheless, their memories of an inclusive nationalist

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society certainly do not apply to all citizens of Baghdad during these years. The government struggled to provide essential services, such as education, housing and health care. During the 1950s there were significant episodes of violence and destruction such as the intifada of 1952 and the Jewish exodus from Baghdad. The experience of most Baghdadis with their high-minded elite and government was that there was discrepancy between nationalist rhetoric of development and progress on the ground. There were good compelling reasons why some Baghdadis took to the streets in July of 1958 and violently overthrew the governmental elite. They were rejecting both the people involved in governance and some of the ideas associated with that elite.

During the Hashemite Monarchy, the policies adopted by the governing elite emphasized centralization and a unified, Iraqi identity irrespective of sect or religion. Through a purposeful educational policy predicated on prevailing ideas of an Arab identity, the early Iraqi state emphasized the love of country to be nurtured within the political boundaries of Iraq. The ruling parties

in Iraq have generally always upheld notions of a secular Iraq where people of different ethnic, religious, and tribal backgrounds could work together for the common nationalist cause. Though the official policies and rhetoric portrayed an image of a unified Iraq, the monarchical ruling elites were certainly not free of ethno-sectarian bias. As is widely known, Sunni Arabs monopolized governance. They deliberately prevented various other sects, such as the Shi´i majority, from assuming central positions of power. Moreover, the Sunni minority justified many of its more controversial and violent decisions in the name of national unity. The Iraqi government was quick to demonstrate its strength when it felt threatened from within. It was certainly a strong state, but that strength was primarily in the realm of security. It was, however, weak and ineffectual in executing policies that would enable the Iraqi people to live in a society in which basic services such as housing and education would be available to all. While the rhetoric of the government sought to be inclusive, its actions, or in most cases its inactions, were exclusive. In other words, its rhetoric and visible manifestations of power (police, judicial system) were strong and gave the impression of a government in control. Nevertheless, the execution and deliverance

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of that projected power was inefficient. It was partly because of the system's frailty that Islam continued to be a part of people's lives and identity, particularly below the elite level. One side effect of the IDB policies in the countryside and the reorganization of landholding was an extensive population migration to the capital, Baghdad. In 1947, the population of Baghdad was around 800,000; ten years later, the inhabitants of Baghdad were more than 1.3 million or a 60% growth rate in a decade.[45] Though some of this increase can be attributed to natural growth, the swell in population can largely be attributed to migration to the city. Many of these were very poor rural inhabitants who were seeking better opportunities in the big city and most of them were probably illiterate. In 1946, at least, it was estimated that the illiteracy rate was at 95%.[46]

The 1958 Revolution

On July 14th, 1958 units from the Iraqi

Army, under the leadership of 'Abd al-Karim Qasem and 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif, engineered a coup d'état that overthrew the Hashemite Monarchy. Members of the royal family were killed and Nuri al-Said, the prime minister, who tried to escape disguised as a women was lynched by an angry mob. After two days of some unrest with minimal casualties, the revolutionaries were able to reestablish public order. The once strong Hashemite Monarchy had fallen in a few hours with very little resistance. Very few Iraqis came to their support during those fateful days. The government's following amongst the general population seems to have been razor thin.

The revolutionaries heavily criticized the ancien regime's reliance and infatuation with Western countries, especially the United States and Great Britain. They made drastic changes in government. Iraq became a republic and the new government overturned many of the policies of the Hashemite monarchy. With the exception Gropious' university, all IDB architectural commissions were disbanded and the IDB's urban plans scrapped. The new Iraqi Republic ushered in a new agricultural law that sought to reform, if not dismantle, the large landed estates that had characterized the Hashemite Monarchy. The Republic relied on Iraq's leftist intellectuals to legitimate

the state though political scientist Eric Davis maintains that the 1958 Revolution "did not represent an institutional break with the past in the area of cultural production but rather a continuation and intensification of a growing interest in national heritage" that would be more appealing to the experiences of the working class.[47]

My interview subjects had very different feelings about the Revolution depending on their relationship with the Hashemite Government. Those who considered it a serious setback for the nation tended to emphasize how liberal and progressive the Monarchy had been. They chose not to remember how the government banned the meetings of many political parties, closed a number of newspapers, and how it imprisoned a number of people who vehemently criticized the government. The newspapers from the period such as Sawt al-Ahali and

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Liwa' al-Istiqlal vividly describe some of the government's actions to curtail dissenting voices. Yet each time the government took steps to limit or mute political opposition, their political opponent would re-tool and re-think ways to work against the government and eventually found a way to overthrew the Monarchy in July of 1958.

Final Questions

In the Monarchy's attempt to modernize, the discrepancies in Iraqi society became all the more clear. The failure of their urban engineering hadserious repercussions for Iraqi political life, essentially postponing the development of an equitable and cohesive society with strong civil institutions to counteract any maximizing attempts of centralized political power.

Baghdad in the 1950s offers a memory of a very vibrant cultural and a dynamic economy. It was a time of seemingly boundless energy. What made this time distinct was a combination of political, cultural, and economic developments. At the same time, this was also a question of timing, as a new generation was emerging in Iraq, that was fundamentally different from earlier generations and sought new solutions and offered new visions. This new generation had gotten Iraqi nationalism with their mother's

milk as they went through the educational system of the nascent Iraqi state.

Though the hopes and promises of the age never materialized, there was something about the 1950s that inspires awe and inspiration among Iraqis today. For some this means a pro-monarchical stance. For others, it is an appreciation of the revolutionary spirit of the times that culminated in the 1958 Revolution. Whether it was through the revolutionary movement or through the elitist activities of the IDB, Iraqis in the 1950s had faith in the future and a faith in their own abilities to define

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new solutions and offered new visions. This new generation had gotten Iraqi nationalism with their mother´s milk as they went through educational system.

The nationalist nostalgia of 1950s Baghdad, I argue, is an integral part of an ironic Iraqi modernity that is based on the dissatisfaction with the experiences of modernity and the various modernization projects. Longing for this lost past is not merely to recreate a "utopia" of earlier decades but is rather based on a progressive concept of time that is both forward looking but at the same time seems to assume the possibility of reverse trajectories. It remembers a youthful past in which the individual remembers him or herself as an idealistic young person brimming with potential. Looking back they see that all of their dreams did not materialize. Yet, at the same time, they recognize that the future of the nation lies with a younger generation, hopefully looking to the future hoping – hoping for the best. Nationalist nostalgia is thus both linear and circular in which progress and disappointment are alter egos. In the 1950s Iraqis had faith and future and faith in their own abilities to define their own future struggles. Ultimately it may be a visible reminder of the unfulfilled potential of the 1950s and the determination to have faith in the future.

Notes

* Magnus Bernhardsson is a professor of history at Williams College. He is the author of Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nationalism in Modern Iraq. His research is concerned with modern Iraqi history, U.S.-Iraqi relations 1900-2000, archaeology, and nationalism in the modern Middle East. Before coming to Williams in 2003, Bernhardsson taught modern Islamic and Middle Eastern history at Hofstra University. He received his doctorate in history, with distinction, from Yale University in 1999. An earlier version of this article appeared in the on-line journal History Compass 9/10 (2011): pp. 802-817.

1   See for example Hugh Kennedy's When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World. The Rise and Fall of Islam's Greatest Dynasty (New York: Da Capo Press, 2006)

2   For a great history of the study of history see John Burrow's A History of Histories (New York: Knopf, 2007). On Iraq, see Jordi Tejel et.al (ed). Writing the Modern History of Iraq. Historiographical and Political Challenges

    (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2012).

3   The best books that study this era include Hanna Batatu's classic The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett Iraq Since 1958 (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), and Eric Davis, Memories of State (Berkeley: University of California, 2005).

4   See for example Jabra Ibrahim Jabra Shari' al-amirat: fusul min sirah dhatiyah (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-

'arabiyah lil-dirasat wa-al-nashr, 1994)

5   David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985)

6   Esra Ozyurek, Nostalgia for the Modern. State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 8-10.

7   Amman, Jordan, October 25th, 2006. Interview "D".

8   Amman, Jordan, October 29th, 2006. Interview "F".

9   Pierre Nora, Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 8.

10   Eric Davis, Memories of State. Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 13.

11   Aziz al-Azmeh "Nationalism and the Arabs," in Arab Nation, Arab Nationalism, ed. Derek Hopwood (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p.69. For a very good discussion on al-Husri and on Arab nationalism in general see Adeed Dawisha's Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

12   According to many accounts, this great proponent of Arab nationalism always spoke Arabic with a slight Turkish accent.

13   Sati al-Husri, Abhath Mukhtara fi al-Qawmiya al-'Arabiya, (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wuhda al-'Arabiyya, 1985), pp. 35-6.

14   Sati al-Husri, Ara' wa Ahadith fi al-Wataniya wa al-Qawmiyya (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wuhda al-'Arabiyya, 1984), p. 95.

15   Davis, Memories of State, pp. 13-14.

16   For this development in Iraq see Magnus T. Bernhardsson, Reclaiming a Plundered Past. Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq (University of Texas Press, 2005)

17   Dawisha, Arab Nationalism, p. 69.

18   Saddam's concern with Islam became considerable in the 1990s and early 2000s. He was often depicted praying or reading the Qur'an in stark contrast with earlier depictions of him in official photographs. Though this may have a been a genuine religious conversion at a time when Saddam felt particularly vulnerable and mortal. Most observers, however, suggest that Saddam's newfound religiosity was primarily political and a cynical use of religious symbols in order to bolster support in other parts of the Islamic world.

19   See, for example, Amatzia Baram Culture and Ideology in the Making of Ba'thist Iraq, 1968-1989 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), Orit Bashkin The Other Iraq. Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009) Phebe Marr, The Modern History of Iraq (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985), Peter Wien Iraqi Arab Nationalism. Authoritarian, Totalitarian and Pro-Fascist Inclinations, 1932-1941 (London: Routledge, 2006) and Reeva Simon Iraq Between the Two World Wars (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

20   See Mostafa Elm Oil, Power and Principle. Iran's Oil Nationalization and Its Aftermath (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992) and Irvine Anderson, Aramco, the United States, and Saudi

Arabia : a study in the dynamics of foreign oil policy, 1933-1950 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981)

21   Ferhang Jalal, The Role of Government in the Industrialization of Iraq 1950-1965 (London: Frank Cass), p. 10

22   Yusuf Sayigh The Economies of the Arab World: Development Since 1945 (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 37.

23   For the activities of the board see Jalal, op.cit. and Abbas al-Nasrawi Financing Economic Development in Iraq. The Role of Oil in a Middle Eastern Country (New York: Praeger, 1967), and Kahdim al-'Eyd Oil Revenues and Accelarted Growth: Absorptive Capacity in Iraq (New York: Praeger, 1979)

24   James Scott, Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), especially pp. 1-10.

25   Scott, Seeing Like a State, p.4.

26 ibid, p. 4

27   Haj, Making of Iraq, p. 36

28   The IDB sought foreign advice. See for example Lord Salter's The Development of Iraq: A Plan of Action (London: Iraq Development Board, 1955) and The Economic Development of Iraq. Report of a Mission organized by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Deveopment at the request of the Government of Iraq (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1952).

29 Amman, Jordan, October 29th, 2006. Interview "F".

This film was probably financed by the Iraq Petroleum Company.

30   A good example of this connection can be found in Rashid Salim's article "Diaspora, Departure and Remains" in Faraj Strokes of Genius, p. 55.

31 Dia al-Azzawi al-Jumhuriyyah (Baghdad), no. 1432, 1972. pp. 164.

32   The books by critic Jabra Ibrahim Jabra really emphasize this trend among Iraqi artists. See, for example, his Jewad Salim wa Nasb al-Hurriya (Baghdad: 1974). See also Shakir Hasan al-Said Fusul min tarikh al-haraka al-tashkiliyah fi al-Iraq 2 vols. (Baghdad: Wizarat al-thaqafah wa al-ilam, 1983) and Kanan Makiya (orig. published under the pseudonym Samir al-Khalil) The Monument. Art, Vulgarity, and Responsibility in Iraq (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 79.

33 See Nada M. Shabout, Modern Arab Art. Formation of Arab Aesthetics (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

34   A good example of this connection can be found in Rashid Salim's article "Diaspora, Departure and Remains" in Faraj Strokes of Genius, p. 55.

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the pseudonym Samir al-Khalil) The Monument. Art, Vulgarity, and Responsibility in Iraq (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 79.

37   Shabout, Modern Arab Art, p. 27

38   Terri Deyoung, Placing the Poet. Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab and Postcolonial Iraq (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 192.

39   Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Princesses' Street. Baghdad Memoirs (Fayetville: University of Arkansas Press, 2005), p. 88

40 'Abd al-Wahhab al-BayyatiTajribati al-shi'iriyya (Beirut: Manshurat Nizar Kabbani, 1968), pp. 13-21.

41   This sentiment is expressed in Shakir Hassan Al Said's Fussul min Tarikh al-Haraka al-Tashkiliah fi al-Iraq [Chapters from the History of the Plastic Art Movement in Iraq] part 1 (Baghdad: Ministry of Culture and Information, 1983), p. 126.

42   See a good discussion on cosmopolitanism in the Middle East see Sami Zubaida essay "Middle Eastern Experiences of Cosmopolitanism" in Vertook and Cohen (eds.) Conceiving Cosmopolitanism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). See also Will Hanley's excellent historiographical essay "Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies" in History Compass 6/5(London: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 1345-1367.

43 See especially his Shakhsiyat al-fard al-'iraqi: bahth fi nafsiyyat al-sha'b al-'iraqi 'ala daw 'ilm al-ijtima al-hadith (Baghdad: Matba'at al-Rabitah, 1951)

44 Bashkin, The Other Iraq, p. 35

45 L.W. Jones, Rapid Population Growth in Baghdad and Amman" in Middle East Journal, v. 23, n.2 (Washington DC: Middle East Institute, 1969), p. 209.

46 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Zahiral-iqta' wa'l dawawin fi al-'Iraq (Cairo: Matb'at al-sa'ada, 1946)

47 Davis, Memories of State, p. 111