

# Iraq's libraries: what recovery from "a national disaster beyond imagination"?

By Sandy English  
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Under the auspices of the Middle East Library Association, Jeff Spurr of Harvard University's Fine Arts Library has authored the most recent report on the condition of Iraqi academic libraries since the American invasion. "Indispensable yet Vulnerable: The Library in Dangerous Times" describes the state of these institutions, focusing primarily on the most prestigious and largest. It also details various international efforts under way to assist them.

The report documents warnings the Bush administration received about the dangers an American invasion posed to Iraq's cultural heritage. In February and April 2003, the International Council of Museums warned the Department of Defense of its responsibility to protect cultural property. Citing the provisions of The Hague's 1954 "Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict," the ICOM urged that the Coalition forces "undertake to prohibit, prevent, and, if necessary, put a stop to any form of theft, pillage or misappropriation of, and acts of vandalism directed against, cultural property." [1]

The International Committee of the Blue Shield declared on March 7, 2003, that "access to authentic cultural heritage is a basic human right" and that "Iraq is universally recognized to be especially rich in cultural heritage ... the loss of parts of that heritage would certainly represent a loss to all the peoples of the world." It called upon all nations with the ability to do so to draw up detailed plans to protect Iraqi cultural infrastructure and to assess and repair any damage done to it.

As Spurr observes, "The warnings went unheeded." In the days following the collapse of the Ba'athist regime in April 2003, scores of Iraqi libraries, museums, and archeological sites outside of the Kurdish north were vandalized, robbed, and often partly or entirely destroyed. Responsible were professional looters, Baathists worried about incriminating paper trails, Iraqis enraged at the former regime, and forces whose motivations are not fully understood.

The report continues, "The well-known fact that American troops were deployed to protect the Ministry of Oil demonstrates that museums, libraries, other ministries and institutions could have been similarly protected."

The report only deals with the damage done to major academic libraries and does not focus on other cultural institutions or local libraries. It builds upon several other reports made since the invasion, including one by representatives of the American Library of Congress in November 2003. [2]

Located across from the Ministry of Defense in Baghdad, the Iraqi National Library and Archive contained 12 million documents. In addition to a substantial book library, it may have had the largest collection of Arabic newspapers in the world. It housed documents from the period of the Hashemite monarchy (1920-1958) and the Turkish Ottoman period (1534-1918) as well as documents from the Republican period after 1958 to recent times.

Shortly before the invasion, staff members and Shia clerics removed

nearly 40 percent of the book collection and some of the documents for safekeeping. Clerics also had a steel door to one of the collections welded shut and it remained safe.

After the US takeover of Baghdad on April 8, 2003, according to the report, "a first fire had been lit during the initial wave of looting on the 11th, and the much more destructive fire had been set on the 14th, with the clerics acting between the two events."

An entire wing of the library, the Old Library, was almost completely destroyed. This area housed documents from the Republican era, which may have been the reason for the fires.

Also completely destroyed was the microfilm collection of periodicals and other documents. Dr. Saad Eskander, the library's Director-General, estimates that 60 percent of the Hashemite documents were destroyed.

A portion of the documents that were removed by the Islamic clerics faced another disaster. These were stored in the basement of the Board of Tourism, which was deliberately flooded by looters. By the autumn of 2003, the documents had been moved to a space above ground, "where the Library of Congress mission saw them in November exhibiting 'extensive and active mold growth.'"

The freezers that these documents were put into for emergency preservation then turned out to have been coolers in which the documents continue to deteriorate.

Moreover, the experienced Dutch conservationist appointed by the Coalition Provisional Authority to oversee this and other reconstruction, Dr. René Teijgeler, was not replaced after he left his job in February, 2005, "a further sign of American unwillingness to take responsibility for culture, cultural institutions, and the consequences of American and allied actions jeopardizing them," according to the report.

Dr. Saad B. Eskander, Director General of the Iraq National Library and Archive, has described the events of mid-April, 2003 as a "national disaster beyond imagination."

The semi-private al-Awqaf Library, founded in 1920, is the oldest heritage institution in Iraq. It is situated near the Ministry of Health in Baghdad. It contained 45,000 rare printed books of which 6,000 were in the Ottoman script as well as a number of special collections. The staff was able to put 5,250 of 7,000 in safekeeping, including a collection of Korans.

Spurr's report does not contain a comprehensive description of the horrible fate of this institution, but the Middle East Library Association has published on its web site an earlier report by University of Chicago graduate student Nabil Al-Tikriti in June 2003 and another report written a year later by the Iraqi archivist Zain Al-Naqshbandi.

On April 13 or 14, 2003, arsonists completely destroyed the library. All of the 45,000 books, including Ottoman manuscripts and a collection of rare medical texts, were burnt, and much of the library's equipment such as Xerox machines, air conditioners, and bookbinding materials appears to have been looted previously (looting of equipment was the rule for other libraries as well). The 5,250 manuscripts remain undamaged.

The US military bears responsibility for the destruction of another 1,744 manuscripts. These had been removed before the fire and placed under armed guard at the Qadiriyya Mosque complex. Operating under a policy to shoot armed Iraqis on sight, US forces killed the guard on April 13. The al-Awqaf staff returned these manuscripts to the library, now unguarded because of the American "rules of engagement." These manuscripts were either looted or incinerated.

The arson itself bears a particularly suspicious and notorious character in Iraq. According to Al-Tikriti's report and press accounts at the time, approximately 15 Arab males using an incendiary substance systematically burned the library. Two other men from this group videotaped the arson.

Many Iraqis believe, as the American press has also reported, that the arsonists, based on the dialect they were overheard using, were Kuwaitis. This supposition, however, remains unproven.

No international agency appears to have come to the assistance of this library.

Named after the great Abbasid dynasty library established in 832 and destroyed in the last invasion of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258, the House of Wisdom had been installed in 1995 in one of the few surviving 13th century Abbasid structures in Baghdad. This building was the site of the first Iraqi parliament. The institution had a small collection of 100 manuscripts but these included a 9th century Koran and an Ibn Sina text of philosophy. The institution possessed a 5,500-volume set of documents from the British foreign office, US congressional documents concerning the 1940 coup in Iraq, a number of documents concerning the Jewish community in Baghdad, as well as Ottoman property registrations and court documents. Although these collections were all copies, the originals were held in the National Library and may have burnt.

On April 11, the facilities were looted. An Ottoman costume exhibit was looted in addition to furniture and moveable parts of the building. The looters returned the next day, stealing the library's most valuable manuscripts and books. The facility was then torched. Witness have reported that the arsonists "were instigated," according to Al-Tikriti's report, which does not indicate by whom. Books from the collection have been seen for sale on the streets of Baghdad.

The Iraqi Academy of Sciences, an independent research institution in Baghdad, contained foreign language books, manuscripts, and unpublished theses. It also held an Internet lab. Staff members allege that shortly after the invasion an American tank crashed through the gates of the premises, removed the Iraqi flag, and left. Shortly afterwards, looters stole the institute's fixtures, computers, furniture, vehicles and personal possessions of the staff who lived in apartments on the Academy grounds. The academy was not burned and appears to have been looted by local poor people.

Spurr reports that the "entire collection of 175,000 books and manuscripts at the library of the University of Baghdad's College of Arts was reduced to ashes."

Looting and arson occurred at dozens of other libraries across Iraq. The extent of the problem is even now not fully clear. According to Spurr's report, "The whole principal library of the University of Basra [Iraq's second-largest city] is incinerated." The Central Public Library in Basra lost 100 percent of its holdings, according to a 2003 report to UNESCO by Jean-Marie Arnoult, the inspecteur general des bibliothèques of Paris.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions reported in May 2003 that the Central Library of the University of Mosul, with a collection approximately 900,000 books and serials, was looted. Arnoult estimates that because of a public call issued by Islamic clerics, many volumes have been returned and the library is now missing 30 percent of its collection. Arnoult notes that the library of the Mosul Museum was looted by "specialists."

In an interview with Inter Press Service published in February by the

online *Asia Times*, Fernando Baez, author of *The Cultural Destruction of Iraq* and *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books* (in Spanish), claimed that over 40,000 religious manuscripts were destroyed in a fire in Nasyria set by coalition forces during the confrontation with Muqtada Sadr's Mahdi Army in May 2004.

Baez estimates that the total losses of Iraqi books, periodicals, and manuscripts exceed 10 million.

The report emphasizes that the major problems in reconstructing Iraqi libraries stem from the destruction of infrastructure, as well as "the rapidly degrading situation, niggardly provision of funds, and locally oriented efforts."

A number of nations and private institutions have provided assistance to Iraq's libraries to mitigate the looting and arson of two years ago.

Institutions in the Czech Republic have trained National Library staff to facilitate in conservation methods. The First Lady of Qatar has pledged \$15 million in reconstruction aid. UNESCO and the World Health Organization have pledged funds. Online bibliographies and full-text databases such as OCLC and EBSCO are providing some of the most tangible help.

The Library of Congress also promised aid in 2004, but has yet to make good. This month the British Library presented the Iraqi National Library and Archive with microfilm and microfiche reproductions of manuscripts that were lost from the museum. USAID's Higher Education and Development Program for Iraq has sponsored several efforts by American universities. The report notes, though, that funding commitments for this program for the next three years are uncertain.

The commitment of the American and British governments remains slim, given the extent of the damage and the responsibility these governments bear for it. The dearth of such aid stands in sharp contrast to the support and participation of scholars and librarians in the United States and Britain for the rapid reconstruction of Iraqi library holdings and infrastructure.

This report makes it clear that the world has witnessed more than the theft of the lives, health and happiness of a people. It documents the destruction of a culture. Whatever the intention of the planners of the American invasion, in intellectual life as well as politics and economics it has served an objective purpose: to rob Iraq's people of a consciousness of their past. By allowing the destruction of Iraqi libraries, the United States has laid the intellectual groundwork for neo-colonial oppression.

**Notes:**

1. The United States and Britain are among the few nations that have not signed this agreement, the report notes.
2. Most of these reports, which give further details on the destruction of Iraqi libraries and manuscript collections, as well as the Jewish Archive discovered by the Americans in the headquarters of the Ba'athist Mukhabarat, can be found at the web site of the Middle East Librarians Association's Committee on Iraqi Libraries: <http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/mela/melairaq.html>

To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>