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Culture as a Last Resort

Baghdad's Quest for National Accord Thwarted Internally

Amin Alsaden

Iraq is at a critical juncture. A decade after the US-led invasion, the country faces intensifying power struggles, social divides, and recurring violence, and its population is weighed down by fear, distrust, and frustration. Aware of these formidable challenges, the political leadership has begun to turn toward culture, hoping that a reinvigoration of an integrative national identity can reunify Iraqi society and repair paralyzing ruptures among its constituents. Taking advantage of Baghdad's celebration as the 2013 Capital of Arab Culture, the government is on a campaign to upgrade the country's cultural infrastructure and to disseminate the leadership's message, which promotes pluralism and calls for acceptance and inclusiveness. These attempts are currently compromised, however, by inseparable local and regional crises, the leadership's implausible approach to culture, and the political system's inherent flaws. European policy makers should support Iraq's national reconciliation efforts, mostly through developing the country's human capital and encouraging independent cross-community cultural initiatives.

Celebrating Baghdad as the 2013 Capital of Arab Culture is a glaring paradox. Following the 2003 occupation of Iraq, looting, burning, and the destruction of various institutions associated with the previous regime – which had already been suffering from years of economic sanctions and international isolation – severely compromised the city's own cultural capital. Iraq's current troubles, however, clearly go beyond the deterioration of Baghdad's cultural institutions. Hopes generated with the fall of the previous regime and Iraq's first democratic experience have devolved into profound disappointment. As the country

became mired in turmoil, instigated by militant groups with sectarian agendas, Iraqi society has become increasingly conservative and radicalized, and the new leadership more divided and polarized. The Iraqi government, having failed to reach a satisfactory power-sharing mechanism, has become more isolated, thus resorting to authoritarian practices in an attempt to consolidate power and control Iraq's volatile situation. Conflicts – fueled by old vendettas, over access to national wealth, and motivated by regional interests and alignments – have translated into social and spatial divides, institutional failure to pro-

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vide security and basic services, and, in spite of Iraq's significant oil wealth, dismal economic conditions.

Today, the primary challenge facing Iraq, however, is the impending collapse of a national identity that has been painstakingly crafted since the establishment of the modern Iraqi state in the early 20th century – an identity that supersedes ethnic, religious, sectarian, tribal, and other types of primordial association. Thus, the country's burden not only involves the rebuilding of a government and its institutions, but the resuscitation of a popular Iraqi national identity.

Capital of Arab Culture

Celebrating Baghdad as the 2013 Capital of Arab Culture has alerted and encouraged the current Iraqi government to pay closer attention to the role that culture can play in forging a national identity, and has initiated a serious level of official engagement with cultural planning, as well as reflections over the meanings and manifestations of culture. Indeed, prior administrations of the post-2003 Iraq did not seem particularly interested in the potential of culture, perhaps because they had to deal with basic and pressing government-formation tasks, and possibly because local security concerns have overridden all other agendas since the fall of the previous regime.

And neither the current nor any of the post-2003 governments, in fact, had a role in the choice of Baghdad becoming the Capital of Arab Culture this year – the title has rather been inherited from the ousted regime of Saddam Hussein. Thus, the ostensible paradox presented by celebrating Baghdad this year – against the backdrop of an upsurge of violence – is demystified, as the city's selection actually took place several years ago.

The years of preparation that preceded the event witnessed the hardening of local political and social divisions, prompting the government to seek an integrative national culture that would bring Iraqis

The "Capitals of Arab Culture" program goes back to the mid-1990s, when UNESCO, as part of its World Decade for Cultural Development 1988–1997, picked Cairo and Tunis to be celebrated as Capitals of Arab Culture as it launched this regional program in the Arab world. When the UNESCO decade was over, ALECSO (the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization) approached UNESCO to extend the program of Capitals of Arab Culture so that more Arab cities would be included. Since 1998, when ALECSO took over coordination, several Arab cities have been selected, primarily on a "first come, first served" basis. Iraq applied in 2002 for Baghdad to host the event in 2006, yet since that year had already been allocated to Oman's capital, Muscat, Baghdad's turn was postponed till 2009. When sectarian violence exploded in 2006, Iraq submitted a request to ALECSO to postpone the event to 2013.

together and curb local violence. The leadership's ambitions were articulated explicitly by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Culture during this year's celebrations, and have been repeated and carried out by officials in various governmental organs. The predominant atmosphere of hatred, radicalization, division, and chaos that has threatened national bonds can only be challenged, Iraqi officials believe, with a unifying culture of plurality and inclusiveness. This unifying culture is not to be invented now, nor is it necessary to radically alter existing Iraqi culture – instead, the remnants of the country's inclusive and indiscriminate modern national identity are to be strengthened and revived.

In this sense, the current Iraqi government holds that addressing national culture to promote dialog and acceptance among the diverse groups that constitute Iraqi society (two-thirds of Iraqis are Shia Muslims, with Sunni Arabs and Kurds

making up about a fifth of the population each, in addition to various religious and ethnic minorities), is a crucial condition to establish a civil, stable, and democratic Iraq. Unless acceptance and inclusiveness become the core values of a national culture that is shared by the country's population, Iraqis will not be able to identify with the national community, and thus coexist and participate peacefully in the political life of the nation.

The shaping of a national culture would imply the formation of an identity to which all citizens can relate. Iraq's key intellectual and political elites hope that such a culture can contribute to lifting Iraq out of its crippling deadlock of internal confrontation. The government is therefore using this year's event as an opportunity to launch new cultural projects and rehabilitate existing institutions, while simultaneously disseminating a message of acceptance and plurality.

In this vein, the government is also urging Iraqi and Arab intellectuals to spread a culture of moderation and openness, to promote dialog and understanding, and to emphasize the value of a culture that accepts and celebrates differences. While aware of the perils of imposing an overarching national ideology or identity – which was how the Ba'ath legitimized its totalitarian rule – and proudly stressing newfound freedoms and the lack of censorship in the new Iraq, the government is pursuing the production of a unified yet pluralistic culture that would enable Iraqis to work together peacefully and productively, and that can resolve the country's security challenges without resorting to pure force.

Thus, the leadership – ultimately invested in addressing the values of Iraqi society – seems interested in taking advantage of two aspects of this year's event that converge with its cultural ambitions. Both aspects define the meaning of "culture" as celebrated by this year's program, and chart essential differences between manifestations of culture that may not be necessari-

ly compatible. The first aspect highlights and celebrates culture in its anthropological sense – the distinctive set of customs, beliefs, patterns of behavior, linguistic and ethnic characteristics, and the associated geographies, monuments, and artifacts that constitute Arab, and more specifically Iraqi, cultures. The second aspect alludes to a definition of culture that denotes what is referred to as "high culture" or the "cultural industries," namely intellectual, aesthetic, and artistic disciplines and their supporting institutions – a definition that embodies a civilizational claim, which suggests that engaging in cultural exchange can lead to cultivation and refinement. Both aspects serve the leadership's aspiration to promote a civil code of national conduct that would allow Iraq's various factions to come together and interact peacefully.

While celebrating culture in Baghdad this year is part of a regionally organized program, one that is meant to address audiences throughout the Arab world, Iraq's circumstances – particularly the recent deterioration in the security situation – meant that this year's event became targeted primarily toward Iraqis. Aside from media coverage and minimal Arab and international direct participation, the year's activities and projects benefit the local cultural scene, which is in urgent need of official attention.

Implementation

Given what Baghdad's title as the 2013 Capital of Arab Culture came to mean locally – an opportunity to reinvigorate national culture, engage in regional diplomacy, and prove that there is a sense of normalcy in Iraq in spite of ongoing turmoil – the government has been committed to making this year's event a success. Indeed, beyond an intellectual engagement with concepts and implications of culture, preparations involved a substantial financial investment, which demonstrates the government's dedication to its vision.

Expenditures went into two main trajectories. The first involved temporary activities distributed over the year, such as celebrations, symposia, publications, and other initiatives meant to boost cultural exchange. The second consisted of a series of long-term infrastructural projects meant to rehabilitate, upgrade, and add to existing cultural institutions and monuments. Both kinds of investment aim at developing the city's cultural capital – a goal at the heart of this year's program, as originally conceived by UNESCO and as subsequently carried out by ALECSO.

Besides the considerable sums spent on this year's celebrations and temporary events – the actual cost of which remains largely under wraps, but the magnitude of expenditure is evident from the events held to date, such as the lavish opening ceremony – it is the second category of investment that has received the lion's share of the government's attention. An impressive sum of more than 480 billion Iraqi dinars (approximately 400 million US dollars) has been allocated since 2011 for this year's restoration, rehabilitation, and building projects – an exceptional amount given the otherwise poor levels of cultural investment since 2003.

The list of projects undertaken is not extensive but represents a carefully compiled cross-selection of Iraq's rich cultural heritage, meant to convey the leadership's message that the core quality of Iraqi culture is its diversity – for instance, restoration efforts target ancient Mesopotamian, Sassanid, Abbasid, Ottoman, modern, and even Ba'athist monuments. In terms of scope, some of the projects undertaken this year involve the protection, maintenance, or rehabilitation of various historical sites and cultural institutions; the erection of new memorials around Baghdad; the purchasing of new equipment and needed machinery for various cultural departments; and the construction of brand new cultural institutions and facilities. Almost all of these projects were initiated in 2011,

and the majority of them were to be concluded by 2013.

However, by mid 2013, most of the projects had been delayed or had not even started (mostly due to concerns over corruption accusations), with only a few nearing completion. This begins to reveal some of the dark realities of working in the new Iraq. These delays – and the likely possibility that most of the projects will not be ready by the end of 2013 – are not the only challenge facing the Iraqi government's cultural vision, however. Rather, some of the projects envisaged for this year can be seen as inherently problematic and confirm that there are flaws in the official approach to culture.

Misplaced investment

It is indisputable that many of the preservation and rehabilitation efforts intended by the Ministry of Culture are very much needed. Most of Baghdad suffers from damage and neglect, and many of its landmarks and institutions require urgent protection and maintenance. These efforts, however, constitute a small percentage of the overall budget allocated for reinvigorating culture this year. A substantial portion of the budget is being invested into new projects that seem to have escaped scrutiny or internal critique, not to mention public debate or involvement – which not only contradicts the leadership's professed ideal of inclusiveness, but indicates continuities with the old Iraq, in terms of top-down, unilateral decision-making processes.

Perhaps no other project illustrates the contradictions inherent in contemporary cultural planning better than the Iraqi Opera House, currently underway. Officials at the Ministry of Culture consider the project to be the most important cultural initiative they are working on. Over a third of this year's budget has been allocated for the construction of this project and its associated complex, making it the single largest current cultural investment. Whether Baghdad needs such a facility

at this point in time is a question that is brushed off by officials in charge. Given that opera is not a familiar art form in Iraq and that Iraq is currently plainly incapable of putting an opera production together, the project will most likely be used for other musical performances. Upgrading existing concert halls or building a smaller facility could have served that purpose at a fraction of the cost. And while an opera house could certainly become a source of unifying national pride – which could ultimately serve the leadership’s current ambitions – and could engender activities that encourage inter-community collaboration, the scale and appropriateness of the project remain questionable, considering Iraq’s current tribulations.

Indeed, the rush to launch the government’s cultural agenda seems to have precluded thorough evaluation of the need for the planned projects and the plausibility of their execution at this point in time. Other examples raise further questions about whether qualified expertise was consulted before embarking on such massive cultural projects. About a fifth of this year’s budget is being channeled toward the creation of a large cultural district out of historic Baghdad in al-Rusafa, on the eastern bank of the Tigris. The cost is understandable, as there are numerous landmarks and institutions to be restored in this part of the city, and the urban setting itself requires serious refurbishment. But the government is ignoring the fact that the rest of Baghdad deserves equal attention. And if history’s recent lessons are to be learned, Iraq’s leadership should realize that centralization of certain activities may not be an intelligent strategy in a volatile context like that of contemporary Iraq – if cultural activities were concentrated in one district, and if the area were targeted by a series of attacks, then Baghdad’s cultural life would be drastically threatened. Distributing many of Baghdad’s cultural facilities throughout the city’s various districts would clearly be the safer and more sustainable approach.

Another project that further consumes a sizable percentage of the budget involves the construction of a “cultural city” for children in al-Zawraa’ Park – sums that could be channeled into existing cultural institutions, perhaps with an emphasis on children’s educational programs, rather than erecting an ambiguous facility that is difficult to operate convincingly. In general, such investments attest to the dated and highly centralized approach to cultural planning that favors large government-run projects over humble community-based facilities that can serve as many of Baghdad’s population as possible.

It is important to note that in addition to the budget the Ministry of Culture has allocated for this year’s events and projects, there are a series of other initiatives that the Ministry calls “investment projects,” which are part of its regular cultural planning. Some of these projects include the rehabilitation of key cultural and touristic facilities – for instance, upgrade works on Baghdad’s School of Music and Ballet, the National Library, the Iraqi Fashion House, and other libraries, studios, and auditoriums; the establishment of a cultural television station; adding new facilities to the National Theater, the House of Books and Documents, among others; and purchasing equipment for various institutions. Thus, most of these projects focus on improving existing facilities rather than planning new ones. Although these rehabilitation and maintenance efforts are extremely important, they further expose a rather conservative and narrow approach that relies on how institutional culture was defined and run in Ba’athist Iraq, without taking into account that the country’s exceptional circumstances should generate unique, decentralized, and need-driven solutions adapted to realities on the ground.

Flaws and challenges

There is no doubt that Iraq’s cultural infrastructure urgently requires renovation and maintenance, and that substantial efforts

are needed to update the country's cultural facilities. This is where the opportunity presented by celebrating Baghdad as a Capital of Arab Culture has served a purpose – notwithstanding how long it will take to get palpable results or how appropriate the new additions to the country's cultural repertoire happen to be.

As for the leadership's vision for Iraq and its intention to utilize this year's event as an opportunity to instill a new sense of inclusive and pluralistic national culture in the Iraqi public, the efficacy of the government's current approach can certainly be disputed. Iraq's political elites, while perhaps genuinely convinced of the principle of inclusion, have a fundamentally deficient understanding of how to effectively reach their national goals. This deficiency informs the way they conceive and implement the project, and, to a certain extent, this creates conditions for its failure. Two fundamental flaws in the government's vision need to be highlighted: the fact that the activities of the country's cultural elite are conflated with the national culture of the Iraqi public, and that Baghdad's culture is taken as an adequate proxy for all of Iraq's. Furthermore, the country's current difficulties – a number of which can be blamed on the poor performance of the government – as well as the political system's structural flaws are also to blame for the potential futility of current cultural efforts.

Indeed a very basic conceptual confusion seems to dominate the government's current vision. The leadership does not seem to realize that it is one thing to upgrade the physical infrastructure of cultural facilities, and another to engender a national identity and the associated popular values or codes of behavior. Indeed, cultural institutions such as museums, theaters, and public libraries can host and encourage intellectual and artistic exchanges, but the audience for these institutions is produced elsewhere, and this audience already arrives with a set of values and attitudes that determine cultural production and reception. To change Iraq's national culture involves

a much more comprehensive set of institutions, actors, and activities. Thus, the Iraqi government's vision is currently too limited in its linearity, stemming from the top leadership and moving in the singular direction of the Ministry of Culture and its agencies.

For the vision to succeed at producing results across the general population, the authorities' approach would have to be much more holistic, encompassing the responsibilities of state departments concerned with education, research, communication, and youth, among others. The current approach means privileging a rather small number of cultural elites, whose influence is limited to a select and highly educated audience, whereas the majority of Iraq's population – those who need to benefit from the sort of national culture the Iraqi government wishes to engender – remain excluded and are relegated to sub-state influences, many of which are detrimental to national unity.

The other conceptual, or perhaps administrative, shortcoming of the current approach to culture involves the excessive focus on Baghdad, treating the capital as though it could stand for the entire country. This vision may well be echoed by many Iraqis who do not reside in Baghdad, but who identify with the city as the true representative of the nation. Baghdad is, after all, not only Iraq's most developed and populous city, but also a microcosm of Iraq's diverse population and the historical locus of the nation's most educated and influential elites. Baghdad was also the capital of a vast Islamic empire that is inseparable from the foundations of the contemporary Arab world as well as an important center of Arab modernity in the 20th century. But all this should not blind the government to the fact that more than three-quarters of Iraq's population live outside the capital, and that a successful revision of national culture cannot be achieved with a focus on Baghdad only – a bias that characterizes the activities of the Ministry of Culture well beyond this year's celebrations.

The government's ambition of engendering a unifying national culture is undermined not only by administrative and procedural flaws, however, but by the staggering challenges of Iraq's current circumstances. One must ask what an engagement with culture means in a context where people's basic needs are not being met – where electricity and basic comforts are lacking, for instance. One must ask what it means in a city that remains physically divided, where many neighborhoods are besieged by a suffocating network of ubiquitous concrete barriers, and where movement is restricted by numerous checkpoints, often bringing mobility to a standstill. In fact, security measures today are so omnipresent that it is rare to be in a public place in Baghdad without soldiers and their varied menacing machinery in the immediate vicinity. Despite these measures, however, attacks are a regular occurrence and take an enormous toll on lives, property, and the mental well-being of the population. Dire poverty, inflation, unemployment, and a worsening housing crisis further compromise the public's capacity to engage in intellectual and artistic projects. Against these stark realities, this year's event inevitably appears detached from reality, and the blue signs bearing its logo, which have been dutifully distributed throughout Baghdad, look almost frivolous when found in some of the city's dilapidated, poor, and confined neighborhoods.

The political practices of the elites also cast serious doubts over the meaning and effectiveness of the leadership's vision. To a large extent, these practices reflect a limited and skewed understanding of the propagated ideal of inclusivity – and at times even contradict it. They are also directly generative of many of the institutional challenges that jeopardize its implementation. For instance, the dominant political strategy that seeks to establish inclusion and pluralism through a division of power and government responsibilities by ethnicity or sect, or by partisan allegiance, has created a situation in which

positions are increasingly held by unqualified individuals, simply because they are connected to a certain politician or party, creating a network of incompetence that even reform-minded officials cannot penetrate. These complex and overlapping networks – not to mention the resulting suffocating bureaucracy that impedes the government's own initiatives – are now the prime reason behind the obstruction of critical decisions, unnecessary delays paralyzing the progress of key initiatives in the country, and the creation of a system of corruption that is difficult to monitor and control. This is attested to by the massive sums reportedly spent by the government on various projects without definitive outcomes. Within this context, it is not a surprise to discover that most of this year's Arab Capital of Culture projects are behind schedule, and that many of Iraq's significant historical monuments and cultural institutions continue to deteriorate. Thus the post-2003 division of power – based on demographic statistics rather than a negotiated consensus – has neither produced a climate conducive to positive developments, nor a unified vision for the future of the country. Indeed, building an Iraqi cultural identity that celebrates diversity – and that encourages citizens to connect across sectarian and ethnic borders and resolve conflicts through dialogue – cannot succeed if the political system itself sets an example to the contrary. Rather, the leadership's cultural vision is liable to become a thin façade merely masking the system's troubles.

Conclusion and recommendations

Perhaps the greatest criticism that can be leveled against the government's cultural efforts is that, while the majority of the expenditure has been channeled toward tangible results, what needs to be targeted is, paradoxically, the opposite: investment into human capital, the results of which may not be immediately visible, but that will ultimately yield a substantial outcome.

To focus on the education of a generation of Iraqi citizens is without doubt more important than facilitating access to a theater or publishing a number of books – without the former, the latter cannot be engaged with in the first place. What seems to be missing in the new Iraq is a plausible comprehensive vision that attempts to engender a population capable of embracing a reinvigorated Iraqi national culture. Regardless of the current trajectory and intentions, however, any investment made into preserving and upgrading Iraq’s cultural heritage is a positive thing in and by itself, and an effort that should be encouraged. Therefore, Europeans should assist the Iraqi government toward achieving its goals by:

- ▶ supporting international cultural practitioners from countries with a particularly relevant ethnic or religious diversity to share expertise with Iraqis on how to draw up inclusive and egalitarian policies that strengthen belonging to the nation without trampling individual associations or privileging one particular group over others;
- ▶ organizing inclusive and creative projects – through independent agencies – that develop cross-community dialogue and collaboration, focusing on youth and grassroots initiatives that relate to current local issues and needs;
- ▶ providing institutional cultural expertise to guide Iraqis on how to better plan, manage, and sustain cultural activities and institutions. Iraq urgently needs experts to train personnel involved in cultural affairs and to work closely with the Iraqi government in assessing and improving its cultural institutions’ performance;
- ▶ developing citizenship education at multiple levels. This should take place by training Iraqi youth abroad and providing the necessary exposure through exchange programs, for instance, where Iraqis can become familiar with inclusive civil practices and egalitarian policies that celebrate differences and foster dia-

logue. Simultaneously, advice should be provided to various ministries on how to develop the local educational systems to incorporate issues of national identity, particularly within the primary and secondary school curriculums;

- ▶ assisting the Iraqi leadership in integrating the private sector and non-governmental entities in its campaign in order to get the largest possible segment of society to share – and be invested in – the government’s cultural vision. This can be achieved by providing direct assistance to local cultural and educational entrepreneurs, aiding private cultural investment, and encouraging independent foundations to open branches in Iraq and interact with local talent.

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