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# Cultural heritage predation in Iraq

## The sectarian appropriation of Iraq's past

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# Summary

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- Heritage predation – the destructive exploitation of cultural resources for political purposes – has become a prominent feature of Iraq’s post-2003 political landscape. The country’s elites have appropriated cultural heritage in the service of various undesirable agendas, which range from commercialization of cultural sites to the propagation of sectarian and exclusionary political and religious narratives. Large sections of Iraq’s cultural heritage are now increasingly captured for private gain, diminishing its role as a public good accessible to all Iraqis.
  - A key factor behind these developments has been the political power-sharing system of *muhasasa*, which is premised on sectarian divisions and quotas. This has encouraged sectarian elites to instrumentalize and distort Iraq’s shared histories and identities as a means of sowing cultural divisions and establishing the primacy of one agenda over another. It has also both fundamentally damaged the country’s cultural life and left a society even further divided by sectarian politics.
  - The effects are manifest in the rewriting of history by the country’s post-2003 sectarian elites, and in the restructuring of entire cultural and religious sites, cities and towns by subnational institutions captured by partisan interests. Examples include the culturally insensitive renovation and ‘custodianship’ of the historically important city of Samarra, and similar works at the ancient Shrine of Prophet Ezekiel in the province of Babil.
  - Such problems are amplified by the fact that cultural heritage has become an indispensable economic and political resource, and thus the subject of competition between political and religious groups. Income and other resources derived from cultural heritage accrue not to the state but to sub-state institutions, yet often such bodies cannot be trusted to provide responsible, non-partisan stewardship of what should be shared national assets. The political economy of Iraq’s cultural heritage is thus increasingly tied to subnational institutions that actively promote ethno-nationalism, sectarianism and religious objectives.
  - Cultural continuity and sustainability are also being damaged by the lack of enforcement of national laws on heritage protection, as well as by weak coordination and communication between political and religious groups.
  - A national and international discussion is needed to examine the damaging impacts of *muhasasa* and the sectarian allocation of cultural resources. Iraq’s Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities should take centre stage in these

debates alongside civil society organizations and Iraqi universities. Participants will need to be supported and strengthened by the Iraqi government and international organizations.

- An ethics-based framework for the management of Iraq's cultural heritage is urgently required. International organizations can play a key role in this regard, although domestic buy-in and good faith are equally important. As such, this paper outlines a series of recommendations for countering the impact on Iraq's cultural heritage of sectarianism and the post-2003 degradation of the state. Those recommendations are respectively aimed at: (1) Iraqi government and heritage institutions; (2) the country's religious endowments; and (3) international donor and research communities.

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# 01

# Introduction

**Iraq's cultural heritage, which includes historical sites and artefacts as well as intangible traditions, has been degraded by conflict and sectarianism since 2003. At the same time, competitive exploitation of cultural assets by political elites presents an obstacle to more effective heritage preservation.**

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Iraq's post-2003 politics continues to alter the country's cultural landscape. *Muhasasa* – the sectarian quota arrangement pursued by US occupation forces and their partners for the management of the country's politics, power and revenues – has resulted in the division and exploitation of Iraq's cultural heritage. The management of cultural heritage has shifted in large part from the central state authorities to new post-2003 institutions. Large swathes of the country's heritage are now controlled by competing ethno-nationalist, religious and political actors. Exploitation of this rich cultural heritage by political and religious groups has been fundamentally detrimental to the social and cultural fabric of Iraq, reflecting profound failings on the part of both the political system and international partners. The mechanisms, modalities and impacts of cultural heritage exploitation in Iraq are the subject of this paper.

Cultural heritage does not exist in a void, nor does it matter to the past only. In Iraq, it has become integral to the present-day operation of politics, particularly at the highest echelons of power. This paper develops a policy-relevant framework for understanding cultural heritage as a significant component of politics in Iraq today, and for setting parameters to improve heritage management in the future. For this purpose, the concept of 'heritage predation' – defined as the destructive exploitation of cultural resources for political purposes – is introduced here and its repercussions assessed.

Iraq is privileged to possess more than 15,000 archaeological sites and many more heritage and religious buildings, monuments and historic centres, as well as nationally significant archives, manuscripts, cultural artefacts, paintings and art. Yet it is suffering from cultural loss at unprecedented rates. 'Intangible heritage' – an embodiment of people's identities and Iraq's rich history and shared cultures – is being eroded at a similar pace. This paper contends that

these losses, and the appropriation of Iraq's cultural heritage by political elites, are not only the outcome of dictatorship and conflict, but also the result of the post-2003, elite-based sectarian power-sharing system, which in large part is premised on the politicization and fracturing of the country's diverse identities and culture.

Decades of neglect, sanctions and conflict – including factors such as the US occupation and the rise of Islamic State (ISIS) – have taken a heavy toll on Iraq's cultural heritage. This much is well known. However, much less attention has been paid to the ways in which cultural resources have been divided between religious and political elites aiming to entrench their presence and rule. Cultural heritage is in fact a primary arena of state contestation; it can therefore illuminate much about a country's internal dynamics. Specifically, the concept of heritage predation – which illuminates how key centres of political and religious power are reshaping Iraq's cultural heritage – provides an entry point into discussions about the country's future.

Crucially, the manipulation of Iraq's cultural heritage is designed not only to legitimize political and religious groups but ultimately to reshape Iraq itself in line with the priorities of post-2003 religious and ethno-nationalist interests. Case studies of heritage predation abound in Iraq. Examples in this paper – from Babil, Baghdad, Erbil, Mosul and Samarra, among many others – show how cultural heritage has been recrafted to serve the objectives of sectarian actors seeking to shape society for their own ends.

What could and should be a common resource for developing society-wide amicable relations is instead subject to systematic and predatory exploitation, leading to the enrichment and empowerment of narrow interest groups and the alienation of many citizens from Iraq's shared cultures and communities. The fragmentation of cultural heritage reflects the country's own political fractures. These include the creation of autonomous heritage-related institutions, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and the rise of religious endowments that promote subnational ethnic and religious interests. As a result, narratives of exclusion and the promotion of religious and cultural differences have become central to how politics is conducted, a key characteristic of heritage predation. Communities and society at large have become increasingly apprehensive about the ways in which cultural and religious heritage, and more broadly narratives about the past, have been instrumentalized by political elites.

Prior to 2003, the central state managed and controlled Iraq's cultural heritage. While all of Iraq's cultural property and cultural heritage is in theory still the property of the state, the combination of multiple custodians, competing legal frameworks and rival interests complicates prospects for nation-building, the safeguarding of cultural resources and the development of a sustainable post-oil economy. Even in the context of the ongoing cultural emergency in Iraq – arising from the massive damage inflicted since 2003 – the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities and other central state institutions do not have sufficient financial support to deliver basic services such as security at major archaeological sites, emergency conservation, documentation and cultural safeguarding.

Iraq is forced instead to rely on foreign organizations and funders, whose interests are often circumscribed and short-term, and are not always aligned to Iraq's own needs. In many cases, these same US and European institutions have bypassed Iraqi laws and worked with Iraqi subnational actors without state approval or knowledge. This paper offers examples of how cultural heritage is also a national sovereignty issue. In many cases – and particularly in the KRI – US and European heritage programmes, including excavations and cultural rehabilitation projects, have normalized Iraq's fragmentation by ignoring and excluding domestic state institutions and legal frameworks. Such interventions are often another form of exploitation. For example, international heritage institutions have benefited from the allocation of hundreds of millions of dollars since the destruction wrought by ISIS from 2014 onwards, but outputs on the ground have generally not reflected this investment.

## **Heritage predation involves intentional historical erasure with a view to ensuring that cultural heritage is remade in accordance with political interests.**

Significantly, heritage predation – whether in the KRI or the rest of the country – is tied to the construction of new histories. Saddam Hussein pursued major state-funded projects aimed at rewriting Iraq's history,<sup>1</sup> with a view to promoting his own vision for the country. Similarly, the post-2003 elites – namely Kurdish and Shia political groups – have engaged in expansive rewritings of history, using such projects to justify their own political actions and control of the Iraqi state.

Another dimension of the problem can be seen in the rapid growth of political party-controlled universities, at the expense of intellectual and academic independence.<sup>2</sup> In an increasing number of cases, master's and PhD students (particularly in social sciences and humanities) are being asked to revise their theses in line with political diktats.<sup>3</sup> In the field of cultural heritage specifically, political interference has ranged from cultural appropriation and historical fabrication to the partial or complete erasure and restructuring of cultural and religious sites. Identities have similarly been exploited by political elites within the *muhāsasa* political system, encouraging separatist state-building projects that have destabilized the country.

Interventions to manipulate cultural heritage generally involve more than one of the above elements and include changes to physical as well as intangible cultural heritage. Whether through state-sanctioned actions, legal mechanisms, or the sectarian and religious political mobilization of public support, heritage

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1 Davis, E. (2005), 'History matters: Past as prologue in building democracy in Iraq', *Orbis*, 49(2), pp. 229–44, <https://www.researchwithrutgers.com/en/publications/history-matters-past-as-prologue-in-building-democracy-in-iraq>.

2 See further Chomani, K. (2021), 'Why Are Iraqi Kurds Fleeing to Europe?', *New/Lines Magazine*, 22 November 2021, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/why-are-iraqi-kurds-fleeing-to-europe>.

3 See further Khoshnaw, S. (2001), 'Christian Anger Over a Thesis at the University of Mosul. Education Committee in Parliament Intervenes. Supervisor Responds That the Thesis Does Not Offend Religion' [Arabic], Rudaw, <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/310120213>; see also Shafaq News (2021), 'Al-Sulaymaniyah University bans using "North Iraq" in academic theses', 20 November 2021, <https://www.shafaq.com/en/Kurdistan/Al-Sulaymaniyah-University-bans-using-North-Iraq-in-academic-theses>.



predation involves intentional historical erasure with a view to ensuring that cultural heritage is remade in accordance with political interests.

Reversing this transformation of Iraq's public cultural and religious assets – as well as addressing the widespread neglect of and lack of government support for institutions such as the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities and the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) – should be a priority for policymakers and cultural/archaeological institutions. So too should addressing the lack of official support for civil society, educational and other concerned institutions.

Unless new strategies are devised and delivered, and the non-partisan preservation of cultural heritage is elevated to the highest levels of domestic and international policymaking, Iraq's current political trajectory will lead to a further degradation of cultural resources and social harmony. This paper aims to serve as a wake-up call not only to those concerned with cultural heritage *per se*, but also to national and international institutions, donors, governments and other key actors concerned with the wider stability and future of Iraq and the Middle East.

#### **Box 1. Heritage predation in Iraq – a first-hand account**

*The following is a first-hand account of the experiences of one of the co-authors, and his observations of the destruction of cultural heritage, during on-the-ground research in Iraq.*

The drive from Baghdad to Samarra, in the province of Salahadeen, took less than two hours. After passing several checkpoints on the highway – the last two of which were managed by the Sadrist Movement's Peace Brigades, or Saraya al-Salam, part of the Popular Mobilization Forces – we entered the city. Samarra was briefly the capital of the Abbasid Empire in the ninth century. It contains the Great Mosque and its iconic spiral minaret, which are part of Samarra Archaeological City, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.<sup>4</sup>

Samarra is also home to Al-Askari Mosque, which contains the tombs of the Shia imams Ali Al-Hadi and Hasan Al-Askari; the site was attacked by Al-Qaeda in 2006 and 2007, and its partial destruction led to widescale sectarian conflict. The mosque has been rebuilt in recent years by the Shia Endowment, a semi-state institution responsible for Shia religious cultural property. Today, the shrine and adjoining historical mosques and cultural sites are secured within an enclosure covering much of central Samarra. As we walked on foot past one of the security checkpoints, we entered the main street leading to the mosque. The shops, closed for that day, indicated that the formerly bustling city of Samarra was now increasingly oriented to serving religious tourism from outside the province.

Although Al-Askari is one of Iraq's most opulent mosques, the area surrounding it seemed neglected. As part of the mosque's expansion, the historically significant built environment of central Samarra (which the new security enclosure encompassed)

<sup>4</sup> Northedge, A. (2008), *The Historical Topography of Samarra*, London: British Institute for the Study of Iraq, <http://www.bisi.ac.uk/content/samarra-studies-publication-series>; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (undated), 'Samarra Archaeological City', <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/276>.

was gradually being transformed by the Shia Endowment. Tens of Ottoman-era buildings and other heritage sites had been being demolished to make way for the mosque's expansion, and for the development of a religious tourism infrastructure which, for reasons of instability and generalized insecurity in the province, had only started to take shape in recent years.

The 'renovation' of the area also displaced tens of thousands of Sunni families. This rendered the cultural life of Samarra – which now revolved largely around Al-Askari – less diverse.<sup>5</sup> This transformation can also in part be interpreted as a consequence of the 2006–07 Al-Qaeda bombings and subsequent assaults by ISIS in 2014: security responsibilities were transferred to Saraya al-Salam, demonstrating the weakness of Iraq's central state security apparatus. Indeed, one of the key factors in Saraya al-Salam's intervention was the fact that in the city of Tikrit, in the same province, ISIS loyalists had massacred more than 1,900 Shia air force cadets at Camp Speicher in June 2014.<sup>6</sup> But the Saraya al-Salam-dominated security response to such events also prompted demographic change in Samarra, alongside the above-mentioned transformation of the city's cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup> For example, a Sunni Endowment-managed mosque, opposite Al-Askari, was shuttered and claimed by the Shia Endowment as its own.<sup>8</sup>

Much to the consternation of the Sunni majority population, Samarra's historic city centre – including state assets belonging to the central and provincial authorities – was thus being folded into the control and possession of the Shia Endowment. The endowment's usurpation of the city's cultural and religious resources, and its direction of infrastructure works within the enclosure, fundamentally changed the character of one of Iraq's most important cities. (Similar developments have also occurred in many other parts of the country.)

While the repercussions for local society have not yet been studied, it was clear from our conversations in the area that people's relationships to the Shia shrine were being shaped by narratives around the city's troubled past. Indeed, intercommunal relations once characterized by amicability and mutual respect had turned into apprehension and suspicion, as stated by a community representative:

*Samarra is a changed city. Many things are different now since the bombings [of Al-Askari Mosque]. We can't speak publicly about what is going on here, we feel afraid. The city is being deliberately transformed and we have no say – we are excluded. I am speaking on behalf of the city's Sunni communities. Relations between the Shia religious authorities here and the Sunni communities are very weak and defined by suspicion.<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> *Alqabas* (2006), '5,000 families displaced since Samarra bombing', 30 March 2006, <https://alqabas.com/article/174645>; *Alquds* (2016), 'Following in the footsteps of Diyala... Samarra is spreading common and the "Popular Mobilisation" changes the city's demographics', 30 December 2016, <https://www.alquds.co.uk/%EF%B%BF%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%89-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D8%AA%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7>.

<sup>6</sup> See further Üngör, U. Ü. (2019), 'Eurocentrism in Research on Mass Violence', in Brolsma, M., de Bruin, R. and Lok, M. (eds) (2019), *Eurocentrism in European History and Memory*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

<sup>7</sup> *Alquds* (2016), 'Following in the footsteps of Diyala...'

<sup>8</sup> *Al Ssaa* (2021), 'For refusing to include the great mosque on the threshold, Sunni waqf director in Samarra referred for investigation', 10 May 2021, <https://alssaa.com/post/show/3488>.

<sup>9</sup> Author interview with a leading figure of society in Samarra, Iraq, 27 June 2021.

The social discord to which this community representative was alluding was exacerbated by accusations that local Sunni communities and security forces had themselves either directly or implicitly been responsible for the 2006 and 2007 attacks, and were therefore responsible for the destruction of the site. These suspicions and insinuations continue to poison intercommunal relations within Samarra.

The outcome of all the above turmoil was that Sunni communities couldn't help but feel that Al-Askari Mosque now represented less a shared Iraqi site than one appropriated to serve the interests of the Shia Endowment, and instrumentalized to alter Samarra itself.

## **Box 2. Who is responsible for protecting Iraq's cultural heritage?**

The Iraqi state has both the right and duty under national and international law to protect its cultural property. Indeed, a country's archaeologically and historically significant physical remains are state assets and are defined in international law as its cultural property, which all state parties have a duty to protect, in peacetime and in conflict.<sup>10</sup>

On paper, certain protections of heritage are enshrined into law in Iraq. The country ratified the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, as well as the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. The Iraqi government therefore has a duty to care for the country's cultural heritage even in a situation of conflict.<sup>11</sup>

Under Iraq's Antiquities and Heritage Law (No. 55, 2002), state responsibility for heritage primarily rests with the SBAH, which is a sub-directorate within the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities.<sup>12</sup> The SBAH is headquartered at the Iraq Museum complex in central Baghdad, as well as having offices and overseeing provincial museums in every governorate except the KRI. The board's responsibilities include maintaining a central database of over 15,000 heritage sites; overseeing both Iraqi and international archaeological excavations; and site management, protection and conservation. The SBAH is also charged with keeping central inventories of heritage objects, from archaeological finds to manuscripts and ethnographic artefacts; storing those objects securely and in good condition; and undertaking research and public education, particularly through its museums. A further element of its remit is the recovery of looted and stolen heritage artefacts, both inside the country and internationally. Directorates within the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities

<sup>10</sup> Posner, E. A. (2007), 'The International Protection of Cultural Property: Some Skeptical Observations', *Chicago Journal of International Law*, 8(1), pp. 213–32, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cjil/vol8/iss1/12>.

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO (undated), 'Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage', <https://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext>.

<sup>12</sup> Arabic and English versions of the law are accessible via UNESCO (undated), 'List of National Cultural Heritage Laws', <https://en.unesco.org/cultnatlaws/list>.

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are responsible for intangible heritage, such as music, arts, and the culture of the past 200 years. Separate laws have been passed by the Kurdish parliament regarding cultural heritage in the KRI, including the Law on Management and Protection of Archaeology and Heritage in the Kurdistan Region.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Kurdistan Parliament – Iraq (2021), 'Parliament passes Law on Management and Protection of Archaeology and Heritage in Kurdistan Region', 30 April 2021, <https://www.parliament.krd/english/parliament-activities/latest-news/posts/2021/april/parliament-passes-law-on-management-and-protection-of-archeology-and-heritage-in-kurdistan-region>.

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# 02 Historical context – conflict and destabilization

**Cultural heritage promotion and protection were national priorities, albeit instrumentalized for political aims, in the early years of Saddam Hussein’s rule. Subsequently, however, economic sanctions and post-conflict instability have prompted widespread looting of antiquities and a breakdown in state capacity to manage cultural assets.**

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From the founding of the Iraqi state up to 2003, cultural heritage was a constitutive feature of national state policy. Focused mostly on Iraq’s pre-Ottoman past, the state prioritized cultural heritage as a symbol of nationhood, and heavily funded and supported the heritage and arts sectors. However, the evolving manifestations of the Iraqi state over time – as a mandate, a monarchy, a republic, a dictatorship and a semi-functional democracy – have pushed and pulled the politicization of national heritage in different directions.<sup>14</sup>

While the British Mandate authorities largely excluded Iraqis from the creation and consumption of knowledge about the new nation’s ancient past, the Ba’athist state co-opted pre-Ottoman heritage to tell a triumphalist story of national unity

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<sup>14</sup> See also Gershon Lewental, D. (2014), ‘Saddam’s Qadisiyyah’: Religion and History in the Service of State Ideology in Ba’thi Iraq’, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 50(6), pp. 891–910, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00263206.2013.870899>.

that downplayed diverse identities in favour of top-down imperial history.<sup>15</sup> Because the past was instrumentalized for the purposes of nation-building, the archaeology and antiquities sectors in the 1970s and 1980s enjoyed unprecedented support from the state. Most famously, the former city of Babylon was a particular focus of Saddam Hussein's attention, and the site of a problematic archaeological restoration.<sup>16</sup> The then president of Iraq attempted to immortalize himself through archaeology, and exploited cultural heritage and the arts as part of his governing apparatus. In this case, the process illustrated how the use of heritage is inherently bound up with the self-fashioning of the state.

In the instability and uprisings that followed the 1991 Gulf War, provincial museums in southern Iraq were looted by criminals and organized gangs, and thousands of artefacts flooded the international antiquities markets.<sup>17</sup> International sanctions from the early 1990s to 2003 devastated Iraq's cultural heritage, with state funding for its protection, conservation and promotion plummeting to unprecedented lows. Central government heritage institutions were defunded, while heritage experts who could no longer support themselves left the service or fled the country. Others attempted to hold the service together, focusing on the essentials of preventing looting at remote archaeological sites even while a handful of influential Ba'athist figures were widely known to be running lucrative smuggling operations.

As international sanctions strangled Iraq's economy, destitution gave rise to the looting of major archaeological sites, with large numbers of artefacts again coming on to international markets (as had been the case in 1991).<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the establishment of the KRI in northern Iraq in 1991 led to the creation of parallel governance structures, including those with responsibility for archaeology and heritage. Since then, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has pursued the development of an independence-oriented Kurdish identity and related institutions, and has worked to incorporate cultural heritage within an ethno-nationalist political agenda. The region has also hosted increasing numbers of international archaeological projects, with the KRG even issuing its own excavation licences in an attempt to legitimize its control of newly secured territory. The process has continued to this day, including in so-called 'disputed territories' such as the provinces of Diyala, Kirkuk and Nineveh.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Bernhardsson, M. (2015), *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq*, Austin: University of Texas Press; Al-Gailani-Werr, L. (2014), 'Archaeology and politics in Iraq', in Brown, B. A. and Feldman, M. A. (eds) (2012), *Critical Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Art*, Boston and Berlin: De Gruyter; Ashmolean Museum (2020–21), 'Owning the Past: from Mesopotamia to Iraq – ملكية العراق إلى العراق – من بلاد الرافدين إلى العراق – ملكية', <https://www.ashmolean.org/event/owning-the-past>; Baram, A. (1983), 'Mesopotamian identity in Ba'thi Iraq', *Middle Eastern Studies*, 19(4), pp. 426–55, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00263208308700561?journalCode=fmes20>.

<sup>16</sup> Schwartz, A. E. (1990), 'Saddam Hussein's Babylon', *Washington Post*, 4 April 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/04/04/saddam-husseins-babylon/dbc684ee-3d14-493c-b016-35a6f10e2bae>.

<sup>17</sup> Baker, H. D. et al. (1992–96), *Lost Heritage: Antiquities Stolen from Iraq's Regional Museums*, Fascicles 1–3, Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, <http://oi-archive.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/lh.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Brodie, N. J. (2006), 'Iraq 1990–2004 and the London antiquities market', in Brodie, N. J., Kersel, M. M., Luke, C. and Walker Tubb, K. (eds), *Archaeology, Cultural Heritage and the Antiquities Trade*, Gainesville: The University Press of Florida.

<sup>19</sup> Eichberg, K. (2018), 'Archaeology, Nationalism, and the State: A Case-Study on the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq', bachelor's award thesis, Leiden: University of Leiden Student Repository, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/66957>.

Further degradation of Iraq's civil society and educated classes was a major outcome of sanctions, which also led to the collapse of the university system. International isolation resulted in a dramatic deskilling of academics and heritage professionals. This 'brain drain' meant that few were left to teach or be taught; where teaching continued, it was with meagre and outdated resources unchanged since the 1980s. On the international scene, in contrast, the forced break from excavation drove a huge increase in the publication of fieldwork results, and fostered the development of new theories, methodologies, technologies, and even whole fields such as cultural heritage studies – to which Iraqis had no access. The gap between Iraqi and international knowledge about the country's past has still not closed, and has commonly been a contributing factor in the exploitation of Iraq and its cultural heritage. Examples of such damage are too many to list, though all are connected to and have been exacerbated by the destabilization of Iraq since the 1990s. As a repository of world knowledge, Iraq's past and cultural heritage continues to be the target for predation, a situation highlighted by the US-based Museum of the Bible's acquisition of more than 12,000 cultural artefacts from Iraq and Egypt that were later discovered to have been removed from those countries illegally, including the Gilgamesh 'Dream Tablet'.<sup>20</sup>

## **The Iraq National Archive and Library's Jewish Archive – a collection of artefacts, manuscripts and books from Iraq's Jewish communities – was removed to the US, supposedly for conservation. It has not yet been returned.**

Cultural heritage was the subject of renewed attack in 2003 – most visibly symbolized by the pillaging of the Iraq Museum and other major cultural institutions in the spring of that year.<sup>21</sup> The breakdown of authority and state institutions precipitated by the US occupation led to the systematic looting of archaeological sites in the south of the country. Tens of thousands of Iraqi cultural objects flooded international antiquities markets and private collections, despite attempts to rapidly strengthen international law in this area.<sup>22</sup> Paintings, manuscripts and other nationally significant cultural objects encapsulating the history of Iraq were also stolen.<sup>23</sup> Most prominently, the Iraq National Archive and Library's Jewish Archive – a collection of artefacts, manuscripts and books from Iraq's Jewish communities – was removed to the US, supposedly for conservation. It has not yet been returned.<sup>24</sup> Major archaeological sites, including Babylon,

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<sup>20</sup> Flood, A. (2021), 'Ancient Gilgamesh tablet seized from Hobby Lobby by US authorities', *Guardian*, 28 July 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jul/28/ancient-gilgamesh-tablet-seized-from-hobby-lobby-by-us-authorities>; Flood, A. (2021), 'Gilgamesh Dream Tablet to be formally handed back to Iraq', *Guardian*, 21 September 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/21/gilgamesh-dream-tablet-to-be-formally-handed-back-to-iraq>.

<sup>21</sup> Polk, M. and Schuster, A. M. H. (eds) (2005), *The Looting of the Iraq Museum, Baghdad: The Lost Legacy of Ancient Mesopotamia*, London: Abrams.

<sup>22</sup> Stone, P. and Bajjalay, J. F. (eds) (2008), *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Iraq*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press.

<sup>23</sup> Asia Society (2010), 'The Sad State of Iraq's Modern Art Collection', *Asia Blog*, 13 July 2010, <https://asiasociety.org/blog/asia/sad-state-iraqs-modern-art-collection>.

<sup>24</sup> Iraqi Jewish Archive (undated), 'Preserving the Iraqi Jewish Archive', <https://ijarchive.org>.

Hatra, Samarra and Ur, were occupied by US forces and other foreign armies, which often inflicted heavy damage.<sup>25</sup> Deliberate destruction of cultural heritage was also pursued by post-2003 political parties under the banner of de-Ba'athification, even if the removal of statues and monuments was unrelated to the Ba'ath Party.

Post-2003, armed attacks on icons of Iraqi cultural heritage have remained a common feature of the political and security landscape. Attacks on religious groups and symbols, such as the Our Lady of Salvation Church massacre in 2010, prompted large sections of Iraq's Christian communities to flee the country, a response supported by some Christian leaders.<sup>26</sup> From 2014, ISIS carried out attacks on places of worship, cemeteries and other representations of Iraqi communities. These actions were designed not only to destabilize the country but also to normalize inter-community violence and attacks against cultural, religious and ethnic groups. By so doing, ISIS was of course seeking to reshape Iraq in line with the organization's fundamentalist agenda.

Generalized violence has damaged and traumatized Iraqi society, with a particularly heavy impact on non-dominant or minority cultural, religious and ethnic groups. For example, the Mandaean and Baha'i communities have been uprooted because of the absence of security over the past two decades or so. Public displays of the Baha'i faith – a relatively new offshoot of Shia Islam – have disappeared as a result of continued threats, due to accusations by some armed and religious groups that its adherents are Shia imposters, heretics and servants of foreign interests.<sup>27</sup> The historically significant Baha'i lodge in Sheikh Bashar, on the Karkh side of Baghdad, which was listed as a heritage building by SBAH, was demolished in 2013 by the Shia Endowment and a new Shia mosque built on the site.<sup>28</sup>

A Baha'i activist in Baghdad, who works to raise awareness of the community's history and cultural past, speaks of the effects of targeted and generalized violence since 2003:

Iraq is our country, we are Iraqis and we are from here. Our community has been attacked constantly and we are not afforded protection. Extremist Shia religious groups think of us as heretics. Many of us have been driven underground, and most of us have left the country. Our families are now scattered between different countries. We are looked at through our faith, not as Iraqi citizens.<sup>29</sup>

In its extreme form, the erasure of cultural heritage has led to the levelling of entire archaeological, religious and cultural sites. Indeed, ISIS's destruction of cultural heritage was integral to its politics, as the group sought to erase local identities and steer those provinces it controlled into a political direction conducive to its own interests. In effect, its ideology and actions sought to

<sup>25</sup> Curtis, J. (2011), 'The present condition of Babylon', in Cancik-Kirschbaum, E., van Ess, M. and Marzahn, J. (eds), *Babylon: Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident* [Babylon: Knowledge Culture in the East and the West], Berlin: de Gruyter, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110222128>.

<sup>26</sup> Shadid, A. (2010), 'Church Attack Seen as Strike at Iraq's Core', *New York Times*, 1 November 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/02/world/middleeast/02iraq.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Preti, T. (2007), *Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq's minority communities since 2003*, London: Minority Rights Group International.

<sup>28</sup> Al Mada Paper (2013), 'The Baha'i and the Iraqi State. The Informal Writing of History', 30 March 2013, <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=124839>.

<sup>29</sup> Author interview with Baha'i activist in Baghdad, 28 September 2021.



eradicate Iraq's multicultural society through violence. ISIS forces and officials destroyed and damaged hundreds of places of worship, cemeteries, statues, and other religious and cultural sites. This process of erasure also included Sunni shrines. ISIS members also committed atrocities against the Yezidi and Shia Turkoman, as well as the Sunni and Shia Arab populations.<sup>30</sup> Paradoxically, and despite its culturally exclusionary politics, ISIS also exploited Iraq's antiquities as a source of income.<sup>31</sup> Much of the tangible and intangible heritage in the affected provinces still lies in ruins.

While armed groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS have sought to reshape the cultural and, by extension, political landscape in Iraq through violence, heritage predation by Iraq's political elites has also occurred with the legal protection of the state. Such predation has taken the shape of incremental appropriation and restructuring. As discussed above, changes in Babil, Baghdad, Erbil and Samarra have been pursued by sectarian political parties aiming to establish publicly demarcated ethnic and religious fiefdoms. In this sense, the control of cultural property and its folding into competing sectarian narratives – the subject of the next chapter – are themselves forms of symbolic violence, associated with the construction of intentionally differentiated boundaries between otherwise shared histories and communities.

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<sup>30</sup> Hawley, E. (2017), 'ISIS Crimes Against the Shia: The Islamic State's Genocide Against Shia Muslims', *Genocide Studies International*, 11(2), pp. 160–81, <https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/abs/10.3138/gsi.11.2.02?journalCode=gsi>; Bor, G. (2019), *Response to and reparations for conflict-related sexual violence in Iraq: the case of Shi'a Turkmen in Tel Afar*, LSE Middle East Centre Report, London: LSE Middle East Centre, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/102145>; Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2015), 'Dispatches: Remembering ISIS's Bloodiest Massacre in Iraq', 11 June 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/11/dispatches-remembering-isis-bloodiest-massacre-iraq>.

<sup>31</sup> Suárez-Mansilla, M. (2018), 'Blood Antiquities: a Net Acting in Spain Helped to Finance DAESH through Illicit Trafficking of Cultural Goods', *ArtWorldLaw Bulletin. Chronicles of Themis & Athenea*, 4, May 2018, Madrid: Artworld Law, [http://artworldlaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BloodAntiquities-IllicitTraffickingCulturalGoods-ConnectionTerrorism\\_MartaSMasilla.pdf](http://artworldlaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BloodAntiquities-IllicitTraffickingCulturalGoods-ConnectionTerrorism_MartaSMasilla.pdf); Pauwels, A. (2016), 'ISIS and illicit trafficking in cultural property: Funding terrorism through art', *Freedom from Fear*, 2016(11), pp. 64–71, <https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/journals/25190709/2016/11/7>.

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# 03 Cultural heritage as an object of political contestation

**Politicized efforts to appropriate Iraq's heritage are part of the ongoing contest for control of the state. This effective 'weaponization' of heritage also includes the recasting of cultural and historical narratives to support sectarian agendas.**

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Cultural heritage provides a means for Iraq's ethno-nationalist and sectarian elites to give credibility to their political actions, make claims to the past and, by extension, legitimize efforts to access the resources and institutions of the state. These elites have fought fiercely to control cultural and religious property in the country, as part of a wider ongoing contest to shape Iraq's political future. In addition to complicating the national political context, heritage predation and elite competition for cultural and religious property are affecting local power dynamics in cities across the country, thereby reshaping the political geographies of entire regions.

The politicization of cultural heritage in Iraq has been in large part enacted through the institutionalization of political quotas. *Muhasasa*, as it is referred to in Iraq, was actively promoted as part of US occupation policy, which was designed to appease groups which the US government had chosen to lead

Iraq and to weaken opposition to the US presence.<sup>32</sup> Appointments to the key institutions of state, including the positions of president, prime minister and speaker of parliament, were (and continue to be) based on an ethno-sectarian division of power between Kurdish, Shia and Sunni interests respectively. This resulted, in turn, in the sectarianized division of state assets, including cultural resources.

Sectarian political groups continue to carve out new spaces for the pursuit of their political agendas. While such manoeuvring has become a part of everyday politics, sectarianism was a particularly prominent feature of the 2017 referendum in the KRI, in which Kurdish ethno-nationalist political parties sought to claim and secure new territories based on ethnicity and cultural differences. Similarly, in the 2021 national elections, Azm – a leading Sunni political coalition – sought to appropriate cultural identity for its own interests by referring to Samarra's Abbasid-era Great Mosque and minaret as a source of Sunni power and political renewal.<sup>33</sup> The exploitation of ethnic and sect-based identities by political parties is a common tactic in heritage predation, often used to secure control of cultural property and win public support.

By embedding a sectarian allocation of power within Iraq's state structure, the top-down *muhasasa* system has dissipated central state authority, creating an environment conducive to heritage predation. Since 2003, substantial powers have been transferred from central state agencies to autonomously controlled institutions, including to political parties, religious groups and the KRG. In addition, influence within central ministries, including the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities, has been distributed among Shia, Sunni and Kurdish political parties, as the *muhasasa* system has delivered post-electoral windfalls to competing interests. Outside the KRI, control of which is entrenched between two major political parties, this 'merry-go-round' of political influence has devastated the prospects of developing cohesive state institutions able to govern, provide adequate services, and address urgent cultural needs and emergencies.

The fragmentation of Iraq's national cultural heritage has been compounded by the establishment of religious endowments. The Shia, Sunni and non-Muslim endowments were created from the disbanding of the pre-2003 Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments. Religious and cultural sites pertaining to different denominations were formally reallocated to these new entities. Religious sites in Iraq are now controlled by confessional political and religious groups,<sup>34</sup> sanctioned by the Iraqi Constitution of 2005 and by separate laws promulgated in 2012 that include the Shia Endowment Law, the Sunni Endowment Law, and the Christian, Ezidian and Sabeian Mandeian Religions Endowments Law.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Ismael, T. Y. and Ismael, J. S. (2015), *Iraq in the Twenty-First Century: Regime Change and the Making of a Failed State*, Abingdon: Routledge, <https://www.routledge.com/Iraq-in-the-Twenty-First-Century-Regime-Change-and-the-Making-of-a-Failed-State/Ismael-Ismael/p/book/9781138102088>.

<sup>33</sup> Kathem, M. (@Mehiyar) via Twitter (2021), 'A political party video politicising cultural heritage and UNESCO World Heritage Site of Abbasid Minaret and Grand Mosque in #Samarra as a way for securing 'sunni' votes. Also, head of that political party is under US sanctions for corruption. #iraq', 28 September 2021, <https://twitter.com/Mehiyar/status/1442636876955914243?s=20>.

<sup>34</sup> See Hasan, H. (2019), *Religious Authority and the Politics of Islamic Endowments in Iraq*, Beirut: Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/29/religious-authority-and-politics-of-islamic-endowments-in-iraq-pub-78726>.

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Justice of Iraq (2012), 'Religious Endowment Laws of 2012', <https://www.moj.gov.iq/uploaded/4254.pdf>.

In a similar way to the situation in Samarra (see Box 1), the parcelling out of power to non-state and semi-state institutions has meant that cities, districts and provinces are being reshaped not with a view to national, Iraq-wide, interests but for furthering the entrenchment of sectarian elites. The province of Babil, for example, which neighbours Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf, is gradually being transformed through the actions of religious groups. Babil was once a centre of cultural diversity and a key component of Iraq's national identity, containing the UNESCO World Heritage Site of ancient Babylon.

A well-known example of heritage predation in Babil is the 'restructuring' of the Shrine of Prophet Ezekiel, known as al-Kifl in Iraq, who is said to have belonged to the exiled Judean community in Babylon in the sixth century BCE.<sup>36</sup> Until 2010, the SBAH was the custodian of the complex, which comprised the shrine, a synagogue, a mosque and adjacent *khans* (inns). However, its ownership was subsequently transferred to the Shia Endowment, on the basis of a claim that Imam Ali had set up camp and prayed on the site. In the decade since its assumption of control of the site, the Shia Endowment has implemented a series of interventions to remove the synagogue and Ottoman-era *khans*, expand the mosque and build new minarets.<sup>37</sup>

Most of those interventions have fundamentally degraded this former icon of multicultural, inter-community identity, which embodied histories from ancient Babylonian, Jewish, Ilkhanid, Islamic, Ottoman and modern-day heritage, by restructuring the site to serve Shia pilgrims. The politically orchestrated transformation of al-Kifl and the eventual appropriation of its management are just one example of the rapid growth of a network of religious sites, controlled by the Shia Endowment and spanning the country. This illustrates again how the management of cultural and religious sites has provided a means for political and religious institutions to expand and deepen their political power.

The sectarian appropriation of heritage sites has commonly been accompanied by similar transformations of administrative districts. For example, the sub-district surrounding the Shrine of Prophet Ezekiel has been renamed al-Nukhailah (from al-Kifl previously); the new name is that of an historic mosque formerly located in or close to the site, according to the Shia Endowment.

Evidence of a predatory approach to the management of historically significant cultural and religious sites can also be seen in and around Babylon. Although the ancient ruins themselves are in part protected, at least nominally, by Babylon's 2019 designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site,<sup>38</sup> a growing list of unique sites in the surrounding province of Babil are gradually coming under the control of the Shia Endowment and being absorbed into the endowment's expansive political economy in this region.

<sup>36</sup> Zeed, A. A. (2015), 'Babil's Jewish shrine, mosque share space', *Al-Monitor*, 14 May 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/05/iraq-babil-religion-jews-muslims.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Maulana Syed Ali Raza Rizvi Official Channel via YouTube (2019), 'Spiritual Journey | EP13 | Hazrat Zul Kifl A.S | Maqam e Imam Ali A.S | Hillah, Najaf | June 2019', video, 16 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maL6u5oVtq8>.

<sup>38</sup> UNESCO (undated), 'Babylon', <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/278>.

Heritage predation in this region, with a view to control of new land, has seen the construction of hundreds of mosques and shrines, as well as encroachments on and violations of extensive archaeological plots. On a largely unexcavated area of the Babylon site,<sup>39</sup> for example, the expansion of the Omran Ibn Ali Shrine has included the development of a new tourist-oriented market and a car park, in addition to work on the mosque itself.<sup>40</sup> The use of cement, bricks, glass and other modern materials has compromised the integrity of the significant archaeological complex of Esagila, an ancient temple to the god Marduk.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the nearby Bakr Ibn Ali Shrine, previously a modest grave, has been transformed into a reinforced concrete building, to the detriment of the underlying archaeology and in disregard of the SBAH's concerns for appropriate care or laws.<sup>42</sup> A few kilometres away, at the largely unexcavated Babylonian city of Borsippa, the mosque and *maqam* (a site for visitation and prayer) of Ibrahim al-Khalil, a site purported to have been visited by the Prophet Abraham, are located on top of an archaeological mound. This site too is now overlain by new concrete structures, a market and a car park.<sup>43</sup>

In many ways, the ease with which heritage predation has unfolded in Iraq reflects the weakness of the SBAH and the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities. An archaeologist from Iraq summarizes the situation:

Our main issue is the lack of funding. There is simply no money for protecting archaeological sites, monuments and other important symbols of Iraqi history. It is all being destroyed, degraded and lost. We have sites in Nineveh, Dhi Qar and Babylon, for example, that are falling apart. In Babylon alone, we have tens of sites, if not more, that are falling down because we don't have funds to buy emergency support scaffolding and carry out conservation work. Several Sumerian and Babylonian sites, and many other sites that are no less than 2,600 years old, and some 4,000 years old, including at the UNESCO site of Babylon, are falling apart because of a lack of government financial support.<sup>44</sup>

In Baghdad, competition for cultural heritage is also highly prevalent and, again, symptomatic of a much larger crisis over the ownership and future of the country. Disputes over cultural identity at mosques, monuments and landmarks in the Iraqi capital have commonly been settled through the federal courts, but at other times through forcible action by one party or another.<sup>45</sup> In other contexts, under the guise of investment and development, cultural or sectarian competition has unfolded in relation to attempts to undermine national icons such as the Martyrs' Monument commemorating the Iran–Iraq War.<sup>46</sup> Attempts to demolish the Martyrs' Monument were initially pursued through de-Ba'athification

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Rubaie, A. (2015), 'Economic initiatives and support for the popular mobilization precede construction and reconstruction work', *Al Huda Magazine*, 9 June 2015, <http://www.alhodamag.com/index.php/post/954>.

<sup>41</sup> Alrekabi, Q. via YouTube (2018), 'The shrine of mr. omran, son of imam ali bin abi talib (p) / hilla / iraq, during restoration 2018', video, 4 September 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXop0NPRd0k>.

<sup>42</sup> Sheikh Zaid Alsalamy via YouTube (2018), 'Ziyarah vlogs: Hillah, Iraq – Bakr ibn Ali (a.s.) (2)', video, 23 November 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-lKveMuP3JU>.

<sup>43</sup> Maulana Syed Ali Raza Rizvi Official Channel via YouTube (2019), 'Spiritual Journey | EP16 | Birthplace (جائے پیدائش) of Hazrat Ibrahim A.S | Hillah | June Group 2019', video, 24 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ap8nltuN990>.

<sup>44</sup> Author interview with an Iraqi archaeologist, 15 September 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Hasan (2019), *Religious Authority and the Politics of Islamic Endowments in Iraq*.

<sup>46</sup> Al Jazeera (2018), 'The martyr's monument: Iraqi teacher cries his history', 30 April 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/citiesandregions/2018/4/30/%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%A8%D9%83%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE%D9%87>.

politics and regulations, but were stopped after public pressure. Post-2003 heritage predation, in this context, has undermined symbols of the nation and what little remains of popular nostalgia of better times.

## **History is thus being reimagined through narrowly constructed prisms of Shia, Sunni and Kurdish identity, with a view to pitting sections of society against one another.**

Statues and symbols in the capital are also increasingly the objects of sectarian contestation. Examples include calls by certain religious actors to destroy Baghdad's Abu Hanifa Mosque,<sup>47</sup> or to remove the bust of the Abbasid-era founder of Baghdad, Abu Jaafar al-Mansour (accused by some Shia religious leaders of having poisoned the Shia imam, al-Jaafar al-Sadiq, in the eighth century). The latter agenda is less about claims of historical injustices than about who owns the future of Baghdad:<sup>48</sup> by targeting the city's founder, agitation for the removal of this bust in the Sunni-majority district of Al-Adhamiyah aims to pre-empt or subdue any political action on the part of Sunni leaders that would seek to derive legitimacy from the past – in this case, from the Abbasid Empire (which is increasingly being appropriated as a symbol of Sunni identity). History, and more specifically the cultural property that it embodies, is thus being reimagined through narrowly constructed prisms of Shia, Sunni and Kurdish identity, with a view to influencing public perceptions and pitting sections of society against one another.

Across the Tigris River from Al-Adhamiyah, the district of Al-Kadhimiya has also undergone substantial transformation with the expansion of the shrine of Imam Musa al-Kadhim. More than 130 heritage buildings and archaeological sites, including from the Ottoman era and historically significant modern heritage, have been demolished to make way for the shrine's expansion, as well as new hotels and commercial enterprises to accommodate religious tourism.<sup>49</sup> These developments have fundamentally changed the architectural character and urban fabric of the district. The shrine itself has also been substantially 'renovated' without due regard for its historical and cultural character, as seen in the unsympathetic use of modern materials to replace Qajari-era (1789–1925) architecture.<sup>50</sup>

The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities has been undermined by Kurdish and Shia political parties, which view it as a potential competitor in respect of their efforts to control cultural heritage. Part of the problem is that, since 2003,

<sup>47</sup> Sky News Arabia (2021), 'Threats in Iraq to destroy shrines and statues – and the security apparatus is on standby', 12 June 2021, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/amp/middle-east/1443957>.

<sup>48</sup> *The Economist* (2021), 'Shia zealots try to cancel a statue of Baghdad's founder', 19 August 2021, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/08/21/shia-zealots-try-to-cancel-a-statue-of-baghdads-founder>; see also Sky News Arabia (2021), 'Threats in Iraq to destroy shrines and statues – and the security apparatus is on standby'.

<sup>49</sup> Khazal, G. (2012), 'Call to restrict heritage sites in Kadhimiya', Radio Free Iraq, 10 January 2012, <https://www.iraqhurr.org/a/24447380.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Golubeva, Y. (2011), 'Evolutionary approach towards redevelopment of historical sites versus complete erasure. Case study Kadhimiya historical centre, Baghdad, Iraq', 47th ISOCARP Congress 2011, [http://www.isocarp.net/data/case\\_studies/1913.pdf](http://www.isocarp.net/data/case_studies/1913.pdf); and Al Saady, S. O. F. S. (2018), 'The Iranian Role in the Restoration of the Holy Shiite Shrines in Iraq during Al-Qajari Era (1796-1925)', *Al-Ssebt Journal*, 1(6), pp. 127–48, <https://www.iasj.net/iasj/article/136631>.

responsibilities for the management of Iraq's heritage have been shared – at least in theory – between the central government authorities and the country's provinces. Article 113 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution states that:

Antiquities, archaeological sites, cultural buildings, manuscripts, and coins shall be considered national treasures under the jurisdiction of the federal authorities and shall be managed in cooperation with the regions and governorates, and this shall be regulated by law.<sup>51</sup>

Weak enforcement, combined with a severe lack of resources, has impaired the SBAH's ability to protect and maintain Iraq's cultural heritage. Under-resourcing makes cooperation with other institutions difficult, a problem compounded by the fact that responsibility for cultural heritage is split between different bodies: the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities; the Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works; the religious endowments; and local and provincial governments. This not only causes conflicts of interests but leaves the SBAH without the full authority to carry out its mandate. In effect, the quotas of the *muhāsasa* system have made Article 113 nearly impossible to implement, with the SBAH being viewed by other agencies and interest groups not as a partner but as a rival.

The SBAH's weak position and the growth of autonomously controlled institutions, including in the KRI, bode poorly for coordination and partnerships in the future. The KRI has run a parallel heritage infrastructure for the past 30 years, which operates independently of Iraqi central authority and is answerable to the KRG only. Wealth accrued by the KRG from the post-2003 quota arrangement enabled it to put into action an ethno-nationalist state-building project premised primarily on promoting Kurdish identity as separate from the rest of the country. In other words, ruling political elites (including members of the KRG) not only established alternative institutions but claimed legitimacy to separate rule based on ethnicity and notions of suffering and 'otherness'.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the KRG considers archaeology and heritage in the KRI, or in territories claimed by the KRG in Diyala and Nineveh, for example, as its own rather than as belonging to Iraq as a whole. Government authorities and the antiquities department in the KRI have viewed cultural heritage as a key component of state-building, commonly promoting the semi-autonomous region as a 'cradle of civilization' and framing understandings of Iraq's national history in ways designed to promote Kurdish ethno-nationalism.<sup>53</sup>

Attempts to reconstruct history have also been in evidence at the multi-period UNESCO World Heritage Site of Erbil Citadel, from which the KRG forced the eviction of residents from 2007 onwards as it sought to establish the citadel as an icon of its state-building agenda.<sup>54</sup> The KRG is regularly accused by Assyrian and Chaldean communities of appropriating and undermining ancient

<sup>51</sup> Constitute (2021), 'Iraq's Constitution of 2005', 26 August 2021, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq\\_2005.pdf?lang=en](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iraq_2005.pdf?lang=en).

<sup>52</sup> BBC News (2006), 'Kurdish clash at Halabja memorial', 16 March 2016, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/4812128.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4812128.stm).

<sup>53</sup> See further Spät, E. (2019), 'Monuments, civil war and local communities: Archaeological heritage in the Duhok Region (Kurdistan Region of Iraq), Parts 1 and 2', *Hungarian Archaeology*, 8(3), pp. 28–34, 36–45, <https://doi.org/10.36338/ha.2019.4.6>.

<sup>54</sup> Akhbarak (2015), 'How Erbil Citadel was transformed into a city of shadows without life', 8 August 2015, <https://akhbarak.net/news/6998619/articles/19440461>.

Assyrian heritage.<sup>55</sup> A common tactic of the KRG has been to use land grabs of Assyrian towns and villages to expand the territory under its control; this concerted programme has led to population displacement, migration and demographic change.<sup>56</sup> This is another example of how heritage predation, whether of Assyrian, Chaldean and Christian-populated areas or multi-period heritage sites, is a direct outcome of competition for land and resources.<sup>57</sup>

Political fractures make it difficult to develop cohesive national plans for the country's archaeology and heritage. The KRG's policy of issuing excavation licences to local and international excavation projects without approval from the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities – including licences for projects in 'disputed territories' – is a major point of contention.

Archaeology, in this sense, has become tied to competition for wider legitimacy, albeit through the assumed credibility conferred by US and European donor states that fund excavations. Archaeological sites within territories claimed by the KRG, as well as within the formal boundaries (demarcated in 2003) of the KRI more generally, have been instrumentalized as part of the aims of the political elite's territorial expansionism in northern Iraq: namely, to facilitate political legitimation and separatism, and as part of resource control.<sup>58</sup> Museums in the KRI too, including in Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah, have also been politicized and have promoted new ethno-nationalist histories that intentionally seek to separate the KRI and the history of that area from the rest of Iraq.

US and European cultural institutions have generally been dismissive of these issues, though their involvement is not without its problems. The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities has commonly complained that internationally funded projects, including those involving foreign excavation teams, have neither sought permission to work in the country nor shared their research, findings and lists of extracted artefacts. In other cases, the operators of rehabilitation projects funded by the US or European countries, including in 'disputed territories', have not properly consulted the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities and have regularly bypassed central state institutions altogether.<sup>59</sup> In some cases, artefacts extracted in such excavations have been illicitly transferred to the KRI and distributed among its museums. In some cases, the exact history and labelling of artefacts and archaeological sites have been modified by KRG officials and archaeologists to suit ethno-nationalist politics and the construction of new histories. Many cases abound of ancient Assyrian sites and artefacts being redesignated to reflect narratives that align with the political objective of asserting the Kurds as a distinct and historical ethnic group in the region.

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<sup>55</sup> Zaya, R. S. (2019), 'What Ancient Stones Still Mean to the Assyrian People Today', Hyperallergic, 1 November 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/524967/what-ancient-stones-still-mean-to-the-assyrian-people-today>.

<sup>56</sup> HRW (2016), 'Iraqi Kurdistan: Christian Demonstration Blocked', 22 April 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/22/iraqi-kurdistan-christian-demonstration-blocked>.

<sup>57</sup> Assyrian Policy Institute (undated), 'Iraq', <https://www.assyrianpolicy.org/iraq>.

<sup>58</sup> Eichberg (2018), 'Archaeology, Nationalism, and the State'.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, US-funded programmes in al-Qosh, which is formally part of the province of Nineveh but has been controlled by KRI authorities since 2003: Clancy, L. (2021), 'The Prophet Nahum, the Assyrians of Alqosh, and the Kurdistan Region', Times of Israel blog, 5 January 2021, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-prophet-nahum-the-assyrians-of-alqosh-and-the-kurdistan-region>.



There are major repercussions for Iraq's sovereignty. For example, a case of heritage predation has involved manuscripts from Mosul that are now being held in the KRI; digital copies of these manuscripts have been transferred to US and European funding organizations and libraries without the knowledge of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities.<sup>60</sup> The fact that US and European cultural institutions compete for such transfers of knowledge, without the approval of central state authorities, represents an emerging point of contention that has not been addressed. In other cases, manuscripts and rare books from Iraq have been taken out of the country altogether for conservation, again without the knowledge of central state authorities. One example was a 500-year-old Christian manuscript that was restored and returned to a church in the province of Nineveh during Pope Francis's visit to Iraq in 2021.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, it was only during the Pope's visit that the Iraqi government and other central state institutions were informed of the manuscript's existence.

Some such cases have involved US organizations such as the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, located at Saint John's University in Minnesota. While its work in the KRI has safeguarded significant manuscripts from Mosul and other areas, the absence of communication and coordination with the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities has reinforced Iraq's fractured cultural heritage landscape and exacerbated tensions between the SBAH and heritage institutions in the KRI.<sup>62</sup> Significantly, while knowing that cultural heritage is the property of the Iraqi state, US and European cultural organizations in several fields have opted to deal with the KRG directly.

There are also unresolved challenges in relation to thousands of cultural objects, including cuneiform tablets and seals, in the possession of museums in the KRI. These were purchased on the black market or confiscated at Iraq's internal KRI-managed borders, in a scheme sponsored by Hero Talabani, the wife of the late Jalal Talabani (the former president of Iraq from 2006 to 2014 and co-founder of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan political party), to prevent their removal from the country.<sup>63</sup> The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities has yet to receive a list of those cultural objects, many of which were looted from the Iraq Museum in the spring of 2003 or plundered from archaeological sites in the following months and years. The SBAH, which has no real political power or party backing, has been unable to assert authority over Iraq's cultural heritage in the KRI. The current situation is one requiring high-level negotiations between stakeholders.

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<sup>60</sup> Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (undated), 'Iraq', <https://hmml.org/about/global-operations/iraq>.

<sup>61</sup> Mahmoud, S. (2021), 'Pope Francis to return rare 500-year-old 'refugee' Christian prayer book to Iraq', *The National*, 6 March 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/pope-francis-to-return-rare-500-year-old-refugee-christian-prayer-book-to-iraq-1.1177534>.

<sup>62</sup> Author interview with a Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities official, June 2021.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Amin, O. S. M. (2015), 'The Newly Discovered Tablet V of the Epic of Gilgamesh', *History Et Cetera*, 24 September 2015, <https://etc.worldhistory.org/exhibitions/gilgamesh-enkidu-humbaba-cedar-forest-newest-discovered-tablet-v-epic>.

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# 04

## The economic and geostrategic dimensions of cultural heritage

**Revenues and benefits derived from cultural resources accrue to political and religious elites. This incentivizes elite rivalry over the exploitation of such resources and provides an opening for external powers to leverage offers of financial assistance.**

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Quota politics within Iraq's state agencies have made ministries targets for resource extraction. A key example is that of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities, control over which has been variously allocated (as an electoral windfall) to successive Shia, Sunni and Kurdish political parties. For example, between 2018 and 2021 parts of the ministry were under the control of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, a political party and part of the Popular Mobilization Forces, whose members are also represented in the Iraqi parliament.<sup>64</sup> Their primary interest appears to be exploitation of the ministry's tourism assets, especially hotels, and authority over lucrative alcohol licences.<sup>65</sup> The ministry's cultural heritage remit

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<sup>64</sup> Latif, H. (2020), 'Cabinet appointment illustrates militias' hold on Iraq's political system', *The Arab Weekly*, 8 June 2020, <https://thearabweekly.com/cabinet-appointment-illustrates-militias-hold-iraqs-political-system>.

<sup>65</sup> Al-Bazi, W. (2020), 'These are the reasons why Asa'ib is holding the Ministry of Culture... Iran has a relationship', Al Hal Net, 8 June 2020, <https://7al.net/2020/06/08/%D9%87%D8%B0%D9%87-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81/albazi/slide>.

appears to be of little value to Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, leaving the SBAH without strong political support and enabling other interest groups to take advantage of this gap. Other parts of the ministry are controlled by Kurdish, Sunni and Shia political actors who, while in some cases chosen on the basis of merit, are often appointed on the basis of their ethnicity and religion.

In addition to the organized extraction of resources by political parties, since 2003 the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities has repeatedly been marginalized as an institution. Inadequate budget allocations – particularly for the SBAH – have reduced capacities to address Iraq's cultural heritage needs. A shortage of skills and resources has left central state heritage institutions unable to implement long-term plans for cultural recovery. As a result, the SBAH today is having to address one emergency after another. An official concerned with conservation at the SBAH, regarding those challenges, said:

The most important challenges that cultural heritage is facing in Iraq are: first, lack of funding to preserve and redevelop archaeological sites; second, environmental factors and their adverse effects on monuments and buildings; and, last, the lack of stability and security, which leads to destruction – hence the need to employ security guards for the sites.<sup>66</sup>

Cultural heritage is one of Iraq's richest resources, arguably second only to oil in its economic potential – but is also, therefore, widely vulnerable to exploitation if not adequately safeguarded.<sup>67</sup> The Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities has not, however, been considered a 'front-line' institution by political groups and is therefore not deemed important by the country's political elites. On the contrary, it has mostly been attacked and undermined by sectarian political elites who have lobbied to ensure that it remains weak. The SBAH has consequently had limited state funding to rehabilitate degraded and destroyed heritage sites, or to respond effectively to the damage inflicted by decades of war, occupation, armed conflict, agricultural activity and urban expansion. Significantly, even though Iraq has lost hundreds of thousands of cultural objects since the 1990s, there has been insufficient support to prevent or prosecute incidences of looting and smuggling of archaeological materials. Poor funding has also meant that many museums remain closed to visitors and are barely able to maintain the physical condition of their collections. It is impossible to conduct routine inspection and maintenance of the SBAH's vast estate of heritage sites on the tiny budget available. Not surprisingly, demoralized staff feel over-stretched and under-equipped.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with a Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities official in Baghdad, 24 July 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Vrdoljak, A. F. (2010), 'Unravelling the cradle of civilization 'layer by layer': Iraq, its peoples and cultural heritage', in Langfield, M., Logan, W. and Craith, M. N. (eds) (2010), *Cultural Diversity, Heritage, and Human Rights: Intersections in theory and practice*, Abingdon: Routledge; Lostal, M. (2017), *International Cultural Heritage Law in Armed Conflict: Case-studies of Syria, Libya, Mali, the Invasion of Iraq, and the Buddhas of Bamiyan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## The new political economies of religious endowments

With their privileged positions in society, religious endowments are widely viewed in Iraq as having exploited their custodianship of religious heritage for the benefit of their members, often at a wider public cost. Their actions do not need approval from higher state authorities, yet they have restructured entire cities and heritage sites. For example, the expansion of Shia shrine cities has effectively reshaped the urban fabric, resulting in major cultural and historical losses in such places as Karbala, Khadimiyah, Najaf and Samarra; such developments have also displaced thousands of families.<sup>68</sup>

Resources accrued from ownership or control of cultural and religious assets have – especially in the case of the Shia Endowment – been recycled into profit-making enterprises. In addition to its religious affairs, the Shia Endowment is increasingly transforming itself into a corporation, with interests in property investment, agriculture, trade, factories, and private universities and hospitals.<sup>69</sup> Funds and revenues derived from those investments, as well as from the lucrative Shia pilgrimage trade, accrue to the Shia Endowment rather than to the state.<sup>70</sup>

### The expansion of Shia shrine cities has effectively reshaped the urban fabric, resulting in major cultural and historical losses in such places as Karbala, Khadimiyah, Najaf and Samarra.

Cultural property under the endowment's control is also being folded into an expansive religious tourism network spanning the country. Plans to commercialize cultural heritage in Babil, Baghdad, Samarra and many other provinces and cities are pursued with a view to integrating each region's cultural heritage into the Shia Endowment's religious tourism network, effectively undermining prospects for the development of a national tourism strategy or a sustainable post-oil economy.

Religious endowments commonly compete, with each other as well as with national state institutions, to exploit cultural property for the interests of their own political parties and religious groups. The Sunni and Shia Endowments have competed fiercely for possession and/or control of lucrative real estate and mosques in Baghdad and other cities.<sup>71</sup> They regularly pressure the SBAH for the rights to exploit religious and cultural sites or for the transfer of state-owned land. In recent years, this pattern of aggressive extraction of state property

<sup>68</sup> Falah, S. M. (2018), 'The Shrine that Consumed Its Town: The Role of Religion and Politics in Reshaping the Iraqi City of Najaf', doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati: OhioLINK Electronic Theses and Dissertations Center, [https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws\\_olink/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10\\_accession\\_num=ucin1523636269597604](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_olink/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10_accession_num=ucin1523636269597604).

<sup>69</sup> Alkafeel Global Network (undated), 'The Projects of the al-Abbas's (p) Holy Shrine', <https://alkafeel.net/projects/?lang=en>.

<sup>70</sup> See further Kathem, M. (2016), 'The troubling political economy of Iraq's Shi'ia clerical establishment', openDemocracy, 29 March 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/troubling-political-economy-of-iraq-s-sh-ia-clerical-establishment>.

<sup>71</sup> Hasan (2019), *Religious Authority and the Politics of Islamic Endowments in Iraq*.

has been further evidenced by the capture of cultural heritage assets by the Shia Endowment in Mosul (as indeed across most of Iraq's provinces).<sup>72</sup>

Resource extraction from cultural property also involves the use of lucrative contracts for the expansion and 'rehabilitation' of heritage sites. Political and religious institutions have benefited from these opportunities. Two notable examples involved the Sunni Endowment, which was investigated by Iraq's court system in 2020 for corruption.<sup>73</sup> In 2016, the Sunni Endowment began a project to rebuild the 1,000-year-old Imam al-Dor Shrine near Tikrit, which had been destroyed by ISIS in 2014.<sup>74</sup> The project was subsequently terminated because of the new structure's lack of resemblance to the destroyed mausoleum and allegations of corruption.<sup>75</sup> More recently, the endowment has funded work to stabilize the leaning minaret of the Abbasid-era Caliph's Mosque in central Baghdad; this work involved contractors with limited experience in heritage conservation.<sup>76</sup> In the face of widespread corruption within the religious endowments, and their support by political parties, the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities has found it difficult to develop a working relationship that can halt destructive interventions, although there have been several successes such as the Imam al-Dor Shrine.

## International assistance

The rapid expansion of a network of Shia shrines across the country, particularly in Karbala, Khadimiyah, Najaf and Samarra, has been supported by funding from Iran.<sup>77</sup> While Iran's assistance to Iraq's Shia shrines and mosques draws on religious and historical ties that go back to the Safavid period in the 1500s, the nature of this current support is closely oriented to the expansion of Iranian interests in the country and the wider Middle East. The intention of such actions is to bind Iraq closer to Iran, primarily through religion and the integration of the two countries' political economies. In pursuing this project, Iran has often worked directly with the Shia Endowment, bypassing central Iraqi state institutions. The resulting heritage 'landscape' is characterized by an increasingly complex infrastructure of Shia Endowment- and Iran-supported religious and commercial projects.

In recent years, Iraqi cultural heritage preservation has also received major funding from US and European donors, as well as from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and many other countries. These latter interventions have been a response

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<sup>72</sup> Ibrahim, A. and Al-Rubaie, A. (2019), 'After the fall of ISIL, a sectarian battle over property in Mosul', Al Jazeera, 30 July 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/7/30/after-the-fall-of-isil-a-sectarian-battle-over-property-in-mosul>.

<sup>73</sup> Al-Zahawi, S. (2017), "'Corruption' in the Iraqi Sunni Endowment and news of the dismissal of its head', *Arabi21*, 4 May 2017, <https://arabi21.com/story/1003608>.

<sup>74</sup> Archnet (2020), 'Qubba Imam al-Dur', 28 February 2020, <https://archnet.org/sites/3838>; Hardy, S. (2014), 'The First Shrine of Its Kind in Iraq Is Destroyed', *Hyperallergic*, 31 October 2014, <https://hyperallergic.com/159952/the-first-shrine-of-its-kind-in-iraq-is-destroyed>; see also Sunni Affairs (2016), 'Dr. Al-Hamim lays the foundation stone for the reconstruction of Imam Muhammad Al-Dari in Al-Dour District', 5 June 2016, [http://sunniaffairs.gov.iq/ar/imam\\_muhammad\\_dorry](http://sunniaffairs.gov.iq/ar/imam_muhammad_dorry).

<sup>75</sup> Author interview with a senior Iraqi official in the President's Office, December 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Author interview with senior Iraqi official, June 2021. See also Archnet (undated), 'Jami' al-Khulafa', <https://www.archnet.org/sites/27>.

<sup>77</sup> Davison, J. (2020), 'Iran expands shrines and influence in Iraq', Reuters, 2 December 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/iraq-iran-shrines>.

to changing power dynamics within Iraq itself, and represent an extension of regional and international politics in the country. For example, in 2018, the UAE donated \$50.4 million to UNESCO, one of the largest gifts to that organization, for the rebuilding of Mosul's al-Nuri Grand Mosque and al-Hadba Minaret. Funding for the rehabilitation of two churches was also included in the grant. However, the project proved to be fraught with problems. The UNESCO-led international competition for the contract to reconstruct the mosque complex was widely criticized in Iraq for implanting designs alien to the country, for ignoring Mosul's own rich architectural history, and for not adequately involving Iraqi expertise and professional institutions such as the Union of Engineers, a body with more than 200,000 members.<sup>78</sup> The EU has also provided \$22 million to UNESCO's rebuilding of heritage sites in Mosul, along with some historic houses in Basrah.<sup>79</sup>

In sum, the UNESCO-led \$100 million 'Revive the Spirit of Mosul' initiative could have provided an unprecedented opportunity for Iraqi architects, designers and urban planners to lead community-informed projects to restore cultural heritage. Yet the initiative's activities are being mostly delivered as contractor-led enterprises, producing windfalls for European consultants and operators. Such an approach, which is characteristic of most US and European cultural organizations, has conferred limited opportunities for Iraq to develop its own capacity to protect, conserve and rebuild cultural heritage. On the contrary, Iraq's SBAH and other institutions have merely been viewed as a facilitator rather than a partner whose needs are often overlooked or ignored. A clear case of this is how international organizations have, for the past 20 or more years, ignored SBAH's own conservation unit and capacity needs. The SBAH will be an important institution if Iraq is to move beyond parachuted-in support from US and European organizations.

Heritage-related aid modalities are closely intertwined with donors' own interests in Iraq and the Middle East. This has created a situation in which each funder country is associated with a particular form of culture in Iraq, commonly with a view to promoting its own religious or cultural interests in the country. Such funding and the resulting activities, while at times providing valuable support for emergency-related heritage projects and conservation, have often not focused on people, communities or sustainable engagements. This situation has led to fierce competition between US and European cultural institutions for securing contracts and managing and controlling Iraq's cultural heritage.

After ISIS's destruction of cultural heritage between 2014 and 2017, funding from international donors increased significantly in certain areas of Iraq. For example, the US government allocated \$373 million to Nineveh's Christian groups, contracting numerous US-based organizations and universities to document and work on rehabilitation projects in Old Mosul and the wider region.<sup>80</sup> While US

<sup>78</sup> Arraf, J. (2021), 'UNESCO Mosul Competition Design Prompts Outcry', *New York Times*, 27 June 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/27/world/middleeast/unesco-mosul-reconstruction.html>.

<sup>79</sup> UNESCO (2018), 'UAE, UNESCO and Iraq conclude historic \$50m partnership to reconstruct Mosul's iconic al-Nouri Mosque and al-Hadba Minaret', 23 April 2018, <https://en.unesco.org/news/uae-unesco-and-iraq-conclude-historic-50m-partnership-reconstruct-mosuls-iconic-al-nouri-mosque>.

<sup>80</sup> See further Torbati, Y. (2019), 'How Mike Pence's Office Meddled in Foreign Aid to Reroute Money to Favored Christian Groups', *ProPublica*, 6 November 2019, <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-mike-pences-office-meddled-in-foreign-aid-to-reroute-money-to-favored-christian-groups>.

government initiatives are seemingly designed to support Christian groups, the wider political objectives of such funding are geared to addressing the post-war power vacuum left by the annihilation of minority groups; such groups have commonly been seen by the US as providing a geostrategic 'buffer' against other interests in the region, not least Iran.<sup>81</sup>

In recent years, Saudi Arabia–Iraq relations have also improved, with strengthening cultural relations playing a key role.<sup>82</sup> Saudi Arabia has signed initial agreements to fund a \$1 billion sports stadium in Iraq.<sup>83</sup> There are also ongoing discussions over potential Saudi support for the protection and celebration of Abbasid-era and modern cultural heritage (especially in historic Baghdad), sorely neglected since 2003. This proposed intervention, like the UAE's funding for the reconstruction of the al-Nuri Grand Mosque, is tied to Sunni–Shia competition in the Middle East, with the Gulf states increasingly anxious about the growth of Shia Islam as a political force in the region.

The US is one of the largest external funders of cultural heritage, in part using its Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA) to fund US-based organizations' activities in Iraq.<sup>84</sup> The US government views cultural diplomacy and heritage interventions as a key component of its work in the country. In practice, however, the SFA has enabled the US to support projects directly, without necessarily forging genuine partnerships with central state institutions or developing long-term Iraqi capacity. Such arrangements need to be reconsidered to ensure that Iraq's own needs are prioritized, which is not always the case. Activities related to the post-Islamic State recovery of Nimrod in Nineveh, for example, have been characterized by inefficiency, a lack of vision and strategy, and interests that do not primarily concern the devastated site. Indeed, several years on from 2017, thousands if not hundreds of fragments of destroyed Assyrian-era cultural monuments in Nimrod have remained on the ground, suffering from the effects of rain and harsh summers.

In a context of state fragmentation and underfunding, international financing has, however, offered an essential resource. For example, the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH) has supported numerous projects in Nineveh and other parts of Iraq to safeguard and celebrate Iraq's cultural heritage.<sup>85</sup> Such mechanisms have funded work on icons such as the Arch of Ctesiphon (Taq Kisra), part of a sixth-century CE Sassanian palace complex.<sup>86</sup> Other examples have to do with such things as the devastation that might unfold on communities as a result of the construction of the Makhoul Dam, which will affect Kirkuk and Salaheddin provinces. The dam, if completed,

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<sup>81</sup> *Arabi21* (2017), 'The opening of the "Imam Khomeini" school in Nineveh, which is predominantly Sunni', 16 September 2017, <https://m.arabi21.com/Story/1034641>.

<sup>82</sup> Kathem, M. (2018), 'A New Era Beckons for Iraqi-Saudi Relations', War on the Rocks commentary, 2 February 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/a-new-era-beckons-for-iraqi-saudi-relations>.

<sup>83</sup> Debusmann, Jr., B. (2019), 'Saudi Arabia to give \$1bn towards building 'sports city' in Iraq', *Arabian Business*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/417090-saudi-arabia-to-give-1bn-towards-building-sports-city-in-iraq>.

<sup>84</sup> US Department of State (2021), 'Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue', media note, 7 April 2021, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue>.

<sup>85</sup> Aliph Foundation (undated), 'Protecting Heritage to Build Peace', <https://www.aliph-foundation.org>.

<sup>86</sup> See further Kenney, N. (2021), 'ALIPH finances effort to shore up crumbling Taq Kasra in Iraq, the world's biggest brick vault', *The Art Newspaper*, 28 January 2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/01/28/aliph-finance-effort-to-shore-up-crumbling-taq-kasra-in-iraq-the-worlds-biggest-brick-vault>.

will flood 40 villages and hundreds of Assyrian-era sites, including Ashur, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.<sup>87</sup> Current and future international support in relation to cultural and archaeological sites will be essential in terms of the safeguarding and documentation of some of Iraq's most important cultural heritage. In light of unaddressed issues associated with the nature of Iraq's political challenges, it is likely that – regardless of the above-mentioned limitations and risks – international funding will continue to offer a significant support mechanism for the protection and rehabilitation of cultural property.

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<sup>87</sup> Community Voices of Makhoul Dam Basin (undated), <https://makhouldam.com>.



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# 05 Implications for community relations

**Iraqi communities have been devastated by sectarianism and its myriad outcomes. Cultural heritage has been both a victim and an instrument of these problems, with politicized interventions damaging social cohesion and communal relations.**

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The present disconnection between society and heritage is a direct outcome of a post-2003 politics in which the latter has increasingly become the domain of unaccountable, non-transparent and self-serving groups. The entanglement of cultural heritage in competitive resource extraction in Iraq has meant that heritage is increasingly viewed by Iraqi society as pertaining to a specific group's interests rather than as a symbol of shared histories or cultures. Attacks against heritage have been used to justify intercommunal violence, leading to severely diminished societal relations. Moreover, while sectarian groups often justify their actions as serving the needs of their particular community, they have demonstrated limited interest in supporting the constituencies they claim to represent.

In recent years, the negative image associated with most of Iraq's heritage institutions, particularly religious endowments, has been strongly criticized by Iraq's youth and by protesters in Baghdad, Basrah, Najaf and many other cities.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Al-Dulyme, A. A. A. (2020), *The Role of Social Networks in Changing the Image of Religious Institutions in Iraq During the October Protests: A Field Study from the Viewpoint of Iraqi Students Studying in Jordanian Universities*, dissertation, University of Petra (Jordan), <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2491108010?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>.

There are so many divisions and no boundaries to control what is happening on the heritage scene. We protect the cultural heritage of Iraq by unifying our policy. The government should protect a formal organization such as SBAH.<sup>89</sup>

There are growing calls by Iraq's heritage experts, including academics, to unify heritage policy across the country. However, this is enormously difficult in a context of institutionalized political fragmentation and *muhasasa*:

We should focus on sharing values to unify our heritage to avoid sectarianism. We need to empower our local communities, especially women and the youth.<sup>90</sup>

The sectarianization of a significant chunk of Iraq's cultural heritage has aggravated social tensions across the country. It has led to the exclusion of constituencies, and to generalized sentiments that the country's history, community identities and cultural property have been appropriated by political elites. Local communities are keenly aware of the political dimension to cultural heritage transformation and neglect. An activist in Baghdad, who spends a significant amount of time working with communities and raising awareness of Baghdad's history, refers to the neglect of Abbasid-era heritage in the city:

In Iraq's current situation, Abbasid heritage is viewed as Sunni. This means that in the emerging sectarian discourse of redefining the past, Abbasid heritage is seen by many, particularly political parties, as not Iraqi but as belonging to one group or section of society. This is not good for the future, as people will start to think that this heritage does not belong to all Iraqis. We have seen a lot of neglect of this heritage, but most Iraqi monuments and buildings are neglected in Baghdad. They are waiting for it to all collapse, so they can build shopping malls, new housing and with it erase the history of the old part of Baghdad.<sup>91</sup>

Nearly 20 years of political and social engineering through the domain of cultural heritage and, more broadly, the institutionalization of sectarian quotas across the state system have gradually embedded society-wide divisions based on ethnicity and religion. As the case above attests, Iraq's past is being reimagined according to sectarian discourses. By extension, cultural property and citizens' relationships to heritage sites have similarly become susceptible to interpretations aligned with those sectarian narratives. Shia and Sunni religious events, for example, are today viewed as culturally and religiously separate occasions, pertaining to demarcated religious groups. This sense of inaccessibility and exclusion in respect of cultural heritage bodes poorly for social cohesion and is a direct outcome of heritage predation.

Systems to involve local communities in decision-making are weak or non-existent and are in large part a legacy of colonialism and dictatorship. Individual communities and the general public have each in effect been the victims of cultural heritage transformation, as built environments have been radically altered by unaccountable semi-state institutions answerable to their members rather than to wider society. Over time, heritage predation will disenfranchise Iraqis from their own histories and ensure that cultural heritage is no longer a common resource for the public interest.

<sup>89</sup> Author interview with Dr Ula Merie, architect, University of Babil, 24 July 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Author interview with Dr Dhirgham Alobaydi, architect and planner, head of the Department of Architecture, University of Baghdad, 27 July 2020.

<sup>91</sup> Author interview with heritage activist, 2 October 2021.

As previously mentioned, forced evictions in the name of cultural heritage have been commonplace. In all major historical sites in Iraq, including cities such as Karbala, Khadimiyah, Najaf and Samarra, large sections of local populations have been forcibly evicted to make way for expansion, often induced to leave by generous compensation. An example is the multi-period site of the Shrine of Prophet Jonah, within the precincts of Mosul. The complex was looted and damaged by ISIS in 2014. A partially destroyed 20th-century mosque, managed by the Sunni Endowment, sits on top of the medieval shrine, which in turn is embedded in the remains of a large Assyrian palace dating from the seventh century CE. In June 2020, 700 families were forcibly displaced from the site to make way for an archaeological team from abroad to conduct excavations.<sup>92</sup> The families' houses were demolished on the basis that they did not have permission to be there.

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<sup>92</sup> Akhbar Al Aan 24 news now via YouTube (2020), '700 families displaced due to excavations in Iraq's Nineveh', video, 29 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qywzASo6ZgU>.

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# 06 Accountability and policy

**Accountability needs to be central to the management of cultural heritage. Iraqi and international institutions should work to develop an ethics-based framework for cultural heritage management and protection.**

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Heritage predation offers an important and underused lens through which to view Iraq's post-2003 politics. As this paper has shown, the politicization and appropriation of cultural heritage are closely tied to elite-based politics. Given the importance of heritage to shaping Iraq's society and future, and as a constituent element in its politics and security, there is an urgent need for cultural property to be taken more seriously in domestic and international policy agendas.

As previous chapters have indicated, a major consequence of the *muhasasa* quota system has been the transfer of power over heritage matters to semi-state and non-state institutions. This has resulted in huge sections of Iraq's cultural heritage falling under the control of political parties and religious groups rather than that of central state institutions. Entire regions and territories have been divided into political party-controlled fiefdoms, while in the north of the country the KRI has strengthened its 1990s status as a self-governed, semi-autonomous region.

Interventions by particular groups, whether in Babil, the KRI, Samarra or anywhere else in the country, are designed to shape particular cultural sites, entire districts and provinces in line with certain religious and political agendas. Heritage predation is thus sectarianizing Iraq's formerly rich cultural history. The repercussions of those actions will shape Iraq's political trajectory in ways likely to further entrench sectarianism and to increase the long-term risk of social disorder.

The *muhasasa* system and its impact on governance have also impeded cooperation between disparate and competing heritage-related institutions. In the current politicized context, the responsibility falls on political elites themselves – rather

than Iraqi archaeologists, architects or heritage managers on their own – to address the future protection and continuity of Iraq's cultural property. Whether the political elites responsible for heritage predation have a desire to engage in ensuring the celebration of cultural property as a national good, however, remains questionable.

The capture of Iraq's cultural resources by political parties means that key institutions such as the SBAH will likely remain underfunded and weak. Funding the basic protection of archaeological sites, strengthening capacity and rehabilitating sites have become enormously difficult, with the SBAH now encouraging international organizations to undertake work that prior to 2003 it was largely doing itself. However, international organizations cannot replace domestic state institutions, and the neglect of large sections of cultural heritage under the SBAH's circumscribed authority inspires little confidence in future Iraqi stewardship of the heritage and archaeology sectors. International cultural institutions and donors also have a responsibility to work towards peace, neutrality and impartiality. These concepts should be operationalized in a 'do-no-harm' code of conduct and ethics-based principles that should be developed for the international heritage sector, especially in relation to conflict-affected contexts.

To address Iraq's cultural heritage crises and its ongoing, mostly unaddressed, emergencies – not least including the legacies and impacts of four decades of conflict – policymakers in Iraq need to elevate cultural heritage to the highest level of priority. Rather than dismissing cultural heritage as an issue of little relevance in the context of more pressing day-to-day concerns, central state actors and others who preside over Iraq's national interests must develop effective partnerships to protect, safeguard and ensure the continuity of heritage – and to cultivate its potential economic role in income and employment generation. Cultural heritage, in this sense, should be viewed as an economic resource, offering the prospect of supporting Iraq's long-term prosperity and nation-building. In this context, heritage management and protection should also be treated as important for national security interests.

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# 07

# Recommendations

**Ensuring the continuity and protection of Iraq’s cultural heritage should be the starting point for policies around cultural recovery. Domestic institutions and actors will be central to this effort, but international organizations also have a role to play.**

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New national and international support mechanisms and programmes are needed to address the current emergency in Iraq’s cultural heritage and to initiate a sustainable recovery. Strengthening Iraqi civil society and state institutions to overcome cultural loss should be a priority, but enlightened action is also required on the part of domestic religious endowments as well as by international heritage institutions and donors. While a complete list of recommendations and suggestions for support would be too numerous to propose in this paper, key actions for strengthening Iraq’s cultural heritage are outlined below.<sup>93</sup>

## **For Iraqi government and heritage institutions:**

- Transform the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities into a ‘front-line’ institution and allocate adequate budgets to support cultural rehabilitation and recovery.
- Develop a strategic cultural heritage fund that should be managed by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities and international cultural and funding institutions. Such a fund would strengthen national and international efforts to address urgent repair, conservation and documentation needs. A charter of principles should be drawn up to guide the fund’s work. The fund should be supported by international state agencies, experts, museums, and other cultural and funding bodies to build the confidence and capacity of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities, and allow it to address

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<sup>93</sup> See also UNESCO (2007), ‘Final Recommendations: International Coordination Committee for the Safeguarding of the Cultural Heritage of Iraq’, Third Plenary Session, 13–14 November 2007, [http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/pdf/FinalRecommendations\\_ICC\\_September2007](http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/pdf/FinalRecommendations_ICC_September2007).

urgent and rapidly developing policy priorities. Such an intervention should be designed with a view to offering long-term international support to a mix of emergency and strategic programmes.

- Create a national cultural heritage strategy, including prioritizing best use of international funding to ensure that international support aligns with Iraq's own heritage priorities. Ensure the SBAH develops a long-term strategy for strengthening its management.
- Conduct needs assessments in partnership with the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities to plan and develop safeguarding and protection strategies. Currently, major elements of Iraq's national heritage – including, among others, those pertaining to film, music, art, manuscripts and museums – require urgent support. A series of assessments should be prepared by the ministry coordinating with other relevant institutions, and assistance should be a matter of priority. There is a particularly urgent need for documentation of Iraq's stolen cultural objects, including the preparation of a professional database in partnership with international institutions such as INTERPOL.
- Establish a national heritage conservation and training institute at the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities to support the development of good practices in conservation and protection. Given the current situation of cultural collapse, such an initiative should be supported by a broad group of relevant international organizations and funders. It should include the possibility of placements of regional and international conservation experts within the SBAH and other institutions to address Iraq's cultural degradation.
- Strengthen existing legal frameworks and, where possible, promote the depoliticization of identity and cultural heritage through education, support to civil society organizations, universities and the preparation of a national charter on cultural heritage principles.
- Develop a framework with the KRG to manage archaeological and cultural assets in the KRI. Create a working arrangement for the care and protection of archaeological assets, including those in the KRI and those controlled by the religious endowments.
- Work with the Ministries of Education and of Higher Education and Scientific Research to develop modern, fit-for-purpose history, archaeology and heritage curriculums. Promote an inclusive understanding of Iraq's past and develop the theoretical and practical skills needed to protect and develop Iraq's heritage.
- Promote and celebrate nationally symbols of Iraq's shared culture and pluralist heritage, including through education and national awareness campaigns.
- Reform Iraqi laws and regulatory systems to ensure that external funding is monitored by Iraqi state authorities. Currently, international funding in Iraq is outside Iraqi law systems, which provides significant opportunities for corruption and mismanagement of resources.
- Ensure that international, US and European government and private sector funding is held to financial scrutiny, and that project outputs and funding bring benefits to the people of Iraq. Develop systems for monitoring foreign

and Iraqi money in relation to cultural heritage projects. Ensure that Iraq's anti-corruption institutions, including the Oversight and Anti-Corruption Authority, are involved in monitoring Iraqi and non-Iraqi funded cultural heritage projects in terms of financial scrutiny.

- Develop models and practices for the effective involvement and participation of communities and society in the protection and celebration of cultural heritage.
- Develop Iraq's own research and studies capacity in relation to cultural heritage, particularly through the SBAH Research and Studies Unit and Iraqi universities.
- Work towards a post-oil economy that prioritizes Iraq's national cultural heritage and generates heritage-related jobs.

## **For religious endowments:**

- Engage in national dialogue, including with NGOs and communities, about the protection and safeguarding of Iraq's cultural heritage and the need to work towards common goals devised in partnership with central state institutions.
- Seek advice and approval from the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities for any major restructuring of, or architectural changes to, religious and cultural heritage sites. Ensure that such interventions meet internationally recognized standards.
- Work towards alternative, non-destructive development models for shrine-related areas. Build trust by fully engaging with communities and wider society.

## **For international donor and research communities:**

- Develop strategic partnerships with the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities to support institutional capacity, and to ensure that appropriate programmes are implemented to address Iraq's heritage emergency. Long-term projects – based on assessments of Iraq's own needs rather than on the priorities of foreign partners – will be an essential component of cultural rehabilitation and on-the-ground effectiveness.
- International operators and funding organizations should directly support the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities as a central component of their work in Iraq.
- Integrate cultural heritage within the highest echelons of international policy and advocacy, including in peacebuilding frameworks and political mediation. Work towards a new political engagement with Iraq's heritage institutions, including with religious endowments and organizations in the KRI.



- Develop intersectoral and national programmes to strengthen Iraq's heritage and highlight its potential positive role in rebuilding Iraq's national identity. Such programmes should be based on tangible outputs, and should focus on civil society, universities and communities, as well as government authorities.
- Support and strengthen coordination with the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Antiquities through the establishment of an internationally connected database of looted artefacts, manuscripts, monuments and sites and cultural objects.
- Prepare and abide by humanitarian principles enshrined in a 'do-no-harm' code of conduct in relation to cultural heritage.
- Ensure that projects funded in Iraq are held to the highest standards of quality and accountability in terms of finances and outputs. Strengthen financial transparency of international projects and share financial expenditures and detailed reports on Iraqi projects with state authorities.
- Combat corruption and mismanagement of resources in international heritage projects and ensure Iraqi partners and facilitators are held to account in cases of clear corruption and the misuse of funds.
- Ensure that research and fieldwork teams from outside of Iraq obtain approval from both the SBAH and the local antiquities directorates before beginning any work. Such organizations should also seek approval before announcing funding competitions for projects. The decision to finance a restoration project cannot be left solely in the hands of external funding agencies. Such decisions must also be authorized by the SBAH.

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Cover image: A guard in front of a replica of the Ishtar Gate at the ancient city of Babylon, Iraq, 20 December 2016.

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