

Iraqi National Library and Archives: recovering from looting and destruction

Unlike the National Museum of Iraq, which was looted with a number of priceless items still remaining unaccounted for, the Iraqi National Library and Archives (INLA) was almost completely destroyed during the 2003 Iraq war.

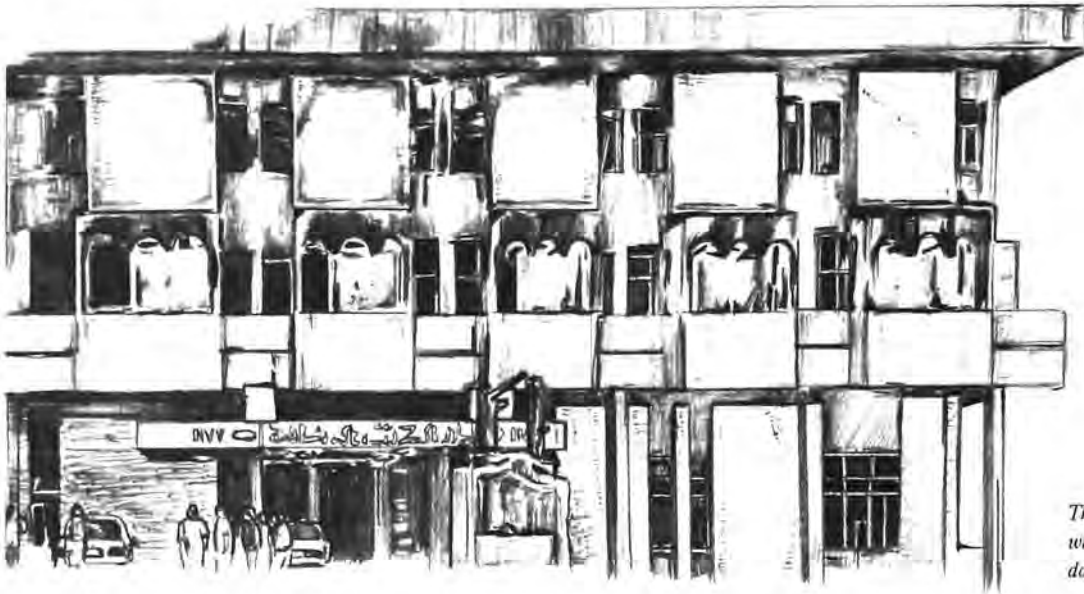
An excerpt of a report by Robert Fisk of the *Independent* (London) offers a glimpse of the scene during the destruction:

*Yesterday, there was the burning of books. First came the looters, then the arsonists. It was the final chapter in the sacking of Baghdad. The National Library and Archives, a priceless treasure of Ottoman historical documents, including the old royal archives of Iraq, were turned to ashes in 3,000 degrees of heat. Then the library of Korans at the Ministry of Religious Endowment was set ablaze... [F]or Iraq, this is Year Zero with the destruction of the antiquities in the Museum of Archaeology on Saturday and the burning of the National Archives and then the Koranic library, the cultural identity of Iraq is being erased. Why? Who set these fires? For what insane purpose is this heritage being destroyed?*¹



After the burning of the library and archives

¹ Robert Fisk, "Library Books, Letters and Priceless Documents Are Set Ablaze in Final Chapter of the Sacking of Baghdad" <http://www.thememoryhole.org/history/iraq-natl-library.htm>



The charred INLA building, which had housed copies of all doctoral theses, rare books, etc.

Dating to 1977, the three-storey INLA building housed all types of local publications, including copies of all doctoral theses, as well as rare old books on Baghdad and the region, historically important books on Arabic linguistics, volume of antique manuscripts in Arabic that had been gradually transformed into printed versions, and manuscripts from the Ottoman and Abbasid periods.² Moreover, it even had records of the dark years of Iraq's modern history, including handwritten accounts of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, with personal photographs and military diaries, and microfiche copies of Arabic newspapers going back to the early 1900s.³

Through its collection and recording of all types of local publications, together with old and modern records and documentation of official and semi-official files and private papers, the INLA was not only central to the development of Iraqi culture⁴ as the principal source of information on the country but was also a major cultural treasure house of the Arab world itself. Baghdad was, for almost a thousand years, the cultural capital of the Arab world. Its people were the most literate population in the Middle East. It was once said that Arabic books were written in Cairo, printed in Beirut and read in Baghdad. Genghis Khan's grandson, Hulagu Khan, burnt the city in the 13th century, and the Tigris was said to be black with ink of books. Now, in the 21st century, the modern Mongols ransacked and gutted the INLA,

² Charles J Hanley, "Looters Ransack Iraq's National Library" <http://www.thememoryhole.org/history/iraq-natl/library.htm>

³ Fisk, "Library Books, Letters and Priceless Documents Are Set Ablaze in Final Chapter of the Sacking of Baghdad"

⁴ Saad Eskander, "Prelude to Iraqi National Library and Archivers", *Iraqi National Library and Archives* <http://www.iraqnl.org/wpeng/>

and “the black ashes of thousands of ancient documents filled the skies of Iraq.”⁵

It is unclear who started the fires. Amidst the worldwide condemnations of what a UNESCO official called “a catastrophe of the cultural heritage of Iraq”,⁶ the U.S.-led coalition forces were particularly criticized for their failure to prevent or stop the looting and arson. While privately admitting that no plans had been made to protect the antiquities from looters and arsonists, as opposed to ensuring that historical sites were not caught in the fighting itself, the U.S. Defence Department rejected charges in a letter from nine British archaeologists (published in a British newspaper) that private collectors were “persuading the Pentagon to relax legislation that protects Iraq’s heritage by prevention of sales abroad.”⁷ Likewise, the American Council for Cultural Policy, a New York-based coalition of about 60 collectors, dealers, and others, insisted that it had “no special treatment” in this matter by the U.S. government.⁸

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The devastation was almost total. The whole INLA building had been gutted. Almost all of its contents are reported to have been destroyed by fire. According to Charles J Hanley of *Associated Press*, except for wooden catalogue card drawers and a carved wooden service counter which had somehow escaped the fire, nothing was left in the INLA's main wing but its charred walls and ceilings, and moulds of ashes. The courtyard was also littered with long rolls of microfilm.⁹ According to Dr Saad Eskander, the INLA director, the extent of the losses are: archival (60-percent); rare books (95-percent); and manuscripts (25-percent).¹⁰

⁵ Fisk, “Library Books, Letters and Priceless Documents Are Set Ablaze in Final Chapter of the Sacking of Baghdad”

⁶ Oliver Burkeman, “Ancient Archives Lost in Baghdad Library Blaze” <http://www.thememoryhole.org/history/iraq-natl-library.htm>

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ Hanley, “Looters Ransack Iraq’s National Library”

¹⁰ “Diary of Dr Saad Eskander, Director of the Iraq National Library and Archives (Covering the Period November 2006 - July 2007)”, *The British Library: The World’s Knowledge* <http://www.bl.uk/cgi-bin./print.cgi?url=/iraqdiary>

Having spent 21 years in exile, Eskander returned to Baghdad in December 2003 with his wife, and was appointed director of the INLA. He said that, before his return from exile, he had always dreamed of coming back “to participate in building a new society, a new Iraq based on equality, on cultural and ethnic diversity.”¹¹ Now back in Baghdad, where he had been born to a Kurdish family, he has found how awesome the task would really be in rebuilding the INLA; let alone the whole Iraq society.

He said in an interview he gave to the *BBC* that the first thing he did after being appointed the INLA director was to search for the remaining Hebrew books. Under Iraq’s ex-leader, Saddam Hussein, all Jewish schools and synagogues were closed down, and the Ministry of the Interior confiscated all their books. Eskander has so far succeeded in saving a huge number, some of which were published in the 17th and 18th centuries.¹²

The INLA director describes his task as an “Ali Baba mission”, driving a truck across Baghdad, which was still in the throes of fighting, to “re-appropriate” some of the materials. The greatest challenge, however, was the horrific conditions he and his staff have been facing almost on a daily basis, especially the high level of violence that includes kidnap and murder. According to Eskander, they are targeted by radical Islamists because they are librarians. “Archivists like me represent secular culture and they want to stop



Librarians rebuilding the archive collections

¹¹ Quoted in Jane Beresford, “The Baghdad Librarian’s Story, *BBC News* 2008/01/08 http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/7177208.stm

¹² *Ibid*

normality and disrupt our daily lives.”¹³ Five of his staff have been killed in sectarian violence, and Eskander himself received a death threat in 2005.¹⁴

The religious extremist assault on intellectual freedom in the new Iraq was most appallingly encapsulated by the bombing of al-Mutanabbi Street, known in Baghdad as the street of booksellers. For decades under Saddam, the street was the place where illegal books were copied underground, and now it is the source of 95 percent of the INLA’s new acquisitions. Eskander explained: “It was a symbol of resistance. After the downfall of Saddam, new publications started to emerge on that street, especially progressive books on sociology and so on. It represented the new Iraq and that was why it was targeted.”¹⁵

Strongly committed to contributing to the new Iraq, Eskander and his staff continue their hard work. The INLA is actually slowly being rebuilt, thanks in part to donations from abroad as well as local purchases. Its staff has also steadily grown in number. According to news reports, the security environment near the library improved substantially towards the end of 2007, though residual terrorism and sectarian violence plus bureaucratic corruption still pose significant challenges for the library

Contribution by Theera Nuchpiam

Illustration by Sakulchat Chatrakul Na Ayuddhaya

¹³ Quoted in *ibid*

¹⁴ “Heretical Librarian: A conservative librarian, documenting radical Islamism’s war on intellectual freedom (and other topics of interest) <http://hereticallibrarian.blogspot.com/2008/01/two-profiles-of-saad-eskander.html>

¹⁵ Quoted in *ibid*