

**Unity in Diversity:
The Cultural Mosaic of Iraq**

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Introduction

Culture is a dynamic system. It reaches through the entirety of a social system to codify and organize social behavior. No single institution, political body, or social movement can create culture. Rather, culture is conditioned and formed over time by the combined weight of collective history and experience. It is an expression, the product of ongoing social interaction and learning that acts to create, (re)create and transmit meaning in society.

In a post-conflict setting, culture is often in crisis, standing at the cross roads between its cruel memories and vibrant dreams of the future. In approaching the reconstruction of Iraq within a cultural context, the goal should not be to create any specific ‘culture’ of reconciliation or transformation, but rather to enable positive avenues for Iraqis, on their own terms, to conceive of new cultural symbols and modes of expression whose combined voice will shape a new inclusive model of Iraqi citizenship. This takes the form, for example, of ensuring adequate public forums in the new Iraq to include libraries, parks, public art work, digital space (e.g. new media co-ops), and local (free) press outlets; spaces in which Iraqis can define their culture, come to terms with collective trauma, and through it, their political future.

It is within the context of viewing culture as both a (historical) voice and system of behavior, that we make recommendations concerning the cultural dimensions of political reconstruction of Iraq. In line with the UNESCO ‘First Cultural Forum on Iraq’, these are conceived not as a critique, but rather as ‘strategies’ that could be employed by international parties assisting the new Iraqi state and/or adopted by the members of the new Iraqi state. These strategies include:

1. Political Culture: The Institutional Framework of the New Iraq

- a. If political culture reflects the memory of society, the new Iraqi state will have a culture that is influenced both by its past memories as well as its new initiatives. The historic deprivation of certain communities leaves us today with an initial environment, or political culture, of suspicion and antagonism.
- b. Democracy will require certain universal rights to balance all interests and defuse existing fears and antagonisms. To create the possibility for a new political culture, which will enable the many communities within Iraq to have equal access to the political and economic arena while ensuring they maintain equal dignity, requires certain political mechanisms to preserve autonomy both at the individual and

communal levels. At the most basic level, a committee should be established to discuss political culture in relation to the following:

- i. *Federalism*: Iraq will require a federal model that is unique, merging what is best of different working models (American, Swiss, Belgian, Canadian and others) while factoring in the context of historic relations between Iraq's many religious groups.
- ii. *Federal Cities*: In order to avert conflict of interests within a federal system over key, multi-ethnic and multi-religious cities there is a need to develop a system of 'federal cities' that maintain a degree of regional and federal autonomy.
- iii. *Reconciliation Commissions*: because of the role of memory in shaping culture, Iraqis will need to develop a mechanism specific to their own customs and traditions (i.e. *musalahah*) for 'truth telling', healing, and reconciliation.

2. Protecting the Individual Rights of Iraqis

- a. Democracy represents the flowering of the individual. It is an indigenous and delicate flower that only flourishes when deeply rooted in the dreams and hopes of the great majority of a nation.
- b. Before delineating the cultural nexus of political reconstruction, a universal basis of individual rights must be enshrined, and widely promoted.
- c. A formula for the future of Iraq must balance the rights of states and the rights of people through adopting universally acknowledged standards of the highest order (e.g. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) and synthesizing them the Islamic traditions of social justice.
- d. In turn, there should be an effort to situate the legal basis of cultural rights in Iraq within the context of international human rights standards.
- e. The new Iraqi state through its institutions and guiding constitutional order should acknowledge the universal basis of human and cultural rights through a 'Bill of Rights'. This document should be written by a large convention and be open and subject to debate. This document should represent the combined effort of each identity community in Iraq and be open to debate across Iraqi society. The international community, in conjunction with Iraqi political leaders, should

establish a commission to research the requirements for holding such a public convention.

- f. To coincide with this movement towards universalizing principles of human and cultural rights, there must be simultaneously an effort made to both educate Iraqis on their rights and promote social venues for discussing these rights. This takes the form both of extensive public education campaigns as well as including human rights curricula within schools.
- g. Along with education projects, there must be a sustained effort to engage each community and within them a range of individual interests in articulating the context of rights within Iraq. This takes the form of establishing, for example, a ‘Muslim’ basis for citizenship (i.e. answering the question of what are the obligations and meaning of Muslim citizenship in the absence of authoritative religious guidance) and determining what will be imported from Islamic conceptions of social justice in creating a basis for social models of participatory decision-making. This will require establishing a separate committee within the ‘Bill of Rights’ constitution where both democratic activists, scholars, Imams, and Muslim legal scholars can develop an articulation of the Muslim basis for universal human rights and through them citizenship in the new Iraq. The flowering of the individual as citizen within the Islamic community inspires new avenues of meaning for Islamic notions of social justice.
- h. Local artists have a vital role to play in creating new public symbols (monuments, plays, movies, music, etc.) of these rights within an Iraqi context. This has a secondary effect of assisting society in engaging in post-trauma healing. There is a real demand for using arts to tell the story of past abuses and visions of a better future.

3. Building Open Public Spaces: The Forums of Iraqi Democracy

- a. The backbone of all democratic forms of government are social spaces in which diverse communities and individuals can engage in dialogue that acts as a non-violent form of social interaction.
- b. It is only in forming new ‘public spaces’ where Iraqis can find non-violent forms of social and political expression that productive cultural transformation can begin.
- c. There should be a committee established to determine, historically, what spaces have functioned as public forms in Iraq. A committee could act in conjunction with the new Cultural Ministry to secure international assistance in funding public commissions to include:

- i. *Commissions for culturally specific art forms within Iraqi public spaces*: just as pictures and statues of Saddam used to stand at every corner, so to should Iraqi authorities with the financial assistance of the international community seek to create a new renaissance whereby images of ALL Iraqi faces adorn the society. Such a renaissance would have significant regional consequences, possibly even acting as a catalyst to issue in a new ‘golden’ era of Arab culture and development.
 - ii. *Commissions for historical research (archeological sites, historical texts, art restoration, etc.) upon coexistence within Iraqi communities historically*: examine the history of Iraq as a mosaic of many cultures, the meeting point of many traditions and peoples.
 - iii. *Commissions for preserving and protecting ancient and modern religious sites*: The rich religious history of Iraq should be preserved and safeguarded so that successive generations do not seek to rewrite history through destroying and/or rebuilding over historic sites. In addition, many of the older religious sites are greatly in need of repair in order that they may be shared with the public and future generations.
- d. Efforts should be made to fund the development of culturally specific public spaces while creating other proven public forms in Iraqi society where individuals can exchange information and experience.
 - e. This includes the development of libraries and museums as the keepers of historical memory and could conceivably extend, if deemed appropriate by the Iraqi government post-elections to using those spaces within the context of political action (i.e. voting and town hall type meetings occurring within libraries or culturally unique public forums).
 - f. Media/Journalism should also be conceived of as public space.
 - g. There must be a sustained effort to ensure a free, open and professional press within the new Iraq with international organizations working to assist (vs. dictate) the formation of such outlets. This includes:
 - i. Internationally sponsored training programs in media professionalism.
 - ii. Fostering ‘common ground’ journalism (for example, collaboratively authored papers by people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds).

- iii. Creating journalist exchange programs where international news outlets such as the New York Times, The Times of India, The Globe and Mail, the Guardian, etc., set up exchange programs with local Iraqi news outlets.
- iv. Designing new media collectives in major urban areas: creating open and accessible spaces where any individual can explore new media and express themselves digitally (example: Sarai in India, a new media co-op set up to allow all of New Delhi's citizens rich or poor, Muslim, Sikh, or Hindu to experiment with new media technology and digital forms of expression).

4. Inclusive Education Systems: Citizenship in a Multicultural State

- a. The Iraqi education system at each level (from pre-school through post-graduate education) must establish a basis for linguistic and cultural equality while providing a basis for conceiving of a unified social identity. There is a community and socially oriented basis for education. Helping the new Iraqi to coexist in a country with a diverse ethnic, religious, and historical context means engaging the whole of society, through the education system, in a dialogic process of searching for truth and meaning. It means acknowledging the many voices and truths of Iraq, including disenfranchised communities, and enabling each community to exchange the best of its values and experiences.
- b. Belief in the primacy of human values in designing social spaces. All education must be grounded in a guiding ethical order. This means ensuring that there is first and foremost no relative deprivation based upon class, gender, ethnicity or religion in the classroom, and opening up a public space for rediscovering the applicability of past experiences and values to the present.
- c. Acknowledging the utility of technology in enabling innovative solutions. Iraq should remember its place in the Islamic world as one of the modern and historical centers of learning. We should work with Iraqis to bring this tradition to the forefront by embracing high standards of excellence in math and science based education. At the same time, we should explore innovative ways to use technology to explore the liberal arts including literature, music, visual arts, and theatrical and tradition performance forms. This synergy between technology and traditional art forms will provide a platform for new social spaces.

- d. In constructing a new educational system for the Iraqi state, every effort should be made to acknowledge the importance of human dignity. This means acknowledging both the worth of every individual and their perspective in the class room as well as taking the time to acknowledge that poverty is more than mere material deprivation. It represents a condition in which your dignity has been removed, and traditional ways of knowing, like those of the Marsh Arabs, are construed as antithetical to modern progress. Instead of defining society in opposition (modern vs. pre-modern), the new education system should seek to critically engage local as well as global traditions. Within this, an emphasis should be placed upon the function of dignity in creating social cohesion.
- e. To achieve these ends, it is necessary to establish a working group on 'Citizenship and Education'.

5. Creating Cosmopolitan Centers: The Blossoming Flowers of the New Iraq

- a. Make a commitment towards investing in cosmopolitan centers within the context of a new Iraqi state.
- b. Multi-ethnic, multi-religious cities like Baghdad and Kirkuk require dual infrastructure and culturally specific investment.
- c. Cultural investment is conceived here as investment in public spaces and art/media forums through which Iraqis can develop new voices and synthesize new understandings of a long and proud history to include:
 - i. Development of centers for preserving and highlighting cultural heritage, including both large scale activities and smaller, community focused projects (i.e. community art centers and theaters).
 - ii. Small business development loans and grants for cafes, local markets, and urban renewal projects in key districts that increase the overall quality of life for all persons including children, the disabled, and the elderly.
- d. Through creating vibrant cosmopolitan centers of coexistence within the center of Iraq, one enables the flower of coexistence to blossom, sending the message of tolerance and harmony and through them ultimately reducing ethnic and religious competition over strategic cities and associated resources.
- e. A special commission could be appointed to formulate recommendations for investment in urban diversity and renewal.

6. The Intersection of Culture, Development and Ecology

- a. There is a need to think about the interfaces between culture and development as well as culture and ecology.
- b. In this perspective, development is a historical process through which human beings choose and create their future within the context of their environment to achieve a humanist and creative society. It is concerned with the dignity of the individual – that level of self-esteem and self-awareness that is secure and self-accepting and the restructuring of the institutions and culture of society to support such ends.
- c. The late American mathematician and futurist Willis Harman (Stanford University) identified poverty as the erosion of a subsistence culture.
 - i. “We need to recall that poverty is not the state of being without money; it is the state of having had one’s communal subsistence culture weakened by the prevalence of a monetized culture which one is marginalized. Indigenous cultures lasted for centuries without bringing about environmental degradation.” (Harman, unpublished essay: ‘Our Hopeful Future: Creating a Sustainable Global Society’ June 1995, p. 4)
 - ii. The disruption of traditional subsistence cultures is often accompanied by significant ecological deterioration and poverty.
- d. Case: The Marsh Arabs
 - i. There is a need to provide assistance as the Marsh Arabs adapt to tremendous change.
 - ii. This investment must seek to deter further cultural erosion while providing an example of culturally adaptive forms of economic empowerment.
 - iii. Restoration of historic marshlands should seek to be part of a larger economic and cultural revival of key geographic regions reflecting the history of the Iraqi people and their migrations and adaptations to environmental change.