"Speaking Truth to Power?" Intellectuals in Iraqi Baathist Cultural Production

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How free can intellectuals (writers, poets, and artists) be in a political system that exercises a huge amount of pressure, control, and censorship, forcing them to conform to its heavily skewed ideological and historical perspectives? The core question of a dispute among Iraqi intellectuals since 2003 has been: Who has the right to speak for Iraq? This question underlines the need to delve deeper; it touches upon the urgency of re-examining the political and cultural dynamics of Baathist rule, the cultural institutions of which provided a restrictive framework within an overall atmosphere of intimidation, control, and surveillance. During this time, Iraqi intellectuals took on various attitudes, varying from compliance and collaboration, to resistance to the system or outright exile. The rift between Iraqi intellectuals is mostly between those on the "inside" and those on the "outside." This paper discusses the relationship between intellectuals and power and the peculiarities of Iraqi cultural production in Baathist times, and then analyses the role of intellectuals through two case studies, debating the strategies of survival and complicity.[1]

Intellectuals and Power

Who has the right to speak for Iraq? In the dispute among Iraqi intellectuals who belong to the "inside" and those who belong to the "outside," there is, however, no clear line between the two—although this is the terminology used by Iraqis themselves. Many intellectuals fled the country as recently as the 1990s to become critics of its policies.[2] Others chose to remain inside the country, for divergent reasons. Some of those "inside" chose to actively support the system, becoming its mouthpiece; others outwardly submitted to the political system while attempting to subvert the official discourse. Still others tried to keep silent and inconspicuous, somehow trying to keep their integrity. Openly opposing the system would have meant to expose oneself to severe dangers and attacks on life and property. Many had already gone into exile in the 1960s and '70s, and now—in the post-2003 era—former Baath officials are living in exile.

This Iraqi dispute on the freedom of intellectual activity is not only of academic concern; it is an ongoing debate among intellectuals. The main issue is the attitude toward Saddam Hussein, the Baath system, and the wars. Let's not forget that, up to his final days, Saddam Hussein was perceived by many on "the Arab streets" as a leader who dared to stand up to the

West (no matter how heavily he had been supported by Western powers during the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988!), as single-handedly defending the increasingly weakened notion of Arab nationalism, and of maintaining "Arab pride." Arab savior or brutal dictator, these conflicting perspectives have led to bitter in-fighting, and are mirrored in the dispute about cultural production and literary merit.

Dictatorial, repressive systems tend to employ intellectual works such as literature in the service of politics, thus creating dissonance between creative autonomy and the societal and political instrumentalization of artistic production. Fully aware of the inherent power of language and history, the Baath apparatus subjected language to its own ideology and agenda, abusing it to fit its "truth."[3] Bengio rightly speaks of the "rape of language" (203-11)[4] to describe a process whereby official language becomes devoid of meaning, yet full of phrases meant to construct a new reality. Lisa Wedeen's analysis of the Syrian Baath's system of compliance through hollow rhetoric and personality cult (723) also applies to the techniques and methods of the Iraqi Baath regime. Characterized by control, censorship, and the promotion of conforming artists, a cultural machinery was established in Iraq which "Baathificated" cultural production and subordi-

nated it to the principles of a monolithic literary canon—similar in some aspects to the cultural production of the former USSR (Kliems, Raßloff, and Zajac). Confronted by a dominant ideology paired with a hegemonic narrative of self and of history, cultural production was very often turned into an instrument of state power, reflecting the increasing militarization of society. The production of such an identificatory literary and historical narrative proved vital to the system and the construction of a new Baathist identity, with Saddam Hussein personally shaping the political discourse with his personality cult, choice of words, images, and myths (Bengio 123; Sassoon 68-9, 76).

The fact that Baathist discourse proved strong and exclusive enough to stifle opposition—at least for a time—and that censorship and control were tolerated and in some sense internalized by intellectuals *en masse* (artists, authors, and writers alike), has been explained in various ways. Toby Dodge analyzes the relationship of dependency and complicity between the state and intellectuals as a "coalition of guilt" (66). More sociologically, Isam al-Khafaji attests to the "atomization" of Iraqi society by the Baath, which facilitated the dependence of the individual on the patron-state through a kind of "vertical connection" (79-80; Davis 7). Sami Zubaida also stresses the

individuals' dependence on their relationships with members of the ruling clique. In this vein, Kanan Makiya in his analysis of state-individual relationship suggests that "complicity" ("Is Iraq Viable 30"; "All levels" 87ff.) played a vital role in the strategy of Baathist ideologists since they succeeded in co-opting and involving various layers of Iraqi society in support—if not always in the direct production—of official discourse: "The peculiarity of the Iraqi regime therefore is to have involved enormous numbers of people directly in its crimes over twenty years, while making the rest of the population at the very least complicit in their commission" (*Monument* 129). Achim Rohde stresses the polycratic character of Saddam Hussein's regime which was "(…) a bargain between the ruler and the ruled, however 'patriarchal' it might have been, and not a totalitarian one way street" (160). Although the analysis of state-society or state-individual relations may vary, all agree that the linkage between the two was tight and direct, preventing opposing group solidarity.

Now, in such a surrounding, what is to be expected of an intellectual? What role does he take on in society?[5] In a broader context, Edward Said has defined the role of an intellectual as to "speak truth to power" (85-102), echoing Noam Chomsky's famous saying of the mid-1960s that

"[i]t is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies" (23). Vaclav Havel, a writer, activist, and former president of the Czech Republic, defines an intellectual as someone who

> […] should constantly disturb, should bear witness to the misery of the world, should be provocative by being independent, should rebel against all hidden and open pressure and manipulations, should be the chief doubter of systems, of power and its incantations, should be a witness to their mendacity. (167)

This normative view of the qualities an intellectual should possess may lead to the conclusion that intellectuals *usually* or *automatically* would oppose established authorities. However, juxtaposed to this normative approach stands the fact of mutual dependency between state and intellectuals. While intellectuals hold some kind of symbolic power, they are nonetheless subordinate to those with economic and political power—or, as Bourdieu put it, they are "a dominated fraction of the dominant class" (qtd. in Karabel 209), and there is mutual if ambivalent attraction, benefit, and dependence. Once a modus vivendi between intellectuals and authorities is reached with intellectuals willingly and consciously lending legitimacy to the prevailing order in return for privileges and other benefits, they will rather work toward reinforcing rather than undermining existing authority, as Jerome Karabel has found out. He even comes to the provocative, sobering conclusion that "what needs to be explained is less why intellectuals reach accommodations with the status quo than what it is that causes some of them, at certain historical moments, to rebel" (ibid.). According to him, for intellectuals to resist and oppose the system rather than accommodate it, several factors must be present, among them (1) the presence of well-organized groups, (2) a high number of "unattached" intellectuals, (3) a distinctive identity of the intellectual group, (4) a "moderately repressive" system that lacks the means and/or will to stamp out dissent, (5) divisions within the ruling group, and (6) a historically grounded cultural repertoire of resistance (211-14). In the case of Iraq, most of these conditions did not exist. As to Karabel's first condition, there were no well-organized groups. None of the former opposition groups which had formed mid-century had remained intact over the course of Saddam's long rule: not the Iraqi Communist Party which was crushed mercilessly at the end of the 1970s, nor Shiite resistance movements such as the *Daʿwa* group, nor important scholars like those of the Sadr Family. By the mid-80s, all had been silenced or forced to flee in exile. Second and third: Intellectuals (writers, journalists, and artists) were mostly embedded in some kind of official workplace, usually the Ministry of Information and Culture, the press, or some other kind of official state organization; e.g., they were dependent on the state and the goodwill of state officials. This made the formation of a distinctive identity of the intellectuals as a group difficult; they did not organize or even mobilize themselves into collective action. Fourth: the political system was by no means "moderately repressive" and did have the means and the will to crush dissent; and fifth, there were no visible divisions within the ruling clique. If there ever had been (as might be deducted by the sudden death of Iraq's defense minister, Saddam Hussein's brother-in-law ʿAdnan Khairallah in 1989),[6] they were immediately and ruthlessly obliterated. The conditions for the formation of overt collective resistance were not given. Karabel concludes:

> Put simply, terror works. (…) Given the considerable benefits of compliance and the high costs of opposition, it is hardly surprising that most intellectuals—including even those elite segments of the cultural and political intelligentsia most prone to dissent—will reach an accommodation with the powers-that-be. (220)

Although the decade-long sanctions after the disastrous Kuwait invasion with its huge humanitarian toll, societal deterioration, and the international and regional isolation of the country harmed the Iraqi population immensely, the regime's success in depicting Iraq as the true victim of international aggression and injustice seems to have fostered an even stronger bond of solidarity.

Cultural Production in Baathist Times

However, one of Karabel's preconditions seems to be met: the cultural repertoire of resistance. Within the literary canon, literary tropes such as the fatherland, death for the sake of the fatherland, and the notion of the poet as "speaker of the nation" have a long tradition in Iraq. Be it in the revolutionary poetry of the 1920 revolution (Tramontini, "Fatherland" 161-86); or in national icons Maʿruf al-Rusafi (1875-1945), Jamil Sidqi al-Zahawi (1863-1936) and Muhammad al-Jawahiri (1899-1997); or later in the committed poetry of Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926-1964) and his contemporaries up to the 1980s and beyond, this feeling of political responsibility informed them and their audience's perception of their role. These poets created and could refer to a canon of easily understood notions and tropes with which they fought colonial occupation, foreign interference, and homegrown

grievances alike. Now, the question arises: How did poets in the Baath era, especially in the 1980s, make use of this canon? Did they speak truth to power?

Aiming at producing a kind of literature compatible with its ideology, especially in times of external threat like during the Iran-Iraq War, Baathist cultural production made use of this literary heritage and repertoire with the aim of boosting national pride and gaining legitimacy. To mobilize and motivate poets and the public alike, the notion of national sacrifice was made official doctrine in the 1980s. This notion had been in use since the 1920s when poets called for resistance against foreign domination; in the 80s, however, it was perverted into a prescribed and state-ordered attitude: death for the homeland as national duty. As a consequence of this *Baathification*, poetry served as instrument for political influence.

Eulogizing the War

As mentioned before, intellectuals had several options for how to deal with power. The poet ʿAbd al-Razzaq ʿAbd al-Wahid (b. 1930) chose to become the "poet of the Qadisiyya" (the official name of the Iran-Iraq War), eulogizing the war:

> Your free blood is colocynth not to be tasted – so show the Persians its taste, oh Iraq / (…) // 'Tis a thousand (years)

that Rustam's head is telling – shivering while the necks did suffer // 'Tis a thousand (years) that Qādisiyya is threatening – fixed in their hearts, unbearable (…) // Oh you mountains of iron, hardened by a thousand years – the iron mountains amongst us shine forth // Oh Saladin who from our sanctuary – leapt up so that the horizons raised a cry by this // Oh you Euphrates of the twenties, oh you Tigris of blessing – be proud of them both and surround them, oh you comrades // It is your glory altogether, so rise – it is the eternal, the magnificent: Iraq! (8-13; Walther 86)

And, addressing Saddam Hussein,
You stood among the people like a radiant lance / you were Iraq, challenging and proud // The currents of Tigris and Euphrates in your eyes / were churning, the anger in them a cosmic space // You stood like a lance, had anyone dared to touch / the skies would have split and cracked // All Iraqis' eyes / watched humbly your shining eyes // And when you spoke it was as if our martyrs / all spoke with your voice for us to hear // They told us with your solemn voice that / it is Iraq alone, all other talk is false // (…) Oh you, Iraq's pride and glory / oh you best of all brothers, leaders, and all. (309, 311)

The militarization of the cultural domain is obvious since in the first poem the diction of the poem echoes official rhetoric, switching between denigration (the term "Persians" [Furs] instead of Iranians), and self-aggrandizing; the reference to the historical battle of Qadisiyya in which the Persians were defeated by Arabs, to great Arab conquerors and military leaders like Saladin, to the strength of the army ("mountains of iron"); to the 1920 revolution which took its course from the Euphrates; and the overarching theme: Iraq, the eternal fatherland. The eulogy for Saddam Hussein is equally telling: written in 1984 when no one believed in a quick victory anymore and when the death toll was already quite high, ʿAbd al-Wahid tried to mobilize his audience. The identification of Saddam with Iraq repeats the official rhetoric; in the course of the war, this personality cult and merging of Saddam with the country constituted a major move of the Baathist propaganda machinery which made criticism synonymous with not loving the fatherland. Saddam is depicted as a menacing figure against his adversaries, proud and provocative (like a lance), with all the forces of nature (rivers and skies) at his command; he is the personification of Iraq, with all the people devotedly hanging on his lips (and eyes). It is through him that the martyrs appeal to the audience, that the defense of Iraq became the highest priority.

The Art of Survival: Spaces of Freedom

But there were other ways of dealing more subtly with the notion of fatherland, and war. A good illustration of the poet's constant tightrope walk across Baathist discourse is ʿAdnan al-Saʾigh, who later on became estranged from the official rhetoric and increasingly emancipated himself from it. Born in Kufa in 1955, Saʾigh served at the frontlines in the Iran-Iraq War and—like all intellectuals working in government institutions—was subject to official cultural policies, and for a period accommodated them to a degree. In the early 1990s he went into exile in Sweden (now in the UK), becoming a prolific critic of the Baath regime. The following poem is an example of how the topos of the fatherland (*waṭan*) can be evoked without falling into the propagandistic, martial or nostalgic tone of Baathist poets, and without eulogizing the war. In his poem "Special condition" (1984), in the middle of the Iran-Iraq War, he wrote:

O Fatherland… I carry it in my ribs / And travel like the wind behind the words / In search / Of a verse / That I can live in, / In search / Of a word that won't get torn to shreds / In the anthologies of the poets, / In search / Of a forgotten sea / Where no boats will roam with the fishers of words, / In search / Of forests in the eyes of a woman / Where no bird or poet / Is stolen out of the trees of her spell, / In search / Of an inch of my fatherland / Where no flowers of fiery steel blossom / And no revolutionary, / In search / Of a rivulet / Which was not crossed over by a passerby, / In search / Of a little apple tree / Where lovers haven't carved their first dates, / In search / Of a coffee shop / Where Bayātī does not sit… and Ḥussayn Mardān, / In search / Of sidewalks / That won't show their beauty to passersby, / In search / Of a bridge / On which no breeze of Sayyāb's breath passes, / In search of… / O fatherland / Wandering has tired me / I slept at your bosom for days / Without a poem! (658-59)

Patriotic love is not a sentiment prescribed from above, but rather an individual experience of belonging, best described as everlasting search. Expressing this longing for the unattainable fatherland, Saʾigh evokes a melancholy, reflective atmosphere devoid of any superficial propaganda aims. The fatherland is defined by absence, by the constant search for it. However, in sharp contrast to ʿAbd al-Wahid's pathetic tone praising the war, Saʾigh reflects the relation between fatherland and poetry. Immediately in the first

verses, the search for language and its role in society are made clear: Poetry is meant to give shelter, to protect, to provide a feeling of belonging and of home. The next verse about the words "that won't get torn" constitutes a fairly direct attack on other (Baathist) poets who "shred their words." Saʾigh refutes the above-mentioned instrumentalization of language in official rhetoric, which denies it its basic function: to act as counter-discourse and to offer an alternative vision of reality. He demands a language that remains true to itself, to the meaning of words, and does not fall prey to hollow slogans. To underline this attitude and to forego the danger of being accused of being unpatriotic, he recalls the older generation of famous Iraqi poets like Sayyab, Bayati, and Mardan, whose patriotism is beyond any doubt. For him, the love for the fatherland is an individual experience which cannot be separated from the self ("I carry it in my ribs"); not a submission to rules from above. This fatherland exists in minute spaces where there is neither war, nor fighting—only longing for peace. So, there were some spaces of "freedom," of maneuvering oneself between censorship and control while keeping one's integrity.[7] Saʾigh's poetry demonstrates the self-assertion of the poet as an individual with his own mind and plans, not subject to any external power. The poet and playwright Yusuf al-Saʾigh, one of his mentors, acknowledges and praises Adnan al-Saʾigh's literary merits straightforwardly:

The artistic value of this anthology confirms one fundamental truth: it is the expression of an authentic poetic experience (…) it strives to be original and keep its very own voice. (…) We can be sure that these poems represent a fundamental contribution to the development of a new generation of poets who embrace ambition and authenticity.[8]

Yusuf al-Saʾigh (1933-2005), a former communist turned Baathist, was a fine poet and an intellectual himself. According to ʿAbbud, he committed "suicide" (25) when finally giving in to Baathist pressure in the year 1983. He achieved a high-ranking career (his last official position before retiring was director of television and broadcast in the Ministry of Culture and Information); however, he continued to hold onto his clear literary judgment, providing encouragement to younger writers who did not conform to the state-dictated patriotism and praise the war.

Debating Survival and Complicity

Actively trying from within society to oppose the system and fight for freedom and democracy is a challenging and very often dangerous task; especially in a system that does not value dissent and opposition. In the much more recent context of the Arab Spring, Syrian intellectual Sadiq Jalal al-ʿAzm warned against outright condemnation of those intellectuals who have arranged themselves within the system, coming to terms and making compromises. So does Kanan Makiya, in a way, when he judges the collaboration of the Iraqi intelligentsia in "(…) that they chose to *live* at the expense of their art (…). In the conditions of Iraq that is an obvious but by no means an easy choice to make" (*The Monument* 124; emphasis in the original). However, those who became mouthpieces of the regimes have lost their credibility and are no longer deserving of respect (Naggar).[9]

In his study *Thaqāfat al-ʿunf fil-ʿIrāq* (The Culture of Violence in Iraq) Salam ʿAbbud complains about the Baathists' literary recognition in the Arab world (61-72). He strongly condemns the appreciation of Sami Mahdi (b. 1940) and Hamid Saʿid (b. 1941), shapers and makers of Baath literary discourse and norms, who were received outside of Iraq as great artists having enriched the canons of Arab poetry. He claims that this was due merely to their high party rank; for him, they were "representatives of the war" (19).[10]

After the fall of the regime in 2003, the situation became yet more complex because the intellectuals categorized as "inside"

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and "outside" in the post-Saddam period were not necessarily in the same positions during Saddam's rule. Kanan Makiya observed that "victims and victimizers effortlessly changed roles both before and after 2003" ("Is Iraq Viable" 6). With former Baathists themselves now in exile, a new dimension to the inner-Iraqi split has arisen. Driven out of the country because of their Baathist affiliations, their opposition to the US military presence in Iraq—shared by many other Arabs, especially in neighboring countries—provides a good opportunity to present themselves as the victims of what has happened in Iraq over the last ten years, as "innocent," a fact which has caused anger, grievance, and annoyance among many Iraqis.

In a way, this struggle over representation can be compared to the inner German dispute after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. American scholar Andreas Huyssen argues that intellectuals of the two Germanies could never really come to terms with each other because West Germans had been turning a blind eye to the repressive side of the German Democratic Republic. Often, West German intellectuals romanticized the GDR as a "potentially utopian space" and as an antidote to the "unloved FRG [Federal Republic of Germany]." This compares to the nonchalance of non-Iraqi Arabs vis-à-vis the Baath re-

gime, their common admiration for Saddam Hussein, and their total ignorance of the miseries and grievances of the Iraqi people and the dilemma of Iraqi intellectuals. ʿAdnan al-Saʾigh bitterly laments this:

Many international and Arab politicians, leaders, scholars, intellectuals, poets, and artists came to Iraq without any of them worrying about us; they just disregarded what was happening there, out of various reasons: national, economic, confessional or propagandistic, while we died and rotted and were buried in silence. (694)

The question of complicity, one of the key issues that continue in the German-German controversy, remains contested in Iraqi circles. In retrospect, or in relative safety abroad, one tends to judge the intellectuals who stayed inside Iraq during the Baath years rather harshly. There, however, intellectuals developed a variety of attitudes and methods for dealing with the situation. There was no single manner with which to cope with the pressure exerted—no matter how much it may seem from the outside. The war(s) and the praise for the Baath system form the main crux of the inner Iraqi struggle. However, to come to terms with each other and with the past, a re-assessment of one's attitudes is needed, on both sides. It remains to be seen how intellectuals will proceed from ʿAbbud's

auto-critique:

It has to be clear that while being responsible for the first and the second Gulf War and probably for a third one—if it is his destiny—Saddam Hussein is (…) not responsible for the worsening of the cultural situation and the turmoil among the intellectuals. We, who are not responsible for Saddam's wars, bear a heavy responsibility for the pains and weaknesses of the cultural sphere; all of us without exception bear varying degrees of responsibility. (177-78)

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→ **Notes**

[1] This article is in large part informed by my article "The Struggle for Representation: The Internal Iraqi Dispute over Cultural Production in Baathist Iraq." Milich, Pannewick, and Tramontini 25-48. For further comments and remarks: tramont@uni-marburg.de

[2] The most prominent example is perhaps Muhsin al-Musawi, former editor-in-chief of the state-owned cultural magazine *Āfāq ʿArabiyya* and the series *Dīwān al-maʿraka* (Anthology of Battle), and now a well-known professor at Columbia University in New York and one of the chief experts on Iraq in the US.

[3] Beware of the widely practiced method of "repeating opinions into truths" (Pinkert 20).

[4] See also Stock in her case study on Saddam Hussein, 135–76; esp. 172-75. The Iraqi author and scholar Sinan Antoon creatively assimilates this critique in one of his novels: Antūn, Sinān. *Iʿjām*. Beirut: Dār al-ādāb, 2004.

[5] Compare Michel Foucault's characterization of the writer as "universal intellectual" par excellence who "is the supposed bearer of values and significations in which all can recognize themselves: 'the consciousness/conscience of us all'" (qtd. in Hall, Gary. "Answering the Question: What is an Intellectual." *Surfaces*. VI 212 (1996): 16. Print.).

[6] See Sassoon 68-9. On the history of the accident, see Tripp 249-50.

[7] See also the interesting findings of Achim Rohde (123-24; 143-56).

[8] Back cover of ʿAdnan al- Saʾigh's original *diwan* (Baghdad 1986). On Yusuf al-Saʾigh and his role as a former Leftist, see Yousif. For an analysis of Yusuf al-Saʾigh's long poem "al-Muʿallim" (The Teacher) and his succumbing to the official line see: Tramontini, Leslie. "Poetry post-Sayyāb. Designing the Truth in Iraqi War Poetry of the 1980s." *Poetry and History: The Value of Poetry in Reconstructing Arab History*. Ed. Ramzi Baalbaki, Saleh Said Adha, and Tarif Khalidi. Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 2011. 289-312. Print; esp. 302.

[9] In other countries, similar situations prevail: so is the Egyptian literary critic Jabir Asfour, winner of the 2010 Gaddafi prize for literature and former culture minister under Mubarak, despite good academic credentials, now being accused of being the corrupt intellectual par excellence because he sided with power. Intellectuals like the Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim demonstrate that there are alternative options to compliance and co-option: in the year 2003, he officially and publicly refused the Ministry of Culture's prestigious literary award (and the prize money) on the grounds that the ministry had no legitimacy and credibility for handing out such a prize—a scandal which earned him a lot of respect.

[10] Further, Abbud commented on Sami Mahdi (67), and on Hamid Said (174-75). What draws ʿAbbud's special wrath is that not only poets inside Iraq participated in the eulogy and flattering of those Baathist intellectuals but also the ones from exile like Saʿdi Yusuf (181).

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