

AFTERWORD

A YEAR AFTER the hardback edition of this book went to press, the prospects for Iraq and its people remain very dim indeed. In a manner of speaking, so are the prospects for its past.

Recent months have brought welcome reminders of the intellectual heights to which ancient Mesopotamian civilization soared – most spectacularly, perhaps, news of the discovery that Hellenistic-era Babylonian astronomers knew how “to calculate the area of a trapezium under a graph (a technique previously thought to have been invented at least 1400 years later in 14th-century Oxford).”¹ Sadly, such reminders have been overshadowed by Islamic State’s ongoing wanton destruction of the material remains of that ancient civilization – including slickly orchestrated and broadcast demolitions at Nimrud, Nineveh, and Hatra in Assyria as well as at the Mosul Museum, and most recently their razing of the 1,400-year-old Monastery of St. Elijah, the oldest surviving Christian monastery in Iraq, on Mosul’s outskirts. I.S.-supported looting of archaeological sites and the sale – and likely loss to scholarly study – of myriad ancient artifacts, among them, cuneiform tablets, some of them perhaps with more evidence of previously unsuspected intellectual achievements, has also continued. In its flagrant trashing of Iraq’s most celebrated antiquities, I.S. seeks to expunge from Iraqis’ collective consciousness historical and cultural memory that could re-animate Iraqi nationalism, which I.S. hopes to obliterate.

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But, more than Iraqi antiquities or nationalism, it’s actual Iraqi lives that matter. As this book has tried to make clear, for decades before I.S. ever infested the Iraqi landscape, Iraqi lives were being trashed, by Iraqi hands and others. On that score, nothing has changed. According to the recent Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq,² between January 2014 and October 2015 almost 19,000 Iraqi civilians were killed, more than 36,000 were wounded, and more than 3,206,000 were displaced. I.S.’s depredations surely account for much of that toll, so we can take heart from recent reports that, under the unremitting pounding of US and UK airstrikes, I.S.’s numbers in Iraq (and in Syria, where the civil war has reaped a toll approaching a half-million lives) have decreased (although they evidently are ramping up in Libya). Nonetheless, I.S. controls enormous swaths of northern and western Iraq, including most of western Iraq’s Anbar governorate. I.S. remains firmly ensconced in Fallujah, whose again besieged citizens, having survived the devastations wrought in 2004, are imperiled by critical shortages of food and medical supplies.

By February 2016, Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi’s government in Baghdad could at least boast of the Iraqi army’s success in re-taking the city of Ramadi – which, tellingly, he could not have chalked up without the massive support of US airstrikes and military advisers; yes, the US military once again has “boots on the ground” in Iraq, and more may be coming. But retaken Ramadi lies in ruins, with thousands of buildings destroyed or damaged and I.S. landmines reportedly awaiting in the rubble if or when rebuilding commences. Meanwhile, Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, remains one of the capitals of the I.S. caliphate (along with Raqqa in Syria where centuries ago the great Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid set up his residence in order to escape Baghdad’s urban congestion). Recapturing Mosul is absolutely essential to restoring some semblance of Iraq as it was pre-I.S., but if Ramadi is any indication (and to channel an expression made infamous during

the US's woeful adventure in Vietnam decades ago) Mosul may need to be destroyed in order to be saved.

Such salvation presumes a rebuilding. Unless its neighbors and friends are willing to open their own coffers to that end, Iraq will need to fund the reconstruction of Ramadi, Fallujah, Mosul, and other devastated cities and towns with its own resources. Over millennia past, up until the Mongol conquest of 1258, the vast agricultural surplus harvested from Iraq's irrigated floodplain funded multiple rebuildings of cities. During the 1970s and 1980s, when the Baath regime built up Iraq's infrastructure and medical and educational systems, it could draw from the petroleum resources beneath Iraq's soil.

As is well known, of course, the American architects of the 2003 invasion confidently predicted that within a short time of their pacifying Iraq, Iraq's oil would quickly finance its postwar rebuilding. Thirteen years on, Iraq's oil production is beginning to boom. But the global oil market now has more of the stuff than it knows what to do with; supply vastly exceeds demand (ironically, owing in no insignificant part to the burgeoning shale-oil production of Iraq's putative American liberators). The price of oil accordingly has nose-dived – from more than \$100 per barrel in 2012 to (as of February 2016) less than \$25 per barrel. As a result, at the time of writing, Iraq's oil revenues are fifteen percent of what their value was only two years earlier.³

At the same time, with its fulfillment of the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action mandating the downsizing of its nuclear program, followed by the January 2016 lifting of economic sanctions on its oil sales, Iran has begun to ramp up its own oil production in hopes of garnering some portion of whatever profits are still to be had from oil sales and thereby rejuvenating an economy that sanctions had brought low. Meanwhile – and thankfully so – with the Paris Agreement of December 2015, many of the planet's industrialized countries – and most prolific oil buyers – have committed to combatting human-induced global warming by reducing their burning of fossil fuels. In

so doing, they chopped another chunk from the potential revenues of oil-producing countries, Iraq included.

The oil glut, then, is going to persist for the foreseeable future; oil prices may end up ranging below \$20 per barrel. Countries like Iran, with its more diversified economy, are better prepared to deal with the consequences. But more than ninety percent of Iraq's income is derived from the sale of oil. Compounding Iraq's difficulties, its government provides a lopsidedly large proportion of the population's jobs, and salaries. And making matters even worse, Iraq has long been rife with corruption; between 2012 and 2014, Iraq ranked consistently near the very bottom of the 170 countries listed in the Transparency International Corruption Index.⁴ Abadi's promises to stem it have so far shown scant results. Consequently, revenues have been – and, barring real progress against corruption, will be – sapped even more. So much then for the rebuilding of cities devastated by the war with I.S., not to mention devastation post-2003, or, for that matter, the rebuilding of infrastructure degraded by the 1991–2003 sanctions.

The drying up of oil revenues is already devastating the economy of Iraq's Kurdish region where the much-vaunted post-2003 economic boom has imploded. Salaried government employees have reportedly gone without paychecks for months. Ominously for the fight against I.S., they include the Peshmerga, the de facto army of the Kurdish Regional Government, who staved off the initial I.S. assault against Erbil in 2014 and who now, and for the foreseeable future, are being counted on to hold them off and roll them back in Iraq's north.

The hemorrhaging of Iraq's oil revenues also threatens to bleed into the frayed sectarian seams that the ill-conceived 2003 invasion busted wide open. In Tikrit (which the Iraqi government reclaimed from I.S. in April 2015) and the Diyala region, the struggle against I.S. has been spearheaded by the Hashd al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), whose ranks have swelled with recruits ever since 2014, when the Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called upon Iraqi Shi'a to defend their holy

cities against I.S. attack. Consisting of almost exclusively Shi'a militias that are sometimes affiliated with Iraq's long-established Shi'a religious parties – and their creation – the PMF officially operate under the aegis of the Baghdad government. In actuality, the government's control over them ranges from loose to non-existent; in fact, the Iranian government ostensibly exercises more influence over them. Most troubling, they have been repeatedly accused of atrocities against Sunnis. For example, a January 2016 report from Human Rights Watch⁵ documented how, in the wake of that month's I.S. bombings in the town of Muqadiyah in the Diyala governorate, PMF soldiers "abducted and killed scores of Sunni residents...and demolished Sunni homes, stores, and mosques." Another Human Rights Watch report from earlier that month related how in the city of Tuz Khurmatu, Shi'a Turkmen PMF (along with Kurdish Peshmerga) executed, tortured, or detained perhaps dozens of Sunni Arabs and destroyed dozens of their homes and shops.⁶

As was noted in the final chapter, Iraq's previously dominant Sunni Arabs were being disenfranchised, even persecuted by the Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad even before the I.S. onslaught of 2014. Since 2014, they have been subjected to continuing, even harsher abuse and atrocity at the hands of the PMF, which undercuts Abadi's professed intention to improve sectarian relations. Nonetheless, Abadi needs the PMF because without them his government stands no chance of holding off I.S.. On the other hand, regardless of US assistance to Abadi's government, the PMF stand little chance against I.S. without the continued support of the (Shi'ite) Islamic Republic of Iran, from which has come a constant, copious flow of weapons, funds, and other crucial military assistance. Iran's assistance is, in fact, indispensable, because Abadi's government hasn't the oil revenue to fund the PMF, as well as its security forces, on its own.

One can only hope that the reports of I.S.'s waning numbers in Iraq are accurate. Regardless, even if I.S. can be defeated and Iraqi soil completely freed from its menace, Iraqis will be left with immense

challenges. Among them will be concocting a new political contract that can bring disaffected Sunnis – and increasingly separatist Kurds – into what will be a radically different vision of the Iraqi "nation" that existed before 2003. But whatever shape a new Iraq might take, it likely cannot cohere unless Iraqis' livelihoods and future can be uncoupled from oil rigs and hitched to knowledge and innovation. Perhaps, in that quest, Iraqis can gaze back upon the brilliance of Babylon's astronomers, and from their achievement draw inspiration to propel them into a better future.