

Iraqi archivist demands US return seized documents

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Millions of historical documents seized by US occupation forces from Iraqi archives remain held in the United States by the CIA and the Pentagon and must, under international law, be returned to Iraq. Dr. Saad Eskander, the director of the Iraqi National Library and Archive in Baghdad, told an audience at Columbia University in New York City on November 12.

Eskander stressed that the taking of these documents threatened the Iraqi people with the loss of their historical memory.

The Iraqi National Library and Archive (INLA) functions as one of the major cultural institutions in the Middle East. It is a repository for government and historical documents from many periods and is the central location for research into the history of the Iraqi people.

Arsonists destroyed much of the library and archive on April 14, 2003 shortly after the occupation of Baghdad by American-led forces. The entire Old Library wing was almost completely burnt. The fire also desolated the microfilm collection of periodicals and other documents.

A portion of documents removed for safekeeping by Islamic clerics faced another disaster. These were stored in the basement of the Board of Tourism, which was deliberately flooded by looters. By the autumn of 2003, the documents had been moved to a space above ground, according to a 2005 report, “where the Library of Congress mission saw them in November exhibiting ‘extensive and active mold growth.’”

Since then, the INLA’s compound has been bombed and shot at, and its staff have been threatened and beaten. Five of them have been killed in the last year and a half. For their safety, employees are discouraged from leaving premises during working hours.

The Iraqi government routinely ignores the INLA’s importance as a cultural center. In August Iraqi security forces “positioned themselves on the roof of the library and dismantled the building’s main gate and smashed doors and windows inside the main building,” according to a CBS News report based on a communication from Eskander.

Stanley Cohen, president of the Scone Foundation, which co-sponsored Eskander’s lecture at Columbia, introduced him by noting that the Bush administration had played a critical role in extinguishing historical memory in the United States as well.

Cohen was referring to the notorious 2001 Executive Order 13233 that gutted the Presidential Records Act of 1978, which allowed for the public access to presidential documents, and to the 2003 Executive Order 13291 that delayed the declassification of millions of government documents.

Cohen worried that the history of the last six years is incomplete, that documents that have been withheld will ultimately be destroyed. These Executive Orders, he noted, reversed the presumption of disclosure of public documents. While archivists have vigorously protested them, Cohen observed that they were “Perhaps the first casualty in the decline of a free and open society.”

Eskander began by giving a brief history of the difficulty in preserving historical documents in Iraq under British colonialism, the monarchical regime, and then under the republican and Baathist nationalist regimes.

Eskander then reviewed the disaster of April 2003: the National Archive lost 60 percent of its documents, the National Library lost 25 percent of its books, and over 95 percent of its rare books. The groups that had attacked the institution had been, on the one hand,

professional thieves looking for valuable books, and on the other hand, ordinary Iraqis who wanted to know the fate of their relatives under the Baathist regime.

The arsonists, who burned the INLA and destroyed many documents from the Republican period, have widely been acknowledged to be Baathist operatives who were protecting the perpetrators of crimes against the Iraqi people.

Extremely significant was Eskander's observation that British and American troops had seized millions of documents from the secret police archives. The Baathist Ministry of the Interior, for example, had more documents in basements than existed in the entire National Archive collection.

He said that it was well known that many of these documents were used by the Americans to blackmail the secret police operatives of the former regime into working for the occupation.

These documents are now in the United States, presumably held by the CIA and the Pentagon. Eskander highlighted their importance for understanding Iraqi history and to the Iraqi people. "We need to compensate the victims" of the Hussein regime, he said.

Eskander outlined the way in which government documents that do remain in Iraq have been misused or ignored. De-Baathification, for example, was not supported by documentary evidence, and was subject to the whims of the partisan groups and individuals.

He also noted the many published documents violated the privacy of victims, and that the manner in which the names of perpetrators have been revealed has led to an escalation of violence and revenge killings. He spoke of the uneven government compensation for crimes of the former regime, based on selected release of documents.

"Without archives, democracy cannot be established," Eskander said. "There is only oral testimony."

Some individuals, such as the American intelligence asset Ahmed Chalabi, took Baathist records and have printed them to sell at a profit.

Eskander told the audience that for four years he has tried to persuade the new government of the importance of archives, but with little result. "The situation is very bad," he said. Rather than attending to the preservation of historical memory, "Politicians are raising their salaries and holding parties in the Green Zone."

He ended by saying that he hoped that educated Americans would pressure the American government to return seized Iraqi documents. According to international law, they belong to the Iraqi people and represent an important part of Iraq's cultural heritage.

In a question and answer period, Eskander was asked if documents were used in the trial of former regime leaders, such as Saddam Hussein. He said very few were used in the Dujail trial (for reprisals against the village of Dujail after a failed assassination attempt on Saddam Hussein in July, 1982). Eskander called the execution of Hussein "morally wrong." Better documentary evidence, he said, was used in the trial over the Anfal campaigns in which the Baathists, between 1986 and 1989, gassed thousands of Kurds to death.

In response to another question, Eskander noted the hypocrisy of the Arab regimes, which condemned the destruction of Iraqi cultural heritage, but have done little to stop it themselves. He noted that rare books looted from Iraqi collections are sold openly on the black market in Amman, Jordan.

He also observed that over the last period many pledges of aid and equipment for the reconstruction of the Iraqi National Library and Archive, particularly from the American military, had gone unfulfilled.



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