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Looting of Iraq's Treasures a Profound Loss for Assyrians

Posted 04-19-2003

The rapid disintegration of Iraq's armed forces at the conclusion of Operation Iraqi Freedom created a disastrous vacuum in authority and security for the people of Iraq. In Baghdad alone, news coverage of widespread looting and near anarchy were matched only by Kurdish terror raids into Mosul and Karkuk that erupted into full fledged ethnic firefights.



Vaults in the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad

The looting of the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad epitomized the extraordinary destruction endured by Iraqis in general and Assyrians in particular following the collapse of the government. For Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) these losses were doubly traumatizing because the lost artifacts documented the indigenous Assyrian, Sumerian, and Babylonian heritage of Mesopotamia. International outrage was quick and led to a UNESCO sponsored meeting in Paris on April 17, 2003 which, according to the Associated Press (AP) was called "to assess the damage to Iraqi museums and libraries looted in the aftermath of the US-led invasion." According to University of Chicago Professor Macguire Gibson, "It looks as if part of the looting was a deliberate planned action." While at the conference, Mr. Gibson added, "I have a suspicion it was organized outside the country..."

Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, the Director-General of UNESCO, called for a UN resolution imposing a ban on Iraqi antiquities trading and the establishment of a "heritage police" force. In an apparent reference to coalition forces, Mr. Matsuura also suggested that responsibility for security of such cultural sites in Iraq rested with the "authorities on the ground." French President Jacques Chirac described the looting as a loss for the entire international community and labeled the theft and destruction as "crimes against humanity." President Chirac's statements were also a not so subtle indictment of Coalition forces who under international law are ultimately responsible for establishing security as the occupying force following the liberation of a territory. Perhaps sensing the growing Iraqi and international outrage and recognizing possible American culpability in the losses, FBI director Robert Mueller announced on April 17 that FBI agents were already in Baghdad in order to help recover stolen treasures and artifacts. Mr. Mueller noted "We are firmly committed to doing whatever we can to secure these treasures to the people of Iraq."

For Assyrians celebrating their first glimpse of freedom, the realization that it was primarily Assyrian heritage that was lost in the Museum lootings and burglary was a bitter reminder of

the disproportionately high price paid by Assyrians for their liberation.

Assyrians did not fare better in their ancient capital of Nineveh (present day Mosul) or Karkuk. In these cities, Assyrians were subjected to terror raids by Kurdish bandits. Residents of these and other northern Iraqi cities were harassed, intimidated, and sometimes shot. Homes, businesses, and government buildings were looted and burned. News footage showed traffic jams leading into and out of the cities with empty Kurdish vehicles lined up trying to enter the cities to loot and over loaded vehicles full of booty lining up to leave the cities. In Karkuk, armed Kurdish terrorists evicted unarmed civilian residents at gunpoint without hearing or due process. One Assyrian observing the apparently premeditated terror inflicted by the Kurds lamented "They seem to relish being the perennial barbarians at the gates -- forever the bandits waiting for a lapse in authority to reek havoc and ransack civilization."

"The Kurdish onslaught was not supposed to happen!" cried another Assyrian. "We had been given assurances that they would not enter the cities." Indeed, in the lead up to the war, the US expended enormous diplomatic capital in an effort to balance the desires of Kurdish paramilitary forces to march into Karkuk and Mosul with Turkey's trepidation over the possible establishment of an economically viable Kurdish break-away regime in northern Iraq. According to earlier reports, an US -brokered agreement between Turkey, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), would keep Kurdish forces out of Mosul and Karkuk in exchange for Turkey not invading Iraq.

In a prewar interview with the leading French newspaper, Le Monde, PUK leader Jalal Talabani was quoted as saying "Kurdish fighters are looking forward to protecting the liberated Kurdish zone, but have no intention of occupying Mosul or Karkuk." Another Kurdish leader, Mr. Azad Murin, the head of paramilitary operations of the KDP announced to Agence France Press that "American troops will, at first control... Mosul and Karkuk, and that the Iraqi Kurdish fighters will take positions in the surrounding villages once the strike on Iraq begins."

Assyrians have remained contemptuous of Kurdish intentions from the very beginning. Kurdish statements that they would only move towards the villages surrounding Mosul and Karkuk rather than the cities were in themselves troubling to Assyrians since the villages around Mosul are almost exclusively Assyrian. In a tragically sad irony, Assyrian military resources during the war were primarily deployed to secure Assyrian villages in the northern Assyrian provinces, not so much to defend against retreating Iraqi forces, but to protect Assyrian villages from marauding Kurdish forces.

The peculiar and suspicious timing of the Kurdish terror raids did not escape the attention of some observers. Apparently, prior to the onslaught into the cities, Kurdish bands were kept in close check by their American counterparts. With the sudden melting away of the Iraqi military, armed Kurdish terrorists poured into the city. American forces who were supposed to secure the cities did not arrive till considerably later, giving Kurdish forces free reign for a time. Some Assyrians have complained, "We are still not sure why American forces let this savagery occur. We only know that at a time when we should all have been celebrating the downfall of Saddam, these terrorists succeeded in creating still more ethnic strife as though we hadn't had enough terror and tyranny."

Some Kurdish apologists have insisted on a Kurdish "right" to Karkuk as a Kurdish capital

that they liken to their version of the Jewish Jerusalem. Those with a clearer sense of history, however, have likened such Kurdish proclamations regarding the Assyrian- founded city to a recent and artificial sentimentality born more of a brazen lust for oil than any genuine belonging to the land.

Assyrian disappointment has grown into rage. Reflecting on the damage suffered, one Assyrian noted "We have paid a heavy price for liberation. From the destruction and looting of our historical artifacts in Baghdad to the terror raids of Nineveh (Mosul) and Karkuk. We refuse to allow the substitution of the savagery of the Iraqi regime with the savagery of Kurdish terrorist forces. We refuse to continue to be occupied by these thugs."

Assyrians have long chronicled a policy of persecution and ethnic cleansing under Kurdish occupation in the northern Iraqi provinces since the first Gulf War. The experiment in Kurdish self-rule has netted Assyrians torture, land expropriations, and assassinations. One Assyrian political leader concluded "Our experience in the north in the last 12 years has only been reinforced by these recent attacks. We cannot count on others to rule us. We must demand sanctuary for our people, our culture. We need a safe haven, a self-administered area- call it what you will- where we can safe guard our language, culture, faith- our villages, our people. Otherwise, Assyrians may not survive too much more of this celebration and this very strange form of democracy."

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