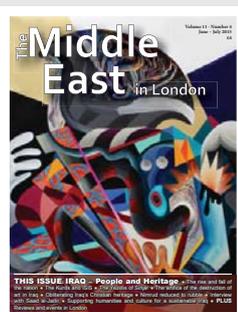




The Middle East in London

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THIS ISSUE: IRAQ – People and Heritage • The rise and fall of the nation • The Kurds and ISIS • The Yazidis of Sinjar • The artifice of the destruction of art in Iraq • Obliterating Iraq's Christian heritage • Nimrud reduced to rubble • Interview with Saad al-Jadir • Supporting humanities and culture for a sustainable Iraq • **PLUS** Reviews and events in London



Athier, *Man Of War VIII*. 175 X 190. Acrylic on canvas
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The Middle East in London

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The London Middle East Institute (LMEI) draws upon the resources of London and SOAS to provide teaching, training, research, publication, consultancy, outreach and other services related to the Middle East. It serves as a neutral forum for Middle East studies broadly defined and helps to create links between individuals and institutions with academic, commercial, diplomatic, media or other specialisations.

With its own professional staff of Middle East experts, the LMEI is further strengthened by its academic membership – the largest concentration of Middle East expertise in any institution in Europe. The LMEI also has access to the SOAS Library, which houses over 150,000 volumes dealing with all aspects of the Middle East. LMEI's Advisory Council is the driving force behind the Institute's fundraising programme, for which it takes primary responsibility. It seeks support for the LMEI generally and for specific components of its programme of activities.

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Eleanor Robson details the work of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq

Pasts and futures entwined: supporting humanities and culture for a sustainable Iraq



© Lauren Mulvee

Dr Nabeel Nooruldeen Hussein, Iraqi Visiting Scholar sponsored by the BISI. Photograph by Lauren Mulvee

Since the summer of 2014, ISIS has been bombarding the world with brutal images of mass murder and the destruction of religious and cultural heritage in northern Iraq. Christian churches, Yazidi shrines, Shi'a mosques, museums, libraries and archaeological sites have all been targets. ISIS knows very well that culture is the glue that holds communities together and that by wiping out the buildings at the heart of communities it is effectively wiping out their ability to remain intact. How can we in London help Iraq resist this systematic erosion of human and cultural diversity?

Cultural and scientific organisations all over the world, from UNESCO to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, have recently been encouraging research on northern Iraq's built heritage: what has been destroyed, what can and should be salvaged? While it will be a challenge to restore and replace the lost mosques, churches, shrines and

archaeological remains, it will be even harder to knit together the fragile remnants of communities that have been badly traumatised by war after war in recent decades. Yet the two projects must go hand in hand, for it is individuals and communities who create culture and who use, enjoy and make meaning from their built environment.

Over the past decade the highest priorities in Iraqi educational reform have understandably been on sciences, technology, medicine and business – the subjects most urgently needed and most directly geared to enabling Iraq's economic recovery. But it is becoming increasingly apparent that the country's social and political development has not been keeping

pace. Widening the focus of educational priorities to include humanities and culture can help to rebuild Iraq in many direct and indirect ways.

Even in the UK, we are only just starting to acknowledge and quantify the skills and benefits that humanities-educated students bring to the workforce. Maybe because the humanities are so well embedded in our own society, they are barely visible as distinct elements of the economic and cultural landscape. But we cannot assume that they will flourish through neglect. And if they need to be nurtured in the UK then it is even more critical that we help foster them in the much more fragile political environment of contemporary Iraq.

The British Institute for the Study of Iraq

Culture is the glue that holds communities together; wiping out the buildings at the heart of communities is effectively wiping out their ability to remain intact

BISI is helping to maintain and develop the in-country expertise that will enable Iraqi institutions and individuals to harness the resources at their disposal

(BISI) was originally set up as the British School of Archaeology in Iraq. Based at the British Academy in central London, we have been promoting the value of research and education in the humanities, social sciences and culture in Iraq for over 80 years. As a small and dynamic charitable organisation lacking external grants or sponsors, we currently operate on a relatively small scale. But we have developed an ambitious yet carefully phased and costed strategy for growth over the coming years that puts Iraq at the heart of all we do. We have plans for bottom-up educational projects in Iraq at all levels, from primary to higher education. BISI copes with the challenges of working in Iraq by focusing on individuals and local institutions that have the vision and energy to make transformative change.

We support archaeological projects in Iraqi Kurdistan, for instance, and museum refurbishments in the southern cities of Karbala and Basra.

Here in the UK, we are working to persuade British-Iraqi businesses that they can benefit directly by investing in humanities and culture and by co-operating with organisations such as BISI. Employers not only gain articulate, literate, well-rounded staff who can put together evidence-based arguments, make critical judgements and take appropriate decisions, they are also helping to create empathetic, tolerant citizens and communities who have pride and confidence in the variety and power of Iraq's history, culture and identity.

Another key component of BISI's work is to protect, support and mentor Iraqi colleagues in humanities and cultural heritage, to help close a skills gap that is now a quarter of a century old. The Gulf War of 1991 and the subsequent UN sanctions against Iraq not only cut academics off from the huge technological changes brought about by the internet, but also denied them access to discoveries and methodological innovations made in their research fields elsewhere in the world. Even now, 12 years since the end of the Iraq War, universities, museums and libraries are still badly managed and under-resourced.

To help bridge that skills gap, each year BISI offers two or three Visiting Scholarships to humanities academics, museum staff, librarians and other cultural heritage professionals from Iraq. They come to the UK for a month or two with a programme tailored to their particular needs. They engage in research, training and collaborative work with colleagues in universities, museums, and libraries all over the country. We then maintain mentoring relationships with them once they have returned to their own place of work. In 2014 BISI sponsored two Iraqi Visiting Scholars from northern Iraq, in the months before ISIS's invasion of the region.

The first was Dr Nabeel Nooruldeen Hussein, a Lecturer in Archaeology at Mosul University and the Chief of Excavations at Nineveh, the capital of the vast and powerful Assyrian empire in the 7th century BC. Through his BISI visiting scholarship, he was able to survey the British Museum's collection of sculptures from king Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh, to see how they relate to those that he and his team have recently excavated. During the visit Dr Hussein was able to meet with UK academics in his area of expertise and to access the libraries at UCL's Institute of Archaeology and at SOAS.

The second visiting scholar was Father Behnam Sony, a Priest and Lecturer at Saint Ephrem's Seminary in Qaraqosh, and a

distinguished scholar of Syriac, the classical language of Middle Eastern Christianity. Qaraqosh, just south of Mosul, is an old and important Christian centre, with many churches and monasteries and where many people still speak a modern variety of Syriac called Neo-Aramaic. His BISI scholarship enabled him to come to London to take part in a programme organised by the British Library. He learned how to care for, conserve and create a digital catalogue of the Seminary's manuscript collection. Importantly, it includes the former holdings of nearby Mar Behnam monastery, now feared destroyed by ISIS. Father Sony was also able to access documents relating to the early Christian writers of Qaraqosh which he had never seen before, thereby greatly contributing to the history of Iraqi Christianity he is currently writing.

In these and other ways BISI is helping to maintain and develop the 'in-country' expertise that will enable Iraqi institutions and individuals to harness the resources at their disposal, so that humanities and culture can thrive there again. As ISIS is driven out of northern Iraq, the needs of academics in Mosul and its surroundings will become particularly acute.

More information about the BISI and its projects can be found at <http://www.bisi.ac.uk>.

Eleanor Robson is Professor of Ancient Middle Eastern History at University College London and currently the voluntary Chair of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq's governing Council

Visiting the Museum of Imam Hussein in Kerbala to plan a staff training programme with BISI. Photograph by Eleanor Robson



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