

Coping with Dictatorships: Cultural Diplomacy in Iraq

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Cultural Diplomacy is an odd phrase and one which we tend not to use much in my business. It is redolent of Haroun's elephant and *The Pope's Rhinoceros*, of string quartets on the lawns of tropical High Commissions, of 'Jambassadors,' of Antrobus and of French colonial documentary films full of beads, Citroens and naked flesh. In other words, the deployment of culture in the service of good, old-fashioned diplomacy. It is distinct from (though not infrequently overlapping with) what at the British Council we call *Cultural Relations*, and consider to be our own stock-in-trade. So I shall begin with a few words of definition, and a health-warning, that what I am going to talk about this evening is mostly *Cultural Relations* rather than *Cultural Diplomacy*.

Traditionally we have used a slightly stilted taxonomy that recognizes *diplomacy*, of course, as the management of relationships between governments; *public diplomacy* as that of relationships between a government and a foreign public (generally over the head of its own government); and *cultural relations* as the building of direct links between people and institutions in different countries, crucially over a longer timespan than individual governments and policies can generally sustain. Government is not really a player in cultural relations, or so we have always maintained (though there's a fair dose of self-deception in that statement). Anyway, as more and more of the central problems in world politics come today to centre upon issues with big cultural components, of identity, migration, cultural heritage, and what is called, all too crudely, radicalisation – diplomacy is becoming more 'cultural,' more attentive to the pitfalls and possibilities of the often hidden tides of culture that ruffle the surface. This is a development very much to be welcomed.

As far as cultural relations go, that old definition remains important. Direct and largely unmediated people-to-people relationships are still central to our work, and getting easier all the time – in this social media age they are potentially limitless, despite most authoritarian attempts to strangle them. But direct people-to-people relationships are not, by their nature, a commodity that dictators much like, so an organization specialising in them has a fine line to tread. And naturally this is more, rather than less, insofar as an organization like the British Council is seen as being a proxy for government.

There is, however, scope for mutual self-deception in a good cause. The British Council stresses its own independence of government, its Royal Charter and its long-term approach, though it is in its rather different way as much a part of what

is sometimes called ‘Great Britain Ltd’ as is the Embassy. But as long as we behave *as though* we are independent we are often seen as preserving a pragmatic integrity. As a 2005 British Council enquiry in the Middle East noted, “Respondents are clear about the need for the Council to have an identity separate from the official representation of the British government – but not naïve enough to suggest that it can be absolutely independent.” We share that view.

At the centre of this cultivated ambiguity is the careful choice of what a cultural organization does. Some areas of work are more neutral than others, and by their nature foreign cultural organizations can be allowed a free(er) rein here. Language, examinations, research collaboration and external examiners in the sciences are relatively easy areas in which to achieve a sort of elbow-room. Libraries, theatre and cinema get more scrutiny but can still often be managed. In these areas cultural relations can often – but unpredictably – wriggle under the wire.

The key to understanding how this work is, (or at least in my view should be), imagined is to grasp that whatever it is that we actually *do*, that is not what our business is really about – or at least it is only the secondary level of impact. The real end objective is always the building of long-term, mutually beneficial relationships founded on trust. These bear dividends in all sorts of areas, and they do so regardless of the specific nature of the contact: the aim is that such relationships should flourish at a personal and institutional level, and survive the political adversity of an often brutal dictatorship. They are the seeds of the future.

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My first posting with the British Council was to Baghdad in 1988-90. It seems a long time ago now, but when I was sent there it felt alarmingly present, a job in a rather nasty, difficult dictatorship, which was still at war with Iran when I received notice of my posting. Certainly fascinating, but quite a daunting prospect as I flew out with my wife and 8-month-old daughter at the very end of 1988. I had never lived or worked in a totalitarian state, and that was what we were about to do, though fortunately the war with Iran, with its uncomfortable shower of rockets on Baghdad each day, was over by the time we actually went out to post.

There is a very legitimate question as to what we thought we were doing there at all – and this is the question of cultural relations and dictatorships that I am addressing tonight. The then US cultural attaché, Jack McCreary, wrote later of the same time in Baghdad:

They were building chemical and nuclear weapons while they let a few diplomats open a library and play in a jazz club. It all seems so stupid and misguided.

This seems to me to illustrate a disillusionment, even a despair, which I don't at all share. But that is probably because the British Council, and the USIS for which Jack worked, were rather different beasts. For a start, as McCreary makes clear in passing, the Americans *were* diplomats: we were not. This was more than a technical difference, though if you half closed your eyes you could miss it. US cultural officials were career diplomats, albeit specialised, accredited to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and like all other diplomats had to have permission, several days ahead, which might or might not be granted, to move outside the Baghdad-Babylon corridor. For Iraqis, a conversation with them, as diplomats, was reportable – the infamous *taqrir* that had to be filed with the Mukhabarat after such meetings. At the British Council we were a bit different, as non-diplomats accredited, uniquely, to the Ministry of Information. Although we were certainly watched, and our staff had to file monthly *taqarir* about our activities, we could go more or less wherever we liked in Iraq without permission, and we could meet, talk to and make friends with Iraqis much more easily than diplomats could. In this sense the Iraqi government connived at the notion that we were non-political, which in a real (but not absolute) sense we were.

There was a downside. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, and the officials of other Cultural Institutes like that of the USA promptly left for home on their diplomatic passports, we could not. We found ourselves as Saddam delicately called us, 'Heroes of the Peace,' which is to say hostages. And there's the conundrum. If you really want to build and sustain cultural relations, you need to be *there* in a different sense from that of a few diplomats opening a library and playing in a jazz club. This semi-immersion has risks, and nowhere more than in a dictatorship. In that tense and difficult period every exit visa for a European was being signed – or rather was not being signed – in person by Saddam Hussein.

My own tawdry career as a 'Hero of the Peace' lasted from August 2nd to early December 1990, when all hostages were released, though my wife and daughters were turned loose in mid-September. It is perhaps worth saying that during this not-at-all-easy period we were treated by *every* individual Iraqi with utter courtesy, gentle sympathy and quiet, embarrassed apology. There was not the slightest hint of the malicious, jingoistic attitude to resident Argentinians that we saw in Britain during the Falklands War. All my best, and most revealing experiences of Iraq came in this pressured time; and the friendships that I still have are mostly of people who provided support and comfort, regardless of *taqarir* and personal risks. It's not too much to say that in this kind of circumstance you can often glimpse the real (or a significantly less *un-real*) nature of a people in a way that isn't possible in normal times, through sharing, however fleetingly, the ubiquitous fear, privation and uncertainty about the future with which they lived permanently.

But in the period before the Kuwait invasion we operated what was, for Iraq, a 'normal' Cultural Relations. This meant seeking out the neutral subjects I've mentioned already – external examiners for medical faculties, short technical courses, English language, the provision of library services including photocopied academic articles from the British Library at Boston Spa, some theatre, often of the most safely conventional sort – Shakespeare was generally neutral enough. In these areas we could operate fairly successfully, though at the whim of the host government. Through these areas we made friends and contacts. And we were of course immensely helped by the fact that Iraq was a very Anglophone country, and sent many students to Britain on Iraqi government, as well as British Council, scholarships. In cultural terms it was also a very *Anglophile* country in those days, so that our 'offer' was warmly received where it was safe to do so.

As well as students, we used to send remarkably large numbers of Iraqi doctors, engineers and lawyers on short mid-career professional courses in Britain; but we didn't have a free hand in selecting them. Rather, for professional courses as for scholarships, a short-list rather like that of candidates for bishoprics sent up to No 10, would find its way to us, so that we could ostensibly choose, but from an approved pool of Ba'th loyalists and 'deserving' time-servers. This had odd aspects, and I quote from my book what has always seemed to me a wonderfully revealing epitome of Ba'thist Iraq.

So important a market was Iraq to our Courses Department in London that its director travelled out to visit us in 1989, and we arranged a lunch in a private room at a hotel by the Tigris for him to meet the deans of Baghdad's universities and medical schools. There was a passage in the lunchtime conversation that I treasure as a vignette of Ba'thist Iraq. One Iraqi dean spoke sycophantically about the legal reforms being undertaken by the French-educated Minister of Justice, and how they were transforming his country.

"Ah," said our London visitor, "then you may be interested in a course we are running about administrative law."

"What exactly is administrative law?" asked the dean, politely.

"Well, broadly speaking, it concerns the whole area of the claims of the individual against the state." A stunned silence fell on the whole table. Mouths sagged. The dean who had asked the question said in a strangled squawk,

"I don't believe His Excellency went that far."

Everything was therefore a compromise, even if it was one which we believed (and probably rightly) that we were able to manipulate a little bit. We kept a fairly steady stream of theatre moving into the country, and of students and professionals going out. Books being imported for our library were censored (I still have a children's book about Noah's Ark, with *mamnu* scrawled inside the front cover). Sometimes we were forced to do things that ran well against the grain, like bringing in Morris

dancers for the Babylon Festival – Morris dancers having been the bane of the British Council since Lord Beaverbrook’s malignant send-ups in the *Daily Express* of 70 and more years ago. But we were able too to build open, if careful, relationships with Iraqi academics (particularly in what are now called the STEM subjects, seen I suppose as more politically neutral than the social sciences); and to run exams like the MRCP written exams, which took place in a huge marquee every year; to cram the theatre with enthusiastic audiences; and to fill our classrooms with students of English.

But there was and is a very real sense in which our achievement was simply *being* there. The things we did that left the greatest mark were often unspecific, behaviours and quirks as much as programmes and projects. I remember a gnarled old Ba’thist in olive drab and Saddam moustache asking me menacingly at lunch once, in a very thick accent, whether I knew “Miss McPherson.” I confessed to not remembering her, but this turned out to be excusable, as she was a secretary who had run informal Scottish dancing lessons with a wind-up gramophone down by the Tigris, twenty or thirty years before. But Miss McPherson lived on in the dark recesses of that flinty old heart, as a little gleam of light.

What always seemed to me the most important achievement, though, was the construction and protection of a space that was morally, and to some extent practically, safe. A physical space where the fears and uncertainties of life in Saddam’s Iraq could be left at the gate. One student, Irada al-Jabbouri, who was a regular visitor at about the time I was there, later wrote:

On the way to the British Council in the Waḡiriya area, we stop at the print shop ... we pretend to drink tea on the pavement of the café next door, while we wait for our photocopies of forbidden books ... in the British Council garden we swap books and talk - Iraqis from Baghdad and the provinces, Arabs, foreigners. We borrow books, films, music tapes from the Council's library.

And we in turn knew very well that our library, and the photocopying service we ran for the British Library, were lifelines for many in that extraordinarily Anglophone society. The librarian once caught a ring of cheerful borrowers, each ordering single photocopied chapters from Boston Spa of Salman Rushdie’s banned *Satanic Verses*, a project to which she had wistfully to put a stop. Just as important was the almost industrial book-theft that went on: we had the highest rate of book-loss of any British Council library in the world, and thanks to the artificially high exchange rate, still turned a healthy profit. Again, in this unusual way, we were a useful conduit for books to reach Iraqis, some of the biggest – and then, in contemporary terms at least, the most deprived – readers in the Arab world.

As Jabbouri suggests, things were a little bit *different* in the tea-garden, with its wicker chairs and chipped green tin tables. For one thing, milling with students and perhaps protected by its cultural ambience, it was one of very few places in Baghdad where a young man and a young woman could respectably meet without a chaperone. For another, it seemed, as Jabbouri's description hints, a safe place to swap the illicitly copied books that the students had about them. I think probably that it *was* relatively safe – that surveillance was difficult; and a certain sixth sense seemed to allow students and visitors to isolate and by-pass those who made them feel uncomfortable.

This I have always thought our greatest achievement. Not just showing the tangible products of our culture, but imbuing a small space with its best practices. An Italian journalist once said of an annual conference I set up just outside Siena, still running today after 25 years, "Its magic is that not only do Italians and Brits relate differently to each other when they're at Pontignano, but that Italians relate differently to each other." This describes well the alchemy, that at its best, Cultural Relations can achieve.

But of course the environment was a fragile one. Even in 'the good times' we were conscious of being under constant scrutiny. Typewriters, imported through the diplomatic bag, had to be disposed of by burial in the desert at night lest they escape onto the black market. Telephones were tapped, locked doors left ajar, even on occasions dead cats nailed to diplomatic front-doors. More seriously (though not for the cats), events would be cancelled at short notice, students withdrawn at the last moment without explanation, friendly people would suddenly become frightened and taciturn, victims of an invisible process and rationale of intimidation, that we scarcely understood.

It was not an easy environment, but it was where I learned my trade., and where I began to work out some of the ethics of Cultural Relations that have preoccupied me since. My strong sense is (and this has since become a bit of a commonplace) that Cultural Relations are based on trust. There is much frankly glib and mistaken talk about 'trust-*building*.' That isn't what we do: as the philosopher Onora O'Neill put it in one of her 2002 Reith Lectures, there are only two things you can do with trust – *earn* it and *give* it. To which I'd add, *fritter it away*. The job of Cultural Relations is to earn it, and that's a matter of trial and error, and the best we can manage of humility and generosity.

Much of the delicacy is managing the visible relationship with your own government. As the report which I mentioned above had it, the perception of independence is very important. One of the results of that perceived independence was the freedom with which Iraqis, once they felt confident in doing so, spoke to us. Amongst our more circumscribed diplomatic colleagues this did not go

unnoticed, and we were quite often asked what young Iraqis thought about this and that. We had patiently to explain that if we knew anything about it, it was only because we were seen as *not* being a conduit to the Embassy, and that therefore we respectfully declined to file our own *taqarir*. Of course, once our two countries were careering down the slippery slope towards war this changed, though with reluctance and sadness. And my boss still strapped on, on Monday mornings, the Saddam Hussein wristwatch which he, rather impishly, wore only to the Ambassador's weekly meeting.

Almost the final word must go, I think, to Freya Stark, who worked in Baghdad during the last war, and sat through the 1941 siege of the British Embassy. In a report written two years later, she said "The British Council, particularly, offending no nationalism, should take all the weight it can carry. When everything else withdraws there is every chance that these institutes will remain and flourish ... the good it does is immense." That seemed to me as true in 1990 as it must have seemed in 1943, and I regret to this day the newspaper-driven jingoism that led to the British Council's closure to students long before we ourselves were finally able to leave the country.

Today the British Council in Baghdad is heavily guarded in what was until recently known as the Green Zone. My colleagues are driven about in armoured cars and under close protection. Much excellent work gets done, huge contracts for educational reform are serviced with the EU and UNESCO; exams, Shakespeare and English continue as themes. Through them, with difficulty, robust, long-term and trust-based relationships are doubtless still built. But in part for security reasons much activity takes place outside Baghdad, in Erbil and Basra and Sulaimaniyya; and hard as those operating environments can be today, Baghdad is much tougher still. Mosul, alas, is quite out of reach these days.

But in Baghdad at least, immersion is impossible, and as I understand my business, immersion, however imperfect, is what Cultural Relations are really about.

Martin Rose
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