

Made in Iraq: urban planning, reconstruction and change during international sanctions

As a result of the First Gulf War, the vast majority of over one million foreign nationals employed in the various sectors of Iraqi economy had to flee the country. Among those who left were many skilled labourers and professionals, employed in the public sector, as well as private Iraqi and international companies. Since the 1950s, foreign experts played a crucial role in the Iraqi modernization and development projects implemented by the changing political regimes. In 1990 they were suddenly gone, along the many Iraqi professionals and experts who continued to flee the country plunged in post-war destruction, economic crisis exacerbated by international sanctions and the repressive regime of Saddam Hussein. Despite the measures introduced by the government to curb outmigration, an estimated number of one and a half million Iraqis left the country permanently between 1990 and 2003. The mass emigration led to the depletion of Iraqi middle class and professional cadres. Those who remained had to deal with a difficult task of rebuilding the country amidst international isolation and filling the void left by the departure of foreign and Iraqi professionals.

The 1990s' Iraq was then a country that had to break with its decades-long dependence on foreign know-how overnight and start to rely on local experts. The project aims to explore this process on the case study of one profession - urban planning. Until 1990, i.e. until the First Gulf War, urban planning of Iraqi cities was generally outsourced to foreign consultants contracted by the Iraqi government. While the contracts were supervised by employees from line ministries and often required cooperation with local experts, the leading role was played by foreign urban planners. The successive master plans of Baghdad prepared by British, Greek, Polish and Japanese planning teams serve as a good example. The situation changed after 1990, as a result of international sanctions and departure of all foreign experts, with the Iraqi engineers, architects and urban planners taking charge of reconstruction, planning and development of Iraqi cities. Looking back, Iraqi urban planners and architects who remained in the country often emphasize the formative impact this period had on their professional carriers. The project aims to place this period in the context of contemporary history of urban planning profession in Iraq, to analyse the changes it brought to the lives of individuals and institutions, as well as in debates, standards and realities of spatial planning in Iraq. Through the study of one profession, the project tells a broader story about the socioeconomic transformations under way in the Iraqi society. While the English- and Polish-language literature on the post-1990 Iraq focuses on geopolitics, security, war and terrorism studies, there is little research on the social and spatial aspects of the country's contemporary history.

Beyond the Iraqi context, the project looks at the long-term consequences of modernization and development projects steered by foreign experts and implemented through foreign know-how. The available literature on development programs offered as part of Cold War competition focuses on the perspective of experts, their knowledge and technical expertise. Instead, the project places the experiences and perspective of knowledge-recipients in the countries then classified as the "Third World" in the centre of attention and asks questions on the consequences of foreign-driven modernization for the development of knowledge fields and their related professions. To better understand these experiences, the project will conduct a series of in-depth interviews with Iraqi interlocutors involved in the planning of Iraqi cities in the 1990s. Such methodological approach draws on history and social anthropology, combining archival research with fieldwork in Iraq.