



IRAQ IS NOT JUST OIL AND DATES

From Our Special Correspondent
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It rained nonstop for several days before the New Year in Baghdad and, for that matter, throughout Iraq. Driving became dangerous, for one risked getting stuck in the mud or skidding on the wet asphalt. Rivers of mud rushed down from the mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Tigris River swelled, its waters turned a dirty brown. The sewage disposal facilities and the waterworks in the capital went out of commission.

Then the rain stopped and the sun reappeared, bringing warmth with it. For a northerner like myself the Iraqi winter seemed more like summer.

It was four years since I had last visited Baghdad, and I was naturally interested to see what changes had taken place in the meantime. I found far more than I had expected. Nouri Latyf, General Secretary of the General Union of Land Transport Workers, told me that one would find big changes even after a year's absence.

Stone and Bronze

Changes are evident primarily in the appearance of the capital. The city is rapidly being built up and is growing ever handsomer. The architecture of the new buildings in its main thoroughfare, Saadun Street,

arrest the attention: each has its own particular style.

Baghdad is constantly growing. New housing estates have risen in the Zeiyuna, Seidia, Taji and Kadhimiya districts. What was outskirts only recently is now practically the centre of the city.

Salah Shaker, a trade union official acting as my guide, said that much was being done in Iraq to resolve the housing problem. I saw new housing developments in Basra, Kirkuk, Arbil and Madain, some of them in the vicinity of industrial enterprises.

Much that is traditional is preserved in the architecture of the new districts. Most of the houses are of one or two storeys, with a separate entrance for each family and a courtyard, however small. High-rise apartment houses are erected mainly in Baghdad, where the housing problem has to be resolved quickly and on a large scale.

Quite a few new monuments and memorials have appeared in the capital in recent years. Many artists seek to perpetuate even recent events. An illustrative example is the "Liberation" fresco in Tahrir Square. Its author, the gifted artist Salem Jawad, has depicted the main stages of the people's fight for freedom in a series of dynamic figures.

Although one may question the artistic merits of some of the new works, their very appearance is symbolic, as for instance the sculpture of a worker with a sledgehammer standing in a square in Basra. In Kirkuk I saw a small stylized derrick, the symbol of the country's oil wealth and oilworkers' labour. And in Baghdad itself, on the way to the airport, one cannot help noticing a huge stele with the text of the 1972 decree on the nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company.

Iraqi artists turn more and more to the country's past. A monument to Abu Nawas, the well-known medieval poet and philosopher, has been erected in the street that bears his name. It symbolizes the outstanding thinker's love of life and the humorous and optimistic character of his works.

Some of the monuments depict personages from "A Thousand and One Nights." For instance, in one of Baghdad's squares there is a fountain showing Fatima of the tale of "Ali-Baba and the Forty Thieves" pouring oil into the jars in which the thieves hid. And in Abu Nawas Street a bronze Scheherazade relates one of her tales to the sultan.

Two interconnected tendencies—interest in the past and projection into the future—are perhaps the

most notable features of Iraq's present-day art.

They Fought for It

The country is building a great deal, and in this sense Iraq is truly a "developing country." It is indeed constantly in motion, catching up with time and overcoming the backwardness inherited from the colonial past.

Iraq has the good fortune to possess oil. What is more, it disposes of this wealth at its own discretion and uses the receipts for its own development. But for this it had to wage a long and difficult struggle.

Not far from Kirkuk, at Baba Gurgur, I was shown the first oil well in the country. It was sunk in 1927 and operated until 1941, when a popular uprising flared up in Iraq. The monopoly bosses decided to discontinue production and pumped cement into the well to prevent the Iraqis from using it. This relic now stands as a reminder of how the imperialist monopolies once lorded it over the country.

I also saw another well, one of the first sunk after nationalization. It produced its first oil on July 20, 1972, and was named "Well of Peace and Solidarity" in honour of the International Conference of Solidarity with the People of Iraq held that same year in Baghdad.

The officials of the Iraq National Oil Company did not conceal their pride as they showed me around the complex of four oil-refining plants, gas-separating works and tanks for oil products which was commissioned last summer. They had good reason to be proud, for not so long ago foreign specialists predicted that the extractive industry would fall into decline after nationalization.

But things have shaped out quite well. Iraq is building up its oil industry and opening new fields. Soviet specialists have contributed their share to this, helping to build the first national oil field in North Rumaila, providing the Nahr Umr oil field with all the necessary equipment and installations, and carrying out geological surveys.

Iraq is now one of the leading oil producers in the world. It stands for fair prices and firmly resists the pressure applied to the members of

the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries by the industrial powers, notably the United States. This was the position adopted by its delegation at the recent Abu Dhabi conference which decided to raise the price of oil by 14.5 per cent.

While the Iraqi government devotes much attention to the oil industry, whose output under the five-year plan for 1976-80 is to increase by 15.5 per cent a year, it plans to lower the share of oil in the gross national product to 50.6 per cent. According to Minister of Planning Adnan Hussein, the economy is to be restructured so as to lessen its dependence on the export of oil. And Oil Minister Tayeh Abdul-Karim said in an interview with the *Alif Ba* magazine that this was "imperative inasmuch as complete dependence on oil resources in building up the economy may have undesirable consequences."

Reviving the Glory of Ancient Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia, the region now occupied by Iraq, was a flourishing land in ancient times. According to the Bible, it was the site of the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve dwelt. I visited a little place called Qurna, at the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates, and was told by the local inhabitants that it was the "paradise" the Bible speaks of, and to prove it they showed me "Adam's Tree"—a large, spreading tree on a well-tended lawn on the bank of the river.

Besides the Biblical legends there is trustworthy historical testimony to the fertility and riches of this land. Herodotus spoke of it with admiration, while the Greek geographer Strabo wrote thus of Mesopotamia: "This country grows more barley than any other, for it is said that 300 grains are born out of every seed. The palm yields all else: bread, wine, vinegar, honey, and all manner of wicker vessels." Strabo might perhaps have exaggerated slightly, but two harvests a year, with 40 to 60 grains produced by one seed, have indeed been gathered there. But of course it was not so much the gift of Nature as the result of hard work. To reap good harvests, people in Mesopotamia patiently built irrigation canals that were famous in the ancient world.

The present government devotes

serious attention to cropping and stock raising. Large sums are invested in agriculture and the manufacturing industry. A wide network of irrigation canals is being created. A new canal, built with Soviet technical assistance from Lake Tharthar to the Euphrates, was opened at the end of 1976, and another is under construction.

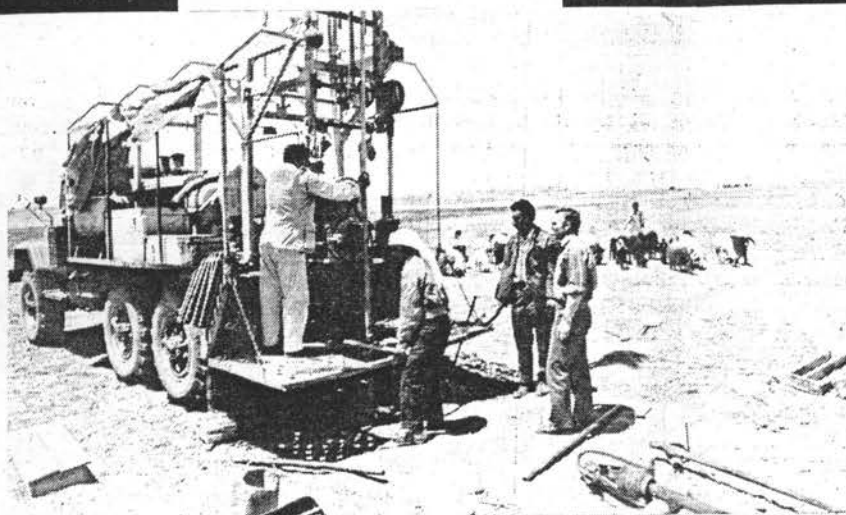
It is difficult to overestimate the role played in the life of Iraqi peasants by the agrarian reform law which was promulgated in May 1970 and extended to the Kurdish Autonomous Region in the summer of 1975.

One indication of the changes in the countryside is the establishment of co-operatives and state farms. I had an opportunity to visit a co-operated village in Madain District. It has new houses for the peasants, a school and a first-aid station. Close by is a large, modern state stock farm. I was told that several more such farms were to be built in the near future in order to provide the country with milk, meat and other foodstuffs. At present the country still has to import much of the food it consumes.

Comparing what I saw now with what had been four years ago, I could not help noticing that there were fewer imported goods in the shops. Their place has been taken by locally made articles. The buses in the streets, though made of imported parts and materials, are now assembled in Iraq. The farm implement works in Iskandariya, one of the more than 100 industrial and agricultural enterprises built or being built in co-operation with the Soviet Union, produces tractors.

Basra is Iraq's sea gate. Ships flying the flags of different countries put in at its port, bringing the machinery, mechanisms and building equipment imported by Iraq. Trade today is a far cry from that in the days of Sindbad the Sailor, whose name has been given to one of the islets within the city limits. But, then, Basra itself of course is greatly changed. Its population now comes to half a million. It was the "capital of dates" only a while back, Vice-Governor Abdel Aziz Badr Taka told me, and today a steel mill, a cement factory, a petrochemical plant and an oil refinery are being built in its suburbs.

I was shown around one of the new enterprises, a paper factory, by its assistant general manager Jamil



Soviet specialists help with geological surveys for the Hadiitha hydrotechnical development.

Photo by Vadim Kivrin

Zouhair. The basic raw material is reeds, which grow in abundance in the swamps between the Tigris and the Euphrates. Zouhair told me something about the production process and spoke of the difficulties the factory had to contend with.

"Man and not the machine is the main factor in our country's development," he said. "We import modern equipment from West Germany, but our workers' professional level is still pretty low. We are aware of this shortcoming and are confident that we shall overcome it."

There are of course other factors too that retard Iraq's progress. As the Iraqi Communist Party newspaper *Tarik al-Shaab* recently wrote, co-operation among the patriotic parties and organizations is indispensable for the success of the revolutionary movement and socio-economic reforms. The importance of such co-operation is especially great today when imperialism, Zionism and reaction are stepping up their subversive activities in the Arab world. In Iraq, the paper stressed, these activities are aimed at undermining the National Progressive Front and alienating its members, primarily the Baath and Communist parties. The persecution of the Communists and reprisals against the communist press, the paper said, are jeopardizing the gains of the revolutionary movement and creating favourable conditions for the activation of the reactionary forces. The Communist Party, *Tarik al-Shaab* wrote, will continue to exert efforts to prevent

its relations with the ruling Baath Party from deteriorating and not only preserve but deepen their co-operation.

The Nation Goes to School

That man and the improvement of his well-being are one of the country's main concerns is something I heard from different people I met in different parts of Iraq. Comparing the lot of the bulk of the Iraqi population with that in Egypt or some other Arab countries, one can say with all justice that the standard of living in Iraq is considerably higher. Much is also being done to raise cultural and educational levels.

A wide campaign was launched at the end of last year to implement the law on the liquidation of illiteracy which had been adopted in May. Posters hung out in cities, towns and villages tell Iraqis that imperialism is taking advantage of widespread illiteracy in some countries to exploit them still more and that labour productivity and the country's defence capacity depend on literacy. For those who are unmoved by patriotic appeals there are posters with excerpts from the Koran, urging people to learn to read and write. The press, radio and television constantly report on the progress of the campaign. Considering that in many Arab countries the number of illiterates comes to between 80 and 90 per cent of the population, the significance of Iraq's initiative in this respect far transcends its boundaries.

It is no chance accident that the Iraqis' heightened interest in their great past has coincided with the campaign to combat illiteracy. Four

years ago at the site of Babylon, the capital of one of the mightiest of the ancient states, I was told: "First we must defend and consolidate the revolution and then we can occupy ourselves with history and excavations." Today archeological work there is in full swing. Wahbi Abdel Razzak, the young, energetic and enthusiastic custodian of the local museum, said the government had allocated a large sum for the purchase of the equipment needed for excavation work and research and for hiring more workers. An international conference on Babylon and other ancient monuments was in progress when I was there. It was not meeting on that day and Wahbi readily acquainted me with the excavations. The scientists, he told me, recently discovered new data indicating that the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the "seven wonders" of the world, were not located where originally believed. The spot where they were thought to have been was actually the site of wine or grain storehouses. And the scientists are now looking for the actual location of the Gardens laid out on the orders of Nebuchadnezzar to gratify his wife, daughter of a Median king, who longed for the wooded hills of her native country.

In our talks about the Babylonian monuments we discussed the possibility of the return to Iraq of the unique items that had been taken to Western countries. Iraq has time and again raised this question at various international conferences and in UNESCO, saying it was prepared to defray the expenses involved in their shipment home. The Soviet Union's invariable support of this just demand is highly appreciated in Iraq.

I heard many expressions of friendship for the Soviet Union and a high appraisal of the co-operation between our two countries. The Baghdad newspaper *Al-Jabha* wrote recently that Iraq sees its relations with the socialist countries, notably the Soviet Union, as a factor of "strong support in its struggle against the forces of imperialism, Zionism and colonialism." The paper said a new stage in the development of the ties between our countries had been ushered in by the Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation signed in 1972. This treaty has become a solid foundation for strengthening relations between the two friendly states.