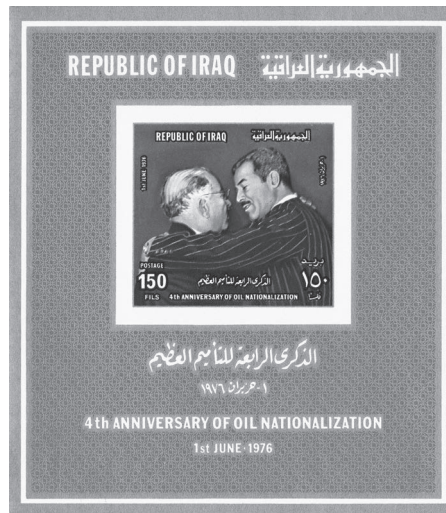


# *Al Bahithun* The (Re)searchers



A special edition stamp was issued on 1 June 1976, marking the fourth anniversary of the Republic of Iraq’s “great” oil nationalisation. It features a depiction of two men in embrace: then President Ahmed Hassan Al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein. Hussein was appointed as deputy to the President in 1968; they both came to power as a result of the third military coup in the decade-old republic. He led the negotiations with the foreign oil companies, including an articulate calculation of state sovereignty, compensations earned by law, and untimely arrogant manipulations related to the number of oil barrels exported by these companies. On 1 June, 1972, Al Bakr read the decree on national radio and television that nationalised the assets of the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). Between 1973 and 1975, the state continued to oust one European shareholder after another until all settlements were finalised in February 1979. Saddam Hussein assumed his new role as President in July of that year.

In many ways, this stamp can be read as a map—not of a defined geographic location or nation but rather of a process of production—charting Hussein’s ascent to power. Like a map, this stamp has borders, it does not demarcate a solid or monolithic state but instead enshrouds an expanse of a dense, interwoven pattern. Within the inner frame of the stamp: the figure on the right is younger, taller and is overpowering in appearance. His face and features are visible, and his arm is extended around the President—the back of the latter’s head being more visible than his face.

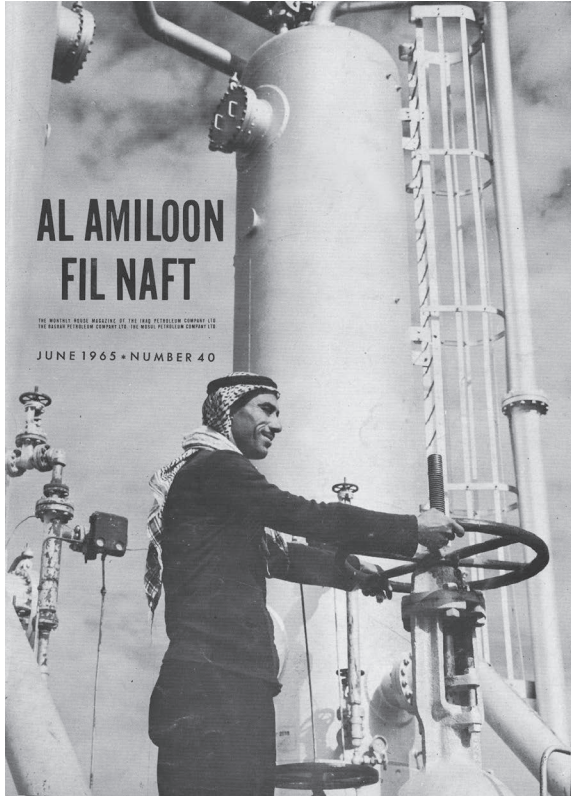


On the one hand, the stamp is celebrating another year of the state's nationalisation of oil after decades of exclusive possession and control by foreign corporations. On the other, the image depicts an impatient Saddam Hussein as deputy, someone who has also accumulated great power within the ruling party and in the higher departments of the state. The stamp is thus a map of power relations made by the state, which exceeds the formal spatial coordinates of a geographic document of other realms, providing a window into an intimate moment that foretells the gradual transfer of power in Iraq's first office and a sharper transfer in the control of its most precious resources. To read the stamp in this way is to understand that space is not given, it is not merely there, it is not a neutral entity.

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To further explore the ideas that shaped the collective aspiration of the Iraqi people in that decade, we can also map various scenarios presented in a feature film titled *The Searchers*, directed in 1976 by Mohammad Yousef Al Janabi, the same year the special edition stamp was issued. Produced by the Iraqi state's Cinema and Theatre Department, the film follows a group of men searching for oil in the marshes area (Al Ahwar) in the south of Iraq. The team was comprised of a representative constituency of Iraqi society at the time—an engineer, a revenge-seeking peasant, an amateur historian and an uneducated explorer. The men live and work on the water and conduct their explorations with a strange looking tractor, a simple boat and various telecommunication devices. When a phonecall alerts the team they are floating on a sea of oil, they erupt with joy, and two of the men split from the group to embark on a secret search for a legendary land of 'lost paradise'. After a long, tedious cruise that involves one of them leading the way based on what he senses as eerie sci-fi-like sounds and lights torching the sky, they finally arrive at the base of flaming oil

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towers in the Rumaila Oil Field. One man cries at the delusion of his 'lost paradise', the other is enchanted by the revelation that the oil field for him is a paradise. Rumaila Oil Field, said to be the fourth largest in the world,<sup>1</sup> was nationalised in 1961 through a law put forward by Abdel Karim Kassem, then Iraqi Republic's first Prime Minister, who assumed power following a military coup/revolution that overthrew the Hashemite monarchy in 1958. Friction between the Iraq Petroleum Company and the Iraqi government did not become acute until after the 1958 revolution, although differences of opinion naturally existed between the IPC and the government in this early period. National sentiments at the time were on a rise, and the IPC was seen as a Western entity exploiting Iraq's resources without much benefit given in return to the Iraqi people. The monopoly over Iraqi petroleum production began in 1925 of the Kirkuk field, Baba Gurgur, a seventy-five year concession that would not end before 2000. Kassim's Law 80 expropriated all IPC group concession areas not currently producing oil, but did not nationalise the IPC outright as Kassim would have liked. He could not have nationalised the IPC in 1961 because the Iraqi government lacked the technical and managerial capabilities to run the its operations, and he feared a boycott from Western buyers of Iraqi crude as happened in the early 1950s in Iran.

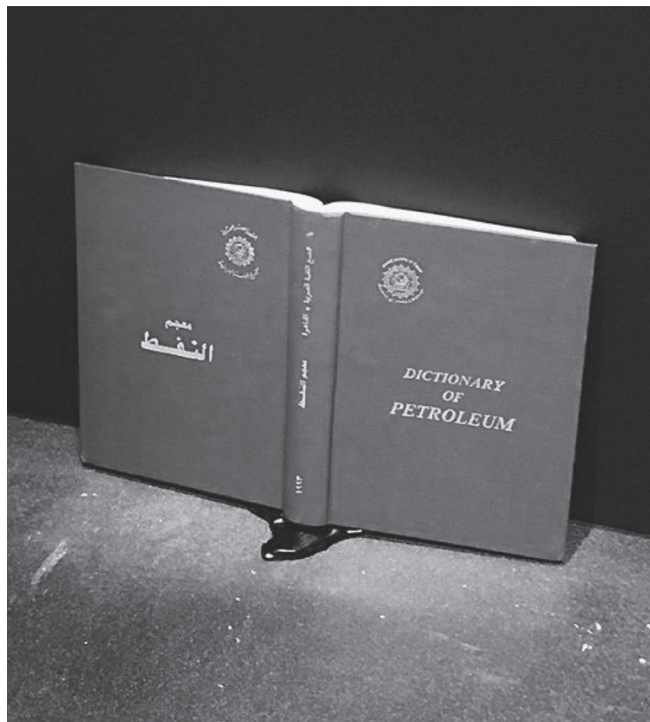
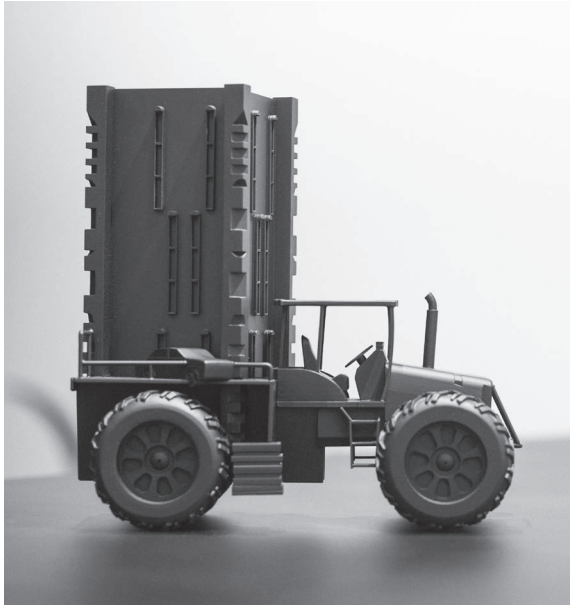
Saddam Hussein was a young revolutionary when he failed to assassinate Kassem in 1959. But Kassem was overthrown in a subsequent military coup in 1963, led by his deputy and the Ba'athists. INOC, the Iraq National Oil Company was founded through legislation issued in 1964 (Law 97), but INOC had no physical plant for over four years. One year after Al Bakr and Saddam Hussein took over Iraq's first office, the INOC became a going concern, courtesy of a Soviet Russia fifteen-year agreement that provided a technical team to advise over negotiations, drill wells in Rumaila, train INOC staff, provide pipelines and equipment, release several tankers, and most importantly, accept a commercial deal to take Rumaila's crude in return to these services. Five hundred Soviet specialists arrived in Rumaila two months before the nationalisation of IPC in 1972.

Michael Brown, writing in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* in 1979, stated that nationalisation of the IPC was feasible given the establishment and assured viability of the INOC as an alternative source of revenue for the Iraqi government, and the increased technical expertise of the INOC staff enabled it to run the IPC fields upon nationalisation. In 1970, government oil revenue was 186.1 million Iraqi dinars. An Iraqi dinar was worth US\$2.80 throughout 1971, increasing to US\$3.04 in 1972. Crude oil exports in 1971 were 523.2 million dinars, 99% of which the IPC accounted for its production.

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The sounds calling the men in *The Searchers* film were heard as eerie sounds, similar to those from popular sci-fi films of the era. Only one of the two men could hear them, and so became obsessed with the messages he thought he was supposed to decipher. As he realised that the 'lost paradise' he was looking for was an oil field he collapsed to his knees, trembling, weeping, and unable to speak. Next to him was the scientist, the archaeologist or geologist, whose surprise was rechannelled into scientific reasoning, his instinctive response being of optimism, and national pride. This is your real paradise, he said: "Real signs for a physical Aden. An Aden that is capable of creating a coherent mix of myths and reality. Symbol and logic. I think this is what you were looking for, no?" The two men had lost contact with their team and thus were in a 'paradise', left under the sun without help or guidance. The coercing sounds could not be heard anymore.

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As they awaited inspiration for a solution to their dilemma, their other colleagues were already on a mission to find them, locating the two men with the help of a helicopter hovering over the mangroves, seeing them from a distance. The group reunites finally, the helicopter lands nearby, *they found us!* they shout joyously, and run to the helicopter. One scene shows the pilot in dark sunglasses with a thick moustache scrutinising them. The next scene shows their return to the work station in the middle of the river, riding the same weird water tractor. The last scene is of their return from the outdoor (of the fields) to the indoor (of their station).

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Given to them with their salaries, the workers of the Iraq petroleum companies were used to reading selected literary works, interviews with writers and artists, archaeological findings, some fashion or sport highlights, the news on the world's oil industry and oil workers in Iraq, in a magazine published by Iraq petroleum companies, titled *Al Amiloon Fil Naft (The Workers in Oil)*. Each issue's front cover was in Arabic, often with an image of an Iraqi product or personality, and the rear cover would have a photo of the work stations of the Iraq petroleum companies.

An earlier IPC magazine came out in the 1950s, called *Ahl Al Naft*, the "people of the oil", which ceased publication after the 1958 revolution. *Al Amiloon Fil Naft* began publication in 1961, with a circulation of 8000 copies, selling for 25-30 fils, and offering subscriptions. Its editorial was based in Baghdad, while its former version was based in Beirut. Reader's letters were answered in the magazine's first pages, and lists of accepted and rejected literary submissions were also indexed. Though privately published, it nevertheless operated under the supervision of the Iraqi Ministry of Oil and Metals.

Images of the oil workers and oil fields appeared also on its covers, especially in the English section included towards the end of the magazine. The Arabic section was mostly dedicated to colour reproductions of Iraqi works of art. On the cover of the 53rd issue, August 1966, was a reproduction of a work by Nuha Al Radhi, a ceramic mural that had just been installed at the entrance of the IPC headquarters in Baghdad. Inside this issue an article elaborated upon how the twenty-five year old artist was one of the first in Iraq to revive the local ceramic heritage as art, and how her moderately priced works earned her the IPC commission. It also explained briefly how a ceramic piece is made, and what one saw as they entered the artist's studio.

*Although the work was generally abstract in design, the artist based it on the concept of oil. Looking for a phrase connected with Iraqi oil, the Arabic lettering of which would provide the centre of her design, she hit upon the words "Baba Gurgur", the name of the place near Kirkuk where the oil was first struck in 1927, which formed the beginning of one of the richest oil fields in the world. The two words were so designed as to combine Arabic letters, crescent shapes, and motifs resembling storage tanks and pipes. Decorative details were also based on oil motifs—valves, pipes, resembling towers, etc., with a periphery of traditional Iraqi ornamentation. When firing the tiles, she minimised the glazed parts, in keeping with an ancient Sumerian practice, and did the background in an earthy yellow interspaced with brilliant suns suggestive of the visual effect of locations where oil was usually found.<sup>2</sup>*

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A decade before *The Searchers* was made, Nuha al Radhi attempted to translate the sounds of the names of the oil fields in Arabic letters and formal constellations. She disconnected the letters to modernise their Arabic font, and included not one but many suns in her mural. The names of the oil fields also demonstrate the acknowledgement of the geographic or geologic features of a national fortune, despite the fact it was only partially accessible. It is interesting to think of her use of fired clay that sprang from the same earth as the oil fields, to make an art work of refineries marked with flames of fire. It is for us to imagine how under the very hot sun, 'paradise' promised by black liquid bubbles coming out from the earth under the workers feet and their machines, went from the hands of the searchers to the shareholders of IPC that had not a single Iraqi on the board of its directors.

But the IPC did have some Iraqi employees. In fact, *Al Amiloon fil Naft* is not referred to without crediting artist and writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra as its chief editor, although his name never appeared in the magazine between 1962 and 1972. He contributed many articles and his own work was reviewed in the pages of the magazine. Jabra was a Palestinian who was displaced from Bethlehem/Jerusalem in 1948 to settle in Baghdad. He was a close friend of Jewad Selim and other prominent Iraqi artists, and took part in the local art scene's foundational activities and early movements. It is said that Jabra founded *Al Amiloon Fil Naft*. Being a poet, writer, artist and translator, he managed to bring to the magazine works by young and established writers, poets and artists, but not the Marxists as one article mentions, who decided to boycott the magazine before and after its nationalisation. Contributors were paid from oil revenue, and they were often seen in his office at IPC. The last issue of *Al Amiloon Fil Naft*, its 119th, was in May 1972. In the following month, the Ba'athist government nationalised IPC, and its operations were taken over by the Iraq National Oil Company. After nationalisation, Jabra became an employee of INOC, and published a new magazine, *Al Naft Wal 'Alam (The Oil and the World)*. These local, visual and cultural magazine interventions motivated the local readership to reclaim some of the revenues monopolised by the petroleum companies. It is also what encourages researchers decades later to inspect the early works of writers and artists before they became influential in regional visual culture. Published articles and artworks combined with lists of rejected contributions which appear in the first pages of *Al Naft Wal 'Alam*, illustrate an active authorship and readership.

When Iraq negotiated its share of oil in 1952, the increase in revenue activated the government's Economic Development Board, which was legally entitled to 70% of all government revenues obtained from the oil industry. The increased revenues allowed the country to invest in infrastructure, invite star architects like Le Corbusier, Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright to visit and design projects, and enabled young Iraqi graduates to lead projects all over Iraq. These international guests were hosted by local artists and architects whose own experimental works were 'breaking out' around Iraqi cities, removed from political influence or interference.

These infrastructural works were redrawn and modified in the decade that followed, determined by continual political fluctuations: Iraq experienced a Presidential change in 1963, 1966, and 1968. Saddam Hussein also became deputy to President Ahmad Hassan Al Bakr in 1968. Al Bakr announced the nationalisation of oil on 1 June, 1972 in a televised speech, but this development was actually his deputy's project. In a newsreel of the day, the President and his deputy are seen arriving at the television station, following which the former enthusiastically announces that the monopolies of the private companies exploiting the nation's oil are finished as of that day. Iraq's golden days were to follow. The state took over oil production and its revenues, living standards rose, new industrial projects were launched, and more people were not only sent abroad



on scholarships but also lured back to the country after finishing their studies. One of the incentives given to graduates was a tax exemption to import a Mercedes car, prompting many to drive back to Baghdad. On this, the artist Nuha Al Radi made a sculptural work that she exhibited in Baghdad. It had only two components, a model Mercedes with human brains oozing from its windows, and the same brains flying Mercedes flags. Mercedes cars presented an indication of the academic status of their owners, especially in the university neighbourhood and in front of public housing. Additionally, graduates in general received free land or modern accommodation.

Oil industry workers in particular, and those who worked in camps in Mosul, Kirkuk or Basra, were given nearby housing, transportation, a one hundred-year plan for water and electrical supplies, electrical appliances paid in installments, 120 litres of oil directly to each household, laundry, drycleaning and barber services; there were also onsite hospitals with medical staff commuting to/ from London, entertainment clubs for single workers and social clubs for those married, subsidised canteens, and *Al Amiloon Fil Naft* with their salaries each month.

Nuha Al Radi made another mural in the 1980s for the newly developed Haifa Street, which was built between 1980 and 1987 with an large amount of public funding, for shopping areas, an art museum and high-rise buildings, including a collection named after the Dutch contracting company that built them. The Holland Apartments was a complex of fifteen-stories, dedicated to graduates and academics who had yet to secure housing through the government's benefits program. Scholars were moving into this building while the Iraq-Iran war, which raged in nearby fields in the south, continued to drain hard currency from the Iraqi state. Architects as well as men of all professions were summoned to the battlefield or to army bases to respond to war developments. From Le Corbusier's construction site, a senior architect was relocated to a military airport to design an enlargement of an air base facility. That war ended in 1988. By late 1990, following a serious dispute over the pricing oil in an Arab summit, Iraq invaded Kuwait, instigating a new war and sustaining international sanctions limiting the export of oil and the import of numerous goods. The buildings on Haifa Street, as monuments for social class rupture became visible during the blockade years. Academic salaries, just like the Iraqi Dinar, devalued early in the blockade, making it difficult for academics to maintain their social status acquired over the previous decade. Some had to secretly sell their libraries, one book at a time; others had already sold their Mercedes cars which had no, if not wildly expensive spare parts, as a result of sanctions.

Nuha Al Radhi this time created her installation *Embargo Art* (1995), in which she presented figures constructed from parts of machines that had become dysfunctional during the blockade. Graduates were now not allowed to leave the country, and for those who needed to, had to deposit large sums of money as a guarantee of their return. These deposit amounts varied, based on the person's education level, and for Nuha Al Radhi to receive a leave permit from Baghdad to show this installation in Amman, she had to claim she was illiterate and pay a reduced amount. Nuha Al Radhi wrote in *Baghdad Diaries* (1999) on this, and how she saw in a dream herself carrying a tree that had blossomed bread loaves, before giving them to people. In another dream, she saw groups of American soldiers stationed on Haifa Street, some in its alleys, embracing each other.

In 2007, four years after Saddam Hussein fell from power, Haifa Street became a fierce battleground, a fault-line where members of the former Iraqi army fought face-to-face as, and with, insurgents against the American forces and the new Iraqi army. Videos captured the American troops moving between the buildings of the neighbourhood, devoid of the once cultural and scholarly inhabitants. Video cameras following these soldiers as they entered the Holland

Apartments captured rare images of the interiors, not as domestic or private spaces but as pockets of the fallen regime. These years also saw Iraqi academics threatened with violence, kidnapping and assassination, sometimes based on misleading claims of their political affiliation. Specific names of scientists had circulated on the US Army wanted list. The Iraqi Association of University Lecturers reported that about three hundred academics, including doctorates working in Iraqi government ministries and university administration were killed before January 2007. Those murdered were mostly chemists, physicists and engineers, along with some physicians. The extent of this violence prompted an exodus of academics who wanted to leave Iraq. There was also an upsurge of bombings and the house of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra was destroyed in a suicide attack in 2010. His library of books and rare manuscripts, and a valuable collection of original artworks of his or gifted from his artist friends were lost.

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A dictionary of oil began as a list of words compiled by Saudi Aramco, given to the Arabic Language Society in Baghdad which organised a symposium in the second half of 1970 to discuss the terms of translation, from English to Arabic. It was finally published by the Egyptian Arabic Language Society in 1993, when Iraq was not on good relations with many other Arab countries. For every oil related English term, this dictionary provides an Arabic equivalent, attempting another nationalisation of the terminology of an industry that shapes the lives and fortunes, or misfortunes, of the Arab world. In 1994, The Arabic Language Union of Societies organised in Damascus a seminar to revise the work that was done on this dictionary. Over three days, all participants, from Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia went through every page of the dictionary and studied around half of the terms translated. Among their final recommendations was to use computers for the storage of the revisions, and to work towards unification of terms around all Arab countries.

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In my artwork related to these narratives, I have tried to play on the double translation of the Arabic word, *Al Bahithun*, found in the title of the 1976 film. "*Al Bahithun*" are the searchers, of those who go to look for oil, and the researchers who produce the knowledge on (oil), from (its revenue), and beyond (the nationalist claims of the structures of power it enables). The (re)searchers obsess over the details found in these complexities of nationalising knowledge with the money of nationalised oil. The strange water tractor is juxtaposed with the modular architecture of the Holland Apartments, cars are coming out of its walls, while books are crushed under its wheels. The sun is essential here, big, hot, and encompassing. An oil bubble sits in Nuha's ceramic material. The ceramic is the seepage from which knowledge, or blood, is drawn from the pages that gave an Arabic name to each of oil's technical terms. The searchers are the researchers, the black on black is the undecipherable sounds that called men, artists, writers, graduates, scholars, teachers, engineers to the fields.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Helman, 'The World's Biggest Oil Reserves', *Forbes*, 21 January, 2010; <http://www.forbes.com/2010/01/21/biggest-oil-fields-business-energy-oil-fields.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Al Amiloon Fil Naft* 53, August 1966