

HOW NOT TO OCCUPY IRAQ

By Martin Kramer

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As war against Saddam looms, military planners should read a very pertinent article by the late Elie Kedourie. Its title: "The Sack of Basra and the Baghdad Farhud." It's the story of how not to occupy Iraq's two principal cities.

In 1941, the British sent forces into Iraq to remove a pro-Axis military junta from power. Now it's called "regime change," and more than one journalist and strategist has remarked on the parallels between 1941 and today. But they omit the mistakes made by the British commander, General (later Field Marshal) Sir Archibald Wavell, in securing Basra and Baghdad.

The British didn't want to use troops to provide administration in the two cities, preferring that it be done by Iraqi authorities, while they bore down on strategic objectives such as the besieged RAF station at Habbaniya. Wavell's instructions: "As long as Iraqi administration meets our military requirements it is not, repeat not, to be interfered with or superseded because it is inefficient in other directions." And Wavell again: "Every encouragement is to be given to local Iraq administration to function so far as is consistent with safety of our forces. Political officers are to be regarded as liaison officers between Iraq administration and British forces and not as administrators except where Iraq administration is inoperative."

British forces thus left key areas of both cities to the mercies of a defeated regime. In Basra, the abdication resulted in the sack of the bazaar by rioters and looters. In Baghdad, it was far worse. Wavell instructed that his forces "should not get involved in street fighting in disadvantageous conditions." So while the British forces camped west of the Tigris, looting on the east bank by the bedouin and the remnants of the army and police turned into a full-scale pogrom. (Jews used the term farhud, a murderous riot.) About 180 Jews (and some Muslims) were slaughtered. A British officer later wrote of hearing "the growing crescendo of rifle and machine-gun fire. Baghdad was given up to the looters. All who cared to defend their own belongings were killed, while eight miles to the west waited the eager British force which could have prevented all this." Iraq's ancient Jewish community never fully recovered from the blow, and its younger members began to plan emigration. (The pogrom also left a mark on young Elie Kedourie, who lived through it.)

The British could get away with cutting corners in 1941. They were immersed in a world war on multiple fronts, their forces were stretched thin, and the world wasn't watching. In 2003, the world's sole superpower is bearing down exclusively on Iraq, under blazing media spotlights. If the 1941 handling of Basra and Baghdad were repeated under these circumstances, the stain would be indelible. Preventing it means exercising complete control in urban areas. Delay could produce a bloodbath surpassing any "collateral damage" in cost and effect.

Battle plans come down to priorities, and in Iraq there are a lot of them: oil fields, the Western desert, possible WMD sites, Tikrit, and more. But the lesson of Baghdad 1941 (the Jewish quarter)—like that of Damascus 1918 (the Turkish hospital) and

Beirut 1982 (Sabra and Shatila)—is the importance of immediately deploying forces to police an Arab city upon its conquest. In the absence of such policing, or upon its delegation to others, the likelihood of massacre rises sharply. That lesson is liable to be forgotten in all the optimistic chatter about how ready Iraqis are for democracy. Before that, Iraqis must be kept from settling scores. The road to hell—or a Belgian indictment—is paved with good intentions.

You'll find Kedourie's article in his collected volume, *Arabic Political Memoirs and Other Studies*, 1974.

ADDENDUM: Things were done differently before CNN and the Hague tribunal. Sir Alec Kirkbride, who entered Damascus in 1918 on the defeat of the Turks, explained how he put down looting, rioting, and the butchering of Turkish stragglers by vengeful Damascenes: he made "free use" of his large service revolver.

"Occasionally, someone turned nasty and I shot them at once before the trouble could spread." Right out of his memoirs, *A Crackle of Thorns* (1956).

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