

Iraq Through the Lens of 1882

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As a Middle East historian, I cannot help but think about historical parallels to the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. The one that leaps consistently to mind is the British invasion and occupation of Egypt in 1882. Not unlike the ‘shock-and-awe’ campaign on Baghdad with which the Americans began their assault on Iraq, the invasion of Egypt began with a brutal bombardment of the port city of Alexandria, undertaken from British ships in the Mediterranean, during which large swaths of the city were leveled. Not unlike the campaign of lies regarding weapons of mass destruction with which the American invasion was justified, the British invasion was in large part precipitated by a campaign of lies regarding Egyptian attacks on Europeans and their interests. Not unlike the ex-post-facto justifications offered for the American invasion, to the effect that Iraq was delivered from dictatorship through Western beneficence and would thenceforth enjoy democratic governance, the British invaders purported to offer Egyptians the opportunity to learn how best to govern themselves by following their invaders’ example.

The British reaped considerable rewards from their occupation, ensuring a steady supply of Egyptian cotton for the mills of Lancashire as well as security for the Suez Canal, which

reduced the journey to India by 6,000 km. The occupiers sought to avoid the appearance of ruling Egyptians directly, opting to have their diplomatic representatives in the country exert whatever pressure was necessary on Egyptian leaders in order for their prerogatives to be respected. Nevertheless, the British swiftly earned the enmity of Egyptians. The colonial aggression and interference in Egypt stoked a nationalist movement that would finally expel the British military from Egyptian soil in 1954.

The Americans made much of their withdrawal of troops from Iraq in 2011, with the final contingent of soldiers departing the country on December 18 of that year. But they left in their wake the largest U.S. embassy in the world, with a staff that has reached as high as 16,000. The irony of having left such an enormous diplomatic presence behind is that the actual influence of the Americans in the country has practically collapsed, given the fierce resentment about the conduct of the U.S. occupation that lingers in the country – a resentment that has emboldened and empowered the Iranian state in cultivating its influence in Iraqi government, social, and cultural circles. One need only glance at the latest figures of the Iraq Body Count project – between roughly 112,000 and 122,000 civilian deaths from violence since the invasion – to grasp the ferocity of that resentment.

But this comparison of Egypt 1882 with Iraq 2003 has important limits. Despite having experienced a seven-decade-long colonial occupation, Egyptians never faced the level of violence under the British that Iraqis faced under the Americans. And here I speak not simply of physical violence, that is, violence against persons or property. I speak too of a more figurative violence, the obliteration of Iraqi heritage. The American occupiers stood by as countless Iraqi artifacts, manuscripts, and books were stolen or destroyed. Moreover, they have appropriated vast swaths of Iraqi history for themselves, having transferred countless documents of the Baath regime to their own archives. After all of the brutal physical violence of the past ten years, I suspect that it is this figurative violence, this obliteration of Iraqi heritage, that will define this dark period in Iraqi memory for years to come.

NEXT



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