

Bedless in Basra. A Review of a Predictable Disaster

Britain commits extensive war crimes

By [Felicity Arbuthnot](#)

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So the British have finally slunk off, in the dead of night, from their squatted palace in central Basra, to the old air base at Shuaiba, west of the city. The new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown has worked hard to dress up slinking as victory. Our brave boys, he said, have brought to the south stability, they have rebuilt schools, hospitals, electric power stations (which they destroyed over thirteen years of illegal bombings during the embargo and then finally flattened in an illegal invasion.) Actually, speak to any one in Basra and they say they are by far worse off than under Saddam Hussein, who restored some semblance of normality, after 1991's forty two day carpet bombing, in just months, in spite of the embargo on a country which broadly, imported seventy percent of everything, including maintenance and essential materials.

A year after the invasion, I met with a group of doctors, old friends, from Basra, dedicated, heartbroken professionals, who had watched their patients die for want of equipment and medication under the embargo. None were fans of Saddam Hussein; all had been incensed at the 1991 Kuwait invasion, yet again putting their beautiful, ancient city in the front line, with they, literally, picking up the pieces. The 1991 bombing and assault by the US-UK led 'coalition' was such that they had described how they were unable to collect bodies from the streets, which were eaten by dogs, rats. That perpetrators of the embargo's horrors and 1991's carnage, were going to be greeted with anything but loathing and lethal attacks by the entire community, was delusional, bordering on insanity. One of my friends hesitated for a moment, when talking of the British in Basra and the south, caught the eye of colleagues, before she said: 'You know, we all wish Saddam Hussein was back'. So much for the British 'liberation' doing so much better than the Americans.

So now the British have retreated to the Shuaiba base, a remnant from the last time they took Basra in 1918, when they were worried about the oil fields in Abadan (one of the world's earliest oil fields) over the border in Iran and finally slunk off in 1932, after imposing various puppets and leaving an impressive legacy of British war graves for the Iraqis to maintain (as they did, right up to the invasion.) The resistance must be rubbing their hands, they now have all the invading apples in the one Shuaiba barrel.

During the embargo, the British and Americans flew together, in the south and the north, bombing painstakingly reconstructed essentials, built from cannibalized parts from another facility beyond hope. As soon as they were finished, Basra airport, water purification plants, electricity sub-stations, they were bombed again. The Iraqis repaired again, only for them to be bombed again. Now, we are told, the invaders must stay 'until Iraqis can stand on their own feet'. (Read: until we have helped steal the oil.) The bombing was often continual. One day, sitting in a cafe, a bombing rocked the area, the blast deafening. Crockery and cutlery

rattled and fell. I jumped. No one else even looked up. It was the norm. Children were still losing life and limb from the 'bomblets' which were dropped in 1991, made to look like tempting shiny toys. How seriously sick are weapons designers?

In one bombing in a tiny street, in a proud but poverty stricken area of the city, whole families were wiped out, one man losing his wife and three little daughters, all under seven. Saddam Hussein ordered the homes rebuilt. They were, in just months, to exemplary specifications (what exactly have the British rebuilt in four and a half years?) Saddam though, could not rebuild the lives our brave lads had decimated from on high. And of course Basra's sons and daughters were dying from the cancers caused by the depleted uranium munitions used by the US and UK. It is frankly astonishing that the British, jointly responsible for so many horrors prior to and since the invasion, have lost so few.

Whilst the U.S., run, lynch mob, kangaroo courts in 'sovereign' Baghdad 'tries' those of Iraq's legitimate government, in a spectacle which shames the world, law and any claim civilization itself, there are real war criminals out there, from those who ordered the illegal thirteen year bombings and the invasion, to those who carried them out and invaded. Again, Nuremberg's 'supreme international crime'.

Further, did the British know anything of this jewel of a city they were defiling, kicking down doors, beating up kids, indulging in the occasional bit of torture here and there, with their tanks tearing up it's streets, 'criss-crossed with waterways and canals', in the former 'Venice of the Middle East'? Founded in A.D. 637, by Omar bin Khattab, it quickly grew to a city of 300,000 and became a focal point of Arab sea trade which went as far as China. It became an intellectual center where philosophers, scientists, literary luminaries created and flourished. Ibn Al Jowzi and Ibn Al Haitham gifted discoveries in optics and mechanics that are thought to have taught Europe lessons.

Did they marvel as the sun fell and rose behind Basra's millions of palms and the birds soared and swung in their great sun eclipsing waves, dancing and singing in the dusk and dawn? Did they walk with compassion through ancient, ochre stoned, damaged streets, that have witnessed so much destruction and wonder at the remaining, superb and unique architecture of homes with vines, internal mosaic courtyards, intricate balconies, ancient elegant arched windows? Or did they just kick in the doors again, some doors fashioned when Oliver Cromwell thought to democratize Britain?

Did they trespass on 'Sinbad's Island' in the middle of the Shatt al Arab (named for Sinbad the Sailor who set off for his magical journeys from here) and wonder at its gardens, fountains and think of those who came there over generations, to picnic, sun and spend family time in its peace, beauty and tranquility, where the Tigris and Euphrates meet? Or have they commandeered it, or worse, bombed it?

Did they rush to the hospitals to distribute equipment and pharmaceuticals, denied for so long? Shamed by the state of them, in spite of the heroic effort of the staff who had risked their lives during 1991, the subsequent bombings and invasion. Did they restore some normality, drainage, clean water, cooling, heating? No. When Richard Branson flew in, free, in 2003, essential aid, collected by Medical Aid for Iraqi Children (<http://www.maic.org.uk>) palletted and marked for hospitals, it was handed to the British Commanding Officer in charge, who vowed to have his men distribute it. In fact, he passed it to the US troops, who allegedly passed it on to a South Korean fundamentalist, Christian evangelical group (of the

ilk of the 23 recently kidnapped in Afghanistan by the Taliban) and a quarter of a million £'s of medical aid, which would have translated into lives, not deaths, was never heard of again.

The loathing for the British in the south was never clearer than just after the 1998 Christmas four day blitz by the US and UK. Award winning photographer Karen Robinson and I traveled to Basra on an assignment. We went to hotel after hotel, formerly always welcoming, in a city which has a special place in both our hearts. Handing over our passports to check in, they beamed at me: 'Welcome back'. My passport is Irish. Faces froze at they looked at Karen's: British. 'Madam Felicity, you are so welcome, but I am sorry, not your friend'. Finally, around 3 a.m., having been traveling, sleepless, for nearly two days, we found beds. Since the lights were not working, we could not check the rooms and were anyway, we thought, beyond caring. It was a very low point. Collapsing into our beds, we both immediately sat bolt upright. The pillows were near congealed, bedding seemingly unchanged in recent history. The stench from what passed for the bathroom was eye watering. To call it a doss house would elevate it. But it was the only place in Basra that would take a British passport holder.

'Lord Blair of Kut Al Amara' , as dubbed by the Independent's Robert Fisk (Kut, site of another humiliating British defeat in Iraq in an earlier colonial adventure, December 1915-April 1916) trumpeted the sweets and flowers stuff, sold to him by convicted embezzler, CIA funded Ahmed Chalabi and by Iyad Allawi, of whom Fisk writes, has been paid by up to three dozen spook agencies. Their British and American passports should surely be withdrawn (by two countries avowed to rid themselves of undesirable immigrants) and they packed back to their country of origin for good, to face their fate with those they have so shamefully betrayed. Those who visited Iraq regularly and diplomats in the region, who knew and warned of the inevitable, impending disaster for the U.S., and U.K., were dismissed, threatened and ridiculed by governments who had no diplomatic representation on the ground for thirteen years.

Never were the words of the 1914-1918 war poet, Siegfried Sassoon more apt for the beleaguered British, holed up in their Shuaiba base, since he wrote them, a hundred years ago. He wrote to the British government: ' I am making this statement, as a willful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the war has been deliberately prolonged, by those who have the power to end it.'

Sassoon of course, also wrote: ' When the war is over and youth stone dead and old men toddle home - and die in bed'. Replace the 'old men' for politicians. Sassoon, of course, was Basra's son, he came from a family of wealthy Jewish merchants there.

History repeats uncannily in Iraq. After Kut, half the eight thousand British soldiers captured (by the Ottomans) died. Around the same number (including support staff) are holed up in Shuaiba. Since they are there illegally anyway, they have the perfect excuse to echo Basra's son and end this ' deliberately prolonged' invasion for oil and lies, in which, every hour, their lives hang in the balance.

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