

# Resurrecting Empire

By **Rashid Khalidi**

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*Some members of the U.S. coalition in Iraq argue that the insurgency there is merely an aberration. But to gloss over resistance of Western subjugation that occurred throughout the Middle East in the past is to ignore a key lesson in history. Author Rashid Khalidi explores how the history of Western domination in the region has conditioned its people to resist outside control.*

Little attention has been paid to the degree of resistance that took place during the Western subjugation of the Middle East.

## Uneasy occupations

To recapitulate the high points of more than 170 years of Middle Eastern resistance to foreign military occupation: There were continuous revolts and other forms of lasting nationalist resistance in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia from the moment French troops set foot in North Africa in 1830 until the moment they unwillingly withdrew in the mid-20th century.

In Egypt, the khedive's army resisted the British military in 1882, which thereafter had to conquer and then re-conquer the Sudan — and faced a nationwide revolt in Egypt in 1919.

Britain found its forces under guerilla attack in the Canal Zone after World War II, until its 74 year “temporary” occupation of Egypt ended with a final, humiliating withdrawal following the fiasco of the 1956 Suez War.

## Defeating the Brits

Following World War I, Iran — and especially Turkey — had to struggle tenaciously to force foreign troops to leave their soil. There was strong resistance to the British advances in Iraq and Palestine during World War I by Ottoman armies made up in large part of Arab conscripts from these countries.

In Iraq, these forces won one of the most resounding victories of the war, leading to the surrender of over 10,000 British and Indian troops at Kut al-'Amara in April 1916 — at the end of a disastrous campaign that resulted in more than 33,000 British casualties.

## The high price of expansion

Only two years after the occupation of Baghdad, an Iraqi national revolt enabled the Iraqis to take control of large parts of the country in 1920, while — as already noted — Britain was obliged to conquer the country all over again from its semi-independent government in 1941.

Palestine was almost as hard for Great Britain to conquer in World War I as Iraq, obliging it to wage a hard campaign that took even longer than that in Iraq.

After a series of disturbances and riots, the country erupted into a lengthy and bloody nationwide popular revolt against the British from 1936 until 1939. This revolt eventually succeeded in the rebels taking over several urban centers — and could only be mastered by means of the largest single pre-World War II colonial deployment of British forces.

### **Damascus bombardments**

The Syrians resisted the French in similarly stubborn fashion, obliging French forces to bombard and subjugate Damascus three times in the course of major military efforts, in 1920, during the nationwide Syrian revolt of 1925-26 — and again in 1945.

The numbers of people killed by colonial forces as they suppressed this resistance were high. In the most lethal of the French bombardments of Damascus in 1925 — in revenge for having been driven out of much of the city — French forces killed over 1,400 people, almost all of them civilians.

### **French revenge**

Earlier in 1925, after a similar humiliation in Hama, the French had killed 344 people — again mainly civilians — during a punitive aerial bombardment of the town.

French forces were later to kill as many as 1,000 in a similar attack in May 1926, after they once again lost control of the Damascus neighborhood of the Maydan.

The numbers of those killed in the Syrian countryside, especially in the Jabal Druze region where the revolt began, are much harder to determine, but were also undoubtedly very high.

### **Desert laboratories**

Iraq, Morocco, Libya and Syria were the laboratory where the military high-technology of the post-World War I era was first tried out and where the textbook on the aerial bombardment of civilians was written.

The RAF's "Notes on the Method of Employment of the Air Arm in Iraq" stated of this air campaign that "within 45 minutes a full-sized village...can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed and injured by four or five planes, which offer them no real target and no opportunity for glory or avarice."

### **Were Western powers ever in control?**

It is worth considering carefully the full meaning of these formidable European powers being obliged to conquer and re-conquer — and often conquer once again — their Middle Eastern colonial possessions.

It is also worthwhile to ask what motivated poorly armed colonial subjects to rebel repeatedly against the power of the colonial state, with its artillery, its airplanes, its motorized columns — and its unlimited resources, particularly since these subjects were aware of the occupier's readiness to employ this force until it had restored "order."

Although the motivation of these Middle Eastern men and women was denigrated and demeaned in colonial accounts as "fanaticism" — rather than being seen as patriotism and a desire for freedom — it should not be hard to understand this region-wide resistance in different form over more than a century and a half in terms of a natural opposition to the imposition of alien rule.

### **Natural opposition, not fanaticism**

Westerners make a serious mistake in thinking that these events are buried in the distant past and thus are long forgotten by the younger generations that now dominate Middle Eastern societies.

Leaving aside the fact that any citizen over 50 years old — including the majority of Middle Eastern elites — can recall vividly the waning days of the colonial era, the history of the struggle for liberation from foreign rule has for decades been amply conveyed to several generations of children by the national educational systems in Middle Eastern countries.

### **Commemorating rebellion**

National holidays, statues, postage stamps, museums, street names and memorial commemorations reinforce these lessons, cultural markers of societies that are extremely attentive to history, highly politicized — and in large measure literate.

Thus, while Americans may have short memories (who, in Washington, D.C., recalled Lafayette and Rochambeau, French heroes of the American Revolution, during the frenzied denunciations of French "ingratitude" in early 2003 provoked by France's

opposition to war in Iraq?), Iraqis, Turks, Egyptians, Iranians and other Middle Easterners have extremely long ones.

In consequence, the memory of resistance to foreign intervention and occupation is still very much alive among them.

### **Western tyranny**

Many of the older ones among them also retain memories of the day when most Middle Eastern countries lived under constitutional, parliamentary and democratic — albeit flawed — systems, fatally crippled by foreign intervention and occupation, that existed all too briefly.

And along with these memories are recollections of what happened to most of these hopeful experiments in democracy — and of the role played by the Western powers in their demise.

*From **Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East** by Rashid Khalidi.*