

BAGHDAD BULLETIN



Baghdad Bulletin

Dispatches on the American Occupation

DAVID ENDERS

University of Michigan Press | Ann Arbor

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for my brother

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Why are you going to China?

—*One of my roommates, when I told
her I was going to study in Beirut*

Preface

In February 2003 I left the University of Michigan to spend my final semester at the American University of Beirut. I went to Beirut for various reasons, including a desire to locate distant relations (my maternal grandparents are first-generation Lebanese immigrants). I also wanted to be somewhere I could go skiing. But most of all I wanted to be in a place where American students feared to tread, where they didn't even think to go. I like proving to people that their preconceptions are misconceptions. When I was an intern for the Associated Press in Detroit, I walked the entirety of Eight Mile Road, the rough-and-ready border between Detroit and the suburbs. One side of the road was thick with urban rot; the other was edged with tidy tree-lined streets and single-family homes. My mother warned that I was going to get mugged, or worse. My entire walk took place after dark, but all I found were people. They were the people who worked in the strip clubs or hit the bars after a hard day at an auto plant. They were the people who lived along the main thoroughfare. I didn't end up dead because I was a white boy walking around north Detroit. I ended up hanging out with the people I found there.

With war in Iraq almost a certainty, Beirut seemed like an especially good place to break down barriers. I found an apart-

ment two blocks from the Mediterranean, not far from the parking lot that had once been the U.S. embassy. (The embassy was blown up twice in the 1980s before they moved it to a fortified compound in the suburbs.) Before long I was marching with Lebanese students and a handful of internationals to protest the American invasion of Iraq. We marched in solidarity with the Lebanese demonstrators, holding signs identifying ourselves as American: the Lebanese police were too afraid to turn tear gas and water cannons on internationals. We voiced our disgust. The day the bombing began in Baghdad, students blocked the doors to all the classrooms, though most of us had already decided to skip class and attend a march to the British embassy. After the march ended I stayed with the kids hurling rocks through the embassy windows, dodging tear gas, fire hoses, and rifle butts. I was amazed. Here they were, expressing the outrage so many of my peers and I feel, but in a manner we would never dare.

My friends in Beirut often asked me, “You are an American who opposes the war. But what are you really doing about it?”

“I’m writing about what I see here,” I would say. “I’m telling people in America what people outside America are saying. And I’m reassuring people here that everyone in America hasn’t gone nuts.”

But it happened over and over again.

I was sitting in a bar in Beirut the night the war started, with Mira and Rania, two friends who always took me to task for being American. My French was less than perfect; my Arabic was nonexistent. Here I was, a kid from the Midwest in the Mideast, just hanging out. They knew how I felt toward my government, they knew that I didn’t hold the same prejudices and misconceptions as many Americans, and so we usually didn’t get stuck on questions of motivation, or on questions of blame. But on that night it was all too much. Rania started crying.

“Why would they do this? Why do Americans want to make war?”

Maybe it was just machismo. Maybe it was because the dis-

tance between Beirut and Baghdad is less than that between Detroit and New York. I decided to go to Baghdad. I was in the position to do it, so why not? It was considerably less of a sacrifice than many of my compatriots were being asked to make. It suddenly became entirely real to me that a large part of the story of my generation was unfolding not too far to the east. At the very least, I could bear witness.

“I’m going to Baghdad,” I told Rania.

I don’t remember now if those words stopped the tears or not, though that was the hoped-for result.

“Are you serious?”

I had been talking for twenty-two years. Now I had my chance. During Easter break I would go to Baghdad. I went to the embassy and applied for a visa, standing next to a long line of Lebanese men who were going to Iraq to fight. The visa never came—the Iraqi government fell first. In the meantime I kept trying to convince my Lebanese friends to make the trip with me. I would need someone who spoke Arabic. But in the end none of them would do it. That was when Ralph called.

Ralph had come to Beirut on a whim. He was twenty-four, with a master’s degree in chemistry from Oxford. He had spent some time working in a lab, but his real passion seemed to be international relations. When he got tired of the lab, he managed, with a little help from connections, to land an internship of sorts at a British daily; from there he decided to go to Beirut to study Arabic. We met because we were both freelancing for the *Daily Star*, Lebanon’s English-language daily. While Ralph was home on Easter break, his mum suggested he open an English-language paper in Baghdad after the war. “They’re going to need one, right?” she asked him.

She later said she hadn’t meant it seriously. Regardless, it stuck. Ralph only had about six months of actual experience in journalism, so he called me. I was standing in downtown Beirut, and the only thing that occurred to me was that an open-ended trip to Baghdad might cause problems for graduation and the AP job I’d lined up.

“If you can get the money, I’ll do it,” I said. So I stalled my plans to travel to Baghdad and waited for Ralph to come back to Beirut. A few days later we were in Amman. This was my chance.

“You oppose the war, but what are you doing about it?”

Now I really could say I was doing something.

Ralph and I had originally conceived of the *Baghdad Bulletin* as a daily newspaper before deciding that the problems of staffing, distribution, and production made insightful daily journalism in Baghdad a pointless endeavor. I envisioned (modestly, of course) a sort of *Harper’s* for the Middle East, an intellectual magazine that could somehow draw together all of the issues for which Baghdad had suddenly become the nexus. The actual paper turned out to be a little more like the *Economist* in its form, but almost entirely unique in its content. An English-language magazine in a war zone. We ran for seven issues, twice monthly, printing ten thousand copies of each issue and distributing them around the country. We were getting at least as many readers on our Web site, where the paper was available for free download.

To give an idea of exactly what we were trying to accomplish, I’m reprinting a response I wrote to a reader’s letter in the summer of 2003. The letter read, in part:

As I was reading the articles I began to ponder the reality of the Baghdad Bulletin. It seems bizarre in the extreme, when one thinks about it, that such a publication would be established and set up by outsiders.

My response:

First, we do not intend to present ourselves as authoritative, only honest. The target audience of the *Bulletin* is anyone in Iraq who speaks English (and there are a lot of English-speaking Iraqis), and the plan is to eventually publish two issues, one in Arabic, one in English, with the same content. It is extremely important to have English-language reporting here on the ground right now because English speakers (the

Coalition especially) are going to be making most of the decisions—it's an unfortunate fact, but they should be making them based on good information, and there should be a publication here to challenge and examine those decisions (in English) as well.

The media here should not be controlled and edited by foreigners, and much of it is not. We are one of the many new publications in Iraq—freedom of the press has been one of the happiest by-products of the invasion.

The intent is not to have foreign journalists writing most of the articles, but to begin training Iraqi journalists to take over the publication, eventually writing all of the foreign staff out of the equation and leaving the *Bulletin* here as a locally owned and operated publication. The situation is as it is at this point because, quite simply, there are not very many well-trained journalists here. Thirty years of oppressive rule have taken a toll. We are encouraging Iraqi involvement as much as possible and rely heavily on the advice and contributions from our Iraqi staff, which do outnumber the foreign staff at the magazine. . . .

Iraq should demand world attention, and I suspect it is unlikely anyone locally would have set up a Web site and magazine people would be interested in reading internationally so quickly. We are providing a much greater readership for Iraqi writers than they would receive anywhere else. Also, by having the company incorporated in London and initially set up by foreigners, we strongly reduce the chances we will be harassed by Coalition forces and can call attention to the harassment of other publications. (Unfortunately, we're still subject to the same press prevention tactics as everyone else here.)

Hope this makes you feel a little bit better about reading us.

Acknowledgments

These people, in no particular order, helped me maintain my sanity (and safety) as I lived and wrote this book. Shukran.

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Special thanks to Yahya Sadowski for letting me write my term papers in Baghdad, to Fadhil for lying to the neighbors, and to Kathleen's mom.

All articles from the *Baghdad Bulletin* are printed here as they appeared in the magazine, without further editing.

Hathahee al-hurrea!

Basically, if you can carry it away or hold onto it, it's as good as yours.

—Mark Gordon-James, on the looting by Iraqis
and the U.S. Army

Prologue

Agence France-Presse

6.9.03

“Baghdad freesheet hits the streets”

By Steve Kirby

BAGHDAD—A country devastated by war and occupied by U.S. and British troops may seem the least promising place to open an English-language paper, but as the first edition of the *Baghdad Bulletin* hit the streets Monday its owner-editors were confident of success.

The bi-monthly news magazine is ground-breaking in every way.

It is independent, colorful and produced to Western standards in a country used to the turgid propaganda sheets of the Saddam Hussein regime.

The *Bulletin* is also distributed free to hotels, businesses, and households across the five wealthiest neighborhoods of Baghdad so that the advertisers who cover most of its costs know they are reaching their big-spending target markets.

Getting the paper off the ground in a city which still has to contend with lawlessness, frequent power cuts and a night-time curfew has

been a labour of love for the American and two Britons who conceived the project.

The trio—two journalists and a financial consultant—have been taking no wages, banking on the eventual success of their innovative but high-risk brainchild to reward their efforts.

In the month or so since they arrived to set up the paper, they say they have had to contend with Kalashnikov-toting Iraqi gunmen and jumpy U.S. troops nearly shooting them up at a checkpoint.

“There was never a time when we thought we weren’t going to make it work,” says British journalist Ralph Hassall. “We have always worked ’round the problem or battled until we got it done.”

The 10,000-copy launch edition boasts an article by Britain’s special envoy for human rights, Ann Clwyd, on how the coalition intends to preserve the evidence from the dozens of mass graves being found around Iraq, and also takes a critical look at U.S. efforts to restore power and security to the capital.

Fellow Briton Mark Gordon-James stresses that the paper’s editorial line is entirely independent of the U.S.-led administration. Although all three of them opposed the war, the magazine is “apolitical.”

The financial mastermind of the operation, Gordon-James acknowledges that the trio have benefited from an immense amount of goodwill from Iraqis and Westerners alike who want to see their project succeed.

But on the strength of the advertising contracts he has already sealed he expects the paper to break even after just a few issues. He has even signed up a Jordanian distributor and hopes to find one for Kuwait as well.

Among the advertisers in the first edition are Emirati airconditioning manufacturer SKM, an Iraqi water filter distributor called Action Group and Baghdad’s Cedar Hotel.

The paper has been operating on a shoestring budget—a British venture capitalist stumped up start-up capital of \$20,000 in return for a minority stake.

“If other companies come in with more money and better resources I am not even sure that they would do better,” says Hassall.

“The fact that we were on such a tight budget means that we have run an extremely tight ship.”

The trio have taken on an Iraqi partner to take care of the advertising and paid-for distribution—a pioneering Western-educated commercial printer who worked as an astrophysicist until Iranian bombers destroyed the huge observatory he was working on for Saddam in the late 1980s.

“Of course in the past we never had a free press in any respect,” says Dr. Aziz Sadik. “I thought about such a business before but I couldn’t because I wasn’t allowed to.”

The trio acknowledge that finding English-language journalists has proved a problem—years of politicisation of both newspapers and education under Saddam’s regime has made it extremely difficult to find people with both the writing skills and the independence of mind.

But for the next edition, they have taken on three Iraqis—one of them an English professor and another a former employee of Saddam’s propaganda sheet, the *Baghdad Observer*—and they plan progressively to employ more.

“The endgame is to set up something sustainable—run, edited and managed by Iraqis but within the framework that we are operating now,” says Hassall.

Amman

4.30.03

The Al-Saraya Hotel is near the Roman theater, in the oldest part of town. The “oldest part of town” is a bit of a misnomer—most of Amman, despite being built around the ruins of a Roman city, is little more than fifty years old, having sprung up with the prosperity of Jordan and the Palestinian exodus from the other side of the Jordan River. The city sprawls blandly outward from the amphitheater into the surrounding hills. There are Pizza Huts and mini-malls; the rocky desert setting makes it feel like Utah with mosques. There is a Safeway, the last place to buy a decent jar of peanut butter before leaving for Baghdad. The sales tax is 20 percent. I suppose that’s why the royal family

looks so happy in the larger-than-life pictures found all over the country.

The Saraya is as far away from the sprawl as one can get in Amman, situated amid the nondescript commercial buildings and gray tenements that climb the hills around the city. The hotel is a jumping-off point for freelance journalists, human shields, and other people who can't afford to stay at the Intercontinental Hotel en route to Baghdad. I certainly can't, nor can we afford a fraction of the one thousand dollars per car that the drivers are charging to take people into Baghdad. Ralph and I have spent the last two days using ATMs as often as we can. We withdraw money from our accounts 300 Jordanian dinars (about \$510) at a time, then take the cash to an exchange shop so that I'll have American currency when I get to Baghdad.

Alistair, a old-money friend of Ralph's from Oxford, has agreed to pay for my fact-finding trip to Iraq, but the funds haven't come through yet, and I max out my credit card covering the deposit on the rental of a satellite phone. It doesn't really matter much. It's not as though I'll be able to use it once I get to Iraq.

Ralph is afraid that the Jordanian Ministry of Information won't give us papers to cross the border into Iraq. We don't have press passes, and we're not affiliated with any actual publication. I hop on a computer and make some *Baghdad Bulletin* letterhead and e-mail it to Mark, a friend of Alistair's in London who has agreed to meet us in Baghdad in a few weeks to set up the business side of things. But right now we're not entirely sure we're going to get into the country. Mark writes a short note of endorsement from the fictitious Royal Press Association and faxes it, complete with signature, back to Amman. A day later the passes are rubber-stamped—the MOI has issued nearly four thousand of them since the invasion began. I take the passes from the woman at the MOI and triumphantly hand one to Ralph. We also have to sign a piece of paper swearing that we