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April 9, 2003: a statue, a bridge, and a city, fall



Ten years after the statue of Saddam Hussein was famously toppled in Firdos Square, symbolizing the fall of Baghdad, Ezzedine Said, AFP's Chief Editor for the Middle East and North Africa, recalls the events of the historic day: It was the 21st day of the Iraq war, and the atmosphere at the Palestine Hotel, where much of the international press was based, was heavy. A day earlier, two of our colleagues had been killed by an American tank shell fired on the building. State television had not broadcast in 24 hours and U.S. forces were nearing Saddam Hussein's presidential palace but on April 9, 2003, his regime's propaganda machine was talking about its "imminent victory". Then information minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf -- known the world over as "Comical Ali" -- had even offered a day earlier that American troops could lay down their arms, or face being burned in their tanks. A few hundred meters from the hotel, a small band of fighters were firing across the Tigris River in the direction of two Abrams tanks that were positioned on the other side as coalition forces sought to take the strategic Jumhuriyah Bridge. To avoid being in the line of the tanks' fire, dozens of pro-Saddam fighters -- Iraqis and Arabs -- all dressed in civilian clothes hid behind buildings or sandbags establishing their positions. It was almost as though they were willfully ignoring the advances American forces were making across the capital, instead focusing all their attention on those two tanks, which were obscured by the arched bridge. "Baghdad will never fall," one of them, armed with a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher, assured me. His brothers-in-arms all had an unflappable sense of inevitable victory. On the other side of the river, those fighters' eventual fate was foreshadowed by the rout of Iraqi forces that was evident on the streets. U.S. tanks advanced on the presidential complex virtually unmolested, regularly firing their cannons on bunkers. In the ensuing confusion, cars made sudden about-turns on the street and sped away. Passersby ran to take shelter. At the time, many of the capital's residents did not seem to know that American troops were on the verge of taking the city. In Zayouna, east Baghdad, hundreds of Iraqis ran to the edge of the nearby highway to greet U.S. forces speeding towards the center of the capital. Young men took off their t-shirts and waved them in the air in front of American troops, while others cried out, "Welcome! Welcome!" Almost immediately after having seen the tanks pass through their neighborhoods, Iraqis seemed more willing to talk, to open up about the regime of Saddam Hussein whose name, just a few hours earlier, would have terrified them to their core. "Dictator", "torturer", "traitor" were all words they used to describe him and his cronies, words never heard by foreign journalists, even in private. Just two days earlier, the Americans had hit a house where Saddam was supposed to have been hiding out, and since then, rumors had been flying about his whereabouts. As recently as April 4, in fact, Saddam had made two walkabouts in Baghdad -- within range of American fire. On the way back to the AFP office in the Palestine hotel, I took a detour to an area filled with government ministries in the north of the capital. Incredibly, the looting had already begun. I saw wheelbarrows loaded with furniture, computers, heaters and fans, all being ferried to nearby trucks, waiting expectantly at the gates of government buildings. The most valuable "spoils" were, of course, taken from the palaces of Saddam and his sons. When I returned to the hotel, the staircase was filled with reporters, all trudging up and down -- the elevators had not worked since the beginning of the war thanks to a city-wide power cut. Back in the office, my colleagues were all gathered on a balcony, shouting, "they are there, they are there!" It was around midday and the American tanks had arrived, just outside the hotel at Firdos Square, where a bronze statue of Saddam towered over all comers. The scene was incredible -- we knew the fall of Baghdad was imminent, but we thought it would have taken several more days. A few minutes later, American marines were in the lobby of the hotel, where employees served them Arabic coffee in a sign of hospitality -- soldiers told me later they were surprised