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## Middle East



THE ROVING EYE

### The real fury of Fallujah

By Pepe Escobar

*"The Romans create a desolation and call it peace."*  
- Tacitus

*"The enemy has a face. It is Satan's. He is in Fallujah, and we are going to destroy him."*

- Colonel Gary Brandl, US Marines

President George W Bush is "reaching out" to Fallujah - the first major foreign policy initiative of the second Bush administration. The name: Operation Phantom Fury. The strategy: precision-strike democracy. The message: kill them all, and let God sort them out.

Former US intelligence asset turned prime minister without a parliament Iyad Allawi - widely known in Baghdad as "Saddam without a moustache" - has got himself another title: the Butcher of Fallujah. On Sunday, before co-launching with the Pentagon the biggest urban war since the storming of Hue in 1968 Vietnam, Allawi installed de facto martial law in Iraq for 60 days. Historians and political scientists are breathlessly trying to explain to the world that no democratic election can possibly be preceded by a state of siege.

To add insult to injury, Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld is saying that Allawi is responsible for all major military decisions regarding Fallujah: only the Bible Belt may be gullible enough to believe that an Iraqi civilian without an army rules over the Pentagon. So it's the Vietnam tragedy all over again, replayed as farce - a biblical crusade in Mesopotamia. Those who learned their lessons from history know full well what happened after Hue.

#### The new Hue, or the new Grozny

The Pentagon spin machine is selling Operation Phantom Fury as a battle of good against evil to root out "terrorists" in the "militant stronghold" of Fallujah. It is selling war on civilians as "the liberation of the people of Fallujah" as well as the next step towards implementing "democracy" in Iraq. These are outright lies. Fallujans insist they are not harboring al-Qaeda fighters, or even the elusive Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The Pentagon insists that Fallujah is the headquarters of Zarqawi's al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Unity and Holy War) movement. So if there's no Zarqawi - if he really does exist, he has already left the building, sources tell Asia Times Online - and no al-Qaeda, what's the point of unleashing this fury?

The code name betrays it all: the real motive for turning Fallujah into Grozny is revenge. In the first siege of Fallujah in April, the mujahideen inflicted a severe defeat on the Americans. Fallujah had already become the symbol of the Iraqi resistance after Marines killed 15 civilians in May 2003 - when the city even had a pro-American mayor. Last April, up to 1,000 Iraqis were killed, blown up,

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burnt or shot by the Americans - two thirds of them civilians, mostly women and children. Now, one of the first targets of Phantom Fury was a Fallujah hospital, qualified by the Pentagon as "a center of propaganda". The fact is, in April hospital doctors were carefully detailing to the world media the hundreds of innocent civilians killed by the American assault. Now, under a strategy of what could almost be called collective punishment, the hospital has become a military target.

### **No images, no sound**

This is the ultimate asymmetric war - ultra high-tech F-16s, Cobra and Apache helicopters, AC-130 gunships, tanks, Bradleys and awesome firepower against a bunch of youngsters in tracksuits and trainers with mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. A few hundred of them are Arabs - Saudis, Yemenis, Jordanians, Tunisians - the new generation of the jihad diaspora. But the majority are Iraqi fighters, many of them former or retired military officers, engaged in a war of national liberation. The Pentagon is pitting between 2,000 to 2,500 fighters in Fallujah and environs along with another 10,000 Iraqi civilians against at least 12,000 troops - four US military brigades and one 500-strong Iraqi brigade, trained by the Marines and included in the American payroll.

Serious fighting rages in al-Guaifi, in the northern part of the city, in the Golan and Military neighborhoods to the east, and in the Industrial and al-Shuhada neighborhoods to the south. The mujahideen, at least for the moment, are holding their positions.

Nobody will know the full extent of the horror inflicted on Fallujah civilians because this is a war micromanaged by the Pentagon - carefully built up for weeks, timed to set off only after the re-election of Bush, and now conducted with a few embedded journalists on the side duly brainwashed by a barrage of propaganda and spin. The Sunni triangle has become so dangerous that independent journalism is out of the question. Thus the absence of war images - apart from Pentagon propaganda videos of Marines under night vision cameras with the faint sound of explosions in the background.

There's no soundtrack to this war. No sound of 2,000-pound bombs falling on rows of houses and followed by relentless wailing, the sound of missiles flying overhead, the sound of prayers and cries of "Allah Akbar!" trying to drown out the fear, the sound of AC-130 Spectre gunships demolishing a whole city block in less than a minute, the sound of bodies hitting the sand targeted by Marine snipers. The only reliable information of what's happening on the ground in Fallujah comes from civilians who have left to Baghdad.

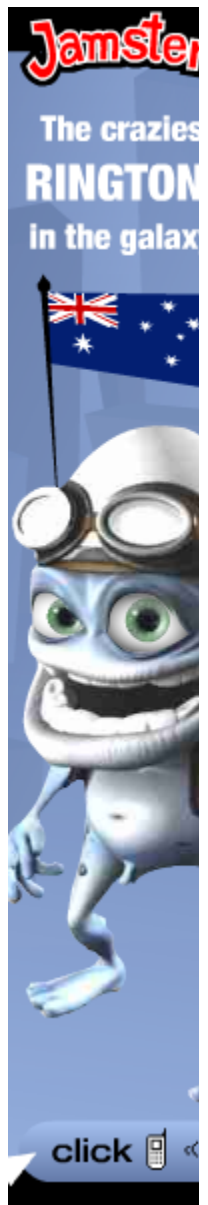
It's a blatant lie to describe a city of 300,000 as a "militant stronghold". Even if there were only 100,000 residents left, most of these, tens of thousands, are civilians, and as usual in any war, they are the most vulnerable: the poor, the elderly, the sick, the ones who could not get away because of fate, and the bravest of the brave - nurses and doctors.

### **Fallujah from the inside**

Senior scholar Sheikh Omar Said identifies three major strands in Fallujah - Sufism, the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism, all united at the moment against the occupation. The city is being run by the mujahideen *shura* (council) - led by influential imams and mosque preachers like Abdullah al-Janabi, Zafir al-Obeidi and Omar Hadid.

Fallujah has four main clans: Zawbaa, al-Jamilat, Bu Eisa and al-Mahameda, plus many secondary clans like Tamim, Bani Kabis, al-Fayad, al-Aneen and al-Raween. Most of the clans are Sunni and originally came from the Arab peninsula.

The backbone of Fallujah is Islam and its tribal clans. Bravery is the common staple. Vendetta is a must. People prefer to die than to submit to a foreign invader: it's considered their Islamic duty. More than 20 prominent Saudi scholars recently qualified the resistance as a legitimate right and obligation.



The Fallujah mujahideen *shura* is a real unifying force. There are no "terrorists" in the midst of these resistance leaders, tribal chiefs and Sunni clerics - only Iraqis fighting a war of national liberation. To counteract Pentagon propaganda, the *shura* has promised to protect journalists and house them in a "special building". But considering what happened in Kabul in 2001 and Baghdad in 2003, there's every reason to believe the Marines could have an "accident".

The local command in Fallujah is centered in two mosques: Saad ibn Abi Wakkas, run by imam Abdullah al-Janabi, and al-Hadra al-Mohammadiya, run by imam Zafir Al-Obeidi. Janabi controls the mujahideen *shura* and Obeidi controls the political *shura*, presided by Sheikh Tarlub Abdel Karim al-Alusi and uniting tribal and religious chiefs and city notables. Tarlub is the de facto political chief of the guerrillas in Fallujah - even though decisions are collective and the word of the imams and the emirs carries enormous power.

Asia Times Online sources in Baghdad close to the resistance in Fallujah confirm that Tarlub was saying as late as last week that the city would have preferred negotiations, but the Americans wanted a war. The sheikh also said that 80% of the youth of Fallujah had joined the resistance, as it would be a shame for their families if they were not committed to defend their city. According to the sheikh, there are more than 1,500 foreign jihadis in town (the Pentagon says they are between 2,000 and 2,500), but no al-Qaeda. The sheikh defends the presence of "the Arabs" - as Iraqis call them: they are "Muslim brothers" who came to help expel the invaders. Many nationalist Iraqis though are angry with the foreigners' presence because, they say, this serves the American strategy of labeling everybody as "terrorists". But in terms of an attack on Fallujah and as far as the Iraqi resistance is concerned, the sheikh was sure that the mujahideen would adapt, retreat and later come back in full force.

#### **What will the world say?**

Even before Phantom Fury, American bombing had been killing Fallujah civilians for weeks. Now the Marines are invading hospitals, targeting ambulances and in the next few hours and days may even bomb mosques: so much for capturing Iraqi hearts and minds. The souk in the city center used to be open until noon and still had some food - but this was before Allawi cut off the roads from Fallujah to Baghdad and Ramadi. The hospitals are overflowing, but with no supplies, medicine and only occasional electricity. The brand new Nazzal hospital - funded by Saudi donors - was destroyed last Saturday by two American missiles.

A few days ago, a message from "the mosques of Fallujah" threatened a jihad all over Iraq against the Americans and those who helped them if Fallujah was attacked. A fatwa - approved by top religious authorities in Baghdad - officially proclaiming the jihad may be issued in the next few hours or days, something that would set the whole Sunni triangle on fire and promote even closer collaboration between the jihadis and Iraqi nationalists.

The civilian victims of Phantom Fury can barely count on global public opinion expressing outrage. It didn't happen last April, under the first siege of Fallujah, and it didn't happen last August, when Najaf was attacked. According to a study published by the British medical paper *The Lancet*, the American invasion and occupation has caused at least 100,000 Iraqi deaths - September 11 dozens of times over. Fallujah may add one more September 11 to the list. More than half of the dead were women and children.

#### **Fallujah as the road to civil war**

What will be achieved by turning Fallujah into Grozny? Absolutely nothing positive for the US. History shows that a people fighting a war of national liberation is never easily intimidated. The resistance will melt away and regroup. Top Sunni clerics all over the Sunni triangle and beyond have reminded Iraqis - as if they needed any reminding - that they should help the guerrillas to escape. On the jihadi front, the Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades, the group linked to al-Qaeda which has claimed responsibility for the Madrid bombing, has already threatened the US with "unbearable hell" - and did not forget

to hold the American electorate responsible for condoning Bush's Phantom Fury-style strategies.

Mohamed Bashar Faidhi, a member of the Sunni Association of Muslim Clerics, promised the powerful association would boycott the January election if Fallujah was attacked. The association - as well as the majority of Iraqis - knows that "Saddam without a moustache" Allawi is alive and in power only because of 137,000 US troops.

On Tuesday, a major Sunni Muslim political party, the Iraqi Islamic party (Hizbul Islami al-Iraqi), quit the interim government and withdrew its single minister from the cabinet in protest against the assault on Fallujah. The Iraqi Islamic party is the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamic party well established in the Middle East.

Its members have a long history of oppression under Saddam Hussein's rule. As a result, party leaders went into exile, mostly in London. Immediately after the fall of Saddam, they restored their activities, and somewhat surprisingly adopted a peaceful political struggle to give the US a chance to hand over power to the Iraqi people. This chance has now been lost.

Martial law means in practice a daily curfew, no political meetings and no free press - but the resistance won't go away. The dynamic is inexorable: Sunnis will increasingly view themselves as excluded from the new Iraq as Shi'ites keep gaining power. This is the road for civil war.

There could not be a more tragic exercise in futility than Phantom Fury as Vietnam revisited - to destroy Fallujah in order to "save" it. The new Grozny, filled with rubble, will either become a garrison - with scores of Americans being blown up by roadside bombs - or the resistance will eventually get the city back when the Americans leave. Few Sunni Iraqis will believe this was all about protecting them from "terrorists" and promoting "democracy". Precision-strike democracy is a neo-conservative phantom, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

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