

# Is the US military preparing another massacre in Fallujah?

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There are indications that the US military is preparing another massacre in Fallujah, where over 1,000 Iraqis were killed during the American siege of the city in April. The number of US troops in the surrounding province of al-Anbar is being increased and a campaign is underway in the US and international media to demonize Fallujah as the headquarters of Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi—the Jordanian Islamic extremist in whose name a series of provocative killings have been carried out in Iraq, including last week’s bombings across the country and the murders of Nick Berg and Korean national Kim Sun-il.

The US Marine Corp is bringing in new forces which could provide the vanguard for an assault within a matter of weeks. Some 2,200 fresh marines, including the Third Battalion of the First Marine Regiment, are currently being rushed from California to the Fallujah area to reinforce the units that were involved in the heavy fighting in April. In a departure from normal procedure, the newly-arriving troops are reportedly not going to be given any time to acclimatize in Kuwait to the burning heat of an Iraqi summer, but deployed immediately. A total of 5,000 extra marines are being brought by the beginning of August.

Since June 19, three US air strikes have been carried out on Fallujah homes, sending tensions in the city to a fever pitch. US spokesmen have claimed that the targeted buildings were “safe houses” for Tawhid wa al-Jihad—the organization allegedly headed by Zarqawi. Fallujah leaders and members of the US-armed and paid Fallujah Brigade militia have categorically rejected the US accusation that Zarqawi and his shadowy organization are in the city. Al Jazeera has carried interviews with locals, testifying that those killed by the American air strikes were Iraqi civilians.

Last Thursday, American tanks and marines advanced

to the fringes of the city’s eastern suburb of al-Askeri, provoking a battle with the resistance fighters who have defended Fallujah from the occupation forces. In an indication of the intensity of the combat, Air Force and Navy aircraft were called in 10 times by marine commanders to drop 500-pound laser-guided bombs on alleged insurgent positions.

The real motive for the US vendetta against Fallujah is not that the city is a haven for terrorists, but that it is a focus of the popular Iraqi national opposition to the presence of US and foreign troops in the country. With a predominantly Sunni Muslim population of some 300,000, it has been a center of armed struggle against the occupation since Iraq was invaded. Well-organized resistance groups have held off a number of US military attempts to “pacify” the city. From April 5 to April 9, Fallujah’s defenders withstood a murderous assault by US marines, following the killing of four American mercenaries in the city on March 30.

At the end of April, shaken by the Shiite uprising across southern Iraq, the Bush administration sanctioned a deal to withdraw American troops from Fallujah and hand over control to the Fallujah Brigade, a militia formed by former Iraqi Army officers and recruited from the very insurgents who had been fighting the US forces. The deal constituted a temporary US acceptance that Fallujah would be controlled by the resistance and was a devastating setback to the political and military authority of the occupation.

In the weeks since, there have been numerous criticisms of the Bush administration for making the deal and calls in the American political establishment and media for Fallujah to be brought to heel. The situation in the city was the subject of intense discussion during the visit to Iraq by Deputy Defense

Secretary Paul Wolfowitz earlier this month. A US official in Iraq told the *New York Times* last week that the military was now actively considering “the kinetic option”—a major assault—to impose American control. “Keeping the city quiet is not sufficient”, the official stated.

There are good reasons to believe that a decision has been taken by the Bush administration and military planners to hold off on a major attack until after the sovereignty over Iraq was transferred to the US-installed interim Iraqi government. It wants to be able to portray a bloodbath against the people of Fallujah as taking place at the request of a sovereign Iraqi government, rather than at the orders of the White House.

The Iraqi defense minister, Hazim al-Shalaan, issued statements last week that indicate the new regime is prepared to allow a US assault to unfold in its name. Shalaan repeated that the interim government intends to use its powers to declare martial law in areas of the country, with the justification it is necessary to eliminate “foreign” terrorists. He stated Friday that “an urgent plan” has been drawn up to impose security in Baghdad and certain provinces. Fallujah and al-Anbar province stand out as the most likely targets.

In a video statement released on Friday, Fallujah resistance fighters directly accused the US and interim government of using false claims that Zarqawi is in the city as the cover for an attack. The statement declared: “We know that this talk about Zarqawi and the fighters is a game the American invader forces are playing to strike Islam and Muslims in the city of mosques, steadfast Fallujah.”

Whoever makes up the “Zarqawi network”, they act, and are viewed in Iraq, as agent provocateurs for the US occupation. Indiscriminate bombings and the murder of civilians serves only to confuse and alienate the tens of millions of people around the globe who sympathize with the Iraqi resistance to the American takeover of their country. The killing of Kim Sun-il and the bombings in Iraq last week in Zarqawi’s name, which killed scores of Iraqi civilians, have been condemned by leaders of both the Sunni and Shiite wings of the Iraqi resistance.

The American media, however, is functioning as nothing more than a propaganda agency for the Pentagon. As if on cue, the major television networks

and newspapers are pouring out the accusation that Fallujah is a hotbed for Zarqawi’s terrorist activities and censoring the testimony to the contrary being made by Iraqis and in the Arab media.

In one of the more shameless examples, the media has universally reported the unsubstantiated US military claim that the third air strike on Fallujah, on a house in al-Askeri, killed between 15 and 25 members of Zarqawi’s organisation. According to the Al Jazeera correspondents who reported from the site, the precision-guided bomb hit only a vacant house and wounded four people in a neighboring home.

The mayor of al-Askeri showed an Associated Press correspondent the bombed-out house the next day and stated it was owned by Youssef Kanash, who had moved his family out of the area due to the prospect of major fighting in eastern Fallujah.

The only evidence of casualties was a dead rabbit on the front lawn. The mayor told AP: “If this animal is a member of the al-Zarqawi group, then I congratulate the Americans on their victory.”

According to an Iraqi correspondent for the British *Telegraph*, the city is girding itself for an attack. Members of the US-armed Fallujah Brigade and the Iraqi police were seen alongside resistance groups, coordinating the preparation of defensive positions in the eastern suburbs.



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