

Iraq: US assault underway on Fallujah

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In recent weeks there has been speculation in the press as to whether the American-led occupation forces in Iraq would attack Fallujah before or after the November 2 US presidential election. The question has become something of a moot point. The roads out of Fallujah have been cordoned off by US forces, all talks have broken down, the city is being bombarded every night by US air strikes and 1,000 marines are engaging Iraqi resistance fighters in the outer suburbs.

A bloody battle in Fallujah has begun—accompanied by a major escalation in the violence across Iraq—largely behind the backs of the American people and the world as a whole.

The *New York Times* reported Monday: “The escalation of fighting in Fallujah came as hundreds of [Iraqi] insurgents arrived from other cities for a long-anticipated offensive by US forces, according to witnesses.” An anonymous US military official gloated to the *Boston Globe* that the Iraqis preparing to defend Fallujah “are definitely going to fulfill their jihadist dream of going to heaven, because they’re going to die pretty quickly”.

A Fallujah resident told the Arab cable network Al Jazeera on Sunday: “US helicopters and armoured vehicles are bombing the city in an attempt to destroy its infrastructure, with no consideration for whether its targets are resistance fighters or civilians.” Observers in Fallujah told Al Jazeera that ambulances have not been able to reach the areas where the fighting on the ground is taking place. Among the confirmed civilian casualties in the past week are a family gunned down at an American checkpoint and a young girl killed when US artillery demolished her home.

Tens of thousands of the city’s 250,000 inhabitants have already fled their homes over the past week. A local factory owner told the *Washington Post*: “Most of the people, 90 percent, have left the city. We can’t stay in Fallujah anymore. It’s the bombing.”

The assault on Fallujah is being justified with propaganda that the city is the headquarters of the alleged terrorist network headed by the Jordanian extremist Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi. The group said to be headed by Zarqawi, Tawhid wa al-Jihad, has claimed responsibility for the brutal murder of foreigners in Iraq—most recently that of British citizen Kenneth Bigley—and a series of car bombings and other attacks. The US-installed Iraqi interim government is demanding Fallujah hand over Zarqawi or face an all-out offensive by American forces.

The Zarqawi ultimatum is nothing more than a pretext. The Fallujah council, made up of Iraqi tribal and resistance leaders, has emphatically denied that Zarqawi is operating from the city and rejected as baseless the US allegations that most of the fighters in Fallujah are non-Iraqis. The true motive for the attack is that the city is a focus of the Iraqi national opposition to the US-led occupation. Resistance groups in Iraq’s western Anbar province have waged a constant guerilla war since the country was invaded and effectively controlled Fallujah from the end of 2003.

A leading tribal leader in the area, Ali Ibrahim Faris, told Associated Press: “I don’t believe al-Zarqawi has any presence in Iraq. It’s a myth that the Americans have created to confuse the situation.” The main negotiator for the Fallujah council, Khalid al-Jumaili, denounced the US propaganda over Zarqawi as comparable to the Bush administration’s false pre-war claims that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction”.

The actions of the US military are widely understood in Iraq as aimed at terrorising the population and subduing resistance ahead of the illegitimate elections planned by Washington for January 2005. The assault on Fallujah is part of a broader offensive that is targeting the Sunni Muslim areas of central and northern Iraq, referred to as the “Sunni Triangle”.

In April, the killing of four American mercenaries in Fallujah was used as the pretext for a marine offensive aimed at retaking the city and crushing the resistance. Hundreds of civilians were killed by bombing and snipers. Under conditions where the attack was provoking outrage across Iraq and the Middle East and a Shiite uprising was engulfing much of southern Iraq, the offensive was ended with a purely tactical ceasefire. The US military agreed not to enter the city in order to stabilise the situation in Fallujah while it crushed the Shiite rebellion.

In June, the US military renewed its vendetta against Fallujah, subjecting the city to repeated air strikes. The conditions for a new assault, however, did not open up until the Shiite rebellion led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr was brought largely under control in early September. The weeks since have seen a massive ramping up of US military action in the Sunni regions. US attacks have been launched in Mosul, Ramadi and Samarra, while Fallujah has been subjected to virtually daily aerial bombardment.

From October 2, the Fallujah council sought to negotiate an end to the air strikes with the puppet interim prime minister Iyad Allawi, offering to allow his Iraqi national guard troops to enter the city, but no American forces. The answer of the Bush administration was given on October 13. Allawi told the interim parliament: “We have asked Fallujah residents to turn over Zarqawi and his group. If they don’t do it, we are ready for major operations in Fallujah.”

The American military used loudspeakers to broadcast the threat over Fallujah. Combined with the daily strikes, the psychological terror triggered a mass exodus of the civilian population.

The repression is threatening to unleash a massive reaction. The main national Sunni religious leadership, the Association of Muslim Scholars, which opposes the occupation and claims to speak for as many as 3,000 Sunni mosques, has called for a nation-wide campaign of “civil disobedience” to force the US-led forces to stop bombing Fallujah.

The Association warned last Friday: “If the interim government and the occupation forces do not respond to the civil disobedience campaign, Muslim scholars and representatives of all Islamic and national groups will declare holy war over Iraq and declare a

mobilisation against the occupation troops, as well as all those collaborating with them.”

The ferment in the Sunni population provoked Iraqi interim president, Ghazi Ajil al-Yawar, to warn against any attack on Fallujah: “We learn one thing in Iraq—that blood causes more blood. It will send ripples as far as Mosul, which has the biggest Sunni Arab population, three million plus, which is living in a very tense situation right now. It is very dangerous.”

US casualties are already climbing due to the offensive. Since the beginning of September, 124 American soldiers have been killed and over 1,000 wounded—the highest rate since the April fighting. An all-out assault on Fallujah is being egged on in the US, however, regardless of the casualties or the consequences.

F.J. Bing West, an assistant secretary of defense under the Reagan administration, declared in an opinion piece in the October 17 *Los Angeles Times*: “Yawar has said he will not countenance unnecessary violence by the US military... he has said that the city should not be ‘punished’ for the transgressions of a few. This is like saying in 1943 that Berlin should not be ‘punished’... The longer the marines are kept from taking control of Fallujah, the longer Zarqawi is allowed to run free, the more Iraqis and Americans will be blown to bits.”

The comparison of Fallujah with Berlin, however ahistorical and false, does give a taste of what significant sections of the American political and military establishment want to see done to the city that has dared to defy their illegal colonial occupation of Iraq. Much of Germany’s capital was reduced to rubble by the end of World War II.

As for who in Iraq warrants comparison with the political leadership of Nazi Germany and its policies of reprisal and collective punishment in occupied Europe, it is the American ruling elite, not the resistance fighters of Fallujah.



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