

As US prepares mass killings in Fallujah

Study estimates 100,000 additional Iraqi deaths since the invasion

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With the US military offensive to seize the city of Fallujah approaching a bloody climax, a study just published in the *Lancet* medical journal has provided a damning assessment of the consequences so far of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. The increase in Iraq's mortality rate over the past 18 months suggests that there have been at least 100,000 additional deaths since the US-led war began on March 20, 2003.

Iraqis of all age groups and gender are 58 times more likely to suffer a violent death than before the war. Infant mortality—the rate at which babies die before their first birthday—has more than doubled. American air strikes, helicopter gunship assaults and shelling in densely populated urban areas such as Fallujah have caused the greatest number of violent deaths.

The horrific statistics derive from a scientifically-vetted study into pre- and post-war Iraqi mortality rates by two American universities—Johns Hopkins and Columbia—and Al Mustansiriya University in Baghdad. The results, which were published by *Lancet* on October 28 (<http://www.thelancet.com/>) were established by extrapolating from the findings of face-to-face interviews, carried out in September 2004, with a representative sample of 988 randomly-selected Iraqi households in 33 clusters around the country.

Before the war, 46 people in the surveyed households had died, eight of whom were infants. Only one of these deaths had been caused by violence. But since the invasion, 142 people from the same households have died, 21 of them infants. Seventy-three of these deaths were caused by violence—61 by the US military or other occupation troops.

A total of 52 of these violent deaths were suffered by the several dozen households chosen as the cluster in Fallujah—signifying that the mortality rate in that city had risen to the staggering level of nearly 200 deaths per 1,000. Fallujah was besieged and attacked by US forces in April, and has been subjected to continuous air strikes since June.

Fallujah is at the centre 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 took control of Fallujah at the end of 2003.

To justify the constant attacks on the city and its people, the US military and the American-installed puppet Iraqi interim

government claim Fallujah is the headquarters of the terrorist group allegedly headed by Jordanian extremist Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi. The resistance leadership has continually denied that Zarqawi or any other terrorists are in the city and has sought to inform the world that the victims of the US air strikes have overwhelming been noncombatants, women and children. In the three-week attack in April alone, between 600 and 1,000 Fallujans were killed.

The deaths among the surveyed households in Fallujah were so high that the researchers felt compelled to exclude them, so as not to distort the figure when they made the nation-wide extrapolation to obtain a mortality rate. Even so, the study found that violence had caused 24 percent of all deaths in Iraq outside Fallujah, sending the mortality rate soaring from 5 deaths per 1,000 before the war to 7.9 deaths per 1,000 subsequently—or 98,000 additional deaths among Iraq's 24 million people.

The authors of the study have acknowledged that it has limitations. The sample is small and the researchers conducting interviews needed to be extremely cautious due to the risks to their own safety. If anything, they believe their findings may be conservative. The households interviewed in Sadr City in Baghdad, for example—the scene of some of the most intense fighting and heaviest casualties in the capital—reported they had lost no family members to violence since the war. This may have been due to fears the interviews could be used by the occupation forces to identify families supporting the Mahdi Army militia of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

The study is the second independent attempt to assess the human toll of the US invasion and occupation that has come to the conclusion that tens of thousands of Iraqis have lost their lives due to the actions of the American military. A survey carried out by the Iraqi group, the Peoples Kifar, estimated 37,000 civilians had suffered a violent death in Iraq in the seven months from March 2003 to October 2003. Even the website Iraq Body Count (<http://www.iraqbodycount.net/>), which tallies only the Iraqi civilian casualties that are reported in the media, has now documented a minimum of 14,160 and a maximum of 16,289 deaths due to violence since the invasion.

The horrific civilian death rate in Fallujah gives the lie to the constant propaganda of the American military that it seeks to avoid civilian casualties with “precision strikes”. In fact, the opposite is

the case. The primary aim of the air strikes and helicopter gunship assaults has been to terrorise the general population and collectively punish Iraqi communities for supporting or sympathising with resistance fighters.

Apart from occasional images on the television news, the repression is largely taking place out of the sight of the vast majority of the American people. The finding that 100,000 Iraqis are dead because of the US occupation has barely rated a mention on the main American cable networks and has generally been downplayed in the printed media. As has been the case since before the invasion, the media remains totally complicit in the war crimes of the Bush administration.

The carnage in Iraq has also received no mention from Democratic Party presidential candidate John Kerry. The Democrats criticise the Bush administration's conduct of the Iraq occupation entirely from the standpoint that the violence must be escalated to "win" the war. In the presidential debates, Kerry specifically raised the inconclusive outcome of the battle over Fallujah in April as an example of Washington's lack of resolve to crush the resistance. He declared: "What I want to do is change the dynamics on the ground, and you have to do that by beginning to not back off from the Fallujahs and other places."

Guaranteed the support of whichever presidential candidate occupies the next White House, the US military has formulated plans for mass killings in Fallujah. American officers, including the operation's commander, Marine Lieutenant General John Sadtler, briefed journalists on their battle plans on October 22.

According to the summary of the briefing published by the *New York Times* on October 27, well over 5,000 US forces will be used, as well as thousands of interim government troops. A ground offensive will be preceded by an "intensified version of the nearly nightly airstrikes", with a range of Air Force and Marine jets using 500-pound laser guided bombs to destroy a number of pre-selected targets throughout the city. Ground forces will enter the city from "multiple directions", the *Times* reported, "unleashing direct tank, artillery and mortar fire against insurgent positions that had been weakened by allied airstrikes and internecine fighting in recent weeks".

Marine Brigadier General Dennis Heklik told the press on Friday: "When we do go, we'll whack them."

The assault will take place on a city where, according to US military estimates, at least 50,000 to 60,000 civilians are still in their homes and living in desperate conditions. The BBC reported earlier this month that electricity has been cut off, food is running out and medical services are suffering from a lack of supplies. As many as 200,000 other residents of the city have fled, seeking refuge with family, friends or charities in other parts of the country.

The people who have stayed are primarily those who have no way, means or desire to leave—the elderly, the sick, the poor or those whose loved ones are defending the city. They may soon be at the epicentre of some of the most intense urban combat in recent memory.

The US estimates there are around 5,000 Iraqi fighters in Fallujah, occupying positions they have developed and strengthened over the past six months. Anecdotal reports indicate

that the resistance has rigged many of the city's highways, streets and main buildings with explosives, raising the prospect of heavy US casualties.

The final stages of the US military preparations appear to be underway. Iraqi interim prime minister Iyad Allawi issued another ultimatum on Thursday, declaring "this chance could be the last" for Fallujah's leaders to hand over Zarqawi and "foreign terrorists" and surrender the city to US forces and interim government troops. The *Washington Post* reported yesterday that, according to a military spokesman, frontline marine combat troops "are no longer getting hot meals three times a day", but, to conserve food for an offensive, "they get packaged rations for lunch".

In response to the US vendetta against Fallujah, uprisings against the occupation are brewing in a number of Iraqi cities and towns. Sunni Muslim clerics repeated their calls on Friday for demonstrations and civil disobedience unless the attack is stopped. Expressing the general attitude across Iraq toward the US claim that terrorists are controlling Fallujah, a leading cleric in Baghdad, Mahdi al-Sumaidai, told the media: "Everybody knows that Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi is another lie, like the WMDs."

Al Jazeera reported "fierce clashes" yesterday between resistance fighters and US troops on the outskirts of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province some 50 kilometres to the east of Fallujah. According to a report in the October 28 *Washington Post*, the marine garrison inside the city is essentially under siege. A marine officer stated: "The [US-installed] provincial government is on the verge of collapse. Just about everybody has resigned or is on the verge of resigning." Another American officer declared: "The insurgent activity is everywhere. It's at our firm bases here. It's among women and children."

If Fallujah falls to the US-led forces, it will only serve to intensify opposition to the occupation of Iraq. The criminal ambitions of US imperialism to control the Middle East and its energy resources, and the murderous activities of the US military, have only brought a nightmare of death and mayhem to the Iraqi people.



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