

Fallujah in US hands as uprising sweeps Sunni regions of Iraq

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Nine days after the US ground assault began on Fallujah, the city, or what is left of it, is largely in US hands.

Marine Lieutenant General John Sattler claimed Sunday that somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 Iraqis had been killed so far in Fallujah, and more than 1,000 captured. The number of Iraqi casualties, however, both fighters and noncombatants, is impossible to verify. Mortuary teams have not even begun picking up the bodies and body parts that litter Fallujah's streets, let alone begun searching for corpses buried beneath the rubble of homes and apartment complexes.

The Bush administration's propaganda that Fallujah was being held "hostage" by foreign terrorists has crumbled. The only purported evidence of Islamic extremist activity has not been found in the headquarters and fighting positions of the city's defenders, but in what has been luridly reported as a "slaughterhouse" in a windowless room on the fringes of the northern suburbs.

The overwhelming majority of Fallujah's fighters—and the prisoners the US has taken—are city residents. In the southern districts of Fallujah, US troops have reported fighting well-trained and uniformed Iraqis, with developed command and control structures. An intense air and ground bombardment is being reported against these remaining concentrations of Iraqi fighters, with 2,000-pound bombs being unleashed on well-defended bunker complexes.

Fallujah's "crime" is that its fighters, backed by the community, have been at the forefront of Iraqi resistance to the US-led invasion and occupation of the country. The US assault is Nazi-style collective punishment of the entire city, aimed at terrorising the Iraqi population as a whole into submission before sham elections are held in January to legitimise a US-vetted puppet government.

The US media continues to repeat the worthless claim of the American military that it sought to minimise civilian casualties. The claim is belied by the very methods that have been employed.

Entire districts of the city, where resistance was the strongest, were pounded by aerial and artillery bombardment before US troops moved in. If body heat was detected inside buildings by the thermal sights of the advancing forces, it was assumed to come from a fighter and the building laid waste with tank,

machine-gun and small-arms fire.

The common assessment of embedded journalists accompanying the American troops is that Fallujah has been devastated by the US tactics. The first estimate of structural damage—sourced from the less than reliable US-installed Iraqi interim government—is that 700 of the 17,000 buildings in the city have been destroyed. Most of Fallujah's 120 mosques have suffered some degree of damage. Thousands of homes are damaged or burnt out, with the streets coated in glass from shattered windows. Power lines are down across the city, and sewerage and water mains have been blown open.

Estimates of the number of civilians in Fallujah when the assault began on November 7 range from 30,000 to over 100,000. It is becoming clear, however, that thousands fled for their lives as US troops pushed into the northern suburbs. At least 4,000 families flooded into refugee camps on the outskirts of the city by mid-last week. The Iraqi Red Crescent Society has reported they are suffering from a lack of food, water and medical treatment.

In a direct breach of the Geneva Convention noted by Human Rights Watch, US troops on Thursday forced a group of unarmed males, who were attempting to leave with their families, back into city. Other American war crimes have already come to light. On Saturday, an NBC cameraman captured on film a US marine apparently executing wounded Iraqi fighters at a mosque. The incident is said to be under investigation.

Iraqis who escaped have testified to journalists as to the brutal and indiscriminate character of the American operation. Associated Press (AP) photographer Bilal Hussein, who lived in the northern district of the city attacked by US marines in the first days of the assault, was among them. He told AP: "Destruction was everywhere. I saw people lying dead in the street, wounded who were bleeding and there was no-one to come and help them. Even the civilians who stayed in Fallujah were too afraid to go out. US soldiers began to open fire on the houses, so I decided it was too dangerous to stay."

Hussein told AP he had initially planned to swim across the Euphrates to the city's southern suburbs, "but I changed my mind after seeing US helicopters firing on and killing people who tried to cross the river... I kept walking along the river for

two hours and I could still see some US snipers ready to shoot anyone who might swim”.

After getting out into the rural districts, he was able to make contact with AP correspondents in Ramadi who arranged for a fisherman to transport him out of the area.

Fallujah doctor Ahmed Ghanim and an anesthetist also escaped the city last Tuesday, after US artillery destroyed the clinic they was working in. Ghanim believed that two other doctors and most of the patients died in the attack.

He told the *Los Angeles Times*: “I was doing amputations for many patients... But I am an orthopedic surgeon. If a patient came with an abdominal injury, I could do nothing... We would bring the patient in and we would have to let him die. We were treating everyone. There were women, children, mujaheds [fighters]. I don’t ask someone if they are a fighter before I treat them. I just take care of them.”

After the destruction of the clinic, he sheltered in an abandoned house. American tanks, he said, “hit anything that moved”. Fighters who recognised him as a doctor showed him an escape route, north along the Euphrates.

Nicole Choueiry, a London spokeswoman for Amnesty International, told AP: “According to what we’re hearing and some testimony from residents who have fled Fallujah, it looks like the toll of civilian casualties is high. It remains the responsibility of the US military officials and the Iraqi government to establish that. So far they haven’t given any figure.”

The self-deluded conception in US political and military circles that the Iraqi opposition can be subdued by bloody repression is being exposed by the rebellion now taking place among Iraq’s Sunni Muslim population.

The main Sunni Association of Muslim Scholars, as it warned it would before the assault on Fallujah, is calling for a boycott of the January elections. Anger among the Sunni population has been further inflamed by the US arrest over the last week of four leading clerics, on charges of promoting armed resistance.

American and pro-US interim government forces are coming under stepped-up attack in cities and towns across the central and northern regions of the country.

Insurgents have attacked US convoys between Fallujah and Ramadi. US air strikes were called in to dislodge Iraqi fighters from a police station they had attacked in Baquaba. The Green Zone headquarters of the occupation in Baghdad was mortared Monday night, with reports of widespread guerilla activity in parts of the city.

In Mosul, heavy fighting has taken place between hundreds of Sunni fighters and American troops, backed now by several thousand Kurdish militiamen who were rushed in from the Kurdish-controlled northern provinces. A Mosul resident told the *Washington Post*: “Mosul will become another Fallujah. And later on, all the cities of Iraq will be Fallujahs.”

To try and slow the arrival of US reinforcements, guerillas blew up a bridge in the city of Baiji, which lies between Mosul

and Baghdad.

The Kurdish militiamen or *peshmerga* have been the only forces who will fight alongside the occupation troops in the Mosul area. As many as 5,000 Sunni police are believed to have deserted or joined the guerillas when they occupied the streets. The US reliance on the *peshmerga* prompted the interim government deputy prime minister, Barham Saleh, to warn of the dangers of an Arab-Kurdish civil war in the country’s north.

Ethnic Turkomen fighters in the city of Tal Afar also launched attacks on occupation targets over the weekend, taking over a prison and freeing captured guerillas from cells. US armoured vehicles are reported to have established a cordon around the city. In September, the US military conducted a series of bloody raids in the area, only calling them off after the Turkish government threatened to stop cooperation with the American presence in Iraq unless US attacks on ethnic Turks were halted.

The passions that have been provoked by the events in Fallujah could see direct resistance to the occupation break out again in the Shiite regions of southern Iraq. Shia political and religious leaders who had hoped to exploit the US-staged elections are conducting an increasingly tenuous balancing act between their ambitions and the opposition of ordinary Iraqi Shiites to the mass killing being conducted by US forces.

Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr came out on Friday stating his organisation was “suspending” support for the elections as no “clean and honest” ballot could be held under conditions of US attacks on Iraqi cities. A senior Sadr aide demanded that members of the interim government security forces “stop fighting against your brothers in Fallujah”.

Another leading Shiite cleric in Baghdad, Hadi al-Khalissi, declared Friday: “The current savage military attack on Fallujah by US occupation forces and the US-appointed Iraqi government is an act of mass murder and a crime of war.”

The first two weeks of November have already proven costly for the US military. American soldiers are dying at the rate of five per day—a figure higher than any other period than the first 10 days of the invasion itself. So far this month, 72 US troops have been killed. At least 39 have been killed in Fallujah, and more than 300 wounded.



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