

# Fallujah residents return to a destroyed city

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On December 23, US forces in Iraq began allowing a handful of residents of Fallujah to return to their devastated homes. Reports from these residents have provided a glimpse of the destruction inflicted upon Fallujah by the American military since an offensive against the city began early in November.

Fallujah is home to 250,000 to 300,000 Iraqis. Most of the city's occupants fled before the invasion last month, many taking up temporary shelter at squalid and cramped refugee camps outside Baghdad. For a month and a half, these residents have been prevented from returning, as US troops carry out ongoing operations against remaining resistance fighters in some neighborhoods.

According to a US military spokesman, about 8,000 have been allowed to reenter the city during the past week, all of whom had homes in the neighborhood of al-Andalus, which is described as one of the less-devastated regions. Conditions in the rest of the city therefore are likely to be just as bad as the descriptions provided by these returning Iraqis, if not worse.

While the US media made much of the supposed victory of US forces in Fallujah last month, the tales of its residents—which make a mockery of American claims to be fighting for freedom and democracy—have been virtually ignored in the press.

The Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), a humanitarian information unit of the United Nations, interviewed a number of those who have returned to Fallujah. IRIN states that despite some reports to the contrary, most of those who returned “found their homes destroyed, with the remainder finding extensive damage inside their homes. Windows, television sets and other household items had been shattered by bullets.”

Fadhe Kubaissey told IRIN, “Fallujah is nothing but destruction and empty areas. It's a new desert inside Iraq. Those who have returned to their homes in the

past few days lack the minimum conditions—the city is uninhabitable.”

Abbas Jumaili, another Fallujah resident and father of five, said, “We are three brothers and all of us have lost our homes. I really don't know how we will start our life again inside this city.... This city cannot offer a minimum of living conditions for a year. It's a complete disaster.”

Dr. Saleh Hussein Iswawi of the Fallujah General Hospital told the British Broadcasting Corporation, “About 60 percent to 70 percent of the homes and buildings are completely crushed and damaged, and not ready to inhabit at the moment. Of the 30 percent still left standing, I don't think there is a single one that has not been exposed to some damage.” He reported ongoing fighting. “I was in Fallujah hospital last night [December 23] and I heard a lot of fighting and bombing, which continued for about three or four hours. I heard very loud explosions inside the city.”

Another resident, Ali Mahmood, told Reuters: “I saw the city and al-Andalus destroyed. My house is completely destroyed. There is nothing left for me to stay for.” Yasser Satar said: “What do they want from Fallujah? This is the crime of the century. Is this freedom and democracy that they brought to Fallujah?”

Included in the destruction are not only civilian homes, but the basic facilities necessary for providing minimal public services. The American military has apparently deliberately targeted any structures relied upon by ordinary citizens. The two main hospitals, including Fallujah General Hospital, are no longer operable. The general hospital was one of the first targets of the invasion in November because the US military wanted to cut off any reports of civilian casualties.

According to IRIN, “In the city as a whole, the two main library buildings have been burned and schools and medical clinics have been all but destroyed and are

unable to function.” The US military also targeted electrical and water treatment facilities, and sewage has flooded some areas. Most mosques have also been destroyed or damaged.

Sheik Hareth Suliman Al-Dari told *IslamOnline* that Fallujah “has become uninhabitable with no water, electricity or wastewater facilities. The rotten smell of the dead is widespread and smokes of internationally banned weapons cover its sky.” There have been widespread reports that the US military has used chemical weapons—including napalm—against remaining Iraqi fighters in the city.

In addition to destruction, returning residents have also encountered death on a large scale. *Al Jazeera* reports that according to one resident, Abd al-Rahman Slim, “Charred and half-eaten corpses littered the streets.” Stray dogs are reported to roam the streets, eating decaying bodies. Salim said that he “entered my neighbor’s house and found him, after identifying him from an identity card. His body was lying on the ground, nothing left of him but some bones. The scene was very shocking and I could not stay as the smell in the houses and the street was intolerable.”

It is impossible to say how many Iraqis have been killed in Fallujah during the last month and a half. The Iraqi Red Crescent gave one estimate of 6,000 dead. Much of the evidence is being destroyed, as the US has reportedly been clearing the streets of bodies and burying them in mass graves. Most of the city, moreover, remains off limits to anyone but the US military.

Many of those who have returned have done so because of the terrible conditions at the refugee camps where they have been staying for the past month. These camps are cramped, with up to ten people in tents designed to hold three. Food and medical supplies are scarce. With the onset of winter, families are suffering from the cold, without adequate—or any—heating equipment.

Nevertheless, conditions are so bad in Fallujah that, according to a US military spokesman, most of those who have returned have not elected to stay.

Statements from residents have confirmed reports that the American forces are preparing a police state for any residents that do decide to remain in the city. Those who have returned have been forced to pass through US checkpoints, where they are fingerprinted and have

their retinas scanned for identity purposes. Anyone staying must obtain a photo ID from the US military, which must be displayed on his or her person at all times. There is also a strict curfew.

Speaking to *Al Jazeera*, Fallujah resident Abd Allah Mahmud al-Issawi said, “The instructions [from the Americans] stipulated that no car can move inside the city. No child or elderly can cross the street and they [the US troops] are not responsible for anyone’s security, meaning that residents will live in a cage inside the town.”

US forces have not yet begun implementing plans for work gangs, overseen by the US military. Previous reports indicated that all Iraqi males able to work would be pressed into these units.

The reality in Fallujah is the face of the US occupation. The destruction of the city, which is a war crime on a massive scale, is meant as an example. It is an indication of what the American military is prepared to inflict on any region offering resistance to the US presence in Iraq.



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