

Fallujah two months after the US military assault

## The “City of Mosques” has become the “City of Rubble”

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Channel Four News in Britain recently broadcast a short film report from inside Fallujah, showing the massive devastation wreaked on the city in last November’s US-led assault.

The assault by US forces on the Iraqi city of Fallujah was one of the greatest war crimes since the Second World War. Over the course of nine days, Operation Phantom Fury, involving 10,000 US troops backed by 500 British soldiers, reduced the city, once famed for its 120 mosques and modern infrastructure, to ruins.

In the two months that have passed, little or nothing has been reported of the fate of Fallujah and its residents. In part, this is because the US military placed a cordon around the city and closely controls all movement in or out. But the silence is as much a result of the dishonest and servile attitude of the media.

There are, however, a few rare exceptions. One such was broadcast on British television January 11. In a special report for Channel 4 News, produced by Guardian Films, Dr. Ali Fadhil travelled to the Fallujah area to find out what had become of the city in the aftermath of the US military assault.

Initially, Dr. Fadhil, a hospital doctor turned journalist from Baghdad, is unable to get inside the city, so he begins by looking for Fallujans in the surrounding villages and refugee camps, where most of the former city inhabitants now live. He travels first to Habbaniyah, a town 35 kilometres west of Fallujah. In the main street of this former tourist resort, he witnesses a pitiful scene as people huddle around makeshift fires, trying to keep warm in freezing temperatures. The people at the refugee camp have received no food aid for three months.

Abu Rabe’e, who has lived in a camp in Habbaniyah for the past two months, tells Fadhil, “We’re meant to be the country of oil, aren’t we? But look at me: I’m measuring the kerosene for this lamp by the drop. We’ve no heat here—we’re using wood for the fire.”

Asked about the election planned for January 30, Rabe’e replies, “We won’t vote! We just won’t vote! They must take us back to our houses first.” This is the general response to the planned elections. The authorities have not distributed ballot papers to any former residents of Fallujah. Hameed Allawy, another refugee, tells Fadhil he has not received any ballot papers, “and I don’t want them, anyway. None of the Fallujans here have got their voting coupons.”

In Saqlawyah, a village just north of Fallujah, at Friday prayers,

the talk is all about the elections. A priest asks, “Why isn’t the government giving people here their vote?” Sheikh Jamal al-Mihimdi attracts large numbers of Fallujan refugees to listen to his sermons. He is shown giving an emotional address to the congregation about the US military assault: “And I saw with my own eyes the holy Koran thrown to the floor of the mosque by those sons of pigs and monkeys. The Americans were treading on the holy Koran, and it broke my heart.” At this point, he breaks down in tears.

Sheikh Jamal, who had been asked by the US military to remove bodies from Fallujah, describes what he found: “The Americans had marked the houses with dead bodies with a cross. That’s where we found the martyrs. In my opinion, these people were civilians, not terrorists. They were men who had stayed behind in the city to protect their homes. I say this because we found the bodies in groups of two or three or four; it was Ramadan and people would naturally gather together for Iftar, the first meal after fasting.

“We found the bodies right behind their front doors. It looked to me as if they had opened their doors to the Americans and been immediately shot dead. That’s how we found them.”

The sheikh takes Fadhil to a cemetery on the edge of the city and shows him where he has buried the dead. The gravestones have no names, only numbers. Sheikh Jamal says that none of them had carried weapons and that he had found an old man of 90 who had been shot dead as he stood in his kitchen.

To get into Fallujah, it is necessary to apply for a special Identity Card from the American military. Most returning Fallujans find this a deeply humiliating experience; being fingerprinted by an American soldier just in order to go home is acutely embarrassing.

The film shows a line of men queuing for the card, their faces covered to save public embarrassment. One man says, “This is just another humiliation for the people of Fallujah. I think they are doing it on purpose to humiliate us.”

The first thing Fadhil and his cameraman notice on the road into Fallujah is the graffiti; typical is “Long live the mujahideen.” But Fadhil is unprepared for the sheer scale of the devastation of the city itself. “I couldn’t believe it, the whole city is destroyed. It was a big shock. I wasn’t prepared for this much destruction. I was here just before the American attack. It’s hard to believe this is the same city; it’s incredible, destruction everywhere. Fallujah used to

be one of the few modern Iraqi cities, and now there is nothing.”

In the ruined landscape of rubble and general carnage, Fadhil hears from survivors how innocent civilians have been killed during the military onslaught, unarmed residents shot in their beds. Rabid dogs feed on corpses in the street. In a city formerly home to almost a third of a million people, there is now virtually no water, electricity or working sewage system; most of its inhabitants are homeless and destitute. For many of the people, all that is left of their homes is a pile of rubble—in many parts of the city the terrain has been altered beyond recognition.

The film shows a man frantically rummaging through a heap of bricks littered with mostly broken household objects. The debris is all that remains of Abu Salah’s home. He beckons to the camera, “Look at these mattresses here! These were for my son’s wedding. This was my son’s room. And, look, here! This was our kitchen.... This is the sugar bag that we left in the kitchen right here.” Again, the looming elections, mentioned only in anger: “If [US puppet Iraqi President] Allawi wants us to vote in the elections, then let him come here first and look at the state we’re living in.”

As Fadhil moves through the city, he comes across increasing instances of the slaughter. At one point, he says he can smell the bodies beneath the rubble.

He is taken to the old city of Fallujah, where the four American contractors were killed last March. “The Americans don’t allow any one to go here: they say it’s not safe. It is a scary place, but these Fallujan people insist on taking me somewhere. They want to show me something really gruesome.” In the front room of a deserted house are four rotting dead bodies lying on the floor, shot as they slept. There are no signs of a gun battle and no bullet holes. “I could not see any weapons. There are no obvious signs that they were insurgents.... I am told they were civilians.”

Nahida Kham was among the first Fallujans to go back since US troops occupied the city. She motions for Fadhil to come see what has become of her home, “Look at it! Furniture, clothes thrown everywhere! They smashed up the cupboards, and they wrote something bad on the dressing-table mirror.” As Nahida speaks no English, Fadhil has to explain to her that scrawled on mirror are the words, “F\*\*k Iraq and every Iraqi in it!”

When Fadhil goes to the main cemetery in Fallujah, they are still burying the dead. Two months after the fighting started, there was still no accounting of how many Fallujans died.

Fadhil describes the scene he saw upon entering the cemetery: “As I went into the graveyard, the bodies of two young men were arriving. The faces were rotting. The ambulance driver lifted the bones of one of the hands; the skin had rotted away.”

Fadhil counts 76 graves. “The Americans claim they killed 1,200, so even if these people were insurgents, where are the other graves?” he asks. Fadhil says he saw no evidence of the hundreds of foreign fighters that the US had said were using Fallujah as their headquarters. “People told me there were some Yemenis and Saudis, some volunteers from Tunisia and Egypt, but most of the fighters were Fallujan. The US military say they have hundreds of bodies frozen in a potato chip factory 5 kilometres south of the city, but nobody has been allowed to go there in the past two months, including the Red Crescent.”

The film shows Mr. and Mrs. Salman looking for their 18-year-

old son Ahmed. Fadhil asks if they think they will find their son here. Mr. Salman replies, “Yes, God willing.” A man approaches and tells them he believes their son is buried next to the remains of a Tunisian fighter.

As she wails over the grave of her son, Mrs. Salman cries, “Ahmed, my dear son, I told you not to go with those men. I told you they were deceiving you, my darling.” Mr. Salman looks nervous: “Shut up, woman!” Mrs. Salman: “I blame Iyad Allawi for all this. I’d like to cut his throat!”

For the two weeks Fadhil travels around the villages; he tries to get in contact with one of the insurgent leaders, to find out why there appear to be so few fighters’ bodies. Fadhil finally makes contact with Abu Shaiba, the commander of the “Army of Mohammad,” based in the al-Shuhada’a district in south Fallujah. With his face covered, Shaiba relates what had happened to the insurgents under his command: “The fighters withdrew from the town following an order from our senior leadership. We pulled out, but not because we had lost the fight with the Americans. It was a tactical decision to re-group.”

Finally, Fadhil speculates on the results of the US military offensive against the city. “If so many of the insurgents escaped, what did the American forces really achieve in Fallujah? The violence has simply spread to other parts of the country; over 300,000 people have lost their homes and now bitterly resent the Americans. ‘The City of Mosques’ has become the ‘City of Rubble.’

“It is hard to see how this will strengthen Iraq’s new democracy. The elections are two weeks away—but most of the Fallujans I met won’t even be given the chance to vote.”

As the film report from Fallujah makes clear, the future envisioned for Iraq by US imperialism is not one of a flowering democracy, but the terrorising and suppression of all resistance from an outraged and rebellious population.

The film report and a transcript can be downloaded from the Journeyman Pictures web site

<http://www.journeyman.tv/?lid=18059#18048>



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