Fallujah: A Symbol of US War Crimes

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In-depth Report: Fallujah: US War Crimes

No city in Iraq is more symbolic of the criminal consequences of the US invasion of Iraq than Fallujah. Prior to 2003, the 300,000-strong, prosperous, predominantly Sunni Muslim community on the Euphrates River, one of humanity's oldest continuous urban settlements, was known as the "city of mosques." After 13 years of destruction at the hands of the US military and its client state in Baghdad, it is today a labyrinth of ruins, a city of the dead.

Following weeks of air strikes by US, British and Australian bombers, a combination of Iraqi government forces and Shiite militias is reportedly on the verge of a final offensive to seize back Fallujah from some 500 fighters of the Sunni-extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which took control of the city in early 2014. Iraqi special forces units are accompanied by elite troops of the US, British and Australian militaries, who direct air strikes and ground artillery bombardments and provide tactical advice to Iraqi commanders.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) Zeid Ra'ad al Hussein has issued urgent appeals concerning the fate of the estimated 50,000 civilians who are trapped in Fallujah, without food or water. Civilian deaths caused by the offensive have been justified in advance by the US-backed Iraqi government with allegations that the occupiers are using the population as "human shields." ISIS is accused of murdering dozens of people who have attempted to flee.

Men and teenagers who do escape are being detained by Iraqi government and militia units. According to the UNHCR, they are being subjected to "physical violations and other forms of abuse, apparently in order to elicit forced confessions" of being ISIS members or supporters. The UNHCR has received unconfirmed accounts of at least 21 summary executions.

In the media coverage, the question as to how and why ISIS was able to gain control of the city two years ago is largely ignored. To the extent it is raised, the explanation given is Sunni resentment over the sectarian and discriminatory policies of the Shiite-dominated government— *after* the withdrawal of American troops in 2011. The Iraqi people as a whole are generally portrayed as incurably divided along Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish lines, incapable of living in harmony together and inherently attracted to extremist ethno-sectarian ideologies.

A review of the tortured history of Fallujah since 2003 makes clear that this narrative is a lie. The current situation in Iraq and neighbouring Syria is the outcome and continuation of the deliberate stoking of sectarian conflict by the American occupation for the purpose of dividing the Iraqi masses and cementing the US grip over the oil-rich Middle East.

After the illegal invasion of Iraq and overthrow of the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, Fallujah was the scene of one of the first widely reported crimes by American troops against Iraqi civilians. Two hundred youth demanding the reopening of their school were fired on by troops of the US 82nd Airborne Division. Seventeen were murdered and over 70 wounded.

Over the following months, Fallujah emerged as a centre of Iraqi resistance to the US occupation. By early 2004, the city was effectively controlled by armed groups overwhelmingly made up of former members of the Iraqi Army and local Sunni tribes. Religious-based extremists, such as the small grouping calling itself "Al Qaeda in Iraq," had only a minor presence.

The killing of four Blackwater mercenaries in Fallujah in March 2004 triggered a massive American military response. Across Iraq, the defiance of the people of Fallujah became a clarion call for resistance. In the first week of April, the stand in the city against the occupation was joined by an uprising of tens of thousands of Shiite working class youth in Baghdad and cities across southern Iraq. The armed insurgency against the US forces spread to predominantly Sunni cities such as Ramadi, Tikrit and Mosul.

The dominant feature of the anti-occupation resistance in Iraq in 2004 was that it objectively unified Iraqis of all backgrounds who opposed the US occupation and its local collaborators. However, it lacked any coherent perspective or strategy. In city after city, Iraqi fighters were overwhelmed by the superior firepower of the US military, including in Fallujah in November 2004. After a months-long siege, the city was left depopulated and in rubble. Of its 200 mosques, 60 were destroyed or damaged, along with some 39,000 homes and other buildings.

The other central feature of the US occupation in 2004 was the deployment of US-trained Shiite death squads, such as the Wolf Brigade, against the Sunni population. Thousands of people were murdered. At the same time, Al Qaeda in Iraq escalated sinister bombings of Shiite civilians, which assisted the US occupation in driving a wedge between the two communities. By 2006, US policy had provoked a full-scale sectarian civil war that forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee for safety into areas controlled by the militias of their religious denomination.

The origins of the present savage sectarianism in Iraq lie in the manner by which US imperialism "stabilised" Iraq under the control of its Shiite-dominated puppet state, using the criminal methods of divide-and-rule, mass killings and mass dislocation. In 2011, as it withdrew its forces from Iraq, Washington launched a regime-change war in Libya and began sponsoring a regime-change operation in Syria using the same methods that had triggered civil war in Iraq. In Syria, however, the CIA and US military worked through Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to arm Sunni-based groupings to overthrow the Russian- and Iranian-backed Shiite-dominated government of Bashar al-Assad.

One of the main groupings that benefited from the flow of arms was the remnants of Al Qaeda in Iraq, which sent fighters into Syria and soon emerged as a dominant force in the civil war. In April 2013, strengthened by a flood of foreign Islamist fighters who were permitted to enter Syria from Turkey, it renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The ISIS fighters who entered Fallujah in late 2013 and claimed control over the city in January 2014 had been financed, equipped and armed as part of the US intrigues in Syria.

ISIS seized other areas of Sunni-dominated western and northern Iraq, most dramatically the city of Mosul, in July 2014. To the extent the Islamist movement received support, it was because it pledged to defend the Sunni population from the consequences of the US invasion, including the depredations and abuses of the US-backed government in Baghdad. Both materially and ideologically, ISIS is the by-product of US policy.

The current onslaught on Fallujah is only the latest chapter in the catastrophe that US imperialism has inflicted on the peoples of Iraq and the Middle East as a whole. It can be ended only through the building of a mass international anti-war movement based on the working class and the fight for socialism.

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