

Fallujah and the Meaning of Jihad: Algeria 1956/Iraq 2004

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After Fallujah, no two Americans can meet without there lying between them a corpse. I steal the image from Jean Paul Sartre, writing about the Algerian War of Independence (1956-62). Today, as France then, we are a haunted nation. Ghosts are everywhere. By the now famous Lancet's account, there have been 100,000 Iraqis dead—probably a conservative number—before the siege of Fallujah on November 8. Now, we are told by US military spokesmen that 1,200 “insurgents” have been killed in the city of trashed mosques.

According to the BBC online (19 November), US Lieutenant-General John Sattler told reporters the “operation” in Fallujah “flushed the rebels out of their safe havens and scattered them.” Sattler seems to be a little dim about the tactics of guerrilla fighters—scattering is their common article of tactical faith; they don't need the bombing enemy army to point them in the right direction!

You can bet they read Ernesto Che Guevara's “Episodes in the Cuban Revolutionary War,” among other works by tacticians of guerrilla war, for no sooner had the Americans penetrated Fallujah with their perambulating toy-shop of massive air and ground assault weapons than the rebels “scattered” to Mosul—leaving fighting cadres behind that are still holding significant parts of the city.

“America is having news-media crisis; if they control 90 percent or more of Fallujah as they alleged, I challenge them to allow world news satellites to see for themselves,” says Fallujah Mujahideen Advisory Council spokesman Abu Saad Al-Delaimy. He says 100 mujahideens have been “martyred.” The rest of the dead are civilians.

Surprise.

Almost alone in the world to readily swallow the grotesque and indigestible plots of the Bush lie-factory like so many village idiots, a majority of the American public continues to be bamboozled by this infantile fib—the idiocy—of the phantom Zarqawi, supreme commander of the “terrorist” insurgency in Iraq—this because they have yet to learn, as other befuddled populations in losing imperial centres throughout history eventually learned, that the homeland's invention of a discourse of “terror, terrorists, terrorism” to sell war has always been an instrument for intimidating the population into silence, thus empowering the real terror their aggressor country visited abroad.

It is time we faced the truth.

It is time we heard the mutterings on the streets of Baghdad at the sight of rolling Humvees, guns pointed out the windows: “Get off our streets with your guns,” “You aren't here to

protect us, you bastards,” “Can’t you see we have no weapons of mass destruction? Now, go home” (quoted from unembedded reporter in Baghdad, Dahr Jamail).

It is time we heard the cry of the mother of 12-year-old Fatima Harouz, lying in hospital in Latifya, with US-bullets shattered shins: “They attacked our home, and there weren’t even any resistance fighters in our area. . . . Before they left, they killed all of our chickens.” “Insurgent” chickens, no doubt! In between shattering Fatima’s legs and massacring the chickens, they killed Fatima’s mother’s brother and wounded his wife.

It is time we paid attention to the account by Fallujah refugee Abu Sabah, who escaped with his family while soldiers shot bullets over their heads: “They used these weird bombs that put up smoke like a mushroom cloud. Then small pieces fell from the air with long tails of smoke trailing behind them. These exploded on the ground with large fires that burnt for half an hour . . . When anyone touched those fires, their bodies burnt for hours.” These features identify white-phosphorus bombs.

They are being dropped in our name.

Are we listening yet? Do we have the courage to admit that “if the USA’s honor can go along with these tactics . . . then the USA is a country without honor.” I have substituted “USA” for “France,” the entity in the original quotation by Robert Bonnard, French intellectual protesting his country’s brutal repression of the Algerian popular resistance in the 1950s to the 130-year-old occupation of their country.

Then, it took one million dead Algerians to shake the conscience of the French people awake and turn them in revulsion against the slaughter in the name of ridding “French” Algeria of “terrorists,” who were no other than the Algerian people themselves, yearning to be free.

Now as then, when Sartre reminded the French that “our victims know us by their scars and by their chains,” our silence over the wounds we inflicted on Fallujah and, indeed, on the whole of Iraq, will be to “no avail; today the blinding sun of torture is at its zenith; it lights up the whole country,” Sartre wrote. Substitute “collective punishment” if the word “torture” is too narrow a term for what was done to Fallujah—a “ratonnade” (literally a rat-clearing), as the French army slang called their Arab-killing campaigns such as ours in Fallujah—and the insight remains stark.

Indeed, our silence, in the full glare of the truth as the world sees it, exposes our nakedness before the indefensible reality of this monstrous fact of our destruction of Fallujah on Ramadan, formerly the city of some 120 intact mosques. Do we feel exposed to the contempt of the world? We should, for with Sartre I agree that “no one has the power or right to give anything to anybody, for each of them has every right, and the right to everything.” To the ears of the Iraqis, our bad-faith “gift” of democracy at the point of a gun translates as a democracy that will do what the US wants. And they will resist this false democracy, for what democracy can come from their election prepared by our bombs?

But even with no bombing on the scale of Fallujah’s, occupation breeds resistance, and at the apex of their resistance, when all social conditions will have ripened them into one national epic force, the Iraqis will pour out into their streets in protests and strikes—streets in Fallujah forever remembered as covered with corpses defiled by hungry cats and dogs and crushed by the impersonal indifference and yet criminally punitive weight of the rolling tanks of the re-invaders—they will pour out like tidal waves, as they did in Algeria, when the

French army could not kill all of them in one spot, under the filming scrutiny of the world.

So the French had to stop—but not before they had to point their tanks' guns at the rivers of protesters in France's city streets. That's colonialism for you. Sooner or later the people of the imperium and the people of the colony are persuaded to fight side by side, albeit on separate shores, the armed enemy that is the enemy of them both. It happened to us with Vietnam.

Between now and then, however, we must stop crediting the shopworn lies that offer up Iraqis as "unpeople"—passive victims of "mastermind foreign terrorists" or pathetic "collateral damage" whose deaths don't matter in our noble fight for their emancipation. We must see them as what they are becoming through the pitiless vengeance of our wounded pride. They will become the agents of their own liberation. No wonder General Sattler had "no information" about "civilian deaths" in Fallujah! Unacknowledged in his remark lurks the unconscious fear that Iraq is moving toward a popular uprising, when there will be no "civilians" left in Iraq as every Iraqi's "irrepressible violence [will be] neither sound and fury nor even the effect of resentment but human beings recreating themselves [as free people]," to quote Sartre's prophecy of Algeria's successful struggle for self-determination.

This process of liberation in Iraq will be cruel and unforgiving; they may even have to kill one another. The Algerians did—collaborationists, opportunists, spies, and traitors. Perhaps even the reluctant ones. I don't know if they will target us here at home (in Algeria they occasionally killed French colonists at hand on Algerian soil), but I wouldn't be surprised, for with Sartre I recognize that "every single one of us has made his bit, has got something out of them" over the years of exploitation of their resources to the advantage of our once-comfortable life at home.

Still, true resistance does not routinely use wholesale terror against masses of civilians. That is the prerogative of the master race. So we must pray for a resistance that will wipe out the barbarism of the opportunistic terrorists afoot in quisling, anarchy-riddled, US-destabilized Iraq. We may yet survive if we can wrench out of our shame the self-revolutionary spark to end our silence.

Some of my friends on the left deride me for this trust in the Iraqi people's ability to mount a national liberation struggle on the scale and organization of the Algerian FLN. They say that Iraq lacks the national unity and political ideology necessary to lead them to victory—by which they mean the absence of the socialist echo in the world today (admittedly a considerable loss, especially, even in its distorted USSR form, as a check on "this imperious being, crazed by his absolute power" as no doubt Sartre would have called the imperializing US as he did the imperially maxed-out France), but I say that fighting for survival is the most powerful, the most basic ideology of them all. The unifying factor will be found. The Algerian leadership found it in their understanding of "jihad"—not as a call for the defense of Islam but as a rallying cry for the survival of the national identity in Islam.

Let us listen to this echo from the past—the defense of "jihad" by the Algerian FLN. Let us listen because the call will come for Iraqis—and not from the criminal bands and sundry terrorist groups now butchering, kidnapping, and beheading in the name of Muslim fundamentalisms to the delight of our criminal chaos-planners in official DC—if indeed the terrorists are not like Ansar al Islam, CIA-related, psy-op-style mischief-makers, intent on creating anarchy on the ground to prolong the occupation. Somewhere, hidden from our TV screens even if these had any interest in showing it, the resistance is maturing into

something it will become—the face of free Iraq, liberating itself at last.

We go to Algeria, 1956. From the editorial of the first issue of [El Moudjahid](#), official organ of the FLN:

“It is about time that an organ of resistance fighters comes to be . . . in order to make known to the Algerian people in struggle, and to a world polarized by the war in Algeria, the voice of our fighters. . . . Some will doubtless be surprised by the choice of title, which they might believe [is] inspired by a form of political sectarianism or religious fundamentalism, when our goal is to liberate ourselves of de-nationalising colonialist restraints, and for democracy and equality among all Algerians, regardless of race or religion.

“We must respond. The word ‘jihad’ (holy war) from which ‘el moudjahid’ (fighter for the faith) derives, has always been, because of an anti-Islamic prejudice that dates from the Crusades, taken in the Christian West in a limited and restrictive sense. It is taken as a symbol of religious aggressiveness. This interpretation is rendered absurd by the very fact that Islam is tolerant, and the respect of religions, in particular Judaism and Christianity, is one of its fundamental precepts, something which, in fact, has been in practice over the centuries.

“‘Jihad,’ reduced to its essential element, is quite simply a dynamic manifestation of self-defense, for the preservation or the recovery of a heritage of superior and indispensable values for both the individual and the group. It is also the will to continually perfect oneself in all areas.

“It just so happens that Islam was in Algeria the last refuge of these values hounded and profaned by an outrageous colonialism. Is there any reason then to be surprised that . . . in recovering a national consciousness, it contributes to the victory of a just cause?

“Thus, the word ‘jihad’ has necessarily evolved with time, and its meaning becomes more clear. Adapting itself to the modern world, in this mid 20th century which more particularly concerns us, it puts in ever clearer relief the unshakeable will, the concentration of effort, the spirit of total sacrifice up to martyrdom, to totally destroy the existing retrograde system. It doesn’t include any religious or racial hatred, any form of exclusivity or conformism, if only that of the unity necessary for final victory.

“So understood, ‘jihad’ is a quintessentially liberal and open patriotism. It’s the soldier of the ALN [Armée de Liberation Nationale], it’s the political activist, the liaison agent, the little shepherd who provides information, the housewife in the casbah who comments on events, the little schoolchild in Algiers who goes out on strike, it’s economic sabotage, the student who joins the resistance fighters, the distributor of tracts, the peasant who suffers and hopes along with his family. In a word, it’s that ensemble of efforts carried forward by the wheel of history, guided by the FLN, and converging on a single goal, the independence of the country.

“That said, we must add that a war can never be holy enough against a colonial regime which after a cowardly aggression in 1830 has, for the past 125 years, tried to exterminate the Algerian people and, not being able to do so, has worked to despoil it and exploit it to the extreme, to maintain it in fetters, in an iron collar of political domination, to systematically violate its language, its religion, its traditions . . . In calling itself ‘El Moudjahid’ this brochure does nothing but consecrate this glorious name, which since November 1, 1954, the good sense of our people has attributed to the patriots who took up arms for a free, independent, and democratic Algeria.”*

* I have not altered this text, although it is much in need of editing

After all, as Matthew Arnold said, journalism (or whatever this commentary may be called) is "literature in a hurry"—and as the time for silence is running out, great is the need to hurry in what we must start to say.

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