

Fallujah Defies Coalition

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Murder and mutilation of four American civilians exposes lack of Coalition control over town.

Four cars pull up to a police roadblock outside Fallujah. A group of men carrying RPG rocket launchers step out.

"Leave the area," one of them can be heard telling the officers. "We will attack the US army, and we don't want to see you here. If you refuse we will kill you."

Inside the town, a journalist leaving the Fallujah headquarters of the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps, ICDC - a US-sponsored paramilitary organisation formed to fight insurgents - is accosted by a man who has been surveying the building from across the street.

"Did they tell you anything about the resistance?" the man asked. "We've warned the ICDC not to cooperate with foreigners, and not to give any information to anyone."

The Coalition's lack of control over Fallujah was exposed by the March 31 killing of four American civilians by insurgents in the town's centre.

The bodies were set on fire, dragged through the streets, and hung from the town's main bridge, where they remained for 12 hours.

The images, captured by a TV cameraman, stirred outrage in the United States.

US deputy director of operations Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt vowed to return to Fallujah "at a time and a place of our choosing" to punish those responsible.

The mutilation of the bodies was condemned by prominent Fallujis interviewed by IWPR, as well in a statement purportedly issued by the insurgents.

Nonetheless, many citizens proclaimed their support for the militants, who they say are fighting to keep the Americans out of their town.

Fallujah, a conservative and predominantly Sunni town west of Baghdad, was a former recruiting ground for Saddam's Republican Guard and other politicised military and intelligence units.

It has been a centre of anti-Coalition attacks since an April demonstration in which at least 15 citizens were killed by US troops. The Coalition says its men were returning fire from the crowd.

In one of the town's more dramatic incidents, insurgents stormed Fallujah's main police station on February, killing 22 policemen.

The Coalition also says the town is a staging area for non-Iraqi Islamists coming down the Euphrates valley from Syria.

The US Marines recently took over responsibility for Fallujah from the Army's 82nd Airborne division.

The Marines said they would step up their presence in the town, conducting counter-insurgency and reconstruction operations to suppress the unruliness and build a rapport with the locals.

The current round of violence seems to have come just as the Marines were attempting to put those principles into practice.

The day before the contractors were killed, Marines launched a pre-dawn sweep of the al-Askari neighbourhood, triggering two nights of fighting with the insurgents in the early morning hours of March 25 and 26.

According to the ICDC, nine civilians - including an 11-year old-boy, an ambulance driver, and a freelance Iraqi TV cameraman - were killed, and 25 people injured in separate nightly raids by US troops.

The Coalition reported one Marine killed in the fighting.

The Americans entered the district - a spread-out, low-lying neighborhood of walled residences - at midnight on March 25.

"It was an unusual force that entered the town, a whole army," said Qaiser Alwan, a resident of the al-Askari district.

"US tanks closed the main roads and the highway, pointing their weapons towards the town," Alwan said.

He added that "the mujahidun [insurgents] observed the troops and spread out at road intersections".

Another resident, Jasem Mohammed Saheb, said "the mujahidun launched rocket propelled grenades and used machineguns, and the US troops fired back randomly".

Residents expressed fury at the Coalition for turning their neighbourhood into a battlefield, as well as for arresting residents suspected of being militants.

"The inhabitants are angry because the Americans... used aircraft and bombed civilians randomly, and arrested people randomly thanks to the misinformation of their informants," said Khaled al-Issawi, an elder from the area.

On March 31, five Marines were killed when their Humvee was hit by a roadside bomb outside the town.

The same day inside the city, guerrillas attacked two vehicles carrying armed security contractors on the main road through Fallujah, killing at least four.

Day labourer Salaam Hashem says he was a passenger in the car that was behind one of the contractors' vehicles when it was attacked.

"They were waiting at the traffic [intersection] when two resistance fighters came at them from the left. They used small arms, coming very close to the cars to avoid hitting the others," he said.

"One of the [contractors'] cars tried to jump the divider to get away, but when he crossed he hit another parked car. One of the attackers chased him, and shot the driver.

"The fighter then came up to the side of the car, and shot the second person. She was a woman. She had tried to open the window to use [a] gun, but she couldn't use it before [the insurgent] fired."

According to a source in the ICDC, who preferred not to give his name, the insurgents withdrew after the attack. The ICDC blamed the mutilation on a group of day labourers, waiting by the side of the road for work.

After the ambush, the report said, the labourers set upon the bodies, hacking them apart with their shovels and picks. Body parts were weighted with bricks and thrown over a power line.

The labourers chanted a song glorifying revenge, "Where can those, upon whom we shall avenge ourselves, run away?"

The incident took place approximately 100 metres from the town's police station.

"When the police came to help, the people said 'they are agents'. They threw stones and shoes," said a local police officer. The bodies were then taken to the town's main bridge and hung.

One ICDC officer, who preferred to remain nameless, blamed the violence on "the American insistence on entering the town... The resistance wants nothing more than for the Americans not to enter."

"We told them that if you ever come to visit the ICDC, we will leave as soon as you arrive. We will quit, because we will be subject to attack," said a colleague.

Prominent residents of Fallujah, meanwhile, condemned the mutilation of the contractors' bodies. Local mosques posted a fatwa from the Muslim Clerics' Board - a conservative religious authority - condemning the "criminal deed".

A pamphlet issued in the name of the "mujahidun" also denounced the desecration, blaming it on "people in the town who wish revenge on the US military".

Some, however, blamed the anger on alleged US abuses, including raids on suspected insurgents' homes and the confiscation of their identity documents and money.

Tribal leader Sheikh Thahrán al-Sadiq said that he "rejected and condemned" the mutilations, but added "there is a reason for it. The US army entered the town and took people's money and identification, and never returned them. And they killed people, without caring".

One taxi driver, who proudly proclaimed himself a member of the resistance, said that the movement's sole goal was to drive the Americans out of Fallujah.

"Before [the arrest of ousted President Saddam Hussein], when we attacked the US army, the people thought that we wanted Saddam to come back," he said. "It is now clear that we are not fighting for Saddam. We are fighting to push out the US troops."

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Location: [Syria](#)

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