

# Events that make Fallujah a dead



By Amir Taheri

*Fallujah's history has given it a martial tradition that few other Iraqi cities share. Now once again it has become the big prize in a high stake conflict involving a superpower*

**A** long history of war, a radical religious attitude, and an unfortunate accident may well have served as ingredients of the deadly cocktail that has turned Fallujah into the capital of insurgency in Iraq and the scene of the only major battle fought by the US-led coalition for the control of the country.

First the history. Fallujah has been the site of many battles for the past 2,500 years. Its capture by Cyrus the Great in the 6th century BC opened the path to the Mediterranean for the Achaemenids who pressed on to conquer Syria, the Sinai desert and Egypt. It was renamed Hoxth-dezh (Distant Fort) until its capture by the Romans in the 3rd century AD when its name was changed to Misiche (The middle one) because it is surrounded by a loop of the Euphrates River that turns it into a peninsula.

In April 224, however, the city once again changed hands after a bitter battle in which Roman Emperor Gordian III was slain by the Persians under the Sassanid King Shapur I.

The Persian king had news of his victory engraved in three languages in the mountainside of Naqshe-Rostam, near present-day Shiraz. He also renamed the city Piruz-Shapour (Victorious Shapour) and built up as the principal garrison town in the mid-Euphrates area, starting a martial tradition that has continued ever since.

For six centuries after that Piruz-Shapour was always a prize in the Persian-Roman wars. Emperor Julian captured it before being killed in a successful battle, allowing the Persians to restore their presence in the whole of the Levant. Bahram V, another Sassanid king built a hunting palace (Kushk) close to the city and adorned it with a garden full of desert animals and exotic flowers based

on the Persian *parada'us* (the origin of the word paradise and, in Arabic, *ferdaus*). In Nezami's great epic poem "The Seven Cupolas", the city represents the palace inhabited by a princess dressed all in green. The city was lost to the Romans soon afterward but regained by Khosrow-Parvez, the fun-loving Sassanid monarch who was a contemporary of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). There, Khosrow-Parvez built a fire temple the remains of which have provided a major archaeological site in Mesopotamia for decades.

The Arab conquest of Mesopotamia in the 7th century AD marked the start of the city's decline, from which it did not recover until the 1940s. The conquerors sacked the city, burned its big buildings and bazaars, and destroyed its gardens and palm groves. Gradually, the name Fallujah, referring to a particular type of dates, began to appear.

Because of its location, however, Fallujah, was bound to make a comeback. It is an almost natural halting place for caravans from the Arabian Desert hinterland on their way to the shores of the Mediterranean. Because it is well watered, the location can also sustain a relatively high level of agricultural activity.

Fallujah attracted Saddam Hussein's attention for a number of reasons. First, it is located in what is known as the Sunni Triangle,

a narrow swathe of territory that provided the bulk of the Iraqi military elite under the Ottomans. Saddam, convinced that he would never win support among Iraqi Shias, went out of his way to court the Sunni Triangle.

Fallujah also provides the western wing of a system of military bases and garrison towns developed under Saddam, with the eastern wing represented by Baqubah. Located just 58 kilometres west of Baghdad, Fallujah is one arm of a pincer of which the other arm is Baquba, some 50 kilometres to the east of the Iraqi capital. Suspicious of a possible coup against him inside Baghdad, Saddam always kept substantial forces in both Fallujah and Baqubah to counter any uprising in the capital.

Saddam's sons, Uday and Qusay loved Fallujah

because of its natural beauty and closeness to both the Euphrates and the desert. The two sons built palaces there, including an artificial lake, with an artificial island in the middle, where they set up a boat club, organised boat races, and practiced water-sports. In the year 1995 Saddam Hussein himself built one of his 22 new palaces there. All the palaces of the Tikriti clan are now in the hands of the American military. Qusay's palace is the headquarters of the 361 Psychosocial Operations Unit of the US Army whose task is to win the hearts and minds of the people in the city. The late Qusay's palace is at the centre of Camp Orham, another US Army facility in the mid-Euphrates area.

Because of its role as a garrison city, Fallujah was home to large numbers of military families. According to some estimates at least a quarter of the city's 300,000 inhabitants consisted of the

been home to most of Iraq's radical Salafi clerics and their madrassas.

The religious character of Fallujah was bound to clash with its personality as a military centre. The first clash came in the mid-1980s when the government ordered that all mosque sermons must end with praise and prayers for Saddam Hussein. The Fallujah clerics refused, many of them ending up in prison.

Saddam also put the financial squeeze on the city's religious seminaries by cutting off government subsidies. But this was partly compensated thanks to donations from the oil-rich Gulf States where Salafi organisations and charities are strong. Several Gulf States also built hospitals, orphanages and other social facilities in Fallujah as a tribute to its Salafi personality.

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When the 2003 war started, Fallujah had no reason to side with Saddam. But then a number of unfortunate accidents happened. The first came when one British bomber missile hit an open bazaar inside Fallujah killing 150 innocent civilians. Another reason was the seizure of housing units built for the Republican Guard by their families by the US Army to house the GIs. The final misadventure was Bremer's decision to abolish the Iraqi Army and the Republican Guards. It was not long before they decided that only by taking up arms against the invaders could they find a new job

Iraqi military, including the Republican Guards, and the various paramilitary forces set up by Saddam and his sons. The largest number of families from the Popular Army (Haras Al-Qowmi) set up by the Baathists in the 1960s was also located there.

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But to that must be added the city's religious personality as the biggest concentration point for the Salafi radicals since the 19th century. The city was heavily proselytised in the 18th century by preachers from Najd who disliked the way the Mesopotamian Shias worshipped their imams. In 1802 a Najdi army, with Fallujah volunteers, raided the Shia cities of Karbala and Najaf and destroyed their shrines. Since then Fallujah has

reason to side with Saddam. But then a number of unfortunate accidents happened.

The first of these came in March 2003 when a British bomber fired four laser-guided missiles against a bridge over the Euphrates to the south of Fallujah. Three of the missiles missed the target and fell into the river. The fourth went astray and hit an open-air bazaar inside Fallujah killing some 150 innocent civilians. The accident was seized upon by the local Salafis and the remnants of Saddam's army and Republican Guards to foment hatred against the US-led coalition. At first, afraid that the coalition may be as brutal as Saddam Hussein, Fallujah demonstrations were small and limited to the main city square. Soon, however, the Fallujah leaders realised that the coalition could not come in and kill as Saddam often did,

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and that the presence of hundreds of foreign journalists and televising cameras provided them with a safety shield.

Thus Fallujah became a scene of almost daily demonstration and gained a reputation as the centre of opposition to the coalition.

Another accidental mistake by the coalition made matters even worse. The US Army seized the housing units built for the Republican Guards and their families to house the GIs. These houses had been abandoned just before the start of the war as Saddam's Republican Guards sent their families away to safer places further from Baghdad. But when they returned after Saddam's fall in April, they found their homes occupied by the Americans.

In politics no one mistake comes alone. Thus, to complicate the situation, the US head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Ambassador L

Paul Bremer, decided to abolish the Iraqi Army and the Republican Guards. This meant that thousands of Iraqi military were suddenly left homeless and jobless and derided by their compatriots as cowards who had run away. It was not long before they decided that only by taking up arms against the invaders could they find a new job and a new reason for being.

All this makes for a deadly cocktail. At the same time, Fallujah's natural location makes it an ideal hiding place for guerrillas. The city covers a compact area of only 3 by 3.5-square kilo-

metres. This is surrounded by dense palm groves where one could always hide. Since the city is built on both sides of the Euphrates, it looks like a peninsula with ample opportunities for coming and going through the river. An outer ring of extensive farms that add another layer of defence and a further escape-route surrounds the immediate ring of palm groves. The marshy nature of much of the terrain makes it hard for armoured units to operate in.

Because of its compactness Fallujah has one of the highest rates of demographic density in Iraq. There are mazes of narrow streets in which large numbers of people live in relatively small houses. There are only a dozen or so streets wide enough for armoured units to move in.

At its peak, Fallujah and its environs were home to some 300,000 people. But by the time

the latest round of fighting began no more than a quarter to a third were believed to be still inside Fallujah. At least three different groups are fighting in Fallujah.

One consists of the remnants of Saddam's military. They are desperadoes who believe that by preventing the emergence of a new regime in Baghdad they could restore the old and regain at least part of the privileges they once enjoyed.

Another group consists of local Salafi militants, backed by some tribal elements that, although they are happy that Saddam is gone, have concluded a tactical alliance with the Saddamite leftovers against the coalition and the interim Iraqi government. The third group is made up of radical terrorist groups once linked with Al Qaeda. They are mostly non-Iraqi jihadists from a dozen different Arab countries. They offer skills that the local insurgents lack. Again, there is little love lost between these jihadists and the Saddamite leftovers. But both sides need one another, at least for the time being.

In April this year the coalition tried to regain control of Fallujah. An agreement was signed under which the militants inside the city would give up their heavy weapons. When that did not happen US Marines attacked on April 20, 2004 and were poised to move in with force to pacify the city if necessary. But they were soon ordered to stop amid fears that a wrong turn in the events could harm President George W Bush's re-election prospects.

The six weeks of soft fighting ended in a truce, amid reports of hundreds of civilian deaths. The agreement turned over security to a force — the "Fallujah Brigade" — led by former officers of Saddam's mobilised army. This entity quickly collapsed, and control of the town passed into the insurgent hands. Abu-Mussab Al-Zarqawi, the alleged mastermind of many of the most vicious attacks in post-liberation Iraq is believed to have set up his headquarters in Fallujah, convinced that the Americans cannot take it.

By Oct 30, 2004, US forces were conducting air strikes against suspected militant bases in Fallujah as they prepared for a major operation to root out insurgents' stronghold. Conventional wisdom suggested that the real assault would not start until the end of Ramadan. But by Monday night Operation Phantom Fury was in full swing. Once again Fallujah had become the big prize in a high stake conflict involving a superpower. COURTESY ARAB NEWS