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Remember Fallujah : Demonising Place, Constructing Atrocity

Guest Editorial for *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*

Stephen Graham

*And what will their faces tell them
When they look in the mirror
When they look on their dressers
And see the pieces of metal they were given
For killing us in our own homes, in our cities, in our mosques and
churches,
What will their eyes say, what will they say when their twisted lies
are uncovered
When the rest of the world speaks of their massacres of women
and children, of old men
Of bombing hospitals*

Excerpt, 'This Night in Fallujah' by Sam Hamod
(cited in Whitney, 2004).

In late 2001 I received an invitation from a Geographers at Haifa University to attend an 'urban' conference. Through the usual e-mail channels, he had heard that, at that time, Simon Marvin and I were organising a conference called *Cities as Strategic Sites: Militarisation, Anti-Globalisation, and War*, to be held in Manchester the following Spring. The Haifa academics organising the event thought that the two events would clearly address similar issues -- hence the invite. Simon and I, whilst deeply ambivalent about attending an event in Israel, decided to go, expecting that it would involve social science discussions about the changing intersections of urbanisation and political violence.

It was no such event. Populated by senior US Marine Corps, Israeli Defense Force and British Army specialists and commanders in 'urban warfare', and representatives from the likes of the RAND Corporation, we quickly realised that the conference was one of an ongoing series where practitioners of state 'urban warfare' exchanged practical tips on fighting wars and counter-insurgency operations in cities. Once the initial shock of being catapulted into a dark world of 'urban research' that we never in our wildest nightmares imagined existed, Simon and I retreated to a nearby bar for a long discussion about what to do. Fairly naïvely, in retrospect, we were revolted and angry to discover that urban state killing had been elevated to a technoscientific discipline with its own conference series, research centres and journals. We were sickened by the euphemistic and obfuscatory language where every discursive trick was employed to not call a killing a killing. We were amazed to discover that US, Israeli and British 'experts' in this emerging field of 'urban warfare' were such close friends that they seemed to constitute a transnational social body, orchestrating the intense exchange of technology, experience, training and experience between the three nations. We were nauseated at the bellicose technophilic masculinities, where systematic repression and state killing were portrayed in glossy Powerpoint Slides with a palpable sense of fascination, even excitement. Finally, the fact that the organisers of the event were geographers astonished us.

After considerable deliberation we decided to stay on to the end of the event, conscious that this dark world of 'urban' research was virtually unknown in critical social science (at least as far as we knew). Better to stay, and record everything we could, we thought, than make some political statement by leaving half way through.

The Construction of 'Urban Warfare'

In the years since that week has constantly haunted me. My personal research agenda radically transformed, I have since tried to help expose the dark, obscured terrains where states systematically practice, hone, and exchange their skills in city killing, and killing in cities. Meanwhile, the murderous effects of Sharon's incursions into the Occupied Territories, and Bush's 'war on terror' invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, have provided a continuous stream of gory evidence of the importance of emerging doctrines of 'urban warfare' (see Graham, 2003, 2004a,b,c). Strikingly, the

tricks of the trade of such warfare have, since 2001, quickly morphed to once again become central platforms of state geopolitical power. Fuelled by a paranoid sense that global urbanisation is somehow working to undermine the technoscientific, disciplinary and killing abilities of imperial nation states, so the techniques and strategies discussed in Haifa have provided the basis for radical rethinks in how the United States, the other Western powers, and Israel, wage war.

The symptoms and results of such a transformation are now all too clear. In fact, they are difficult to escape. There is the demonisation and the calls to annihilate cities that symbolise resistance to colonial power ; the masking of atrocities through an all-encompassing 'terrorist' discourse; and the Orientalist 'Othering' of Arab urban places and their inhabitants. Then there are the assaults on dense cities with helicopter gunships, cluster bombs and artillery; the 'psychological operations' that involve the bombing and targeting of journalists' who have the temerity to show the resulting carnage on the ground ; and the voyeuristic consumption of city-killing for pleasure and entertainment in news and video games (some produced by the militaries themselves). Finally, there are the political calls to destroy, 'cleanse' or 'pacify' aberrant, dehumanised 'terrorist nest' cities who's inhabitants, it is endlessly implied, might easily project unimaginable terror on to western cities if not annihilated.

All are elements in the call to legitimise, celebrate, be entertained by, even consume, orgies of state terror. Sharon's 'Operation Defensive Shield' in 2002 provided the template here. Two months after the Haifa conference, with US 'urban warfare' specialists actually participating, the Israeli 'Defense' Force, using the techniques discussed in that event, demonstrated that they could violently repress the Intifadah by going into the hearts of densely packed Palestinian cities and refugee camps. With techniques blending real-time high-tech surveillance, total coverage by sniper fire, bulldozing, and blowing continuous new streets and walkways through the built fabric of cities, the Israelis laid the basis for a paradigm shift in military thinking that has since been closely studied as the model for the US invasions of Afghanistan and, particularly, Iraq.

Fallujah: Atrocity Invisible

In Iraq it has been estimated in a *Lancet* article that at least 100,0000 people died prematurely between the US-UK invasion in March 2003 and September 2004, mostly through the effects of aerial bombing, helicopter gunships, rockets, and the urban insurgency (Roberts et al, 2004). More than 50% of the deaths recorded in this study were women and children.

Tellingly, one Iraqi city was systematically excluded from this research because the death-rates revealed by the adopted methodology were considered so high by the research team that they would unreasonably skew the overall national results, so radically increasing the above estimate still further. This is the city that, after Jenin in 2002, has now come to symbolise the attempted killing of a city, or urbicide, by the massive high-tech forces of imperial nation states in our 'colonial present' (Gregory, 2004a).

This city, of course, is Fallujah, a largely Sunni and densely populated city with a population of 300,000, 50 kms to the west of Baghdad. The initial insurgency in the City was sparked by the killing there, in cold blood, of 18 civilians protesting about the US military's initial occupation of their primary school on April 28 2003. Following this, the burgeoning resistance against US occupation in Fallujah emerged to symbolise the wider Iraqi insurgency on both sides. Fallujah was thus constructed as the symbolic centre of resistance against the installation of a US friendly regime in Iraq. It was also repeatedly alleged, but totally unproven, that the City was the base for the key Islamist resistance leader Aby Musab al Zarqawi.

The US forces' first attempt to 'pacify' the City began between the 4 and 9th April, 2004, after four private military contractors were killed and mutilated there in front of global news teams. 2,000 US Marines took part in the first siege and assault. Through a carefully orchestrated strategy of air strikes, helicopter missile attacks, mortar and artillery bombardments, cluster bomb raids, assaults by circling Hercules 'gunship' aircraft, and night-time 'sweeps' by ground forces, the US forces together participated in the most unrestricted US assault on a densely populated city since

the Iraq war had begun. US forces withdrew on April 29th and less intense gun battles resumed in the City.

By then at least six hundred (and possibly up to 880) Iraqis lay dead. Over 1500 were seriously wounded. 60,000 refugees had been forced from their homes. Ten Marines had also been killed (Wilding, 2004). On 14th April Iraqi medical staff working for the Médecins sans Frontières NGO -- who had entered Fallujah on April 10th on a bus filled with medical equipment -- spoke of the casualties that they found in the City on their arrival. By Sunday 11th April, an audit of all hospitals treating casualties from the assault revealed that, of the 518 confirmed dead by that date, at least 157 were women and 146 were children. 100 of the dead children were under the age of twelve. 1200 wounded people had also been admitted (Ekklesia, 2004). Dr Abed Al-Ilah, a representative of the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, reported after visiting the city on April 13th that "about 350 out of the 600 dead were women and children [...]. Many died from simple wounds and could have been saved if they had had medical attention" (Cockburn, 2004).

After the temporary withdrawal of US forces, the lack of control of the US military over Fallujah morphed into a massive symbolic call amongst large parts of the US polity and media to urbicide and place annihilation. As the US Presidential election campaign continued, and radical Islamists stepped up their hostage-taking (and murdering), and their brutal suicide bomb campaigns against those associated with the Interim government, so the political and popular obsession with 'taking out Fallujah' reached frenzied proportions.

With Bush re-elected, a much more massive, and even more violent, second assault on Fallujah was launched in early November 2004. Deliberately bombing the Nazzal hospital first -- presumably to reduce the chances of casualty images and figures leaking out to the outside world this time -- this assault seems likely, at the time of writing (26th November 2004), to go down as one of the major war crimes of the early 21st century. The horrors of the assault are only now starting to emerge. As of November 20th, US forces claimed that at least 1200 "insurgents' lay dead. Little mention was made, however, of the very high numbers of dead and wounded civilians (100,000 of which were still in the City during the second assault). The

New York Times, quoting the International Red Crescent, estimated on November 20th that over 800 civilians had been killed (Wong, 2004). 54 US Marines and 9 Iraqi soldiers had also been killed by that date.

It is very clear that the newly re-elected Bush regime, emboldened by the electoral victory, was keen to unleash their deepest fantasies of place annihilation in the second Fallujah assault. Simply irritated that the population of an entire city, grieving and enraged after the carnage of the first assault, could sit outside their dreams of 'Full Spectrum Dominance,' Fallujah and its citizens were singled out for special attention. As Robin Cook, Blair's ex Foreign Secretary, commented, Paul Wolfowitz, in particular, was "furious [in Spring 2004] when the outcry among both Sunnis and Shias obliged the Marine corps to abandon its siege" (2004, 28). US forces, meanwhile, entertained fantasies of some final military assault on Fallujah that would be their biggest 'urban operation' since they invaded Hue in Vietnam after the Tet Offensive in 1968 (Ramadani, 2004, 30).

In this second assault, indiscriminate artillery barrages were employed. British forces were moved North to help lay siege to the City. Once the barriers were in place, all men of 'military age' were prevented from leaving the City. Water and power were switched off. Mass demolitions were employed. Dozens of mosques were occupied or bombed. Humanitarian aid convoys and non-'embedded' independent journalists were prevented from entering the City. Above all, over 12,000 Marines were systematically trained to employ new rules of engagement. "Shoot everything that moves and everything that doesn't move", instructed one Marine commander in the run-up to the assault (Al-Jazeera, 2004). Marines were told that they should shoot dead any male on the street between 15 and 50 -- even if they unarmed -- if they could in any way be viewed as a "security threat". When Marines asked a Gunnery Sergeant for clarification on this policy, he told his men that if they saw "military-age" men on the street that they should 'drop 'em" (Al-Jazeera, 2004) This policy was captured on film when an embedded TV reporter filmed the routine killing of injured fighters in the City.

Both assaults on Fallujah were legitimised by powerful propaganda campaigns, by US state PR operations and mainstream and pro-Bush US media alike. Both

depicted virtually all the Iraqi casualties that resulted from the attack as "terrorists", "al-Qaeda fighters", "Saddam loyalists", or "foreign insurgents". Both also widely followed General Richard Myers, Chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, when he labelled the whole of Fallujah as a dehumanised "rat's nest" or "hornet's nest" of "terrorist resistance" against US occupation that needed to be "dealt with" (News24.com 2004). "The enemy has got a face", Marine Colonel Gareth Brandl told the BBC before the second assault. "He's called Satan. He lives in Fallujah" (quoted in Klein, 2004a). The second assault was also legitimised as necessary so that 'free' elections could go ahead in January 2005. So complicit were mainstream US media in such constructions that, astonishingly, letters to various newspapers after the second assault complained that a widely circulated picture of one Marine in action during the battle showed him smoking a cigarette (Klein, 2004b).

In making sense of the Fallujah atrocities, three points deserve special emphasis.

Orientalist Dehumanisation

First, the Fallujah assaults, and the United State's many other military incursions into Islamic cities are, of course, discursively constructed and legitimised. They rest on complex imaginative geographies which manipulate the discourses of the 'war on terror' to project, and construct, Islamic urban places, and their inhabitants, in extremely powerful ways (Gregory, 2004a).

Central here is the principle of the absolute eternality of the 'terrorist' -- the inviolable inhumanity and shadowy, monster-like status of those deemed to be actual or dormant 'terrorists' or those deemed sympathetic to them. Crucially, any act of resistance to US invasion and occupation is branded as a 'terrorist' act through such discourses (even though 'terrorist' violence against a military occupier of one's homeland is, by most definitions of the word, impossible). The 'enemy' is thus "criminalised if he defends himself and returns fire with fire" (Zizek, 2002).

"Terrorist' discourses do much to shield the realities of US state terror. As Al-Mufthi (2004) notes, describing one family's losses in the second assault, that:

“relatives of Ateka Abdel Hamid, 24, did not know that this seven-month pregnant woman was a terrorist until the day she died. As the family collected the mutilated bodies of Ateka and her family, a United States spokesman boasted that the ‘multinational forces’ killed a number of terrorists and Al-Zarqawi supporters during an offensive in Falluja. The terrorists, it turned out, were Ateka, her three-year-old son Omar, her husband Tamer and six other members of her family.”

Legitimations of the assaults on Fallujah, and other Iraqi cities, have also relied on Orientalist tropes and clichés (see Tuasted, 2003). These emphasise the supposed impenetrability and structurelessness of Islamic cities and the purported irrationality, backwardness and infantile nature of their inhabitants. Closely leavened here also are heavy doses of dehumanising racism and Islamophobia. All this, of course, is constructed in a complex binary system where the Orientalized, barbarian, terroristic Other is opposed to the legitimate, rational, technologised mastery of "Western civilisation", who have the mandate to possess and direct the "Orient", colonially, from afar (Said, 1978).

Like Palestinian civilians in Israeli military discourse, then, US depictions of Iraqi civilians construct them, "essentially, as evil children who have to be brought back to an honest life by stern discipline and punishment" (Zizek, 2002). As Edward Said stressed just before his death, "without a well-organised sense that these people over there were not like ‘us’ and didn’t appreciate ‘our’ values -- the very core of the Orientalist dogma -- there would have been no war" in Iraq (Said, 2003, x-xxiii.).

Widespread pronouncements of the US soldiers themselves illustrate these racist imaginative geographies all too clearly. In both assaults US Marine snipers in Fallujah, for example, talked exultantly about their ‘kills’ of "rag-heads" and "sand niggers" (Davis, 2004). US officers also widely employed Orientalist tropes emphasising some essentialised, racist notion of the ‘Arab mind’ to legitimise the use of overwhelming US fire power. Take, for example, the view of Captain Todd Brown, one company commander with the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division in Baghdad. In early

December 2003, he stated that, to control Iraqi cities with military force, "you have to understand the Arab mind. The only thing they understand is force – force, pride and saving face" (cited in Filkins, 2003).

Such a blend of Orientalism, dehumanisation, Islamophobia, and 'terrorist' Othering does the (geo)political work of casting out Islamic cities -- and their inhabitants -- from any notion of 'civilisation'. From Huntingdon's binaries of a 'clash of civilisations', to a widespread demonisation of entire Islamic cities as 'terrorist' or barbarian 'nests' amongst US military and political leaders and mainstream media, such discourses directly legitimise the use of massive, indiscriminate force by US forces in Islamic cities.

'Kill Faster!' Constructing Islamic Cities as Military Targets

The discursive roots of the US military's racist, dehumanising approach to Islamic cities are deep and multitudinous. They are influenced, of course, by the pronouncements of their political leaders that Iraq is a pivot in an "axis of evil" where the US forces of 'freedom' and 'good' must engage ruthlessly with 'terrorist' barbarians, ensconced within fundamentally 'evil' cities. They are also constructed through the outputs of mainstream US media, which pumps out endless 'action' films in which Arabs are unerringly "portrayed as stupid, animalistic, amoral, sex-starved, abusive, wife-battering terrorists who seek to kill themselves and their children" (Al-Atraqchi, 2004).

Above all, though -- and this is my second key point -- huge discursive efforts are also being made to continually construct, and reconstruct, Islamic cities as little more than receiving points for US military ordnance (Gregory, 2004a).

The US Army -- which now brands itself as "the world's premier land force" -- itself works hard and at many levels to demonise Islamic urbanism *per se*. Now one of the world's biggest developer of video games, it gives games such as *America's Army* -- with its simulations of 'counter terror' warfare in densely packed Islamic cities in a fictional country of 'Zekistan' -- free to millions over the Internet. "The mission" of *America's Army*, writes Steve O'Hagan:

"is to slaughter evildoers, with something about 'liberty' [...] going on in the back ground [...]. These games may be ultra-realistic down to the calibre of the weapons, but when bullets hit flesh people just crumple serenely into a heap. No blood. No exit wounds. No screams" (O'Hagan, 2004, 12).

To parallel such virtual, voyeuristic Othering -- the mass, racist construction of (virtual) bodies for potential and actual US military recruits to routinely kill for entertainment -- US forces have constructed their own 'shadow' urban system : a chain of 60 mock 'Islamic' urban districts, built across the world since 9/11, and designed purely to hone the skills of US forces in fighting and killing in 'urbanised terrain'. Taking 18 months to construct, these simulated 'cities' are then endlessly destroyed and remade in practise assaults that hone the US forces for the 'real thing' in sieges such as those in Fallujah (Davis, 2004).

Replete with minarets, pyrotechnic systems, loop-tapes with calls to prayer, donkeys and hired 'civilians' in Islamic dress wandering through narrow streets, and olfactory machines to create the smell of rotting corpses, this shadow urban system works like some bastard child of Disney. It simulates, of course, not the complex cultural, social or physical realities of Middle eastern urbanism, but the imaginative geographies of the military and theme park designers that are brought in to design and construct it.

All this furthers the deep discursive equivalence that is constructed between Islamic urban places and 'terrorist nest' war zones to be assaulted and 'cleansed'. Military commanders often compare the various facilities as though comparing cities as holiday destinations. "The advantage of [the training complex at] George Air Force Base", reflected Colonel James Cashwell in March 2003, "is that it is ugly, torn up, all the windows are broken and trees have fallen down in the street. It's perfect for the replication of a war-torn city." (cited in Wilson, 2004).

Finally, the US Military's demonisation of Islamic (and other majority world) cities *per se* is accomplished through the combined vitriol of a whole legion of US military 'commentators' who enjoy huge coverage, exposure and influence in the US media. Taking advantage on the traditional reticence of US forces to engage in urban

warfare, these commentators endlessly discuss what is known in the jargon as "Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain" (or 'MOUT'). Once again, they serve to construct Islamic urbanism as little more than a combat site, a killing zone which challenges the US to harness its techno-scientific might to sustain hegemony and empire by killing 'terrorists' as rapidly and efficiently as possible with as few (US) casualties as possible.

Crucially, here, the purportedly irrational, structureless and impenetrable spaces of Casbahs and Medinas are cast as little more than the results of deliberate strategies to interrupt the high-tech killing power of US forces: the only remaining shelters from the verticalised, orbital targeting that sustains US global military pre-eminence.

One of the most influential sources of these discursive appeals to the Islamic city-as-target is Ralph Peters, a retired U.S. military urban warfare specialist and an influential columnist on Rupert Murdoch's neo-conservative *New York Post*. Peters's starting point is that the majority world's burgeoning megacities and urbanising corridors are spaces where "human waste goes undisposed, the air is appalling, and mankind is rotting" (Peters, 2002, 6). Here, cities and urbanisation represent little but decay, anarchy, disorder and the post Cold War collapse of 'failed' nation states. "Boom cities pay for failed states", he writes, "post-modern dispersed cities pay for failed states, and failed cities turn into killing grounds and reservoirs for humanity's surplus and discards (guess where we [i.e. the United States military] will fight)" (Peters, 1996, 2).

And yet even the savagery of the first US assault on what Ralph Peters calls the "terror-city" of Fallujah did little to satisfy Peters's bloodlust for violent mastery of Islamic cities (Peters, 2004a). Praising the US Marines "for hammering the terrorists into the dirt" during this first assault, Peters nevertheless castigated the cease fire negotiations after the battle that, he argued, allowed those 'terrorists' left alive to melt back into the civilian population (Peters, 2004b). Again, the symbolic importance of Fallujah was strong in his mind: "make no mistake: There can be no compromise in Fallujah. If we stop one inch short of knocking down the last door in the last house in the city, our enemies will be able to present the Battle of Fallujah to their sympathisers as a great victory" (Peters, 2004b).

Nearly a month later, Peters concluded that a military, technological solution was available to US forces that would enable them to 'win' such battles more conclusively in the near future: killing faster, before any international media coverage is possible. "This is the new reality of combat," he wrote. "Not only in Iraq. But in every broken country, plague pit and terrorist refuge to which our troops have to go in the future" (2004b).

Arguing that the presence of "global media" meant that "a bonanza of terrorists and insurgents" were allowed to "escape' US forces in Fallujah, US forces, he argued " have to speed the kill" (Peters, 2004c). By "accelerating urban combat" to "fight within the 'media cycle' before journalists sympathetic to terrorists and murderers can twist the facts and portray us as the villains," new technologies are needed, Peters argues, so that "our enemies are overwhelmed and destroyed before hostile cameras can defeat us. If we do not learn to kill very, very swiftly, we will continue to lose slowly" (Peters, 2004c).

The second Fallujah assault was certainly planned to maximise the speed, and scale, of the killing of 'insurgents'. "By quitting in April, we created the terrorist city-state of Fallujah", Peters argued. "Now we need to shut it down for good" (sic. 2004d). Discussing the high 'kill number' on Murdoch's Fox News, he argued that "the best outcome, frankly, is that [the insurgents are] all killed". He was proud that "the proportion of killed to prisoners is extraordinarily high and that is good news because, at the end of the day, this is about taking Fallujah [...]. You kill enough of the right people and you make the problem a lot smaller" (cited by News Hounds, 2004). "Even if Fallujah has to go the way of Carthage, reduced to shards, the price will be worth it" (Peters, cities in Lobe, 3004).

Casting Out Islamic Cities

The third and final point to stress is that the tightly-coupled projects of dehumanising the people living in islamic cities, and demonising such cities so that they can be constructed as little more than spaces to absorb US military firepower, together work to produce a third discursive trick. In constructing people as inhuman 'terrorist'

barbarians understanding little but force, and urban places as animalistic labyrinths or "nests" demanding massive military assault, Islamic cities, and their inhabitants, are, in turn, cast out beyond any philosophical, legal or humanitarian definitions of humankind or "civilisation" (Gregory, 2004a, chapter 6). Civilian inhabitants of cities such as Fallujah are thus denied the protection of international law. Their piling up bodies remain unworthy, largely invisible, unrecorded and uncounted. And their deaths are rendered of no account. Like the inmates of Abu Ghraib, Basra Airbase or Guantánamo Bay (Gregory, 2004c), such dying civilians and resistance fighters become examples of Agamben's *homo sacer* or 'bare life' -- mere zoological organisms to be targeted through force and disciplinary measures who are completely devoid of political or human rights (Agamben, 1998). Derek Gregory has termed such people "the half-human detritus of Bush's Holy War" (Gregory, 2004b).

Here a final perverse twist emerges in the massive discursive work being done to construct Iraqi civilians and the cities in which they live as targets for the United State's latest military firepower. Here, the already deep connections between the Iraq war and the Israeli-Palestinian war become deeper still (Graham, 2004c). For, by 'casting out' ordinary Iraqi civilians so that they, their cities, and the fragile infrastructures upon which they rely to survive become the targets of massive US firepower, these discourses help to forcibly create a kind of chaotic urban hell.

Perversely, then, in places like Fallujah, the violence of the 'war on terror' -- following as it does the massive demodernisation brought by the 1991 war and twelve years of sanctions-- produces exactly what the above discourses depict : an urban world "outside of the modern, figuratively as well as physically" (Gregory, 2003, 313). As the despair amongst those unlucky enough to be in the way of the hate-filled violence of US forces pushes them to support their own violent resistance, so the self-fulfilling cycles of 'war on terror' take another bloody turn. For, as Zulaika argues:

"the ultimate catastrophe is that such a categorically ill-defined, perpetually deferred, simple minded Good-versus-Evil war ['against terror'] echoes and re-creates the very absolutist mentality and exceptionalist tactics of the insurgent

terrorists. By formally adopting the terrorists' own game – one that by definition lacks rules of engagement, definite endings, clear alignments between enemies and fiends, or formal arrangements of any sort, military, political, legal, or ethical – the inevitable danger lies in reproducing it endlessly” (2003, 198),

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