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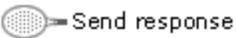
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Remember Falluja

By Orit Shohat

During the first two weeks of this month, the American army committed war crimes in Falluja on a scale unprecedented for this war. According to the relatively few media reports of what took place there, some 600 Iraqis were killed during these two weeks, among them some 450 elderly people, women and children.



The sight of decapitated children, the rows of dead women and the shocking pictures of the soccer stadium that was turned into a temporary grave for hundreds of the slain - all were broadcast to the world only by the Al Jazeera network. During the operation in Falluja, according to the organization Doctors Without Borders, U.S. Marines even

occupied the hospitals and prevented hundreds of the wounded from receiving medical treatment. Snipers fired from the rooftops at anyone who tried to approach.

This was a retaliatory operation, carried out by the Marines, accompanied by F-16 fighter planes and assault helicopters, under the code name "Vigilant Resolve." It was revenge for the killing of four American security guards on March 31. But while the killing of the guards, whose bodies were dragged through the streets of the city and then hung from a bridge, received wide media coverage, and thus prepared hearts and minds for the military revenge, the hundreds of victims of the American retaliation were practically a military secret.

The only conclusion that has been drawn thus far from the indiscriminate killing in Falluja is the expulsion of Al Jazeera from the city. Since the start of the war, the Americans have persecuted the network's journalists - not because they report lies, but because they are virtually the only ones who manage to report the truth. The Bush administration, in cooperation with the American media, is trying to hide the sights of war from the world, and particularly from American voters.

This week, for the first time, the Americans permitted pictures to be published of the coffins of dead American soldiers being sent back home. Until this week, such pictures were forbidden. Therefore, it is no wonder Bush's poll results are better than ever, even though the number of Americans killed in

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Iraq in April has reached 115.

Is the occupation of Iraq hindering terrorism, or inflaming it? Will the number of dead soldiers - in contrast to the number of Iraqi victims - prompt a reassessment? It is clear that the American war crimes will not reach the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Today, America sets the world's moral standards. It alone decides who will be judged, who is a terrorist, what is legitimate resistance to occupation, who is a religious fanatic, and who is a legitimate target for assassination. That is how four Iraqi children, who laughed at the sight of a dead American soldier, merited being killed on the spot.

Ariel Sharon's government can thus cite a great authority for its own actions, and there are no visible limits to its plan to create a new security order in the Gaza Strip and in the territories in general. To the Israeli government, not crossing the red lines that America sets for its friends is more important than resolving the conflict with the Palestinians.

The ethical dilemmas in Israel over the targeted killings must make the American government laugh. After Falluja, Israel Defense Forces commanders can feel easier with their consciences - and especially with the consciences of those who refuse to carry out such operations. The one-ton bomb that was dropped on an apartment building in Gaza in order to assassinate Salah Shehadeh, which also killed 14 civilians, is almost like throwing candy compared to the number of bombs the Americans dropped on the houses of the residents of crowded Falluja. And there, too, incidentally, the Marines' commander said they did their best in order to avoid hurting civilians. "We brought to this action our experience from World War II, Korea, Vietnam ... The operation in Falluja will be remembered and studied for many years to come," he said.

What can the perplexed Israeli learn from this cynical comparison? Ariel Sharon can feel that he was simply persecuted in the Sabra and Chatila affair. Those who like to say that "the whole world is against us" will choose to talk about the double standards applied to America and Israel with regard to, for instance, Israel's destruction of the Jenin refugee camp. But anyone who has absolute, rather than relative, moral standards can conclude that we should not be learning from the Americans - not with regard to the consumption of junk food, not in the area of human rights, and not even in the area of democracy and freedom of expression.

The practical difference ought to be obvious. America is a superpower, which can evidently do what it pleases, and it can withdraw from the war in Iraq whenever it wants. Israel has no place to which to withdraw. It must remain here, in proximity to its neighbors - its partners in the land, the climate and the fate of its children. Therefore, every retaliation, revenge operation and assassination that we carry out has historical consequences going far beyond

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those of the cruel assault on Falluja. Operation Vigilant Resolve, in contrast, will become no more than a footnote in American military history - and perhaps a few Marines will even write a book about it.


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