

Fallujah: My Lost Hometown

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Global Research, September 20, 2023

[Reveal](#) 11 September 2021

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

In-depth Report: [Fallujah: US War Crimes, IRAQ REPORT](#)

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[This article was originally published on September 11, 2021.]

It was the first day of summer vacation in France, and I was unusually melancholic for an 8-year-old. I lived in a little town outside Paris and all my friends had left to visit their families in the provinces. The morning was blue, unusually cold and felt decidedly lonesome. I decided to approach my sullen father with a question about Iraq, the country he had fled in the '70s as a dissident: "Baba, do we even have a family?"

Sensing my dismay, my father smiled, took out a piece of paper and began writing down names. He didn't stop until he'd filled the page with nearly a hundred names of family members: Auday, Mazen, Riad, Nahla, Soad, Hasna. ... I practiced saying them. One name in particular stood out to me: Fallujah. My father had circled the word and written right next to it, "our hometown."

I carried the page with me, reading and rereading it until I had memorized as many names as I could. My father told me that every one of these people knew my name and had seen photographs of me. We hadn't spoken to them because Iraq was at war with Iran and telephone calls were rare.

I was struck by the paradox of my situation: born in Paris when really, I belonged to Fallujah.

One summer day in 1988, we finally received that long-awaited phone call: The war was over! A year later, my mother, my sister and I found ourselves on an Iraqi Airways plane bound for Baghdad, then Fallujah.

Of course, it's hard to say the name Fallujah today in Europe or the United States without instantly conjuring up images of war, destruction and battle-hardened anti-American jihadis. What does the world know of Fallujah besides its destruction by U.S. forces in 2004 and its

2014 conquest by the Islamic State group? From my experience, almost nothing. But that empty space is where my history and my family's history reside.

Fallujah is the city where my parents were born, a clean, green city bordered by the Euphrates – or Al-Furat – River, after which I was named. It wasn't as exciting as Baghdad, a much larger and wealthier city, but its greatest charm was the world of family it opened up. During my first visit, it was exhilarating to meet aunts and uncles and cousins in the flesh, people whose lives I'd only been able to imagine until then. After years of feeling isolated in France, as one of the only Iraqi families we knew, I was overwhelmed to discover that I belonged to a warm and loving community of more people than I could count.



Feurat Alani (second from right) and his sister on the banks of the Euphrates River in Fallujah with his uncles in 1989. Credit: Courtesy of Feurat Alani

1989 was a year of peace, sadly an anomaly in Iraq's recent history. In the years that followed, the lightness and joy of my first visit began to fade. When I returned in 1992, an unstoppable United Nations Security Council-imposed embargo had just begun to set in, and by 1995, the weight of the sanctions hung heavy over Iraq. Fallujah began to fold in on itself. Everyone was hungry. More and more of my cousins were dropping out of school to work in the local markets. When I left Iraq at the end of that visit, I didn't know if or when I would return. I wanted to just be a teenager and focus on my life in France.

The turning point came on Sept. 11, 2001. I remember the shock and grief watching the news on that fateful Tuesday. I remember phone calls of disbelief and tears from my cousins in Iraq. But as Bush administration officials wasted no time in building their case for invading Iraq, a slow horror set in about what this emerging narrative – however fraudulent – could mean for my hometown. It was this narrative, coming out of 9/11 and daily conversations with my father, that pushed me back to Iraq and into journalism.

My father had fled Iraq after being imprisoned by Saddam Hussein for spreading Communist ideas and building an opposition to his authoritarian rule. During the lead-up to the war, we talked about his activism in Iraq and his fears and hopes for the future every day. I knew I had to go back myself and tell stories about what Iraqis were going through.

And so for a decade, I made Baghdad my base and reported across the country for a range of French and international outlets on everything from the fallout of the U.S. invasion to the rise of the Islamic State group. But my most powerful stories – and life lessons – came from Fallujah and my family.

The horror of reporting on bodies buried in the local football stadium after the deadly battles of Fallujah in April and November 2004 was surpassed only by recognizing some of the names on the makeshift tombstones. Three of my cousins died during the fighting and are buried there.



The Martyrs' Cemetery was previously a football stadium in Fallujah. Credit: Yvon Le Gall

A fourth cousin had joined the insurgency but was caught and imprisoned in Abu Ghraib and Camp Bucca. When he was released a year later, he decided to enroll in the newly created Iraqi police force. He was killed a week later by al-Qaida in Iraq, which called him a traitor for joining any part of the U.S.-installed Iraqi government.

As I was trying to make sense of the senseless violence and the sectarian nightmare that was unfolding in Iraq, I learned that my uncles, all of whom had been in the Iraqi military, had joined different sections of the anti-American insurgency: Salafi, Sufi, nationalist, independent. I was initially surprised by the diversity of ideology in a city that had always seemed homogenous on its face, essentially an army town, which in Saddam's time also meant a Sunni town. But mostly, I was uncomfortable with how the fighting had changed my

uncles. One of them, a decorated veteran of the war with Iran, reminded me that resistance to an occupying force was legitimate under international law. But I also saw the rage that swept across his face each time an American military convoy passed through the rubble of our hometown. It terrified me.

This is when my father planned his first visit to post-invasion Iraq. A few days after he arrived, he ran into an old friend he hadn't seen in 30 years at a cafe they both used to love in Baghdad. Minutes after the encounter, two young men walked in and shot his friend, killing him on the spot. We later learned that the friend had been suspected of working with the Americans. My father left Iraq soon after and, after three decades of holding out hope of returning and playing a role in his country, applied for French citizenship.

By 2007, I could no longer ignore the stories I'd been hearing about an uptick in the number of birth defects among babies born in Fallujah. My friend Abu Yunis, a former football player who became my fixer and guide in the city, told me about babies dying soon after birth and deformed children growing up in hiding. His descriptions were so fantastical that I had struggled to believe him. But after he started sending me photographs, I started investigating the phenomenon for [French television](#). I [interviewed](#) Iraqi families, medical researchers, doctors, scientists, weapons experts, as well as Marines who had fought in Fallujah. Doctors reported a sharp uptick in birth defects after the invasion. No one knew exactly what had caused it, but one theory was that toxic contamination caused by the war might be responsible. One doctor in Fallujah told me she was so overwhelmed by seeing 1 in 5 babies being born with deformities that her only advice to people in the city was to stop having children.

Even after most American troops left the country, policies the United States put in place – like the disbanding of the army, the de-Baathification of government institutions, and the imposition of a sectarian political system – continue to haunt Iraq. There's no other way of putting it: The war has left Iraqis a legacy of death. Each year, the Fallujah I knew and loved slips further away. But this history, as bloody and painful as it is, matters and should not be forgotten. There's no official count of how many Iraqis have been killed since the U.S. invasion began. There's no memorial for all the Iraqis who've died terrible, violent deaths. Or for those who've died of hunger or disease as a result of the war.

As a French Iraqi, I'm used to translating Iraq for a French audience, right from when I returned from my first visit in 1989 and tried explaining what life in Iraq was like to my school friends. But I also think of my role as an archivist, a keeper of memories, both joyful and hard – my own and my family's and of the people in Fallujah and across Iraq. It's why I became a journalist, to insist on recording the history of our present moment, however imperfect and incomplete it is. It's the only way I can piece together the full picture of what happened to Fallujah, my lost hometown.

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