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FOCUS SPECIAL

Karim Sahib



Insurgents celebrate as a US convoy burns outside Falluja last week

APOCALYPSE NOW?

The barrels were long and the slogans menacing. As several American tanks hunkered together in Sadr city, the lawless slum near the centre of Baghdad, the words daubed on two were clear. "Anger Management" read one; "Analyse This" read another.

For the three marines nervously unciling barbed wire around the position last Wednesday, the analysis was all too uncomfortable: anger management, American-style, was not working. The locals were just getting more vengeful, more bloodthirsty.

A few hundred yards down the road a horde of armed Shi'ite Muslims were spoiling for a fight. Clustered on a rooftop, they were dressed in black and laden with rocket-propelled grenades, AK-47s, sabres and other weaponry.

"Come and get us if you dare," they chanted at the tank crews. "We will fight you to the death." Below, the street crowd cheered and children set fire to truck tyres built into a barricade.

The fighters were members of the al-Mahdi army, an outlawed militia loyal to Moqtada al-Sadr, the fiery Islamic cleric blamed for the bloody rioting that erupted last week throughout central

and southern Iraq. Inside the building al-Sadr's local representative was holding court.

Surrounded by aides and wearing a thick black turban, Said Amir al-Husseini looked more warlord than cleric as people queued to offer him their help. One woman, her face covered with a veil, came in cradling an AK-47 saying she would fight the Americans. A man kissed the sheikh's ring and claimed he was willing to sell his house to raise money for al-Sadr. Some visitors offered food, others weapons and ammunition.

"This is a proper army defending our beliefs and our people," said al-Husseini. "The Americans are no longer welcome. They are killing and arresting innocent people. This is our country. We want to rule ourselves. And if they want to fight we have no shortage of volunteers."

It sounded like a declaration of war — and yesterday the battles were still raging. In the town of Falluja, west of Baghdad, men and teenagers brandished rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) as American planes screamed overhead. Explosions rocked buildings. Bodies and burnt-out vehicles littered the streets.

Inside Sadr city, tens of thousands of Shi'ite men per-



Hijacking, murder, kidnap. Last week anarchy seemed to have gripped 'post-war' Iraq. **Mark Franchetti** reports from Baghdad on the revolt that gained momentum as it spread

formed prayers outside for the weekend's holy festival. In unison they raised their fists and pledged their lives to al-Sadr. It was a fearsome sight at the end of a bloody week in which militants across the country had battled the troops who had liberated them from Saddam Hussein. By last night 42 US troops and more than 500 Iraqis had died.

Civilians, aid workers and journalists all came under fire. Then a terrifying new tactic — kidnap — seemed to take hold. Three Japanese citizens were snatched by militiamen and an ultimatum was issued: Japan must withdraw its forces helping the coalition or the captives would be burnt alive.

Yesterday two US soldiers were reported missing, feared kidnapped. A British worker, Gary Teeley, is also missing.

In Hit, a town 110 miles west of Baghdad, a British security contractor called Michael Bloss e-mailed

friends on Wednesday amid the rioting: "We are expecting to be overrun tonight and we may have to fight our way to a safe haven. Unfortunately all the safe havens are already under attack."

The next day, as Bloss guided workers to safety, he was shot dead.

In Basra, controlled by British troops, the Ministry of Defence claimed all was calm. Some calm. One unit commander contacted in the field on Thursday said: "I survived an RPG attack... one of dozens of multi-weapon attacks in the last 48 hours. My regiment

alone has had four wounded in action and two vehicles destroyed."

Even Paradise Square, where the toppling of Saddam's statue had symbolised triumph, was sealed off. "Warning, warning," blared loudspeakers in Arabic. "If anyone tries to get close to a military vehicle they will be attacked. If anyone is carrying a gun he will be shot. Thank you."

For Bush and Blair it was a grim anniversary of "victory". On Wednesday, on the secure videolink from the basement of No 10 to the White House,

they discussed what to do ahead of Blair's forthcoming visit to Washington.

Blair is said to have advised the president to be more conciliatory. But the American instinct was to be bold: al-Sadr's support was limited, they judged, and ordinary Iraqis wanted the process towards democracy, however imperfect, to continue.

This was no popular uprising or "intifada", the Americans argued. The trouble was being caused by a limited number of hotheads who had to be hit, and hit hard. They would either be martyred or driven to the negotiating table.

THE road to democracy in Iraq was always going to be spattered with blood. As Iraqi exiles returned after the fall of Saddam to vie for power with local politicians, the struggle quickly turned murderous.

Soon after allied troops began racing through southern Iraq towards Baghdad in

March last year, Ayatollah Abdul Majid al-Khoei, a young, moderate Shi'ite Muslim, fled in from London. With American money behind him, he went to Najaf to hold talks with the most senior Shi'ite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The two were seen as offering Iraq some of the best hopes for a prosperous future.

But the day after Saddam's statue fell in Baghdad, al-Khoei was emerging from a holy shrine in Najaf when he was stabbed. As people tried to get him to safety, he was stabbed again, near al-Sadr's offices. This time it was fatal.

Although the evidence of murder pointed at al-Sadr and his supporters, the coalition let them be. In October he denounced America as the "Bigger Satan", in an echo of the old Iranian chant of the US being the "Great Satan", but still he was left alone.

The cleric's power base is the Baghdad slum of Sadr city, home to some 2m Shi'ites who live in desperate poverty. A sprawling labyrinth of fetid streets, it is the poorest and most crime-ridden district of the capital.

It is to the dispossessed youth of this ghetto that al-Sadr owes his power. He has established a sophisticated

welfare network there and "courts" that dispense sharia justice in his name.

It was his militia — the al-Mahdi army — he likes to remind people that protected the local Shi'ites from looters and Saddam loyalists in the wake of the war.

If the Americans thought that they could ignore or sideline al-Sadr, they were wrong. The young cleric has proved to be an adept media manipulator and his al-Mahdi army is now thought to number about 6,000 men.

"The word was put out in the mosques," said Abu Hammed, from Sadr city, who gave up his job to join the militia. He now heads a cell of 40 men. "The recruiting has been going on for months. I was given an AK-47 and joined overnight to protect our people and our land from the Americans. They are cheating us and have become occupiers, not liberators."

Al-Sadr fomented trouble by spreading his poisonous preachings through a weekly newspaper called al-Hawza. "We are still under the rule of Saddam but with an American face," began one article, which went on to accuse the coalition of spreading "moral corruption by the selling of

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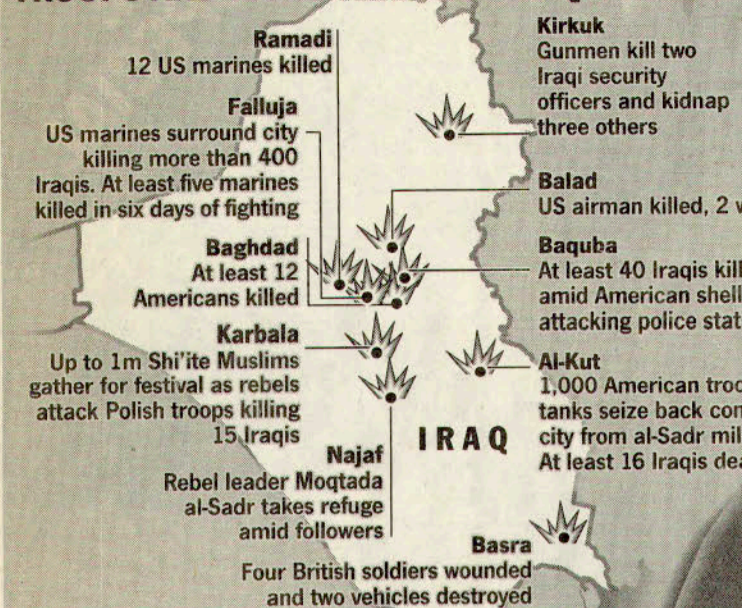
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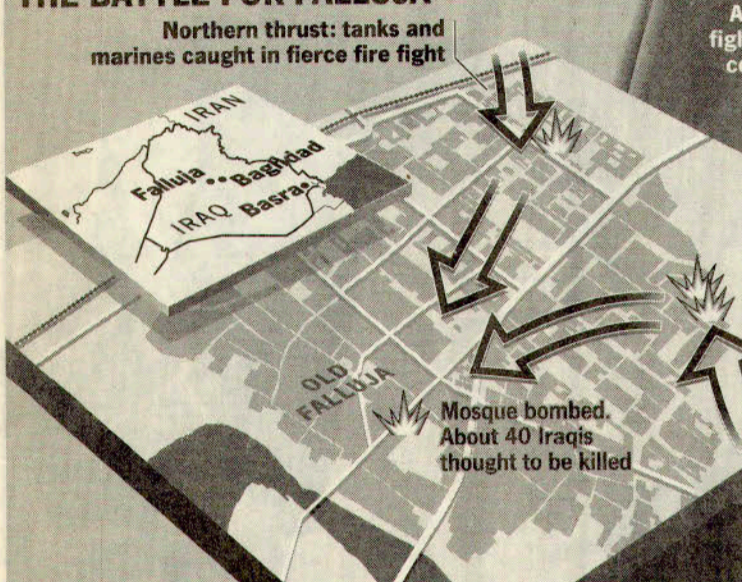
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MAJOR ATTACKS LAST WEEK IN WHICH 42 US TROOPS AND MORE THAN 500 IRAQIS DIED



THE BATTLE FOR FALLUJA



Main attack: US forces enter from south and battle towards city centre

CLERIC'S ARMY SPARKS IRAQ BLOODBATH

Continued from page 15... erately killing Iraqi police and civilians. The newspaper also derided Paul Bremer, the American consul running Iraq, as a "third-rate intelligence agent" with a desire to "erase Islam from the Earth".

THREE days after the newspaper was closed, four employees of a private security firm called Blackwater set off from an army base in a convoy of vehicles. Their mission: to collect kitchen equipment.

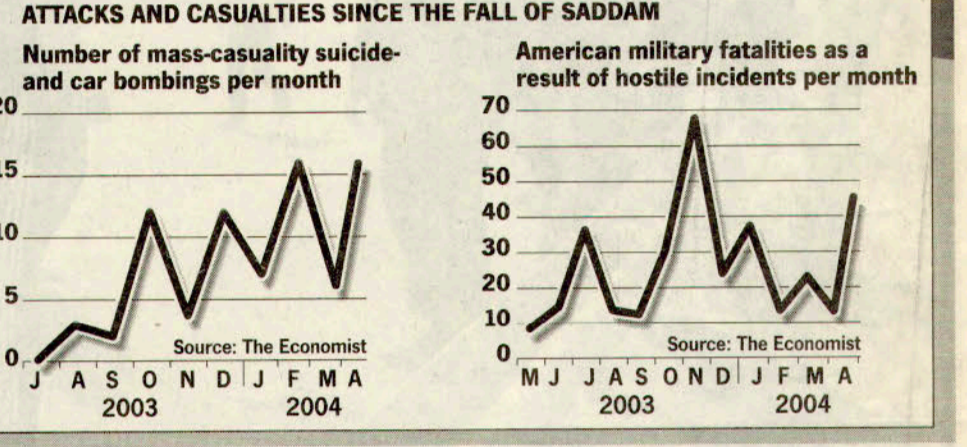
Some of the remains were strung up from a bridge as the mob chanted their delight. "The bodies were hanging upside down on each side of the bridge," said one friend. "They had no hands, no feet, one had no head."

Some observers believe that al-Sadr wished to produce a force akin to Saudi Arabia's religious police, but the al-Mahdi has swelled into something even more sinister. Thousands of Iranian Revolutionary Guards are said to have crossed the border and joined up with al-Sadr's forces.

Al-Sadr's vision for his country remains unclear. He rejects the idea of a federal government with autonomy for the Kurds, and argues vehemently against federalisation of Iraq. "Federalism is an Israeli idea to divide us," he said.



4 Heavily armed AC-130 aircraft last militia gunmen ahead of advancing marines



A wounded US marine is given first aid near Falluja last week



A wounded US marine is given first aid near Falluja last week

IRAQ BLOODBATH

going on whatsoever and I can't blame them. As ever, though, the bombs and killings that grabbed the television headlines were prompted the best soundbites did not tell the whole story.

Behind the scenes the Iraqi Government Council was trying to cut a deal with al-Sadr, promising to give him a fair trial in return for his surrendering to the council (rather than the Americans) and calling off his militia.

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TROOPS LACK NUMBERS AND SKILLS

A YEAR ago America was celebrating the success of "warfare-lite". It took fewer than 250,000 troops supported by smart bombs to topple Saddam Hussein.

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