

# Urban warfare: Is Iraq a rehearsal for US hoods? by Mike Davis

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The young American Marine is exultant. “It’s a sniper’s dream,” he tells a Los Angeles Times reporter on the outskirts of Fallujah. “You can go anywhere, and there so many ways to fire at the enemy without him knowing where you are.”

“Sometimes a guy will go down, and I’ll let him scream a bit to destroy the morale of his buddies. Then I’ll use a second shot.”

“To take a bad guy out,” he explains, “is an incomparable adrenaline rush.” He brags of having “24 confirmed kills” in the initial phase of the brutal U.S. onslaught against the rebel city of 300,000 people.

Faced with intransigent popular resistance that recalls the heroic Vietcong defense of Hue in 1968, the Marines have again unleashed indiscriminate terror. According to independent journalists and local medical workers, they have slaughtered at least 200 women and children in the first two weeks of fighting.

The battle of Fallujah, together with the conflicts unfolding in Shia cities and Baghdad slums, are high-stakes tests, not just of U.S. policy in Iraq, but of Washington’s ability to dominate what Pentagon planners consider the “key battlespace of the future” – the Third World city.

The Mogadishu debacle of 1993, when neighborhood militias inflicted 60 percent casualties on elite Army Rangers, forced U.S. strategists to rethink what is known in Pentagonese as MOUT: “Militarized Operations on Urbanized Terrain.” Ultimately, a National Defense Panel review in December 1997 castigated the Army as unprepared for protracted combat in the near impassable, maze-like streets of the poverty-stricken cities of the Third World.

As a result, the four armed services, coordinated by the Joint Staff Urban Working Group, launched crash programs to master street-fighting under realistic third-world conditions. “The future of warfare,” the journal of the Army War College declared, “lies in the streets, sewers, high-rise buildings, and sprawl of houses that form the broken cities of the world.”

Israeli advisors were quietly brought in to teach Marines, Rangers and Navy Seals the state-of-the-art tactics – especially the sophisticated coordination of sniper and demolition teams with heavy armor and overwhelming airpower – so ruthlessly used by Israeli Defense Forces in Gaza and the West Bank.

Artificial cityscapes – complete with “smoke and sound systems” – were built to simulate combat conditions in densely populated neighborhoods of cities like Baghdad or Port-au-Prince. The Marine Corps Urban Warfighting Laboratory also staged realistic war games (“Urban Warrior”) in Oakland and Chicago, while the Army’s Special Operations Command “invaded” Pittsburgh.

Today, many of the Marines inside Fallujah are graduates of these Urban Warrior exercises as well as mock combat at “Yodaville,” the Urban Training Facility in Yuma, Arizona, while some of the Army units encircling Najaf and the Baghdad slum neighborhood of Sadr City are alumni of the new \$34 million MOUT simulator at Fort Polk, Louisiana.

This tactical “Israelization” of U.S. combat doctrine has been accompanied by what might be called a “Sharonization” of the Pentagon’s worldview. Military theorists are now deeply involved in imagining how the evolving capacity of high-tech warfare can contain, if not destroy, chronic “terrorist” insurgencies rooted in the desperation of growing mega-slums.

To help develop a geopolitical framework for urban war-fighting, military planners turned in the 1990s to the RAND Corp.: Dr. Strangelove’s old alma mater. RAND, a nonprofit think tank

established by the Air Force in 1948, was notorious for war-gaming nuclear Armageddon in the 1950s and for helping plan the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

These days RAND does cities – big time. Its researchers ponder urban crime statistics, inner-city public health and the privatization of public education. They also run the Army's Arroyo Center, which has published a small library of recent studies on the context and mechanics of urban warfare.

One of the most important RAND projects, initiated in the early 1990s, has been a major study of "how demographic changes will affect future conflict." The bottom line, RAND finds, is that the urbanization of world poverty has produced "the urbanization of insurgency" – the title, in fact, of their report.

"Insurgents are following their followers into the cities," RAND warns, "setting up 'liberated zones' in urban shantytowns. Neither U.S. doctrine, nor training, nor equipment is designed for urban counterinsurgency." As a result, the slum has become the weakest link in the American empire.

The RAND researchers reflect on the example of El Salvador, where the local military, despite massive U.S. support, was unable to stop FMLN guerrillas from opening an urban front. Indeed, "had the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front rebels effectively operated within the cities earlier in the insurgency, it is questionable how much the United States could have done to help maintain even the stalemate between the government and the insurgents."

More recently, a leading Air Force theorist has made similar points in the *Aerospace Power Journal*. "Rapid urbanization in developing countries," writes Capt. Troy Thomas in the spring 2002 issue, "results in a battlespace environment that is decreasingly knowable since it is increasingly unplanned."

Thomas contrasts modern, "hierarchical" urban cores, whose centralized infrastructures are easily crippled by either air strikes (Belgrade) or terrorist attacks (Manhattan), with the sprawling slum peripheries of the Third World, organized by "informal, decentralized subsystems, where no blueprints exist, and points of leverage in the system are not readily discernable."

Using the "sea of urban squalor" that surrounds Pakistan's Karachi as an example, Thomas portrays the staggering challenge of "asymmetric combat" within "non-nodal, non-hierarchical" urban terrains against "clan-based" militias propelled by "desperation and anger." He cites the sprawling slums of Lagos, Nigeria, and Kinshasa in the Congo as other potential nightmare battlefields.

However, Capt. Thomas – whose article is provocatively entitled "Slumlords: Aerospace Power in Urban Fights" – like RAND, is brazenly confident that the Pentagon's massive new investments in MOUT technology and training will surmount all the fractal complexities of slum warfare.

One of the RAND cookbooks, "Aerospace Operations in Urban Environments," even provides a helpful table to calculate the acceptable threshold of "collateral damage" – aka dead babies – under different operational and political constraints.

The occupation of Iraq has, of course, been portrayed by Bush ideologues as a "laboratory for democracy" in the Middle East. To MOUT geeks, on the other hand, it is a laboratory of a different kind, where Marine snipers and Air Force pilots test out new killing techniques in an emergent world war against the urban poor.

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