

By Jack Healy

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*Michael Kamber for The New York Times / Residents of Falluja on Wednesday celebrated the departure of American troops from Iraq.*

FALLUJA, Iraq — They came on Wednesday to bury the war: clerics and sheiks, children and widows from across this scarred city. In the shadow of an overpass, they waved banners, burned an American flag, displayed photos of their dead and shouted well-worn denunciations of departing American forces.

“It’s a festival,” said Sheik Hamid Ahmed Hasham, the head of the local council, whose four

predecessors were assassinated.

Once an inner ring of Iraq's wartime inferno, Falluja is only too eager to say goodbye to nearly nine shattering years of raids, bombings and house-to-house urban combat. At least 200 American troops were killed in this city. Untold thousands of Iraqis died, civilians and insurgents who are mourned equally as martyrs.

Today, Falluja is a city desperately seeking normal.

Calls to prayer ring out from minarets where insurgent snipers once perched. In restaurants once obliterated by mortars and airstrikes, waiters skate from table to table with trays of lamb kebabs and fire-roasted tomatoes. Opulent houses rise from fields of rubble, built by sheiks, contractors and anyone else who benefited, illicitly or not, from the vast sums of American money that poured into Iraq during the war.

But amid the rebuilding, Falluja remains stranded between its past and present. American military officials plan to fold up the flags and formally conclude their mission at a ceremony on Thursday at the airport in Baghdad, but Falluja's anger toward the Americans seems almost certain to endure long after they leave.

That legacy is visible in the concrete walls spangled with bullet holes and shrapnel scars, in apartment buildings still lying in heaps. It is visible in the faces of widows who crowded the stairs outside an Islamic education center at Wednesday's Day of Resistance and Freedom, waving photographs of dead husbands and sons, asking for money for the loss they have suffered.

"We are full of pain," said Turkiya Fehan. She pointed at a photo of her son Mohammed, 19, who was killed in 2004. "He was in the resistance. He took his RPG and went to face the Americans. He was a hero."

It lives in the face of 16-year-old Mustafa Kamel, watching the day's speeches from a wheelchair. Walking home from school five years ago, he said, he was caught in a firefight

between American forces and insurgents and was shot in the neck. His injury left him paralyzed but the experience left him with a very specific set of goals for the future.

One: To become a doctor. Two: To walk again. And Three: "I'd ask God to let you see what the people of Falluja suffer from. That you suffer as I do."

Falluja, the City of Mosques, was once known mainly as a conservative, Sunni Muslim stopover on the road between Baghdad and Syria. An industrial redoubt of about 300,000 people, it exploded onto the American consciousness in March 2004, when insurgents attacked a car carrying four contractors and a cheering mob dragged their charred bodies through the streets, stringing two of them up over a bridge straddling the Euphrates.

Mohammed Khodor was a 16-year-old aspiring photographer in 2004 when he bolted from his house, point-and-shoot camera in hand, to find the mob that had set upon the Blackwater contractors. Today, he marvels at how young they all look in his pictures.

"The damage done to Falluja was all because of this," he said, clicking through the photos of that day.

The images of the Americans, burned beyond recognition, surrounded by jeering crowds deepened a growing sense of unease among Americans back home that the occupation was spiraling out of control. The United States military vowed to pacify Falluja. Two battles followed, in April and the end of 2004, that restored control but pulverized the city and left hundreds dead.

As the American presence faded, the city's frustration and suspicion have shifted toward the Shiite-led government in Baghdad and the Iraqi Army soldiers who answer to officers directly under Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki.

Throughout 2011, residents of Falluja and the surrounding deserts of Anbar Province have skirmished with the central government over control of security forces, gas resources, money and governance in the area. The conflicts raise fundamental tensions between officials in

Baghdad who favor a strong central government, and those in largely Sunni provinces arguing for a freer hand in running their affairs.

Sheik Hasham, the council official who has survived multiple assassination attempts, criticized Baghdad for failing to support Falluja's [reconstruction](#). He said that the vast majority of the 10,000 destroyed homes had been repaired or rebuilt, but that many damaged factories were still shuttered.

Mohammed Hussein al-Halbusi has not just rebuilt his kebab restaurant since it was pummeled by American bombs in October 2004, killing his son, niece and nephew. A few years after reopening, he decided to gut the restaurant and rebuild a second time.

"It gives the city a good flavor," Mr. Halbusi said.

In news reports from the time, American military officials said the restaurant had been used as a center for meetings of Al Qaeda in Iraq. Mr. Halbusi said he was simply the scion of restaurateurs who wanted to focus on the day's work ahead: slaughtering lambs, grilling kebabs, and preparing for the next day's meal.

*Omar al-Jawoshy contributed reporting.*