

Where were the panicking crowds?

And the food queues? And the empty streets?

A kind of fraudulent, nonchalant mood clogged Baghdad yesterday. There appeared to be no attempt to block the main highway into the city. Save for a few soldiers on the streets and a squad car of police, you might have thought this a holiday. All day yesterday, I asked myself the same question: where was the supposed American assault on Baghdad? Where were the panicking crowds? Where were the food queues? Where were the empty streets?

And what exactly were the Americans doing? They were surrounding the city, every foreign radio and television service insisted, but travellers still arrived from Amman. The city authorities have put more of their Chinese double-decker buses back on the streets – normal service, as they say, has been resumed – and the railway company claimed its trains were still leaving for northern Iraq.

Then, just before midday yesterday, a low buzzing sound insinuated its way into the consciousness of all those on the streets of central Baghdad, a long, monotonous, slightly wavering sound, a cross between a distant lawnmower and a purring cat. And when I followed the pointed arms of a dozen shoppers and policemen in Jumhurriyah Street, I at last caught sight of the fly-like machine slowly moving up the grey, hot skies over the city.

The Americans had sent their first drone over Baghdad, the very first pilotless reconnaissance aircraft anyone here had seen in this war, flying so slowly that, unlike the supersonic jets that eagle their way down on the city to drop bombs, it was easy to follow.

It buzzed westwards towards the largest and most bombed of the presidential palaces and then wobbled southwards. It seemed so fragile a creature, so tiny a

Robert Fisk » Where were the panicking crowds?

presence in the black, angry sky, that it was possible to forget the all-seeing eye in its belly, the pictures it was showing to the Americans outside the city perimeter, the choices it was helping to make about which suburbs were to be bombed.

At the Yarmouk Hospital yesterday, the soldier was in agony, his comrade in Saddam Hussein's Fedayeen militia weeping in sympathy as his friend writhed in pain. The American bullets had hit him in the legs and a woman doctor was slowly, with infinite care, trying to ease his right boot from his foot. He refused to cry out, refused to show his own suffering although his eyes were clenched tight shut as the woman worked at the boot, pulling the laces apart, fearing to cut the trouser leg for what she would find underneath.

"We are the Fedayeen, we are proud men," his friend said, brow drenched in sweat, shaking from the battle outside Saddam international airport. "We were confronting the Americans and we were holding them off. The Americans were scattering. Then an officer told my comrade to go and get food and rations for the men. It was when he got back that the bullets came and wounded him."

In one corridor at the Yarmouk, a middle-aged, white-haired soldier wearing a colonel's uniform hobbled past me on a crutch. But he stood erect in the hallway, brushing the dust from his shoulders with their gold braid and epaulettes.

So where are the Americans? Only 18 hours earlier, I had prowled the empty departure lounges of Saddam airport, mooched through the abandoned customs department, chatted to the seven armed militia guards, met the airport director and stood by the runways where two dust-covered Iraqi Airways passenger jets – an old 727 and an even more elderly Antonov – stood forlornly on the Tarmac not far from an equally decrepit military helicopter. And all I could hear was the distant whisper of high-flying jets and the chatter of the flocks of birds that have nested near the airport car park on this, the first day of real summer in Baghdad.

There was new evidence yesterday of the use of cluster bombs, on Baghdad itself this time, not just in the villages outside. From Furad, in the Doura district and Hay al-Ama and other areas west of Baghdad, civilians were arriving in emergency wards with the usual terrible wounds – multiple and severely deep gashes made by shrapnel released by bombs that explode in the air.

The death toll at Furud alone was said to be more than 80. One central hospital received 39 wounded, four of whom died in surgery. One young man had run for his life when he saw white canisters dropping from the sky but he was hit as he tried to run through his own front door. Another was a motorist who saw the clusters of tiny bomblets, each packed with star-shaped steel shrapnel, falling "like small stones" from the sky. His feet were bathed in blood and the familiar tiny, jagged holes of metal

Robert Fisk » Where were the panicking crowds?

fragments could be found in his chest and arms.

There was a change in the clientele at the city's restaurants. On Thursday, I had dropped into the Furud Takeaway for my daily fix of chicken shish-taouk, tomatoes and green beans. It was packed with Shia families chomping through giant mezzes of houmous and tabouleh and lamb and rice. The television was showing an Iranian channel, a musical in the Persian language – Iranian TV has two Arabic channels whose signal can be picked up without a satellite dish – and many Baghdadis trust its news service more than that of Kuwaiti or Saudi television.

Yesterday the cafés were packed with soldiers from the Republican Guard divisions defending Baghdad, men who could drive only 15 minutes back from the front to eat between battles, their anti-aircraft guns and military vehicles parked outside.

So where were the thousands of Guards whom the Americans could not find in the desert? They were here in Baghdad, defending their capital. Why, I wondered, should the Americans find that so surprising?

But still there was that remorseful, illusionary refusal among ordinary folk to accept the profound military, and thus political, changes being prepared for Baghdad. In Mansour, shopkeepers put the stories of America's approach – evident from the rumble of shellfire at the city limits – down to "foreign lies"; this from a seller of pistachio nuts who was not being monitored by any government minder

Maybe, I thought, Baghdad-is have known so much war over the past 23 years that the great armies and air forces that have bombarded this country simply no longer register the feelings of "shock and awe" that America expects.

Few here believe the Americans cannot bash their way into Baghdad if they really want to. But what was meant by that weird statement from the Americans that their special forces would enter parts of Baghdad to discover whether US soldiers would be welcomed or not? Would the Americans move faster if they received a friendly response? It sounded here as if an opinion poll was to decide the fate of Baghdad. ♦