

Washington denounces Syrian air strikes on ISIS

Peter Symonds
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The US has seized on Syrian air force strikes on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) stronghold of Raqqa to denounce Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and push for his government's removal. For the past three years, the Obama administration has backed anti-Assad militias in Syria. The main aim of its new Middle Eastern war remains regime-change in Damascus.

US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki on Wednesday said the US was "horrified" by reports that Syrian air strikes the previous day killed scores of civilians. She condemned the Syrian regime's "continued slaughter of Syria civilians" and "callous disregard for human life," declaring that "Assad long ago lost all legitimacy to govern."

According to the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least 95 people were killed in the air strikes on Tuesday, including 52 civilians. A Raqqa activist with the Syrian opposition network—the Local Co-ordination Committees—told the BBC that further deaths were likely because only one hospital was operating normally in the city and "a lot of people [are] dying from their wounds." Both organisations are aligned with the pro-Western opposition in Syria that is hostile to both Assad and ISIS.

Psaki's comments are utterly cynical from every standpoint. The Pentagon routinely dismisses evidence of civilian casualties from air strikes by US and allied war planes in Syria and Iraq, as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan, even in the face of eyewitness statements. It wages its bogus "war on terror" with complete indifference for civilian life.

Earlier, the same Syrian Observatory for Human Rights released figures on Saturday indicating that at least 52 civilians, including 8 children and 5 women, were killed in air attacks by the US-led coalition in

Syria. Given the organisation's political sympathies, this figure is likely to be an under-estimate. Not surprisingly, the US State Department expressed no horror over these casualties.

It is also unclear whether the deaths in Raqqa were solely due to the Syrian air force. American warplanes bombed the city as recently as Monday. A *Wall Street Journal* report stated: "It wasn't clear whether the US and its allies had carried out airstrikes in Raqqa on Tuesday. The scale of the casualties and how many were civilians or Islamic State militants was also unclear." It noted that it was often "hard to distinguish Raqqa locals from the extremists."

The Raqqa activist told the BBC: "All the markets in the city are closed after the air strikes. There is nobody walking in the streets ... They are just afraid because they say in the morning there are regime air strikes and in the evening there are [US-led] coalition air strikes and it's very, very hard to live under IS [ISIS]."

According to US Central Command figures, its war planes carried out 41 air strikes inside Syria and Iraq from last Friday up until Wednesday, including on Raqqa and the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane. The Voice of America web site reported yesterday that the US recently brought a squadron of A-10 Thunderbolt fighter jets from Afghanistan to Kuwait to carry out low-level bombing raids in Iraq and Syria, as well as six more Reaper drones armed with missiles.

Inside Iraq, US-backed government forces are battling to retain control of the city of Ramadi in the western Anbar province, much of which is already under ISIS control. ISIS militias launched an offensive earlier this week to capture the provincial capital. According to government officials on Wednesday, ISIS fighters advanced to within several hundred metres of governor's office, before being pushed back. Kurdish

peshmerga forces in the northern province of Kirkuk are also involved in heavy fighting to hold off a major ISIS offensive.

Last weekend, US Vice-President Joe Biden visited Turkey to try to patch up frayed relations and enlist greater Turkish support for the war in Iraq and Syria. The Turkish government has pressed the US for a more explicit call for regime-change in Damascus, as well as support for the imposition of a no-fly zone and buffer zone inside Syria. It has also been reluctant to support Kurdish militia holding out in Kobane, due to their affiliation with the outlawed separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey.

After meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Biden told the media they had agreed not only to roll back ISIS in Syria, but also to “strengthen the Syrian opposition and ensure a transition away from the Assad regime.” The Turkish foreign ministry announced it would collaborate with US forces in training 2,000 “moderate Syrian opposition fighters” at a base in the central Turkish city of Kirsehir. Turkey has also indicated it would be prepared to equip and train national guard units in Iraq to fight against ISIS.

Biden clashed with Erdogan last month when he accused Turkey of encouraging the rise of ISIS in Syria. While Turkey has certainly backed the Syrian opposition militias that have been dominated by right-wing Islamist organisations such as ISIS and the Al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, it is not alone. The US and its other Middle Eastern allies have been closely involved in training, financing and arming anti-Assad forces. The CIA has maintained a base inside Turkey to assist and arm opposition forces in Syria.

Reuters reported on Wednesday that the CIA was also involved in covertly training anti-Assad fighters at a camp in the Gulf state of Qatar. The desert camp lies inside a military zone guarded by Qatari special forces. The program has been running for a year and reportedly involves small groups of 12 to 20 fighters affiliated with the pro-Western Free Syrian Army (FSA). According to Reuters: “In recent weeks, the Qataris, disappointed by the lack of progress in the fight against Assad, have started to consider training members of the Islamic Front—another Islamist militia.”

While the US claims to distinguish between ISIS and “moderate” anti-Assad fighters, these forces have commonly worked closely together. Arms supplied to

the pro-Western FSA have ended up in the hands of Islamist militias. Now amid a groundswell of civilian opposition inside Syria to US air strikes, sections of the FSA are going over to ISIS, according to a *Guardian* article on Monday. Such defections will only encourage the US to openly declare war on Assad, sooner rather than later, in a bid to stem the tide.



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