

The atrocities of ISIS and the US wars of sociocide

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Images posted Tuesday on social media have confirmed the destruction by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) of the 2,000-year-old temple of Baal Shamin in the Syrian city of Palmyra. The images show ISIS fighters planting explosive charges throughout the ancient structure and then detonating them, reducing the temple to rubble.

The willful demolition of this site, one of the most important cultural centers of the ancient world and one of the best preserved Greco-Roman ruins in existence, followed the savage murder a week earlier of Professor Khaled Assad. The 82-year-old Syrian archeologist had participated in the excavation and restoration of Palmyra's ruins and had remained there as the head of antiquities for nearly half a century. He was beheaded for refusing to assist ISIS in looting the site.

UNESCO, the United Nations cultural and educational agency, justifiably denounced these atrocities as "war crimes," adding that "their perpetrators must be accountable for their actions."

There is no question that those responsible for these acts and for far bloodier atrocities against the Syrian people are criminals and should be held accountable. The obstacle to bringing to justice those principally responsible, however, is the fact that they are the former and current chief officials in the White House, the Pentagon and the CIA.

It was they who laid waste to one Middle Eastern country after another, while working with the Islamist forces that comprise ISIS to carry out their wars of regime-change against a series of secular Arab governments.

The systematic destruction of a cultural heritage carried out by ISIS has a historical precedent in the crimes carried out by the Pol Pot regime and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. This regime set

out to erase the country's cultural heritage, while carrying out a reign of terror and mass murder against the population.

The similarities between ISIS and the Khmer Rouge do not end with their barbaric assaults on culture and human life. In both cases, the preconditions for these atrocities had been created through the destruction of entire societies by US imperialism.

In Cambodia, a US bombing campaign dropped some 532,000 tons of explosives on the country in four years—more than three times the tonnage dropped on Japan during all of World War II. The resulting death toll is estimated as high as 600,000, while 2 million people out of a population of 7 million were made homeless and economic life was shattered.

ISIS and the current bloodshed across Syria and Iraq are the direct products of similar acts of sociocide on the part of US imperialism. In Iraq, the illegal US invasion of 2003, the subsequent occupation and the systematic destruction of what had been one of the most advanced health and social infrastructures in the Arab world claimed the lives of over 1 million Iraqis, while turning another 5 million into refugees. The divide-and-rule strategy pursued by the Pentagon stoked a sectarian civil war by deliberately manipulating tensions between Iraq's Shia and Sunni populations.

The ramifications of this policy have long since spilled across national borders, with increasingly catastrophic consequences, all driven by Washington's resort to militarism to advance its aim of hegemony over the energy-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia.

To this end, the US has been involved in wars for over 35 years, beginning with the CIA's orchestration of the war for regime-change against the Soviet-backed

government in Afghanistan, where it allied itself with Islamist forces, including Osama bin Laden and the other founders of Al Qaeda.

Nine months before the last US troops withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, Washington and its NATO allies launched another unprovoked war of aggression to topple the government of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and impose their own puppet regime over the oil-rich North African country. The destruction of the Libyan state and the murder of Gaddafi plunged the country into chaos and bloodshed that continues to this day. Islamist militias used as US proxies in the Libyan war, along with tons of captured Libyan weapons, were subsequently funneled—with the aid of the CIA—into the civil war in Syria, strengthening ISIS and helping create the conditions for it to overrun more than a third of Iraq.

In the name of the never-ending “war on terrorism,” Washington is prosecuting another military campaign in alliance with the Shia-based government in Baghdad against ISIS in the predominately Sunni regions of Iraq, while in Syria it is stepping up military operations in alliance with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Gulf monarchies, while attempting to find “moderate” Sunni Islamists it can utilize as proxies in the war to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The *New York Times* Tuesday published a lengthy article reflecting an internal debate within the Obama administration over whether to provide more direct US support to Ahrar al-Sham, a Sunni Islamist militia with multiple links to Al Qaeda. The group already receives extensive backing from key US allies Turkey and Qatar.

The horrific consequences of decades of US wars are now spilling into Europe, with the increasingly desperate flight of hundreds of thousands of refugees—in many cases at the cost of their own lives—from homelands that Washington has turned into killing fields.

Politically and morally, the US government and its top officials, starting with Bush and Obama, are totally responsible for all of the crimes, atrocities and human suffering resulting from the multiple wars of aggression they initiated.

None of them have been held to account. Representatives and defenders of an oligarchy of corporate billionaires, they are not, under the present

political setup, answerable to the American people, whose opposition to war they routinely defy.

The task of bringing these war criminals to justice and putting an end to the succession of wars and growing threat of a new world war lies with the working class. It must mobilize its independent strength in a mass international antiwar movement armed with a revolutionary socialist program for the overthrow of capitalism.



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