US air strike kills 12 Iraqi civilians

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US air strikes against Mosul killed at least 12 civilians on Monday, Reuters reported, citing eyewitnesses and medical officials in the northern Iraqi city.

The two attacks were carried out within 10 minutes of each other, apparently aimed at killing anyone who had come to the aid of those hit in the first strike. Pentagon officials reported that the intended targets were the houses of an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) commander and his son. In addition to the targeted houses, the bombing raid heavily damaged adjacent homes.

Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, fell to ISIS in 2014 after US-trained Iraqi security forces melted away without putting up any significant resistance.

The Pentagon's Central Command reported that US warplanes carried out 17 air strikes in Iraq on Monday, as well as eight in Syria. In addition to Mosul, they were directed at targets near Ramadi, Fallujah, Kisik and Qayyarah.

The civilian casualties in Mosul come just days after US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter issued a public apology for a US air strike that, according to Iraqi government reports, killed at least nine Iraqi government soldiers near the city of Fallujah last Friday. Others have put the death toll at over 20, with another 30 wounded.

A second such "friendly fire" incident was reported on Monday, with Iraqi military sources saying that a Canadian warplane was responsible for hitting another Iraqi army position near Fallujah on Sunday.

Much of the US air war has now been concentrated over the city of Ramadi, the capital of the predominantly Sunni Anbar province, which encompasses most of western Iraq, including its border with Syria. The Pentagon reported heavy air strikes there, with US warplanes dropping upwards of 140 separate bombs and missiles in and around Ramadi between Sunday and Monday.

These airstrikes are directed at supporting an Iraqi government offensive to retake the city, which is just 60 miles from the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. ISIS captured Ramadi last May.

An Iraqi military spokesman said that government forces had pushed into the center of Ramadi and was in the process of "purging residential areas."

Earlier, Iraqi forces dropped leaflets over the city urging residents to flee. Iraqi and US government officials have both warned of ISIS using civilians in Ramadi as "human shields," a charge which provides an advance alibi for civilian casualties inflicted in the siege of the city.

"It's a ferocious fight, it's premature to say how long it will take but we can say victory will be achieved in a few days," said Sabah al-Numani, spokesman for Iraq's counterterrorism unit. Military officials reported that dozens of ISIS fighters had been killed, but declined to provide any casualty figures for the government forces.

Pentagon officials have been pushing for the Iraqi military to retake the city since last summer, but Baghdad has repeatedly delayed the operation. Iraq's Defense Minister Khaled al-Obeidi said that the delays were designed to "avoid casualties among our forces and also civilian casualties."

Iraqi officials have also claimed that the operation has taken more time because the Shia-dominated Hashd al-Shaabi, or Popular Mobilization Unit paramilitary forces, have been left "on the fringes" of the assault on Ramadi.

Washington has pressed the Iraqi government to exclude these forces, many of which are loyal to Shia sectarian militias, for fear that their participation will only inflame Sunni grievances against the Shia-dominated central government that played a major role in ISIS being able to establish control in the first place.

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The Popular Mobilization Units played the predominant role in earlier campaigns to take the city of Tikrit and the oil-refining center of Baiji, where there were reports of widespread looting, killings and attacks on Sunni homes, businesses and mosques.

An indication that these militias have been active in the siege of Ramadi are reports that as many as 1,200 Sunni civilians fleeing to the south have been kidnapped after reaching the Razazah checkpoint leading to Karbala to the south.

"These kidnapping operations first began when the military operations by Iraqi forces against IS started two months ago, and have escalated gradually," Taha Abdel-Ghani, a member of Anbar's provincial council told the Saudi daily *Asharq al-Awsat*. Taha charged that the kidnappings were the work of armed factions belonging to the Popular Mobilization Units.

According to a recent report in *Newsweek* magazine, which cites military sources in Washington, these Shia militias have been integrated into the Iraqi army and still constitute the government's principal fighting force.

The security forces, the article states, "largely consist of Shiite fighters in league with murderous militias that have slaughtered innocent Sunnis after ousting ISIS militants from Tikrit and other battlegrounds in the past year."

The report quotes Derek Harvey, a retired Army colonel and intelligence officer who specialized in Iraq, as stating that sources in Iraq had told him that the Shiite militias are "very much involved" in the siege of Ramadi and that, while their fighters have put on Ministry of Interior uniforms, they are flying militia banners from their vehicles.

Harvey added that the Ministry of Interior itself is controlled by the Badr Brigade, a Shiite force which was heavily involved in death squad killings of Sunnis during the sectarian bloodbath that was provoked by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

An investigative report by Reuters published earlier this month, titled "Torture by Iraqi militias: the report Washington did not want you to see," reviewed decade-old documents prepared by the Pentagon on the crimes carried out by the Badr Brigade when it oversaw an unofficial Interior Ministry organization called the Special Investigations Directorate, which carried out illegal detentions, torture and death squad murders.

"The documents show how Washington, seeking to defeat Sunni jihadists and stabilize Iraq, has consistently overlooked excesses by Shiite militias sponsored by the Iraqi government," the Reuters report states. "The administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama have both worked with Badr and its powerful leader, Hadi al-Amiri, whom many Sunnis continue to accuse of human rights abuses."

It further concludes: "Washington's policy of expediency has achieved some of its short-term aims. But in allowing the Shi'ite militias to run amok against their Sunni foes, Washington has fueled the Shia-Sunni sectarian divide that is tearing Iraq apart."

Thus, the Obama administration's "war on ISIS" is only deepening the catastrophe inflicted upon Iraq beginning with the US invasion of March 2003. Its predatory goal, like that of the Bush administration before it, is to secure US hegemony over the Middle East and its vast energy resources. To that end, it is prepared to continue the slaughter that has already claimed over a million Iraqi lives.

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