

“Staggering” violence in Iraq: The legacy of US war and occupation

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Describing current levels of killing and mayhem in Iraq as “staggering” and “obscene,” two United Nations agencies released a report Tuesday that recorded at least 55,047 civilian casualties between January 1, 2014 and October 31, 2015. The total included at least 18,802 civilians killed and another 36,245 wounded.

The report added that over roughly the same period, a total of 3,206,736 civilians, including over 1 million school-age children, have been driven from their homes by the violence.

The UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Raad Al Hussein said the report failed to reflect the full human toll inflicted by the conflict in Iraq. The numbers reported killed or wounded, particularly in areas under ISIS control, undoubtedly fell well short of the real level of carnage. Moreover, many more had “died from lack of access to basic food, water or medical care,” he said.

The high commissioner added that the report “starkly illustrates what Iraqi refugees are attempting to escape when they flee to Europe and other regions. This is the horror they face in their homelands.”

The period dealt with in the report begins with the month the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seized the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah in the predominantly Sunni Anbar Province, subsequently overrunning fully one-third of Iraq’s territory. It stops short of the upsurge in violence over the past few months, including US-backed military campaigns to retake Ramadi as well as Banji and Sinjar, which undoubtedly saw a further spike in casualties.

The report deals at length with atrocities carried out by ISIS as well as attacks on civilians by Iraqi government security forces, along with Shia and Kurdish militias.

It is decidedly muted, however, about Washington’s responsibility, not only for civilian casualties from thousands of airstrikes, but more fundamentally in terms of the historic destruction wrought by the illegal US invasion of 2003 and the more than eight years of military occupation that followed.

As the report was issued, US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter told reporters in Paris that the Pentagon is preparing

to substantially escalate the US military presence in Iraq. “I expect the number of trainers to increase, and also the variety of the training they’re giving,” he said.

A US military spokesman in Baghdad on Wednesday said the number of new “trainers” would be “not thousands, hundreds.” They would be in addition to the 3,670 US troops the Pentagon says are now deployed in Iraq.

Much of the UN report deals with the grisly violence unleashed by ISIS against the Iraqi population, targeting in particular both current and former employees of the Iraqi government and security forces, as well as Shia Muslims and members of religious minorities, together with Sunni Muslims perceived as too “moderate.”

The report recounts a series of ISIS atrocities, including mass killings “in gruesome public spectacles, including by shooting, beheading, bulldozing, burning alive and throwing people off the top of buildings.” It documents sexual violence and enslavement of women and children by ISIS, including 3,500 from the Yazidi community, which was early on invoked by the Obama administration as a pretext for US intervention, but has since been largely forgotten by the US government and media.

It also cites “unlawful killings and abductions perpetrated by pro-Government forces” as well as their persecution of civilians forced by the fighting to flee their homes, particularly from predominantly Sunni areas. It reports that “some have experienced arbitrary arrest in raids by security forces and others have been forcibly expelled.”

In addition to Iraqi security forces, the report points to the abuse of civilians by both Shia militias and the Peshmerga, the forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

A report released Wednesday by Amnesty International further documents the systematic destruction of Sunni Arab homes by the Kurdish forces in northern Iraq, saying that their actions may constitute war crimes.

Backed by US airstrikes, the Kurdish forces have taken over areas in Nineveh, Kirkuk and Diyala provinces that were previously ethnically mixed. In an apparent attempt to incorporate these areas into Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdish

forces have launched what amounts to a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

The UN report includes accounts of large numbers of civilian casualties inflicted by airstrikes, while failing to attribute them to any party in the conflict and stating that its investigators have been unable to confirm the totals. The US military is responsible for the majority of airstrikes carried out in Iraq. While acknowledging, as of a week ago, dropping some 29,000 bombs and missiles on the country and claiming to have killed more than 6,400 ISIS fighters over the past three months alone, the Pentagon has, incredibly, acknowledged only 15 civilians killed.

The UN report tells a different story. Among last year's airstrikes listed in the report, some of the bloodiest include:

May 22-23—"... airstrikes hit al-Najjar, al-Rifai and Sahaa areas in western Mosul in Ninewa, allegedly killing 30 civilians and wounding 62 others, including women and children."

June 3—"... an explosion due to an airstrike in Kirkuk's Hawija district allegedly killed several ISIL fighters and civilians... A member of the Kirkuk Provincial Council was quoted by multiple local sources as stating that around 150 individuals, including women and children, were allegedly killed and wounded in the blast."

June 8—"... local sources reported that an airstrike in Mosul, Ninewa, caused 33 civilian casualties. The report alleged that several residential neighbourhoods in al-Zuhour district were hit, killing 20 civilians, including seven children and nine women, and wounding 13 others, mostly women."

June 11—"... an airstrike reportedly hit an ISIL target near a market in Hawija, Kirkuk. According to a source, 10 civilians were killed and wounded in the incident. Other reports mentioned more than 60 civilians killed and over 80 wounded."

July 1—"17 civilians, including four children and six women, were reportedly killed in an airstrike conducted in the al-Rifaie area of western Mosul, Ninewa. Eleven other civilians were reportedly wounded."

July 31—"... up to 40 civilians may have been killed and over 30 wounded when three houses allegedly sheltering IDPs was hit by an airstrike in Rutba, west of Ramadi, Anbar. Official sources confirmed the incident and the number of casualties, which included 18 women and 11 children (under 14 years old)."

August 13—"... a maternity and children's hospital in Nassaf village, south Fallujah, was hit by airstrikes reportedly carried out by ISF warplanes pursuing ISIL fighters. Sources confirmed the airstrikes destroyed the hospital and killed at least 22 individuals (including six women and eight children) and wounded 52 (including eight

women and 17 children)."

September 3—"... an airstrike hit a bridge in Jazeera al-Khaldiya, around 20 kilometres east of Ramadi, Anbar, killing 46 civilians and wounding 20... On the same day, another airstrike reportedly hit a residential area in eastern Ramadi, killing 28 civilians."

These murderous airstrikes are only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the responsibility of US imperialism for the slaughter outlined in the UN report. The current situation is the direct product of over 25 years of US war against Iraq and of Washington's interventions elsewhere in the region.

From the first Gulf War of 1991 through the 2003 invasion and subsequent military occupation of Iraq, US imperialism carried out the systematic destruction of what had been one of the most advanced healthcare and social infrastructures in the Arab world. The second war claimed the lives of over 1 million Iraqis, turning another 5 million into refugees, while 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.

ISIS itself is the direct product of US interventions in the region, emerging first under the US occupation and then growing in strength thanks to the wars for regime-change launched first in Libya and then in Syria, in which it and similar Salafist jihadi militias received weapons and funding from the CIA and Washington's closest regional allies, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

While the UN report asserts the necessity of holding accountable those responsible for "war crimes and crimes against humanity" in Iraq, it fails to indict the principal criminals, who comprise the leading figures in the last two US administrations, from Bush and Obama on down.



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