

US accused of war crimes in air strikes on Iraqi city of Mosul

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Amnesty International issued a report Tuesday charging the US-led coalition besieging Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, with war crimes involving the "disproportionate and indiscriminate" bombing of residential areas that has slaughtered hundreds of civilian men, women and children.

The report by the human rights group, which chronicles bloody incidents that took place in eastern Mosul during the end of 2016 and the beginning of this year, has been released amid mounting evidence that the Pentagon carried out one of its worst atrocities in decades in the March 17 bombing of the Jadida neighborhood in the densely populated western sector of the city.

While earlier reports spoke of some 160 dead being pulled from the rubble left by the US airstrikes in Mosul's Jadida district, on Monday the Iraqi Civil Defense Department released a report saying that 531 bodies have been recovered thus far.

"We probably had a role in those casualties," Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, the top US commander in Iraq and Syria, acknowledged to Pentagon reporters Tuesday. At the same time, however, Townsend suggested that the "the enemy had a hand in this," alleging that there was no reason for civilians to have congregated inside buildings targeted by US warplanes other than their being exploited as "human shields."

This attempted alibi is contradicted by multiple reports from survivors of the bombing raid, who said that entire families, terrorized by US bombs as well as mortar attacks by Iraqi government forces, had huddled in basements of homes in the neighborhood. Indeed, before launching the offensive last fall, the US-backed Iraqi military dropped leaflets on Mosul, a city of 1.8 million people, urging residents to "shelter in place" rather than flee to safety.

The US and Iraqi commanders on the ground apparently called in the air strikes to kill small numbers of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) snipers located on rooftops, in the process reducing entire city blocks to rubble.

General Townsend dismissed Washington's responsibility for the carnage. "If the US did this," said Townsend, it was

an "unintentional accident of war." Chillingly, he added that civilian casualties in western Mosul are "fairly predictable," given its crowded residential neighborhoods and the intense street fighting. In other words, many more atrocities like that of March 17 are still to come.

Iraqi vice president Osama al-Nujaifi, who is from Mosul and the most senior Sunni official in the country, described the US bombing as a "humanitarian catastrophe" that had resulted in the "martyrdom of hundreds of civilians." He called for an emergency session of the Iraqi parliament along with an official investigation of the incident. He charged that the mass civilian casualties were the result of changed rules of engagement on the part of the US-led "coalition" that have minimized any attempt to protect the lives of unarmed men, women and children trapped in Mosul.

This same charge was leveled by Iraqi officers cited by the *New York Times* Tuesday. According to the *Times*, the officers report that "the American-led coalition has been quicker to strike urban targets from the air with less time to weigh the risks for civilians. They say the change reflects a renewed push by the American military under the Trump administration to speed up the battle for Mosul."

In a report from the scene of the devastation, the *Times* described "a panorama of destruction in the neighborhood of Jadida so vast one resident compared the destruction to that of Hiroshima, Japan, where the United States dropped an atomic bomb in World War II. There was a charred arm, wrapped in a piece of red fabric, poking from the rubble; rescue workers in red jump suits who wore face masks to avoid the stench, some with rifles slung over their shoulders, searched the wreckage for bodies."

The newspaper reported that "One of the survivors, Omar Adnan, stood near his destroyed home on Sunday and held up a white sheet of paper with 27 names of his extended family members, either dead or missing, written in blue ink."

The Amnesty International report released Tuesday indicates that the atrocity in Jadida is only the bloodiest in a series of attacks carried out by US forces resulting in mass

civilian casualties.

“Evidence gathered on the ground in East Mosul points to an alarming pattern of US-led coalition airstrikes which have destroyed whole houses with entire families inside,” reports Amnesty’s senior crisis response adviser Donatella Rovera following field investigations in the war-ravaged city.

“The high civilian toll suggests that coalition forces leading the offensive in Mosul have failed to take adequate precautions to prevent civilian deaths, in flagrant violation of international humanitarian law.”

The Amnesty report quoted Wa’ad Ahmad al-Tai, a resident of the al-Zahra neighborhood of East Mosul, who said he and his family were among those who had followed the advice of the US-backed Iraqi government to stay in their homes rather than flee the siege.

He recounted how his extended family had sought shelter in the two-story home of his brother: “We were all huddled in one room at the back of the house, 18 of us, three families. But when the house next door was bombed, it collapsed on us, precisely over the room we were sheltering in. My son Yusef, nine, and my daughter Shahad, three, were killed, together with my brother Mahmoud, his wife Manaya and their nine-year-old son Aws, and my niece Hanan. She was cradling her five-month-old daughter, who survived, thank God.”

Hind Amir Ahmad, a 23-year-old woman who lost 11 relatives, recounted a similar attack in eastern Mosul that took place on December 13, 2016: “We were sleeping when the house literally collapsed on us. It was a miracle none of us was killed. We ran to my uncle’s house nearby. At about 2 p.m. that house too was bombed and collapsed on us ... almost everyone in the house was killed—11 people. My cousin, two aunts and I were the only ones who survived. Everyone else died. It took us six days to find only pieces of their bodies, which we buried in a mass grave in a field nearby. ... I don’t know why we were bombed. All I know is that I have lost everyone who was dearest to me.”

The Amnesty report also debunked the Pentagon’s attempt to justify the killing of Iraqi civilians with claims that ISIS is using the population as “human shields.” Even if the Islamist fighters showed indifference to human life, this did not justify the indiscriminate air strikes launched by US warplanes, the human rights group said. It also pointed out that the US-backed Iraqi military is setting up its own firing positions in and around civilian homes, exposing them to return fire from ISIS forces.

As of March 21, the monitoring group Airwars had recorded over 1,000 “civilian casualty events” resulting from airstrikes by the US and its allies in both Iraq and Syria. The number of incidents has risen sharply in the course of the first three months of this year with the siege of

Mosul and the preparations for a similar bloodbath in the ISIS-held Syrian city of Raqqa.

The group pointed out that the US air strikes have far eclipsed those being conducted by Russia, which intervened in Syria in support of the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Yet the same US and Western media, which waged an intense propaganda campaign over civilian casualties caused by Russian air strikes against Al Qaeda positions in the Syrian city of Aleppo, has proven itself largely indifferent to the killing of Iraqi men, women and children in Mosul.

Nor for that matter have the changed “rules of engagement” enacted by the Pentagon under the Trump administration elicited any protest from its ostensible political opponents in the Democratic Party. This is because, as the Amnesty report documents, the carnage in Mosul was already well under way before Barack Obama left the White House.

The US escalation in Iraq and Syria enjoys bipartisan support. Launched under the pretense of a campaign against ISIS, which is itself the direct product of the US invasion and destruction of Iraq, followed by the proxy wars for regime change in Libya and Syria, the aim of the ever growing American intervention is to assert US imperialist hegemony over the entire oil-rich Middle East.

The US pursuit of this geostrategic aim has already cost millions of lives over the past quarter century. Its aggressive renewal has been launched in preparation for far more dangerous confrontations with Washington’s chief global rivals, China and Russia.



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