

Deaths from US bombings triple in Syria, Iraq

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A report by the British monitoring group Airwars has found that the death toll from US air strikes in Iraq and Syria nearly quadrupled in the month of March as compared to the last full month before Donald Trump entered the White House. Reported civilian deaths jumped from 465 in December 2016 to 1,754 in March 2017, a rise of 277 percent.

The report was issued in the midst of the media hysteria over fabricated charges of nerve gas attacks by the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, the pretext for last week's missile strikes ordered by President Trump. It demonstrates that American bombing has killed far more innocent civilians in Iraq, including children, than reportedly died in last week's alleged chemical attack in Syria. For that very reason, the study has gone virtually without mention in the American media.

The Airwars organization, which tabulates deaths due to air strikes in the Iraq-Syria war zone and evaluates the strength of the evidence supporting the reports, found that more civilians were reported killed during the first three months of 2017, a total of 2,826, than in all of 2016. The increases actually began in the fall of 2016, when the Iraqi Army and its US military "advisers" began their onslaught on the city of Mosul, occupied by the Sunni fundamentalist group ISIS for the past two-and-a-half years.

Amnesty International has investigated a series of mass killings due to US air strikes in the eastern half of Mosul, which was reconquered during the first phase of the assault, from October through December 2016. A report published last week found "an alarming pattern of US-led coalition air strikes which have destroyed whole houses with entire families inside."

The group's senior investigator in Mosul, Donatella Rovera, said, "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." She cited particularly the Iraqi authorities advising civilians to stay in their homes instead of fleeing, following by bombing raids that targeted homes known to be fully occupied.

Even worse is the situation in western Mosul, where the second stage of the US-Iraqi offensive began earlier this year. This comprises the older core of the city of two million, the most densely populated area, where air strikes have been routinely called in to destroy apartment buildings with snipers on their rooftops, in the process killing most of the occupants of the floors below. One such US strike on March 17 killed as many as 300 people.

Three times as many innocent people were killed by US bombs on March 17 as the death toll of the massively publicized alleged Syrian chemical weapons attack on the town of Khan Sheikhoun, the pretext for the US missile strikes on a Syrian airbase ordered by President Trump. The total civilian death toll from US bombing during March is 20 times as great.

But there has been almost no mention of the US bombing atrocities in the American media. Certainly nothing comparable to the nonstop propaganda barrage that provided political cover for the Trump-ordered barrage of Tomahawk cruise missiles against Syria.

None of the Democratic politicians who rushed to hail Trump's first major action as US "commander-in-chief," from Charles Schumer to Nancy Pelosi to Elizabeth Warren, have made any objections to the ongoing massacre of civilians in Mosul.

Nor did the media advocates of "human rights" imperialism, like the trio of armchair warrior-pundits for the *New York Times*—Nicholas Kristof, Roger Cohen and Thomas Friedman—spend so much as a

column-inch on condemning the bloodbath in Mosul, or any of the other mass killings carried out by American military forces. Their sole concern is to demonize those governments and forces targeted by the CIA and Pentagon, and thus make American imperialist intervention more saleable to their upper-middle-class audience.

One major obstacle for the media campaign over the alleged Syrian nerve gas attack on Khan Sheikhoun has been the complete implausibility of the charges from the standpoint of motive. Assad heads a ruthless regime and is responsible for many crimes against his own people. But there was simply no reason to engage in such an attack under conditions where his forces have regained control of all of Syria's major cities, and where top Trump administration officials had just conceded that Assad was likely to survive the civil war and that the US goal in Syria was to destroy ISIS, not to overthrow the Syrian leader.

There is no such difficulty in determining a motive for the mounting death toll from US bombs and missiles in Iraq and Syria. It is an indispensable part of the drive by American imperialism to maintain its dominant position in the Middle East as a whole, an effort that has now cost the lives of more than one million people, and plunged Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia and other countries into bloody chaos.

The escalating bloodbath represents both a continuation of the policies of the Obama administration and an intensification of its worst features. By one calculation, carried out by Micah Zenko of the Council on Foreign Affairs, drone missile strikes have tripled in frequency since Trump entered the White House, from an average of one every 5.4 days to one every 1.8 days.

The rules of engagement that prescribe the terms for US bombings and missile strikes have been significantly loosened in Yemen and Somalia, in both cases by executive actions of President Trump. At least one mass killing, of 30 people in Yemen, immediately followed the change, and hundreds of US Special Forces operatives have now been deployed in Somalia in a policy change that was initiated by the Pentagon under Obama and confirmed under Trump.

For the much larger US forces engaged in Iraq and Syria, the Trump administration is in the final stages of reviewing the rules of engagement with an eye to

relaxing them or abolishing them altogether. Already, decision-making has been pushed down the chain of command so that field officers, not headquarters, are calling in air strikes. The soaring death toll of the past several months will skyrocket even further as the Pentagon carries out Trump's mandate to "take the gloves off."

The Pentagon began this week an official investigation into the March 17 mass killing in Mosul and several other catastrophes brought about by US bombing. Pentagon spokesman Col. Joseph Scrocca conceded that these events "have a negative impact on our image at least throughout the region and the world." But he suggested that "that's exactly what ISIS is trying to target right now." In other words, those who expose the crimes of American imperialism are doing the work of the terrorists!

The reports by Airwars and Amnesty International underscore the completely criminal character of US foreign policy in the Middle East. They expose all those involved in the anti-Assad and anti-Russian hysteria as propagandists for imperialism.



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