

Washington levels new allegations against Syria on eve of Geneva talks

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Ahead of the commencement of the sixth round of peace talks in Geneva Tuesday, the US State Department accused the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad in a Monday afternoon press conference of burning the bodies of thousands of political opponents in a crematorium at the Sednaya prison near Damascus.

Presenting satellite images of the facility, acting Assistant Secretary of state Stuart Jones denounced Assad for “sinking to a new level of depravity.” He claimed that up to 50 people were being hanged at the prison every day and that the crematorium had been constructed to remove the need to bury bodies in mass graves.

Even the United Nations special Syria envoy, Staffan de Mistura, was compelled to acknowledge Tuesday that the body could not independently confirm the State Department’s unsubstantiated allegations.

The US moved swiftly to implement new sanctions on Syria, citing attacks on civilians to justify the banning of doing business with five individuals and five Syrian companies. This followed three weeks after the Treasury Department unveiled broader sanctions against 271 individuals April 24, accusing them of involvement in the alleged chemical weapons attack in Khan Sheikhoun April 4. The brutal US sanctions regime in place since 2011 has in fact made it increasingly impossible for aid organizations to provide for the desperate civilian population.

A Syrian government statement dismissed the US allegations as a “Hollywood plot.” “U.S. administrations continue fabricating lies and allegations to justify their aggressive and interventionist policies in other sovereign countries,” the Syrian foreign ministry stated. “These allegations are totally untrue and are only fabrications by the imagination of this administration and its agents.”

Indeed, since the outbreak of the war for regime change which it instigated in 2011, Washington has time and again seized upon fabricated reports of chemical weapons attacks, such as the 2013 incident in Gouta or last month’s unverified claims about the use of sarin gas, to justify an escalation of the conflict. Within little more than 48 hours of the first lurid media headlines accusing the Assad regime, without any evidence, of deploying sarin in Khan Sheikhoun, Trump ordered the launching of 59 cruise missiles on a Syrian air base, killing nine civilians and 15 people in total in the process.

The atrocities committed by the Assad regime have been well documented. In February, an Amnesty International report detailed how between 5,000 and 13,000 prisoners had been executed at the Sednaya facility since the outbreak of the conflict. But such brutality is hardly unique to the Assad regime in the Syrian conflict, which has also seen the deliberate targeting and killing of civilians by the US-backed so-called rebels.

However, the crimes of the Assad regime pale in comparison to those of US imperialism, which is least in a position to lecture anyone about human rights. The Syrian conflict, which Washington fomented through the CIA and other covert operations, has claimed the lives of close to half a million people and forced millions more from their homes. The destruction of the country is only one episode in a long series of brutal US-led military interventions throughout the Middle East over the past quarter century, which have included the devastation of Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen. Taken together, the US and its allies are responsible for the deaths of millions of people.

Just days before the latest allegation against Assad, Airwars, an independent monitoring group, released

estimates showing that over 13,000 civilians have been killed in Syria and Iraq since the US-led coalition began its air war ostensibly targeting ISIS in the fall of 2014.

On Tuesday, both the Assad government and rebel activists blamed the deaths of at least 40 civilians and the injuring of scores more in the eastern town of al-Bukamal in a US-led coalition air strike. Rebels reported that at least 11 children were among the dead. Predictably, the US military denied responsibility for the incident.

Washington's outrage at civilian casualties has been highly selective. While Trump demonized Assad as a monster after the alleged chemical weapons attack, which reports said claimed the lives of 80 people, there was virtual silence from the Trump administration a week later when a rebel suicide bombing killed over 120 civilians being transported by bus through areas controlled by US-backed Islamists.

Jones indicated the real target of the latest US claims of atrocities by the Assad regime when he declared Monday, "These atrocities have been carried out seemingly with the unconditional support from Russia and Iran."

The Trump administration, like its predecessor, has no interest in bringing the bloodbath in Syria to an end, but is prepared to recklessly escalate the conflict so as to secure Washington's geostrategic domination over one of the world's most energy-rich regions. In recent months, Trump has doubled the number of US troops operating in Syria and loosened the rules of engagement for US aircraft, resulting in a sharp rise in civilian casualties.

The escalation is a desperate attempt to offset the debacle confronting the US-backed Islamist proxies, which were driven from Aleppo late last year and now no longer control any major urban area. As the talks got under way in Geneva, reports emerged of pro-Assad forces making advances in eastern Damascus and being on the verge of bringing the entire city under its control for the first time since the conflict broke out.

The escalation of the Syria conflict directly poses the danger of a wider war erupting that would draw in regional and global powers. In an indication of the mounting tensions in the region, Israeli housing minister Yoav Gallant, a former Israeli Defence Forces commander, seized on the latest US allegations against

Assad to call for the Syrian president's assassination. Likening Assad's assassination to cutting off the tail of a snake, he added that afterwards, "We can focus on the head, which is in Teheran."

Washington is yet to explicitly endorse the Astana ceasefire agreement brokered earlier this month, which implemented a halt in fighting in four areas across the country: in the south, in Homs and Hama provinces, and in the northwestern Idlib province.

The *Financial Times* reported this week that the framework established by the de-escalation zones is increasingly being viewed by the powers involved in Syria as a mechanism for partitioning the country as each actor moves to strengthen its own position. The newspaper pointed to the proposal for a buffer zone in the south near the Jordanian border, noting that it could become the base for a push by US proxies to cut off Iran's access route through eastern Syria to Lebanon. On the other hand, pro-government and Iranian-backed forces hope to prevent US proxies from taking ISIS territory around Deir ez-zor in order to strengthen Iranian supply lines. "The situation in Syria after Astana is not the same as it was before," a diplomat told the FT. "Whether the Astana deal becomes a map to partition or power sharing, the race now is to get the biggest share."

In a related development that points to the ongoing danger of the major powers being dragged further into the conflict, Britain's *Daily Telegraph* reported Monday that pro-Assad troops are advancing on a military base close to the Iraqi border used by British and US secret service personnel.



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