

US-backed Iraqi forces carry out “annihilation tactics” in Mosul

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30 May 2017

Secretary of Defense James Mattis has again declared, during a lengthy interview with CBS News on Sunday, that the US-led campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has shifted from “attrition tactics” to “annihilation tactics.”

Mattis implied these “tactics” included the extrajudicial execution of wounded or captured people suspected of being ISIS militants—a flagrant war crime under international law. The former marine general, who directed the murderous US military assaults against Iraqi insurgents in the city of Fallujah in 2004, told CBS: “Our intention is that the foreign fighters do not survive to return home to North Africa, to Europe, to America, to Asia, to Africa. We’re not going to allow them to do so.”

The current focus of the US-directed war on ISIS is the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, which once had a population of over 1.6 million. After months of relentless air strikes and bloody street-to-street fighting, the Iraqi government claims that the remaining ISIS fighters are trapped in the compact and densely-populated suburbs of Mosul’s west, known as the “Old City.” What is left of the ISIS leadership is believed to be holed up in the 900-year old Great Mosque of al-Nuri, where ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed a “caliphate” three years ago.

In October 2016, a massive force of Iraqi troops, Kurdish peshmerga militias and Shiite militias began the offensive to retake Mosul. The assault has been supported from the air by jet fighter-bombers and helicopter gunships provided by the US, Australia, Britain, Canada and France. Iraqi ground forces are being accompanied into battle by special forces personnel from the same countries. Iraqi military commanders have boasted they will complete the recapture of Mosul over the coming two weeks.

Earlier this month, Iraqi commanders claimed that some 16,000 ISIS fighters had been killed in the Mosul area since October. When the offensive began, the number of ISIS fighters in the city was generally estimated, by both US and Iraqi government sources, at around 5,000, and at the most, 10,000.

How many of the purported ISIS dead were in fact non-combatants may never be known. What is known, however, is that all males from Mosul older than 14 have been interrogated by government forces as potential ISIS fighters. An unknown number have not survived the process.

In now widely published images, taken between October and December 2016, photographer Ali Arkady captured, in photo and film, some of the horrific torture inflicted during interrogations. According to a March report by Human Rights Watch, some 1,269 people, detained during the earlier stages of the fighting, were being held in “horrendous” and “degrading” conditions in makeshift prison camps. Some 700 others had been transferred to prisons in Baghdad.

Other sources have partially documented atrocities committed by government forces. In April, the IRIN news agency reported examples of apparent extrajudicial killings and the mutilation of the bodies of alleged ISIS fighters. IRIN photojournalists recorded bodies dumped in ravines and corpses hanging from telephone poles. During interviews, Iraqi officers and soldiers casually indicated that prisoners were executed after being interrogated.

The war crimes committed by Iraqi forces have taken place with the undoubted knowledge and complicity of US and allied advisors on the ground, and their governments. US imperialism bears ultimate responsibility for the carnage that has already taken place and the slaughter being prepared during the final

stages of the battle for Mosul.

The city's civilian population has suffered unspeakable horrors during the past three years. Hundreds of thousands fled Mosul when it was captured by ISIS. Hundreds of thousands more have fled since the government offensive began last October. Thousands of homes and buildings in "liberated" suburbs, as well in surrounding towns and villages, have been destroyed or damaged by the fighting.

According to recent figures, released by the provincial government, some 670,000 people are living in overcrowded refugee camps, while another 600,000 have found refuge with relatives or in rented accommodation elsewhere in Iraq.

Some 200,000 people are believed to be trapped in the ISIS-held Old City. They will pay the greatest price for the "annihilation tactics" of the US-directed assault.

In his CBS interview, Mattis dismissed concern that the onslaught would cause the deaths of non-combatant men, women and children. "Civilian casualties are a fact of life in this sort of situation," he asserted. "We do everything humanly possible, *consistent with military necessity*, taking many chances, to avoid civilian casualties at all costs" [emphasis added].

In other words, the military necessity to "annihilate" ISIS fighters will take precedence.

A US military investigation has belatedly conceded that an American air strike on March 17 caused the deaths of hundreds of people in Mosul. The US admitted to only 105 deaths. On-the-ground sources, independent of the Pentagon, put the number slaughtered at well over 300, overwhelmingly women and children.

The American investigators placed sole blame on ISIS, alleging that the building bombed by the US aircraft, purportedly to kill several snipers, was either rigged with explosives or housing them. Residents in the area, which is now under government control, angrily rejected this claim in comments to Associated Press. Ahmed Abdul Karim, whose brother was among those killed, told AP: "There were no explosives in the house, only families. There were children in the basement, and in the garden was where the women were."

US colonel Joseph Scrocca admitted to AP that coalition aircraft dropped some 81 bombs on western Mosul on March 17, including 12 in the neighbourhood

where the massacre took place.

The monitoring organisation AirWars released data last week showing a sharp spike in reported civilian deaths, which were likely caused by coalition air strikes in Iraq and Syria during the first three months of 2017. It estimates that at least 1,793 people were killed in Mosul alone. And the bombing only intensified in April and May.

Ahead of the final push into the Old City, the US-led coalition has sought to deflect all responsibility for civilian casualties onto ISIS by dropping leaflets over the area, advising people to flee. The claim will now be made that those civilians who do not leave, for whatever reason, are either being used as unwilling "human shields" by ISIS, or are Islamist diehards who intend to resist to the end.

Alongside the operations in Mosul, Shiite militias, loyal to the parties that dominate the Iraqi government, are claiming to have fully surrounded the ISIS-held city of Tal Afar and cut off all escape routes from Iraq into Syria.

Tal Afar will witness the next application of the "annihilation tactics" dictated by US imperialism, as part of its ruthless efforts to maintain dominance over the Middle East.



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