

# US air strike kills scores of civilians in Syria

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A US air strike early Monday killed dozens of civilians near the Euphrates River town of Mayadin in Syria's eastern Deir al-Zour province.

The US bombs struck a prison run by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) where civilians deemed opponents of ISIS were being held.

"The airstrikes on that prison have resulted in dozens of civilian casualties and the killing of two prison guards," reported *Deirezzor24*, a news site run by local activists. The site put the civilian death toll at 70.

"The prison has been turned into dust and several houses nearby it sustained extensive damages due to the violent strikes, which pushed the residents in that area to leave for elsewhere," the report added.

A spokesman for the US military, Col. Ryan Dillon, admitted that US warplanes had conducted airstrikes in the area, but insisted that the attack had been "meticulously planned," and that the US commanders "always take into account human suffering and any type of casualties in our planning."

In reality, the US air war in both Iraq and Syria has become ever bloodier, claiming record numbers of civilian lives, as Washington steadily escalates its latest intervention in the Middle East.

Airwars, a monitoring group that tracks reports of civilian deaths resulting from air strikes by the so-called US-led "coalition" in both Iraq and Syria, has placed the number at over 4,000 at a minimum, more than 10 times the toll to which the Pentagon has admitted.

Meanwhile, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), which is opposed to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad, has recorded 1,953 civilians killed by US airstrikes in Syria alone, including 456 children and 333 women.

The pace of the killing has steadily escalated as the US has sent more troops into the region, with over 5,000 now deployed in Syria, and as the US defense secretary, recently retired Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis, has urged the Pentagon to pursue "annihilation tactics."

Earlier this month, the head of the United Nations'

independent Commission of Inquiry into the Syrian civil war declared that the US air war had resulted in a "staggering loss of civilian life."

Within this context of mass slaughter inflicted by US bombs and missiles, the Trump White House's allegations Monday that the Assad government is preparing a "chemical weapons attack" and its threat of US retaliation in the name of preventing the "mass murder of civilians, including innocent children," are nothing short of obscene.

It has become increasingly clear that the so-called anti-ISIS campaign and the allegations of abuses by the Assad regime both serve merely as pretexts for a major US escalation in Syria. This escalation is aimed, on the one hand, at consolidating US imperialism's grip over the oil-rich Middle East, and, on the other, at preparing for war against the country seen as the principal regional obstacle to this objective, Iran, Syria's closest ally.

The area where the US air strike inflicted mass civilian casualties on Monday is increasingly becoming the focus of these preparations. Washington's aim is to utilize its proxy forces in the north, dominated by the Kurdish fighters of the YPG, to take the city of Raqqa, which was overrun by ISIS in 2014 and declared the Islamist militia's "capital," and to continue pressing southeast down the Euphrates River into Deir al-Zour province.

Meanwhile, US special forces troops have set up a desert outpost in al-Tanf, near both the Iraqi and Jordanian borders, to train Sunni proxy forces with the aim of directing them north up the Euphrates River valley. The aim of this operation is to secure a stranglehold over Syria's eastern border with Iraq and thereby cut off Iran's land route into the country and beyond it to Lebanon and the Mediterranean.

To this end, American forces have engaged in repeated attacks on militias aligned with the Syrian government in the area and have downed two Iranian drones. Recently, the Pentagon moved a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) into southern Syria for the first time. The truck-mounted multiple rocket launcher is capable of

hitting targets nearly 200 miles away, which would include the Syrian capital of Damascus.

While advancing precipitously toward a military confrontation with Iran through its Syrian intervention, Washington's escalation of the six-year-old war for regime change also threatens to draw other regional powers deeper into the conflict, laying the groundwork for a major intensification of the bloodletting.

Turkey, which formally ended its "Operation Euphrates Shield" military intervention in northern Syria at the end of March, is preparing to launch another major incursion into the northwestern province of Idlib, one of the last strongholds of Islamist militias linked to Al Qaeda. In preparation, it began sending convoys of tanks, artillery and armored vehicles across the border into northern Aleppo province last week.

The Turkish daily *Yeni ?afak* ("New Dawn"), which is closely aligned with the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdo?an, reported that Turkish forces are preparing to seize control of an 85-km long and 35-km deep stretch of Idlib along the Turkish border. Ankara is reportedly preparing to field a force of 1,500 to 2,000 Turkish-trained Sunni Islamist militiamen. The objective of the intervention is to disrupt the consolidation of a Kurdish autonomous zone in the border area.

The Turkish intervention comes in the midst of growing antagonisms between Ankara and Washington over the Pentagon's direct arming of the YPG and its fielding of large numbers of US special forces "advisors" alongside the Syrian Kurdish militia.

These tensions have no doubt been exacerbated by remarks made by General Mattis on Tuesday in which the Pentagon chief walked back earlier reports that the US military would take back arms it had given to the YPG once the siege of Raqqa had been completed.

Mattis said that, rather than taking back the arms given to the YPG, "We'll be recovering them during the battle, repairing them, when they don't need certain things any more they'll replace those with some things they do need, that sort of thing." Asked what arms the YPG would be given after the conquest of Raqqa, Mattis replied: "We'll see. It depends what the next mission is. It's not like the fight's over when Raqqa is over." In other words, Washington intends to continue using the Kurdish militia as a proxy force in its drive to carve out a US-controlled zone in Syria, further the war for regime change and prepare for a confrontation with Iran.

Speaking to a rally of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) Sunday, Erdo?an sharply

denounced the US arming of the Syrian Kurds, charging that Washington's action violated the NATO treaty and suggesting that terms of Turkey's membership in the US-led alliance should be "revised."

"We will be together in NATO, and you will act together with terrorist groups. What kind of business is this?" he said.

"Those who think that they can fool Turkey by saying that they will get those weapons back will eventually understand the vital mistake they made, but it will be too late. We will call to account the real owners of those weapons for every drop of blood they shed with those weapons," Erdo?an added.

Meanwhile, Israel has also intervened more aggressively in the Syrian conflict, repeatedly striking Syrian government military positions allegedly in response to stray shells crossing the border into the Israeli-occupied section of Syria's Golan Heights.

"Our policy is clear: We will not tolerate any spillover or trickle whatsoever — neither mortars nor rockets, from any front," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told his Cabinet on Sunday. "We will respond strongly to any attack on our territory or our citizens." Israel seized the Golan Heights in the Six Day War of 1967 and illegally annexed two-thirds of the territory in 1981.

Israel's supposed retaliation against stray shellfire was timed to coincide with a ground attack by the al-Nusra Front, the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda, against Syrian government positions in the area. Israel's support for these elements against Damascus has long been known. In an article earlier this month, the *Wall Street Journal* reported "Israel has been regularly supplying Syrian rebels near its border with cash as well as food, fuel and medical supplies for years."



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