

Syria charges Washington with war crimes in siege of Raqqa

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In the past several days, US air strikes have claimed the lives of scores of Syrian civilians, including women and children, as the Pentagon and its proxy ground forces escalate the two-month-old siege of the ISIS-controlled city of Raqqa.

In the latest bombing of Raqqa nearly 50 civilians were killed or wounded, according to a monitoring group opposed to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, based in Britain, reported Tuesday that 13 civilians, including women and children, were killed over the previous 24-hour period. At least 30 more were wounded.

The US military acknowledged on Tuesday that its warplanes had carried out “35 strikes consisting of 42 engagements” against Raqqa over the previous 24 hours.

The city has been targeted relentlessly by both US warplanes and artillery, and missiles supplied by the Pentagon to the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, the American proxy force dominated by the YPG Syrian Kurdish militia.

US imperialism is reprising in Raqqa the same kind of devastation and slaughter inflicted on the Iraqi city of Mosul, where as many as 40,000 civilians are believed to have been killed, while over 1 million Iraqis were driven from their homes. In both cities, the Pentagon is executing the tactics of “annihilation” enunciated by James “Mad Dog” Mattis, the recently retired Marine General serving as the Trump administration’s defense secretary.

This strategy was reiterated by Brett McGurk, US special envoy for the US-led anti-ISIS “coalition,” who said on Sunday that some 2,000 ISIS fighters remaining in the city “most likely will die in Raqqa.” He said nothing as to the fate of as many as 50,000 civilians the

UN believes are trapped there with them. In addition to the continuous airstrikes and shelling, this population is facing the growing threat of starvation and lack of access to water, medical care and other necessities.

Given that the Kurdish proxy forces that the US can draw upon to take Raqqa are far smaller in number and less well armed than the Iraqi security forces and allied militias employed in the siege of Mosul, the Syrian offensive is even more dependent upon US air power and artillery.

Moreover, US ground forces are even more heavily involved in the siege of Raqqa than they were in Mosul, according to the Pentagon’s own admission.

Colonel Ryan Dillon, spokesman for the US military operation in Iraq and Syria, said that US military “advisers” were operating inside Raqqa, while claiming that there were “not hundreds” of these special operations troops in the city.

The military spokesman said the role of these troops was to “advise, assist and accompany” the Kurdish proxy forces. “They are much more exposed to enemy contact than those in Iraq,” he added.

US Marines, meanwhile, are on the ground in Syria manning artillery units that are raining death and destruction on the city from the surrounding areas.

While the previously approved number of US special forces troops deployed to Syria amounted to 500, the Pentagon will not disclose how many soldiers and Marines are currently on the ground there. The real number is believed to have risen as high as 2,000 after the Trump White House announced that military commanders would be given full authority to determine troop levels and rules of engagement.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon’s 2018 budget includes \$500 million for training and arming Syrian proxy forces.

The civilian casualties reported on Tuesday are only the latest inflicted by the US siege, whose death toll already numbers in the many hundreds if not thousands.

On Saturday, the deputy head of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent reported that US warplanes attacked a hospital in Raqqa with phosphorous bombs, killing at least 30 civilians. The day before, the Syrian state media reported an airstrike that claimed the lives of a woman and seven children.

The Red Crescent official, Dina al-Assad, reported that the warplanes attacking the hospital carried out 20 combat sorties, targeting its power generators, vehicles and wards, leaving much of the facility in rubble.

Both the targeting of a hospital and the use of phosphorous munitions are war crimes. These chemical weapons, which burn flesh to the bone and reignite inside wounds, are banned under the Geneva Conventions for use in civilian-populated areas. The Pentagon previously admitted in June to having dropped phosphorous bombs on Raqqa, claiming it was using them to mark targets.

In an appeal to the United Nations, the Syrian government denounced this US war crime.

“The systematic bombing of residential areas, houses of civilians, the destruction of the Raqqa state hospital and the use of banned white phosphorus by the aircraft of the international coalition are a blatant violation of international law and is among a number of coalition’s crimes against the innocent [civilians] in the provinces and cities of Syria,” the Syrian Foreign Ministry said in a statement Sunday.

Noting that the US military is operating in Syria “outside the framework of the UN and without the permission from the Syrian government,” the ministry called upon the United Nations to uphold international law by ordering Washington and its “coalition” out of the country. Given the US veto on the UN Security Council and the habitual subservience of the UN to US imperialist interests, there is no prospect for such an intervention.

US imperialism has no intention of leaving Syria. Under the cover of the so-called campaign against ISIS—a Sunni Islamist militia which is itself the byproduct of the US wars and regime change operations in Iraq, Libya and Syria—the Pentagon is setting up a string of bases and attempting to carve out a zone of control from which it can pursue its broader

aims in the region. These include, in the first instance, the preparation of war against Iran, which is seen by Washington as an obstacle to the drive for US hegemony over the Middle East.

The threat that the US intervention will provoke a wider war was posed starkly with the reported American airstrike Monday morning on a Shia militia unit deployed on the Iraq-Syria border. The militia, known as the Seyid Suheda, belongs to Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units, a predominantly Shia and Iranian-backed force that Baghdad has incorporated into its security forces. The militia reported that the bombing killed 35 of its fighters and wounded another 25. “We guarantee the attack will not go unpunished, and we call upon all Islamic resistance units in Iraq to consider an appropriate response to such a criminal act,” the group said in a statement.

The militia had been preparing to participate in an operation to take Tal Afar, one of the last ISIS strongholds in northwestern Iraq. The area is across the border from the Syrian city of Al-Hasaka, where the Pentagon has set up a base for US special forces troops.



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