

US air strike slaughters over 40 civilians in Syria

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An air strike launched by the United States on the ISIS stronghold of Raqqa in northeastern Syria Monday claimed the lives of 42 civilians, 19 of whom were children. It is the bloodiest incident thus far in a ramped-up series of strikes over the past eight days that have killed at least 167 civilians, including 59 children.

The air assault on the Syrian city is the latest stage in a three-month siege waged by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), predominantly made up of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militias, which are being supported by significant numbers of US ground troops. The offensive to force ISIS from its main stronghold has already driven thousands of civilians from their homes, killed hundreds more, and left at least 25,000 stranded with little food and water in Raqqa.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the bombing came a day after numerous civilian casualties were reported Sunday during air attacks. While the SDF claims to have 60 percent of the city under its control, observers speaking to the *Financial Times* noted that ISIS fighters continue to operate and launch attacks in many parts of the city claimed by the SDF.

The indiscriminate and ruthless assault on the city by the US-led coalition is in line with the vicious assault conducted by Washington and its Iraqi-backed forces earlier this year to recapture the northern Iraqi city of Mosul.

In the course of nine months of military operations, an estimated 40,000 civilians lost their lives and an additional one million Iraqis were driven from their homes. These war crimes have been made possible by President Donald Trump's decision to ease restrictions on engaging in combat, giving military commanders on the ground the power to decide when to launch air

strikes and other attacks.

According to AirWars, a London-based monitoring group which collates data on civilian casualties resulting from US-led coalition air strikes, more civilians have died in the seven months since Trump took office than in the close to two-and-a-half years during which Barack Obama oversaw the conflict in the Middle East.

This slaughter is only an indication of what is being prepared for the escalation of the war in Afghanistan announced by Trump Monday night.

While the nominal target of the US-led onslaught on Raqqa is ISIS, the Sunni extremist organization whose very existence is bound up with the disastrous consequences of US-led wars of aggression in Iraq, Libya and Syria, Washington's real goal is to strengthen its geostrategic position in the region.

The use of overwhelming force regardless of the impact on innocent civilians flows from US imperialism's determination to capture ISIS's rapidly shrinking territory before troops loyal to Bashar al-Assad, backed by Russian air power and Iranian forces, drive the Islamists from eastern Syria and establish more direct supply lines from Teheran to Damascus.

To prevent this, Washington has combined the offensive against Raqqa with the establishment of a military base at al-Tanf in southeastern Syria on the borders with Iraq and Jordan, where American and British Special Forces are training Sunni militias to capture territory in eastern Syria. The US also hopes to utilize this proxy force when a suitable opportunity presents itself to bring about regime change in Damascus.

Moreover, Washington wants to consolidate its unchallenged domination over the energy-rich Middle East by preparing for war with Iran, which Trump has

repeatedly denounced as an enemy and sponsor of “terrorism.”

News of the massacre in Raqqa came as Defense Secretary James “Mad Dog” Mattis, who earned his nickname for his role in leading the devastating assault on the Iraqi city of Fallujah, visited the region to discuss US imperialist policy with the Iraqi government.

Mattis met with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in Baghdad on Tuesday and boasted that US and Iraqi forces were defeating ISIS. Mattis made no mention of the widespread reports of human rights abuses and vicious reprisals against the civilian population by Iraqi forces in areas retaken from ISIS, which have included summary executions and torture. Instead, he praised the advance of Iraqi forces towards the ISIS-held town of Tal Afar.

Similar atrocities are to be expected in Raqqa. Reports are already emerging of the SDF refusing to allow civilians fleeing the city to leave refugee camps set up in areas under their control, prompting condemnations from aid agencies.

Although US imperialism bears chief responsibility for the bloody civil war in Syria and the destabilization of the entire region, the war danger is being exacerbated by the efforts of regional powers to pursue their own interests in Syria.

On Monday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan indicated that discussions had taken place between Ankara and Teheran about a joint military operation to target bases of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq. Turkish news outlets reported that Iranian troops would launch an offensive in the Qandil Mountains backed up by Turkish air power, a suggestion swiftly rebuffed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC). However, the IRGC statement did not rule out launching military interventions into northern Iraq in the future.

Frictions between Turkey and the US, a key NATO ally, have risen over recent months, especially following the Trump administration’s decision to rely on the Kurdish-dominated SDF to lead the Raqqa offensive. Erdogan, whose relations with Germany and other European NATO powers have become ever more strained, has floated the possibility of purchasing a missile defense system from Russia in a move that would be a major slap in the face to NATO.

Returning from a visit to Jordan, Erdogan vowed Monday that Turkey was also ready to launch military operations into northern Syria if the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (PYD), the political wing of the Kurdish militants fighting for control of Raqqa, expanded their influence over the region. He noted that the issue had been discussed with Iran’s chief of the General Staff during a visit to Ankara last week.

The Syrian conflict remains a major flashpoint that could rapidly escalate into a regional and even global war. The conflict, which has claimed upwards of half a million lives, was deliberately stoked in 2011 by Washington with the aim of bringing about regime change in Damascus.

Russia, which intervened in the US-instigated civil war in 2015 to prop up its chief ally in the Middle East, has stepped up attacks on ISIS positions in eastern Syria to aid the progress of pro-government soldiers. On Friday, Russian aircraft reportedly killed some 200 ISIS fighters seeking to reach Deir ez-Zor, a city currently being targeted by Assad’s forces for capture.

Government-aligned fighters have been attacked by US air strikes on several occasions, with Washington alleging that they intruded into a unilaterally declared “deconfliction zone” set up around its al-Tanf base.

Any of these incidents, with nuclear-armed powers operating on the basis of conflicting interests in close proximity to each other, could provide the spark that sets the highly volatile Middle East ablaze with catastrophic consequences for the region’s long-suffering population.



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