

Syrian government offensive prompts calls for intensified US military intervention

Jordan Shilton
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Syrian government forces have launched an assault on the enclave of eastern Ghouta over recent days with the aim of recapturing it from Islamist rebels. US media outlets have seized on the escalation of violence to legitimize and call for the expansion of Washington's illegal military intervention, which is aimed at toppling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and installing a US puppet regime in Damascus.

Syrian aircraft, backed by Russian planes, have conducted repeated air strikes on the area over recent days. According to a report by the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, upwards of 270 civilians, including more than 60 children, have allegedly been killed. The strikes, which have included the dropping of barrel bombs, have damaged hospitals and other critical infrastructure. Doctors Without Borders said that 13 of its facilities have been hit.

Eastern Ghouta has been used as a military base by Islamist groups throughout the conflict. They regularly shell government-controlled districts in Damascus and have continued to do so during the latest offensive, killing at least 12 and injuring dozens more on Tuesday alone.

Human rights groups such as Amnesty International issued statements condemning the civilian deaths and appealing for a ceasefire. United Nations officials described living conditions in Ghouta, where only one aid truck has arrived over the past three months, as "hellish."

With its trademark moral double standards and outright hypocrisy, the corporate-controlled media in the US has provided saturation coverage of the government offensive. The transparent aim is to whip up public support for a catastrophic escalation of the Syrian war that could put the lives of millions of people at risk.

Videos of the carnage were widely circulated, including in articles published online by the major news outlets, while the Washington Post ran a piece containing a series of pictures from Ghouta.

In a lengthy New York Times article, the "newspaper of record" proclaimed that Assad's forces would "show no quarter" and described the attack on Ghouta as "the deadliest" in Syria "in years."

This turns reality on its head. The bloodiest and deadliest assaults in Syria and Iraq since the conflict began have in fact been carried out by the United States and its proxies. The civil war itself, which has claimed the lives of over 400,000 people, was deliberately incited by Washington seven years ago to bring about regime change in Damascus.

In the devastating air and ground onslaught to recapture the ISIS-held city of Mosul in Northern Iraq, which lasted over six months, conservative estimates placed the number of civilian deaths at between 5,000 and 10,000. Some reports were substantially higher, with one Iraqi estimate suggesting that 40,000 were slaughtered in the vicious onslaught. Many were massacred as US military personnel indiscriminately fired artillery shells into the city, which was home to some 1.5 million people.

As the bombardment of Mosul raged on, President Trump announced the lifting of the limited restrictions imposed on the US military in Iraq and Syria by Obama. This led to a vast intensification of air strikes and a corresponding sharp rise in civilian deaths. In one attack in March 2017, a US air strike in Mosul killed up to 300 Iraqis, more than Assad's forces are alleged to have killed in their current offensive.

Evidence also emerged of the US deploying white phosphorus shells, which are banned under international law.

When the battle shifted to Raqqa last summer, US war planes were slaughtering more than 100 innocent civilians every week as they dropped high-powered explosives on residential areas. In the end, to pursue its broader strategic goals of preventing Iran from consolidating control of eastern Syria and opening up a land corridor from Tehran

to Damascus, Washington allowed thousands of ISIS fighters to escape Raqqa so they could take on pro-Assad forces.

Throughout both of these shameful episodes, which international rights groups criticized as war crimes, the Times and other establishment media mouthpieces not only buried reports of civilian casualties, not to mention images or videos from the war zone, but positively praised the US military for its supposed restraint in carrying out air strikes.

The media outcry over Ghouta is merely the latest in a long line of propaganda campaigns to drum up support for the US war in Syria by portraying it as a humanitarian crusade against an evil dictator. When the Assad regime, backed by Russian air power, launched a sustained assault to recapture Aleppo in late 2016, politicians and the media accused Assad and Russia of war crimes for causing civilian casualties while systematically downplaying or covering up entirely reports of deaths in government-controlled parts of the city due to shelling by the Jihadists. The eventual removal of the Islamists from Aleppo, including the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaida, represented a significant setback for US imperialism.

The latest war-mongering media campaign takes place under conditions in which the Syrian conflict has become even more explosive. Seeking to secure its unchallenged dominance over the energy-rich Middle East against its rivals, Washington has escalated its intervention in Syria over recent months. In a February 7 air strike, US warplanes bombed a convoy of pro-Assad forces, reportedly killing hundreds, including several Russian contractors, and the US is collaborating with the remnants of ISIS to prevent Assad's forces from recapturing energy reserves in eastern Syria.

Russia continues to support Damascus, its chief ally in the Middle East, meaning the danger of a direct military clash between the world's two largest nuclear powers remains extremely high.

Washington is also determined to push back against Iranian influence in Syria as part of a broader strategy to contain and prepare for all-out war with Tehran. This has encouraged Israel to step up its intervention into the conflict, targeting Iranian installations in Syria February 10 in what were the largest Israeli air strikes in the country in over thirty years.

In northern Syria, a new front in the war appears to have opened over recent days after Assad dispatched pro-government militias to back the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in the enclave of Afrin against an

invasion by Turkish troops. Turkey intervened to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish-controlled region on its southern border and has threatened to push eastwards to Manbij, raising the risk of a clash with US special forces, who are deployed in the city to train and operate alongside the YPG. Russia gave its tacit backing to the Turkish operation in hopes of exploiting the divisions between the two NATO allies to strengthen its hand in Syria.

A US escalation of the Syrian conflict could thus rapidly provoke a regional war that would draw in the major powers on opposing sides. Some of the media pundits howling most hysterically of all over events in Ghouta are quite prepared to back, and are indeed explicitly calling for such a development.

Jonathan Freedland complained in a column for Britain's *Guardian* entitled "The slaughter in Syria should outrage us. Yet still we just shrug" that the CIA-concocted allegations of the use of chemical weapons by Assad last April "only" resulted in "a limited US cruise missile strike." He added ominously, "Until now the only message we have sent Russia, Iran and Syria is a silent shrug. If we want the killing to stop, we need to say so."

The prospect of such a catastrophic conflict is not a fantasy of so-called liberal journalists, but is actively being prepared by US imperialism. Just last month, the Trump administration openly acknowledged that great power rivalries represent the main national security threat to the United States. It also announced the creation of a 30,000-strong border force for Syria made up predominantly of the Kurdish YPG militias to support the more than 2,000 US military personnel already in the country.

Earlier this month, it was revealed that the Pentagon has submitted a request for \$1.8 billion worth of arms to wage war in Syria and Iraq. This amounts to 20 percent more than the entire arms budget for Middle East operations in 2017.



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