

Amnesty International report finds US guilty of war crimes in Syria

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The US carried out war crimes in its four-month-long siege of the Syrian city of Raqqa last year, according to evidence gathered by Amnesty International and released in a report by the human rights group on Tuesday.

The report takes its title, “War of Annihilation,” from the description given by Defense Secretary James Mattis of the tactics that would be pursued in taking the city from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The report concludes that “the impact on civilians was devastating.”

“There is strong evidence that [US] coalition air and artillery strikes killed and injured thousands of civilians, including in disproportionate or indiscriminate attacks that violated international humanitarian law and are potential war crimes,” Amnesty International declared.

While the Pentagon utilized proxy ground troops in the siege, organized in the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), comprised almost entirely of members of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, their advance was made possible only through a relentless bombardment by US warplanes and artillery units.

The Amnesty report quotes US Army Sergeant Major John Wayne Troxell, who declared: “In five months they [US Marines] fired 30,000 artillery rounds on ISIS targets. ... They fired more rounds in five months in Raqqa, Syria, than any other Marine or Army battalion, since the Vietnam War. ... Every minute of every hour we were putting some kind of fire on ISIS in Raqqa, whether it was mortars, artillery, rockets, Hellfires, armed drones, you name it.”

Using satellite imagery and eyewitness testimony, the report decisively refutes the claim by the top US commander in the operation, General Stephen Townsend, that the US offensive on Raqqa had been “the most precise air campaign in history.”

“The Coalition’s claims that its precision air campaign allowed it to bomb IS out of Raqqa while causing very few civilian casualties do not stand up to scrutiny,” said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International’s senior crisis response adviser. “On the ground in Raqqa we witnessed a level of destruction comparable to anything we’ve seen in

decades of covering the impact of wars.”

Reports from Raqqa have established that up to 80 percent of the city was razed to the ground, with 11,000 buildings either damaged or destroyed. The remaining population has been left without adequate food, electricity or running water, nor the means of removing either the explosives that still claim lives or the bodies still buried in the rubble.

General Townsend’s claims paralleled those made in a report issued by the Pentagon last Friday to the US Congress acknowledging “credible reports of approximately 499 civilians killed and approximately 169 civilians injured during 2017” as a result of US military operations in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen.

The report, which is mandated under an executive order signed by President Barack Obama, was supposed to be released on May 1, but instead came out a month late. It is absurd on its face. The evidence supplied by Amnesty establishes that the death toll in Raqqa alone far exceeded the total number supplied by the Pentagon. Moreover, the razing of the Syrian city followed that of the even larger urban center of Mosul in Iraq, where a report by Kurdish intelligence estimated the number of dead as high as 40,000.

The Pentagon gave nothing more than the total number of 499 civilian deaths, providing no estimates for individual attacks in any country. Instead, it repeated over and over self-serving claims about the US military using “best practices” and “precision munitions” in its bombing campaigns, while stating that “unfortunately, despite the best efforts of U.S. forces, civilian casualties are a tragic but at times unavoidable consequence of combat operations.” It went on to blame such casualties on adversaries “who use civilians as shields.”

The report acknowledged that “more than 450 reports of civilian casualties from 2017 remained to be assessed,” and attributed the vast disparity between the Pentagon’s estimates and far higher civilian casualties recorded by human rights and monitoring groups to “different types of information and different methodologies to assess whether civilian casualties have occurred.”

As the Amnesty report makes clear, the “methodologies” employed by the Pentagon include a failure to actually visit any of the sites of US airstrikes to assess their impact, and the routine denial of civilian casualties before making any investigation.

Indeed, before Amnesty had even issued its report, a spokesman for the US military, Colonel Sean Ryan, issued a rebuttal, inviting the director of the human rights group to “personally witness the rigorous efforts and intelligence gathering the coalition uses before any strike to effectively destroy IS [ISIS] while minimizing harm to civilian populations.” Colonel Ryan described Amnesty’s accounts of indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets as “more or less hypothetical.”

The Amnesty report was based on visits by researchers to the sites of 42 US airstrikes across the demolished city of Raqqa and interviews with 112 survivors who had lost relatives to the bombing campaign.

The report cites the case of the Badran family, which suffered the deaths of 39 family members and 10 neighbors in the course of four separate US strikes as they tried to flee from one place to another in search of shelter from the bombs.

First, nine of the family’s men were killed in a July 18, 2017, airstrike while they desperately sought to move their relatives out of a neighborhood under attack. Then, on August 20, US warplanes struck two neighboring houses in which the surviving family members were staying.

Rasha, who survived the airstrike, but lost her two-year-old daughter Tulip to the American bombs, told Amnesty:

“Almost everybody was killed. Only I, my husband and his brother and cousin survived. The strike happened at about 7 p.m. I fainted and when I regained consciousness I heard my husband’s cousin, Mohammed, calling out. I could neither move nor speak. Then my husband and his brother found me. My husband was the most seriously injured [of the survivors]—he had a head wound and blood was pouring from his ears. It was dark and we could not see anything. We called out but nobody else answered; nobody moved. It was completely silent except for the planes circling above. We hid in the rubble until the morning because the planes were circling overhead. In the morning, we found Tulip’s body; our baby was dead. We buried her near there, by a tree.”

The story of the Badran family is just one of many documented in the report.

The report also calls attention to the continuation of airstrikes against Raqqa, even as the US and its proxy forces in the SDF were negotiating a ceasefire with ISIS, “under the terms of which ISIS fighters were allowed safe passage out of the city.”

The report, confirming earlier reporting by the BBC and

other news agencies, states: “As part of the deal, a convoy of buses arranged by the SDF took IS fighters and their families out of the city to areas east of Raqqa that were still under IS control. To date, the Coalition has not explained why it continued to launch strikes which killed so many civilians while a deal granting IS fighters impunity and safe passage out of the city was being considered and negotiated. Many survivors of Coalition strikes interviewed by Amnesty International asked why Coalition forces needed to destroy an entire city and kill so many civilians with bombardments supposedly targeting IS fighters—only to then allow IS fighters to leave the city unharmed.”

The deal cut between the US military and ISIS was meant to further American strategic interests in Syria, which centered on seizing control of the country’s oil and gas fields east of the Euphrates River. With over 2,000 US special forces troops still occupying the area, Washington’s aim is to deny these resources to the Damascus government in order to prevent the country’s reconstruction and continue the war for regime change that has devastated Syria since 2011. By channeling the ISIS fighters to the east, the Pentagon sought to utilize them to block the advance of Syrian government forces seeking to retake the country’s energy reserves.

While waged in the name of a campaign against ISIS, the real aim of the US intervention in Syria is to further the drive of American imperialism to assert its dominance over the oil-rich Middle East and to counter the influence of the principal obstacles to Washington’s regional hegemony, Iran and Russia.

The same US corporate media that gave wall-to-wall coverage to fraudulent claims of a Syrian government chemical weapons attack last April has largely ignored the latest revelations of US war crimes in Raqqa, whose victims number in the thousands.

Behind this guilty silence lies concern within the US military and intelligence apparatus over growing antiwar sentiment among the broad mass of the population in the US and worldwide, even as Washington prepares for far bloodier wars.



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