

UN documents civilian deaths in Syrian war, ignoring their cause

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The war in Syria has cost the lives of more than 306,000 civilians in the ten years between March 1, 2011 to March 31, 2021, according to data collected by the UN Human Rights Office. This does not include soldiers and fighters—believed to be in the tens of thousands—or civilian victims buried by their families without notifying the authorities.

This is the first time the UN agency has provided data on the number of civilians killed in the war. It includes the total number of documented civilian deaths and estimates of undocumented deaths. Earlier figures issued by the UN did not distinguish between civilians and non-civilians and focused only on documented deaths.

The international media has largely ignored the release of these figures, testifying to its acceptance of large-scale civilian deaths even as the rapidly escalating US-NATO proxy war against Russia in the Ukraine threatens to spiral into nuclear conflict.

Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said the UN's data was the "highest estimate yet of conflict-related deaths" in the civil war. The deaths represented "a staggering 1.5 percent of the total population" and gave "a clearer sense of the severity and the scale of the conflict." She stressed, "Let me be clear, these are the people killed as a direct result of war operations. This does not include the many, many more civilians who died due to the loss of access to healthcare, to food, to clean water and other essential human rights, which remain to be assessed."

The UN's figures are derived from the Damascus Center for Human Rights Studies, the Center for Statistics and Research-Syria, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Violations Documentation Center, Syria Shuhada records, Syrian Government records as well as records of the UN Human Rights Office itself. Its database records the full name of the victim, the date and location of death, the actors allegedly responsible and the cause of death by weapon type.

Of the documented deaths, the UN said most were caused

by the use of multiple weapons during clashes, ambushes, and massacres, while others were caused by heavy explosive weapons, small arms and light weapons, planted explosives, chemical weapons and unexploded remnants of war. A significant number died in custody, or as a result of sexual violence, torture, beheading or hanging.

The UN said that many of the deaths were allegedly caused by the Syrian government and its allies, as well as by armed anti-government groups.

Bachelet said that the number of civilian deaths triggered serious concerns as to "the failure of the parties to the conflict to respect international humanitarian law norms on the protection of civilians" and warned that civilian deaths would continue to rise for as long as the war goes on.

She neglected to point out the near weekly bombing raids on densely populated areas by Israel or Turkey's plans to attack the US-backed Kurdish militias in Syria that will inevitably lead to further hostilities and casualties. On May 23, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signaled his intention to invade Syria, saying, "We are starting to take new steps soon regarding the remaining parts of the works which we have launched to create 30-kilometer-deep secure zones along our southern borders."

Nowhere does the report list the parties to the war, which it describes as a "conflict", or how and why it arose: namely as a proxy war waged by reactionary mercenary forces supported, financed and armed by US and European imperialism, Turkey, the reactionary Gulf States and Israel, with the aim of toppling the bourgeois national regime of President Bashar al-Assad and installing a puppet government subservient to Washington.

At no point does the UN explain or even hint at the role the US and its allies played in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians or in the transformation of Syria from a middle-income country into the hell hole that it is today, without access to electricity for more than two hours a day. These same countries, responsible for reducing much of Syria to rubble, continually wring their hands over the Assad regime's violation of human rights conventions, as they do

over Russia's in Ukraine.

The UN has nothing to say about the illegal occupation of parts of Syria by the US, UK, France, Turkey and Israel, or the US's destruction of the country's oil and gas infrastructure around the eastern city of Der al-Zur or its pillaging of Syria's archaeological artefacts.

The Syrian war, following hard on the heels on the US-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011, was part of Washington's efforts to violently restructure Middle Eastern and Central Asian politics, which has cost millions of lives. The Obama administration sought to use the Assad regime's brutal suppression of the protests that erupted in Dera'a in the south of the country in March 2011 as the pretext for a regime change operation that had been under active consideration for some years and thereby isolate Iran, Syria's key backer.

As in the operation against Libya's Gaddafi regime, Washington's key proxies were Sunni sectarian forces tied to Al Qaeda, including veterans of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group in Libya, the Al Nusra Front and later the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Jeish al-Islam and other Islamist groups in Syria, as US officials and media admitted. As in the case of Afghanistan, in the period after the Soviet invasion in 1979, the US was willing to countenance an Islamist victory since it believed that Turkey and Israel would constrain its reach.

These reactionary forces were extolled as "revolutionaries" by pseudo-left groups, including France's New Anti-Capitalist Party, Britain's Socialist Workers Party and the US's International Socialist Organisation as well as by academics Juan Cole and Gilbert Achcar. These political charlatans in the service of imperialism never bothered to explain the programme and perspective of these "revolutionaries", much less how such arch-reactionaries as Saudi Arabia and Qatar that outlaw all opposition at home could support a progressive revolution abroad.

It was only when ISIS expanded its field of operations into Iraq, capturing large swathes of Iraqi territory, and came within an inch of reaching Baghdad in 2014 that the Obama administration moved against ISIS. It set up bases inside Syria in breach of Syria's sovereignty, supported the Syria's rebel Kurdish forces against ISIS and carried out bombing campaigns against the facilities of both ISIS and the Syrian government and its allies.

Notwithstanding the lavish support of the imperialist powers and their regional allies, these "revolutionaries" proved unable to topple Assad, testifying to the lack of popular support for their far-right, often jihadist politics.

The UN, the major powers and the world's media have largely ignored the appalling suffering produced by the imperialists' proxy war, apart from that in the opposition

held Idlib province, and skated over the terrible loss of life caused directly and indirectly by their warmongering. While the US-led multinational coalition against ISIS has acknowledged killing at least 1,417 civilians in air strikes in Iraq and Syria since 2014, the monitoring group Airwars has put the actual figure at between 8,192 and 13,244. Nevertheless, such US military investigations as have been carried out found that its troops did not violate the laws of war or deliberately cause civilian casualties.

The Syrian war spawned the world's largest refugee and displacement crisis, until Russia's reactionary invasion of Ukraine. Around 5.6 million people fled the country, with another 6.9 million displaced within Syria, while hostilities continue in various parts of the country. Nearly 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Around 14.6 million people—nearly 80 percent of the population and the highest number recorded since the start of the war—need humanitarian assistance. Some 12 million are expected to face food shortages in 2022 as food prices soar and food availability falls. At the same time, appeals for humanitarian aid, unless it is for the rebel held Idlib province, routinely fall on deaf ears.

The destruction of Syria, its economy, agriculture and education and healthcare systems, in a proxy war for the control of the Middle East and its energy resources, must serve as a sharp warning of what is to come as the US and its NATO allies massively escalate the war in Ukraine in a bid to topple Russia's President Vladimir Putin and seize control of Russia's vast energy and mineral resources.

Those responsible for the hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths and the terrible suffering ongoing for more than 11 years in Syria are neither named nor brought to account by the UN, an agency controlled by the imperialist powers. That is the task of the working class, in a unified struggle throughout the world for socialism, against war and the capitalist system that is its source.



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