

# US airstrike kills 23 civilians as Marines deploy to Syria

By Bill Van Auken  
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A US airstrike on the northern Syrian village of Al-Mataba near the Syrian city of Raqqa claimed the lives of at least 23 civilians Wednesday night. Many of the victims were from one family, whose house was demolished in the bombardment. The dead were reported by Syrian monitoring groups to have included at least six children and four women.

The carnage from the air coincided with a dramatic escalation of the US military intervention on the ground with the deployment of a US Marine battalion armed with powerful M777 howitzers, artillery capable of firing as many five rounds per minute over a range of more than 20 miles. The amphibious task force was taken off Navy ships at the US Special Forces base at Djibouti, flown into Kuwait and then into Syria, a Pentagon official told the *Washington Post*.

The deployment of the Marines from the San Diego-based 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit, along with a contingent of Army Rangers, roughly doubles the number of US troops inside Syria, which was previously limited to just over 500 special forces “trainers and advisers.”

The new troops are to provide fire support for the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, a militia dominated by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), which operates as a proxy ground force for the US intervention in Syria. Washington is preparing these forces for an assault on Raqqa, a Syrian city of 300,000 which is under the control of the Sunni Islamist militia, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The US military command is operating on the pretense that the deployment of the new American forces is only “temporary,” but their arrival likely signals the escalation of the US intervention in Iraq and Syria that the Trump administration has advocated. The

Pentagon presented a report to the White House outlining proposals for such an escalation at the end of last month.

Testifying before the US Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday, Gen. Joseph Votel, the chief of US Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees military operations in the region, claimed that the authorization to use military force (AUMF) passed by the US Congress in 2001 following the September 11 attacks on New York City and Washington provided the authority to escalate the deployment in Syria (a country that had nothing to do with 9/11) in order to fight ISIS (which did not exist in 2001). Votel also made it clear that the US intervention was being carried out without the permission of the Syrian government.

It was further reported Thursday that the Pentagon is preparing to send nearly 1,000 additional troops to Kuwait to serve as a “reserve” force that US commanders on the ground in Iraq and Syria could call into the country as they see fit.

These changes are part of a shift in the rules of engagement for the US intervention in the region, which is ostensibly directed at defeating ISIS. US commanders are to be given far greater discretion in terms of calling in airstrikes and ordering other offensive actions, which previously had to be approved by the senior brass. Also being lifted are restraints that were supposedly in place to limit so-called “collateral damage,” i.e., the slaughter of Iraqi and Syrian civilians.

The past several weeks have seen a major escalation of the US-led bombing campaign leading to a steady increase in the number of civilian deaths in both countries. This toll will only increase with the deployment of US artillery.

The Pentagon’s spokesman for the US intervention

in Iraq and Syria, referring to the deployment of the Marine battalion, told Reuters, “We have had what I would describe as a pretty relentless air campaign to destroy enemy capabilities and to kill enemy fighters in that area already. That is something that we are going to continue and intensify with this new capability.”

According to statistics released by the US Air Forces Central Command, US and allied warplanes dropped 7,494 bombs, rockets and other munitions on targets in Iraq and Syria during the first nine weeks of this year. This represents an increase of nearly 50 percent compared to the same period in 2016, and is nearly double the number of airstrikes conducted in 2015.

The group Airwars, which monitors airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, has estimated that as many as 370 Iraqi civilians have been killed in the US bombardment of the densely populated neighborhoods of western Mosul just since March 1. The assault on the ISIS-held area of the city has turned whole blocks into rubble and forced 40,000 civilians to flee their homes over the last week alone.

According to Airwars, as many as 130 civilians died on March 5 in an assault on a government compound in the Dawassa district of Mosul, which reportedly involved US Apache attack helicopters. Another 50 to 80 were killed in a March 1 airstrike against a mosque that was being used as a shelter for refugee families.

The monitoring group estimates the number of civilians killed in both Iraq and Syria by the US air war since its beginning in 2014 at nearly 2,500.

Part of the US escalation in Syria has consisted of sending Army Rangers aboard Stryker armored vehicles into the area around Manbij, northwest of Raqqa. This intervention, dubbed by the Pentagon as a “reassure and deter” mission, is aimed at forestalling an armed clash between the US proxy forces in the Kurdish YPG and Washington’s NATO ally in the region, Turkey.

Turkey has threatened to attack YPG forces--which Ankara describes as “terrorists”-- in the area in order to prevent linking up the two “cantons” of Kobane and Afrin to form a Kurdish autonomous zone along Turkey’s border with Syria.

“What is important for us is to clear Manbij of YPG elements. Why did the YPG come there? To establish its terrorist canton and to gain more territory,” Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said on Thursday.

For its part, the YPG has denounced Turkish troops inside Syria as an “occupation force” and has insisted that they cannot be allowed to participate in the planned offensive against Raqqa. Unconfirmed reports circulated on social media Wednesday that elements of the YPG had used a US-supplied TOW missile to attack a Turkish tank in northern Syria.

The increasingly tense situation in the region was discussed in a three-way meeting held in the Turkish port city of Antalya Wednesday between the US, Russian and Turkish military chiefs of staff. Gen. Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, met with his Turkish counterpart, Gen. Hulusi Akar, and Russia’s Chief of the General Staff, Gen. Vasily Gerasimov.

The Pentagon issued a statement saying the meeting was necessary because the area surrounding Raqqa had become “a crowded battlespace” and the conflicting interests of the different armed forces operating there had created “a dangerous situation.”

The growing dangers in Syria are the outcome of the nearly six-year-old US-orchestrated war for regime change and the attempt by US imperialism to utilize the conflict as a means of weakening the positions of regional and global rivals, particularly Iran and Russia. The growing US military presence in the region poses the threat of the conflict in Iraq and Syria escalating into a far wider war.

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