

The massacre in Mosul

27 March 2017

The US-led “coalition” has admitted that its forces carried out the March 17 air strike in Mosul—ostensibly against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters—that slaughtered as many as 200 civilians, including numerous children. The admission was only made in the face of evidence provided by survivors to Iraqi journalists, whose accounts were reported by sections of the Western press.

The massacre is being described as possibly the largest single death toll inflicted by a coalition air strike since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The grim reality, however, is that very little is known about the impact of the assault on Mosul, which the Iraqi government began last October under pressure from the Obama administration. Coverage of the offensive has been heavily censored and marked by a propaganda-like character. Almost universally, the fighting has been portrayed as a “heroic” battle by Iraqi forces against the “barbaric” ISIS. Little attention has been given to the fate of hundreds of thousands of civilians trapped inside the besieged city.

News of the March 17 carnage began filtering out as the Trump administration’s Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and representatives of 62 other countries gloated in Washington over the “success” of their “campaign for the lasting defeat of ISIS.” A March 22 statement cynically declared that the “Global Coalition” against ISIS underscored “the need for safeguarding civilians” and applauded “the Iraqi government for protecting civilians in conflict zones.”

In fact, in February, the Trump administration let it be known it would sharply escalate the onslaught on Mosul in order to end the fighting—regardless of how many innocent lives were claimed. Unnamed US officials told the *Wall Street Journal* plans included “loosening battlefield restrictions” to “ease rules designed to minimize civilian casualties.”

Such plans have clearly been put into effect. The intensity of air attacks has risen dramatically in recent

weeks as Iraqi forces pushed into the western suburbs of the city still held by ISIS fighters. According to the Pentagon, close to 1,400 separate munitions were unleashed over two weeks. In a detailed account, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on Friday that “US pilots describe dozens of strike aircraft circling high above west Mosul, waiting their turn to drop a bomb.”

On the weekend, US military representatives announced that hundreds more American ground troops, from the 82nd Airborne Division, were being sent to “advise and assist” Iraqi government forces in Mosul. One of the primary roles of such “advisors” is calling in air strikes, drone attacks and artillery bombardments.

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights reported last weekend it has eyewitness accounts of 3,846 civilian deaths since the assault into western Mosul began in February. It has reports of 10,000 residential homes being destroyed. Every day, thousands of terrified and starving civilians risk their lives to flee through the battle lines to escape the city. The number of refugees has soared to well over 200,000, with more than 10,000 new displaced persons arriving most days. Aid agencies are overwhelmed and warn they will not be able to care for the estimated 400,000 people still hiding out in the city’s ISIS-held areas.

Every effort is being made to conceal from the American and world population the savage consequences of US-led military operations in the Middle East. A feature of American media coverage on the weekend was the paucity of commentary on the air strike and broader humanitarian catastrophe in Mosul, compared with the immense attention paid to the atrocity committed in London by a lone British-born extremist.

To the extent Mosul was mentioned, attempts were made to shift responsibility for the carnage to ISIS. US Republican Senator Tom Cotton declared on CBS News: “Ultimately, though, the blame lays with the

Islamic State. They are the savages that are fighting from civilian locations, like apartment buildings, homes, mosques, hospitals, schools and so forth. The blame does not lay with coalition pilots or with Iraqi forces.”

The hypocrisy of the American ruling elite knows no limits. Barely months ago, every report of civilian casualties caused by the Russian and Syrian government assault on the US-backed rebel forces in the city of Aleppo was declared a war crime and accompanied by demands for an immediate ceasefire. In Mosul, even greater civilian deaths are dismissed as “unfortunate” and no reason to slow, let alone stop, the offensive.

The latest assertions by the US and its allies continue the deceit surrounding the assault on Mosul and other cities that fell under the control of ISIS in 2014. The supposed “war against ISIS” has been marked by the flagrant collective punishment of the civilian populations where ISIS established influence. In the first months of 2016, most of the western Iraqi cities of Ramadi and Fallujah were reduced to rubble to “liberate” them. The same policy has guided the attack on Mosul.

Above all, the political and media establishment attempt to conceal the fact that the very emergence of ISIS is the direct outcome of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, followed by the destruction of Libya and the proxy war the US and its allies sponsored in Syria.

From 2003 on, the conscious policy of the US occupation force in Iraq was to divide and weaken resistance by stoking sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shiite communities, which ultimately led in 2006–2007 to a murderous civil war and the deaths of tens of thousands. Millions were displaced from their homes as entire suburbs and cities were “cleansed” by death squads from one sect or the other.

ISIS—a movement based on the most reactionary interpretation of Sunni Islam—gained a following by claiming it would defend Sunnis from repression by the Shiite-dominated and US-backed government in Baghdad. It gained its strength not in Iraq, however, but in Syria. From 2012, it benefited from the support given by the US, the European powers, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies to Sunni-based militias fighting the Iranian- and Russian-backed government

of President Bashar al-Assad. Utilising the bases, weapons and personnel it gained in Syria, ISIS crossed into Iraq in 2013, taking the western Anbar region and capturing Mosul in June 2014.

The ruthless campaign against ISIS flows from US imperialism’s determination to retain its tenuous grip over Iraq against any challenge. For 25 years, successive American administrations have used brutal wars and intrigues to assert US dominance over the oil-rich Middle East, at the cost of millions of lives and incalculable human suffering—especially in Iraq.

The stark truth, however, is that the assault on Mosul coincides with the escalation of US attempts to assert dominance in other regions of the globe, against far more significant rivals than a poorly-armed Islamist movement.

In Asia, the talk of military action against North Korea has dramatically increased over recent weeks. Conflicts with China are simmering, not only over the Korean Peninsula, but the South China Sea, Taiwan and the Trump administration’s threats of trade war. The Russian regime is increasingly alarmed by the hysteria directed in Washington against it and the provocative military build-up by the US and its NATO allies on its borders. At the same time, underlying tensions are emerging between the US and its historic competitors for global dominance, such as Germany and Japan.

Workers around the world must combine the clear and unambiguous defence of the oppressed people of Iraq, and other countries targeted by great power interventions, with the most determined and active struggle against the descent of world capitalism toward open conflict between nuclear-armed or potentially nuclear-armed states.

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