

Civilian death toll mounts as US escalates offensive in Syria

By Bill Van Auken
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Amid near total silence by the Western media, the US military has steadily escalated its bombing campaign in eastern Syria, killing scores of civilian men, women and children over the past week.

While the offensive is supposedly aimed at clearing out remaining pockets of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Deir Ezzor province near the border with Iraq, it is becoming increasingly clear that the US military campaign has wider strategic aims, directed at regime change in Syria and escalating Washington's confrontation with Tehran.

In the latest incident, US airstrikes on Thursday targeted residential neighborhoods in the villages of al-Boubadran and al-Sousa, destroying homes and killing at least 23 people, the Syrian state news agency Sana reported.

The raid reportedly wiped out an entire family of 17 civilians, who had been forced to flee from the nearby town of al-Baghuz because of intense combat between ISIS fighters and the US proxy ground troops of the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is comprised largely of the Syrian Kurdish YPG [People's Protection Units] militia. The advances of the YPG in the region have been made possible by intense US bombing and close-air support.

The attack comes on the heels of earlier and even more devastating US strikes. On Tuesday, the Syrian government condemned an airstrike against the town of al-Sharifah that left over 60 civilians dead and injured. The Syrian government as well as residents of Deir Ezzor province have also charged that US warplanes are dropping cluster bombs as well as white phosphorous munitions—both banned by international treaties—on civilian neighborhoods, with devastating results.

Syria's foreign ministry addressed two letters last

Saturday to United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres and the current president of the UN Security Council Ma Zhaoxu, condemning yet another earlier US airstrike against the village of Hajin near the Iraqi border that killed 26 civilians, including 14 children.

The letters denounced the US intervention that has been waged since 2014, with continuous bombings that have been carried out without any UN mandate or permission from the Syrian government. They charged that under the false pretense of fighting terrorism, the US was killing Syrian civilians, decimating the country's infrastructure and violating the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity with the aim of perpetuating the CIA-orchestrated war and effecting regime change.

"All these attempts constitute a blatant violation of all United Nations Security Council resolutions on Syria," the Syrian foreign ministry said.

"Whilst the United States and its allies continue to commit war crimes and crimes against humanity, the Security Council has maintained an awkward silence and failed to take any measure to stop these misdeeds," the statement continued.

Speaking to reporters Thursday after a regular meeting of the UN humanitarian agency, Jan Egeland, a special advisor to the UN on Syria, said that the problem of Syrian refugees had been compounded by the destruction of entire cities, which he compared to the decimation of Stalingrad and Dresden in World War II.

Among the worst hit of these cities was Raqqa, the so-called Syrian capital of ISIS, which US airstrikes and artillery bombardments largely reduced to rubble, while killing thousands of innocent civilians.

Russia's foreign ministry—citing the letters sent by Damascus to the United Nations—reported on Thursday

that over 8,000 bodies have been recovered from the ruins of Raqqa, which was besieged by the US military one year ago, between June and October of 2017.

“The bodies of over 4,000 people were found while clearing away the rubble in two of the city’s residential neighborhoods left over from the airstrikes and also around the stadium and the zoo,” Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told the media. “Those were mainly women, the elderly and children. In addition, a mass grave where more than 2,500 people were buried was uncovered at a farm near a pediatric clinic and the National Hospital, while another burial site was opened near Al-Panorama where 1,500 of the bombing raids’ victims were buried.”

The letters to the UN indicated that just two percent of the rubble has been cleared away in Raqqa, where returning residents are living among the ruins and amid the continuing stench of human remains.

In a Wednesday press conference, the State Department’s special representative for “Syria engagement,” James Jeffrey, indicated the aims that American imperialism is pursuing by means of this unrelenting carnage.

Claiming that the military objective of the more than 2,000 US troops on Syrian soil is the defeat of ISIS, Jeffrey made clear that this campaign is seen as a virtually unending venture by the Pentagon and the White House, bound up with the goal of regime change in Damascus, as well as in Tehran.

Jeffrey insisted that “you cannot have an enduring defeat of ISIS until you have fundamental change in the Syrian regime and fundamental change in Iran’s role in Syria, which contributed greatly to the rise of ISIS in the first place in 2013, 2014.”

This is utter nonsense. The rise of ISIS was rooted in the US destruction of Iraqi society after its 2003 invasion and occupation of the country, followed by the CIA’s orchestration of a war for regime change in Syria by means of funneling vast quantities of arms, money and foreign fighters to Islamist militias, with ISIS proving to be the principal beneficiary.

With this attempt to effect regime change through the promotion of Al Qaeda-connected militias having failed, Washington is now pursuing the same aims by somewhat different methods.

Pressed by a reporter as to when US troops would be

withdrawn from Syria, given Jeffrey’s prediction that ISIS would be defeated within the next few months, the US ambassador responded that the mission in Syria was to ensure the “enduring defeat” of ISIS, which he said required “building up local security forces” and “participating in a political process that gives the people of the northeast a future so that they aren’t going to be subject to temptations to go with ISIS as they did back in 2013-2014.”

In other words, Washington is preparing a permanent occupation of northeastern Syria, with the dual aims of controlling a region that contains the country’s oil and gas fields, vital for Syria’s reconstruction, and securing the border with Iraq.

The escalation of US military operations in Syria are bound up with the strategy being pursued by Washington throughout the Middle East to roll back Iranian influence and destroy the Iranian economy by means of sweeping unilateral economic sanctions that are tantamount to an act of war.

Within this broader context, the brutal US offensive being waged in northeastern Syria—at the cost of an increasing number of civilian lives—has the potential for igniting a far more devastating region-wide war.

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