

As Washington hails victory over ISIS, media ignores massive human toll

By Bill Van Auken
30 March 2019

For the last several days, US President Donald Trump and his administration have been staging multiple victory laps over what it describes as the final defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In his right-wing rant before supporters in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on Thursday night, Trump bragged that “the ISIS caliphate is defeated, one hundred percent.”

Last week he showed reporters before-and-after maps of Iraq and Syria—which he held upside down—the first showing areas previously occupied by ISIS in red and a current map that was spotless. The stunt apparently upended a promise made to the Pentagon’s proxy forces, comprised largely of the Kurdish Syrian YPG militia, that they would be allowed to be first in announcing the supposed victory.

The US media has followed suit, sending its embedded reporters striding into the eastern Syrian village of Baghouz, the last reported stronghold, alongside their handlers from the Pentagon’s proxy militia. One NBC reporter acknowledged that bodies had been cleared from the area before he arrived.

This sanitization of the bloodshed in Iraq and Syria has been a constant feature of the news coverage of the over four-year-long US war against ISIS. Few within the corporate media have even bothered to question the Pentagon’s official story that only a handful of the tens of thousands killed in relentless US bombing campaigns have been civilians.

This same hypocritical media provided non-stop coverage denouncing the Russian-backed campaign to re-take the Syrian city of Aleppo from Islamist forces as a war crime.

The Pentagon issued a report on Thursday claiming that the total number of civilians killed in both Iraq and Syria in the course of 34,038 airstrikes by the US and its allies between August 2014 and February of this year amounted to just 1,250.

The figure is a vast, deliberate and grotesque underestimate of the real carnage unleashed against the Iraqi and Syrian people by US imperialism.

Airwars, the organization that has provided the most

comprehensive recording of civilian casualties, has cited as many as 30,000 civilian deaths reported in the course of the war.

The Associated Press issued a report on the siege of the Iraqi city of Mosul nearly two years ago that confirmed the deaths of 3,200 civilians as a result of US airstrikes and artillery and mortar bombardments by the Pentagon and its allies. Other credible reports have put the toll in Mosul at over 10,000, while an official of the Iraqi Kurdish intelligence agency, considered one of the more reliable sources in the Middle East, said that as many as 40,000 had been slaughtered.

Meanwhile, Airwars has estimated that 1,500 civilians were killed by coalition air and artillery attacks between June and October 2017 in the Syrian city of Raqqa—more than the total figure given by the Pentagon for four years of bombardment of both Iraq and Syria. Last October, mass graves were uncovered in the Syrian city holding the bodies of 2,500 people, most of them believed to be victims of the US siege. Thousands more remain buried.

Both of these cities, along with large swathes of north and western Iraq and north and eastern Syria, remain devastated by the US bombing campaign. While the siege of Mosul ended in July 2017, nearly two years ago, and that of Raqqa three months later, much of the first city and virtually all of the second remain in ruins.

Once Iraq’s second city with a population of nearly two million, nearly two-thirds of Mosul’s inhabitants remain displaced. An estimated 130,000 Iraqi homes were destroyed by the US bombardment, along with 90 percent of the city’s hospitals, dozens of schools and much of its basic infrastructure. The UN has estimated that there are some 8 million tons of rubble and debris that must be removed to begin restoring the city. With the resources and equipment now allotted, this task could take up 10 years.

“It is impossible not to be overwhelmed by what you see standing on the roof ... in Mosul. Half of this sprawling city is literally leveled to the ground and it is practically impossible to move through due to the large number of

explosives hidden in the rubble,” said Lene Rasmussen of the Danish Demining Group, the only international NGO operating in the city.

The anger of the remaining population in Mosul boiled over last week after a crowded ferry capsized in the Tigris River leading to the deaths of over 100 people. When the Iraqi president and the provincial governor attempted to join mourners, they were set upon by the crowd chanting, “No to corruption ... all of you are thieves.”

Nearly two million people in Iraq remain internally displaced from Mosul and other cities like Tikrit, Fallujah and Ramadi that were also largely demolished by the anti-ISIS campaign. Many of them are in camps and subject to brutality at the hands of Iraqi security forces and sectarian militias, with men taken away to be tortured and executed and women subject to rape and sexual abuse.

Conditions in Raqqa are no better. It is estimated that 30,000 homes were completely destroyed and another 25,000 partially demolished. Following a visit to the Syrian city in October, Amnesty International’s Secretary General Kumi Naidoo described the “horrific destruction and utter human devastation” that he witnessed, stating, “What I saw in Raqqa shocked me to the core.”

He added: “The city is a shell—bombed-out buildings, very little running water or electricity, the stench of death hanging in the air. That anyone is still able to live there defies logic and stands as testimony to the remarkable resilience of the city’s civilians.”

Residents in both Mosul and Raqqa have told the media that, as bad as conditions were under the brutal and reactionary Islamist rule of ISIS, today they are considerably worse.

While Washington boasts of its final defeat of ISIS, the reality is that the Islamist militia was US imperialism’s own Frankenstein’s Monster. It arose as an offshoot of Al Qaeda, itself nurtured by the CIA during the US-orchestrated war to topple the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan. It was forged in the US war of aggression against Iraq that killed close to a million Iraqis, and then utilized in the 2011 war to topple Libya’s leader Muammar Gaddafi. Fighters and arms were then funneled with the aid of the CIA into the war for regime change in Syria.

ISIS was able to seize control of territories comprising a population of eight million and consisting of nearly half of Iraq and large swathes of Syria only because of the abysmal conditions created by US military interventions and the massive supply of arms and money by the CIA and Washington’s principal regional allies, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar.

In Iraq, its advance was furthered by the anger of the Sunni population over the discrimination and repression

carried out by the Baghdad government. These sentiments are only being deepened by the present conditions confronting the people of Mosul and the cities of Anbar Province.

While Trump initially proclaimed the defeat of ISIS at the end of last year, stating that as a result he would “bring the troops home,” triggering a political fire storm in Washington, the Pentagon has since made clear that the illegal US military presence in Syria will continue indefinitely.

While earlier this month Pentagon officials denied a report that the plan was to leave at least 1,000 US troops in the war-ravaged country, they have provided no alternative number for what is being described as a “residual force.”

The Pentagon’s proposed 2020 budget includes \$300 million for arming and supporting “vetted Syrian opposition” partners, as well as \$250 million to support “border security requirements” in Syria.

Washington’s aim is to carve out its own sphere of influence in Syria’s northeast, seizing control over the country’s main oil and gas-producing region and using Syria as a base for preparing military aggression against Iran.

Meanwhile, the US has encouraged Israel to play a major role in military operations against Syria. Trump’s decree recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the illegally occupied territory of the Golan Heights is bound up with Washington’s cementing of a regional alliance based on Israel, Saudi Arabia and the other monarchical dictatorships of the Persian Gulf against Iran.

Israel carried out airstrikes Wednesday against the Syrian city of Aleppo, reportedly striking warehouses, setting off major explosions that cut off power to the city and killing at least four people.

The so-called victory over ISIS has turned much of the region into a wasteland, creating the conditions for social explosions, even as US imperialism prepares to launch a wider and bloodier war in the Middle East.

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