

U.S. AND RUSSIA IN SYRIA AND IRAQ

Civilian Casualties and U.S. Hypocrisy

by Carl Osgood

Nov. 7—While the Obama Administration and the American mainstream media have been conducting a wartime black propaganda campaign against Russia, accusing Moscow of committing war crimes in Syria, the reality is that it has been the United States that has been carrying out civilian atrocities—in Iraq and Yemen and Libya—which continue to this day. The attacks on Russia are all part of a larger war drive against Moscow, which also includes the deployment of American and NATO forces to the western borders of Russia in the Baltics, the Black Sea, and Eastern Europe; the deployment of a missile defense system into the region bordering Russia to the south; and the propping up of a virulently anti-Russian neo-Nazi regime in Ukraine, following the 2013 regime change operation in the Maidan Square.

Taken as a whole, the Obama Administration, in the words of Russian Prime Minister Medvedev, has driven U.S.-Russian relations into the pit, to the point that we are on the verge of a World War III of Barack Obama's doing.

It is therefore of special importance to expose the fraud of "Russian atrocities" in Syria, and set the record straight about the United States' own war crimes and crimes against humanity in the Middle East and North Africa region.

Goebbels Propaganda

Nearly every day, the Western news media, along with its Middle East fellow travelers such as Al Jazeera, pump out lurid stories claiming that Russian jets are indiscriminately bombing civilians in Syria, especially in Aleppo, and that the government of Bashar al Assad is waging war on its own people. Human rights organizations regularly accuse the Syrian government and the

Russian military of bombing schools and hospitals on an almost daily basis. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and other diplomats have called for war crimes investigations of Russian military actions in Syria, particularly focussed on Aleppo. At the same time, there is almost no accounting of the civilian casualties caused by anti-government groups, other than the Islamic State, and by U.S. and U.S.-led coalition military actions in both Syria and Iraq, particularly since the Russian military intervention began in Syria on Sept. 30, 2015.

Civilian Casualties in Syria

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights calculated on Sept. 30, 2016 that a grand total of 9,364 people had been killed during the first year of the Russian mil-



Combat vehicle participates in NATO field training exercise Silver Arrow in Latvia, Oct. 2016.

itary intervention in Syria. Of the 9,364, 2,746 had been members of the Islamic State, while 2,814 had been from various Islamist and other anti-government groups. The remaining 3,804 were civilians.

The Syrian Observatory, run by Rami Abdulrahman out of his apartment in Coventry, England, is no disinterested observer of the Syrian war, but rather is a British-sponsored propaganda outlet that is supporting regime change in Damascus and, therefore, has every reason to exaggerate the number of civilian casualties in Syria resulting from the war. The Syrian Observatory, in fact, has long been the “go to” source for the Western media for body count numbers, especially of deaths inflicted by government forces and their Russian allies, numbers which they never make any effort to verify. Yet, 3,804 civilian deaths over a one-year period in an intense urban conflict is the most that the Observatory could come up with.

While every civilian death in war is a tragedy, the number of 3,804, if true, pales in comparison with the mayhem inflicted on Iraq, during and after the U.S. invasion of March 2003. While the U.S. military, today, frequently claims that it takes every report of civilian deaths inflicted by U.S. munitions very seriously, the Rumsfeld Pentagon famously refused to keep track of the numbers of civilians that were dying daily, as a result of the U.S. military intervention, a factor which no doubt has increased the difficulty in accounting for the suffering of civilians in Iraq. Numerous studies have been done over the years, and while the findings of these studies often conflict with each other, it is obvious that U.S. military actions in Iraq have been far deadlier than what the Russians have been accused of in Syria.

A research team from the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University, published in *The Lancet* on Oct. 28, 2004, estimated that 100,000 civilians had died from the direct and indirect consequences of the U.S. war and occupation. Among the findings was that violence had replaced heart attacks, strokes, and chronic disease as the leading cause of death in Iraq, compared to before the U.S. invasion. In 2006, the same team of researchers upped its estimate



UNHCR/Ivor Prickett

As Mosul assault begins, internally displaced persons flee to Debaga camp in Northern Iraq.

to a staggering 600,000 deaths, based on an even much larger sampling of households than was used for the 2004 survey.

In 2008, the World Health Organization concluded that there had been 151,000 deaths, which only added to the fierce controversy over the impacts of the U.S. invasion and occupation. Regardless of which study one accepts, however, the impact of the U.S. war on Iraq has been much greater than the 3,800 civilians that the Syrian Observatory counted killed in the first year of the Russian military intervention in Syria. Yet there have been no calls for war crimes investigations of the United States from agencies of the United Nations or from international human rights groups.

Virginia State Senator Richard Black, a Vietnam veteran and a former officer in the Army Judge Advocate General Corps, said in a Nov. 4 interview with LPAC TV, that the Syrian Observatory figure of 3,800 civilians deaths is probably accurate, because it's so *astorishingly low*. The U.S. invasion of Iraq, on the other hand, produced much higher casualties because it was based on “shock and awe.” The term “shock and awe,” Black pointed out, actually has a military meaning:

What you do is attack every agency that can assist people, every place that they can look to for help. You bomb bridges. You bomb roads. You bomb electrical power stations. You “accidentally” bomb hospitals, I don’t think we inten-

tionally bombed hospitals but we bombed a few hospitals. We bombed government offices, police offices, any place that a person in desperation would go ... There was no place to call, no means of communication, all the radio stations, TV stations, were bombed out. So, we did this shock and awe campaign.

In contrast to the U.S. campaign in Iraq, “I think what you see in the Syrian Russian campaign is a considerable degree of caution about killing civilians,” Black said, citing his own experience in Vietnam with fighting an enemy that fights among the population. “When you’re in battle and the enemy chooses to fight in an occupied area, there will be civilians killed. It’s going to happen in Mosul,” in Iraq, where the United States is now leading a campaign against ISIS, “and it will happen to a much greater extent than what is happening now in Aleppo,” Black said.

U.S. War Crimes in Iraq and Yemen

The Russians, in fact, are watching the U.S. military campaign in Mosul very closely. On Nov. 3, Lt. Gen. Sergei Rudskoi, the chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Russian General Staff, presented, in a briefing at the Defense Ministry, two sets of before-and-after satellite images of residential areas near Mosul that had been hit by U.S. air strikes. “The United States continues to make strikes on residential quarters both in Mosul and in other inhabited areas of the Nineveh province of Iraq,” he said.

Rudskoi, in an earlier briefing on Oct. 25, reported that the Russian Defense Ministry knew “about numerous facts of the U.S.-led coalition’s air strikes against living quarters, schools, and other civil infrastructure buildings both in Mosul and in other settlements in Iraq’s Nineveh governorate.” Rudskoi continued, “In the past three days alone, more than 60 civilians, in-



An Iraqi family displaced by fighting in the village of Shora flees towards an Iraqi army checkpoint.

UNHCR/Ivor Prickett

cluding children, fell victim of these air strikes. More than 200 people have been wounded.”

Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova issued a particularly sharp criticism of the U.S.-led campaign in a statement posted on her Facebook page on Nov. 6:

The operation is being conducted in conditions of absolute information blockade as the coalition provides no reliable information about what is going on there. It is absolutely not clear whether the coalition forces are advancing or retreating, how efficient their tactic is, what are their losses, how many sorties were flown, and by whom.

According to Zakharova, civilians are dying from the actions of both militants and the coalition forces confronting them, making a “medieval massacre” of the anti-terrorist operation. The situation is worsened by the lack of systemic approach to evacuation of civilians. “It has turned out that no comprehensive plan for the evacuation of civilians has been elaborated. Nothing like humanitarian corridors has been provided,” she stressed.

But it isn’t just the Russians who are making these accusations. Jürgen Todenhöfer—the German journal-

ist who, with his son, famously spent several weeks inside ISIS-occupied Syria in 2014-2015—estimated, in an angry post on his Facebook page on Oct. 25, that 15,000 civilians have already died in Mosul because of U.S. bombing, which has been going on there for more than two years, and yet, unlike in Aleppo, the world is silent while tens of thousands more civilians will likely die. U.S. bombing has already destroyed electricity, gas and water supplies, hospitals, and universities. In Todenhöfer’s estimate, 50,000 civilians have been killed by U.S. bombing in Iraq (including Mosul) since 2014, and the cities that have previously been “freed” from ISIS, such as Ramadi and Tikrit, haven’t been freed, so much as destroyed, with nothing for their former residents to return to.

In Yemen, where the United States is backing a Saudi-led bombing campaign on behalf of an exiled government, UN relief officials and the World Food Program (WFP) reported last week that 7.1 million Yemenis are threatened with starvation. UN aid chief Stephen O’Brien stated that, “Yemen is one step away from famine,” according to a report by *Vice News*. Eighty percent of Yemen is currently in need of humanitarian assistance, and 19 of the country’s 22 governorates have reached crisis levels of food insecurity, according to the WFP. Due to the closure of the airport in the capital city of Sana’a; Saudi-led coalition border blockades; and repeated bombings of farms, wells, and agriculture, food supplies have dwindled.

“Malnourished children are exceeding the capacity of our centers,” George Khoury, the director of the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Yemen, told *Vice News*. “While the conduct of hostility is one factor for deaths and killing, the major factor is not war in Yemen. People are dying silently every day because of malnutrition.”

U.S. Congressman Ted Lieu, Democrat from California, has warned repeatedly that the U.S. participation in the Saudi campaign means that America is participating in war crimes in Yemen—including the numerous episodes of bombings of civilian sites—by providing key military support to the Saudis. In a Nov. 2 letter to Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary



UNHCR/Yahya Arhab

In Yemen, internally displaced children in Darwin camp, Amran province, after their family fled their home in Saada province.

of Defense Ashton Carter, Lieu wrote:

By now, the United States has knowledge that in the past 18 months, coalition jets have struck civilian targets multiple times. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have already documented at least 70 unlawful air strikes by the coalition on civilian targets, such as children at school, a wedding party, a civilian market, and multiple hospitals.

Lieu warned, therefore, that,

U.S. personnel are now at legal risk of being investigated and potentially prosecuted for committing war crimes. Under international law, a person can be found guilty of aiding and abetting war crimes.

Russia Responds to U.S. Hypocrisy

In contrast, in Aleppo the Russians have refrained from air strikes against opposition-held parts of the city for the past 20 days—despite a terrorist offensive intended to try to break the government siege of those parts of the city—and have opened up humanitarian corridors for civilians to leave, and even for militants to either quit the insurgency or get safe passage to opposition-held Idlib province. The insurgents, who are dominated by the Jabhat Fateh al Sham, the group formerly

known as the Al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra, and who are directed from Turkey and Saudi Arabia, have not only refused to leave, but have actively worked to prevent civilians from leaving, by directing sniper and mortar fire on the corridors.

Nonetheless, the U.S. State Department is completely unsatisfied with what the Russians have done. The “humanitarian pause [in the bombing of Aleppo] was designed for what?” asked State Department spokesman John Kirby on Nov. 4. He continued:

To allow people to leave, but it was also to allow aid to get in. And how much aid has gotten in? None. And so we’re seeing reports now of citizens of Aleppo tying ropes around their abdomens to try to get around the abdominal pain that they’re feeling from starvation. They’re going to contaminated water sources for drinking water, because there isn’t any. What little hospitals there are in Aleppo are now being forced underground into basements, and the medical personnel that are staffing them, we’re seeing reports now, of them having to use non-sanitized equipment to try to tend wounds and to try to make people feel better . . . So whether the pause is in effect or not, you’d have to talk to the Russians. But the Syrian people, particularly the citizens of Aleppo, certainly aren’t feeling any benefits from it.

In an angry reply to these U.S. allegations the next day, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov began by asking, What has the State Department done for the people of Aleppo? He continued:

During this period of time, the United States has not even met the obligations it assumed under the agreements between Russia and the United States. Russia has never received either maps, or positions, or any other information about any terrorist organization in Syria: from the Islamic State to Al Nusra.



IRIN/Tom Westcott

Syrians remaining in Aleppo are too poor to leave, living in the carcasses of apartment blocks. In recent months, Russian forces delivered over 100 tons of food and medications.

Statements such as Kirby’s, he said,

once again demonstrate how differently the State Department and we understand “the use” of humanitarian pauses . . . Over the past months only, we have delivered more than 100 tonnes of most important aid—foods, medications, and essentials. This was delivered to all citizens of Aleppo, not limited to its western or eastern part. Meanwhile, the State Department has not delivered a mite to Syrians it is allegedly so much caring for.

In fact, Russian helicopters have been shot at, with at least two, perhaps more, shot down while on missions to deliver humanitarian aid, while a number of Russian military personnel have been killed. Last week, three Russian soldiers were wounded by mortar fire at one of the humanitarian corridor checkpoints in Aleppo. The Russians are in Syria, taking these risks to reduce civilian casualties, as the full partner of the recognized Syrian government in Damascus. The United States, on the other hand, as in the case of Iraq in 2003, has been the invader far more than it has been an invited partner. The result of U.S. military actions has been a spiral of violence and suffering imposed on civilian populations across the entire region from Libya to Afghanistan, the consequence of a criminal policy.