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Thousands of Syrians buried in the rubble six months after US destruction of Raqqa

Six months after what the Pentagon proclaimed as its “liberation” of the Syrian city of Raqqa from ISIS militants, reports are emerging about the devastation caused by the relentless US siege of airstrikes and artillery bombardments against the city.

The population of approximately 100,000 people, roughly a quarter the number living in the city prior to the US attack, is still without running water and electricity. Between 70 and 80 percent of the city was reduced to rubble by the US assault, with 11,000 buildings either damaged or destroyed.

Six months on, an unknown number of thousands of civilians, men, women and children, remain buried beneath the rubble, filling the city’s neighborhoods with the stench of decomposing corpses.

An April 19 on-the-spot report by Tamer El-Ghobashy for the *Washington Post* —a supporter of US military intervention in Syria—detailed the efforts by 37 emergency services personnel to recover the remains of those killed. Since October, they have recovered more than 300 bodies. There are another 6,000 reports of human remains throughout the city that are yet to be responded to. Many of those discovered are so badly decomposed that they are unidentifiable, or can only be identified by family members based on pieces of clothing.

Yasser Khamis, one of the rescue workers, told the *Post*, “People want to settle back into their neighborhoods and begin to rebuild. But everywhere we go, people are reporting more and more bodies.”

This has given rise to a new threat to the city's population: the spread of leishmaniasis, a parasitic skin disease spread by sand flies attracted to rotting corpses. Khanis noted that "The danger alarms are beginning to sound in this area, diseases and epidemics are starting to spread." Omar Khalf, a member of the US-backed forces, told Syria Direct that the emergency teams are seeking to "extract the bodies before summer comes" to limit the spread of disease.

The *Post* article quotes a 66-year-old Raqqa resident who lost seven family members to the airstrikes. "We suffered under [the Islamic State], but we're suffering more from this American liberation."

Raqqa's four major public hospitals were all destroyed by US bombs, including the Syrian National Hospital, which was deliberately targeted by the US forces in the final days of the assault in October, on the pretext that it was being used as a "command and control" centre by ISIS militants.

The city's population is also threatened with hundreds of unexploded munitions as well as improvised explosive devices and landmines left behind by ISIS fighters as they fled the city. Up to 200 people have been reported killed by these devices since October.

The US assault on Raqqa was a war crime of Hitlerian dimensions, waged against a heavily populated city, and described by US military commanders as some of the deadliest urban warfare since World War II. From June onwards, a 50,000-strong ground force of largely Kurdish US-backed proxy forces, which included embedded US special operations forces, made their assault backed by shelling and air bombings that have devastated Raqqa's social and physical infrastructure.

An indication of the scale of this crime is provided by the fact, reported by Airwars, that the US used 20,000 munitions over four months alone, surpassing the number of bombs dropped on Afghanistan over the entire previous year. Witness statements, reported by multiple news outlets including the *New York Times*, indicated that the US military used white phosphorus munitions, a violation of international law.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based monitoring group with ties to the US-backed anti-Assad Syrian "rebels," reported that from August 14 to 22 alone, 168 civilians died from US bombings.

The siege took place in parallel with the US military's destruction of Mosul. The Trump administration's secretary of defence, James Mattis, who as an army general directed the destruction of the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004, declared that the assault on the Iraqi city was based on "annihilation tactics," rather than "attrition tactics." The number of people

killed in Mosul has yet to be confirmed, but a report by Kurdish intelligence estimated it as high as 40,000.

The siege of Raqqa, which had been captured by ISIS militants in June 2014, was aimed at consolidating US control over the Syrian territories east of the Euphrates River, which cuts through Raqqa, including the oil-rich Deir el Zorr region. It was carried out without the approval of Syria's government, in violation of Syrian sovereignty, as part of the seven-year-long CIA campaign to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad, employing Islamic fundamentalist fighters as proxy forces.

An investigative report published by the BBC in November, entitled "Raqqa's Dirty Secret," revealed that the Pentagon allowed hundreds of ISIS fighters to flee Raqqa for other areas of Syria at the end of the siege. The presence of the ISIS fighters in Syria has been the justification for maintaining the permanent illegal stationing of US troops in the country.

The corporate media has remained virtually silent on the continuing revelations over the US war crime in Raqqa. One can only imagine the wall-to-wall newspaper and television coverage that would be dedicated to it if the bombings had been carried out by Russian, Iranian or Syrian government forces, rather than American.

This hypocrisy is a function of the Western media's role as a propaganda arm for the government and intelligence agencies. The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have inundated the population with denunciations of the supposed "chemical weapons" attack by the Assad government in Ghouta on April 7, which was staged by the CIA in order to provide a pretext for US, French and British airstrikes and cruise missile attacks on Syrian government facilities.

The media's limited coverage in Raqqa has reflected concerns within the intelligence agencies that mass opposition to the US-backed occupying forces will allow the Syrian government to regain control of the territory. In the April 19 *Washington Post* report, El-Ghobashy cited intelligence officials in Raqqa warning that "frustration could open the door for the Syrian government to return and fill the void, benefiting President Bashar al-Assad's main backers—Russia and Iran—and weakening American influence in the region."