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Escalating US Air Strikes Kill Hundreds of Civilians in Mosul

May 4, 2016

USA Today revealed on April 19th that U.S. air forces have been operating under looser rules of engagement in Iraq and Syria since last fall. The war commander, Lt. Gen. McFarland, now orders air strikes that are expected to kill up to 10 civilians without prior approval from US Central Command, and US officials acknowledge that air strikes are killing more civilians under the new rules.

US officials previously claimed that air strikes in Iraq and Syria had killed as few as 26 civilians. A senior Pentagon official who is briefed daily on the air war told *USA Today* that was unrealistic, since air strikes that have destroyed 6,000 buildings with over 40,000 bombs and missiles have inevitably killed much higher numbers of civilians.

As the US escalates its air strikes on Mosul, the largest city occupied by Islamic State, reports of hundreds of civilians killed by air strikes reveal some of the human costs of the US air war and the new rules of engagement.

Award-winning Iraqi environmental scientist and Mosul native Souad Al-Azzawi (Ph.D. Colorado School of Mines) has compiled a partial list of air strikes that have killed civilians and destroyed civilian infrastructure from reports by Mosul Eye, Nineveh Reporters Network, Al Maalomah News Network, other Iraqi media and contacts in Mosul:

- Many government buildings have been destroyed. As US officials told *USA Today*, attacks are often conducted at night to minimize civilian casualties, but they have killed security guards and civilians in neighboring buildings.
- Telephone exchanges have been systematically bombed and destroyed.
- Two large dairies were bombed, killing about 100 civilians and wounding 200 more.
- Multiple daytime air strikes on Mosul University on March 19th and 20th killed 92 civilians and wounded 135, mostly faculty, staff, families and students. Targets included the main administration building, classroom buildings, a women's dormitory and a faculty apartment building.
- 50 civilians were killed and 100 wounded by air strikes on 2 apartment buildings, Al Hadbaa and Al Khadraa.
- A mother and 4 children were killed in an air strike on a house in the Hay al Dhubat district of East Mosul on April 20th, next door to a house used by Islamic State that was undamaged.
- 22 civilians were killed in air strikes on houses in front of Mosul Medical College.
- 20 civilians were killed and 70 wounded by air strikes on the Sunni Waqif building and nearby houses and shops.
- US air strikes on April 24th damaged the Rashidiya water treatment plant in West Mosul and the Yarmouk power station in East Mosul.
- The Central Bank of Mosul in Ghazi Street and several branches of Rafidain and Rasheed banks were bombed, with heavy civilian casualties, despite all cash reportedly being removed after the first bank was struck.
- Three workers were killed and 12 wounded in an air strike on the former Pepsi bottling plant.
- An air strike on a fuel depot in an industrial area ignited an inferno with 150 casualties on April 18th.
- Bombs have damaged a food warehouse, power stations, and substations in West Mosul, and flour mills, a pharmaceutical factory, auto repair shops and other workshops across Mosul.
- The Al Hurairah Bridge was destroyed by air strikes.

At the very least, U.S. air strikes have killed hundreds of civilians in Mosul and destroyed much of the civilian infrastructure that people depend on for their lives in already dire conditions. And yet by all accounts, this is only the beginning of the U.S.-Iraqi campaign to retake Mosul. One and one-half million civilians are trapped in the city, 30 times the UN's estimate of the number of civilians in Fallujah before the November 2004 assault that killed 4,000 to 6,000 people, mostly civilians. Meanwhile ISIL prevents civilians from evacuating the city, believing that their presence protects its forces from even heavier bombardment.

International humanitarian law strictly prohibits military attacks on civilians, civilian areas and civilian infrastructure. The presence of several thousand ISIL militants in a city of 1.5 million people does not justify indiscriminate bombing or attacks on civilian targets. As the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq warned US officials in a Human Rights Report in 2007, "The presence of individual combatants among a great number of civilians does not alter the civilian nature of an area." UNICEF protested the bombing of a water treatment plant in Syria last

December as “a particularly alarming example” of how “the rules of war, including those meant to protect vital civilian infrastructure, continue to be broken on a daily basis.”

The fundamental contradiction of the militarized "war on terror" has always been that US aggression and other war crimes only reinforce the narratives of jihadis who see themselves as a bulwark against foreign aggression and neocolonialism in the Muslim world. Meanwhile US wars and covert operations against secular enemies like Hussein, Gaddafi, and Assad create new zones of chaos where jihadis can thrive.

President Obama has acknowledged publicly that there is therefore "no military solution" to jihadism. But successive U.S. administrations have proven unable to resist the lure of military escalation at each new stage of this crisis, unleashing wars that have killed about two million people, plunged a dozen countries into chaos and exploded Wahhabi jihadism from its original safe havens in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan to countries across the world.

If the US and its Iraqi allies follow through with their threatened assault on Mosul, the resulting massacre will join Fallujah, Guantanamo, and U.S. drone wars as a powerful catalyst for the next mutation of Wahhabi jihadism, which is likely to be more globalized and unified. But although Al Qaeda and Islamic State have proven adept at manipulating U.S. leaders into ever-escalating cycles of violence, the jihadis cannot directly order American pilots to bomb civilians. Only our leaders can do that, making them morally and legally responsible for these crimes, just as Islamic State's leaders are responsible for theirs.