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Washington's war crimes in Syria

Bill Van Auken

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The United States government is guilty of war crimes. This is the stark conclusion reached by the independent international commission of inquiry established by the United Nations in 2011 to investigate human rights violations stemming from the protracted US-backed war for regime change in Syria.

The Pentagon's relentless bombing campaign in and around the northern Syrian city of Raqqa, the so-called "capital" of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), has inflicted a "staggering loss of civilian life," while forcing over 160,000 civilians to flee their homes, Paulo Pinheiro, chairman of the UN's commission of inquiry, said on Wednesday.

US warplanes have dropped tens of thousands of munitions on Raqqa and the surrounding area, killing and maiming thousands of Syrian men, women and children. US Marines units, which have steadily swelled the ground forces illegally deployed on Syrian soil, have unleashed further lethal firepower, firing 155mm howitzers into crowded urban neighborhoods and flying Apache attack helicopters to provide close air support to the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces. This proxy force of Washington is dominated by the Kurdish YPG militia and "advised" by US Special Operations troops.

The bloody siege of Raqqa is unfolding even as the Pentagon is carrying out a similar slaughter, begun last October, in Mosul, an Iraqi city 232 miles to the east that once boasted a population of over 2 million. Most of Mosul has been pulverized by US bombs, rockets and shells. Thousands have been killed and wounded, while many remain still buried under the rubble.

The scope of the war crimes being carried out by the Pentagon comes more sharply into focus with the verified reports that US artillery units are firing white phosphorus shells into both Raqqa and Mosul. These incendiary chemical weapons, banned under international law for use in populated areas, ignite human flesh on contact, burning it to the bone, while those who breathe the gases released by the shells suffocate and burn from the inside out. The horrific wounds caused by these weapons reopen when exposed to air. White phosphorus is used to strike terror among those under attack.

Another murderous weapon being employed against the populations of Raqqa and Mosul is the MGM-140B rocket. Fired from a mobile rocket launcher, the weapon detonates in midair, scattering some 274 anti-personnel grenades, each of which is capable of killing anyone within a 15-meter radius.

Last month, US Defense Secretary James Mattis told the media that the Pentagon was adopting “annihilation tactics” in its anti-ISIS campaign, adding, “Civilian casualties are a fact of life in this sort of situation.” Mattis, a recently retired Marine general whom the military nicknamed “Mad Dog,” knows whereof he speaks. In 2004, he led the two murderous sieges of Fallujah that claimed the lives of thousands of Iraqis, and, as in the latest US atrocities, made use of white phosphorus shells against a civilian population.

The US military interventions in Iraq and Syria are not aimed at “annihilating” ISIS, itself the product of the 2003 US invasion and occupation of Iraq, followed by Washington’s utilization of Islamist fighters as proxy ground forces in the regime-change wars in both Libya and Syria. While Raqqa has been surrounded by US-backed forces from the north, east and west, an escape route for ISIS fighters has been opened up to the southeast in order to funnel them into the province of Deir al-Zour, so they can fight the Syrian army there. Similarly, large numbers of ISIS fighters were allowed to flee Mosul, crossing the border into Syria for the same purpose.

Washington’s strategic objectives in Iraq and Syria are not those of “fighting terrorism,” but rather consolidating US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East and preparing for war against the principal obstacles to this objective, Iran and Russia. For US imperialism, undisputed control over both the Persian Gulf and Central Asia would provide the means to cut off energy supplies to its global rival, China.

These predatory aims are the source of war crimes, and not only in Iraq and Syria. In Yemen, Washington is backing a near-genocidal war led by the Saudi monarchy with the objective of weakening Iran’s influence in the Persian Gulf. During his visit to Riyadh last month, President Donald Trump announced a \$110 billion arms deal with the kingdom, which will, in the first instance, replenish the bombs and missiles it is raining on the population of the most impoverished nation in the Arab world.

This arms package follows similar deals signed by the Obama administration, which also supplied the Saudis with logistical and intelligence aid for the Yemen war, including mid-air refueling for its warplanes and US naval backing for a blockade that is starving the population and denying it medical supplies. In addition to killing 12,000 people outright, the US-Saudi war has left at least 7 million Yemenis on the brink of famine, while cholera is threatening to kill thousands more. Save the Children reports that, on average, one Yemeni child is contracting the disease every 35 seconds.

Meanwhile, Washington is preparing to once again escalate the protracted slaughter in Afghanistan. US officials reported Tuesday that Trump has authorized Mattis to set troop levels in the country, which the US has occupied since 2001. Thousands more soldiers are expected to be deployed, with the aim of carrying out the “annihilation tactics” favored by the defense secretary. A taste of what is to come was seen Monday when US troops whose convoy hit a roadside bomb opened fire indiscriminately on civilians, killing a brick kiln laborer and his two sons, ages eight and 10.

As these atrocities play out across an ever-expanding global battlefield, what is striking is the absence of any organized opposition to US war crimes. The continuous wars are not even a subject of debate in Congress and are supported by both Democrats and Republicans. The media, a faithful propaganda arm of the Pentagon and the CIA, has shown a complete disinterest in US war crimes, paying attention only when allegations are made against Russia or the Syrian government.

Moreover, while masses of working people in the US and around the world are opposed to war, the pseudo-left groups that got their start in the middle class antiwar protests of the 1960s and 1970s have abandoned even verbal opposition to US military aggression. Reflecting the interests of privileged middle-class layers, groups like the International Socialist Organization in the US, the Left Party in Germany and the New Anti-capitalist Party in France have articulated the politics of this new constituency for imperialism, justifying neo-colonial interventions in the name of “human rights” and portraying CIA regime-change operations as in Libya and Syria as “revolutions.”

The emergence of a genuine antiwar movement is today a matter of life and death, as the war crimes being carried out by Washington across the globe threaten to coalesce into a global conflict involving the major nuclear powers. Such a movement can be built only in the fight to mobilize the working class independently on the basis of a socialist program to put an end to capitalism, the source of war.