

Good Deaths in Mosul, Bad Deaths in Aleppo

Exclusive: As the U.S.-backed offensive in Mosul, Iraq, begins, the mainstream U.S. media readies the American people to blame the terrorists for civilian casualties but the opposite rules apply to Syria's Aleppo, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Note how differently The New York Times prepares the American public for civilian casualties from the new U.S.-backed Iraqi government assault on the city of Mosul to free it from the Islamic State, compared to the unrelenting condemnation of the Russian-backed Syrian government assault on neighborhoods of east Aleppo held by Al Qaeda.

In the case of Mosul, the million-plus residents are not portrayed as likely victims of American airstrikes and Iraqi government ground assaults, though surely many will die during the offensive. Instead, the civilians are said to be eagerly awaiting liberation from the Islamic State terrorists and their head-chopping brutality.

"Mosul's residents are hoarding food and furtively scrawling resistance slogans on walls," writes Times' veteran war correspondent Rod Nordland about this week's launch of the U.S.-backed government offensive. "Those forces will fight to enter a city where for weeks the harsh authoritarian rule of the Islamic State ... has sought to crack down on a population eager to either escape or rebel, according to interviews with roughly three dozen people from Mosul. ...

"Just getting out of Mosul had become difficult and dangerous: Those who were caught faced million-dinar fines, unless they were former members of the Iraqi Army or police, in which case the punishment was beheading. ... Graffiti and other displays of dissidence against the Islamic State were more common in recent weeks, as were executions when the vandals were caught."

The Times article continues: "Mosul residents chafed under social codes banning smoking and calling for splashing acid on body tattoos, summary executions of perceived opponents, whippings of those who missed prayers or trimmed their beards, and destroying 'un-Islamic' historical monuments."

So, the message is clear: if the inevitable happens and the U.S.-backed offensive kills a number of Mosul's civilians, including children, The New York Times' readers have been hardened to accept this "collateral damage" as necessary to free the city from blood-thirsty extremists. The fight to crush these crazies is worth it, even if there are significant numbers of civilians

killed in the “cross-fire.”

And we’ve seen similar mainstream media treatment of other U.S.-organized assaults on urban areas, such as the devastation of the Iraqi city, Fallujah, in 2004 when U.S. Marines routed Iraqi insurgents from the city while leveling or severely damaging most of the city’s buildings and killing hundreds of civilians. But those victims were portrayed in the Western press as “human shields,” shifting the blame for their deaths onto the Iraqi insurgents.

Despite the fact that U.S. forces invaded Iraq in defiance of international law – and thus all the thousands of civilian deaths across Iraq from the “shock and awe” U.S. firepower should be considered war crimes – there was virtually no such analysis allowed into the pages of The New York Times or the other mainstream U.S. media. Such talk was forced to the political fringes, as it continues to be today. War-crimes tribunals are only for the other guys.

Lust to Kill Children

By contrast, the Times routinely portrays the battle for east Aleppo as simply a case of barbaric Russian and Syrian leaders bombing innocent neighborhoods with no regard for the human cost, operating out of an apparent lust to kill children.

Rather than focusing on Al Qaeda’s harsh rule of east Aleppo, the Times told its readers in late September how to perceive the Russian-Syrian offensive to drive out Al Qaeda and its allies. A Sept. 25 [article](#) by Anne Barnard and Somini Sengupta, entitled “Syria and Russia Appear Ready to Scorch Aleppo,” began:

“Make life intolerable and death likely. Open an escape route, or offer a deal to those who leave or surrender. Let people trickle out. Kill whoever stays. Repeat until a deserted cityscape is yours. It is a strategy that both the Syrian government and its Russian allies have long embraced to subdue Syrian rebels, largely by crushing the civilian populations that support them.

“But in the past few days, as hopes for a revived cease-fire have disintegrated at the United Nations, the Syrians and Russians seem to be mobilizing to apply this kill-all-who-resist strategy to the most ambitious target yet: the rebel-held sections of the divided metropolis of Aleppo.”

Again, note how the “rebels” are portrayed as local heroes, rather than a collection of jihadists from both inside and outside Syria fighting under the operational command of Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front, which recently underwent a name change to the Syria Conquest Front. But the name change and the pretense about “moderate” rebels are just more deceptions.

As journalist/historian Gareth Porter has written: “Information from a wide range of sources, including some of those the United States has been explicitly supporting, makes it clear that every armed anti-Assad organization unit in those provinces [of Idlib and Aleppo] is engaged in a military structure controlled by Nusra militants. All of these rebel groups fight alongside the Nusra Front and coordinate their military activities with it. ...

“At least since 2014 the Obama administration has armed a number of Syrian rebel groups even though it knew the groups were coordinating closely with the Nusra Front, which was simultaneously getting arms from Turkey and Qatar. The strategy called for supplying TOW anti-tank missiles to the ‘Syrian Revolutionaries Front’ (SRF) as the core of a client Syrian army that would be independent of the Nusra Front.

“However, when a combined force of Nusra and non-jihadist brigades including the SRF captured the Syrian army base at Wadi al-Deif in December 2014, the truth began to emerge. The SRF and other groups to which the United States had supplied TOW missiles had fought under Nusra’s command to capture the base.”

Arming Al Qaeda

This reality – the fact that the U.S. government is indirectly supplying sophisticated weaponry to Al Qaeda – is rarely mentioned in the mainstream U.S. news media, though one might think it would make for a newsworthy story. But it would undercut the desired propaganda narrative of “good guy” rebels fighting “bad guy” government backed by “ultra-bad guy” Russians.

What if Americans understood that their tax money and U.S. weaponry were going to aid the terrorist group that perpetrated the 9/11 attacks? What if they understood the larger historical context that Washington helped midwife the modern jihadist movement – and Al Qaeda – through the U.S./Saudi support for the Afghan mujahedeen in the 1980s?

And what if Americans understood that Washington’s supposed regional “allies,” including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Israel, have sided with Al Qaeda in Syria because of their intense hatred of Shiite-ruled Iran, an ally of Syria’s secular government?

These Al Qaeda sympathies have been known for several years but never get reported in the mainstream U.S. press. In September 2013, Israel’s Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren, then a close adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, told the Jerusalem Post that Israel favored Syria’s Sunni extremists over President Bashar al-Assad.

“The greatest danger to Israel is by the strategic arc that extends from Tehran,

to Damascus to Beirut. And we saw the Assad regime as the keystone in that arc,” Oren told the Jerusalem Post in an interview. “We always wanted Bashar Assad to go, we always preferred the bad guys who weren’t backed by Iran to the bad guys who were backed by Iran.” He said this was the case even if the “bad guys” were affiliated with Al Qaeda.

And, in June 2014, speaking as a former ambassador at an Aspen Institute conference, Oren expanded on his position, saying Israel would even prefer a victory by the brutal Islamic State over continuation of the Iranian-backed Assad in Syria. “From Israel’s perspective, if there’s got to be an evil that’s got to prevail, let the Sunni evil prevail,” Oren said.

But such cynical – and dangerous – realpolitik is kept from the American people. Instead, the Syrian conflict is presented as all about the children.

There is also little said about how Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front and its allied jihadists keep the civilian population in east Aleppo essentially as “human shields.” When “humanitarian corridors” have been opened to allow civilians to escape, they had been fired on by the jihadists determined to keep as many people under their control as possible.

Propaganda Fodder

By forcing the civilians to stay, Al Qaeda and its allies can exploit the injuries and deaths of civilians, especially the children, for propaganda advantages.

Going along with Al Qaeda’s propaganda strategy, the Times and other mainstream U.S. news outlets have kept the focus on the children. A Times dispatch on Sept. 27 begins: “They cannot play, sleep or attend school. Increasingly, they cannot eat. Injury or illness could be fatal. Many just huddle with their parents in windowless underground shelters— which offer no protection from the powerful bombs that have turned east Aleppo into a kill zone.

“Among the roughly 250,000 people trapped in the insurgent redoubt of the divided northern Syrian city are 100,000 children, the most vulnerable victims of intensified bombings by Syrian forces and their Russian allies. Though the world is jolted periodically by the suffering of children in the Syria conflict – the photographs of Alan Kurdi’s drowned body and Omran Daqneesh’s bloodied face are prime examples – dead and traumatized children are increasingly common.”

This propagandistic narrative has bled into the U.S. presidential campaign with Martha Raddatz, a moderator of the second presidential debate, incorporating much of the evil-Russians theme into a question that went so far as to liken the

human suffering in Aleppo to the Holocaust, the Nazi extermination campaign against Jews and other minorities.

That prompted former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to repeat her call for an expanded U.S. military intervention in Syria, including a “no-fly zone,” which U.S. military commanders say would require a massive operation that would kill many Syrians, both soldiers and civilians, to eliminate Syria’s sophisticated air-defense systems and its air force.

Based on the recent Wikileaks publication of Clinton’s speeches to investment bankers and other special interests, we also know that she recognizes the high human cost from this strategy. In one June 2013 speech, she said, “To have a no-fly zone you have to take out all of the air defense, many of which are located in populated areas. So our missiles, even if they are standoff missiles so we’re not putting our pilots at risk – you’re going to kill a lot of Syrians. So all of a sudden this intervention that people talk about so glibly becomes an American and NATO involvement where you take a lot of civilians.”

Yet, during the campaign, Clinton has spoken glibly about her own proposal to impose a “no-fly zone” over Syria, which has become even more dangerous since 2015 when the Russians agreed to directly assist the Syrian government in fighting Al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Also, left unsaid about such a U.S. intervention is that it could open the way for Al Qaeda and/or its spinoff Islamic State to defeat the Syrian army and gain control of Damascus, creating the potential for even a worse bloodbath against Christians, Shiites, Alawites, secular Sunnis and other “heretics.” Not to mention the fact that a U.S.-imposed “no-fly zone” would be a clear violation of international law.

Over the next few weeks, we are sure hear much about the Islamic State using the people of Mosul as “human shields” and thus excusing U.S. bombs when they strike civilians targets and kill children. It will all be the terrorists’ fault, except that an opposite set of “journalistic” rules will apply to Aleppo.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com).

Why Colombia's Peace Deal Failed

Exclusive: Though polls show Colombians strongly favoring peace, President Santos's peace deal went down to a narrow defeat for a variety of unconnected reasons, including Hurricane Matthew's impact, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

It may take Colombia years to recover from the damage wreaked by Hurricane Matthew, which lashed the country's coast earlier this month before heading north. It did far more than simply flood roads and rip the roofs off peasant shacks. It also helped send the national referendum on peace with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) down to an historic defeat that almost nobody expected.

As a result, the nation is now in crisis. No one knows whether the Marxist guerrillas who agreed to lay down their arms will accept harsher terms demanded by leaders of the "No" campaign. Though being selected for the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize just days after the narrow "No" vote, President Juan Manuel Santos has been politically discredited inside Colombia, putting his legislative agenda at risk for the next year and a half. International markets punished the country's currency after the vote, registering investor concern over Colombia's governability.

Many news analyses blamed the referendum's defeat on FARC's history of violence and crime. The *Washington Post* called the vote "an extraordinary repudiation of the guerrilla commanders of the FARC . . . The outcome reveals the depths of Colombian public animosity toward the rebels, accumulated by decades of kidnappings, bombing and land seizures in the name of Marxist-Leninist revolution."

The *New York Times* agreed: "To many Colombians who had endured years of kidnappings and killings by the rebels, the agreement was too lenient. It would have allowed most rank-and-file fighters to start lives as normal citizens, and rebel leaders to receive reduced sentences for war crimes."

That was certainly the message favored by Colombia's right-wing Senator Álvaro Uribe, who led a scorched-earth campaign against FARC during his term as president from 2002 to 2010. More recently, Uribe fought tooth and nail to block the peace accord signed in August by President Santos and FARC leaders after 52 years of civil war, the death of a quarter million people, and the displacement of 7 million.

But a closer look at the evidence suggests that the referendum's extremely narrow defeat was driven as much by voter overconfidence in its passage, bad weather, and a U.S.-style negative campaign that fomented resentment and anger around wedge social issues.

A War-Weary Nation

The referendum did not deliver a popular mandate against peace. It failed by a mere four-tenths of one percent, with only 37 percent of eligible voters showing up at the polls on Oct. 2, which was just two days after Hurricane Matthew reached its peak strength as a Category 5 storm and buffeted Colombia's Caribbean coast with nearly 160 mile-per-hour winds and torrential rains.

A majority of Colombians clearly favor peace in general and the signed accord in particular. Huge peace demonstrations followed the vote in many Colombian cities, even in Uribe's traditional stronghold of Medellín. Survey after public opinion survey had predicted passage of the referendum by a two-to-one margin. "We couldn't imagine that we would win," said Uribe's manager of the "No" campaign, Juan Carlos Velez.

So what went wrong? One problem, Velez said, was the polls themselves. Their lopsided margin instilled in the pro-government camp a sense of overconfidence, sapping the "Yes" campaign of energy and voter turnout.

In addition, torrential rainfall along Colombia's coast – a region of ardent pro-peace sentiment – impeded voting by four million people, or about 12 percent of eligible voters, according to election observers. The rains delayed the opening of polling stations and spoiled election materials. The extreme weather also discouraged supporters – who had every reason to expect victory – from turning out to cast ballots.

Election observers also reported "widespread illegal campaigning" near polling places and inadequate staffing or other poor conditions at nearly 40 percent of all voting stations.

The "No" vote was also inflated by a scare campaign based on misinformation, led by Velez out of the Lee Atwater and Karl Rove playbooks.

Velez explained to a Colombian newspaper – much to Uribe's chagrin – that he appealed to emotions and fear rather than facts. The "No" campaign "stopped explaining the agreements to focus the message on indignation," Velez said. "We wanted the people to go out to vote while fed up."

Velez's team convinced middle- and upper-class voters to reject the referendum by stirring up their resentment against an unrelated proposal by President

Santos to increase taxes to offset declining oil revenues. Radio ads aimed at poorer audiences criticized subsidies the government proposed to pay to former guerrillas to help them reintegrate into society.

“A social media campaign scared pensioners into believing they would have to give over 7% of their pensions to help support demobilized guerrillas,” reported The Guardian. “Flyers for the no side falsely claimed the accord would allow a joint government-FARC committee to prosecute anyone who was against the deal.”

Social Issues in Play

The “No” campaign also rallied conservative Catholic and Protestant evangelical voters by focusing their ire on Gina Parody, a gay education minister who had proposed mixed school bathrooms and more gender-neutral uniforms. She took a leave of absence to become a leading campaigner for the peace accord, which recognized the rights of gays and lesbians. Pointing to her, Uribe’s allies organized protests across the country to denounce the peace deal as a threat to “family values.” Colombia’s inspector general even charged that government officials were “using peace as an excuse to impose their gender ideology.”

Thanks to such tactics, “The ‘No’ campaign was the cheapest and most effective in a long time,” Velez boasted.

Velez has since resigned and is now under investigation for electoral fraud. Also under investigation is another former campaign chief for Uribe’s party, who allegedly ordered an aide to bribe military and police officials to help steal to the private emails of the government’s peace negotiating team.

Perhaps the most disturbing, if unproven, charges are those that connect Uribe and many party members to the country’s large paramilitary drug trafficking organizations, which also opposed the peace accord.

Some 3,000 of these heavily armed criminals are active across the country, according to the national police. Their threats to kill FARC members created one of the most significant obstacles to demobilizing the Marxist guerrillas, who feared the government could not protect them.

Now, unless President Santos and FARC can find a way to get peace back on track, all it may take is one massacre by these paramilitaries against FARC soldiers or sympathizers to plunge the country back into the dark hole of civil war – a war that the vast majority of Colombians want to end.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies, and the CIA in Central America (with Peter Dale Scott). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews included

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