

“The Human Cost” of US Sponsored “Liberty” (aka Terrorism): Civilians in the “Liberation” of Mosul

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Bombs do not have a conscience, however named, blessed or created. They go, at least in a rough sense, where directed, and if the deliverer is ill disposed, confused or simply incompetent, disaster follows. Between the ideological rants and principled feelings about killing the enemy, there is only one fact worth nothing: death and the ordinance used to cause it are intimately twinned.

The very concept of a moralised arsenal, or a principled form of humanitarian liberation, is always problematic. An “arsenal for democracy” against the arsenal of a thousand year Reich, a theme dating from the Second World War, is symbolic rather than functional, based on discriminations artificially made. At the end of any war or battle, however intentioned, is a stocked grave.

The narrative on fighting Islamic State is this: good guys size up bad guys and the former will triumph in a dark-light narrative of childish simplicity. But consequentially, it is always difficult to distinguish a Bomber Harris, architect of the Dresden bombing of 1945 that had no military value, from the camp commander who orders murderous gas for extermination camps. We can well draw distinctions about how wars begin, and regimes behind them, but the methods of war, including their outcomes, are also important.

Put the treacle-pudding guff of humanitarian virtue to the side, and what matters is the result, which usually involves fresh graves strewn over fields of dissolved hopes. Politics tends to follow, patching such matters up with comforting cosmetics. Islamic State is an enemy of certain cherished values, which is deemed more than sufficient in terms of getting onto a plane and unleashing a salvo on a civilian packed suburb.

All of this ties rather bloodily in the supposed liberation of Mosul. The operation is not going according to plan. That, of course, presumes a coherent plan to begin with, with neat objectives, spread sheet directives, and boxes to tick.

The Iraqi forces, packed with US coalition participation in terms of coordinated air strikes, has realised that fighting in urban quarters, ballasted by air support, is a costly affair. It is a discovery that had already been made centuries before, and such fighters, it would seem, are none the wiser.

For the insurgent, the civilian is not merely a shield but a gold asset rich in dividends. Guerrillas, liked or otherwise by the local populace, blend in the landscape of rubble and charred ruins, finding protection in shattered remains and broken families.

The whole point, in a sense, is to obliterate the distinction between guerrilla and civilian, a fact that the intervening voices duly answer by inflicting heavy casualties – on civilians. Be it the ubiquitous car bomb or the air strike with delusionary famed weapons of precision, the distinction of being a combatant or civilian is irrelevant. If you are in Mosul, you either flee, die or chance your luck. Forget the official line, and believe no one.

The casualty rate amongst civilians in the Mosul operation has spiked for the obvious reason that all sides in this conflict wish to capitalise on immediate gains with minimal concern. As Iraqi forces make the bloody advance into a city of half a million, with some 2,000 remaining Islamic State forces, US-led strikes have flattened entire blocks.

The attack on a Mosul block led to as many as 200 civilian deaths, though the response from Iraqi authorities was a steadfast demurral: Islamic State, it was suggested, was behind it with one of their murderous car bombs. Account and counter-account have followed.

According to Amnesty International, hundreds have died in their homes or places of refuge, advised by the Iraqi government to stay put as the cavalry charge in for the rescue.

“Survivors and eyewitnesses in East Mosul said they did not try to flee as the battle got underway because they received repeated instructions from Iraqi authorities to remain in their homes.”[1]

In the newsrooms, civilian casualties are an embarrassment for the Coalition forces, though a confession to error made in good faith always goes down well for the home tax payers fronting the bills for such lethal adventures. This is war, and war can be untidy and imperfect, despite immaculately filled spread-sheets and blueprints for victory.

Removing Islamic State forces from the city should remind the US personnel engaged about the disastrous operations run by the Coalition in Iraq from 2003. Cluttered, dense, and unforgiving, warfare in the streets, where indiscriminate, opportunistically detonated car bombs meet air delivered weapons, can only mean more remorseless suffering.

The pity of war lacks sincerity when monopolised by those who claim the motivations of liberation. Such positions start making combating sides look plain and similar: every warring outfit wants to know they are on the side of the angels when they massacre populations and put a city to the sword. They all ultimately did it for a “good” cause.

The only difference is the hypocrisy associated with those moralist warriors who still claim that God, the Responsibility to Protect, or some fantastic notion of shielding civilians before modern carnage is ever feasible. In war, there is dull, inevitable, cruel death, and in the modern era, the civilian is a pawn to be idealised in terms of protection, and killed in terms of expediency.

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Note

[1] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/03/iraq-civilians-killed-by-airstrikes-in-their-homes-after-they-were-told-not-to-flee-mosul/>

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