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Details are emerging about U.S.-led coalition airstrikes that are believed to have killed over 200 people in a single day in Iraq. The U.S.-led coalition has admitted launching airstrikes on March 17 targeting a crowded neighborhood in Mosul. They are among the deadliest U.S. airstrikes in the region since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. According to some reports, one of these strikes destroyed houses where hundreds of people were taking refuge amid the city's heavy fighting. Up to 80 civilians, including women and children, may have died in one house's basement alone. This bombing is just one of an onslaught of U.S.-led coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria that has killed as many as 1,000 civilians in March alone, according to the journalistic project Airwars. For more, we speak with Chris Woods, founder of Airwars, a nonprofit group that monitors civilian deaths from international airstrikes in Syria and Iraq.

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**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** The U.S.-backed Iraqi military's ground campaign to retake west Mosul from ISIS has been halted, as details emerged over the weekend about U.S.-led coalition airstrikes that are believed to have killed over 200 people in a single day. The U.S.-led coalition has admitted launching airstrikes on March 17th that targeted a crowded neighborhood in Mosul. They are among the deadliest U.S. airstrikes in the region since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. According to reports, one of these strikes hit an explosive-filled truck, triggering a blast that destroyed nearby houses where hundreds of people were taking refuge amid the city's heavy fighting. Up to 80 civilians, including women and children, may have died in one house's basement alone. This is a family member of some of the civilians killed in the strike.

**WITNESS:** [translated] I came to the house to stay with my family, but the owner of the house told me there was no place for me. More than 100 people were inside. Half an hour later, the house was hit in an airstrike. There were neither snipers nor ISIL militants on the street. At least 15 people from this street, that links into the alleyways, have been killed.

**AMY GOODMAN:** This bombing is just one of an onslaught of U.S.-led coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria that's killed as many as a thousand civilians in March alone, according to the journalistic project Airwars. Another one of these strikes occurred last week in Syria, when a U.S. Reaper drone struck a gathering in the rebel-held village near Aleppo, killing as many as

49 people. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, most of the dead were civilians who had gathered at a mosque to pray. The Pentagon acknowledged carrying out strikes on this village, but denied hitting a mosque. Pentagon officials said the gathering was a meeting of al-Qaeda. The high civilian death toll is leading many to question whether the U.S. military has loosened the rules of engagement that seek to limit civilian casualties. The Pentagon maintains the rules have not changed.

Well, for more, we're going to London to speak to Chris Woods, founder of Airwars, the nonprofit group that monitors civilian deaths from international airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Chris Woods is also an award-winning reporter and author of *Sudden Justice: America's Secret Drone Wars*.

Chris, welcome to *Democracy Now!*

**CHRIS WOODS:** Good morning.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Talk about what you understand happened on March 17th in—in Iraq.

**CHRIS WOODS:** This is a very complicated event, and, in fact, the story is still changing today. We know that a devastating explosion, or sequence of explosions, took place in the al-Jadida neighborhood, the New Mosul area. And a minimum of 101 civilians died. Some claims have placed the number of dead in that immediate neighborhood at over 500. We're talking like a really catastrophic event.

In terms of attributing responsibility, that's proving more challenging. The coalition, as you said, has said it did conduct an airstrike in the immediate vicinity on March 17th. But what's complicating this is that the Iraq military also appears to have conducted artillery strikes into that immediate area, and there may or may not have been ISIS booby traps or a vehicle-borne truck bomb. So it's a very complex event. We also—with the coalition, we don't know which coalition partners were involved in the event—the United States most probably, but there are four other nations in the coalition also bombing quite heavily at Mosul at the moment. But—

**AMY GOODMAN:** Those countries are?

**CHRIS WOODS:** —what we can absolutely say—so, these are Australia, the United Kingdom, Belgium and France. All of them have said that Mosul is where most of their airstrikes are now taking place. So, a lot of—a lot of people involved here. But, of course, you know, the reality here is that more than a hundred civilians certainly are dead, *Washington Post* saying this morning that they've been speaking to civil defense in Baghdad—in Mosul, and a minimum of 101 bodies so far removed from the scene, and perhaps many more—many more bodies there. And this is what leads to this report of this is possibly one of the highest-ever reported civilian casualty events that the coalition or the U.S. may have been involved in.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And, Chris, *The Guardian* is reporting that Iraq has suspended the Mosul offensive after these attacks. What do you know about the accuracy of that report? And what's the situation in terms of the response of the Iraqi government?

**CHRIS WOODS:** Yeah, it was certainly reported that the campaign had been paused, but, in fact, there's very little sign of that. The airstrikes have still been going in very heavily from not just the coalition, but also the Iraqis. Two more neighborhoods were captured by Iraqi ground forces just yesterday from ISIS. So, there may have been a slowing down of the campaign, but really, I think, you know, the coalition, the Iraq government, is keen to capture west Mosul as quickly as possible. They're gambling here that the quicker they capture the city, the less overall risk of harm there is to civilians. But civilians are paying a terrible price here. According to one report last week, which appears to have come from a senior Iraq military official, 4,000 civilians have died in the first month of fighting for west Mosul. That's a thousand civilians being killed a week at the moment. Those are very high numbers—unacceptable numbers, in our view.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Now, these casualties are far higher than in the months, the last months, of the Obama administration. Do you get any sense that this is as a result of changes in operation by U.S. forces in this particular offensive, or is this just the fact that they're now moving into a highly populated area?

**CHRIS WOODS:** It's a really difficult one to untangle. There's no doubt that the number of allegations and reported fatalities are through the roof. We have more than 120 alleged civilian casualty events from the coalition so far in March. That's across Iraq and Syria. We have more than 1,200 civilians reported killed, alleged killed, by coalition actions. Those are way up there

with the levels of allegations we saw against Russia last year when it was bombing across Syria. So these are very, very high levels of reported civilian casualties.

Part of that is definitely to do with west Mosul. The U.N. had warned beforehand, the aid agencies had warned, NGOs had warned there were going to be a lot of civilian casualties, because so many civilians were trapped in the city. And that's exactly what we're seeing. And we're seeing far too many civilians killed in west Mosul. But we're seeing many civilians being reported killed in northern Syria, as well, around Raqqa. And the assault on Raqqa itself hasn't even begun yet, and yet we're seeing two, three, four civilian casualty events a day around Raqqa.

So, yes, civilian deaths are way up with the coalition. What's still somewhat difficult to untangle is whether we would have seen that under Obama. The strikes were rising. The deaths were rising steeply in the last months of Obama. Trump has obviously inherited Obama's battle plan, to some degree. Even so, we're hearing from Iraqi officials that it is easier to call in airstrikes now, particularly U.S. strikes. So the picture is still confused. I actually think this is—you know, we need a straight answer from the Pentagon, from the White House. Have they lifted restrictions that were there to protect civilians on the battlefield? Because ordinary Iraqis and Syrians have a right to know that. This is a life-and-death issue for them.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Chris Woods, I wanted to ask you about another recent harrowing attack involving the United States and its allies. In Syria, a U.S. Reaper drone recently struck a gathering in the rebel-held village in the province of Aleppo. As many as 49 people died. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, most of the dead were civilians who had gathered at a mosque to pray. The Pentagon acknowledges carrying out strikes on the village, but denied hitting a mosque. They said the gathering was a meeting of al-Qaeda members. This is Syrian ambulance driver Munther Abu Amar.

**MUNTER ABU AMAR:** [translated] I'm an ambulance driver, Munther Abu Amar, from Aleppo's western province. We came here after we were called, after an airstrike targeted the mosque while worshipers were inside. There are more than 30 martyrs, and dozens of injured people were transported to the Atareb hospital. There are still many people who are missing, five or six missing people. One of the martyrs was an elderly woman who lived close to the mosque. God help us.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So that's a Syrian ambulance driver in Aleppo. Can you tell us what you understand happened there, Chris?

**CHRIS WOODS:** Well, I mean, every—every—report from the ground is in agreement that this was a mosque complex, that it looks like the U.S. wasn't aware that a new building that had been built near the old mosque was an extension of that complex, and that hundreds of locals were gathered for a religious meeting when that unilateral U.S. strike took place. So this wasn't a coalition attack. It was a unilateral U.S. targeted attack, the kind we've more usually seen in Pakistan or Yemen or Somalia. And it's part of this shadow war that only America has been conducting against al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria. It gets very little publicity, but, in fact, many of these strikes taking place now. And again, they've ramped up under Trump, although in the last weeks of Obama we saw quite a big jump in the number of those reports. Significant numbers of civilians killed in that event, as well.

I think one thing we're really seeing with Syria is poor intelligence. It seems CENTCOM did not know that that was a mosque building. And again, there was a school reported targeted and destroyed just last week in a place called Tabqa, near Raqqa. In that instance, the school was being used by internally displaced people. And there were reports of up to a hundred families being in that building when it was struck. There's still a great deal of dispute about how many civilians died. But a minimum, we think, of about 35 civilians were killed in that event, as well. This is poor intelligence. Any local would have been able to tell them that IDPs, displaced civilians, were living in that building. And I think this is—this is about the proxy force that America is using in Syria today, which are not from this area—the SDF, primarily Kurdish force. It's poor intelligence. It's strikes being conducted very quickly. And civilians on the ground in Syria are paying a significant price for that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Chris, we just have a minute left. Certainly, a huge amount of attention was paid to what happened in London with the killing of four people in an attack near the Parliament. There's almost no—in the United States—attention paid to this massive spike in casualties in Iraq and Syria.

**CHRIS WOODS:** You're right. You're right. I mean, there isn't an equivalence there. You know, a few weeks ago, we were very critical of international media for not covering the civilian casualties in Iraq, in Syria. That's really changed now. Great work being done by international, regional, local media in both countries, really outstanding journalism now, looking at these civilian casualties. The disconnect is domestically. Where are the political voices being raised about this? There was a lot of anger from our politicians last year with Aleppo, and quite rightly

so, when so many civilians died. Where are the raised voices here on behalf of Syrians and Iraqis who are dying as a result of our bombs?

**AMY GOODMAN:** Chris Woods, I want to thank you for being with us, founder of Airwars, the nonprofit group that monitors civilian deaths from international airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Chris is an award-winning reporter and author of *Sudden Justice: America's Secret Drone Wars*.