

U.S. Hid Thousands of Civilian Deaths in Mideast Air Wars

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A long two-part series in the December 19 New York Times and in the online version of the Times Sunday December 31 magazine, exposes that since 2014, in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria thousands of non-combatants were killed in over 50,000 air strikes by drones.

This was covered up by the U.S. government under three administrations — Obama, Trump and Biden.

The series by reporter Azmat Kahn is based on a trove of internal Pentagon documents, as well as on-the-ground reporting from dozens of airstrike sites and interviews with scores of survivors. This represented five years of research.

Kahn wrote, “The trove of documents — the military’s own confidential assessments of more than 1,300 reports of civilian casualties, obtained by The New York Times — lays bare how the air war has been marked by deeply flawed intelligence, rushed and often imprecise targeting, and the deaths of thousands of civilians many of them children, a sharp contrast to the American government’s image of war waged by all-seeing drones and precision bombs

“The air campaign represents a fundamental transformation of warfare that took shape in the final years of the Obama administration, amid the deepening unpopularity of the forever wars that had claimed more than 6,000 American service members.

“The United States traded many boots on the ground for an arsenal of aircraft directed by controllers sitting at computers, often thousands of miles away.

“President Obama called it ‘the most precise air campaign in history’.

“This was the promise: American ‘extraordinary technology’ would allow the military to kill the right people while taking the greatest possible care not to harm the wrong people.”

The first article of the expose ends with Afghanistan. This gives some context to what the series documents.

“The August [2021] drone strike in Kabul that killed an Afghan aid worker and nine of his relatives grabbed the world’s attention. But most American air strikes took place far from the cities, in remote areas where cameras were not filming, mobile lines were often cut and the internet was non-existent,” Kahn wrote. Seventy percent of Afghans live in rural areas.

“America’s longest war was, in many ways, its least transparent. For years, these rural battlefields were largely off-limits to American reporters. But after the Taliban returned to power in August, Afghanistan hinterlands opened up.

“The Times arrived in Barang [in the Band-e-Timor Area of Afghanistan] a little over a month later, visiting 15 households in this hamlet of mud homes and farmland, and also interviewing tribal elders

and others across Band-e-Timor. Most said they had never spoken to a journalist before.

“The accounts they gave — consistently and reliably — help explain how America lost the country, how its war of airstrikes and support of corrupt security forces [of the puppet government] paved the way for the Taliban’s return.

“On average, each household lost five civilian family members. An overwhelming majority of these deaths were caused by airstrikes, most during [security forces] raids. Many people admitted they had relatives who were Taliban fighters, but civilians accounted for most of those lost:

“A father killed in an airstrike while running for the forest. A nephew killed while he slept with his flock of sheep. An uncle shot by American soldiers while he went to a bazaar to buy okra for dinner.

“At the sound of helicopters, Hajji Muhammad Ismail Agha’s sons had bounded for the desert. The ‘foreign helicopters’ fired on them. One son, Nour Muhammad, was killed; the other, Hajji Muhammad, survived. ‘How could the planes tell the difference between a civilian and a Taliban?’ The father asked. ‘He was killed just a little far from here. I watched it happen.’

“None of these incidents were mentioned in Pentagon news releases. Few were tallied in United Nations counts. So isolated from the Afghan government were residents that when asked for their loved one’s death certificates, they asked where they might obtain them. Instead, to verify deaths, The Times visited tombstones in graveyards littered across the desert.”

This account reaffirms what other reporters who visited rural Afghanistan wrote in a November article in the New Yorker, “The Other Women of Afghanistan”. The Taliban were supported because they were fighting the Americans and their bombing, as well as the “security forces.”

This explains how the Taliban built up steady support in the rural areas, eventually surrounding cities. When they then attacked cities the corrupt government forces without the U.S. bombing melted away.

Syria and Iraq

The bulk of the series concerns the U.S. campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, 2015-2017.

“Repeatedly, the [military’s] documents point to the psychological phenomenon of ‘confirmation bias’ — the tendency to search for interpret information in a way that confirms pre-existing belief.

“People streaming toward a fresh bombing site were assumed to be ISIS fighters, not civilian rescuers. Men on motorcycles moving ‘in formation’ displaying the ‘signature’ of an imminent attack, were just men on motorcycles.

“Often, the danger to civilians is lost in the cultural gulf separating American soldiers and the local populous. ‘No civilian presence’ was detected when in fact families were sleeping through the days of Ramadan fast, sheltering inside against the midsummer swelter or gathering in a single house for protection when the fighting intensified.

“In many cases, civilians were visible in surveillance footage, but their presence was either not observed by analysts or was not noted in the communications before a strike.

“In chat logs accompanying some assessments, soldiers can sound as if they are playing video games, in one case expressing glee over getting to fire in an area ostensibly ‘poppin’ with ISIS

fighters — without spotting the children in their midst.”

There are many other examples, way too many to list in this article.

Two of note were the battles to retake Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, where the former was bombed into a “necropolis” and the latter reduced to a pile of rubble, with many civilian deaths.

The second long article in the series is titled “The Human Toll of America’s Air Wars”, which goes into details of typical cases.

Links to both parts of the series and an interview with Azmat Kahn can be found at democracynow.org for December 22.

Reading through the series, there is one inescapable conclusion: the U.S. killing of thousands of civilians, including children, was deliberately built into the lackadaisical poor intelligence, slap-dash targeting, no accountability and coverup.

Looking at another arrow in the U.S. war quiver — sanctions — can shed some light.

Sanctions against Cuba, Iran, Venezuela and other countries that reject U.S. domination are acts of war, even if U.S. military might and financial control prevents retaliation.

Even more honest commentators in the mainstream press say what the left knows, that these sanctions are targeted against the populations of these countries, who bear the brunt of suffering caused by them.

The imperialists hope that by severely hurting these populations, they will turn against their governments, and install pro-U.S. regimes. Wishful thinking.

Moreover, the U.S. wants these populations to suffer because they dare to stand up to Washington, a capital crime in its view, deserving of harsh punishment.

The U.S. is now targeting the people of Afghanistan for defeating it and its puppet government in the war.

It is clear that under the U.S. occupation, the economy, including in the cities, became dependent on funding by the U.S. and other rich countries to a less extent, to stay afloat. With the “loss” of the country, the U.S. has frozen all that aid.

The result is a severe economic crisis, including mass starvation. Children are not spared. Malnourished mothers’ milk runs dry. International human rights agencies say that some five million children five-and-under years old face starvation in the coming weeks.

The above report by Azmat Kahn of the civilian toll of Afghan civilians by the U.S. air war was in the same mold as sanctions, an attempt to bomb the people into submission, an attempt that backfired.

ISIS was famous for violently attacking other Muslims and the Yazidi Kurdish minority religious group. The Syrian Kurdish Peshmerga fought ISIS on the ground.

ISIS especially sought to wipe out Shia Muslims. It was militias from Iran and Iraq that were the on-the-ground forces against ISIS in Iraq.

But as Kahn noted, the U.S. bombed not only ISIS troops, but the civilians in areas controlled by ISIS, civilians not supporting ISIS peculiar religious views. The U.S. viewed them as willing or

unwilling supporters of ISIS and bombed them.

Barry Sheppard

Adenda

In the print edition of the NYT magazine today (January 2) the article by Azmat Kahn “The Human Toll of America’s Air Wars” is printed, beginning on the front page. In the newspaper elsewhere there is an article titled U.S. Focuses on ISIS Cell That Hit Afghan Airport As Terror Threat to the West. The hit on the airport that killed many was in August when the U.S. was leaving. The ISIS cell referred to is in Afghanistan, and is known as ISIS-K. ISIS-K is an enemy of the Taliban.

That article includes: “President Biden and his top commanders have said the United States would carry out ‘over-the-horizon’ strikes from a base in the United Arab Emirates against ISIS and Qaeda insurgents who threaten the United States.”

The U.S. already carried out an ‘over the horizon’ drone bombing in retaliation for the attack on the airport — the one Amzat Kahn referred to that killed an Afghan aid worker and nine members of his family — no ISIS members.

Is the American Air War against Afghanistan about to be restarted?

Barry Sheppard
