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How ISIS and the Taliban are Carving Up Mafiastan

By Robert Fisk
February 15, 2016

If anyone wants to understand the shame of Afghanistan – the yearly cull of civilians, the beheadings, the execution by single shots, the kidnapping of women – they have only to read the shocking UN report just published in Kabul. It is laced with fearful eyewitness descriptions of brutality. Isis features in its 87 pages with its usual depravity (in Afghanistan, of course, not in Iraq or Syria) and the report's statistics show clearly that, last year, there were more civilians killed or wounded in the country than in any year since 2009.

In 2015 alone, 3,545 civilians were killed and 7,457 injured. Since 2009, the total civilian dead – not soldiers, militiamen or Taliban – comes to 21,323 dead. And this, remember, is the graveyard of empires into which we blithely trod after 9/11 on the basis that we would not “forget” Afghanistan again. We would see it through to the end. The Taliban, in the words of a Canadian commander, were “scumbags”. Our soldiers would not die in vain. And it has come to this.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) is a very professional institution. It has rigorously examined eyewitness testament and its just-published report contains harrowing quotations from victims of the country's war. In total, 62 per cent of civilian deaths and injuries were caused by “anti-government elements” and 17 per cent by “pro-government forces” – 14 per cent of these by the US-trained Afghan “national security forces”. But for reality, take this quotation from the father of a man killed by Afghan army shelling in Wardak province:

“It was around 8am, and we had finished breakfast at home when I heard an explosion. When I looked out of the window, I saw a man running towards the mosque. My young son called to me and said that my other son had been close to the mosque earlier... When I arrived, I saw one injured person and many bodies. Then I found my son. He was in the final moments of his life...I could not even touch his body or move him. The explosion killed eight people,,, Can you imagine how difficult it is when your son is lying in his own blood and you are crying for him?”

Or this from the witness of an Afghan national army attack in Badghis province:

“We were having lunch in our tent near the pistachio forest. We heard a helicopter overhead so I went outside to watch it. Suddenly, the helicopter started firing rockets... and one hit my family’s tent. I ran over to the tent and saw that the rocket killed my wife and injured my two brothers and my sister.”

Or this from the witness to a

Taliban execution of an engineer who was working for the government: “Two Taliban tightened the bindings on the engineer’s hands. The Taliban commander ordered the execution of the engineer. Without any hesitation, the two Taliban beheaded the engineer in front of me. The commander instructed a Taliban member to record that he had imposed the punishment for supporting the government. He wrote it down and [the] Taliban posted the paper on the engineer’s body.”

Or this infinitely sad brother of a civilian killed in crossfire in Kunduz: “He called my mobile and said ‘Hey brother...I was shot in my stomach... I don’t know who shot me... My injuries are serious... I can see pieces of my own intestines on my motorcycle’, After that the line went dead. The next day I saw his dead body and his motorcycle on TV. His body remained in the streets for three days until my relatives could recover it and bury him...”

And here is a woman wounded in a suicide attack in Kabul city: “After I had fed my baby and put him back to sleep, I took a sip of water and returned to bed. There was a huge explosion and our roof began to collapse. I saw the roof falling on me and I lost consciousness. When I opened my eyes, I saw that my hands, legs and back were bleeding... After 20 minutes, I heard my husband shouting over and over again, ‘Where are the others? My father, my father.’ The blast seriously injured him and my son. My brother-in-law lost both of his eyes. We are a poor family and have lost everything.”

UNAMA confirmed that Isil fighters forced the closure of 25 educational institutions in Deh Bala district, depriving 14,102 students – including 4,900 girls – of education and 341 teachers of work.

Here, then, is Isis at work, just as it operates in Iraq and Syria. UNAMA also noted an increase in the number of deliberate targeting of hospitals, clinics and health personnel – the report deals at length with the US-Afghan attack on the MSF hospital in Kunduz that killed 42 people in October 2015 – and 63 incidents targeting hospitals and medical personnel by “anti-government elements”. Isis stole all the medicine and equipment from two health clinics in Nagarhar

province. There are accounts of Taliban fighting Isis and government militias fighting each other.

Needless to say, UNAMA plead with all groups in the war to respect human rights and civilian lives. But I have long nursed the suspicion that many of these groups, including some Taliban units and even Isis – let alone the government militias – are not fighting about religion or government at all, more about mafia power.

Afghanistan, I fear is Mafiastan, fuelled by the billions we ploughed into this poor country after we arrived in 2001.

An Afghan told me only a couple of days ago how government army students were watching an American military trainer teach them how to shoot an automatic rifle. “The problem was that the students knew much more about shooting than the American. They grew up with automatic weapons in their hands. The only reason they joined was to get knapsacks and free uniforms.”

The same old story. Incompetence, money, grief and pain. UNAMA’s report is first rate. And it brings individual tragedy into a brief, bright and disturbing light. But yes, this is the country we were going to ‘save’ a decade and a half ago.