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By Barry Sheppard
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The United States has concealed the killing of thousands of civilians in the wars in the Middle East



Sources: South Wind [Photo: Azmat Kahn report in The New York Times. Photo: @AzmatZahra]

A lengthy article published in two installments on December 19 in The New York Times and on December 31 in Times Sunday magazine reveals that thousands of noncombatants have been killed since 2014 in the wake of more than 50,000 US drone strikes in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. This data has been hidden by the US government under three successive presidencies: Obama, Trump and Biden.

Journalist Azmat Kahn's article is based on a collection of internal Pentagon documents, as well as a compilation of reports on the ground in dozens of targeted locations and

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interviews with numerous survivors. It is the result of five years of research. Here's an excerpt from what Kahn wrote:

«The collection of documents – the army's own confidential assessments of more than 1,300 reports on civilian deaths, obtained by The New York Times – shows the extent to which the air war has been marked by very poor intelligence information, a hasty and often inaccurate definition of targets, and the deaths of thousands of civilians. In many cases children, in sharp contrast to the US government's image of a war waged by insightful drones and precision bombs...

The air campaign represents a fundamental transformation of the art of war that took place in the final years of Obama's presidency, in the face of the growing unpopularity of the endless wars that had claimed the lives of more than 6,000 U.S. servicemen. The U.S. traded piles of boots on the ground for an arsenal of drones manned by controllers sitting in front of a computer, often thousands of miles away. President Obama called it "the most accurate air campaign in history." This was the promise: America's "extraordinary technology" would allow the military to eliminate the enemy by taking the utmost care not to harm innocent people.»

The first part of the report ends with Afghanistan. This offers some context from what it documents: "The August [2021] drone attack on Kabul, which killed an Afghan aid worker and nine of his relatives, made headlines around the world, but most U.S. airstrikes occurred far from large cities, in remote areas where there were no cameras filming, where mobile phone coverage often failed and where there was no internet," Kahn wrote. 70% of the Afghan population lives in rural areas.

«America's longest war was in many ways the least transparent. For years, those rural battlefields were out of reach for American journalists. However, after the Taliban returned to power in August, the interior of Afghanistan became accessible. The Times arrived in Barang [in Afghanistan's Band-e-Timor region] just over a month later, where it visited 15 homes in this village of mud houses and farmland, also interviewing tribal elders and others from across Band-e-Timor. Most said they had never spoken to a journalist before.

What they told —u2012 consistently and reliably—helps explain how the U.S. lost the country, how its war of air raids, and its support for corrupt security forces [those of the puppet government] paved the way for the Taliban's return. On average, each household lost five civilian relatives. The vast majority of these deaths were due to airstrikes, almost always during incursions [by security forces]. Many people acknowledged that they had relatives among the Taliban fighters, but most of the casualties were civilians:

A father who died during an airstrike while running into the woods. A nephew killed while sleeping with his flock of sheep. An uncle shot dead by American soldiers while going to the bazaar to buy okra for lunch. Hearing the noise of helicopters, the sons of Hajji Muhammad Ismail Agha went to the desert. "Foreign helicopters" shot at them. One of the sons, Nour Muhammad, fell dead; the other, Hajji Muhammad, survived. "How could planes discern between a civilian and a talib?" the father asked. "They killed him not far from here. I saw how it happened."

None of these incidents are mentioned in Pentagon statements. A few are recorded in United Nations counts. So isolated from the Afghan government were the residents that when asked for the death certificate of their loved ones, they asked where they could get it. Thus, to check for the deaths, the Times inspected the tombstones of the graves scattered in the desert."

This information corroborates what journalists who visited rural Afghanistan wrote in an article published in November in *The New Yorker*, "The Other Women of Afghanistan." The Taliban received support because they fought the Americans and their bombings, as well as the "security forces." This explains how the Taliban forged a solid base of support in rural areas, which eventually surrounded the cities. When they then attacked the cities, the forces of the corrupt government, no longer supported by the American bombings, dissolved like sugar cane.

Syria and Iraq

The bulk of the article is devoted to the US campaign against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, from 2015 to 2017.

«Repeatedly, [army] documents point to the psychological phenomenon of "confirmation bias," the tendency to interpret information in ways that confirm pre-existing conviction. It was assumed that a group of people running towards a newly bombed site were IS fighters, not civilians coming to the rescue. Motorcyclists who moved "in formation" showing the "signal" of an imminent attack were nothing more than that, motorcyclists.

Often, the danger to the civilian population is lost in the cultural divide that separates U.S. soldiers from a local neighborhood. The "absence of civilians" was detected when in fact families were sleeping during the day in the Ramadan period, taking refuge in their homes to flee the summer heat or gathering in one of the houses to protect themselves when the fighting intensified. In many cases, civilians were observed in surveillance recordings, but analysts did not perceive them or their presence was not recorded in pre-attack communications.

En los registros de conversaciones incluidos en algunas evaluaciones, las voces de los soldados suenan como si estos estuvieran ocupados en un videojuego, en uno de los casos expresando su regocijo al disparar en una zona visiblemente "repleta" de combatientes del EI, sin distinguir a los niños que había entre ellos.»

Hay muchos ejemplos más, demasiados para enumerarlos en este artículo. Dos que destacan fueron las batallas para la reconquista de Raqqa en Siria y Mosul en Irak, quedando reducida la primera a una "necrópolis" tras los bombardeos y la segunda a un montón de escombros, y causó la muerte de muchos civiles.

La segunda parte del largo artículo se titula "El coste humano de las guerras aéreas de EE UU", y en ella se exponen los detalles de algunos casos típicos. En democracynow.org figuran los enlaces con ambas partes del artículo y una entrevista con Azmat Kahn del 22 de diciembre. Después de leer la totalidad del artículo hay una conclusión ineludible: el asesinato por parte de EE UU de miles de civiles, inclusive menores, fue una consecuencia deliberada de la dejadez abúlica de los servicios de información, de la definición chapucera de objetivos, de la ausencia de toda rendición de cuentas y del encubrimiento.

El examen de otra flecha de la aljaba de guerra estadounidense, la de las sanciones, puede aclarar un poco las cosas. Las sanciones contra Cuba, Irán, Venezuela y otros países que rechazan la dominación de EE UU son actos de guerra, por mucho que la superioridad del ejército estadounidense y el control financiero impidan cualquier contraataque. Incluso comentaristas más honestos de la prensa mayoritaria dicen lo que la izquierda ya sabe: que esas sanciones están dirigidas contra las poblaciones de estos países, que se llevan la peor parte del sufrimiento que causan.

Los imperialistas esperan que golpeando con fuerza a dichas poblaciones, estas se vuelvan contra sus gobiernos y establezcan regímenes favorables a EE UU. ¡Qué más quisieran! Además, EE UU quiere que estas poblaciones sufran por atreverse a alzarse en contra de Washington, lo que a sus ojos es un crimen capital que merece un castigo severo.

The U.S. is now targeting the people of Afghanistan for defeating their army and puppet government in the war. It is clear that during the U.S. occupation, the economy, also in cities, came to rely on U.S. funding, and to a lesser extent other rich countries, to stay afloat. With the "loss" of the country, the US has frozen all this aid. The result is a severe economic crisis, including the death of many people from starvation. Children are not spared. Malnourished mothers stop producing milk. International human rights agencies say some five million children under the age of five may die of starvation in the coming weeks.

Azmat Kahn's report shows that the price Afghan civilians pay for the U.S. air war is the same bill as sanctions: an attempt to subdue the population with bombs, an attempt to backfire. Isis is known to have violently attacked other Muslims and the Azadi religious minority in Kurdistan. Syria's Kurdish fighters fought ISIS on the ground. ISIS especially tried to eliminate the Shia population. It was militias from Iran and Iraq that confronted ISIS on the ground in Iraq. But as Kahn pointed out, the U.S. not only bombed IS troops, but also the civilian population of IS-controlled areas, a civilian population that did not support ISIS's peculiar religious beliefs. The U.S. deemed these people to be voluntarily or involuntarily supporting ISIS and bombed them.

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