

# America's Endless Air Wars. Extensive US and Allied Aerial Bombardments across the Middle East

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Image: F-15 Eagles from the 493rd Fighter Squadron at Royal Air Force Lakenheath, England, taxi to the runway during the final day of Anatolian Eagle June 18, 2015, at 3rd Main Jet Base, Turkey. The 493rd FS received the 2014 Raytheon Trophy as the U.S. Air Force's top fighter squadron. (U.S. Air Force photo/Tech. Sgt. Eric Burks)

*Like his predecessors, President Obama is relying heavily on aerial bombardment to wage war across the Mideast, but the vague notions of who is the enemy and the horrific civilian casualties have continued to generate an endless supply of new enemies, writes **Nicolas J S Davies**.*

*U.S. Central Command's latest figures on **its aerial bombardment of Iraq and Syria reveal that this is the heaviest U.S. bombing campaign since President George W. Bush's "Shock and Awe" campaign against Iraq in 2003.** In the campaign's first ten months from August 2014 to May 2015, the U.S. and its allies conducted [15,245 air strikes](#), or an average of 51 air strikes per day.*

This is only the latest campaign in a 15-year global air war, largely ignored by U.S. media, in which the United States and its allies have conducted at least [118,000 air strikes](#) against other countries since 2000. The 47,000 air strikes conducted in the 6 ½ years since President Barack Obama took office are only a small reduction from the 70,000 in eight years of the Bush administration, and the current campaign will easily make up that deficit if it continues at this intensity until Obama leaves office.

Afghanistan has been the most heavily bombed country, with at least 61,000 air strikes since 2001. That includes [24,000 bombs and missiles](#) in the first year of the war and a relentless bombing campaign that struck Afghanistan with another [29,000 bombs and missiles](#) between 2007 and 2012, a slow motion version of "Shock and Awe." That was an average of 13 air strikes per day for six full years, [two years under Bush](#) and [four under Obama](#). The heaviest bombardment was in October 2010, with 1,043 air strikes that month, but that total is now eclipsed every month by the new campaign in Iraq and Syria.

Iraq had already suffered about 34,000 air strikes since 2000 before the latest campaign began. There were [at least 800 air strikes](#) in the "No Fly Zone" bombing campaign to destroy Iraq's air defenses between 2000 and 2002; [29,200 air strikes](#) in "Shock and Awe" in 2003, a campaign whose planners [compared it to a nuclear attack](#); and another [3,900 during the U.S. occupation](#), peaking with 400 strikes in January 2008 as remaining centers of armed resistance were obliterated by air strikes, Spectre gunships and heavy artillery in the climax of the "Surge."

But until the new campaign in Iraq and Syria, the seven-month NATO-Gulf Cooperation Council bombing of Libya was the heaviest bombardment since “Shock and Awe”, with [7,700 air strikes](#) in seven months, or 36 air strikes per day. NATO and its Arab monarchist allies plunged Libya into intractable chaos and violence, exposing “regime change” as a euphemism for “regime destruction.”

NATO’s destruction of Libya spurred Russia to finally draw the line on its 20-year acquiescence to Western aggression and military expansion. Since then, the U.S. and its allies have persisted in their “regime destruction” policy in Syria and Ukraine, threatening strategically important Russian naval bases in Tartus and Sevastopol, what has evolved from an asymmetric war on a series of relatively defenseless countries into full-blown 1950s-era nuclear brinksmanship.

Drones have played [a growing role](#) in the U.S. air war, but they still account for only a fraction of total U.S. and allied air strikes, [several thousand](#) out of 118,000 air strikes in 15 years.

None of these figures include Israeli air strikes against Palestine, the current Saudi-led bombing of Yemen, or French operations in West Africa, as I haven’t found comparable figures for those campaigns, but they must add many thousand more air strikes to the real total.

### **Keeping the People in the Dark**

In [a recent article](#), Gareth Porter reported that the Pentagon is seriously opposed to putting more “boots on the ground” in Iraq or Syria, but that the generals and admirals are prepared to keep bombing them more or less indefinitely as the political path of least resistance for themselves and the White House. This may indeed be the “safe” course for a politically-driven administration and a Pentagon that is always thinking of its public image and its future funding.

But it depends on keeping the public in the dark about several critical aspects of this policy. First, there is little public resistance to this policy mainly because few Americans know that it’s happening, let alone understand the full scale of the bloodshed and devastation perpetrated in our names for the past 15 years.

The second thing the Pentagon doesn’t want you to think about is the deceptive role of “precision” weapons in U.S. propaganda. Considering how accurate these weapons really are in relation to the huge numbers of them raining down on country after country, it is not surprising that they have killed or wounded millions of civilians and destroyed hundreds of thousands of homes and civilian infrastructure, as we see in photographs and video of the ruins of Fallujah, Sirte or Kobani.

A direct hit with a single 500- or 1,000-pound bomb will cause death, injury and destruction up to hundreds of feet from its point of impact, so even accurate air strikes inevitably kill and maim civilians and destroy their homes. But whatever proportion of these 118,000 bombs and missiles have actually missed their targets have wreaked completely indiscriminate death, injury and destruction.

Rob Hewson, the editor of *Jane’s Air Launched Weapons*, estimated that 20 to 25 percent of the “precision” weapons used in “Shock and Awe” in 2003 [missed their targets](#). Another

one third of the bombs and missiles used in “Shock and Awe” were [not “precision” weapons](#) to begin with.

Even the Pentagon has not claimed a quantum leap in its “precision” weapons technology since 2003, so it is likely that at least 15 percent are still missing their targets, adding daily to a massive and mounting toll on innocent civilians.

As Hewson told the Associated Press in 2003, “In a war that’s being fought for the benefit of the Iraqi people, you can’t afford to kill any of them. But you can’t drop bombs and not kill people. There’s a real dichotomy in all of this.”

*Body Count*, a [recent report](#) published by Physicians for Social Responsibility, confirmed previous estimates of well over a million people killed in America’s wars since 2000. This and previous studies document the horrific results of what Hewson and other experts understand only too well, that “you can’t drop (100,000) bombs and not kill (hundreds of thousands of) people.”

Another element in the Pentagon’s shaky propaganda house of cards is its effort to obscure what bombs and missiles actually do to their victims. Americans watch the Islamic State beheading videos on TV or YouTube but we never see videos of people decapitated or children dismembered by the bombs our taxes are paying for. But our bombs behead people too.

Apologists claim that U.S. bombing is morally superior to the “terrorism” of America’s enemies, because the U.S. killing and beheading of civilians is “unintentional” rather than “deliberate.” The late Howard Zinn, a former U.S. Air Force bombardier and later a history professor, responded to this claim in a letter to the *New York Times* in 2007:

“These words are misleading because they assume that an action is either ‘deliberate’ or ‘unintentional.’ There is something in between, for which the word is ‘inevitable.’ If you engage in an action, like aerial bombing, in which you cannot possibly distinguish between combatants and civilians (as a former Air Force bombardier, I will attest to that), the deaths of civilians are inevitable, even if not ‘intentional.’

“Does that difference exonerate you morally? The terrorism of the suicide bomber and the terrorism of aerial bombardment are indeed morally equivalent. To say otherwise (as either side might) is to give one moral superiority over the other, and thus serve to perpetuate the horrors of our time.”

### **Millions of ‘Enemies’**

In fact, U.S. armed forces are waging war on millions of people for whom becoming combatants in a war would be the last thing they would ever consider if we had not brought our war to their doorsteps. The [Center for Civilians in Conflict](#) recently interviewed hundreds of local people who have participated as combatants in conflicts in Bosnia, Libya, Gaza or Somalia. It found that their motivations were almost entirely defensive, to protect themselves, their families, their communities or their countries.

When military forces attack or invade a country, many ordinary people feel compelled to take up arms to defend themselves and their homes. When the forces that put them in this unbearable predicament in the first place treat their efforts to defend themselves as a legal “green light” to target them with force and call them “terrorists,” they are driven to

join better organized armed resistance movements that offer them protection in numbers and an effective way to fight back.

The essential first step to breaking the escalating spiral of violence is to force the aggressors, in this case the United States and its allies, to cease their aggression, including their state sponsorship of armed groups or “terrorists” in the affected countries. Then legitimate diplomatic initiatives can begin the difficult work of resolving the complex political and humanitarian problems caused by U.S.-led aggression and beginning to restore peace and security.

In his 1994 masterpiece, *Century of War*, the late Gabriel Kolko documented that war was the catalyst for all the major political revolutions of the Twentieth Century. While the working people of the world have otherwise failed to “rise up” as Marx predicted, the one thing that has reliably driven them to do so is the horror of war.

The war that the United States is waging today is proving no different. Armed resistance is spreading throughout the affected countries, spawning new ideologies and movements that defy the conceptual frameworks and limited imagination of the U.S. officials whose actions gave birth to them.

U.S. leaders of all stripes, military or civilian, Democrat or Republican, still fail to grasp what [Richard Barnett concluded](#) in 1973 as he studied the U.S. defeat in Vietnam, “at the very moment the number one nation has perfected the science of killing, it has become an impractical instrument of political domination.”

The last 15 years of war have served to confirm Barnett’s conclusion. After 118,000 air strikes, millions of casualties, trillions of dollars squandered, and country after country plunged into chaos, the U.S. has failed to gain political control over any of them.

But our complacent leaders and their self-satisfied advisers blunder on, debating who to threaten or attack next: [Russia? China?](#) Iran? Which “threat” provides the best pretext for further U.S. military expansion?

As Gabriel Kolko observed, because of “inherent, even unavoidable institutional myopia, ... options and decisions that are intrinsically dangerous and irrational become not merely plausible but the only form of reasoning about war and diplomacy that is possible in official circles.”

But U.S. war-making is not just dangerous and irrational. It is also a crime. [The judges at Nuremberg](#) defined aggression, attacking or invading other countries, as the “supreme international crime, differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.” [The UN Charter](#) goes one step further and prohibits the threat as well as the use of force.

[Benjamin Ferencz](#), the only surviving member of the prosecution team at Nuremberg, is a fierce critic of illegal U.S. war-making. In response to U.S. war crimes in Vietnam, he dedicated the rest of his life to establishing an International Criminal Court (ICC) that could prosecute senior officials of any government who commit aggression and other war crimes.

Ferencz is hailed as the founding father of the ICC, but his vision of “Law Not War” remains unfulfilled as long as his own country, the United States, refuses to recognize the jurisdiction of either the ICC or the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

By rejecting the jurisdiction of international courts, the U.S. has carved out what Amnesty International has called an “[accountability-free zone](#),” from which it can threaten, attack and invade other countries, torture prisoners, kill civilians and commit other war crimes with impunity.

### **Nuremberg ‘Exemption’?**

U.S. government lawyers enjoy the privilege, unique in their profession, of issuing legally indefensible but politically creative legal cover for war crimes, secure in the knowledge that they will never be forced to defend their opinions before an impartial court.

Ben Ferencz very graciously wrote a preface to my book, *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*, and he spoke at [an event with me and David Swanson in 2011](#), just before his 91st birthday. Ben talked about Nuremberg and the ICC, and he compared U.S. justifications for its “preemptive” illegal war-making to the defense offered by SS Gruppenfuhrer Otto Ohlendorf at Nuremberg.

As Ben explained, “That Ohlendorf argument was considered by three American judges at Nuremberg, and they sentenced him and twelve others to death by hanging. So it’s very disappointing to find that my government today is prepared to do something for which we hanged Germans as war criminals.”

If we do not hold American war criminals accountable for their crimes, and accept the jurisdiction of international courts to do so if we do not, how else can we serve notice on those who come after them that they must never do this again?

[Argentina](#), [Guatemala](#) and other countries in Latin America are prosecuting and jailing mass murderers like Videla and Rios Montt who once took for granted that they could kill with impunity. America’s masters of war should not assume that we will fail to bring them to justice.

As for the collective responsibility we all share for the crimes committed by our country and our armed forces, we must be prepared to pay substantial war reparations to our millions of victims and the countries we have destroyed. We could start by paying the reparations ordered by the International Court of Justice when it [convicted the United States](#) of aggression against Nicaragua in 1986, and the [\\$3.3 billion promised](#) by President Nixon to repair at least some of the U.S. bomb damage in Vietnam.

These would be concrete steps to tell the rest of the world that the United States was finally ready to abandon its failed experiment in “the science of killing,” to be bound by the rule of law, and to start cooperating in good faith with the rest of humanity to solve our common problems.

**Nicolas J S Davies** is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on “Obama at War” in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama’s First Term as a Progressive Leader*.

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