

Syria's My Lai? US Massacred 70 Civilians and Covered It Up

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After killing dozens of Syrian civilians in a 2019 bombing, the US military exonerated itself and concealed evidence. It's the latest scandal for a shadowy US war in Syria that has evaded oversight.

The [New York Times has exposed](#) one of the US military’s worst massacres and cover-up scandals since My Lai in Vietnam.

On March 18, 2019, amid a battle with Islamic State fighters, the US Air Force bombed a crowd of civilians taking shelter near the town of Baghuz, Syria, killing a reported 70 people. The attacks occurred within a 5-minute span: an initial strike, and then another with heavier bombs as survivors fled. The Times’ Dave Philipps and Eric Schmitt report:

Without warning, an American F-15E attack jet... dropped a 500-pound bomb on the crowd, swallowing it in a shuddering blast. As the smoke cleared, a few people stumbled away in search of cover. Then a jet tracking them dropped one 2,000-pound bomb, then another, killing most of the survivors.

US military personnel in Qatar watched the attack in real time via a surveillance drone at the scene. The high-definition footage showed that only two or three armed men were near the crowd, and were not engaging in any kind of combat activity that would have justified a defensive military strike.

“Who dropped that?” a confused analyst typed on a secure chat system being used by those monitoring the drone, two people who reviewed the chat log recalled. Another responded, “We just dropped on 50 women and children.” An initial battle damage assessment quickly found that the number of dead was actually about 70.

Instead of accountability, “at nearly every step, the military made moves that concealed the catastrophic strike,” Philipps and Schmitt write. The site of the bombing was bulldozed; the unit that conducted the strike vindicated itself; key evidence was buried; military logs were

altered; and investigations were stalled and subverted. Although the Pentagon's independent inspector general managed to launch a probe, "the report containing its findings was stalled and stripped of any mention of the strike."

The bombing was called in by a classified special operations unit, Task Force 9, which led US ground operations in Syria. Two months after the March 2019 massacre, the task force completed a civilian casualty report on the strike that claimed that only four civilians were killed. It also determined that the strike was lawfully conducted in self-defense.

The Baghuz killings likely only came to light because of whistleblowers who challenged the cover-up from within. Lt. Col. Dean W. Korsak, an Air Force lawyer present at the Qatar air base when the massacre was observed, immediately ordered officials to preserve evidence, including video, and urged superiors to open a war crimes investigation. When they refused, Korsak alerted the Pentagon's independent inspector general.

Earlier this year, after two years of inaction, Korsak shared details about the cover-up with the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"I'm putting myself at great risk of military retaliation for sending this," he wrote. "Senior ranking U.S. military officials intentionally and systematically circumvented the deliberate strike process."

...[Korsak] wrote that a unit had intentionally entered false strike log entries, "clearly seeking to cover up the incidents." Calling the classified death toll "shockingly high," he said the military did not follow its own requirements to report and investigate the strike. There was a good chance, he wrote, that "the highest levels of government remained unaware of what was happening on the ground."

When Korsak alerted the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations, an Air Force major replied that the office would likely only probe the massacre if there was a "potential for high media attention, concern with outcry from local community/government, concern sensitive images may get out."

The Senate Armed Committee reached out to Korsack after being approached by another whistleblower, Gene Tate, an investigator at the Pentagon's Inspector General office. Tate told the Times that he witnessed similar stonewalling and censorship.

"Leadership just seemed so set on burying this. No one wanted anything to do with it," Tate said. "It makes you lose faith in the system when people are trying to do what's right but no one in positions of leadership wants to hear it."

After raising concerns at multiple levels, Tate says that in October 2020 "he was forced out of his position and escorted from the building by security."

In response to the New York Times, Central Command acknowledged the Baghuz massacre for the first time. But it continues to deny the civilian toll, insisting that just four civilians were killed. According to the Times, a US military statement claimed that 60 of the dead may have not have been civilians, "in part because women and children in the Islamic State sometimes took up arms."

The Times uncovered additional evidence that the cover-up is part of a broader pattern of US forces ignoring safeguards against attacking civilians in Syria, and hiding the death toll.

According to the Times, some officials believed that Task Force 9, the unit behind the strike, “was systematically circumventing the safeguards created to limit civilian deaths... by late 2018, about 80 percent of all airstrikes it was calling in claimed self-defense.”

Previous mass casualty causing military operations in Syria have also evaded scrutiny. As a [New Yorker report](#) observed in 2020, US bombings in Syria have “reduced parts of the country to wasteland.” In Raqqa, US adopted “a strategy of physical annihilation applied against a city that still harbored a significant civilian population”, causing an “utter decimation” that “might be unique in this century.”

According to the Times’ exposé on Baghuz, US officials assessing civilian deaths in places like Raqqa “did not investigate on the ground and often based their findings on how many dead civilians they could definitively identify from aerial footage of the rubble.”



Baghuz Cliff, Syria. (J. Steffen @ WikiMapia)

Parallels to My Lai massacre in Vietnam

News of the Baghuz massacre comes just days after the [US military exonerated itself](#) for the killing of 10 civilians, including seven children, in its August drone strike in Kabul.

The US military’s cover-up of the Baghuz massacre also parallels the My Lai massacre in Vietnam. A reported 504 Vietnamese civilians, including 182 women and 173 children, were slaughtered by US forces in My Lai and neighboring My Khe 4 on March 16, 1968. Just like in Baghuz, the US military unit involved in the My Lai massacre – the 11th Infantry Brigade – carried out an investigation and exonerated itself.

The atrocity was revealed in November 1969 by [journalist Seymour Hersh](#), who interviewed

two of the key perpetrators. Hersh's report, published by the small anti-war outlet the Dispatch News Service, helped turn US public opinion against the Vietnam war.

The Baghuz massacre was kept hidden from the public for a year longer than My Lai was. Hersh's story came out 18 months after the My Lai massacre; the Baghuz slaughter occurred on March 18, 2019, and was revealed by the New York Times on November 13, 2021 — more than two years later. Coincidentally, the *Times'* story was published one day after the 52nd anniversary of Hersh's report on My Lai: November 12, 1969.

US massacre in Baghuz follows decade-long dirty war in Syria with little oversight

The lack of accountability for US bombings that kill civilians is only one element of a years-long US warfare campaign in Syria given a blank check by Congress and kept largely from public view.

Against the will of the Syrian government — and with no authorization from the United Nations Security Council or the US Congress — the US military continues to occupy a large swath of northeast Syria with hundreds of troops. As [I reported in September](#), the Biden administration has deceived the public about both the nature of the US mission in Syria and its motives.

Although the US claims that its "sole purpose" in Syria is fighting ISIS, the US military has in fact barely done any fighting over the last two years. In 2019, [now-senior Biden official Dana Stroul admitted](#) that the US military occupation in Syria is "not only about completing the anti-ISIS fight." In reality, Stroul explained, occupying the "resource-rich", "economic powerhouse" region in Syria's northeast — which contains the country's "hydrocarbons" and is its "agricultural powerhouse" — gives the U.S. government "broader leverage" to influence "a political outcome in Syria" in line with US dictates.

At a US gov-funded think tank, this official who oversaw Congress' Syria Study Group outlines the continued regime-change strategy.

She says the US military "owned" 1/3rd of Syrian territory, including its oil/wheat-rich region. And the US is trying to block reconstruction funds pic.twitter.com/NIEJ9elxhs

— Ben Norton (@BenjaminNorton) [November 5, 2019](#)

Underscoring the bipartisan mission, Stroul's rationale was expressed more crudely by President Trump in January 2020, [when he told Fox News](#) that he had backed off a withdrawal from Syria in order to "to take the oil. I took the oil."

The US Congress is so committed to deploying US troops to steal Syrian resources that it refuses to even debate it. In September, a [proposed amendment](#) from [Rep. Jamal Bowman \(D-NY\)](#) that would require Congressional authorization for the U.S. military force in Syria [was defeated 141-286](#).

Although the U.S. military launched operations in Syria in 2014, this vote marked the first time that either chamber of Congress has taken a recorded floor vote on whether to authorize the deployment of hundreds of troops there.

The Congressional endorsement of continued military occupation in Syria pleased the Biden administration, which “doesn’t want a cap on military operations in Syria,” [Politico reported](#). “The United States is in Syria for the sole purpose of enabling the campaign against ISIS, which is not yet over,” a National Security Council spokesperson claimed, omitting the hegemonic motives previously admitted by Stroul and Trump.

The Congressional abrogation of its oversight and war authority powers in Syria follows its decade-long rubber stamp on arguably the most catastrophic and deadly US operation of them all: Timber Sycamore, the multi-billion dollar CIA program that armed and trained insurgents seeking to overthrow Syria’s government.

Just like the cover-up over the Baghuz massacre, US officials concealed the costs and consequences of the massive covert CIA operation.

Timber Sycamore proved to be “one of the costliest covert action programs in the history of the C.I.A”, the [New York Times](#) reported in 2017, after Trump ordered its cancellation. With “a budget approaching \$1 billion a year,” or “about \$1 of every \$15 in the CIA’s overall budget,” the CIA armed and trained nearly 10,000 insurgents, spending “roughly \$100,000 per year for every anti-Assad rebel who has gone through the program,” the [Washington Post](#) revealed in 2015. Citing a “knowledgeable US official,” the Post’s David Ignatius [reported in 2017](#), the “many dozens of militia groups” given “many hundreds of millions of dollars” by the CIA “may have killed or wounded 100,000 Syrian soldiers and their allies over the past four years.”

As David McCloskey, a former CIA analyst who worked on Syria during the program’s early years, [told me in a recent interview](#) for The Grayzone, the US continued this program despite the internal understanding that “al-Qaeda affiliated groups and Salafi jihadist groups were the primary engine of the insurgency.” The US government’s tacit alliance with Al Qaeda, McCloskey said, was “a tremendously problematic aspect of the conflict.”

4/ Ex-CIA analyst David McCloskey: "I think there’s an understanding that al-Qaeda affiliated groups and Salafi jihadist groups were the primary engine of the insurgency." pic.twitter.com/RWGNDaWpFv

— Aaron Maté (@aaronjmate) [November 11, 2021](#)

US support for an Al Qaeda-dominated insurgency was privately acknowledged at the highest levels in the Syrian war’s early years. In February 2012, Jake Sullivan — now Biden’s National Security Advisor — [wrote to Hillary Clinton](#): “AQ [Al Qaeda] is on our side in Syria.”

From: Jake Sullivan
To: Hillary Clinton
Date: 2012-02-12 09:01
Subject: SPOT REPORT 02/12/II

UNCLASSIFIED U.S. Department of State Case No. F-2014-20439 Doc No. C05789138 Date: 10/30/2015

RELEASE IN FULL

From: Sullivan, JacobJ <SullivanJJ@state.gov>
Sent: Sunday, February 12, 2012 4:01 PM
To:
Subject: Fw:SPOTREPORT02/12/11(SBU)

See last item - AQ is on our side in Syria.

Although Sullivan made that admission in secret, the most publicly blunt acknowledgement of the US “side” in Syria came two years later from his current boss. In Syria, there was “no moderate middle,” then-Vice President Joe Biden told a Harvard audience in 2014. Instead, Biden said, US “allies” in Syria “poured hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad. Except that the people who were being supplied were Al-Nusra, and Al-Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis coming from other parts of the world.”

Biden on Syria, 2014: US allies "poured hundreds of millions of dollars & tens...thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad. Except that the people who were being supplied were... Al-Qaeda and the extremist elements of jihadis." pic.twitter.com/0mAaThVf2x

— Aaron Maté (@aaronjmate) [June 8, 2021](#)

Biden’s only error was omitting the extensive US role [in concert with its “allies.”](#)

The New York Times

U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels

The CIA and its allies’ arming of a jihadi-dominated insurgency prolonged the Syrian war and led to untold atrocities. In the coastal Latakia region, a [Human Rights Watch investigation](#) found that US-armed insurgents were responsible for “the systematic killing of entire families.” The US-backed insurgents there were bent on “sectarian mass murder”, [Robert F. Worth of the New York Times found](#):

In Latakia, some people told me that their city might have been destroyed if not for the Russians. The city has long been one of Syria's safe zones, well defended by the army and its militias; there are tent cities full of people who have fled other parts of the country, including thousands from Aleppo. But in the summer of 2015, the rebels were closing in on the Latakia city limits, and mortars were falling downtown. If the rebels had captured the area — where Alawites are the majority — a result would almost certainly have been sectarian mass murder. Many people in the region would have blamed the United States, which armed some of the rebels operating in the area.

Congress is mandated to oversee CIA programs like the covert dirty war in Syria. But instead, “there is no evidence that the intelligence committees ever used their powers to prevent, seriously modify, or terminate this fatally flawed operation,” former Congressional staffer Stephen Weissman [wrote in Foreign Affairs last year](#). Even when the House Intelligence Committee voted in 2015 to cut the CIA program's \$1 billion budget by 20 percent, Weissman observes, “the actions of the committee's Senate counterpart were never made public, so it's possible that even that modest reduction never went into effect.”

Congress has also rejected oversight when it comes to the impact of its crippling sanctions on Syria. The Caesar Act, approved by voice vote in December 2019, aggressively seeks to prevent Syria's reconstruction and has, in the [unapologetic words](#) of former Trump envoy James Jeffrey, “crushed the country's economy.” In 2020, then-Rep. Tulsi Gabbard [advanced a measure](#) that would require regular reports on how sanctions impact civilians of targeted states like Syria. But the proposal was ultimately stripped by the Senate.

Last Congress, [@TulsiGabbard](#) passed an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act to require detailed reporting on the impact of sanctions on innocent people.

The amendment was stripped out of the final bill by the GOP Senate. <https://t.co/SfavfhPwRR>

— Erik Sperling ☐ #BidenEndTheBlockade ☐ (@ErikSperling) [January 22, 2021](#)

The prevailing rejection of accountability for US warfare in Syria is so extreme that not even high-level whistleblowers and explosive evidence can ensure public scrutiny. Whereas two brave US military officials managed to expose the massacre in Baghuz, the US media — including the New York Times — continues to ignore the OPCW scientists who challenged a US-backed cover-up at the world's top chemical weapons watchdog.

The US, Britain and France bombed Syria in April 2018 after accusing it of committing a chemical weapons attack in Douma that same month. Leaked OPCW documents later revealed that the inspectors who investigated the scene in Douma found no evidence of chemical weapons use. Their findings instead suggest that the incident was staged by insurgents to frame the Syrian government. But the team's [original report](#) was doctored, censored, and ultimately kept from the public. A US delegation was also brought in to meet with the inspectors and try to [influence the probe in its favor](#). Although a series of explosive OPCW leaks have been released since May 2019, primarily at [WikiLeaks](#) and [The Grayzone](#), Congress and US media outlets [have refused to even acknowledge the scandal](#).

By revealing that the military murdered dozens of civilians and then concealed the crime,

the New York Times' Dave Philipps and Eric Schmitt have pierced the media and Congressional blockade surrounding US operations in Syria. After a decade of covert dirty warfare; devastating military strikes; and crippling sanctions on Syria, there are many more scandals to come to light.

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Featured image: Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar. US military officials watched the Baghuz massacre here via drone footage in real time. (US Air Force)

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