

Syria: The Pentagon Doesn't Care About Civilian Casualties

Facing little opposition from either Republicans or Democrats, the U.S. military is almost never held accountable for killing civilians during airstrikes.

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In August 2019, thousands of refugees, prisoners, and families of ISIS fighters crowded into an encampment in the border town of Baghuz in eastern Syria, one of the last territories controlled by the so-called Islamic State. The United States, supported on the ground by an allied Kurdish and Arab militia, launched a massive air assault on the enclave.

As *The New York Times* [reported](#) on November 13, 2021, a U.S. attack jet unleashed its payload on the civilian encampment. “As the smoke cleared,” the article noted, “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.” At least seventy civilians died.

A Pentagon legal officer reported internally that this was a possible war crime, but, “at nearly every step, the military made moves that concealed the catastrophic strike,” according to the *Times*. The death toll was downplayed, and reports were delayed, sanitized, and classified.

The U.S.-led coalition forces bulldozed the blast site. The office of the Defense Department’s independent inspector general launched an investigation, but the report was effectively censored. An evaluator in that office lost his job when he complained about the cover-up.

In response to an [inquiry](#) earlier this month from the *Times*, the U.S. Central Command acknowledged the strikes for the first time and admitted that eighty people were killed. Nevertheless, it insisted the airstrikes were justified and that “no formal war crime notification, criminal investigation, or disciplinary action was warranted.”

The Baghuz massacre was one the last of the [35,000 air strikes](#) the United States launched over a five-year period in Syria and Iraq that ostensibly targeted ISIS. According to Pentagon rules, U.S. forces could call in airstrikes without checking to see if civilians were threatened,

so long as it was deemed necessary for self-defense.

What constitutes “self-defense” for the Pentagon, however, is not just when its forces are under fire. The authorization of deadly force can also be granted if enemy troops are simply believed to be displaying “hostile intent,” which the Pentagon defined so broadly in the case of U.S.-backed ground operations in Syria that it constituted 80 percent of all U.S. air strikes.

The New York Times article also [noted](#) that the Pentagon failed to keep track of the numerous reports of civilian casualties and usually failed to follow through with investigations. In the rare cases where an investigation was ordered, it was later squashed. An email shared with the Senate Armed Services Committee revealed that the only time an investigation was allowed to move forward was when there was “potential for high media attention, [or] concern with outcry from local community/government, concern sensitive images may get out.”

So far, the Democratic-led Senate Armed Services Committee has refused to open an investigation into the Baghuz attack or any other possible war crimes by U.S. forces in the war against ISIS.

New technologies have made bombing far more accurate than in World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War. During those wars, the United States regularly engaged in carpet bombing of major urban areas—at the cost of hundreds of thousands of civilian lives. However, since the launch of “the war on terror,” both major political parties have gone to some length to justify the killing of civilians in the name of counterterrorism.

For example, Congress has passed a series of resolutions defending Israel’s attacks on civilian areas in the [Gaza Strip](#), the [West Bank](#), and [Lebanon](#), which have attempted to exonerate the U.S.-backed Israeli armed forces for thousands of civilian casualties.

Often, these resolutions have defended the Israeli attacks on civilians by claiming Arab militia groups were using “human shields.” This is despite the fact that, while using civilians against their will to deter attacks on an adversary’s troops or military hardware is [considered](#) a war crime, it does not give license to bomb them any more than a criminal holding hostages gives police the right to shoot them all.

When investigations by [Human Rights Watch](#), [Amnesty International](#), the [United Nations Human Rights Council](#), the [U.S. Army War College](#), and others failed to find a single documented case of any civilian deaths caused by either Hamas or Hezbollah using human shields while fighting Israeli forces, Congress decided to redefine it.

A 2009 [resolution](#), drawn up by House Democratic leader **Nancy Pelosi** and passed by an overwhelming bipartisan majority, expanded the definition of the use of human shields to include any members of a designated “terrorist group” within a civilian population. By this definition, a Hamas official living in a high-rise apartment building in Gaza would make the entire structure a legitimate military target. In other words, when being in the proximity of a “terrorist” is enough to classify a civilian as a human shield, an entire city can become a free fire zone.

Years earlier, I [predicted](#) that this kind of defense for Israeli war crimes would likely be used as a rationale for “massive U.S. airstrikes on Mosul, Raqqa, and other Islamic State-controlled cities, regardless of civilian casualties.”

And this is indeed what happened. There were virtually no expressions of concern raised in Congress when, in 2017, the United States launched heavy attacks against Syrian and Iraqi cities held by ISIS (which really did use civilians as human shields).

An investigation by Amnesty International [revealed](#) that 1,600 civilians died in the U.S.-led bombing campaign in Raqqa, largely destroying the Syrian city. There has been no challenge to the accuracy of the report, which has been called the “most comprehensive investigation into civilian deaths in a modern conflict,” yet it was largely ignored in the mainstream U.S. media.

There was only a little more coverage of the U.S.-led bombing of Mosul earlier that year, when U.S. planes hit thousands of targets, turning much of that ancient city into rubble and [resulting in](#) the deaths of at least 3,000 civilians. A 2019 investigation by Human Rights Watch [determined](#) that approximately 7,000 civilians had been killed in the previous five years in Iraq and Syria in air strikes by the U.S. and its allies.

With virtually no negative reaction in Washington, D.C., or coverage in the mainstream media, there should be no surprise that the Pentagon thought they could get away with the 2019 massacre in Baghuz. There appears to be a sense that, given the horror of ISIS, the killing of large numbers of civilians may be necessary to ensure their defeat, so it’s important to keep such tragedies quiet.

The problem, however, goes well beyond ISIS. Even when it involves another extremist militia (and even if a U.S. attack on civilians does get in the news), the U.S. government has little reason to worry. For example, after its belated acknowledgement that a drone missile attack in Kabul this past August had targeted a car driven by an Afghan aid worker, killing him and nine others, including seven children, the Pentagon [insisted](#) there was no misconduct or negligence.

The implication is that there would, therefore, be no changes in procedures or personnel, and that the Pentagon would not take steps to prevent such tragedies from happening again.

And there appear to be few political costs. Not only have leading Republicans [defended](#) killing civilians in the name of fighting terrorism, but many Democratic members of Congress who have defended Israeli bombings of civilian targets in Gaza have been [repeatedly endorsed](#) as “bold progressives” and “peace leaders,” sending the message that the killing of civilians in the name of “self-defense against terrorists” is not considered a problem even within the Democratic left.

Meanwhile, the Biden Administration continues to provide arms, training, and maintenance to Saudi and Emirati forces that have killed tens of thousands of civilians through air strikes in Yemen. A bipartisan majority in Congress has reiterated that the billions of dollars’ worth of taxpayer-funded military aid to Israel remain “[unconditional](#),” despite the hundreds of civilians killed during last spring’s [bombardment of crowded urban neighborhoods](#) in Gaza, again under the rationale of self-defense against terrorists.

Maybe it’s finally time to question what exactly constitutes terrorism.

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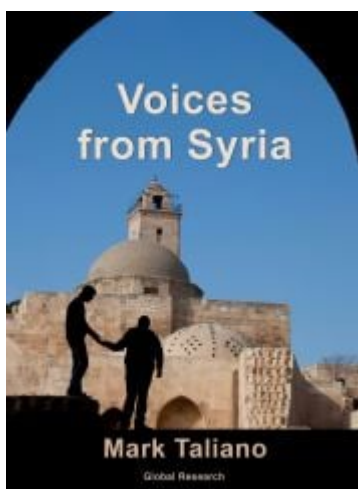
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