

The Double-Speak of American Civilian Humanitarianism

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In-depth Report: [AFGHANISTAN](#)

They suffer without voices. Giles Duley

While Russia was bombing ISIS and al-Qaeda in Syria, the US was bombing a hospital in northern Afghanistan.

In the early hours of Saturday last, a day after the US warned Russia not to target civilians in Syria, a US airstrike killed twenty-two aid workers and patients—three of them children— at the health facility in Kunduz, run by the humanitarian assistance organization, Medecins sans Frontieres-Doctors without Borders (DWB).



The bombardment lasted thirty minutes, despite frantic appeals by the staff to Washington and Kabul. GPS co-ordinates had recently been supplied to all parties in the fighting.

On Sunday, Christopher Stokes, general director of DWB, called the strike a “war crime.” On 4 October, *The Washington Post* wrote, “U.S. forces may have mistakenly bombed a hospital.” Hamdullah Danishi, acting governor in Kunduz, said, “The hospital campus was 100 percent used by the Taliban.” DWB officials contested in a statement the charge that Taliban forces were posted in the garden, at the center of the charity hospital: “The gates of the hospital were all closed so no one that is not a staff, a patient or a caretaker was inside the hospital when the bombing happened.”

By a curious coincidence, only a week before the bombing of the hospital compound in Kunduz, DWB in Yemen had discredited the claim by the Saudi government that the massacre of a wedding party on 28 September had been a mistake and that the target of the Saudi coalition forces had been the rebels, not the 131 civilians (80 of them women) who were killed. DWB officially stated that there had been no military presence in the vicinity of the wedding party.

The United Nations’ World Health Organization (WHO) underscores the critical role that DWB performs in Yemen in saving lives:

Médecines Sans Frontières continues to operate its surgical centre in Aden, and has played a crucial role in saving the lives of many severely injured people. The continuity and scaling up of this centre is critical in ensuring an effective health response in Aden.

WHO reports that all governorates in Yemen are in dire need of trauma and surgical medicines; of fuel for ambulances and generators in health facilities; of medicines for chronic diseases; of safe water in health facilities; of food, particularly as 170,000 children in Yemen are already suffering from malnutrition after six months of the US-backed war; of more ambulances and more medical teams in Southern Yemen. Yet, WHO laments that attacks on existing medical personnel and facilities have been ongoing:

On 4 April, two volunteer paramedics with the Yemen Red Crescent Society in Aden were shot when their ambulance was hit by gunfire. The paramedics, who were brothers, died from their injuries on their way to hospital. On 30 March, a volunteer ambulance driver with the Yemen Red Crescent Society was killed after his vehicle was hit by gunfire in Al Dhale'a.

Although WHO is careful not to reveal the agency of the attackers on medical teams and facilities, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Rupert Colville, reports that thirty-eight Yemeni civilians were killed on average every day between 25 March and 12 April by the Saudi-led bombing campaign:

Two-thirds of the reported civilian deaths during the conflict since March were caused by airstrikes. When you're getting this very high toll of civilians, it suggests something may be going badly wrong or perhaps not enough care is being taken.

Indeed, in recent days, the US-backed Saudi coalition has become a source of embarrassment to the American political establishment. In the *New York Times*, US Secretary of Defense, Ashton Carter is credited with saying that the US-backed Saudi bombing campaign has strengthened Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This is a tergiversation for the cold truth: the campaign has not succeeded in quelling the Houthi rebellion, but it has succeeded in wreaking civilian chaos on Yemen.

Though seldom front-page news, the Saudi airstrikes have destroyed hospitals, schools, neighborhoods, and refugee camps. On 30 March, in Northern Yemen, an airstrike at a camp for displaced people killed dozens of internal refugees. Shortly afterwards, an airstrike destroyed an Oxfam warehouse, storing humanitarian aid. An airstrike on the Mazraq camp for displaced persons in Hajjah province killed forty people and wounded two hundred, as reported by the International Organization for Migration, which provides assistance in the camps.

Not that all grief in Yemen can be laid at Saudi doors. Yemen has been subjected to US drone strikes since December 2009, when President Obama authorized the first known strike, killing fourteen women and twenty-one children. On December 12 last, a drone hit a wedding convoy, killing twelve men. From 2011 to the present, Obama has sold the Saudis \$80 billion in arms.

In the context of these atrocities against civilian persons and social structures in Yemen, it becomes absurd to hold up the lamp of humanitarian righteousness against the supposed motivational dark perfidy of the Russian intervention in Syria, which anyway appears to be making short shrift of the ISIS hordes in less than a week. When ISIS beheads people the media whips up the public into berserker frenzy; when Russia beheads ISIS, the media responds morosely.

Quite frankly, the whole treatment of civilians in Yemen since 2009 turns American protests against week-long Russian strikes killing civilians in Syria a farce—not to mention that such accounts are reported by the dubiously “neutral” Syrian Observatory on Human Rights, which, excluding unnamed “activists” and “activist groups,” appears to be the single source available to and quoted for evidence by the Western press and media.

Trevor Timm in the *Guardian* implicitly sums up for readers the difficulty the US has in selling the Orwellian ritual of the daily two-minute-of-hate-Russia, based on a count of Russian atrocities to civilians in Syria vis-à-vis longstanding, largely American atrocities in Yemen:

While the crisis in Syria continues to garner front-page headlines and ample television coverage, the media has largely turned a blind eye to the other travesty unfolding in the Middle East: Yemen has turned into a humanitarian disaster, where thousands of bombs are being dropped, 1.5 million people are displaced and more than 90% of the population is in need of assistance. The major difference? In Yemen, the US is one of the primary causes of the problem.

American humanitarianism is just plain double-speak. British news photographer, Giles Duley, who lost three limbs in Afghanistan in February of 2013 while documenting the work of the Italian war-surgery hospital of Emergency in Kabul, puts it trenchantly:

After more than 10 years of being in Afghanistan, during a so-called “nation building process,” we are yet to build one functioning hospital.

The director of Emergency, heart and lung transplant surgeon, Gino Strada, has just been awarded the Right Livelihood Award, the alternative to the Nobel Prize. Emergency runs a worldwide network of charity war-injuries hospitals based on “the right to be cured,” in accordance with The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Paris, 10 December 1948). On the medical situation in Afghanistan, the website of Emergency writes:

The number of hospitalized injured has increased in a frightening way: from 2010 to now, the admissions to our war-surgery hospitals have more than doubled. The deterioration in the security situation was also registered by the United Nations. According to the latest report from Unama (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan), in the first 6 months of 2015, there have been at least 4,921 victims between dead and injured, the highest number ever, considering the same period in previous years.

To expose the ludicrous argument that refugees flee “dictators,” we need only turn to Iraq, where the US removed a “dictator” twelve years ago. As the website of Emergency notes,

From 1 January 2014 to 30 April 2015, 14,947 civilians in Iraq have lost their lives; 29,189 were injured. In the same period, more than 2.8 million people have been forced to abandon their home. Among these, there were 1.3 million children (Report, United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq).

It is a moral trial for me to accept the objections of my brothers and sisters on the left to any intervention that would begin to challenge the serial provider of all this suffering.

Admittedly, I am prejudiced by experience. When the Allies bombed Italian cities, we cursed the bombs but not the bombers. Frankly, it made no difference who the bombers were. They could have been 13th-century flying Mongols. They were bringing the war to an end. That's all that mattered, for war makes unscrupulous survivors of us all.

Meanwhile on Monday, Gino Strada's Emergency received twenty-one patients from Kunduz:

At the Emergency hospital in Kabul yesterday 25 patients arrived from the city of Kunduz and the hospital of Médecins sans Frontières, bombed by Nato on Saturday night. Nineteen were hospitalized, the other 6 were treated and discharged. The Emergency hospital in Kabul was already full: in the last 3 days 60 wounded arrived, 320 in the last month, 1.719 in the last 5 months. Our staff is preparing more space, in anticipation for the arrival of other wounded [my translation].

And so it goes. Every horror story has its heroes.

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