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Whistleblowers expose US mass murder of women, children in Syria

Nearly three years ago, as US-led coalition forces trapped a remnant of the Islamic State (IS) in a small enclave near the Syrian town of Baghuz, the US military committed a horrific atrocity. As Air Force officers watched the scene via drone cameras in real time, US warplanes murdered at least 80 unarmed women and children with 500- and 2,000-pound bombs. The officers who saw the attack urged that a war crimes investigation begin immediately.

This act of mass murder is a war crime, the kind of offense for which Nazi officers were tried and convicted at Nuremberg. For three years, however, it was covered up by the US and its NATO allies until a devastating, 4,600-word article appeared on Saturday, based on US officers' testimony, in the *New York Times*.



Smoke rises from a strike on Baghouz, Syria, March 22, 2019. (AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

The atrocity in Syria inescapably recalls the “Collateral Murder” video, revealed by whistleblower Chelsea Manning and WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, of US Apache helicopters slaughtering over a dozen unarmed Iraqi civilians in Baghdad in 2007. It also recalls the massacre of patients and hospital workers in Kunduz, Afghanistan, in October 2015 and the bombing of wedding parties that killed hundreds.

These murderous acts are not isolated events, however. They are the product of the criminal operations of American imperialism as it has sought to subjugate and conquer the Middle East and Central Asia in three decades of unending war.

The revelations of the act of mass murder in Syria come from Air Force officers at Al-Udeid airbase in Qatar, who were monitoring a high-resolution surveillance drone flying over Baghouz.

That day, the *Times* writes, the “US military drone circled high overhead, hunting for military targets. But it saw only a large crowd of women and children huddled against a river bank. Without warning, an American F-15E attack jet streaked across the drone’s high-definition field of vision and 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.”

“We just dropped on 50 women and children,” said one officer monitoring the drone, though the US Central Command told the *Times* that 80 were killed, and the *Times* wrote that Air Force officers later saw a “shockingly high” death toll in another classified report.

The strike had been called in by a US Special Forces unit, Task Force 9. This unit, which bypasses the chain of command and was not coordinating with Air Force officers in Qatar, was advising the majority-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia attacking Baghouz.

It is not credible to attribute this atrocity to error. Lightly armed IS fighters or civilians at Baghouz were defenseless before drones and fighters that could film and bomb them at will.

The *Times* admits: “Coalition drones had scoured the camp 24 hours a day for weeks and knew nearly every inch, officers said, including the daily movements of groups of women and children who gathered to eat, pray and sleep near a steep river bank that provided cover.”

US wars in the Middle East and Central Asia have been sold to the population as a “war on terror.” However, the murder in Baghuz is itself an act of terrorism, aimed at demonstrating that American imperialism will stop at nothing to subjugate the population.

A military lawyer, Lt. Colonel Dean Korsak, ordered drone operators and fighter aircrews to conserve footage of the atrocity for investigations. He then “reported the strike to his chain of command, saying it was a possible violation of the law of armed conflict—a war crime—and regulations required a thorough, independent investigation,” the *Times* reports. Korsak’s concerns were bolstered by reports from CIA officials “alarmed” about Task Force 9’s operations in Syria.

What they encountered, however, was a cover-up orchestrated at top levels of the state, under both the Republican Trump and the Democratic Biden administrations.

Coalition forces in Baghuz oversaw the hiding of the bodies. “Satellite images from four days later show the sheltered bank and area around it, which were in the control of the coalition, appeared to have been bulldozed,” the *Times* writes. It cites a former US Army Special Forces soldier, David Eubank, who arrived a week after the attack: “The place had been pulverized by airstrikes ... There was a lot of freshly bulldozed earth and the stink of bodies underneath, a lot of bodies.”

The US Air Force’s Office of Special Investigations contemptuously ignored Korsak’s material. One of its officials bluntly wrote to Korsak that it would likely ignore his report, as it investigates civilian casualties only if there is “potential for high media attention, concern with outcry from local community/government, concern sensitive images may get out.”

Korsak then contacted the US Defense Department’s Independent Inspector General’s office. Gene Tate, a former Navy officer working as an evaluator at the Inspector General’s office, pressed for Korsak’s materials to be investigated. A team at Tate’s office

even ruled that war crimes allegations were “extremely credible.” Ultimately, however, Tate was fired and thrown out of his office by security in October 2020.

After Korsak sent the US Senate Armed Services Committee his material, several months ago, the *New York Times* began investigating.

“I’m putting myself at great risk of military retaliation for sending this. ... Senior ranking US military officials intentionally and systematically circumvented the deliberate strike process,” Korsak wrote in an email to the committee.

The bipartisan cover-up of the crimes of US imperialism in Syria is continuing, however. The Senate committee has not responded to either Korsak or Tate. The office of Senator Jack Reed, the committee’s Democratic chairman, refused to discuss the Baghuz atrocity with the *Times*.

As for the *Times* itself, after initially posting the article on the top of its site late Saturday evening, it had already begun to bury it by Sunday afternoon. The rest of the media has barely covered the revelations.

It is not hard to imagine what would happen if the US media could pin blame for this atrocity on the governments of Syria, Iran, Russia, China or another country in the Pentagon’s gunsights. There would be morally outraged calls for UN Security Council meetings, sanctions, war threats or US missile strikes in Damascus. When responsibility indisputably lies with the Pentagon, however, it is simply covered up by the US and Western European governments.

The atrocity in Syria again exposes the interests behind the jailing of Assange—who is detained in Britain and facing extradition and death in the United States—and of Manning. Over the 30 years since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union gave them a military opening to wage war across the Middle East, Washington and its allies have laid waste to Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and beyond. Millions died in events that were covered up by the mass media but were witnessed by many people who can expose officials who carried out or are complicit in mass murder and war crimes.

The Baghuz atrocity points to a broad official falsification of death tolls in Syria. From 2014 to 2019, as the US, Britain, France and other countries destroyed the IS enclave in

Syria and Iraq, they called down 35,000 airstrikes. “Nearly 1,000 strikes hit targets in Syria and Iraq in 2019, using 4,729 bombs and missiles,” the *Times* notes. However, “The official military tally of civilian dead for that entire year is only 22, and the strikes from March 18 are nowhere on the list.”

While Washington claimed it was killing only a handful of people in Syria, it was hiding reports on masses of people it had killed. The Pentagon was, the *Times* writes, “overwhelmed by the volume of civilian casualty claims reported by locals, humanitarian groups and the news media, and a backlog of civilian casualty assessment reports sat unexamined for months.”

The vindictive prosecution of Assange and Manning—and threats one can presume are now being made against Korsak and Tate—aim to ensure that war crimes committed as the product of the criminal wars supported by Democratic and Republican administrations alike will go unpunished.

The international working class must demand an end to the horrific persecution of Assange, who faces extradition to the US for revealing crimes such as those exposed by the *Times* article. Those responsible for the mass murder in Baghuz and its cover-up, along with the unending string of atrocities throughout the region, must be prosecuted.

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