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“Civilian Casualty Files” documents the barbarism of US imperialism in Iraq and Syria

On Sunday, the *New York Times* published a major investigative account, the Civilian Casualty Files, accompanied by hundreds of confidential Pentagon documents, revealing that US airstrikes in Iraq and Syria have killed thousands of civilians, and the military has systematically covered this up.

The Civilian Casualty Files are evidence of extensive war crimes. They reveal that the US military, under the Obama and Trump administrations, deliberately killed civilians, including children. The Pentagon documents manifest a contempt for human life that is chilling.

The lead author and investigator, Azmat Khan, an assistant professor at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, spent five years uncovering the story. She filed Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for the reports of the Pentagon’s internal review process. When these requests were denied, she filed lawsuits against the Department of Defense and U.S. Central Command, demanding the release of the documents.



An Iraqi boy carries heavy belongings through the rubble, May 15, 2017. (AP Photo/Maya Alleruzzo)

When the US military receives an allegation from an external source that civilians were hit in an airstrike, a formal review process is launched and a final report issued. There were 2,866 reports issued for airstrikes in Iraq and Syria between September 2014 and January 2018. Prior to the Civilian Casualty Files, “little more than a dozen” had been published. The *Times* was given 1,311 reports, of which hundreds have now been published.

Khan checked the reports against on-the-ground witness testimony, traveling to over 100 sites where civilian casualties had been reported in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan to interview survivors. She found that “many allegations of civilian casualties were erroneously dismissed ... [and] even when civilian deaths were acknowledged, they were often significantly undercounted.”

Her investigation found, for example, that more than 120 civilians were killed in a single airstrike in July 2016 in the hamlet of Tokhar in northern Syria. The US military claimed it was targeting ISIS, but confronted with evidence that the victims were farmers, it admitted to killing 24.

The military report on the slaughter at Tokhar found “no evidence of negligence or wrongdoing” and that “no further action” was necessary. No payment has been made to any of the survivors. This is the pattern with all of the reports, which taken together amount to a massive coverup.

Not a single report contained a finding of wrongdoing or a recommendation for disciplinary action. In many instances, “the unit that executed a strike also ended up investigating it.” A drone footage analyst, who spoke with the *Times* anonymously, reported that “superior officers would often ‘tell the cameras to look somewhere else’ because ‘they knew if they’d just hit a bad target.’” In many cases, reports indicated that “equipment error” meant that no footage was available at all.

The *Times* reported that they uncovered “the deaths of thousands of civilians, many of them children.” The data in the Pentagon reports claimed that children were killed or injured in 27 percent of air strikes that resulted in civilian casualties; Khan’s on-the-ground verification found the number was 62 percent.

Khan summed up her findings: “What emerges from the more than 5,400 pages of records is an institutional acceptance of an inevitable collateral toll. In the logic of the military, a strike, however deadly to civilians, is acceptable as long as it has been properly decided and approved—the proportionality of military gain to civilian danger weighed—in accordance with the chain of command.”

Put more bluntly, the reports reveal that the US military deliberately chooses to kill civilians, including children, and employs a brutal tactical calculus that they put on paper in each report. Each report reveals in a combination of bureaucratic acronyms and grunt vulgarities that Washington views the people of the Middle East as detritus in the path of empire.

Buildings and vehicles are assessed to have a “slant,” e.g., “bldg slant 4/1/3” is a building containing four men, one woman and three children. Those who flee a bomb site are called “squirters,” often hunted down by drones and fired upon.

A log of the chat communications of operators flying drones in Mosul records that when they fired on a building that they knew contained children, they asked how much “play time” their drones had left, because the place was really “poppin’.” Eight civilians in three families were killed.

These logs are then written up in opaque bureaucratic acronyms: “A CIVCAS incident occurred.” Each report has three possible findings, with accompanying checkboxes: “The

casualty report is credible, conduct further investigation”; “It is credible, however, I direct no investigation”; and “It is not credible.”

A report selected at random reads, “I conclude that the number of civilians killed was 25.” The finding? Credible, no further investigation.

A report deemed “not credible,” chosen at random, shows between six and 10 civilians were reported killed, including children, in Raqqa on August 16, 2017. The page and a half report dismisses the claim. Too many airstrikes had been conducted on that day to narrow down an investigation, and it was therefore declared unreasonable to make an assessment of credibility.

Working through the Pentagon reports reveals that the US military employs a calculus of murder by which they assess how many civilians they are willing to kill for any particular target.

On March 20, 2017, Washington bombed a factory in a dense residential neighborhood in Tabqa, Syria, knowing that it employed children. The report reads “The TEA [Target Engagement Authority] determined that the anticipated military value of striking this target warranted a casualty threshold of [redacted] given the target’s function. ... derived from population density table predictions ... assessed that collateral damage of up to [redacted].” The redacted tolerable death toll was determined not to exceed the unspecified “Non-combatant and Civilian Cutoff Value (NCV).” There were at least 10 civilian casualties, including children.

The choice to kill civilians is not simply a matter of estimated average death, however. The reports reveal that the US military deliberately chose to drop bombs on children they saw on camera. In a particularly powerful segment of her article on the “human toll,” Khan describes how the US military knowingly bombed children playing on a roof, killing a family of 11. There was no ISIS presence.

One gets a sense from the Civilian Casualty Files of the immense barbarism of US imperialism. Thousands upon thousands of civilians have been killed, families and households wiped out in airstrike after airstrike.

US bombs started a fire in an apartment complex north of Baghdad killing 70; Khan interviewed an elderly woman in a “displaced persons camp” who reported that her three grandchildren, ages 3, 12 and 13, died in the fire. White bags of “explosives” proved to be cotton from a gin; nine workers were killed. An airstrike killed a man reported to be carrying an “unknown heavy object,” but this was later revealed to be “a person of short stature,” which is how the Pentagon describes a child carried by their father whom they have incinerated. An airstrike on a vehicle of a family fleeing from ISIS killed seven; the mother was “burned into the seat, still holding her infant son in her lap.”

Qusay Saad’s wife, four-year-old son and 14-month-old daughter were among eight civilians killed when the school where they were sheltering was targeted with a precision air strike in Mosul in January 2017. He told the *Times*, “What happened wasn’t liberation. It was the destruction of humanity.”

The reports released by the military are for Iraq and Syria, and none for Afghanistan have yet been provided. It took the ignominious exit of the US military from Afghanistan for Khan to be able to begin ascertaining civilian casualties there. She writes, “America’s longest war was, in many ways, its least transparent. For years, these rural battlefields were largely off-limits to American reporters. But after the Taliban returned to power in August, Afghanistan’s hinterlands opened up.” In one village alone she found “On average, each household lost five civilian family members. An overwhelming majority of these deaths were caused by airstrikes.”

President Barack Obama boasted in 2016, “we’re conducting the most precise air campaign in history.” There is some truth to this. Washington’s slaughter of thousands of civilians in the Middle East is not the result of a technical imprecision in targeting. It expresses, rather, the coldly calculated willingness to kill anyone—even children—if they obstruct the tactical objectives of the US empire.

The Civilian Casualty Files are the most significant exposure yet published of Washington’s wars in the Middle East as an uninterrupted series of war crimes. It demonstrates that the barbarism first brought to light by Julian Assange is in fact the foundation of US empire. Assange’s principled courage in documenting this has been repaid with persecution and imprisonment. The very criminals he exposed seek to extradite him to the United States.

The material published in the *Times* is sufficient grounds for war crime charges to be brought against Obama, Trump, and their top military commanders, and to free Julian Assange to public acclamation as a hero.

The shocking numbers in the Civilian Casualty Files remain, however, a gross underestimation, since Khan was only able to document a fraction of the death toll. The rubble produced by US bombs in Syria and Iraq has covered the corpses of far more civilians than the thousands exposed in this report.

The *Times* report has been greeted with near total silence. There has been no call for a Senate investigation. The American ruling class can no longer muster even the pretense of shock; they are actively overseeing mass death within the United States.

There is a direct connection between the decades of Washington's homicidal policies in the Middle East and the utter indifference of American capitalism to human lives within the United States. The same barbaric calculations are at play. In less than two years, 800,000 people have died of COVID-19 in the United States, but neither Trump nor Biden will do anything to halt the pandemic's spread. The scientifically necessary measures—closures of all nonessential workplaces and schools, mass subsidies to provide for the population—would jeopardize the production of profit.

Like the military brass who prosecute their interests, the capitalists tally up acceptable casualty counts and target children. Mass death is acceptable to the ruling class, they will even welcome it, so long as it ensures the uninterrupted growth of the financial markets.

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