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## The US Massacre in Kunduz Exposes the Bankruptcy of Obama's National-Security Policy

**Air power inflicts horrific human-rights violations and has been thoroughly discredited as a means of fighting insurgencies.**

By: Bob Dreyfuss  
October 6, 2015

The aerial destruction that rained down on a hospital complex run by Doctors Without Borders in Kunduz, a provincial capital in northeast Afghanistan, on October 3 puts an exclamation point on the story of America's 14 years of warfare in that Central Asian country. At least 22 people were killed, among them doctors, other medical personnel, and patients, including three children, and dozens were wounded in the attack.

Beyond the obvious, immediate implications of this massacre—which serves as a reminder that for all of those 14 years, the United States has engaged in a brutal, mismanaged and ill-conceived war—more broadly the ruins of the Kunduz hospital are a symbol of America's unfortunate reliance on air power, including drone strikes and bombers, to combat a host of insurgent groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and elsewhere in Africa.

After the events in Kunduz, Doctors Without Borders, known by its French acronym, MSF, issued a series of scathing statements, demanding an investigation of the incident by an impartial international body “under the clear presumption that a war crime has been committed.” Christopher Stokes, MSF's director general, said that the group is “disgusted” by the statements

of Afghan government officials who justified the attack by claiming that Taliban fighters were present.

“Not a single member of our staff reported any fighting inside the MSF hospital compound prior to the U.S. airstrike on Saturday morning,” said Stokes. “The hospital was full of MSF staff, patients and their caretakers.” And he slammed the United States for its ever-changing excuses about the bombing. “Their description of the attack keeps changing—from collateral damage, to a tragic incident, to now attempting to pass responsibility to the Afghanistan government.”

The attack was particularly egregious because MSF had repeatedly supplied the United States with the precise GPS coordinates of its hospital complex in recent days and weeks. (President Obama’s spokesman called the Kunduz bombing a “profound tragedy” rather than a war crime, and he said that Obama has complete “confidence” in investigations by the Defense Department, by NATO, and by US and Afghan military officers—but he refused to call for an independent investigation, as demanded by MSF.)

Civilian casualties in Afghanistan have been piling up for years, of course—most of them the result of indiscriminate Taliban attacks, including randomly placed IEDs and suicide bombings, but a large number caused by what the United Nations calls “pro-government” forces—that is, the United States and its allies and the Afghan National Security Forces. In October 2013, in a special issue of *The Nation*, “America’s Afghan Victims,” investigative journalist Nick Turse and I researched and wrote a package of stories that provided an account of the ongoing carnage in Afghanistan. In it, we tried to cut through the murky smokescreen that has obscured the toll of dead and maimed among civilian victims from the start of the war in October 2001 through the end of 2012. We documented 458 separate incidents that resulted in as many as 6,481 civilians killed by American forces during that period, and we provided a detailed, interactive database and chart covering every one of those incidents.

At that time, according to data from the UN, human rights groups, and private researchers such as those at Brown University’s Watson Institute for International Studies, it was clear that at least 19,000 Afghan civilians perished during the first twelve years of the war, from violence on all sides. But we also showed that neither the US military nor the government of Afghanistan nor the UN have anything like a complete count of the war’s toll, and that the numbers that exist understate the scope of the tragedy. Since then, of course—as underscored in red by the Kunduz massacre—the toll has only grown. According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), which only began trying to track casualties eight years ago, between 2007 and 2012 there were at least 14,728 civilian deaths; since then, even as the American presence has been cut back, another 8,260 more civilians died through mid-2015. Again, based on our reporting, those numbers are only a fraction of the actual total.

Despite massive US assistance, the Taliban has demonstrated staying power and the ability to control large areas.

If there’s such a thing as an “Obama doctrine” of US national security policy in place, it’s built around two pillars: first, using air power to counter “malign” actors such as the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State, rather than direct, on-the-ground involvement of US forces; and second, the arming and training of proxy forces and newly built national armies to carry out the battles on the ground. Yet both pillars are crumbling. Few if any experienced national security

policymakers and military experts believe that airstrikes can do more than harass or disrupt well-organized insurgencies, and the doctrine of using air power—developed during and after World War II in the Strategic Bombing Survey, proselytized by Robert McNamara and the Vietnam-era Whiz Kids—has been thoroughly discredited, as argued convincingly this week by James Russell of the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. Just this week, *The New York Times* reported extensively on the failure around the world of US efforts to support proxy forces and fledgling national armies, ranging from the \$65 billion spent to build Afghanistan’s crumbling army, tens of billions spent in Iraq to rebuild the army that the United States dismantled in 2003, and the \$500 million effort to organize a rebel force in Syria against the Islamic State that managed to put only “four or five” fighters in the field.

The seizure of Kunduz by the Taliban, the first provincial capital it has controlled since 2001, is a glaring sign of that failure. Despite massive American assistance and training to the Afghan National Security Forces over many years, the Taliban (as well as a newly emerging Islamic State force, exploiting rifts within the Taliban) has demonstrated not only staying power but the ability to seize and control large areas and to menace provincial capitals and even strike in Kabul itself. Backed by Pakistan, the Taliban—under a new commander, Mullah Akhtar Muhammad Mansour, who took control in the wake of the just-reported 2013 death of Mullah Omar—has made gains across the country. Earlier this year, Afghanistan’s interior minister designated 11 provinces as severely threatened and nine more facing medium-level threats. From Badakhshan and Kunduz provinces in the far northeast to Ghazni, Logar, and Kunar provinces in eastern Afghanistan and around Kabul to the vast province of Helmand in the south, the Taliban has carried out significant offensive actions. According to a gloomy report from the Brookings Institution, “Insecurity has significantly increased throughout the country, civilian deaths have shot up, and the Afghan security forces are taking large, and potentially unsustainable, casualties.”

Though President Obama has insisted that the rebooted Global War on Terror will take pains to avoid civilian deaths, the Kunduz bombing came just five days after another, even more extensive massacre, this one in southern Yemen. On September 28, the American-backed Saudi Arabian air force obliterated a wedding party, killing at least 131 civilians, including 80 women huddled under a desert tent. The war in Yemen, which pits a rebel force of Houthis against remnants of the toppled, pro-Saudi regime that formerly ruled the country, is devolving into a proxy battle between Iran, which nominally backs the Houthis, and a US-Saudi coalition that is intent on using military force to restore Saudi dominance of the Arabian Peninsula. In the latest in a series of what appear to be indiscriminate air attacks that have killed many civilians, calls for an independent inquiry into the massacre by the UN were blocked by Saudi Arabia, with American support.

The Obama administration appears to have learned the lesson that affairs in the Middle East cannot be reordered to conform with American ideas about democracy and civil society by deploying tens or hundreds of thousands of US troops in feckless “state building” missions. But it has yet to grasp the related lesson that Washington cannot defeat insurgencies, even terrorism-inclined ones, by remote control via drones or by air power that deploys fighter jets and AC-130 gunships. Indeed, as even Donald Rumsfeld seemed to conclude in the waning days of his tenure

as President George W. Bush's defense secretary, by blowing up low- and mid-level insurgent commanders, the United States is creating more terrorists than it kills.

The White House should draw the conclusion from the Kunduz massacre that there isn't going to be a military solution to Afghanistan's civil war. For fourteen years, under relentless US military action and the presence of up to 100,000 US troops, the Taliban hasn't gone away. Since 2001, the one inescapable conclusion has been that only a power-sharing arrangement among all of Afghanistan's factions, including the Taliban, can provide even the hope of ending the war. To get there will require diplomacy at least as intensive and prolonged as the process that led to the historic agreement between Iran and the P5+1 world powers over Tehran's nuclear enrichment program.

In 2015, there have been promising signs that both the Afghan government and the Taliban might be ready to talk peace, and several recent meetings have been held between the parties toward that end. Last spring, China demonstrated a willingness to involve itself in brokering a deal, which could be important because Pakistan, the Taliban's chief sponsor, is an erstwhile ally of China. Iran, now that it's shown its own readiness to reintegrate into the global polity, could be an important partner in bringing Afghanistan's warlords and tribal chieftains toward a deal. For President Obama, whose instincts seem to tell him to favor diplomacy over war, there's an opportunity to follow his success with Iran by one in Afghanistan, too.