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Afghanistan: Why Civilians are Killed

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The recent rash of civilian killings by NATO forces in occupied Afghanistan raises several basic questions: Why do US – NATO air and ground forces kill so many civilians, so persistently, over such long stretches of time, in regions throughout the country? Why have the number of civilians killed, increased in the course of the conflict? Why do NATO-US airplanes continue to bomb civilian housing and village gatherings and ground troops indiscriminately assault homes and workshops? Why are the pleas of NATO collaborator President Karzai to desist in home bombings go unheeded? Finally, knowing that the killing of civilians, entire families including children, mothers and the elderly alienates the local population and breeds widespread and profound hostility, why do the NATO-US military refuse to alter their tactics and strategy?

Explanations and Excuses for Civilian Killings:

Apologists for the NATO killings of civilians are as abundant as their explanations are lacking in substance. Pentagon spokespeople speak of “accidents”, “errors of war”, “collateral damage”; media pundits blame the guerrilla fighters for engaging in warfare in areas populated by civilians; neo-conservative academics and their “think tank” colleagues blame Islamic fundamentalism for converting villagers to their cause and “forcing” NATO to kill civilians in order to create martyrs and to use their deaths as a recruiting device.

These patently superficial explanations raise more questions than answers, or in some cases, inadvertently refute the justification for the entire war. The “error of war” argument begs a more basic question: what kind of war is NATO-US engaged in that constantly finds the guerrillas ‘melting’ into the population, while the occupation breaks down doors and perceives each and every household as a possible sanctuary, or outpost of the resistance? What kind of military relies on high altitude fighter planes and pilotless planes directed from distant command posts to attack population centers, in which commerce, farming and household economies engage the population? Clearly only an army of occupation, an imperial army, is willing to repeatedly sacrifice a multitude of civilians to kill a single or a few suspected combatants. Only a military operating in a hostile civilian environment is going to assume that lodged behind every door of every home there is an “enemy”; that every family is sheltering a combatant; that it is better to “go in shooting” than to risk a bullet in the gut. ‘Accidents of war’ do not ‘just happen’ for an entire decade, covering an entire country. The killing of civilians is a result of a war of imperial conquest against an entire people who resist the occupation in whatever form is appropriate to their circumstance. The pilots and ground troops recognize that they are a hostile alien force, whose presence is commanded from above by Generals and politicians dealing with abstract schemes of ‘terrorists-linked to Al Qaeda’ that have no relation to the dense web of personal bonds of solidarity between resistance fighters and civilians on the ground in Afghanistan.

Working from these abstract categories, the strategists label extended family compounds as ‘hideouts’; family gatherings as ‘terrorist meetings’; trade caravans as ‘guerilla smugglers’. The conflicting interests of the imperial politicians, generals, strategists and military officers on the one hand and the civilian population and resistance form an immense gap. The greater the number of civilian/combatants killed the faster the career advances for imperial officers –eager for promotions and prized pensions. “Success”, according to the imperial world view is measured internationally by the number of client rulers; nationally by the number of flags pinned to the war maps denoting ‘secure cities’; and locally by the body counts of massacred families.

On the ground, among the millions in intimate family and clan circles, where sorrow and anger co-exist, resistance in all of its manifold forms unfolds: Sacred vows and the profane pledges to ‘fight on’ grow out of the millions of daily humiliations affecting young and old, wives and husbands, in homes, markets, roads and by-ways. The hostile stare of a mother sheltering an infant from soldiers breaking into a bedroom is as telling as the crackle of gunfire of a sniper hidden in a mountain crevice.

A People’s War: Not a War on Terror

The killing of civilians is not “accidental”. The fundamental reason that so many civilians are killed, everyday, in every region for over a decade, is because the civilians and the combatants are indistinguishable. The image of the Afghan combatants as some kind of footloose professional bomb throwing terrorist is completely off the mark. Most Afghan fighters have families, cultivate farmland and tend herds; they raise families and attend mosque; they are ‘part-time civilians’ and part-time fighters. Only in the schematic minds of the “great strategists of war” in the Pentagon and NATO headquarters do such distinctions exist. Their deadly military mission to ‘save the people from terrorist fundamentalists’, a self-serving self-deception, is, in

fact, a ladder up the military-political hierarchy. Each step up depends on waging a ‘just war’ to a successful conclusion.

The civilian-combatants are a mass popular phenomenon. How else can we explain their capacity to sustain armed resistance for over a decade, indeed, advancing with the passing of time? How can we explain their military success against the armed forces and advisers from 40 countries, including the US, Europe and a clutch of Afro-Asian-Latin American mercenaries? How can we explain the growing resistance despite suffering from military occupation, backed by the most advanced technological instruments of war? How can we explain the ebb of popular support for the war in the ‘Conqueror’s country and the growing number of recruits for the Resistance? The combatants have the loyalty of the Afghan people; they do not have to spend billions to buy the spurious ‘loyalties’ of mercenaries who can and have at any moment ‘turned their guns the other way’.

Weddings are bombed because combatants attend weddings – along with hundreds of relatives and friends. Villages are bombed because peasants cultivate crops, which contribute to the resistance. Civilian shelters become military sanctuaries. Afghanistan is polarized: the US military versus a people in arms. Faced with this reality, the real policy of NATO-Pentagon is to rule or/and ruin. Each bomb killing dozens of civilians in search of one sharpshooter deepens the isolation and discredit of the puppet ruler. “President” Karzai has seen his mission of building a ‘civilian base’ to reconstruct the country utterly discredited. His impotent complaints to NATO to cease bombing civilian targets fall on deaf ears; because the NATO command knows very well that ‘the civilians’ are the ‘deep resistance’ – the vast reserve of support for the combatants; their eyes and ears far excel all the electronic intelligence devices of the Occupier. Just as Karzai cannot convince the civilians to turn against the combatants so he cannot convince the imperial armies to stop bombing civilian homes and gatherings.

Washington knows that with each withdrawal (or retreat), the terrain, the towns and villages are occupied by resistance fighters who emerge from everywhere. The best that the US-NATO politicians can negotiate is a safe orderly departure. The best that they can hope is that their local collaborators do not defect or flee abroad prematurely turning over billions of dollars in military ordinance to the resistance. The best the collaborators can hope is that they will secure an exit route, a visa, an overseas account and a comfortable second home abroad. What is absolutely clear is that the US, NATO and its collaborators will have no role to play in the newly independent Afghanistan.