

# Bombs Away Over Iraq

Normalizing Air War From Guernica to Arab Jabour

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A Jan. 21 [Los Angeles Times](#) Iraq piece by Ned Parker and Saif Rasheed led with an inter-tribal suicide bombing at a gathering in Fallujah in which [members](#) of the pro-American Anbar Awakening Council were killed. ("Asked why one member of his Albu Issa tribe would kill another, Aftan compared it to school shootings that happen in the United States.") Twenty-six paragraphs later, the story ended this way:

*"The U.S. military also said in a statement that it had dropped 19,000 pounds of explosives on the farmland of Arab Jabour south of Baghdad. The strikes targeted buried bombs and weapons caches.*

*"In the last 10 days, the military has dropped nearly 100,000 pounds of explosives on the area, which has been a gateway for Sunni militants into Baghdad."*

And here's paragraph 22 of a 34-paragraph Jan. 22 story by Stephen Farrell of the [New York Times](#):

*"The threat from buried bombs was well known before the [Arab Jabour] operation. To help clear the ground, the military had dropped nearly 100,000 pounds of bombs to destroy weapons caches and IEDs."*

Farrell led his piece with news that an American soldier had died in Arab Jabour from an IED that blew up "an MRAP, the new Mine-Resistant Ambush-Protected armored vehicle that the American military is counting on to reduce casualties from roadside bombs in Iraq."

Note that both pieces started with bombing news – in one case a suicide bombing that killed several Iraqis; in another a roadside bombing that killed an American soldier and wounded others. But the major bombing story of these last days – those 100,000 pounds of explosives that U.S. planes dropped in a small area south of Baghdad – simply dangled unexplained off the far end of the *Los Angeles Times* piece, while, in the *New York Times*, it was buried inside a single sentence.

Neither paper has (as far as I know) returned to the subject, though this is undoubtedly the most extensive use of air power in Iraq since the Bush administration's invasion of 2003 and probably represents a genuine shifting of American military strategy in that country. Despite, a few humdrum wire service pieces, no place else in the mainstream has bothered to cover the story adequately either.

For those who know something about the [history](#) of air power, which, since World War II, has been lodged at the heart of the American Way of War, that 100,000 figure might have rung a small bell.

On April 27, 1937, in the midst of the Spanish Civil War (a prelude to World War II), the planes of the German Condor Legion attacked the ancient Basque town of Guernica. They came in waves, first carpet bombing, then dropping thermite incendiaries. It was a market day, and there may have been as many as 7,000-10,000 people, including refugees, in the town, which was largely destroyed in the ensuing fire storm. More than 1,600 people may have died there (though some estimates are lower). The Germans reputedly dropped about 50 tons or [100,000 pounds of explosives](#) on the town. In the seven decades between those two 100,000 figures lies a sad history of our age.

Arab Jabour, the Sunni farming community about 10 miles south of the Iraqi capital that was the target of the latest 100,000-pound barrage, has recently been largely off-limits to American troops and their Iraqi allies. The American military now refers generically to all Sunni insurgents who resist them as “al-Qaeda,” so in situations like this it’s hard to tell exactly who has held this territory.

At Guernica, as in Arab Jabour 71 years later, no reporters were present when the explosives rained down. In the Spanish situation, however, four reporters in the nearby city of Bilbao, including George Steer of the *Times* of London, promptly rushed to the scene of destruction. Steer’s first piece for the *Times* (also printed in the *New York Times*) was headlined “The Tragedy of Guernica” and called the assault “unparalleled in military history.” (Obviously, no such claims could be made for Arab Jabour today.) Steer made clear in his report that this had been an attack on a *civilian* population, essentially a terror bombing.

The self-evident barbarism of the event – the first massively publicized bombing of a civilian population – caused international horror. It was news across the planet. From it came perhaps the most famous painting of the last century, Picasso’s [Guernica](#), as well as innumerable novels, plays, poems, and other works of art.

As Ian Patterson writes in his book, [Guernica and Total War](#):

*“Many attacks since then, including the ones we have grown used to seeing in Iraq and the Middle East in recent years, have been on such a scale that Guernica’s fate seems almost insignificant by comparison. But it’s almost impossible to overestimate the outrage it caused in 1937. ... Accounts of the bombing were widely printed in the American press, and provoked a great deal of anger and indignation in most quarters....”*

Those last two tag-on paragraphs in the Parker and Rasheed *Los Angeles Times* piece tell us much about the intervening 71 years, which included the German bombing of Rotterdam and the blitz of London as well as other English cities; the Japanese bombings of Shanghai and other Chinese cities; the Allied fire-bombing of German and Japanese cities; the U.S. atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the Cold War era of mutually assured destruction (MAD) in which two superpowers threatened to use the ultimate in airborne explosives to incinerate the planet; the massive, years-long U.S. bombing campaigns against North Korea and later North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia; the American air power “victories” of Gulf War I and Afghanistan (2001); and the Bush administration’s shock-and-awe, air-and-cruise-missile assault on Baghdad in March 2003, which, though meant to “decapitate” the regime of Saddam Hussein, killed not a single Iraqi governmental

or Ba'ath Party figure, only Iraqi civilians. In those seven decades, the death toll and damage caused by war – on the ground and from the air – has increasingly been delivered to civilian populations, while the United States has come to rely on its Air Force to impose its will in war.

One hundred thousand pounds of explosives delivered from the air is now, historically speaking, a relatively modest figure. During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, a single air wing from the *USS Kitty Hawk*, an aircraft carrier stationed in the Persian Gulf, did that sort of damage in less than a day and it was a figure that, as again last week, the military was proud to [publicize](#) without fear of international outrage or the possibility that “barbarism” might come to mind:

*“From Tuesday afternoon through early Wednesday the air wing flew 69 dedicated strike missions in Basra and in and around Baghdad, involving 27 F/A-18 Hornets and 12 Tomcats. They dropped nearly 100,000 pounds of ordnance, said Lt. Brook DeWalt, Kitty Hawk public affairs officer.”*

As far as we know, there were no reporters, Iraqi or Western, in Arab Jabour when the bombs fell and, Iraq being Iraq, no American reporters rushed there – in person or by satellite phone – to check out the damage. In Iraq and Afghanistan, when it comes to the mainstream media, bombing is generally only significant if it's of the roadside or suicide variety; if, that is, the “bombs” can be produced at approximately “[the cost of a pizza](#),” (as IEDs sometimes are), or if the vehicles delivering them are cars or simply fiendishly well-rigged human bodies. From the air, even 100,000 pounds of bombs just doesn't have the ring of something that matters.

Some of this, of course, comes from the Pentagon's success in creating a dismissive, sanitizing language in which to frame war from the air. “Collateral damage” stands in for the civilian dead – even though in much of modern war, the collateral damage could be [considered](#) the dead soldiers, not the ever rising percentage of civilian casualties. And death is, of course, delivered “precisely” by “precision-guided” weaponry. All this makes air war seem sterile, even virginal. Army Col. Terry Ferrell, for instance, [described](#) the air assaults in Arab Jabour in this disembodied way at a Baghdad news conference:

*“The purpose of these particular strikes was to shape the battlefield and take out known threats before our ground troops move in. Our aim was to neutralize any advantage the enemy could claim with the use of IEDs and other weapons.”*

Reports – often hard to assess for credibility – have nonetheless seeped out of the region indicating that there were civilian casualties, possibly significant numbers of them; that bridges and roads were “cut off” and undoubtedly damaged; that farms and farmlands were damaged or destroyed. [According to Hamza Hendawi](#) of the Associated Press, for instance, Iraqi and American troops were said to have advanced into Arab Jabour, already much damaged from years of fighting, through “smoldering citrus groves.”

But how could there not be civilian casualties and property damage? After all, the official explanation for this small-scale version of a “shock-and-awe” campaign in a tiny rural region was that American troops and allied Iraqi forces had been strangers to the area for a while, and that the air-delivered explosives were meant to damage local infrastructure – by exploding *roadside* bombs and destroying weapons caches or booby traps inside existing

structures. As that phrase “take out known threats before our ground troops move in” made clear, this was an attempt to minimize casualties among American (and allied Iraqi) troops by bringing massive amounts of firepower to bear in a situation in which local information was guaranteed to be sketchy at best. Given such a scenario, civilians will always suffer. And this, increasingly, is likely to be the American way of war in Iraq.

### The ABCs of Air War in Iraq

So let’s focus, for a moment, on American air power in Iraq and gather together a little basic information you’re otherwise not likely to find in one place. In these last years, the Pentagon has invested billions of dollars in building up an air-power infrastructure in and around Iraq. As a start, it constructed one of its largest foreign bases anywhere on the planet about 50 miles north of Baghdad. Balad Air Base has been described by *Newsweek* as a “15-square-mile mini-city of thousands of trailers and vehicle depots,” whose air fields handle 27,500 takeoffs and landings every month.

Reputedly “second only to London’s Heathrow Airport in traffic worldwide,” it is said to handle congestion similar to that of Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport. With about 140,000 tons a year of cargo moving through it, the base is “the [busiest](#) aerial port” in the global domains of the Department of Defense.

It is also simply massive, housing about 40,000 military personnel, private contractors of various sorts, and Pentagon civilian employees. It has its own bus routes, fast-food restaurants, sidewalks, and two PXs that are the size of K-Marts. It also has its own neighborhoods including, reported [the Washington Post’s](#) Thomas Ricks, “KBR-land” for civilian contractors and “CJSOTF” (Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force), “home to a special operations unit [that] is hidden by especially high walls.”

Radar traffic controllers at the base now commonly [see](#) “more than 550 aircraft operations in just one day.” To the tune of billions of dollars, Balad’s runways and other facilities have been, and continue to be, upgraded for years of further wear and tear. According to the military press, construction [is to begin](#) this month on a \$30 million “state-of-the-art battlefield command and control system [at Balad] that will integrate air traffic management throughout Iraq.”

National Public Radio’s Defense Correspondent Guy Raz [paid a visit](#) to the base last year and termed it “a giant construction site. ... [T]he sounds of construction and the hum of generators seem to follow visitors everywhere. Seen from the sky at night, the base resembles Las Vegas: While the surrounding Iraqi villages get about 10 hours of electricity a day, the lights never go out at Balad Air Base.”

This gargantuan feat of construction is designed for the military long haul. As Josh White of the *Washington Post* [reported recently](#) in a relatively rare (and bland) summary piece on the use of air power in Iraq, there were five times as many U.S. air strikes in 2007 as in 2006; and 2008 has, of course, started off with a literal bang from those 100,000 pounds of explosives dropped southeast of Baghdad. That poundage assumedly includes the [40,000 pounds](#) of explosives, which got modest headlines for being delivered in a mere 10 minutes in the Arab Jabour area the previous week, but not the 16,500 pounds of explosives that White reports being used north of Baghdad in approximately the same period; nor, evidently, another [15,000 pounds](#) of explosives dropped on Arab Jabour more recently. (And none of these numbers seem to include Marine Corps figures for Iraq, which have evidently

not been released.)

Who could forget all the attention that went into the president's surge strategy on the ground in the first half of last year? But which media outlet even noticed, until recently, what Bob Deans of Cox News Service has termed the "[air surge](#)" that accompanied those 30,000 surging troops into the Iraqi capital and environs? In that same period, air units were increasingly concentrated in and around Iraq. By mid-2007, for instance, the Associated Press was [already reporting](#):

*"[S]quadrons of attack planes have been added to the in-country fleet. The air reconnaissance arm has almost doubled since last year. The powerful B1-B bomber has been recalled to action over Iraq. ... Early this year, with little fanfare, the Air Force sent a squadron of A-10 'Warthog' attack planes - a dozen or more aircraft - to be based at al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq. At the same time it added a squadron of F-16C Fighting Falcons ... at Balad."*

Meanwhile, in the last year, aircraft-carrier battle groups have been stationed in greater numbers in the Persian Gulf and facilities at sites near Iraq like the huge [al-Udeid Air Base](#) in Qatar continue to be upgraded.

Even these increases do not tell the whole story of the expanding air war. Lolita Baldor of the Associated Press [reported recently](#) that "the military's reliance on unmanned aircraft that can watch, hunt and sometimes kill insurgents has soared to more than 500,000 hours in the air, largely in Iraq." The use of such unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), including Hellfire-missile armed Predators, doubled in the first ten months of 2007 - with Predator air hours increasing from 2,000 to 4,300 in that period. The Army alone, according to Baldor, now has 361 drones in action in Iraq. The future promises [much more](#) of the same.

(American military spokespeople and administration officials have, over the years, decried Iraqi and Afghan insurgents for "hiding" behind civilian populations - in essence, accusing them of both immorality *and* cowardice. When such spokespeople do admit to inflicting "collateral damage" on civilian populations, they regularly blame the guerrillas for making civilians into "shields." And all of this is regularly, dutifully reported in our press. On the other hand, no one in our world considers drone warfare in a similar context, though armed UAVs like the Predators and the newer, even more heavily armed Reapers are generally "flown" by pilots stationed at computer consoles in places like Nellis Air Force Base outside Las Vegas. It is from there that they release their missiles against "anti-Iraqi forces" or the Taliban, causing civilian deaths in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

As one American pilot, who has fired Predator missiles from Nellis, [put it](#):

*"I go from the gym and step inside Afghanistan, or Iraq. ... It takes some getting used to it. At Nellis you have to remind yourself, 'I'm not at the Nellis Air Force Base. Whatever issues I had 30 minutes ago, like talking to my bank, aren't important anymore.'"*

To American reporters, this seems neither cowardly nor in any way barbaric, just plain old normal. Those pilots are not said to be "hiding" in distant deserts or among the civilian gamblers of Caesar's Palace.)

Anyway, here's the simple calculus that goes with all this: Militarily, overstretched American forces simply cannot sustain the ground part of the surge for much longer. Most, if not all, of



those 30,000 troops who surged into Iraq in the first half of 2007 will soon be coming home. But air power won't be. Air Force personnel are already on short, rotating tours of duty in the region. In Vietnam back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as ground troops were withdrawn, air power ramped up. This seems once again to be the pattern. There is every reason to believe that it represents the American future in Iraq.

#### From Barbarism to the Norm

The air war is simply not visible to most Americans who depend on the mainstream media. In part, this is because American reporters, who have covered every other sort of warfare in Iraq, simply refuse to look up.

It should be no surprise then that news of a future possible escalation of the air war was first raised by a journalist who had never set foot in Iraq and so couldn't look up. In a December 2005 piece entitled "[Up in the Air](#)," *New Yorker* investigative reporter Seymour Hersh suggested that "a key element of [any] drawdown plans, not mentioned in the president's public statements, is that the departing American troops will be replaced by American airpower. ... The danger, military experts have told me, is that, while the number of American casualties would decrease as ground troops are withdrawn, the over-all level of violence and the number of Iraqi fatalities would increase unless there are stringent controls over who bombs what."

After Hersh broke his story, the silence was deafening. Only one reporter, as far as I know, has even gone up in a plane – David S. Cloud of the *New York Times*, who [flew](#) in a B-1 from an unnamed "Middle Eastern airfield" on a mission over Afghanistan. Thomas Ricks traveled to Balad Air Base and did a [superb report](#) on it in 2006, but no reporter seems to have bothered to hang out with American pilots, nor have the results of bombing, missile-firing, or strafing been much recorded in our press. The air war is still largely relegated to passing mentions of air raids, based on Pentagon press releases or announcements, in summary pieces on the day's news from Iraq.

Given American military history since 1941, this is all something of a mystery. A Marine patrol rampaging through an Iraqi village can, indeed, be news; but American bombs or missiles turning part of a city into rubble or helicopter gunships riddling part of a neighborhood is, at best, tag-on, inside-the-fold material – a paragraph or two, as in [this AP report](#) on the latest fighting in an undoubtedly well-populated part of the city of Mosul:

*"An officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to release the information, said three civilians were wounded and helicopters had bombarded buildings in the southeastern Sumar neighborhood, which has seen frequent attacks on U.S. and Iraqi forces that have led to a series of raids."*

The predictably devastating results of helicopters "bombarding" an urban neighborhood in a major Iraqi city, if reported at all, will be treated as just the normal "collateral damage" of war as we know it. In our world, what was once the [barbarism](#) of air war, its genuine horror, has been transformed into humdrum ordinariness (if, of course, you don't happen to be an Iraqi or an Afghan on the receiving end), the stuff of [largely ignored](#) Air Force [news releases](#). It is as unremarkable (and as American) as apple pie, and nothing worth writing home to mom and the kids about.

Maybe then, it's time for Seymour Hersh to take another look. Or for the online world to take

up the subject. Maybe, sooner or later, American mainstream journalists in Iraq (and editors back in the U.S.) will actually look up, notice those contrails in the skies, register those “precision” bombs and missiles landing, and consider whether it really is a ho-hum, no-news period when the U.S. Air Force looses 100,000 pounds of explosives on a farming district on the edge of Baghdad. Maybe artists will once again begin pouring their outrage over the very nature of air war into works of art, at least one of which will become iconic, and travel the world reminding us just what, almost five years later, the “liberation” of Iraq has really meant for Iraqis.

In the meantime, brace yourself. Air war is on the way.

**Note on Air-War Readings:** *The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published a study in December 2007 on the air war in Iraq, which can be read by [clicking here](#) [pdf]. Figures on the rising intensity of air power in that country can be found there – of a sort that the Washington Post only recently reported on. For some historical background on U.S. air power and the bombing of noncombatants, I suggest checking out Mark Selden’s “[A Forgotten Holocaust](#).”*

*Those who, in these years, wanted to find out something substantive about the air war in Iraq had to look to independent sites on line. At TomDispatch, I began writing on the air war in 2004. See, for instance, “[Icarus \(armed with Vipers\) Over Iraq](#)”; others have taken up the subject at this site since: See Dahr Jamail’s “[Living Under the Bombs](#)”; Nick Turse’s “[Bombs Over Baghdad, The Pentagon’s Secret Air War in Iraq](#)” and “[Did the U.S. Lie about Cluster Bomb Use in Iraq](#)” (both of which involved the sort of reporting, long distance, that American journalists should have been doing in Iraq); and Michael Schwartz’s “[A Formula for Slaughter: The American Rules of Engagement from the Air](#),” among other pieces. On the air war in Afghanistan, see my “[‘Accidents of War,’ The Time Has Come for an Honest Discussion of Air Power](#).”*

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