

In Afghanistan, Ignorance Has Become a Crucial Part of the War on Terror

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Away from the media glare, the war on Afghan civilians at the hands of America and its local allies continues to take a toll on everyday life, with hundreds killed as a result.

Three weeks ago, Mullah Abdul Manan Akhund, a powerful Taliban commander in the southern Afghan province of Helmand, was killed by an American drone strike. Several journalists and political observers, both Afghan and foreign, shared the news on their Twitter feeds and beyond. Mullah Manan's death was a big headline, and it also strengthened the 17-year narrative of the so called 'War on Terror', which is supposed to be a success.

On the very same day that Mullah Manan was killed, another event occurred in Paktia, a province in eastern Afghanistan. At least 12 civilians were killed in one night of airstrikes and night raids conducted by Afghan and American forces. In fact, the Afghan forces who have been involved – the CIA-backed Khost Protection Force (KPF) – is notorious for killing and torturing civilians.

The next day, family members of the victims buried their loved ones in public, and by holding this ceremony, they also expressed their protest.

Such an event is not rare in Afghanistan. While the world's – especially the Western public's focus – often lies on Kabul and other cities, the country's rural areas have become the main setting of brutal night raids, drone strikes and other military operations.

Often, civilians are killed. In recent weeks, massacres like the one in Paktia took place in several other provinces such as Nangarhar or Helmand, where Mullah Manan was killed. But contrary to the death of the Taliban commander, civilian casualties often go unnoticed. Nobody cares about some 'alleged militants', as civilian victims are regularly described in news reports and their families in Afghanistan's uncovered hinterland. They are, for many, just collateral damage.

In fact, drone strikes like the one that killed Mullah Manan, rarely kill militant leaders. The very first drone operation in the history of mankind took place in October 2001 in Kandahar, and its target – Taliban founder Mullah Mohammad Omar – survived. Years later, he died naturally, the many drones did not kill him but instead killed others, people without faces and names. Other American hunts were unsuccessful too.

Recently, it has been revealed that Maulavi Jalaluddin Haqqani, a senior Taliban leader, is

dead. His death was caused by sickness and old age, not by a Hellfire rocket. During the last 17 years, Haqqani – who is also considered as the founder of the so-called ‘Haqqani network’ – has been declared dead a couple of times.

Other people, such as Al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, have been ‘killed’ several times by drone strikes. According to Reprieve, a human rights organisation based in the United Kingdom, between 2002 and 2014, at least 1,147 people in Pakistan and Yemen have been killed by drone strikes for the sake of 41 actual targets.

In some cases, targets have been killed after several drone strikes. In others, like in the case of al-Zawahiri, they are still alive today. The question remains, who has been killed instead of them in all these attacks?

This is also one of the reasons why it is problematic that some journalists, analysts and politicians decided to highlight Mullah Manan’s death, despite seemingly not caring about the many civilian casualties of drone strikes and similar operations in the past. It is just strengthening the flawed narrative of ‘precise’ drones and killer squads that solely kill ‘terrorists’.

Another such strike took place last weekend in Logar province. According to different reports, at least 12 civilians were killed.

“They were driving home and were mistaken for Taliban fighters. Will this make it on to the news anywhere? Will, anyone, be brought to justice for this?”, a victim’s relative said on social media.

According to recent US military figures, more than 5,000 bombs have been dropped on Afghanistan in 2018. This is a record in the 17-year long war. Numbers from 2001 to 2003 are not available. Besides, it is also known that the military’s numbers are flawed and problematic. Last year, research by the *Military Times* revealed that US military data from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan was factually wrong.

“The American military has failed to publically disclose potentially thousands of lethal airstrikes conducted over several years,” the media outlet reported.

In short, many more bombs have been dropped. They just did not want to tell us.

While Afghanistan and Afghans are being bombed more than ever, the Taliban – Afghanistan’s largest insurgent group – is controlling more territory than it has since 2001. Additionally, Daesh, also known as Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP), has made crucial gains too and is capable of conducting complex brutal attacks in the middle of big cities like Kabul.

Unsurprisingly, many people are asking themselves the following: Who are these bombs killing?

The answer is simple: Definitely not militants, because the nameless and faceless people who are getting killed regularly are civilians, and the mass murder of these people has created a massive blowback. Thus, militancy and extremism have increased in the region.

Just as in many other places on Earth, the US War on Terror has failed in Afghanistan too. While at least some American policymakers and observers have understood this reality, their Afghan allies in Kabul and their supporters apparently have not. Over the last few years, war crimes committed by Afghan forces have increased significantly.

At this very moment, the Afghan National Army and brutal militias such as the CIA-backed KPF are using American weapons, and they use them much more brutally than the Americans themselves, as whistle-blower who used to be part of the US drone programme, told me after Afghan forces bombed a religious school in the northern province of Kunduz last April.

At least 36 civilians, mostly children, were killed back then while the Kabul government spread fake news, claiming that a 'Taliban meeting' took place inside the school.

After the UN confirmed the civilian casualties, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani apologised in public. Since then, his government has done nothing to prevent more civilian casualties but continues to create more of them.

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