

Obama's Afghan War

The New Metric of Civilian Casualties

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By Eneko in Diagonal Periódico.

During 2009, seven out of ten civilians killed by the Obama and NATO military machines have been women and children. Clearly, the Obama regime has failed on the metric of civilian casualties.

A tacit agreement operates between the Obama administration, the U.S corporate media, most progressive U.S. liberals, and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA). All dream to a lesser or greater degree of a future social democratic paradise in Afghanistan where girls' schools would be flourishing and small farmers exporting pomegranates.[i] Some debate exists over the means to achieve this end. Much ado has been made during the past five months as to whether the Obama approach to Afghanistan differs or not with that of its predecessor.

What is certain is that Afghanistan has become Obama's war.[ii] Words matter: this is Obama's war and it is a military surge. Obama has put in motion a surge of U.S occupation troops raising them by 50% to a level of 55,000 by mid-summer 2009 (including a 1,000-strong contingent of Special Forces). He is continuing and expanding Bush's use of mercenaries. Pentagon data indicates that private security contractors working for the Pentagon have risen by 29% during the first quarter of 2009.[iii]

A debate centers upon to what degree the Obama approach is one of counter-terrorism (CT) or counter-insurgency (COIN). Central to the latter is the metric of civilian casualties and this is where the U.S media by commission and the UNAMA by omission enter the evolving Afghan tragedy. Much of the U.S left by having earlier proclaimed that the Afghanistan was the “good war” and being inebriated by the nation-building of humanitarian imperialism is now suffering from a bi-polar disorder, rendering it irrelevant.

With the sacking of General McKiernan and the entry of General McChrystal (along with the continuing prominence of counter-insurgency aficionado Kilcullen), Obama appears to tilt towards the COIN approach in Afghanistan. Put in other terms, the approach is population-centric rather than military-centric. General McChrystal stated in congressional testimony that “the measure of American and allied effectiveness would be the ‘number of Afghans shielded from violence,’ not the number of enemies killed.”[iv] He also said, “This is a critical point. It may be the critical point. This is a struggle for the support of the Afghan people. Our willingness to operate in ways that minimize casualties or damage, even when doing so makes our task more difficult, is essential to our credibility. I cannot overstate my commitment to the importance of this concept...Sir, I believe the perception caused by civilian casualties is one of the most dangerous things we face in Afghanistan, particularly with the Afghan people, the Pashtun most likely.”[v]

His approach hence is classic COIN, rather than focusing forcefully upon taking the fight to the Taliban and their associates (military-centric). Naturally, the COIN strategy if successful by providing better actionable intelligence enables better carrying out the military fight against “insurgents.” This strategy finds favor both in Karzai’s Kabul (to which yet more monies will flow) and in European capitals where the military-centric approach is unacceptable. The “new” U.S strategy which it turns out is not new at all, involves building up the Afghan military-police apparatus, pressuring NATO to take a greater role, employing “precision strikes” to avoid civilian casualties, etc. All this was tried under Bush and failed. Why should we expect anything different under Obama? But what is new is the metric of Afghan civilian casualties. This was well expressed in an editorial of the Boston Globe,

McChrystal and the new number two commander in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General David Rodriguez, must make one tenet in their guerrilla warfare playbook an absolute priority: protection of the civilian population. The Taliban are reaping benefits from a dynamic that should be familiar from other guerrilla wars. When Taliban fighters stage an ambush, US forces frequently feel compelled to call in air strikes or artillery fire. And all too often, as happened last week, innocent Afghan villagers are hurt or killed. The inevitable outcome is widespread anger against the foreign army. This is what Afghan President Hamid Karzai lamented again and again last week during a visit to Washington. He begged Americans to stop killing Afghan civilians. What Karzai knows, and what McChrystal must take to heart, is that nearly all Afghans despise and fear the Taliban. Yet no US strategy can defeat the Taliban unless the foreigners become protectors – not destroyers – of Afghan families.[vi]

An editorial in the New York Times of June 8th added

Protecting Afghan civilians and expanding the secure space in which they can go about their lives and livelihoods must now become the central purpose of American military operations in Afghanistan.[vii]

As pointed out by Jeff Huber, the McChrystal metric of winning – the number of Afghans shielded from violence – is nonsense. How many shielded Afghans will equate to victory? Who is going to shield them?[viii] General McChrystal who was head of secretive Joint Special Operations Command, involved in widespread murder and carnage across Afghanistan? In other words, under the McChrystal metric, it will be impossible to know when we have won. This is an invitation to war without end.

While it is not my purpose here to critique the feasibility of “protecting civilians” and whether such ever was U.S policy – indeed I argued exactly the contrary in December 2001[ix] – a few words are imperative. Protecting the civilian population requires a massive and prolonged U.S/NATO presence in the countryside, but as I have argued elsewhere, such requires around 400,000 foreign troops.[x] The Obama surge is obvious: to give Afghans enough space to rebuild their lives[xi]; but it is far too little, too late.[xii] Establishing such a presence necessitates clearing areas of the Taliban and their associates, but if many of the Taliban are residents of these regions then such clearing must take the form of population removal to fortified strategic villages (as in Vietnam).[xiii] Moreover, such clearing carried out with admittedly very poor on-the-ground actionable intelligence, will per force kill many innocents (as I demonstrate below has “precisely” occurred under the Obama clock). In other words, the U.S and NATO are caught in an unwinnable Catch-22.

The metric of civilian casualties has two dimensions: the one on-the-ground in Afghanistan and the other how Obama’s war gets reported outside Afghanistan. In Afghanistan today, word spreads very quickly about civilians killed by U.S and/or NATO actions. The foreign forces constantly lament the effectiveness of so-called Taliban propaganda. The presence of cell-phone technology has greatly facilitated such diffusion. No way exists to contain the spread of such information within Afghanistan.[xiv]

Things look very differently as regards how Obama’s Afghan war gets reported outside Afghanistan. Given the new metric of civilian casualties, the U.S government is going to greater lengths to manage the news coming out of Afghanistan. As is widely acknowledged, the U.S corporate (non right wing) media is having a “love affair” with the Obama administration.[xv] This is obvious as regards matters of foreign policy, the Pentagon and all the more so for Central Asia.

It is no secret that Obama has taken over the U.S peace movement.[xvi] For example, John Podesta’s ‘liberal think tank the Center for American Progress (CAP) strongly supports Obama’s escalation or surge in Afghanistan and Pakistan. MoveOn.org today serves as a full-time cheerleader of Obama’s policy agenda and is at best silent on Obama’s Afghan surge. More importantly, the established corporate media is largely silent about the continuing devastation perpetrated upon Afghan civilians by the Obama Afghan war. Only when a thoroughly egregious attack takes place as in Farah in early May 2009 when 97-147 civilians perished under U.S. “precision” bombs, is mention made. A British newspaper (not the Washington Post or equivalents) published a photo of what happens on the ground when a 2,000 pound bomb explodes (see below).[xvii] A B-1B bomber dropped two such bombs on a string of villages in Farah province on May 5th with devastating results.[xviii] This is precision? The effective casualty radius for such a bomb (meaning 50% of exposed persons within this range will die) is at least 400 meters from impact point.



A B1-B bomber delivers a 2,000 lb bomb upon alleged Taliban positions in the village of Yatimchay, Helmand, in support of an assault by British Royal Fusillers during Operation Mar Lew.

Facts-on-the-ground reveal that under Obama since January, more bombs are being dropped contra the administration's public relations. Rolfesen reports in *The Navy Times* that

Air Force, Navy and other coalition warplanes dropped a record number of bombs in Afghanistan during April, Air Forces Central figures show. In the past month, warplanes released 438 bombs, the most ever. April also marked the fourth consecutive month that the number of bombs dropped rose, after a decline starting last July. The munitions were released during 2,110 close-air support sorties. The actual number of airstrikes was higher because the AFCent numbers don't include attacks by helicopters and special operations gunships. The numbers also don't include strafing runs or launches of small missiles.[xix]

One searches in vain in the U.S mainstream press for reporting upon all those bombs being dropped upon Afghanistan. Vietnam-era enemy body counts are now officially back as part of the U.S propaganda war.[xx] Even less is written on the concrete results – other than the prolific references to “eliminated militants” – of such bombing. Such is to be expected from a corporate media largely in tow to the Pentagon and the Obama regime. Naturally exceptions exist as for example the independent reporting by the freelance journalist, Chris Sands of Britain who has been working independently in Afghanistan since 2005.[xxi] Sadly for every Chris Sands, there are dozens like Jason Straziuso (*Associated Press*), Lara Logan (*CBS 60 Minutes*) or Laura King (*Los Angeles Times*) who serve as megaphones for the Pentagon's version of events.

The U.S. military's “Jan. 31, 2009 Airpower Summary” stated “in the Musa Qala area, a coalition aircraft bombed an anti-Afghan force compound with a precision-guided munitions. A coalition ground commander had ordered the strike after enemy forces began shooting at his unit with small-arms fire and RPGs.” How did this look from the ground? Four months after the U.S air strike, the independent reporter, Chris Sands, reported what had happened on that fateful day. He interviewed a 13-year-old girl, Ghrana, in a Kabul rehabilitation center. Walking on crutches, Ghrana told Sands what had really taken place in Musa Qala when U.S war planes “bombed an anti-Afghan compound” killing and wounding many. Sands wrote

She sounded neither angry nor particularly sad describing what happened during a journey to her sister's house in the south-western province of Helmand, one morning. "I didn't hear any shooting or anything. Then I saw red coloured bombs falling from the aeroplane," she said. Nine of her relatives were killed, including her mother. Ghrana lost her right leg and much of her left arm. In military parlance she and her family were all collateral damage, an unfortunate, but inevitable, consequence of war. Each day that goes by they are joined by other men, women and children caught in a struggle that many Afghans say is more brutal than anything in their country's history...Exactly why Ghrana and her family were bombed in Musa Qala district three-and-a-half months ago may never become clear. She insists there were no Taliban in the area at the time and there is no obvious reason why her family was confused for insurgents.

Whatever the events were that led to the bombing, the results have been devastating. In a remote and violent part of one of the world's poorest countries, she must now try to find decent medical treatment and piece her life back together. Meanwhile, her remaining relatives pray for the day when the foreign troops finally withdraw from their country. "It will be like Eid for us," said her uncle, Ahmed Abed, a polite 32-year-old who brought his niece to Kabul. "The Americans know who is a Talib and who is innocent, but they don't care. If it is a Talib or a girl, they don't care. They are crazy. It's like they are blinded by love. If anyone comes in front of their face, they shoot them. They never care who it is. I can accept that airplanes make mistakes, but I have seen with my own eyes them fire from a vehicle at a woman in the street." Mr Abed's anger is common among Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group. Predominant in the south and east, many of them were naturally suspicious of the occupation. Now, with their homes in ruins and their futures more uncertain than ever, they are downright hostile.[xxii]

This atrocity went unreported until Mr. Sands wrote his article in the UAE's daily, The National, providing evidence that the figures cited in The Afghan Victim Memorial Project are a significant under-estimate of the true toll taken upon innocent Afghan civilians by the U.S. and NATO foreign forces.

Another exception is Dexter Filkins of the New York Times, who in February past penned an article titled "Afghan Civilian Casualties Rose 40 Percent in 2008." [xxiii] Mr. Filkins relied upon overall figures provided by the UNAMA in a report released in February, but complemented those with valuable case detail. The UNAMA report was certainly a healthy anti-dote to NATO propaganda which blithely asserted in January 2009 that only 973 civilians were killed and only 97 by international forces during 2008.

But can we confidently rely upon such UNAMA figures? The UNAMA will apparently be releasing new figures for 2009 this month.[xxiv] The UNAMA itself concedes that it is not engaged in "body-counting" in Afghanistan. The reasons cited include inaccessibility to many areas of conflict and a lack of adequate human resources to carry out such work.[xxv] Further skepticism is warranted as the UNAMA refuses to publish disaggregated data which would allow fact-checking. In effect, we are asked to believe in the UNAMA figures. But, such amounts to faith-based counting.

The Table and graph below present the evolving matrix of death for Afghan civilians, 2005-2009. The rows represent different counts: Herold; the United Nations' UNAMA; Human Rights Watch (HRW); the Afghanistan Rights Monitor (ARM); and the Afghan Ambassador to Australia (only 2008 figure[xxvi]). The UN data is for deaths caused by all pro-government forces. In order to make it comparable, I have assumed that 15% of civilian deaths were

caused by Afghan forces, giving the revised () figures. The graph below converts the annual totals into monthly averages for each year.

2005

2006

2007

2008

2009 (Jan-May)

Herold

midpoint

408-478

443

653-769

711

1,010-1,297

1,154

864-1,017

941

401-494

443

U.N

adjusted

477

(405)

829

(705)

HRW

230

434

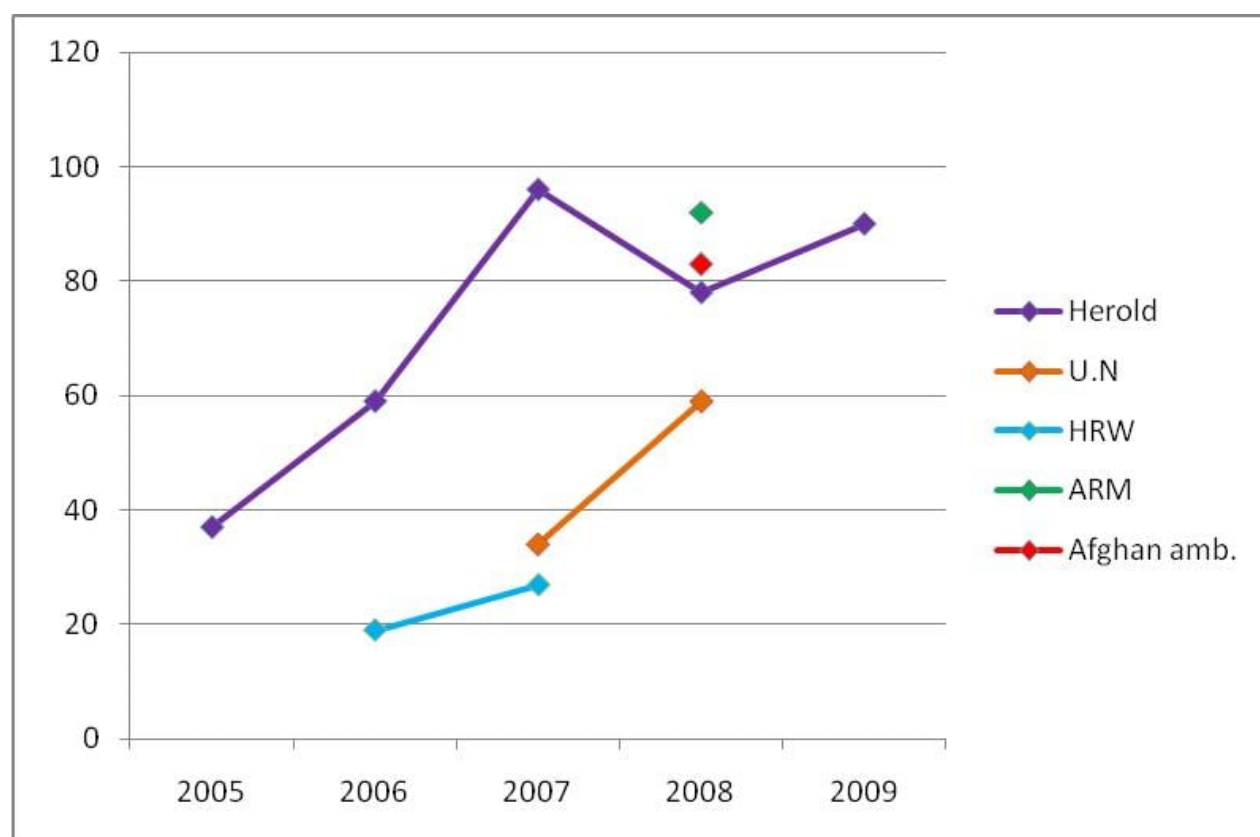
ARM

1,100

Afghan amb.

1,000

In order to better discern the evolution over time, the graph below presents annualized monthly averages of Afghans who perished at the hands of the U.S and its NATO allies. What emerges clearly is that for Afghan civilians, 2009 has been as deadly as the high point of 2007. The average monthly figure for 2009 is 90 innocent civilians killed; if we take just the Obama weeks (Jan 21 – May 31st) the figure rises to 96 (identical to the worst monthly average for 2007). In other words, by historical standards, the Obama regime fails on the metric of protecting innocent civilians from death at the hands of U.S and NATO occupation forces.



Figures for the year 2008 are now available from the UNAMA, NATO and Herold. Whereas the UNAMA provides overall civilian casualty figures, my own work focuses only upon innocent Afghans killed by U.S/NATO actions. The NATO figure is sheer propaganda. The following Table contrasts the compilations for civilians killed by US/NATO:

UNAMA figures for pro-government caused deaths

Herold figures for US/NATO-caused deaths

NATO figures for deaths caused US/NATO action

All of 2008

828 (705)

864-1,017

97

Jan-May 2009 (inclusive)

n.a.

387-472

n.a.

Source: data for Herold can be reconstructed from the Afghan Victim Memorial Project data base

The compilations are not strictly comparable. The UNAMA also includes civilians who perished at the hands of Afghan forces. In other words, one can safely assume that the UNAMA captures only about 70% of those counted by Herold.[xxvii] This serves to lessen U.S/NATO culpability and improve U.S/NATO “performance” on the metric of Afghans protected from violence.

How should one assess Obama’s Afghan war based upon the metric of civilian casualties? The U.S media and the U.S left are largely silent (the latter choosing to ignore data I have provided[xxviii] choosing instead to rely upon questionable accounts by Human Rights Watch and the UNAMA).). The previously mentioned rise in U.S air strikes augers poorly. The following Table presents data on civilians killed by US/NATO actions compiled from the Afghan Victim Memorial Project for 2009:

Low count

High count

January 2009: Bush 20 days

Obama 11 days

63

35

77

35

February

50

50

March

36

36

April

70

75

May

147

221

Sub-total....

Obama sub-total....

401

338

494

419

It should be noted that the figures for the six months Jan-June 2008 (inclusive) were 278-343. Comparing this with the data for five months in the last row in the Table above clearly demonstrates that even by the standards of the Bush administration, the Obama regime cares less about the well-being of Afghan civilians at least insofar as waging a “clean war,” that is on the metric of civilian casualties Obama fails.

What about the demographics of the Afghan dead? As I have long argued, well over one half of Afghan civilians killed by U.S and NATO forces have been women and children. Of the civilians killed about whom demographics are known (70% of the universe deaths), some 70% were women and children under the Obama clock (Jan 21 – May 31st)[xxix]:

Low count

High count

Men

$65 + 11 = 76$

$67 + 11 = 78$

Women

13 = 21 = 34

13 = 21 = 34

Children

71 + 65 = 136

71 + 65 = 136

Undetermined

92

121

Total

338

365

Note: For the massacre in Farah on May 5th, I have used the figures provided by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC): 11 males, 21 women and 65 children (31 girls and 34 boys).

By disproportionately killing civilian women and children, the Obama regime has clearly failed on the metric of civilian casualties.

Frequently one reads commentary (no evidence provided) that air strikes are more deadly for civilians than ground raids. My data base allows testing this hypothesis. The Table below summarizes the evidence for U.S and NATO actions during 2009 which led to the killing of Afghan civilians.

Type of attack

(1) Number of attacks

(2) Civilians killed

Ratio of (2)/(1)

Air

23

213 - 270

9.3 - 11.7

Ground

41

91

2.2

Air & ground

6

27 - 51

4.5 - 8.5

Other (e.g. traffic)

4

7

1.7

The data clearly reveals that U.S/NATO air strikes in Afghanistan today are 4-5 times more deadly than ground raids.

Conclusion

Having inherited a war in Afghanistan, the Obama administration nonetheless had choices. Some for instance like Gilles Dorronsoro argued that the very presence of foreign forces was inflaming the conflict and that what was called-for was a scaling-down of military action, focusing and exiting.[xxx] Instead, the Obama team which includes many members of the former Bush regime, decided to fight the “good war” in Afghanistan. During the past five months, the conflict has further escalated and promises to do more of the same.

By the announced metric of protecting Afghan civilians, the Obama team has failed miserably even more so than its predecessor. What is different is the public relations which began with in the words of Michael Stewart “Operation Redefinition.” One can redefine as much as one wants, the reality for Afghans pursuing their daily lives has deteriorated as documented herein. Since taking office and assuming the position of Commander-in-Chief, Obama and his NATO allies have killed at the very least some 338-419 Afghan civilians (compared to 278-343 under the Bush clock during the first six months of 2008). In addition, deadly CIA drone attacks within Pakistan have continued since Obama took command. Of the sixty cross-border U.S drone attacks upon Pakistan between January 14, 2006 and April 8, 2009,

Only 10 were able to hit their actual targets, killing 14 wanted al-Qaeda leaders, besides perishing 687 innocent Pakistani civilians. The success percentage of the US predator strikes thus comes to not more than six per cent.[xxxi]

Simple arithmetic shows that in some eighty days in office, Obama has managed to raise the monthly average kill rate in drone attacks achieved by Bush from 32 during 2008 to 45

per month (for February-March 2009).

The Obama team might well head the words of the Pakistani intelligence agent, 'Colonel Iman,' who after training at Fort Bragg's Special Forces base, oversaw the training camps for jihadis (including Mullah Omar) during the late 1970's and 1980's. Iman told Christina Lamb (another fine independent British journalist), that he left Afghanistan in late 2001 and claims he has not returned, but

"I can go any time on my old routes, even the Americans cannot stop me, but there is no need," he said. "I have friends roaming all over there. At times they give me a call, they like to hear my voice. I'm quite happy with the current situation because the Americans are trapped there. The Taliban will not win but in the end the enemy will tire, like the Russians." [xxxii]

The ex-CIA station chief in Kabul, Graham Fuller is emphatic that Obama's policies are aggravating the situation in Afghanistan (and Pakistan),

Only the withdrawal of American and NATO boots on the ground will begin to allow the process of near-frantic emotions to subside within Pakistan, and for the region to start to cool down. Pakistan is experienced in governance and is well able to deal with its own Islamists and tribalists under normal circumstances; until recently, Pakistani Islamists had one of the lowest rates of electoral success in the Muslim world. But U.S. policies have now driven local nationalism, xenophobia and Islamism to combined fever pitch. As Washington demands that Pakistan redeem failed American policies in Afghanistan, Islamabad can no longer manage its domestic crisis. [xxxiii]

□

Notes

[i] Barry Newhouse, "Afghanistan Promotes Crop More Profitable Than Poppy," VOA News (December 3, 2008)

[ii] This essay builds upon previous work as "America's Afghan War: The Real World versus Obama's Marketed Imagery," RAWA News (April 12, 2009) and in "What do Obama's First 100 Days Mean to Common Afghans?" Global Research (May 1, 2009)

[iii] Discussed in Michael Winship, "The Privatization of 'Obama's War'," Online Journal (June 8, 2009)

[iv] Al Pessin, "New Commander Pledges to Protect Afghan Civilians in 'Winnable War'," VOA News (June 2, 2009)

[v] Noah Schachtman, "New Top General Could Mean Changes for Afghan Airstrikes," Wired.com (June 5, 2009)

[vi] "New Strategy, New Commander," Boston Globe (May 13, 2009)

[vii] "Editorial Measuring Success in Afghanistan," New York Times (June 8, 2009)

[viii] Jeff Huber, "Our McMan in Bananastan," Antiwar.com (June 8, 2009)

[ix] Where I wrote, "I believe the argument goes deeper and that race enters the calculation. The sacrificed Afghan civilians are not 'white' whereas the overwhelming number of U.S. pilots and elite ground troops are white. This 'reality' serves to amplify the positive benefit-cost ratio of certainly sacrificing darker Afghans today [and Indochinese, Iraqis yesterday] for the benefit of probably saving American soldier-citizens tomorrow. What I am saying is that when the "other" is non-white, the scale of violence used by the U.S. government to achieve its state objectives at minimum cost knows no limits." See my "A Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States' Aerial Bombing of Afghanistan: A Comprehensive Accounting [revised]," Cursor.org (March 2002)

[x] See my "What do Obama's First 100 Days Mean to Common Afghans?" op. cit.

[xi] by the defence editor of the London Times, Michael Evans, "The Yanks and Their Firepower are coming...' but not to destroy the Taliban," Times (May 12, 2009)

[xii] see "America's Afghan War," op. cit and Ken Fireman, "Obama's Afghan Troop-Surge Plan May Prove Too Much, Too Late," Bloomberg.com (December 23, 2008)

[xiii] the difficulty for U.S occupation forces to isolate villagers from the Taliban is described in Philip Smucker, "US Soldiers' Limited Options Limited to Protect Afghans from Taliban," McClatchy Newspapers (May 25, 2009)

[xiv] See Jason Motlagh, "After Gunfire, U.S., Taliban Swing PR Cudgel," ABC News (May 16, 2009)

[xv] On the other hand, in Europe sharp criticisms are more common, see the excellent analysis by Alejandro Pozo Marin, Alliance of Barbarities. Afghanistan 2001-2008 10 Reasons to Question (and Rethink) Foreign Involvement" (Barcelona: J.M. Delas Centre for Peace Studies - Justice and Peace, December 2008), 44 pp.

[xvi] well analyzed in Justin Raimundo, " 'Progressive' Warmongers," Antiwar.com (April 7, 2009)

[xvii] Chris Hughes, "We Witness the Dangers Our Troops Face in Afghanistan Minefield," The Daily Mirror (June 1, 2009)

[xviii] see my account on the Afghan Victim Memorial Project data base

[xix] Bruce Rolfsen, "Record Bombs Dropped in Afghanistan in April," The Navy Times (May 4, 2009)

[xx] Michael M. Phillips, "Army Deploys Old Tactic in PR War," Wall Street Journal (June 1, 2009)

[xxi] See for example his "Afghanistan: Chaos Central," Counterpunch (February 25, 2009)

[xxii] Chris Sands, "Afghan Anger Grows at Slaughter of the Innocents," The National (May 19, 2009)

[xxiii] in The New York Times (February 18, 2009)

[xxiv] Mentioned in Adam B. Ellick, "Uncertainty Clouds British Report of Taliban Leader's

Death," New York Times (June 3, 2009)

[xxv] The UNAMA's Human Rights Unit has around six people in each of the mission's eight regional offices. The unit collects data on civilian casualties from various available sources and tries to verify the data. See "Afghanistan: UN Trying to Verify Civilian Casualties with Limited Resources," IRIN NEWS (September 20, 2007)

[xxvi] from Brendan Nicholson, "Australian Troops Kill 5 Afghan Children," The Age (February 14, 2009)

[xxvii] The 2008 mid-point figures for Herold is 939. If we assume that 20% of the deaths caused by pro-government forces were caused by Afghan forces, then the adjusted UNAMA figure is 662 (which is about 70% of 939).

[xxviii] for example, by Dave Markland and Tom Engelhart, see Dave Markland, "Afghanistan Past & Present," ZNews (June 9, 2009)

[xxix] This figure is almost exactly identical to that (72%) for the first eight months of 2008, see Marc Herold, "Truth as Collateral Damage. Civilian deaths from US/NATO air strikes in Afghanistan are not accidents or mistakes - they are calculated and predicted," The Guardian (October 22, 2008)

[xxx] Gilles Dorronsoro, "Focus and Exit: An Alternative Strategy for the Afghan War," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report (January 2009)

[xxxi] "60 Drone Hits Kill 14 Al-Qaeda Men, 687 Civilians," The News (April 10, 2009)

[xxxii] Christina Lamb, "The Taliban Will 'Never be Defeated'," Times (June 7, 2009)

[xxxiii] Graham E. Fuller, "Obama's Policies Making Situation Worse in Afghanistan and Pakistan," The Huffington Post (May 11, 2009)

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