

U.S. Drastically Undercounted Civilian Deaths Due To Airstrike, Finds Investigation

by Countercurrents Collective, published on Countercurrents, December 20, 2021

Nice quick summary of what is in the report. We should all read it. [jb]

The U.S. military drastically undercounted civilian deaths caused by airstrikes in the Middle East since 2014, according to a New York Times investigation published Saturday.

The New York Times reviewed a hidden Pentagon archive comprised of the military's confidential assessments of over 1,300 reports of civilian casualties in airstrikes, and found, "since 2014, the American air war has been plagued by deeply flawed intelligence, rushed and imprecise targeting and the deaths of thousands of civilians, many of them children. There was and a lack of accountability for wrongdoing.

While the official military count says 1,417 civilians have been killed in Iraq and Syria, the investigation found many more civilian deaths, citing multiple examples, though it did not provide an exact count.

The New York Times found examples of the U.S. forces not disclosing the mistaken killing of civilians during airstrikes. In 2017, a family of four in a car that were fleeing West Mosul, Iraq, and three other civilians were killed after the vehicle was mistaken as a car bomb.

Last month, The Times revealed that military leaders hid

a 2019 airstrike in Syria where as many as 64 civilians were killed.

Earlier this year, a report compiled by an independent monitoring group found that the U.S. airstrikes have killed as many as 48,000 civilians since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The New York Times report (What to Know About the Civilian Casualty Files, by Michael Levenson) said:

“In the years since American boots on the ground gave way to a war of airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, the U.S. military has made a central promise: that precision bombs and drones would kill enemies while minimizing the risks to civilians.

“Recent investigations by The New York Times have undercut that promise. In September, The Times reported that a drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan, which U.S. officials said had destroyed a vehicle laden with bombs, had instead killed 10 members of a family. Last month, The Times reported that dozens of civilians had been killed in a 2019 bombing in Syria that the military had hidden from public view.

“Now, a Times investigation has found that these were not outliers but rather the regular casualties of a transformed way of war gone wrong.”

It said:

“In addition to reviewing the military’s assessments of reports of civilian casualties – obtained through Freedom of Information requests and lawsuits against the Defense Department and U.S. Central Command – The Times visited nearly 100 casualty sites in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan and interviewed scores of surviving residents and current and former U.S. officials.”

Following are key takeaways from Part 1 of the investigation:

Civilian Deaths Have Been Drastically Undercounted

According to the military's count, 1,417 civilians have died in airstrikes in the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria; since 2018 in Afghanistan, U.S. air operations have killed at least 188 civilians. But The New York Times found that the civilian death toll was significantly higher. Discrepancies arose in case after case – none more stark than a 2016 bombing in the Syrian hamlet of Tokhar.

U.S. Special Operations forces hit what they believed were three ISIS "*staging areas*," confident they were killing scores of ISIS fighters. A military investigation concluded that seven to 24 civilians "*intermixed with the fighters*" might have died. But, The Times found, the targeted buildings were houses where families had sought refuge. More than 120 civilians were killed.

In 1,311 Reports, One 'Possible Violation'

The Pentagon has also failed to uphold pledges of transparency and accountability.

Until now, only a handful of the assessments have been made public. None included a finding of wrongdoing or disciplinary action. Only one cited a "*possible violation*" of the rules of engagement – a breach in the procedure for identifying a target. Fewer than a dozen condolence payments were made, even though injured survivors often required costly medical care. The records show little effort by the military to identify patterns of failure or lessons learned.

In many instances, the command that had approved a strike was responsible for examining it, often using incorrect or incomplete evidence. In only one case did investigators visit the site of a strike. In only two did they interview survivors or witnesses.

Taken together, the 5,400 pages of records point to an institutional acceptance of civilian casualties. In the logic of the military, a strike was justifiable as long as the expected risk to civilians had been properly weighed against the military gain, and it had been approved up the chain of command.

Over 50,000 Airstrikes, Most Not Planned in Advance

America's new way of war took shape after the 2009 surge of U.S. forces into Afghanistan. By the end of 2014, President Barack Obama declared America's ground war essentially done, shifting the military's mission to mostly air support and advice for Afghan forces battling the Taliban. At roughly the same time, he authorized a campaign of airstrikes against ISIS targets and in support of allied forces in Iraq and Syria.

At an ever-quickening pace over the next five years, and as the administration of Obama gave way to that of Donald Trump, U.S. forces executed more than 50,000 airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

When the wars intensified, the authority to approve strikes was pushed further down the chain of command, even as an overwhelming majority of strikes were carried out in the heat of war, and not planned far in advance.

Biases and Blind Spots Created Danger

The records suggest that civilian deaths were often the result of "*confirmation bias*," or the tendency to find and interpret information in a way that confirms preexisting beliefs. People rushing to a bombing site were assumed to be ISIS fighters, not civilian rescuers. Men on motorcycles, thought to be moving "*in formation*," displaying the "*signature*" of an imminent attack, were just men on motorcycles.

Cultural blind spots also left innocent civilians vulnerable to attack. The military judged, for example, that there was

“no civilian presence” in a house where families were napping during the days of the Ramadan fast or sheltering from the heat or intense fighting.

Breakdowns In Technology And Surveillance

For all their promise of pinpoint accuracy, at times U.S. weapons simply missed. In 2016, the military reported that it had killed Neil Prakash, a notorious Australian ISIS recruiter, in a strike on a house in East Mosul. Four civilians died in the strike, according to the Pentagon. Months later, Prakash was arrested crossing from Syria into Turkey.

Poor or insufficient surveillance footage often contributed to deadly targeting failures. Afterward, it also hamstrung efforts to examine strikes. Of the 1,311 reports examined by The Times, the military had deemed 216 allegations *“credible.”* Reports of civilian casualties were often dismissed because video showed no bodies in the rubble, yet the footage was often too brief to make a reliable determination.

Sometimes, only seconds' worth of footage was taken before a strike, hardly enough for investigators to assess civilians' presence. In some other cases, there was no footage at all for review, which became the basis for rejecting the allegation. That was often because of *“equipment error,”* because no aircraft had *“observed or recorded the strike,”* or because the unit could not or would not find the footage or had not preserved it as required.

Failure To Account For Secondary Explosions

A target such as a weapons cache or power station came with the potential for secondary explosions, which often reached far beyond the expected blast radius. These accounted for nearly one-third of all civilian casualties acknowledged by the military and half of all civilian deaths and injuries at the sites visited by The Times.

A June 2015 strike on a car-bomb factory in Hawija, Iraq, is among the deadliest examples. In plans for the nighttime attack, the nearest “*collateral concern*” was assessed to be a “*shed*.” But apartment buildings ringed the site, and dozens of displaced families, unable to afford rent, had also been squatting in abandoned buildings close by. According to the military investigation, as many as 70 civilians were killed that night.

In response to questions from The Times, Capt. Bill Urban, the spokesperson for the U.S. Central Command, said that “*even with the best technology in the world, mistakes do happen, whether based on incomplete information or misinterpretation of the information available. And we try to learn from those mistakes.*” He added, “*We work diligently to avoid such harm. We investigate each credible instance. And we regret each loss of innocent life.*”

Countercurrents Collective are a group of writers in India who support and manage the Countercurrents.org blog which has been doing a great job for more than a decade.

“Worse than a Crime”: Pentagon Inspector finds Kabul Drone Strike Killing 10 not a Violation of Law (!)

by Juan Cole, published on Informed Comment, November 6, 2021

Ann Arbor (Informed Comment) – Paul Handley of AFP reports that the US Air Force Inspector General, Lieutenant General Sami Said, found that a drone strike that mistakenly killed 10 civilian non-combatants, including 7 children, in Afghanistan on August 29 violated no laws, including the law of war.

When Napoleon had the royalist Duc d'Enghein assassinated in 1804, Talleyrand is said to have observed, "*It was worse than a crime, it was a mistake.*"

The same sentiment, whether originally expressed by Talleyrand or someone else, seems to apply here.

One of the reasons that the United States refuses to join the International Criminal Court at the Hague is that Washington does not want such assessments to be double-checked in an impartial tribunal.

Gen. Said's reasoning is that no one involved thought civilians would be killed. The target was a white Toyota of a sort US intelligence believed the ISIS-K terrorist group intended to use as a car bomb, but field agents tailed the wrong white Toyota. This one belonged to an aid worker. The Toyota was targeted while sitting outside a house. Gen. Said says that the drone



targeting personnel believed the house was empty. A child came out of the house toward the Toyota to greet his father 2 minutes before the launch, and while this event was caught on video, no one noticed it and they still fired the drone.

US intelligence indicated that a bomb would be brought to the driver of the white Toyota in a computer bag, and American field agents witnessed him receiving a computer bag. In

reality, it was just a computer bag.

In the law of war you are not allowed to take a shot if you think it will kill or injure a lot of civilian non-combatants. Here, the Inspector General concluded that intentions were pure, since the targeting team believed the people in the car were militants and that the house was empty. In fact, they blew up a car full of innocent civilians and also the family members in the house, including children.

At least in civilian law, I would say we have here a case of criminal negligence.

I mean, really, this tragedy resulted from a series of monumental screw-ups and I hope somebody's career suffers for it, at least. They *trailed the wrong car!* They couldn't tell the difference between a laptop and a bomb. They declared a building empty that had a whole family in it. They killed an aid worker while trying to target terrorists. They seem to have had some (bad) human intelligence, but I suspect that some of the mistakes were from relying too much on signals intelligence.

But if you started charging military personnel with criminal negligence for what they call "*collateral damage*," you'd empty out the Pentagon and make war impossible. In many ways the entire Iraq War was criminal negligence on the part of the Bush administration.

The August 29 mistake cost the United States enormously in public opinion in the region. Even the mainstream Turkish paper Haberturk ran a column speaking of how cruel the Americans had been to dismember their own aid worker in this way, which also expressed skepticism that the US would take in very many Afghan refugees (what with us being such cruel people). This, according to BBC Monitoring.

The Iranian press maintained that the Pentagon would never even have admitted that the Kabul strike was an error if it

had not been for a detailed *New York Times* investigation. They are deeply skeptical of US military intentions in the Middle East to begin with, but this strike made us look sinister and incompetent all at once.

Since the US government has started relying so much on drone strikes, as it has reduced its military footprint in the Greater Middle East, we need to know that the drones are hitting legitimate targets. If the drone operators can't do better than this, we should cease using the things.

**Featured Image: Relatives and neighbors of the Ahmadi family gathered around the incinerated husk of a vehicle hit by a U.S. drone strike in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 30, 2021. (Photo: Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times)*

Juan Cole is the founder and chief editor of *Informed Comment*. He is Richard P. Mitchell Professor of History at the University of Michigan. He is author of, among many other books, *Muhammad: Prophet of Peace amid the Clash of Empires* and *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Follow him on Twitter at @jricole or the Informed Comment Facebook Page

Ban the Use of Drones as Weapons

by Peter and Judy Weiss, published on Foreign Policy in Focus, October 15, 2021

America's parting drone attack in Afghanistan, which killed an aid worker and his family, is emblematic of the entire drone

war.

Everyone who followed the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan was horrified by the drone attack, called a “tragic mistake” by the Pentagon, which killed ten members of a single family, including 7 children.

Zemari Ahmadi, who worked for Nutrition and Education International, a U.S.-based aid organization, became the target because he drove a white Toyota, went to his office, and stopped to pick up containers of clean water for his extended family. Those actions, deemed suspicious by the drone surveillance program and its human handlers, were enough to identify Ahmadi falsely as an ISIS-K terrorist and place him on the kill list for that day.

It would be comforting to think that the Ahmadi killing was one of those one-in-a-thousand tragic affairs from which no conclusion could be drawn, but such a belief would itself be a mistake. In fact, as many as one-third of people killed by drone strikes have been found to be civilians.

While it is difficult to get an accurate count of deaths resulting from drone strikes, there are many documented reports of civilians having been mistakenly targeted and killed.

Human Rights Watch found that the 12 men killed and 15 injured by a U.S. drone strike in Yemen in 2013 were members of a wedding party and not militants, as U.S. officials told journalists they were. In another example, a 2019 U.S. drone strike targeting an alleged ISIS hideout in Afghanistan mistakenly targeted 200 pine nut farmers resting after a day’s work, killing at least 30 and injuring 40 more.

U.S. drone attacks, initiated in 2001 when George W. Bush was president, have increased dramatically – from approximately 50 total during the Bush years to 12,832 confirmed strikes in Afghanistan alone during Trump’s presidency. In the last year

of his presidency, Barack Obama acknowledged that drones were causing civilian deaths. "There's no doubt that civilians were killed that shouldn't have been," he said.

The escalation paralleled the transition of the war in Afghanistan from maintaining large numbers of U.S. ground troops to a reliance on air power and drone attacks.



Viewed from a Drone

A primary rationale for the change in strategy was reducing the threat of U.S. casualties. But no attempt to reduce the deaths of American soldiers should also cause more parents, children, farmers, or other civilians to die. Suspicion of terrorism, particularly based on faulty intelligence, cannot justify execution, nor can the desire to save American lives by substituting drones for feet on the ground.

The use of certain weapons determined to be grossly inhumane, or that fail to distinguish between military and civilian targets, has already been banned under international law.

The widespread use of poison gas in World War I caused

humanitarian lawyers, together with civil society, to fight for their prohibition, resulting in the Geneva Protocol of 1925, which exists to this day. Other weapons have similarly been banned over the course of the last century, including chemical and biological weapons, cluster bombs, and landmines. While not all countries are parties to treaties banning these weapons, most countries honor them, which has saved many lives.

The use of drones as lethal weapons also should be prohibited.

It is important here to note that there are two types of drones used by the military to target and kill – those that operate as fully autonomous lethal weapons, using a computer algorithm to determine who lives or dies, and those operated by humans who are safely ensconced in a military base thousands of miles away from the people targeted to be killed. The killing of the Ahmadi family demonstrates that all weaponized drones, whether autonomous or human-directed, must be banned. There are far too many examples of innocent civilians who were killed erroneously.

Prohibiting the use of drones as weapons is required by international law. It also is the right thing to do.

Peter Weiss is a retired international lawyer, former board chair of the Institute for Policy Studies, and president emeritus of the Lawyers Committee on Nuclear Policy. **Judy Weiss** is president of the Samuel Rubin Foundation. **Phyllis Bennis**, a Program Director at the Institute for Policy Studies, provided research assistance.

Droning On: Assassins-in-Chief and Their Brood

by Tom Englehardt, published on TomDispatch, September 28, 2021

What a way to end a war! Apologies all around! We're so damn sorry – or actually, maybe not!

I'm thinking, of course, about CENTCOM commander General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.'s belated apology for the drone assassination of seven children as the last act, or perhaps final war crime, in this country's 20-year-long Afghan nightmare.

Where to begin (or end, for that matter) when considering that never-ending conflict, which seems – for Americans, anyway – finally to be over? After all these years, don't ask me.

Hey, one thing seems clear to me, though: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley undoubtedly didn't apologize for that last Hellfire missile attack – he, in fact, originally labeled it a “righteous strike” – or the endless civilian deaths caused by American air power, because he's had so many other things on his mind in these years. As a start, he was far too preoccupied calling his Beijing opposite, General Li Zuocheng, to warn him that the president of the United States, one Donald Trump, might have the urge to start a war with China before leaving office.

Actually, had Milley called me instead, I would have assured him that I believed The Donald then incapable of doing anything other than watching Fox News, going bonkers over the election, and possibly launching an attack (nuclear or otherwise) on Joe Biden and the Democrats, no less Congress – remember January 6th! – or even his own vice president, Mike Pence, for certifying the vote. Maybe, in fact, Milley should

have skipped the Chinese entirely and called Republican Representatives Liz Cheney and Anthony Gonzalez to warn them that, sooner or later, the president might go nuclear on them.

Of course, in our increasingly mad, mad world, who really knows anymore?

I do know one thing, however, mostly because I wrote it so long ago and it stuck in my mind (even if in no one else's): ever since the presidency of George W. Bush, who reportedly kept "his own personal scorecard" in a White House desk drawer of drone-killed or to-be-killed "terrorists," every American president has been an *assassin-in-chief*. No question about it, Joe Biden is, too. I don't know why the label never caught on. After all, assassination, once officially an illegal act for a president, is now, by definition, simply part of the job – and the end of the Afghan War will do nothing to stop that.

I first labeled our future presidents that way in 2012, after the *New York Times* reported that Barack Obama was attending "Terror Tuesday" meetings at the White House where names were regularly being added to a "kill list" of people to be droned off this planet. The first such Obama assassination, as Jo Becker and Scott Shane wrote at the time, would, prophetically enough, kill "not only its intended target, but also two neighboring families, and [leave] behind a trail of cluster bombs that subsequently killed more innocents." Sound faintly familiar so many years later when U.S. drones and other aircraft have reportedly knocked off at least 22,000 civilians across the Greater Middle East and Africa?

Killers on the Loose

OMG, apologies all around! There I go, in such an all-American fashion, droning on and on.

Still, it's hard to stop, since it's obvious that presidential drone assassinations will go on and on, too. Just think about the thrill of what, in the wake of Afghanistan, Joe Biden has

started to call “over-the-horizon capabilities” (of the very sort that killed those seven kids in Kabul). In fact, it seems possible that this country’s forever wars of the last two decades will now morph into forever drone wars. That, in turn, means that our 20-year war of terror (which we always claimed was a war *on* terror) will undoubtedly continue into the unknown future. After all, in the last two decades, Washington’s done a remarkable job of preparing the way for such strikes, at least if you’re talking about ensuring that extreme Islamist terror groups would spread ever more widely across ever larger parts of this increasingly shambolic planet.

Here’s the thing, though: if, in 2021, you want to talk about assassins-in-chief who never feel the urge to apologize while putting so many in peril, you don’t have to head over the horizon at all. Take my word for it. You need look no further than former president Donald Trump or, at a state level, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Texas Governor Greg Abbott, among others, or simply most Republican politicians these days. Once you refocus on them, you’re no longer talking about drone-killing foreign terrorists (or foreign children), you’re talking about the former president (or governor or senator or congressional representative or state legislator) assassinating American citizens. When it comes to being that kind of assassin, by promoting unmasking, super-spreader events (including unmasked school attendance), and opposition to vaccine mandates, among other things, you’re speaking of the murder of innocents right here in the U.S. of A.

Do you even remember how President Trump, returning from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center after his own case of Covid-19 had been treated, stepped out onto a White House balcony to rip off his mask in front of every camera in town? With 690,000 Americans now dead from the pandemic (and possibly so many more), one thing is clear: the simplest of precautions would have radically cut those numbers.

And if you don't mind my droning on yet more about that crew of assassins (and you might throw in, among others, West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin who, in 2020, made \$491,949 from his stock holdings in the West Virginia coal brokerage firm he founded years ago), what about all the politicians who have promoted the heating of this planet to what could someday be the boiling point? After all, if you happen to be on the West Coast, where the fire season no longer seems to end and "heat domes" are a new reality, or in large parts of the country still experiencing a megadrought of the sort never seen before in U.S. history, you'd have to say that we're already living in the Pyrocene Age. And I'm not even referring to the recent U.N. report suggesting that, if things don't change quickly enough, the temperature of this planet might rise 2.7 degrees Celsius (4.86 degrees Fahrenheit) by the end of this century. That would, of course, produce an all-too-literal hell on Earth (and mind you, such scientific predictions about climate change have often proven underestimates).

The U.S. left Afghanistan in a scene so chaotic that it captured media attention for days, but don't for a moment imagine that such a sense of chaos was left behind at Kabul airport. After all, it's clear enough that we now live in a world and a country in increasing disarray.

Of the two great imperial powers of the last century, the USSR and the U.S., one is long gone and the other in growing disrepair, not just abroad but at home as well. This country seems to be heading, however slowly, for the exit (even as its president continues to proclaim that "America is back!"). And don't count on a "rising China" to solve this planet's problems either. It is, after all, by far the greatest greenhouse gas emitter of our moment and guaranteed to suffer its own version of chaos in the years to come.

Downhill All the Way?

I mean, I'm 77 years old (and feeling older all the time) and

yet, in the worst sense possible, I'm living in a new world as a pandemic rages across America and climate change continues to show off its all-too-visibly grim wonders. Just go to the *New York Times* website any day of the week and look at its global map of Covid-19 "hotspots." What you'll find is that the country our leaders have long loved to hail as the most extraordinary, indispensable, and powerful on the planet is now eternally an extreme pandemic "hot spot." How extraordinary when you consider its wealth, its access to vaccines and masks, and its theoretical ability to organize itself! But give some credit where it's due. America's assassins have been remarkably hard at work not just in Afghanistan or Iraq or Somalia, but right here at home.

In those distant lands, we eternally used Hellfire missiles to kill women and children. But when you fight such wars forever and a day abroad, it turns out that their spirit comes home in a hellfire-ish sort of way. And indeed, those forever wars certainly did come home with Donald Trump, whose accession to the White House would have been unimaginable without them. The result: the U.S. is not only an eternal global hotspot for Covid-19 (more than 2,000 deaths a day recently), but increasingly a madhouse of assassins of every sort, including Republican politicians determined to take out the American democratic system as we knew it, voting law by voting law, state by Republican-controlled state. And that madness, while connected to Trump, QAnon, the anti-vaxxers, and the like, is also deeply connected to how this country decided to respond to the tragedy of 9/11 – by launching those wars that America's generals and the military-industrial complex fought so disastrously but oh-so-profitably all these years.

By now, this country is almost unimaginable without its drone assassins and the conflicts that have gone with them, especially the one that began it all in Afghanistan. In the wake of that war (though don't hold your breath for the next time an American drone takes after some terrorist there and

once again kills a bunch of innocents), the Biden administration has moved on to far more peaceful activities. I'm thinking, for instance, of the way it's guaranteed the Australians nuclear submarines and the U.S. military, with a mere 750 military bases around the planet, will, in return, get a couple of more such bases in that distant land.

Hey, the French were pissed (for all the wrong reasons) and even withdrew their ambassador from Washington, feeling that Joe Biden and crew had no right to screw up their own arms deals with Australia. The Chinese were disturbed for most of the right reasons (and undoubtedly a few wrong ones as well), as they thought about yet another set of undetectable nuclear subs in the waters off the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait.

So it goes, as officials in Washington seem incapable of not having war of one sort or another, hot or cold, on the brain. And keep in mind that I haven't even begun to describe our deathly new reality, not in a country where the Delta strain of Covid-19 has run wild, especially in states headed by gubernatorial assassins. Meanwhile, too much of the rest of the world remains an unvaccinated hothouse for potentially new strains of a pandemic that may be with us, if you don't mind such a mixed metaphor, until hell freezes over.

But you know all this! You've long sensed it. You're living it! Who isn't?

Still, since I'm at it, let me just quote myself (the very definition of droning on) from that article I wrote a decade ago on the president as assassin-in-chief:

"But – though it's increasingly heretical to say this – the perils facing Americans, including relatively modest dangers from terrorism, aren't the worst things on our planet. Electing an assassin-in-chief, no matter who you vote for, is worse. Pretending that the Church of St. Drone offers any

kind of reasonable or even practical solutions on this planet of ours, is worse yet. And even worse, once such a process begins, it's bound to be downhill all the way."

In 2012, the phrase "over the horizon" hadn't yet become presidential, but "downhill all the way" seems like a reasonable enough substitute. And how sad it is, since other, better futures are genuinely imaginable. Just mask up and give it some thought.

Copyright 2021 Tom Engelhardt

Tom Engelhardt created and runs the website *TomDispatch.com*. He is also a co-founder of the American Empire Project and the author of a highly praised history of American triumphalism in the Cold War, *The End of Victory Culture*. A fellow of the Type Media Center, his sixth and latest book is *A Nation Unmade by War*.

A Forgotten Drone Victim And the U.S. War on Indigenous Peoples

by Judith Bello, 2017



Malik Jalal in Islamabad in 2012.

In Pakistan in October of 2012, my group of peace activists met Malik Jalal, who spoke to us about the effect of drones on his community in Waziristan and later accompanied our caravan up to Tank, a town on the edge of Waziristan, where we joined a lively anti-war rally. I specifically remember Malik Jalal as a handsome man in the prime of life, accustomed to having authority. He had a full beard and wore the garb of a Tribal leader, and spoke about the suffering of his people living under drones. There was humor in his expression and I remember that he laughed and his eyes twinkled when members of our delegation told of being arrested for sitting outside a military base demanding an end to drone wars. Only in response to a direct question did he talk about his own experience. He said that he sometimes slept in the mountains so as not to put his family at risk.



Click the Photo to
read Malik Jalal's
story in his own
words.

Last summer, in 2016, I saw a photo of a man visiting London to share his experience with living under drones and demand that the drones stop flying over Waziristan. His name was Malik Jalal. I thought I recognized the man I had met in Pakistan, but an organizer with my group dismissed the possibility out of hand. I waited a little, then went to my photos and took out a photo to compare with the one in the British news article. ** I was then certain it was the same man. He had aged, and his beard was shorter. He was dressed in ordinary Afghan and Pakhtun garb rather than the robes of a Chieftain. But it was the same Malik Jalal we had met in Pakistan. It was sad, really, to see him so much aged in the few years since I had met him.

This week, when I was researching the story of Faisal bin Ali Jabar, I noticed an article on the Reprieve website about Malik Jalal. They are the ones who hosted him in London last summer, and also hosted the CodePink Peace Delegation to meet Waziri Drone victims in Pakistan. I think the headline I saw last summer was in the Guardian. In any case, what interested me were the details of Malik Jalal's story. When we met him in Pakistan, he had primarily focused his remarks on the suffering of his people. I imagine he did the same when he was in London. However, the article on the Reprieve website described how he was targeted and stalked by US drones. On repeated occasions, people were blown up by drone in proximity to Jalal's path; a friend expecting him for dinner, people at a meeting he was on his way to attend, a family member who was driving his car, and even a random car the same color as his own traveling down the road behind him.

Malik Jalal is not an Al Qaeda operative or member of the

Taliban. As a Malik, he is a tribal leader on the payroll of the Pakistani government. He works as a moderator in resolving tribal disputes and is a senior member of the North Waziristan Peace Committee. While carrying out his duties, he might occasionally attend a meeting with a Taliban member present. They too belong to local tribes, and some hold positions of authority. But there is no possible justification for stalking Malik Jalal to try to kill him, terrorizing his family and killing a number of innocent people who were mistaken for him. But Malik Jalal says that the reason he is being targeted is because he came forward and spoke out against the drone strikes on other members of his community.

In 2011, Reprieve called a Jirga with a lawyer named Shahzad Akbar to bring together the people of Waziristan who wished to end the drone killing in their towns and villages. Another person who came forward to try to end the drone strikes in Waziristan, and they were many, was a teenage boy who offered to search for missile parts in the vicinity around his home town. The Jirga (town hall meeting) must have been infiltrated by CIA agents because within a few days this 16 year old boy was incinerated by a drone strike while driving down the road with his 11 year old cousin. Reprieve and Shahzad Akbar, however, have persevered in their efforts to end drone killing in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen and elsewhere, and they have continued to work with members of the community like Malik Jalal who are willing to come forward with information and to demand that the murderous drone strikes end.

Today, we don't hear about this issue very often in the mainstream news. The war in Afghanistan is going badly. After hearing Malik Jalal's story, this is not surprise. It may be that there are less drone strikes in Pakistan this year, but although the drone strikes in Afghanistan are neither tracked or recorded, they are surely occurring at an

accelerated pace. If we are losing there, perhaps we should look at other solutions than war. There is no moral justification for the US war in Afghanistan and no moral or legal justification for bombing people in the tribal region of Pakistan, a country which is not at war with us. Code Pink invited Shahzad Akbar to come and speak in the US in 2013, but he was unable to get a visa. The Afghan Peace Volunteers and their mentor, Hakim were invited a couple of years later, but also failed to receive visas. These are all peace activists who can inform us about the damage done by US wars in their countries.

Drone wars have drifted out of our attention, but that is not an accident. Since the early days of broad political resistance to the use of drones for targeted killing (execution of suspects) and surveillance, it is become more and more difficult to get specific information about drone strikes. They are reported together with manned air strikes in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. But what they don't tell us is that over time, drone strikes have become the majority of aerial attacks. Drone strikes in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan are not reported at all. Google doesn't bring in the news from foreign news outlets about local drone strikes the way it used to. The news is disappearing before our eyes.

How can we support a peace that will allow a country like Afghanistan to reintegrate? Malik Jalal's story gives us some ideas. The tribal councils can go a long ways towards restoring balance if they can be safely held. Americans have a strongly negative understanding of tribes because they are the indigenous power structure in countries like Afghanistan that have been resistant to westernization. But is westernization right for Afghanistan, or Pakistan? Maybe not. The United States works through militarization. That is strong suit of U.S. foreign policy. Therefore, the only tribal representatives who are empowered through U.S. intervention are violent warlords. These same men are then

brought together with westernized rulers to govern the country.

Malik Jalal and his ilk are grass roots leaders who come from the communities they govern and take personal responsibility for the welfare of the people. Tribal leaders at this level actually do represent the people. They can lead an independence movement that really is independent of foreign intervention. These are the men who attend tribal councils and support the public welfare. Warlords and western educated ideologues only have coercive relationships with the people. Grass roots movements are dependent on the people on the ground and their local representatives, men like Malik Jalal. Unfortunately, they cannot safely meet with US drones on the wing. In 2011, a US drone strike in Waziristan killed 54 men at a tribal Jirga where they were meeting to discuss a local mine.

Men like Malik Jalal are deemed terrorists, threatened and targeted by drone strikes, and driven from their homes. Why? They represent the people and not the power structure the U.S. is attempting to impose on their countries. This is true in many places. Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Sadrism movement in Iraq are both engaged in the national political system as well as supporting powerful militias that are determined to protect their countries and their people. So called 'Signature' strikes which target 'suspicious' gatherings make any kind of meeting or gathering dangerous. People are isolated and alienated. Grass roots governance is not the worst basis for the blasted tribal society of Afghanistan. But, drones cause a barrier to that possibility.

I liked Malik Jalal so I wanted to tell you his story. Unfortunately, though the Independent covered his visit in a respectful manner as did the Daily News, they along with some members of the U.S. press wonder why he is in London and has not been arrested. Clarissa Ward, a bold modern woman, a professional journalist, became a friend of Al Qaeda in Syria,

willing to report from East Aleppo while it was still held by Ahrar Al Sham, Al Nusra and ISIS last fall, standing in an empty street dressed in a black dress with veil and hijab in a city where women were liberated from that requirement decades ago.

Under the Tabloid style headline: I'm on the U.S. Kill List Pakistani Elder Claims. Clarissa Ward tells you that she doesn't buy his claim. Ms. Ward criticizes Malik Jalal as paranoid and a complainer. She wonders how he could he have got a visa to the UK if he were on the U.S. 'kill list'. Malik Jalal didn't jump on a plane to NY because he could never get a visa there, and men identified for targeted killing are routinely not arrested. The idea is to avoid the complexity of a legal confrontation. Dead men tell no tales.

Clarissa Ward is both arrogant and ignorant. She doesn't listen. Clarissa Ward didn't meet Malik Jalal near the beginning of his ordeal when he spoke to a group of foreign peace activists on behalf of his community without mentioning his own suffering. Her world is firmly under control unlike the real world she pretends to unveil for her listeners. Ms. Ward pretends. That is her job. Malik Jalal lives the nightmare the pretenders want to erase. Jalal was brought to London by Reprieve, an organization that defends drone strike victims, Guantanamo prisoners and men on death row. Reprieve is the real deal. Malik Jalal represents the real people of Waziristan.

Jalal came to London for relief nearly 4 years after sharing his story, along with several other survivors of drone strike victims, with my delegation in Islamabad. He he had come forward to a meeting arranged and facilitated by Shahzad Akbar to reach a broader audience. We brought their stories back but it wasn't enough to end the killing and was soon dropped by the ever busy news cycle. Malik Jalal says that he fears to go home now. He doesn't want to die and he wants his family to be safe. Imagine! What if your friends and family

members were regularly killed when they attempted to interact with you? It was sad for me to see the man who so proudly represented his people 4 years before, now terrorized into leaving his country to seek relief. It was heartbreaking to see his face lined with stress to the point where those who had met him with me did not recognize him, and so did not support him.

But this is, and has been from the start, the U.S. pretense of 'a War on Terrorism'. Peace loving leaders of indigenous communities, men like Malik Jalal, are threatened, stalked and then ridiculed. Extremist murderers holed up in East Aleppo flying ISIS and Al Nusra (Al Qaeda) flags and shelling civilian housing and schools that happen to border their territory in West Aleppo are presented as noble 'rebels' and their defeat continues to be mourned by the U.S. mainstream media and some alternative venues, even as residents of liberated communities return home in the hundreds of thousands. In Syria, Clarissa Ward happily complied with the oppressive demands with regard to women's dress asserted by a mostly foreign force controlling the area. She presents this as adopting to a 'Syrian' cultural requirement. Apparently she never took the time to research the common culture of Syria before the war began.

In Yemen, the drone strikes against AQAP (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) were gobbled up by a war against all the people of Yemen. Now AQAP, a Saudi ally on the ground, controls vastly more territory in Yemen than before the war, while the United States gives unbounded support to the Saudi air war that is tearing the country apart. They claim to be fighting AQAP with a deadly drone strike here and there, while they are all in supporting the Saudi war against Houthi 'Shia terrorists', an indigenous militia that is a broadly popular movement in the north part of the country who are allied with the remnants of the Yemeni army. The 'internationally recognized' government of Yemen that the Saudis and their

allies claim to fight for is a joke; one man; a single, unpopular, temporary 'president' who refused to call an election when his term had ended, for some reason internationally recognized as the rightful ruler of Yemen. The United States and the United Nations are ready to stand by while Yemen is subjected to a genocidal mix of famine and disease caused by U.S. assisted bombing of public infrastructure and a siege enabled by U.S. and western European ships in the Arab Sea blocking access to Yemeni ports.

We call Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Sadrists in Iraq 'terrorists' despite the fact that both organizations are deeply involved in the politics of their respective countries, both support secular governance despite the fact that they are movements lead by Shia clerics, and both groups have political alliances with movements backed by other religious organizations. Muqtada al Sadr has met with the Kurdish government and with the respected Council of Sunni Scholars. Hezbollah is allied with one of the Christian currents in Lebanon, supports the liberation of Palestine and has seen the danger of a regional wave of extremist violence. Both Hezbollah and the Sadrists are popular grass roots organizations that grew out of civil wars initiated by western interventions. Both have powerful militias, but neither has fought beyond the mandate to protect their own country. Yet the U.S. designates them as the most dangerous of terrorists in league with their sworn enemies in ISIS and Al Qaeda because Hezbollah is capable of defending Lebanon against Israel, and the Sadrists support a secular socialist government in Iraq.

Populist leaders and grass roots leaders are the ultimate enemy of American hegemony. They operate below the radar when they are at their best. They are trusted because they are men who come from the people and who have not forgotten their roots, and because they choose to support the welfare of

the people above their own. They can't be bought and they don't make good proxies for empire.

And so dear Malik Jalal, you have my highest respect wherever you are, in London or somewhere in Pakistan. I pray that one day you will be able to go home and live in peace with your family. And that all the victims of U.S. aggression and the violence of U.S. allies will be restored to your homes and your lives. I bow to your suffering and to your dignity. I raise your name so that you and the others like you will not be forgotten.

****Featured Image:** *Malik Jalal with his family ~Printscreen From CNN/Reprive Video, April 22, 2016*

**** Note:** I went to look for a video recording I made of Malik Jalal in Pakistan in late 2012, but YouTube had removed (deleted) it from my account since the last time I looked – some time in the last few months.

The Ghastly, Remotely Piloted, Robotic Reaper Drone

The Ghastly, Remotely Piloted, Robotic Reaper Drone

by Ed Kinane, Reprinted from Truthout, January 26, 2015

The MQ9 Reaper – now deployed 24/7 over Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere – makes killing too easy. It makes war easier to initiate and perpetuate. US drone wars are started with little or no public awareness or support – and with little apparent

stake in the game. The weaponized drone cheapens honor. It cheapens life.

The Reaper kills and maims combatants and noncombatants, adults and children, infants and elderly. Drone victims are also those left widowed or orphaned, and those – in the hundreds of thousands – who flee the terrorized tribal countryside. Despite the propaganda that saturates US mainstream media, drones are not deployed in a “war on terrorism.” Weaponized drones *are* terror.

Reaper targeting is both precise *and* indiscriminate. *Precise* if and only if the intelligence on the ground is accurate – a very big if. *Precise striking* is too easily confused with *precise selecting*. On average, for every alleged high level adversary assassinated, dozens of family members, neighbors and other noncombatants are also killed.

The British human rights organization, Reprieve, notes that certain al-Qaeda leaders have escaped several drone attacks in which they have been reported killed. Many of those attacks result in “collateral damage,” i.e. other and innocent lives lost. Drone pilots and their chain of command often have no idea who their victims are, or how many they have killed.

Aerial warfare is *cowardly*. The Reaper raises cowardice to new heights. Where there’s no moral compass, where there’s no risk, there’s no courage. Despite the lack of physical risk, drone pilots reportedly often suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. These technicians stalk their human targets for hours or days before launching their Hellfire missiles and 500-pound bombs. From their ergonomic armchairs, they observe the assassination and its aftermath up close and personal. They watch “bugsplat” (pilot talk for victims) try to flee.

Minutes later, the pilot may “double tap” – attacking the first responders who converge on the rubble and carnage. Hours later, they may *triple* tap: targeting those attending the

victims' funeral. Killing and maiming mostly civilians, often far from war zones, drones incite hatred, which can lead to blowback or what might be called *reactive terrorism*: retaliation against suspected informers, aid workers, journalists and US targets near and far. No one can calculate the half-life of such hatred.

Drones violate national sovereignty (Libya, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, Gaza etc.), thereby defying international law, thereby rendering the entire planet more hate-filled, anarchic and vulnerable. Drone attacks are racist: They almost exclusively target Muslims and people of color ("Christian terrorism").

US (and, let us not forget, British and Israeli) drone attacks spur proliferation – a drone arms race in which dozens of nations, if only in self-defense, are now acquiring or building weaponized drones. The barbaric use of killer drones creates markets: The deadly robots are first demonstrated eviscerating or vaporizing human flesh, then exported. The barbarity also creates precedents that make all of us, everywhere, less safe

The Pentagon's PR mantra is that "drones save lives." Yet the Reaper's advantages are negated by the larger truth that only in the *short-term* and within *narrow contexts* do they reduce US casualties. (Those casualties of other nations, of course, don't mean so much. Par excellence, the weaponized drone is the flagship of US exceptionalism.)

Summing up, the Reaper is tactically clever, but strategically stupid. The Pentagon is surely aware of this insufficiency. But the Pentagon doesn't necessarily seek to "win" its wars. The US military machine seeks to multiply enemies and keep the pot boiling, thereby devouring the national budget and perpetuating mega-profits for its corporate allies. The corporados laugh all the way to the bank.

On the Home Front

Reaper deployment from sites such as Niagara Air Force Base near Buffalo and Hancock Air Force Base near Syracuse in upstate New York extend the war zone to nearby civilian areas. Like it or not, without our consent, we've become part of the battleground. Upstate New Yorkers didn't enlist in these undeclared, clandestine wars. We are conscripts. Our federal taxes pay for these wars; vast slabs of our national treasure are diverted to the military and away from schooling, health care, mass transit and other infrastructure.

Reaper deployment is cloaked in secrecy, mocking democracy. Reaper security measures (as at Hancock, home of the 174th Attack Wing) lead to civil liberties abuse. Since 2010, recurring nonviolent anti-drone protests at Hancock have led to more than 150 arrests and multiple incarcerations of those exposing Pentagon and CIA Reaper lawlessness. We're arrested outside the base entrance as we assemble, speak out and petition the government for a redress of grievances – First Amendment rights, supposedly.

The drone assassination of non-US civilians has morphed into the assassination of US citizens overseas. Will these criminal attacks – devoid of due process – morph into drone strikes against US citizens within the United States itself? The targets here one day may be antiwar activists or someone's political opponent, or simply those guilty of being young, male and black, or Muslim. Or, as in Afghanistan, someone's or some cartel's rival drug dealer.

The Federal Aviation Administration, charged with regulating the safety of our skies, can't keep up with the burgeoning drone industry and escalating domestic drone use. Even with adequate regulations, enforcement will at best be patchy. The more drones in the air, the more difficult the enforcement. Drones have a high accident rate. Drones accidentally or deliberately invading air traffic lanes are a threat to manned

commercial passenger aircraft. The more drones in the air, the more collisions. Drones can be launched anonymously. Their origins can be faked. Drones can be hacked and misdirected.

Although a drone pilot's field of vision is like looking through a soda straw, drone surveillance technology is almost preternaturally sophisticated. Drones threaten personal privacy, undermining the Fourth Amendment. Police agencies are itching to deploy drones, leading to surveillance without warrants on a mass, indiscriminate scale – pervasive, persistent, wide-area, suspicionless surveillance. Police drones will also surely be used for crowd control, suppressing demonstrations and other First Amendment activity essential to democracy.

Police surveillance drones can be armed with so-called “non-lethal” devices (facial recognition technology, lasers, sound bombs, rubber bullets etc.). These chill public dissent. Non-lethal can morph into lethal crowd control. Do we really trust the increasingly militarized police and the US intelligence agencies to self-enforce constitutional restraints on their domestic spying? Think NSA.

Drone technology is rapidly evolving. As it penetrates the US economy and the US military machine, drone research in these two spheres will cross-pollinate. The Reaper and its successors are on their way to becoming ever more autonomous and unaccountable.

Domestic drone development has commercial and agricultural application. Drones will create jobs. But rarely mentioned is the fact that drones are a form of automation and that automation snuffs out jobs.

The glitz of consumer drone applications *here* is already displacing perceptions of the military mayhem *over there*. Mainstream media hype is already “normalizing” drones (à la the 1950s “Atoms for Peace” campaign providing cover for the

then-emerging toxic nuclear industry). Such hype swamps coverage of the vile aspects of drones both domestically and internationally. The multibillion-dollar drone industry has already bought and bamboozled its engineers, its universities, its media and its representatives in Congress.