

The Names You Will Never Know

by **Nick Turse**, published on **Counterpunch**, September 26, 2021

...and the ones you will know because you will see them below. I have decided to make this piece a memorial to the members of the Ahmadi family murdered by a U.S. Drone strike as U.S. troops left Afghanistan in disgrace. You will find their pictures throughout this post. [jb]



Ahmadi Family from NY Times Video

As a parting shot, on its way out of Afghanistan, the United States military launched a drone attack that the Pentagon called a “*righteous strike*.” The final missile fired during 20 years of occupation, that August 29th airstrike averted an Islamic State car-bomb attack on the last American troops at Kabul’s airport. At least, that’s what the Pentagon told the world.

Within two weeks, a *New York Times* investigation would dismantle that official narrative. Seven days later, even the Pentagon admitted it. Instead of killing an ISIS suicide bomber, the United States had slaughtered 10 civilians: Zemari Ahmadi, a longtime worker for a U.S. aid group; three of his children, Zamir, 20, Faisal, 16, and Farzad, 10; Ahmadi’s

cousin Naser, 30; three children of Ahmadi's brother Romal, Arwin, 7, Benyamin, 6, and Hayat, 2; and two 3-year-old girls, Malika and Somaya.



Zemari Ahmadi, U.S. employed aid worker in Kabul who was murdered with many family members by a U.S. drone strike as the U.S.,. exited the country.

The names of the dead from the Kabul strike are as important as they are rare. So many civilians have been obliterated, incinerated, or – as in the August 29th attack – “*shredded*” in America’s forever wars. Who in the United States remembers them? Who here ever knew of them in the first place? Twenty years after 9/11, with the Afghan War declared over, combat in Iraq set to conclude, and President Joe Biden announcing the end of “*an era of major military operations to remake other countries,*” who will give their deaths another thought?

Americans have been killing civilians since before there was a United States. At home and abroad, civilians – Pequots, African Americans, Cheyenne and Arapaho, Filipinos, Haitians, Japanese, Germans, Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Afghans, Iraqis, Syrians, Yemenis, and Somalis, among others –

have been shot, burned, and bombed to death. The slaughter at Sand Creek, the Bud Dajomassacre, the firebombing of Dresden, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the My Lai massacre – the United States has done what it can to sweep it all under the rugthrough denial, cover-ups, and the most effective means of all: forgetting.

There's little hope of Americans ever truly coming to terms with the Pequot or Haitian or Vietnamese blood on their hands. But before the forever wars slip from the news and the dead slide into the memory hole that holds several centuries worth of corpses, it's worth spending a few minutes thinking about Zemari Ahmadi, Benyamin, Hayat, Malika, Somaya, and all the civilians who were going about their lives until the U.S. military ended them.

Names Remembered and Names Forgotten

Over the last 20 years, the United States has conducted more than 93,300 air strikes – in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen – that killed between 22,679 and 48,308 civilians, according to figures recently released by Airwars, a U.K.-based airstrike monitoring group. The total number of civilians who have died from direct violence in America's wars since 9/11 tops out at 364,000 to 387,000, according to Brown University's Costs of War Project.

Who were those nearly 400,000 people?

There's Malana. In 2019, at age 25, she had just given birth to a son, when her health began to deteriorate. Her relatives were driving her to a clinic in Afghanistan's Khost Province when their vehicle was attacked by a U.S. drone, killing Malana and four others.

And Gul Mudin. He was wounded by a grenade and shot with a rifle, one of at least three civilians murdered by a U.S. Army "*kill team*" in Kandahar Province in 2010.

Then there was Gulalai, one of seven people, including three women – two of them pregnant – who were shot and killed in a February 12, 2010, raid by Special Operations forces in Afghanistan's Paktia Province.

And the four members of the Razzo family – Mayada, Tuqa, Mohannad, and Najib– killed in a September 20, 2015, airstrike in Mosul, Iraq.

And there were the eight men, three women, and four children – Abdul Rashid as well as Abdul Rahman, Asadullah, Hayatullah, Mohamadullah, Osman, Tahira, Nadia, Khatima, Jundullah, Soheil, Amir, and two men, ages 25 and 36 respectively, named Abdul Waheed – who were killed in a September 7, 2013, drone strike on Rashid's red Toyota pickup in Afghanistan.

Then there were 22-year-old Lul Dahir Mohamed and her four-year-old daughter, Mariam Shilo Muse, who were killed in an April 1, 2018, airstrike in Somalia.

And between 2013 and 2020, in seven separate U.S. attacks in Yemen – six drone strikes and one raid – 36 members of the al Ameri and al Taisy families were slaughtered.



Zamir Ahmadi, age 20,
Zemari's eldest son.

Those names we know. Or knew, if only barely and fleetingly. Then there are the countless anonymous victims like the three civilians in a blue Kia van killed by Marines in Iraq in 2003. *"Two bodies were slumped over in the front seats; they were men in street clothes and had no weapons that I could see. In the back seat, a woman in a black chador had fallen to the floor; she was dead, too,"* wrote Peter Maass in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2003. Years later, at the *Intercept*, he painted an even more vivid picture of the *"blue van, with its tires shot out and its windows shattered by bullets, its interior stained with blood and smelling of death, with flies feasting on already-rotting flesh."*

Those three civilians in Iraq were all too typical of the many anonymous dead of this country's forever wars – the man shot for carrying a flashlight in an *"offensive"* manner; the children killed by an *"errant"* rocket; the man slain by *"warning shots"*; the three women and one man *"machine-gunned"* to death; and the men, women and children reduced to *"charred meat"* in an American bombing.

Who were the 11 Afghans – four of them children – who died in a 2004 helicopter attack, or the *"dozen or more"* civilians killed in 2010 during a nighttime raid by U.S. troops in that same country? And what about those 30 pine-nut farm workers slaughtered a year later by a drone strike there? And what were the names of Mohanned Tadfi's mother, brother, sister-in-law, and seven nieces and nephews killed in the U.S. bombing that flattened the city of Raqqa, Syria, in 2017?



Faisal Ahmadi, age 16

Often, the U.S. military had no idea whom they were killing. This country frequently carried out “*signature strikes*” that executed unknown people due to suspicious behavior. So often, Americans killed such individuals for little or no reason – like holding a weapon in places where, as in this country, firearms were ubiquitous – and then counted them as enemy dead. An investigation by *Connecting Vets* found that during a 2019 air campaign in Afghanistan’s Helmand province, for example, the threshold for an attack “*could be met by as little as a person using or even touching a radio*” or if an Afghan carrying “*commercially bought two-way radios stepped into a home, the entire building would sometimes be leveled by a drone strike.*”

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killings were not the intended targets. So, who were they?



Farzad Ahmadi, age 10

Even if targeting was ordinarily more accurate than during Operation Haymaker, U.S. policy has consistently adhered to the dictum that *"military-age males"* killed in airstrikes should automatically be classified as combatants unless proven innocent. In addition to killing people for spurious reasons, the U.S. also opted for allies who would prove at least as bad as, if not worse than, those they were fighting. For two decades, such American-taxpayer-funded warlords and militiamen murdered, raped, or shook-down the very people this country was supposedly protecting. And, of course, no one knows the names of all those killed by such allies who were being advised, trained, armed, and funded by the United States.

Who, for instance, were the two men tied to the rear fender of a Toyota pickup truck in southeastern Afghanistan in 2012 by members of an Afghan militia backed by U.S. Special Operations forces? They were, wrote reporter Anand Gopal, dragged *"along six miles of rock-studded road"* until they were dead. Then their *"bodies were left decomposing for days, a warning to anyone who thought of disobeying Azizullah,"* the U.S.-allied local commander.

Or what about the 12 boys gunned down by CIA-backed militiamen at a madrassa in the Afghan village of Omar Khail? Or the six boys similarly slain at a school in nearby Dadow Khail? Or any

of the dead from 10 raids in 2018 and 2019 by that same militia, which summarily executed at least 51 civilians, including boys as young as eight years old, few of whom, wrote reporter Andrew Quilty, appeared *“to have had any formal relationship with the Taliban”*?

How many reporters’ notebooks are filled with the unpublished names of just such victims? Or counts of those killed? Or the stories of their deaths? And how many of those who were murdered never received even a mention in an article anywhere?

Last year, I wrote 4,500 words for the *New York Times Magazine* about the deteriorating situation in Burkina Faso. As I noted then, that nation was one of the largest recipients of American security aid in West Africa, even though the State Department admitted that U.S.-backed forces were implicated in a litany of human-rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings.



Benjamin, age 6 and
Arwin., age 7

What never made it into the piece was any mention of three men who were executed in two separate attacks. On May 22, 2019, uniformed Burkinabe troops arrived in the village of Konga and took two brothers, aged 38 and 25, away in the middle of the

night. The next day, a relative found them on the side of the road, bound and executed. Most of the family fled the area. *"The Army came back a week later,"* a relative told me. *"My uncle was the only one in our family who stayed. He was shot in broad daylight."* Such deaths are ubiquitous but aren't even factored into the 360,000-plus civilian deaths counted by the *Costs of War* project, which offers no estimate for those killed in America's "smaller war zones."

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We live in a world filled with monuments celebrating lives and deaths, trailblazers and memorable events, heroes and villains. They run the gamut from civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., and Women's Rights Pioneers to the chieftains of the American Confederacy and Belgium's King Leopold.

In the United States, there's no shortage of memorials and monuments commemorating America's wars and fallen soldiers. One of the most poignant lists the names of the American military dead of the Vietnam War. Initially derided by hawkish veterans and conservatives as a *"black gash of shame"* and a *"nihilistic slab,"* it's now one of the most celebrated monuments in Washington, D.C. More than 58,000 men and women are represented on the visually arresting black granite walls of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Vietnam itself has no shortage of monuments of its own. Many are Soviet-style memorials to those who died defeating the United States and reuniting their country. Others are seldom-

seen, tiny memorials to massacres perpetrated by the Americans and their allies. No one knows how many similar cenotaphs exist in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and other forever-war countries, but in 2017, journalist Emran Feroz found just such a memorial in Afghanistan's Wardak Province – a remembrance of five civilians slain in drone strikes during 2013 and 2014.



Hayat, age 2, Somaya, age 3,
Malika, age 3

There have been other attempts to memorialize the civilian dead of the forever wars from art installations to innovative visual protests to virtual commemorations. In 2018, after then-President Trump signed a bill approving the construction of a Global War on Terrorism Memorial, Peter Maass proposed, even if only half-seriously, that the bullet-riddled blue Kia van he saw in Iraq should be placed on a pedestal on the National Mall. *"If we start building monuments that focus our attention on the pitiless killing of civilians in our wars,"* he wrote, *"maybe we would have fewer wars to fight and less reason to build these monuments."*

A blue Kia on the National Mall would be a good starting point. But if we're ever to grasp the meaning of the post-9/11 wars and all the conflicts that set the stage for them, however, we may need a wall as well – one that starts at the Kia and heads west. It would, of course, be immense. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial spans a total of 400 feet. The

celebrated Vietnam War photographer Philip Jones Griffiths observed that a wall for the Vietnamese dead, counting combatants, of the American War would be nine miles long.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is arrayed in a unique chronological format, but the Civilian Deaths Memorial could begin with anyone. The last civilians killed by the United States as part of its 2001 to 2021 Afghan War – Zemari Ahmadi, Zamir, Faisal, Farzad, Naser, Arwin, Benyamin, Hayat, Malika, and Somaya – could lead it off. Then maybe Abdul Rashid and the 14 passengers from his red pick-up truck. Then Malana, Gul Mudin, Gul Rahim, Gulalai, Mayada, Tuqa, Mohannad, Najib, Lul Dahir Mohamed, and Mariam Shilo Muse. Then maybe Ngo Thi Sau, Cao Muoi, Cao Thi Thong, Tran Cong Chau Em, Nguyen Thi Nhi, Cao Thi Tu, Le Thi Chuyen, Dang Thi Doi, Ngo Thi Chiec, Tran Thi Song, Nguyen Thi Mot, Nguyen Thi Hai, Nguyen Thi Ba, Nguyen Thi Bon, Ho Thi Tho, Vo Thi Hoan, Pham Thi Sau, Dinh Van Xuan, Dinh Van Ba, Tran Cong Viet, Nguyen Thi Nham, Ngo Quang Duong, Duong Thi Hien, Pham Thi Kha, Huynh Van Binh, Huynh Thi Bay, Huynh Thi Ty, Le Van Van, Le Thi Trinh, Le Thi Duong, and Le Vo Danh and her unborn child, all slaughtered in the tiny South Vietnamese village of Phi Phu by U.S. troops (without any of the attention accorded to the My Lai massacre). They could be followed by the names of, or placeholders for, the remaining two million Vietnamese civilian dead and by countless Cambodians, Laotians, Afghans, Iraqis, Somalis, and Yemenis.



Naser Ahmadi, aged 30, cousin of Zemari Ahmadi had hoped to be resettled as a refugee in the U.S.

The Civilian Wall could be built in a zig-zag fashion across the country with the land in its way – homes and businesses, parks and roadways – seized by eminent domain, making Americans care about civilian deaths in ways that news articles never could. When you lose your home to a slab of granite that reads “Pequot adult, Pequot adult, Pequot child...” 500 times, you may actually take notice. When you hear about renewed attacks in Iraq or drone strikes in Somalia or a Navy SEAL raid gone awry in Yemen and worry that the path of the wall might soon turn toward your town, you’re likely to pay far more attention to America’s conflicts abroad.

Obviously, a westward-traveling wall memorializing civilian carnage is a non-starter in this country, but the next time you hear some fleeting murmur about a family wiped out by a drone strike or read a passing news story about killings by a U.S.-backed militia, think about that imaginary wall and how, in a just world, it might be headed in your direction. In the meantime, perhaps the best we can hope for is Maass’s proposal for that blue Kia on the Mall. Perhaps it could be accompanied by the inscription found on a granite slab at the Heidefriedhof, a cemetery in Dresden, Germany, the site of a

mass grave for civilians killed in a 1945 U.S. and British fire-bombing. It begins: *"How many died? Who knows the number?"*

***Featured Image:** *Americans join Pakistani people to protest drone warfare in the streets of Islamabad, 2012*

Nick Turse is the associate editor of TomDispatch.com and the winner of a 2009 Ridenhour Prize for Reportorial Distinction as well as a James Aronson Award for Social Justice Journalism. His work has appeared in the Los Angeles Times, the Nation, In These Times, and regularly at TomDispatch. Turse is currently a fellow at New York University's Center for the United States and the Cold War. A paperback edition of his book *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives* (Metropolitan Books) was published earlier this year. His website is NickTurse.com.

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