

Through the 'War on Terror' Looking Glass

Exclusive: The U.S. government's 15-year-long "global war on terror" has spread death and chaos across entire regions – while also imposing propaganda narratives on Americans – with no end in sight, says Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

The Airwars.org U.K.-based monitoring group reports that 41 U.S-led air strikes targeting ISIS in Iraq and Syria killed at least 296 civilians during the week after the chemical weapons incident on April 4. U.S. cruise missiles reportedly killed another nine civilians in villages near the Shayrat airbase that was targeted on April 7th.

But the fragmentary reports compiled by *Airwars.org* can only reveal a fraction of the true numbers of civilians killed by U.S. and allied bombing in Iraq and Syria. These are only the minimum numbers of civilians killed in 41 of the 178 air strikes reported by the U.S military that week.

In other war zones, when such compilations of "passive" reports have been followed up by more comprehensive, scientific mortality studies, the true number of civilians killed has proved to be between 5 and 20 times higher than numbers previously reported by "passive" methods. [For a fuller discussion of the differences between passive reporting of civilian deaths and actual estimates based on scientific mortality studies, see Consortiumnews.com's "Playing Games With War Deaths."]

So, based on the fragmentary nature of passive reporting of civilian deaths and the ratios to actual deaths uncovered by more comprehensive studies in other war zones (such as Rwanda, Guatemala, D.R. Congo and U.S.-occupied Iraq), it is likely that U.S.-led air strikes killed at least 1,500 innocent civilians in just this one week, or conceivably as many as 6,000.

To put this scale of civilian deaths in the larger context of the U.S. bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria since 2014, the 589 bombs and missiles dropped in the week of April 4- 10 made this only an average week in a campaign that has been waged consistently at this intensity for more than two-and-a-half years.

Airwars has been investigating reports of civilian casualties caused by U.S. and "coalition" bombing since 2014. It has investigated U.S. or allied responsibility for incidents that have killed between 8,303 and 12,208 civilians, reported by local and international media and groups like the Syrian

Observatory for Human Rights. At this point, it has confirmed that 3,061 to 4,943 civilians have been killed in 1,197 U.S. or allied air strikes. Airwars classifies these deaths as “confirmed.”

Airwars classifies the reporting as “fair” for another 454 strikes that have killed between 2,635 and 4,192 civilians, based on reporting by two or more credible sources and confirmation that an alleged U.S. or allied air strike did take place. Airwars classifies the remaining reports of a further 2,607 to 3,093 civilians as either “fair, but with no confirmed strikes,” “weak,” “contested,” or “discounted.”

Applying the 5 to 20 percent ratio of passive reporting to actual deaths found in other war zones to Airwars’ minimum and maximum figures for “confirmed” and “fair” reports of civilian deaths, a reasonable estimate of total civilians killed by U.S. and allied bombing in Iraq and Syria since 2014 would be between 28,000 and 180,000.

We can hope that Airwars’ thorough investigations have already captured a higher proportion of civilian deaths than were counted by passive reporting in Guatemala (5 percent) or occupied Iraq (8 percent). This would mean that the true number of civilians we have killed is closer to the lower of these numbers than to the upper level.

But a similar effort by Iraqbodycount during the first three years of the U.S. occupation of Iraq only counted about one-twelfth of the violent civilian deaths subsequently revealed by a comprehensive mortality study of the same period, and we will only know for sure whether Airwars has been more successful once we can compare its figures with a comprehensive epidemiological mortality survey of the present conflict in Iraq and Syria.

Claims by U.S. officials that the true civilian death toll from the U.S. and allied bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria is in the hundreds, as opposed to the tens of thousands, have never been credible, as senior officers have occasionally admitted. The uncritical repetition of the U.S. military’s absurd claims by U.S. media as if they were credible estimates of civilian deaths is a journalistic scandal. This has only served to increase the near-total ignorance among much of the American public about the real human costs of the wars being waged in our name.

As with the reporting of domestic gun violence in the U.S., occasional reports of single acts of mass killing grab headlines, but give only a hint of the constant slaughter that rages on unreported, day in, day out, in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, Somalia and across the ever-spreading area of the world being dragged into the bloodbath unleashed since 2001 by the U.S. “Global

War on Terror.”

Nationalism, Ignorance and Consequences

There is another critical factor in the under-reporting of these constant, daily atrocities, one that has probably been a common pattern in every war ever fought. George Orwell described it very well in an essay entitled “Notes on Nationalism” that was published in May 1945, as the allies celebrated Germany’s surrender at the end of World War II.

“Actions are held to be good or bad,” Orwell wrote, “not on their own merits, but according to who does them, and there is almost no kind of outrage – torture, the use of hostages, forced labour, mass deportations, imprisonment without trial, forgery, assassination, the bombing of civilians – which does not change its moral color when it is committed by “our” side.. The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them.”

Far from treating this prejudice as a problem to be overcome through public accountability and serious journalism, our current military and civilian leaders and their media mouthpieces treat this kind of nationalism as a weakness they can exploit to further suppress public awareness of their own atrocities.

Then, when a single horrific incident like the mass casualty air strike on West Mosul on March 17 breaks through this wall of silence into the public consciousness, the propaganda machine is quick to frame our killing of civilians as “unintentional” and contrast it with the “deliberate” killing of civilians by our enemies.

The eminent historian Howard Zinn pointed out the flaw in this frame of reference in a letter published in the *New York Times* in 2007, based partly on his own experience as a U.S. Air Force bombardier in World War II:

“These words are misleading because they assume an action is either ‘deliberate’ or ‘unintentional.’ There is something in between, for which the word is ‘inevitable.’ If you engage in something like aerial bombing, in which you cannot possibly distinguish between combatants and civilians (as a former Air Force bombardier, I will attest to that), the deaths of civilians are inevitable, even if not ‘intentional.’ Does that difference exonerate you morally?”

“The terrorism of the suicide bomber and the terrorism of aerial bombardment are indeed morally equivalent,” Howard Zinn concluded, “To say otherwise (as either side might) is to give one moral superiority over the other, and thus serve to perpetuate the horrors of our time.”

Chemical Weapons: Propaganda and History

The persistent role of chemical weapons in U.S. propaganda to justify attacks on Iraq and Syria turns on its head the way that Western powers actually used chemical weapons themselves in the past. During World War I, American factories produced 5,770 tons of chemical weapons for use by the U.S. and its allies on the Western Front, and this was only a small fraction of the weapons produced and used by the U.K., France and Germany.

This past weekend marks the centenary of the first time that chemical weapons were used in the Middle East, by British forces in the Second Battle of Gaza in April 1917, where they failed to dislodge the Ottoman defenders barring the British advance to Jerusalem and Damascus.

As British occupation forces faced a nationwide rebellion in Iraq in 1920, British leaders in London sent chemical weapons to Iraq, but historians disagree on whether they were actually used. British forces relied mainly on bombing, and fire-bombing in particular, to put down the rebellion and enforce British rule in Iraq. One of the British squadron leaders in Iraq, Arthur Harris, is better known to history as Air Marshall "Bomber" Harris, who ordered the fire-bombing of Dresden and other German cities in World War II.

Winston Churchill was a strong advocate for the use of chemical weapons. As War Minister during the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Versailles, he wrote in a memo to his staff:

"I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. We have definitely adopted the position at the Peace Conference of arguing in favor of the retention of gas as a permanent method of warfare. It is sheer affectation to lacerate a man with the poisonous fragment of a bursting shell and to boggle at making his eyes water by means of lachrymatory gas. I am strongly in favor of using poisoned gas against uncivilized tribes. The moral effect should be so good that the loss of life should be reduced to a minimum. It is not necessary to use only the most deadly gasses: gasses can be used which cause great inconvenience and would spread a lively terror and yet would leave no serious permanent effects on most of those affected."

At that time, the British Army's *Manual of Military Law* stated explicitly that the laws of war applied only to war "between civilized nations" and "do not apply in wars with uncivilized States and tribes." The United Nations Charter in 1945 and the revised Geneva Conventions in 1949 formally abolished such legal distinctions between wealthy Western nations and the rest of the world. But attitudes born of wealth, privilege and racism die hard, and the purpose of much of today's Western propaganda is to convince the world of

the moral superiority of our mass technological violence over the asymmetric warfare of our less wealthy and more lightly armed enemies.

As Howard Zinn concluded, these claims to moral superiority only serve to perpetuate a mutually-reinforcing cycle of violence and to foreclose any attempt to resolve any of these conflicts except through even greater violence.

The unwritten rule that our propaganda seeks to impose on the world is that the U.S. and its allies have the right to use unrestrained, unlimited violence at will, with total impunity, while any country or government that dares to oppose us forfeits any right to defend itself, to determine its own future, or even to exist.

After George W. Bush's administration's crimes alienated much of the world, President Obama conducted the next phase of this aggressive policy under cover of his iconic image as a hip, sophisticated celebrity-in-chief with roots in African-American and modern urban culture. This triumph of style over substance constituted a new achievement in neoliberal "managed democracy," allowing him to carry out policies that were the polar opposite of what his supporters thought he stood for.

With Trump, the mask is off, and the world is suddenly faced with the unvarnished reality of an aggressive military power that accepts no legal constraints on its violence.

Justice for War Crimes

If we or our leaders ever seriously want to prevent war crimes and hold war criminals responsible, we must start with the basic principle of justice invoked by Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson at the London Conference that drew up the Nuremberg Principles in 1945. But this is a principle that Trump, Obama and other present-day U.S. leaders would find quite alien. Robert Jackson declared:

"If certain acts in violation of treaties are crimes, they are crimes whether the United States does them or whether Germany does them, and we are not prepared to lay down a rule of criminal conduct against others which we would not be willing to have invoked against us."

When civilians in New York, Washington and on a plane flying over Pennsylvania became victims of an unprecedented crime of mass murder on Sept. 11, 2001, former Nuremberg chief investigator and prosecutor Benjamin Ferencz was a lonely voice invoking another basic principle of justice. Ferencz demanded genuine criminal accountability for the crimes committed, and insisted that only the guilty should be punished.

On Sept. 19, 2001, Ben Ferencz was interviewed on National Public Radio (NPR). "It is never a legitimate response to punish people who are not responsible for the wrong done," he told NPR's Katy Clark, "If you simply retaliate en masse by bombing Afghanistan, let us say, or the Taliban, you will kill many people who don't approve of what has happened."

Clark asked him, "So what do you say to skeptics who believe the judicial process is inadequate because it is very slow and very cumbersome?"

"I realize that it is slow and cumbersome," Ferencz replied, "but it is not inadequate. I say to the skeptics, 'Follow your procedure and you'll find what happens... We will have more fanatics and more zealots coming to kill the evil, the United States.' We don't want to do that. We want to uphold our principles. The United States was the moving party behind the Nuremberg Trials and behind insisting upon the rule of law."

As Ben Ferencz predicted only a week after the 9/11 attacks, our failure to follow the "slow and cumbersome" path of justice and our resort to systematically indiscriminate and illegal threats and uses of force has left us trapped in a cycle of violence that has so far destroyed half a dozen countries and killed about 2 million people.

More are being killed every day, and our government has no mechanism or policy in place to prevent further, even unlimited escalation. Like a blinded and wounded giant, the U.S. lashes out at every perceived enemy on every pretext, falsely invoking laws, values and standards of accountability that our leaders doggedly refuse to apply to their own actions.

Our leaders effectively claim the sole power to define whose violence is justified and whose is criminal, and on a strictly self-serving basis. Our violence is always legitimate. Our enemies' is always criminal. Noam Chomsky has referred to this as the "single standard" that governs U.S. foreign policy. It is more traditionally referred to as "might makes right," or the "law of the jungle." It bears no relation to the rule of law, except to violate, abuse, undermine and discredit it.

Back Through the Looking Glass

Through several administrations, across political parties, and with the active collaboration of the U.S. mass media, our leaders have replaced the rule of law with the rule of propaganda, treating flaws in our public debates like those exposed by Orwell and Zinn only as weaknesses to be exploited, instead of dangers to beware of. The vital principles of justice upheld by Robert Jackson, Ben Ferencz and the ghosts of Nuremberg are reduced to inconvenient

obstacles to be marginalized by propaganda and flushed down the memory hole.

Political skill across the spectrum is now measured in the ability to “connect” with the public in a way that is completely divorced from the actual details or effects of government policy. U.S. politics has gradually been reduced to the corrupt circus of smoke and mirrors now personified by President Trump.

And yet we all have to live in the society that our political and economic systems create. The distractions of glitzy political campaigns and Hollywood fantasies can provide only superficial relief from the monopolization of our resources by an insatiably greedy ruling class; the resulting poverty of more and more working Americans; the systematic corruption of every institution of government and society by corporate power, or “inverted totalitarianism”; and the extreme violence of a foreign policy whose only response to the endless crises its militarism provokes is to threaten and then destroy yet another country and kill hundreds of thousands more innocent people.

It is becoming essential to our very survival that we find our way out of this self-destructive propaganda world, back through the looking glass to the real world: to the beautiful but fragile natural world in which we live; to the kaleidoscopic diversity of our fellow human beings and their societies; and to the serious problems we must all work together to resolve if any of what we each value in life is to survive, let alone thrive.

As our wars escalate in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Afghanistan, as U.S. warships bear down on Korea, and as our leaders issue new threats against Iran, Russia and China, we may have less time to save ourselves, each other and our world than we have previously assumed.

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