The Silent Slaughter of the US Air War

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media voiced moral outrage when Russian warplanes killed civilians in Aleppo but has gone silent as U.S. warplanes slaughter innocents in Mosul and Raqqa, notes Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

April 2017 was another month of mass slaughter and unimaginable terror for the people of Mosul in Iraq and the areas around Raqqa and Tabqa in Syria, as the heaviest, most sustained U.S.-led bombing campaign since the American War in Vietnam entered its 33rd month.

The Airwars monitoring group has compiled reports of 1,280 to 1,744 civilians killed by at least 2,237 bombs and missiles that rained down from U.S. and allied warplanes in April (1,609 on Iraq and 628 on Syria). The heaviest casualties were in and around Old Mosul and West Mosul, where 784 to 1,074 civilians were reported killed, but the area around Tabqa in Syria also suffered heavy civilian casualties.

In other war zones, as I have explained in previous articles (here and here), the kind of “passive” reports of civilian deaths compiled by Airwars have only ever captured between 5 percent and 20 percent of the actual civilian war deaths revealed by comprehensive mortality studies. Iraqbodycount, which used a similar methodology to Airwars, had only counted 8 percent of the deaths discovered by a mortality study in occupied Iraq in 2006.

Airwars appears to be collecting reports of civilian deaths more thoroughly than Iraqbodycount 11 years ago, but it classifies large numbers of them as “contested” or “weakly reported,” and is deliberately conservative in its counting. For instance, in some cases, it has counted local media reports of “many deaths” as a minimum of one death, with no maximum figure. This is not to fault Airwars’ methods, but to recognize its limitations in contributing to an actual estimate of civilian deaths.

Allowing for various interpretations of Airwars' data, and assuming that, like such efforts in the past, it is capturing between 5 percent and 20 percent of actual deaths, a serious estimate of the number of civilians killed by the U.S.-led bombing campaign since 2014 would by now have to be somewhere between 25,000 and 190,000.

The Pentagon recently revised its own facetious estimate of the number of civilians it has killed in Iraq and Syria since 2014 to 352. That is less than a
quarter of the 1,446 victims whom Airwars has positively identified by name. Airwars has also collected reports of civilians killed by Russian bombing in Syria, which outnumbered its reports of civilians killed by U.S.-led bombing for most of 2016. However, since the U.S.-led bombing escalated to over 10,918 bombs and missiles dropped in the first three months of 2017, the heaviest bombardment since the campaign began in 2014, Airwars’ reports of civilians killed by U.S.-led bombing have surpassed reports of deaths from Russian bombing.

Because of the fragmentary nature of all Airwars’ reports, this pattern may or may not accurately reflect whether the U.S. or Russia has really killed more civilians in each of these periods. There are many factors that could affect that.

For example, Western governments and NGOs have funded and supported the White Helmets and other groups who report civilian casualties caused by Russian bombing, but there is no equivalent Western support for the reporting of civilian casualties from the Islamic State-held areas that the U.S. and its allies are bombing. If Airwars’ reporting is capturing a greater proportion of actual deaths in one area than another due to factors like this, it could lead to differences in the numbers of reported deaths that do not reflect differences in actual deaths.

Shock, Awe … and Silence

To put the 79,000 bombs and missiles with which the U.S. and its allies have bombarded Iraq and Syria since 2014 in perspective, it is worth reflecting back to the “more innocent” days of “Shock and Awe” in March 2003. As NPR reporter Sandy Tolan reported in 2003, one of the architects of that campaign predicted that dropping 29,200 bombs and missiles on Iraq would have, “the non-nuclear equivalent of the impact that the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on Japan.”

When “Shock and Awe” was unleashed on Iraq in 2003, it dominated the news all over the world. But after eight years of “disguised, quiet, media-free” war under President Obama, the U.S. mass media don’t even treat the daily slaughter from this heavier, more sustained bombardment of Iraq and Syria as news. They cover single mass casualty events for a few days, but quickly resume normal “Trump Show” programming.

As in George Orwell’s 1984, the public knows that our military forces are at war with somebody somewhere, but the details are sketchy. “Is that still a thing?” “Isn’t North Korea the big issue now?”

There is almost no political debate in the U.S. over the rights and wrongs of
the U.S. bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria. Never mind that bombing Syria without authorization from its internationally recognized government is a crime of aggression and a violation of the U.N. Charter. The freedom of the United States to violate the U.N. Charter at will has already been politically (not legally!) normalized by 17 years of serial aggression, from the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, to drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen.

So who will enforce the Charter now to protect civilians in Syria, who already face violence and death from all sides in a bloody civil and proxy war, in which the U.S. was already deeply complicit well before it began bombing Syria in 2014?

In terms of U.S. law, three successive U.S. regimes have claimed that their unconstrained violence is legally justified by the Authorization for the Use of Military Force passed by the U.S. Congress in 2001. But sweeping as it was, that bill said only,

“That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11th, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons.”

How many of the thousands of civilians the U.S. has killed in Mosul in the past few months played any such role in the September 11th terrorist attacks? Every person reading this knows the answer to that question: probably not one of them. If one of them was involved, it would be by sheer coincidence.

Any impartial judge would reject a claim that this legislation authorized 16 years of war in at least eight countries, the overthrow of governments that had nothing to do with 9/11, the killing of about 2 million people and the destabilization of country after country – just as surely as the judges at Nuremberg rejected the German defendants’ claims that they invaded Poland, Norway and the U.S.S.R. to prevent or “preempt” imminent attacks on Germany.

U.S. officials may claim that the 2002 Iraq AUMF legitimizes the bombardment of Mosul. That law at least refers to the same country. But while it is also still on the books, the whole world knew within months of its passage that it used false premises and outright lies to justify overthrowing a government that the U.S. has since destroyed.

The U.S. war in Iraq officially ended with the withdrawal of the last U.S.
occupation forces in 2011. The AUMF did not and could not possibly have approved allying with a new regime in Iraq 14 years later to attack one of its cities and kill thousands of its people.

Caught in a Web of War Propaganda

Do we really not know what war is? Has it been too long since Americans experienced war on our own soil? Perhaps. But as thankfully distant as war may be from most of our daily lives, we cannot pretend that we do not know what it is or what horrors it brings.

This month, two friends and I visited our Congresswoman’s office representing our local Peace Action affiliate, Peace Justice Sustainability Florida, to ask her to cosponsor legislation to prohibit a U.S. nuclear first strike; to repeal the 2001 AUMF; to vote against the military budget; to cut off funding for the deployment of U.S. ground troops to Syria; and to support diplomacy, not war, with North Korea.

When one of my friends explained that he’d fought in Vietnam and started to talk about what he’d witnessed there, he had to stop to keep from crying. But the staffer didn’t need him to go on. She knew what he was talking about. We all do.

But if we all have to see dead and wounded children in the flesh before we can grasp the horror of war and take serious action to stop it and prevent it, then we face a bleak and bloody future. As my friend and too many like him have learned at incalculable cost, the best time to stop a war is before it starts, and the main lesson to learn from every war is: “Never again!”

Both Barack Obama and Donald Trump won the presidency partly by presenting themselves as “peace” candidates. This was a carefully calculated and calibrated element in both their campaigns, given the pro-war records of their main opponents, John McCain and Hillary Clinton. The American public’s aversion to war is a factor that every U.S. president and politician has to deal with, and promising peace before spinning us into war is an American political tradition that dates back to Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt.

As Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering admitted to American military psychologist Gustave Gilbert in his cell at Nuremberg, “Naturally, the common people don’t want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship.”

“There is one difference,” Gilbert insisted, “In a democracy, the people have
some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare wars.”

Goering was unimpressed by Madison’s and Hamilton’s cherished constitutional safeguards. “Oh, that is all well and good,” he replied, “but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country.”

Our commitment to peace and our abhorrence of war are too easily undermined by the simple but timeless techniques Goering described. In the U.S. today, they are enhanced by several other factors, most of which also had parallels in World War Two Germany:

– Mass media that suppress public awareness of the human costs of war, especially when U.S. policy or U.S. forces are responsible.

– A media blackout on voices of reason who advocate alternative policies based on peace, diplomacy or the rule of international law.

– In the ensuing silence regarding rational alternatives, politicians and media present “doing something,” meaning war, as the only alternative to the perennial straw man of “doing nothing.”

– The normalization of war by stealth and deception, especially by public figures otherwise seen as trustworthy, like President Obama.

– The dependence of progressive politicians and organizations on funding from labor unions that have become junior partners in the military industrial complex.

– The political framing of U.S. disputes with other countries as entirely the result of actions by the other side, and the demonization of foreign leaders to dramatize and popularize these false narratives.

– The pretense that the U.S. role in overseas wars and global military occupation stems from a well-meaning desire to help people, not from U.S. strategic ambitions and business interests.

Taken altogether, this amounts to a system of war propaganda, in which the heads of TV networks bear a share of responsibility for the resulting atrocities along with political and military leaders. Trotting out retired generals to bombard the home front with euphemistic jargon, without disclosing the hefty directors’ and consultants’ fees they collect from weapons manufacturers, is only one side
of this coin.

The equally important flip-side is the media’s failure to even cover wars or the U.S. role in them, and their systematic marginalization of anyone who suggests there is anything morally or legally wrong with America’s wars.

**The Pope and Gorbachev**

Pope Francis recently suggested that a third party could act as a mediator to help resolve our country’s nearly 70-year-old conflict with North Korea. The Pope suggested Norway. Even more importantly, the Pope framed the problem as a dispute between the United States and North Korea, not, as U.S. officials do, as North Korea posing a problem or a threat to the rest of the world.

This is how diplomacy works best, by correctly and honestly identifying the roles that different parties are playing in a dispute or a conflict, and then working to resolve their disagreements and conflicting interests in a way that both sides can live with or even benefit from. The JCPOA that resolved the U.S. dispute with Iran over its civilian nuclear program is a good example of how this can work.

This kind of real diplomacy is a far cry from the brinksmanship, threats and aggressive alliances that have masqueraded as diplomacy under a succession of U.S. presidents and secretaries of state since Truman and Acheson, with few exceptions. The persistent desire of much of the U.S. political class to undermine the JCPOA with Iran is a measure of how U.S. officials cling to the use of threats and brinksmanship and are offended that the “exceptional” United States should have to come down from its high horse and negotiate in good faith with other countries.

At the root of these dangerous policies, as historian William Appleman Williams wrote in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* in 1959, lies the mirage of supreme military power that seduced U.S. leaders after the allied victory in the Second World War and the invention of nuclear weapons. After running headlong into the reality of an unconquerable post-colonial world in Vietnam, this American Dream of ultimate power faded briefly, only to be reborn with a vengeance after the end of the Cold War.

Much as its defeat in the First World War was not decisive enough to convince Germany that its military ambitions were doomed, a new generation of U.S. leaders saw the end of the Cold War as their chance to “kick the Vietnam syndrome” and revive America’s tragic bid for “full spectrum dominance.”

As Mikhail Gorbachev lamented in a speech in Berlin on the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 2014, “the West, and particularly the United
States, declared victory in the Cold War. Euphoria and triumphalism went to the heads of Western leaders. Taking advantage of Russia’s weakening and the lack of a counterweight, they claimed monopoly leadership and domination of the world, refusing to heed words of caution from many of those present here.”

This post-Cold War triumphalism has predictably led us into an even more convoluted maze of delusions, disasters and dangers than the Cold War itself. The folly of our leaders’ insatiable ambitions and recurrent flirtations with mass extinction are best symbolized by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists’ Doomsday Clock, whose hands once again stand at two and a half minutes to midnight.

The inability of the costliest war machine ever assembled to defeat lightly-armed resistance forces in country after country, or to restore stability to any of the countries it has destroyed, has barely dented the domestic power of the U.S. military-industrial complex over our political institutions and our national resources. Neither millions of deaths, trillions of dollars wasted, nor abject failure on its own terms has slowed the mindless spread and escalation of the “global war on terror.”

Futurists debate whether robotic technology and artificial intelligence will one day lead to a world in which autonomous robots could launch a war to enslave and destroy the human race, maybe even incorporating humans as components of the machines that will bring about our extinction. In the U.S. armed forces and military industrial complex, have we already created exactly such a semi-human, semi-technological organism that will not stop bombing, killing and destroying unless and until we stop it in its tracks and dismantle it?

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European Union’s Democracy Dilemma

Exclusive: The European elites want the European Union as a means for controlling the Continent’s economies, but that often requires overriding the popular will of nation states, a dilemma for “democracy,” explains Andrew Spannaus.

By Andrew Spannaus
A sigh of relief was heard across Europe on Sunday night, as far-right candidate Marine Le Pen was beaten soundly in the French presidential runoff election, losing to centrist Emmanuel Macron 66 percent to 34 percent.

Le Pen had come in a close second to Macron in the first round of voting two weeks earlier, less than three points back (24 percent to 21.3 percent) in a crowded field that also included conservative Francois Fillon (20 percent) and leftist Jean-Luc Mélenchon (19.6 percent) among the top vote-getters.

Le Pen capitalized on the anti-establishment fervor sweeping the Western world to challenge for the top spot with a strong critique of financial globalization and the European Union (E.U.), mixed in with her party’s historical message of nationalism with racist overtones. Together with Mélenchon, the first round saw over 40 percent of the votes go to these “extreme” candidates, indicating the presence of widespread dissatisfaction with the political élites and their current economic and social policies.

The fear among European political institutions was that Le Pen’s anti-E.U. message would either carry her to the presidency or at least call into question France’s adherence to the institutions that have transferred large chunks of sovereignty from the single nations of Europe to a supranational bureaucracy.

Macron, on the other hand, defended the E.U. despite recognizing widespread disaffection regarding European institutions. He stressed the need to restore confidence in the Union, while adopting a peculiar argument about how Europe is actually the best instrument to defend the sovereignty of its member states.

His decisive victory in the runoff election, although somewhat tainted by record levels of abstention and blank or spoiled ballots, is causing optimism among pro-E.U. politicians, who are now able to counter the populist narrative with the democratic election of a pro-European president of France.

This argument merits considerable skepticism, as the assumption of majority support for the supranational E.U. institutions based on the election of a national leader is quite a leap. Indeed the issue of the democratic legitimacy of the E.U. itself is a thorny one, due to electoral failures and questionable tactics used to ensure the construction of unpopular international bodies that impose profound changes in economic and social policies among the Union’s member states.

**Why the E.U.**

The origins of the E.U. go back to the 1950s. First there was the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, an agreement for regulation of industrial production among six countries: France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the
Netherlands and Luxembourg. Then came the Rome Treaties of 1957, which gave birth to the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom).

The stated goal, encouraged by the United States in the context of the Cold War, was to “lay the foundations of an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe,” principally through economic cooperation based on the European “common market.” Over the subsequent decades the communities expanded to include 12 countries, an alliance of independent nation-states seeking increasing cooperation at the European level.

A phase shift began in the 1990s. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 transformed the communities into the European Union, and defined a path that would lead to the single currency, the Euro. Other countries were also invited to join, gradually bringing the total up to 28 Member States by 2013, although only 19 of them would participate in the monetary union. The new model of cooperation was that defined in 1992, with the goal of moving towards a single super-state based not only on economic union, but political union as well.

This goal immediately ran into a major obstacle: the popular will. Only three countries held referendums on the Maastricht Treaty: Ireland, France and Denmark. The first two were successful, but the population of Denmark voted against it. This would have been the death knell for the Treaty, so a decision was made to hold a second referendum, in which Maastricht was subsequently approved. The other participating countries merely had their Parliaments vote up the Treaty, so as to avoid the risk of a popular rejection.

The next big step in economic policy was called the Stability and Growth Pact, implementing stricter budget rules based on specific deficit/GDP and debt/GDP parameters. For years the Pact was the key instrument for imposing continuous austerity on the Member States. Here there was no attempt at obtaining approval even of the Parliaments, as the Stability and Growth Pact was enacted simply as an E.U. Regulation in 1997.

Risking Legitimacy

As economic and monetary policy became increasingly centralized and rigid, the risk of a lack of political legitimacy was evident. The response was to attempt the construction of a strong European government, by drawing up an E.U. Constitution.

Given the direct effect on sovereignty, some countries held referenda on the text, starting with France and the Netherlands. In 2005, the French rejected the proposed constitution 55 percent to 45 percent, just a few days before the Dutch
did the same, with an even higher margin of 62 percent to 38 percent.

The idea of creating a “United States of Europe” had been stopped in its tracks, rejected by the democratic vote of two important Member States. A normal response would have been to recognize that the peoples of Europe weren’t ready for full integration, but the institutions decided to go in a different direction.

Since a Constitution wouldn’t pass, they began drawing up a new treaty with essentially the same goal; the advantage was that a treaty could simply be passed by the Parliaments, avoiding putting it before the voters.

The result was the Lisbon Treaty, another step forward in consolidating the supranational power of the structures of the European Union. The path to ratification met only one serious obstacle, the requirement established by the Irish Supreme Court of holding a referendum on any treaties that go beyond the “essential scope or objectives” of existing E.U. documents. In 2008 the Irish rejected the Lisbon Treaty, throwing a wrench into this plan as well. Never fear, the Irish government called a second referendum a year later, and through a number of carrots and sticks the population was induced to pass it the second time.

The Lisbon Treaty entered in force in 2009, and remains the framework for the new form of the European Union, strengthening institutions, which from the 1990s on have been able to dictate economic policy to the member governments, thus keeping everyone in line with the policy orientation of the transatlantic élites.

Finding a Way

The case of Ireland shows the preferred method of European institutions for consolidating E.U. authority. First a goal is set, and then the method is chosen to meet it. If the most influential European politicians agree, the consent of the governed becomes merely an annoying detail to get around however possible.

In subsequent years additional treaties were passed with practically no public debate at all. One of the most important is the European Fiscal Compact (2012), an even stricter version of the Stability and Growth Pact, which obliges Member States to balance their budgets and reduce their debt.

To get a flavor for the ideology, consider the provision of the “debt brake”: any country that fails to reduce its debt-to-GDP ratio to below 60 percent is required to cut the debt by 5 percent each year for 20 straight years; a level of austerity that in some countries would require massive cuts in essential services.
The preferred method for moving forward with European integration raises serious questions. If the only way to create a United States of Europe is to avoid consulting the people, why should the goal even be pursued? The response often heard is based on circular reasoning: Europe needs to be built in order to meet the needs of the people, then the people will understand why it’s so important.

In the elections held so far this year in European countries, the anti-E.U. candidates have increased their votes considerably, but have not made it into the halls of power. For most of the European political class this is a relief, as they feared an imitation effect after the anti-establishment Brexit vote in June 2016 and the election of Donald Trump in the U.S. last November.

It would be a mistake, however, to consider the rejection of far-right candidates an endorsement of greater integration of European nations through supranational institutions, that to date have proved not only unable to deal with the economic effects of globalization, but also impervious to the democratic opinions of European citizens.

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