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For the 15 Years Since 9/11, the US Has Waged an Endless Campaign of Violence in the Middle East

No one knows how many American bombs have gone off on Middle Eastern soil.

By Tom Engelhardt, September 8, 2016

On the morning of September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda launched its four-plane air force against the United States. On board were its precision weapons: 19 suicidal hijackers. One of those planes, thanks to the resistance of its passengers, crashed in a Pennsylvania field. The other three hit their targets—the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, and the Pentagon in Washington, DC—with the kind of “precision” we now associate with the laser-guided weaponry of the US Air Force.

This article originally appeared at TomDispatch.com. To stay on top of important articles like these, sign up to receive the latest updates from TomDispatch.com. From its opening salvo, in other words, this conflict has been an air war. With its 75 percent success rate, Al Qaeda’s 9/11 mission was a historic triumph, accurately striking three out of what assumedly were its four chosen targets. (Though no one knows just where that plane in Pennsylvania was heading, undoubtedly it was either the Capitol or the White House to complete the taking out of the icons of American financial, military, and political power.) In the process, almost 3,000 people who had no idea they were in the bomb sights of an obscure movement on the other side of the planet were slaughtered.

It was a barbaric, if daring, plan and an atrocity of the first order. Almost 15 years later, such suicidal acts with similar “precision” weaponry (though without the air power component) continue to be unleashed across the Greater Middle East, Africa, and sometimes elsewhere, taking a terrible toll—from a soccer game in Iraq to a Kurdish wedding party in southeastern Turkey (where the “weapon” may have been a boy).

The effect of the September 11th attacks was stunning. Though the phrase would have no resonance or meaning (other than in military circles) until the US invasion of Iraq began a year and a half later, 9/11 qualifies as perhaps the most successful

example of “shock and awe” imaginable. The attack was promptly encapsulated in screaming headlines as the “Pearl Harbor of the Twenty-First Century” or a “New Day of Infamy,” and the images of those towers crumbling in New York at what was almost instantly called “Ground Zero” (as if the city had experienced a nuclear strike) were replayed again and again to a stunned world. It was an experience that no one who lived through it was likely to forget.

In Washington, the vice president headed for a deep underground bunker; the secretary of defense, speaking to his aides at the damaged Pentagon, urged them to “Go Massive. Sweep it all up. Things related and not” (the first hint of the coming decision to invade Iraq and take out Saddam Hussein); and the president, who was reading a children’s story, *The Pet Goat*, to a class of elementary school students in Sarasota, Florida, while the attacks took place, boarded Air Force One and promptly headed away from Washington. Soon enough, though, he would appear at Ground Zero, bullhorn in hand, and swear that “the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!”

Within days, he had announced a “war on terror.” And on October 7, 2001, less than a month after those attacks, the Bush administration would launch its own air war, dispatching B-2 Stealth bombers with satellite-guided precision weaponry from the United States, as well as B-1 and B-52 long-range bombers from the British Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, supplemented by strike aircraft from two US aircraft carriers, and about 50 Tomahawk Cruise missiles fired from ships. And this was just its initial air riposte to Al Qaeda (though the most significant parts of the attack were, in fact, aimed at taking out the Taliban regime that then controlled much of Afghanistan). By the end of December 2001, 17,500 bombs and other munitions had rained down on Afghanistan, 57 percent of which were reportedly “precision-guided” smart weapons. Released as well, however, were perfectly dumb bombs and cluster munitions filled with “soda can-like” bomblets which scatter over a wide area, don’t all explode on contact, and so remain around for civilians to mistakenly pick up.

If you really want to experience shock and awe, however, think about this: Almost 15 years have passed, and that air war has never ended. In Afghanistan, for instance, in just the first four years of the Obama administration (2009–12), more than 18,000 munitions were released over the country. And this year, B-52s, those old Vietnam workhorses, retired for a decade in Afghanistan, took to the air again as US air sorties there ramped up against surging Taliban and Islamic State militants.

And that’s just to begin to describe the never-ending nature of the American air war that has spread across the Greater Middle East and parts of Africa in these years. In response to Al Qaeda’s brief set of air strikes against US targets, Washington launched an air campaign that has yet to end, involving the use of hundreds of

thousands of bombs and missiles, many of a “precision” sort but some as dumb as they come, against a growing array of enemies. Almost 15 years later, American bombs and missiles are now landing on targets in not one but seven largely Muslim countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen).

What are we to make of Al Qaeda’s and Washington’s “precision” air campaigns? Here are some thoughts.

1. Success and Failure: Without a hint of exaggeration, you could say that, at the cost of \$400,000 to \$500,000, Al Qaeda’s 9/11 air assault created Washington’s multi-trillion-dollar Global War on Terror. With a microscopic hijacked air force and a single morning’s air campaign, that group provoked an administration already dreaming of global domination into launching a worldwide air war (with a significant ground component) that would turn the Greater Middle East—then a relatively calm (if largely autocratic) region—into a morass of conflicts, failed or collapsed states, ruined cities, and refugees by the millions, in which extreme Islamic terror outfits now seem to sprout like so many mushrooms. This, you might say, was the brilliance of Osama bin Laden. Seldom has so little air power (or perhaps power of any sort) been leveraged quite so purposefully into such sweeping consequences. It may represent the most successful use of strategic bombing—that is, air power aimed at the civilian population of, and morale in, an enemy country—in history.

On the other hand, with only a slight hint of exaggeration, you might also conclude that seldom has an air campaign without end (almost 15 years and still expanding at the cost of untold billions of dollars) proven quite so unsuccessful. Put another way, you could perhaps conclude that, in these years, Washington has bombed and missiled a world of Islamist terror outfits into existence.

On September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda was the most modest of forces with militant followers in perhaps the low thousands in Afghanistan and tiny numbers of scattered supporters elsewhere on the planet. Now, there are Al Qaeda spin-offs and wannabe outfits, often thriving, from Pakistan to Yemen, Syria to North Africa, and of course the Islamic State (ISIS), that self-proclaimed “caliphate” of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, still holds a sizeable chunk of territory in Iraq and Syria while its “brand” has spread to groups from Afghanistan to Libya.

Minimally, the US air campaign, which has certainly killed enough terror leaders, “lieutenants,” “militants,” and others over these years, has shown no ability to halt the process and arguably has plowed remarkably fertile ground for it. Yet, in response to the next terror outrage (as in Libya recently), the bombs continue to fall. It’s a curious record in the generally disappointing annals of air power, and well worth considering in more detail.

2. *Bombs Away!*: As 2015 ended, the rate of US bomb and missile use over Iraq and Syria was so high that stockpiles of both were reportedly depleted. Air Force Chief of Staff General Mark Welsh said, “We’re expending munitions faster than we can replenish them. B-1s have dropped bombs in record numbers.... We need the funding in place to ensure we’re prepared for the long fight. This is a critical need.”

And this situation carried into 2016 as bombing runs over Syria and Iraq only seemed to rise. Even though both Boeing, which makes the Joint Direct Attack Munition, and Lockheed Hellfire, which produces the Hellfire missile (so crucial to Washington’s drone assassination campaigns across the Greater Middle East and Africa), significantly stepped up production of those weapons, there were still shortfalls.

Fears have risen that at some point there might not be enough munitions for the wars being fought, in part because of the expense involved in producing various kinds of precision weaponry.

The numbers associated with the US air campaign that is the heart and soul of Operation Inherent Resolve, the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria begun in August 2014, are striking. As 2015 ended, scholar Micah Zenko estimated (based on figures released by US Air Force Central Command) that 23,144 bombs and missiles had been dropped on both countries by the US Air Force that year (and another 5,500 by coalition partners) in what he calls Washington’s “kill-‘em-all with airstrikes” strategy—which, he adds, “is not working.” (In fact, studies of the “kingpin strategy” or “decapitation” as it’s sometimes known—attempts to destroy terror groups from the top down—indicate that it has had anything but the desired effect.)

In 2016, the weaponry-released-per-month figures are minimally keeping pace with 2015—almost 13,400 for the United States and another nearly 4,000 for the rest of its air coalition through July. According to Pentagon figures, as of August, the United States had conducted 11,339 strikes in Iraq and Syria since 2014 at a cost of \$8.4 billion to US taxpayers.

No point in my boring you with the more modest figures for the bombing and missileing over so many years of Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and Libya. Just know this: America’s air war in the Greater Middle East and Africa is now deeply embedded in the lifeblood of our national capital. Just about every major candidate for that office this year (even Bernie Sanders) was in favor of the air war against ISIS and no future president could ground the drones that continue to carry out White House-supervised assassination campaigns across a significant swath of the planet. Both

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are essentially committed to continuing the US air war into the distant future.

Think of this as a form of success—not overseas, but at home. Bombs away is a triumphalist way of life in Washington and it hardly matters what those bombs do, or don't do, on release over distant lands.

3. Barbarism and Civilization (or Their Precision and Ours): Al Qaeda was quite precise in its assault on the American “homeland.” Its goal was clearly to take out both iconic structures and whoever might be in them. In the process, it clearly meant to horrify and provoke. On both counts, it was successful beyond what even its planners could have imagined. With perfect accuracy, the world branded this as barbarism of the first order.

Al Qaeda's “precision” tactics and those of its successor organizations from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to the Islamic State have not changed greatly over the years. Their precision weapons are sent into the heartlands of civilian life, as in that recent wedding ceremony in Turkey where a suicide bomber, possibly a boy outfitted with explosives, killed 54, including 22 children under 14, to create anger and outrage. The barbarity of this form of warfare is aimed, as ISIS says, at destroying the “gray zone” of our world, and creating instead an ever more us-vs.-them planet. At the same time, such attacks are meant to provoke the powers-that-be into striking back in ways that will create sympathy for ISIS in its world, as well as the kinds of conflict and chaos in which such organizations are likely, in the long run, to thrive. Osama bin Laden understood this early on. Others have grasped his point.

That, then, is their version of precision bombing, and if it isn't the definition of barbarity, what is? But what about our version of—to use a word seldom applied to us—barbarity? Take the Bush administration's official “shock and awe” air campaign that began the invasion of Iraq on March 19-20, 2003. It was to involve an overwhelming display of air power, including 50 “decapitation” strikes meant to take out top Iraqi leaders. In fact, not a single leader was touched. According to Human Rights Watch, those strikes instead killed “dozens of civilians.” In less than two weeks, at least 8,000 precision-guided bombs and missiles would be loosed on Iraq. Some, of course, missed their precise targets but killed civilians; some hit those targets in crowded urban areas or even villages and did the same. A small number of Tomahawk missiles, at a cost of \$750,000 apiece, among the more than 700 fired in those first weeks of war, would miss Iraq altogether and land in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

In those first weeks of war in which Baghdad was taken and the invasion declared a success, 863 US planes were committed to the operation, more than 24,000 air

“sorties” were conducted and, by one estimate, more than 2,700 civilians died under them, or nearly a Twin-Towersful of Iraqi noncombatants. In the first six years of what would become an ongoing air war in Iraq, one study found that “46% of the victims of US air strikes whose gender could be determined were female and 39% were children.”

Similarly, in December 2003, Human Rights Watch reported that American and British planes had dropped or artillery had fired “almost 13,000 cluster munitions, containing nearly 2 million submunitions, that killed or wounded more than 1,000 civilians.” And the likelihood was that more died from scattered, unexploded bomblets in the months or years thereafter, when stepped on or picked up by a curious child. In fact, the United States dropped cluster bombs in Afghanistan as well (with undoubtedly similar results), and in recent times has sold them to the Saudis for their profligate air campaign of slaughter in Yemen.

To grasp the dimensions of that 2003 air assault, consider the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, the aircraft carrier positioned off the coast of San Diego so that President George W. Bush could make a flamboyant landing on it that May 1 and, under a banner reading “Mission Accomplished,” declare that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended” and that the United States and its allies had “prevailed.” (No, it turned out, they hadn’t.) As it happened, that carrier had just returned from a 10-month deployment in the Persian Gulf during which its planes had flown some 16,500 missions and dropped approximately 1.6 million pounds of bombs. And that, of course, was just one part of the overall air campaign against Saddam Hussein’s forces.

That the Bush administration’s shock-and-awe strikes and the invasion/air war that followed were neither precise nor effective in the short or long run is now obvious. After all, American air power is still blasting away at Iraq today. The question is: Shouldn’t it be self-evident that an air war, which went on through at least 2010, was taken up again in 2014, has helped turn embattled Iraqi cities into rubble, and shows no sign of ending any time soon, is barbaric?

It’s clear that, while there is no way to adequately count all civilian casualties from America’s 21st-century air wars, “towers” of dead noncombatants have been piled atop one another in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. This next-to-eternal version of war, with all its destructiveness and “collateral damage” (which a few organizations have tried their best to document under difficult circumstances), should be the definition of state barbarism and terror in a world without mercy. That none of this has proven effective in the very terms that the bombers themselves set seems to matter little indeed.

Put in more graphic fashion, does anyone doubt that the Kurdish wedding slaughter (assumedly by an Islamic State suicide bomber) was a barbaric act? If not, then what

are we to make of the eight documented cases—largely ignored in this country—in which US air power eviscerated similar wedding parties in three countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen) between December 2001 and December 2013, killing almost 300 celebrants?

Of course, you already know the answer to that question. In our world, there is only one type of barbarism: theirs.

4. The Religious Roots of the Air Wars of (and on) Terror: Obviously, while there was a political aspect to Al Qaeda's air war on America, there was also a deeply religious aspect to it. Hence, the ability to convince 19 men that self-immolation was a righteous way to go. Whether you call it *jihad* or fanaticism, at the heart of Al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks was a deep core of religiosity.

How then would you categorize an activity that repeatedly produces negative results and that a government nonetheless continues to engage in for 15 years with no end in sight? Let's add that, in six of the seven countries the United States has bombed or missiled, its planes had full control of the airspace from moment one, and in the seventh (Iraq), it took mere hours, or at most days, to establish it. In other words, during almost every second of this decade and a half of war, American pilots were in next to no danger in enemy skies—or, in the case of drone pilots thousands of miles away from their targets, none at all. They were, that is, in little less than godlike positions above those they were sent to kill, the—as drone pilots reportedly like to put it—"bug splat."

How could that godlike sense of dominance not gain an almost religious intensity over that long decade and a half—even if the deity in question was of an imperial kind? That would undoubtedly hold, by the way, not just for the pilots pursuing the war, but for the generals planning and overseeing it, and the political leaders who ordered or endorsed it. That feeling of having so much uncontested power in one's hands must induce an essentially religious sense of omniscience and potency, hard to resist even when the results prove so unsatisfying.

What we undoubtedly have in the American air war, as in Al Qaeda's, is a deeply embedded belief system that no real world evidence seems capable of shaking. This is, in other words, an American form of *jihad*, which is why it shows no sign of ending anytime soon.

Washington's Thirty Years' War

A child born on September 11, 2001, is now only a couple of years away from being able to sign on as a pilot in the air wars that began just after her birth. There are reasonable odds that her child, born several years from now, might be entering

junior high school when those conflicts officially become America's Thirty Years' War.

I can still remember first coming across that moniker for an endless set of forgotten European religious wars of the 17th century. I found the thought of such a long period of warfare almost unimaginable, not to say antediluvian, given the power of modern weaponry. Well, as the phrase goes, live and learn.

Perhaps this September 11, it's finally time for Americans to begin to focus on our endless air war in the Greater Middle East, our very own disastrous Fifteen Years' War. Otherwise, the first explosions from the Thirty Years' version of the same will be on the horizon before we know it in a world possibly more destabilized and terrorizing than we can at present imagine.