

From [Democracy Now](#) | Original Article

U.S. air power has been central in the country's wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, with officials promising that drones and other sophisticated weapons allow the U.S. military to carry out precision airstrikes that spare civilians caught in war zones. But a groundbreaking investigation by The New York Times reveals the U.S. military's air wars have been plagued by bad intelligence, imprecise targeting and a lack of accountability for thousands of civilian deaths, many of them children. The two-part series by reporter Azmat Khan is based on a trove of internal Pentagon documents, as well as on-the-ground reporting from dozens of airstrike sites and interviews with scores of survivors. "What you have is a scale of civilian death and injury that is vastly different than what they claim," says Khan, who spent five years on the investigation.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We begin today's show looking at how the Pentagon has conducted a vast cover-up of civilians killed in the U.S. air wars in the Middle East. *The New York Times*

has published a remarkable two-part series based on extensive reporting on the ground in Iraq and Syria, as well as 1,300 confidential Pentagon reports on civilian casualties resulting from U.S. drones and other airstrikes.

*New York Times* reporter Azmat Khan writes, quote, "The documents lay bare how the air war has been marked by deeply flawed intelligence, rushed and often imprecise targeting, and the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians, many of them children."

The reports directly contradict public claims made by successive U.S. presidents and military leaders. In 2016, then-President Obama claimed the U.S. was waging the most precise air campaign in history.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** In stark contrast to ISIL, which uses civilians as human shields, America's armed forces will continue to do everything in our power to avoid civilian casualties. With our extraordinary technology, we're conducting the most precise air campaign in history. After all, it is the innocent civilians of Syria and Iraq who are suffering the most and who need to be saved from ISIL's terror.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We're joined now by Azmat Khan, an award-winning investigative journalist, contributing writer for *The New York Times Magazine*. She spent over five years researching the U.S. air wars. As part of her reporting, she visited dozens of different bomb sites in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

[Part one](#)

of her investigation is headlined "Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes." And

[part two](#)

is "The Human Toll of America's Air Wars."

Azmat Khan, welcome back to *Democracy Now!* Thank you so much for this comprehensive report. I'm wondering if you can start off by telling us the story of Ali Fathi Zeidan and his family.

**AZMAT KHAN:** Sure. So, Ali Fathi Zeidan and his family had moved from a town, a village called Wana, which was just south of the Mosul Dam. They left it because there was fighting between ISIS and Peshmerga forces, and they were really looking for anywhere where they could be safe. And that often meant, for many families who were fleeing displacement in 2015, in 2016 — it often meant moving to places where you already had family. And Ali Fathi Zeidan's daughter was married to a young man whose brother lived in West Mosul, and that's where they wound up living.

They moved into an industrial area in this wheat storage district called Yabisat. And, you know, this was a very large extended family. Ali Fathi Zeidan had many children and grandchildren. And they essentially were unable to afford a nice apartment, but they moved into this kind of storage space, you know, made it home, brought in things to sleep on, brought in a water tank — essentially, you know, tried to get by as best they could during this war.

And one night in March of 2016, they were sitting down to dinner, and there was an airstrike. What they didn't know at the time was that the United States had been surveilling this house and that particular compound or area that the house was located on, believing it to be the site — or that area to be the site of a chemical weapons production facility and other kinds of structures associated with chemical weapons making and dissemination.

And so, what wound up happening is that the intelligence review before the strike was carried essentially had different people weighing in on this target. You know, the actual intelligence for this site may have come from this human source. And as different people sort of evaluated what they saw, there was one person who was looking at this and saw the intelligence and said, "Listen, I have a bit of a different assessment." And she was a USAID official who, when she spotted the 10 children that everyone who was reviewing this footage saw, said, "Listen, I don't think those children are transients," meaning they're merely passing through. "I think they may live in or near this target compound." And the military disagreed. They continued to classify the children as transients, meaning that they believed they could mitigate the potential for the harm to those kids by carrying out the strike at night, when they wouldn't be outside playing or wherever it was that they had seen them playing, by a stream near the structure, in the target video, in the pre-surveillance video.

And so, you know, shortly after this airstrike, video surfaced online of family members, whom I met many years later — four years later, I believe — who were picking up the bodies of their loved ones and trying to salvage everyone they could. At least 21 people died from that single family alone in this airstrike, and they were civilians. And when that video surfaced online — ISIS often made propaganda videos — it triggered a credibility assessment, in which the U.S.-led coalition took a look at the evidence, reinterviewed this USAID official to try to determine what went wrong. And what they concluded was that there was — you know, that the process and procedures, you know, they did not find any wrongdoing or disciplinary action. In fact, they said they had even taken more measures than necessary to protect against civilian harm. And there really wasn't the kind of deep unearthing of what happened here.

When I first got this document about this incident, I showed it to somebody, a source in the military. And, you know, he said, "You know what this is, right? This is confirmation bias." He explained it this way. He said that military officials, they see something that's called a target or called a chemical weapons production facility, and as it's being vetted through these chains, they place very high value on that kind of vetting. And at that point, it's very hard for them to unsee it as anything else other than that particular target. And so, you know, he said that probably this USAID official, who had not been through so many instances of that kind of military analysis that would lead you to believe that these people were targets or that these children were not transients, or whatever it might be, she had the kind of eyes that were clear and an understanding of ground realities to understand what was happening here.

And so, that issue of confirmation bias came up again and again in the more than 1,300 records that I obtained through the Freedom of Information Act of the military's own assessments Misidentification, conflating somebody who was a civilian for a combatant was common. And the number one reason why that often happened was that there was confirmation bias at play.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Azmat, I wanted to ask you to put these records and this many deaths in the context of past U.S. wars. It seems to me that the mass killings of civilians have marked all modern U.S. wars. In Vietnam, it was the use of napalm and white phosphorus bombs against what became the civilian — largely civilian population; during the Panama invasion, the first use of what the Pentagon called bunker buster bombs. But it wasn't until the Gulf War of 1991 that the Pentagon began to trumpet the use of so-called smart, remote precision-guided bombs, that were going to eliminate civilian casualties. And our government seems to increasingly rely on this false claim that better technology can somehow eliminate mistakes and save both U.S. soldiers and civilians. What do you see from these documents once again demonstrates the basic or fundamental fallacy of this approach to war?

**AZMAT KHAN:** So, it's true that, you know, a lot of these different innovations in warfare, in weaponry, have been implemented in earlier wars. And at the time, the United States would make grand claims about it. You mentioned the Gulf War. It's true. During the Gulf War, U.S. officials were very apt to talk about the use of precision-guided weapons, laser-guided weapons, their effectiveness in hamstringing one of the largest militaries in the world with what was categorized at the time as "surprisingly few" civilian casualties.

There's Congressional Research Service report that came out many years later, or was made public many years later, that said that a lot of those claims being made about the effectiveness of that precision weaponry's use in the Gulf War were vastly overstated. We've seen that again and again. In fact, there are claims about the use of precision-guided weapons that just don't stack up with the reality of what they can actually offer.

Certainly there are advancements in the ability to follow a moving target, but here's the thing. You can precisely hit a target exactly the way you want to with many of this new weaponry, but that is meaningless, that precision is meaningless, if you have the wrong target in the first place, if your intelligence is wrong. And so, what I found in many of these documents were overwhelming patterns of failures in intelligence, over and over, whether that was conflating a civilian with a combatant. Probably the biggest was just failing to detect the presence of civilians in the first place before carrying out a strike. There were so many instances in which they had determined or concluded that there were no civilians in that area, or they did not detect the presence of them.

And the military is really only held to a standard of, you know, "With reasonable certainty, we concluded this particular thing," and their chain of command and their process. So, you know,

another major finding in the examination of these documents was that there were no findings — or at least not in the records I have — any findings of wrongdoing or disciplinary action. And that surprises a lot of people, but it probably shouldn't, when you know what results in findings of wrongdoing or disciplinary action in the kind of apparatus or the way that these investigations or assessments work, which is that it's based on mainly chain of command, reasonable certainty.

And despite this often being framed — you know, when there's a major failure that becomes very public, like the Kabul strike or the MSF bombing in Kunduz in — you know, the bombing of the Doctors Without Borders clinic in 2015 in Kunduz, Afghanistan, American officials will come out and say this is an anomaly, this is unique, this is an extremely tragic error. But what I found through the examination of the documents and ground visits to, yes, 60 sites that were deemed credible, meaning they had accepted those — they had accepted that casualties occurred, and more than 40 others that were either deemed noncredible or not yet assessed, so more than a hundred in total — what I often found in examining the records, looking at these strikes on the ground, interviewing people, and really going in-depth, was that there were patterns of failure that they really couldn't investigate or understand without being on the ground, that they had limited view from where they were looking and the kinds of things that they were using.

And after a while, once you see that over and over and over, you do have to ask whether this is really a system of accountability or whether it is designed to function as a system of impunity, actually to provide, for example, as some sources have told me, to provide legal cover in instances in which there will be allegations against U.S. soldiers, or even to provide the military, as one analyst, Larry Lewis, who has studied a lot of these kinds of documents in the past, put it, to basically provide them expanded authority on the battlefield and use to justify taking greater freedom of action in war.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And speaking of accountability, your reports of the — and these were actually the military's own investigations. About how many of them did the Pentagon officially acknowledge as civilian casualties? And how many were basically kept in-house, until you were able to uncover these records?

**AZMAT KHAN:** Oh, OK. So, the number of records that had previously been made public before I obtained them, of the vast trove, they've conducted, at least in the air war against Iraq and Syria, I think, around 2,800 assessments that they've done, either determining them to be credible or not. Of those 2,800, 340 have been deemed credible. Before I had started requesting them, or, actually, before — just putting aside the number I got, the number that had

been made public among those was less than 20. So, less than 20 of these records had ever been made public. I obtained, I think, 216 credible assessments and around 1,100 or so noncredible ones, where they concluded that it was not likely that they had killed or injured civilians.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Can you give us the example, Azmat Khan, of what happened in Syria? You have Special Operations forces reporting they killed 85 ISIS fighters in a July 2016 air raid in northern Syria. In fact, the raid hit houses far from the frontline, killing 120 villagers. And use that as an example of what gets covered up.

**AZMAT KHAN:** Yeah. So, I mean, in this case, what you have is a scale of civilian death that is vastly different — of civilian death and injury that's vastly different than what they claim. This is an area of Syria called Al Tokhar. And it was widely known, among local journalists, online materials, open-source materials, that as many as — some people claimed as many as 200 people had died. And in this reporting, essentially, what I got was a single — was a document that said that they had concluded that 85 ISIS fighters had been killed at three staging areas, at these different vehicles they had attacked.

And I went to the site of it in Syria, in Al Tokhar, and, you know, over months, I verified these numbers but came to the conclusion that at least 120 civilians had been killed. And in the Pentagon's own assessment, they acknowledged that between seven and 24 civilians had been killed. So, you're looking at, in this case, like a fourfold increase, at least, of the actual rate of civilian death or injury.

So, you know, the strength or the kind of — I learned a lot from doing this reporting, right? And the ability to compare the documents that are made, with respect to assessing these records, to the reality on the ground, even in cases where they have accepted an incident as credible and acknowledged that maybe casualties took place, to find those distinctions, I think, was really arresting and concerning.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And I know you have to go. I want to get to this issue of what is happening today. You talk about the U.S. new way of war taking shape after the 2009 surge in U.S. forces in Afghanistan. By the end of 2014, 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 authorizing a campaign of airstrikes against ISIS

targets and in support of allied forces in Iraq and Syria. Can you talk about how the Obama administration paved the ground for former President Trump to launch tens of thousands of airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, and then what Biden is doing today?

**AZMAT KHAN:** Well, it's 8:30, and I said that I would leave at 8:30, but I — and it's a very complicated question that deserves like a longer answer. But, certainly, you can say that we've seen a dramatic increase in the use of airstrikes as American soldiers were withdrawn from different war zones under the Obama administration. And as a result of that, there was a choice to ramp up the number of airstrikes. So, certainly, that's the case. And if you like to learn more about that, read it as it's written in this story. And, yes, certainly, under the Trump administration, you saw the expanded use of who could call in airstrikes, as in that chain of command, about who could authorize some of these strikes changed, as well. But, you know, I really don't want to get in —

**AMY GOODMAN:** Yes. Yes, OK. We will link to both parts of this astounding report, that took you years to do. Azmat Khan, we want to thank you so much for being with us, award-winning investigative journalist with *The New York Times Magazine*. We'll link to the new two-part investigation, [part one](#) headlined "Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes," and [part two](#), "The Human Toll of America's Air Wars."