On August 29, 2021 when the US launched an air strike in Kabul supposedly on an ISIS hideout, it killed 10 innocent civilians. Victims included Zemari Ahmadi, who worked for a US-based aid organisation, and nine members of his family, including seven children. While the US officials back then were quick to affirm that the strike followed “solid intelligence”, it was later admitted as an “honest mistake,” and the families of victims were offered financial compensation. This was/is not a solo episode, one that can easily be forgotten. In fact, there is a very long trail of such incidents that renders the US military – the US war machine – much more deadly for the civilians than is often presumed. Recent investigations have shown that the US military commits such “honest mistakes” quite often, with number of civilian deaths at the hands of the US military far exceeding than is often reported in the western mainstream media. However, as irony would have it, a US Congress mandated investigation recently carried out by the RAND Corporation – which is also tied to the “deep state” in the US – has shown how deep the US military’s complicity in killing innocent civilians is.

As the report shows, the US Department of Defense (DoD) has not been honest in its assessments of civilian deaths at the hands of the US military forces, with estimates of civilian casualties from external sources, such as NGOs, being far higher than the Pentagon estimates.

For example, in Raqqa, Syria the US-led coalition, according to a report of the Combined Joint Task Force, killed 178
civilians, injuring 62 others. By comparison, a consortium of local Syrian and International NGOs, including the Amnesty International, assessed that civilian casualties ranged from 774 to 1,600, with four months of relentless bombardment "reducing homes, businesses and infrastructure to rubble." These deaths occurred despite the US military’s claims that it had taken all measures necessary to protect civilians.

In this context, the 2021 Kabul incident, with all the uproar it created in the US, was not a one-of-a-kind incident that could be addressed without addressing deeper problems within the US military/the whole DoD. In fact, it is a deep crisis of legitimacy within the US military/DoD, which necessitated the Congressionally mandated inquiry by the RAND in the first place.

Whereas the findings of this report hint at the US military committing war crimes, the report also reveals "considerable weaknesses" in the Pentagon’s overall “approach to assessing, investigating, and responding to civilian harm.”

Its key findings include:

1. “Air campaigns have an inherent civilian-harm detection problem.”
2. “Technological tools for verifying civilian harm provide an incomplete picture.”
3. “Intelligence efforts focus on the enemy, limiting the resources available to understand the broader civilian picture.”

These critical deficiencies are exacerbated by the fact that, as the report finds out, “individuals involved in an accident often never saw the results of the investigation, so they could not learn lessons from what happened.” What this lack of interest in embracing investigations to prevent further civilian harm means is that there is no mechanism, or a real will, within the US military to actively tackle its problem of “civilian harm.” In short, these investigations are completely ignored, which shows why there have been countless incidents of civilian deaths at the hands of the US military across different war theatres.

In 2019, a US air strike in Syria, in Baghuz, killed at least 70 innocent civilians. A New York Times investigation showed that, while a legal officer flagged the strike as a possible war crime, the US military took all steps to conceal the catastrophe caused by the strike. It downplayed the death toll, with the DoD also deliberately delaying and even classifying reports to shield itself from criticism, accountability and scrutiny to hide the terror the US war machine - which the US leaders claimed to have sent to protect democracy, human rights and freedom - has been causing overseas. Thus, the crisis within the military/DoD is a reflection of the crisis that has engulfed the US itself, questioning its claims to be the “best” system in the world.

The way the DoD acted in 2019 is deeply consistent with a key finding of the RAND report that says that “DoD’s responses to civilian harm have historically been inconsistent and confusing.” That this inconsistency is deep-seated and extends to whole US system is evident from how various US administrations have been blackmailing the International Criminal Court (ICC) to keep it from investigating the US war crimes in Afghanistan.

To the extent that the RAND report’s findings make such an investigation even more timely and significant to prevent future civilian harm at the hands of the US military forces, the US “deep state” remains opposed to such efforts, indicating how the RAND report’s various recommendations with regards to strengthening the overall DoD will not be sufficient to prevent civilian harm in the future.

To cut the long story short, the fact that most of these civilian casualties are caused by aerial campaigns has as much to do with politics as to the operational weaknesses within the DoD.

The US policy makers rely more on air campaigns than committing a heavy number of soldiers to war zones as a means to minimise the risk that an inevitable - and forever increasing - death toll of soldiers from these wars would cause to their political future. With no, or every limited, dead bodies coming back from these war zones, the US leaders can easily - and recklessly - play their geo-political games from the comforts of the Beltway. Therefore, notwithstanding the rhetoric surrounding the need for immediate reforms in the DoD, these institutional reforms are never going to address the broader and deeper political problems associated directly with the way US wars are imposed by the political leadership and fought on foreign soils with complete disregard for innocent civilians.

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