

The Nairobi terror-bombing: some issues not considered in the American media

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The two bombs which exploded outside the US embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es-Salaam, Tanzania caused a severe toll of dead and wounded--more than 260 killed, by the latest count, and over 5,500 wounded.

The Nairobi bomb was especially devastating because the embassy is located at a busy intersection in the crowded downtown sector of the city. The bomb blast destroyed a neighboring office building, which pancaked to the street, and destroyed several buses filled with workday passengers.

US investigators said the blast was the result of an estimated 600 pounds of high explosive, delivered by a pickup truck equipped with a covered flatbed. They said the power of such an explosion was so great that, if the truck had gained entry to the underground garage beneath the embassy, the entire structure would have collapsed. The damage and loss of life inside the embassy were heavy, despite extensive efforts to reinforce the structure and improve its security during the previous year.

In the wake of the bombing, with no evidence yet made public that would connect the terrorist attack with any organization or government, the American media remains filled with speculation about a possible American military action against Iran, Iraq or some other Middle East target. This would likely take the form of an attack by high-altitude bombers or by cruise missiles on cities such as Baghdad, Teheran or Tripoli.

One might ask, if a single 600-pound bomb could do such damage in Nairobi, what must be the impact of a large number of similar bombs dropped on a modern city? The ordnance used by the US Air Force is superior in destructive power to that employed by the terrorists in East Africa. Most American bombs are in the 750-pound to 2,000-pound range, up to three times

the size of the bomb which destroyed so many lives in Kenya.

Less than six months ago, the Clinton administration came to the brink of launching air or missile strikes against Iraqi targets, in what was widely predicted to be the largest bombing raid on Baghdad since the Persian Gulf war. US government officials refused to estimate in advance how many Iraqis--men, women and children--would have died in such a raid.

The Pentagon and CIA dismiss such mass casualties, in typically bureaucratic language, as 'collateral damage.' But if one 600-pound bomb in Nairobi kills 250 people and wound over 5,000, how many could a hundred or a thousand such bombs kill in Baghdad, a city similar to Nairobi in size and density of population? Would 25,000 people have died? Or even 250,000? Would half a million have been wounded? Or even more?

The example of Nairobi also reveals the cynicism of claims that American laser-guided 'smart' bombs are a more humane weapon because they hit their targets more frequently than conventional bombs. The Nairobi bomb was certainly delivered with great accuracy against its target, exploding within a few feet of the back gate of the US embassy. But the result was colossal damage to neighboring buildings and the death of hundreds of innocent people.

During the Persian Gulf war, the Bush administration consistently refused to issue any estimates on the number of Iraqi soldiers or civilians killed in its two-month-long campaign of saturation bombing, which targeted cities like Baghdad and Basra. While the government claimed that there was not enough information to make a credible estimate, the real reason was political: to prevent a public outcry, within the United States and internationally, once the real scale of

the destruction of human life was made clear.

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