

The New York Times calls for blood in Iraq-Syria war

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The *New York Times* published a major front-page critique Tuesday of the Obama administration's military tactics in the air war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The article quotes several US and Iraqi military and intelligence officials, most of them unnamed, denouncing the supposed restraint on bombing due to excessive fears of killing civilians.

The article's headline, "With ISIS in Cross Hairs, U.S. Holds Back to Protect Civilians," gives the flavor of the piece, suggesting that ISIS could be easily crippled or destroyed if only the White House were not so squeamish.

Reporter Eric Schmitt—one of a group of *Times* correspondents who are regular conduits for the CIA and Pentagon—begins the article, "American intelligence analysts have identified seven buildings in downtown Raqqa in eastern Syria as the main headquarters of the Islamic State. But the buildings have gone untouched during the 10-month allied air campaign.

"And just last week, convoys of heavily armed Islamic State fighters paraded triumphantly through the streets of the provincial capital Ramadi in western Iraq after forcing Iraqi troops to flee. They rolled on unscathed by coalition fighter-bombers."

An accompanying photograph shows ISIS fighters brandishing weapons atop an armored personnel carrier parading through the streets of Raqqa, the de facto ISIS capital in eastern Syria. The obvious implication is that what could be targeted for a photograph could also be targeted for a smart bomb or drone-fired missile.

Schmitt continues: "American and allied warplanes are equipped with the most precise aerial arsenal ever fielded. But American officials say they are not striking significant—and obvious—Islamic State targets out of fear that the attacks will accidentally kill civilians."

According to Schmitt, "But many Iraqi commanders, and even some American officers, argue that exercising such prudence is harming the coalition's larger effort to destroy the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or Daesh, and that it illustrates the limitations of American air power in the Obama administration's strategy."

And further, "A persistent complaint of Iraqi officials and security officers is that the United States has been too cautious in its air campaign, frequently allowing columns of Islamic State fighters essentially free movement on the battlefield."

The language is provocative. The US targeting process is "often cumbersome"; critics "say there are too few warplanes carrying out too few missions under too many restrictions." Pilots hover over targets for hours waiting "for someone to make a decision to engage or not." US officials responded to Iraqi targeting requests by attacking "the least important 5 percent" of targets, and "either neglected our requests or responded very late."

Schmitt quotes exactly one critic by name, a Major Muhammed al-Dulaimi, an Iraqi officer in Anbar province, who blames alleged US "restraint" for the loss of Ramadi and other Iraqi military defeats. Two other sources are described as the "pilot of an American A-10 attack plane" and an Iraqi "army commander in Salahuddin Province, of which Tikrit is the capital." Otherwise, the critics are merely referred to in the most general terms, suggesting that the article is not the product of genuine investigation, but a semi-official trial balloon, alerting the television producers and newspaper editors who take their lead from the *Times* that a significant shift in US military tactics is being prepared.

When Seymour Hersh published his recent exposé of US government lies about the raid that killed Osama

bin Laden, he was harshly attacked by critics in the corporate-controlled media for relying heavily on witnesses whose identities had to be kept secret for their own protection.

Schmitt uses anonymous sources for the opposite purpose—not to debunk US government lies, but to spread them, putting into circulation the propaganda of the military-intelligence apparatus, backed by powerful political forces, including the entire Republican Party and significant sections of the Obama administration itself. But there will be no media pundits denouncing Schmitt and the *Times* for their “thinly sourced” report on the US bombing campaign against ISIS.

As Glenn Greenwald points out today in the *Intercept*, the *Times* article fails the most elementary test of journalistic objectivity, since it accepts without question the claims of the Pentagon and CIA that the US bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria has up to now spared civilians. Greenwald cites credible claims from independent observers of nearly 1,000 civilians killed by US bombing since the air war against ISIS began last summer.

The actual figures given in the Schmitt article are 12,500 ISIS fighters killed and only two Syrian children as collateral damage—ludicrous Pentagon numbers that echo CIA Director John Brennan’s claim, at one point in the drone war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, that there had not been a single civilian casualty.

It is notable that Schmitt directly compares the supposedly feeble US air campaign against ISIS—only 15 strikes a day, with three quarters of planes returning without dropping their bomb loads because of restrictions on targeting—to the more aggressive campaigns in Libya (50 strikes a day), the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 (85 strikes a day), and the 2003 invasion of Iraq (a staggering 800 strikes a day), in what was described by the Bush administration as an effort to produce “shock and awe” among the Iraqi victims.

The conclusion is ominous: the US government and its Arab and imperialist allies are preparing to escalate the air war in Iraq and Syria to produce thousands, if not tens of thousands, of civilian casualties.

Schmitt’s article is a signal to begin preparing the American people to accept war crimes on the scale of the previous US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. And it is

a demonstration that the *Times*, which sets the political agenda for the bulk of the American media, will play its role in justifying and covering up for these crimes.



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