

Media faithfully echoes US justifications for war crime at Baghuz, Syria

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After the exposure in the *New York Times* of the cover-up of a US airstrike in Syria that claimed the lives of at least 80 women and children, the international media kept its silence for the best part of a day.

From late Sunday afternoon, some token reporting appeared in the *Guardian*, the *Times* and the BBC in the UK; *Der Spiegel*, *Bild* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Germany; several publications across the Middle East, including *Al Jazeera*; *Forbes* and the *International Business Times*.

However, the most extensive coverage was provided by the UK's *Daily Mail*, which made itself a mouthpiece for the US military. The report begins with the statement, "The U.S. military covered up 2019 airstrikes in Syria that killed up to 64 women and children, a possible war crime, during the battle against Islamic State, according to a new report". But it then marshals what can accurately be described as the US defence case.

The paper went as far as publishing in full at the end of its article the justification for the strike given by the United States Central Command (Centcom) on Sunday.

In its original article, the *New York Times* revealed that a US special forces team had called in an airstrike against a group gathered by the bank of the Euphrates near the town of Baghuz. One 500-pound and two 2,000-pound bombs were dropped on the crowd. A high-resolution US surveillance drone operating in the region captured the attack.

The *Mail* reports Centcom's claims that the strike was "justified" and that 16 of those killed were Islamic State fighters and "just four" of them civilians. In the paper's words, "The military said it was unclear if the other 60 people were civilians, partly because women and children could have been combatants."

Mail provides support for this claim with the photo caption, "Although many women and children fled Baghuz (as seen above) before the final battle, the Pentagon says that some remained and took up arms."

Besides helping to cast doubt on the number of civilians killed, the paper presents a narrative of the bombing designed to implicate its victims as combatants in the fighting between ISIS and the Syrian Democratic Forces and their US allies.

A second photo is captioned, "The strike unfolded as ISIS fighters were making their final stand in a crowded, dirty camp (above) on the banks of the Euphrates River in Baghuz."

Once again taking its key points from the Centcom statement, the *Mail* writes, "On the morning of the bombing in question, ISIS had launched a last-ditch offensive to attempt to break coalition lines, and Task Force 9 called in waves of drone strikes to stave off the attacks..."

"Following the bomb strike, the tide of the battle turned. Within days, the final remnants of ISIS were captured or killed."

Centcom, the *Mail* reports, described the bombing as "legitimate self-defence".

The conclusion intended to be drawn by the reader is that the bombed group were involved in the battle, or at least that the strike was part of the necessarily messy business of war—not a crime, but a tragic necessity that helped turn the tide of battle—and nothing that anyone should dwell on.

Elements of this narrative were included in the other, perfunctory reports of the *New York Times* exposé.

The *Guardian* included extended quotes from Centcom spokesperson Captain Bill Urban, including references to "remaining fighter including some women and child combatants". Its reporters write:

Urban said that on the morning of 18 March, IS fighters launched a counterattack on SDF positions that lasted several hours, during which an SDF position was in danger of being overrun, and US special forces called in an airstrike. He said that they were unaware that a drone with a high-definition video footage was in the area and relied on a standard definition feed from another drone.

The BBC said Urban had told the broadcaster that “US troops had been assured there were no civilians in the area at the time of the attack.”

The *Times* summarised the US position: “It defended the strikes as ‘legitimate self defence’, and proportional in the context of the heated battle, during which there were so many Isis fighters and suicide bombers attacking the SDF positions that the US air force drones sent to assist ran out of missiles.”

Bild wrote similarly from Germany, “The use in question against fighters of the jihadist militia Islamic State in 2019 was ‘appropriate’, said the central command of the US armed forces on Sunday. Accordingly, ‘appropriate steps had been taken to exclude the presence of civilians’.”

In the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: “Apparently, some women and children ‘whether through indoctrination or of their own free will, decided to take up arms in this fight’ and were therefore not classified as civilians.”

These reports, published after some delay, and doubtless after much consultation, betray considerable concern on the part of the ruling class in the wake of the Baghuz revelations. A section of the media has decided that the atrocity cannot be entirely disappeared behind a wall of silence.

Conscious of the mass anti-war sentiment in the population, they have felt obliged to acknowledge the attack and cover-up. But in an effort to contain the political fallout, they have sought in their coverage to trade these actions off against the justifications provided by the US military.

The affair highlights the fundamental role played by the corporate media as gatekeepers of the truth and a PR service for the ruling class. State crimes are for the most part hushed up. Where they are reported, the event

is carefully stage-managed so as not to rock the boat.

What has therefore been produced out of the Baghuz revelations is not a campaign for the trial for war crimes of senior US army personnel, but its opposite: an opportunity for the US army to rehearse and popularise excuses for war crimes.

Breaking these unwritten laws of bourgeois journalism is the reason WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange now finds himself imprisoned in Belmarsh maximum security prison, facing life imprisonment or death in the US. WikiLeaks did not aim to preserve the US imperialist war machine while reporting its crimes, but to demolish it. In Assange’s words describing WikiLeaks’s mission, “If wars can be started by lies, peace can be started by truth.”

This fight, against US imperialism, its allies, and their stenographers in the world’s media, can only be successfully waged by a powerful social and political force. The task of holding the authors of the Baghuz massacre and countless other crimes to account falls to the international working class, mobilised in a struggle against war and for socialism.



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