

Close Air Support and Civilian Casualties in Afghanistan

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American airpower seems to have lost some of its mystique in the war in Afghanistan. American air dominance, including its ability to conduct airstrikes in close air support of coalition troops, has been and continues to be critical to the Afghan war effort.¹ Close air support, in particular, is allowing the United States and NATO to fight an energized insurgency with far fewer troops than it needs.² Yet if one follows press reports from the Afghan theatre, what Eliot Cohen once characterized as an “unusually seductive form of military strength,”³ has become a source of consternation for the United States and a ready cudgel with which to beat America’s troubled prosecution of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).⁴ Tragic news stories of American airstrikes gone wrong and their resultant civilian casualties trump more mundane analyses of the Afghan government’s failings or the (by now routine) atrocities committed by Afghan insurgents.⁵ American airpower, it seems, has become a victim of its own misunderstood successes in the Persian Gulf War and Kosovo bombing campaign. Its famed precision makes any costly error unacceptable, inflames Afghan and international public opinion, and forces American defense officials and military leaders to observe endless rituals of public apology.⁶ The irreconcilable conflict between the immutably violent nature of war and

¹ This paper will focus primarily on American airpower, since according to information provided by U.S. Air Forces Central Public Affairs Combined Air and Space Operations Center, Southwest Asia to Human Rights Watch, “British, French, and Dutch aircraft participat[e] in a small minority of reported airstrikes.” American aircraft conduct airstrikes in support of OEF and NATO operations. This paper will specify whether or not data includes NATO/ISAF airstrikes. “Troops in Contact’: Air Strikes and Civilian Deaths in Afghanistan,” September 2008, available at http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/afghanistan0908webwcover_0.pdf, 11.

² ISAF commander General McKiernan has said, “we don’t have sufficient forces [in Afghanistan] so there is a greater reliance on air;” Jim Garamone, “Gates Offers Personal Regrets for Afghan Civilian Casualties,” *DefenseLink*, September 17, 2008, available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=51205>

³ Eliot A. Cohen, “The Mystique of U.S. Air Power,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 1 (January/February 1994), 109.

⁴ See, for example, Hans-Jürgen Schlamp, “Air Force Confirms Rising Civilian Toll,” *Spiegel Online*, November 13, 2008, available at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,590234,00.html>

⁵ For a report on insurgent attacks against Afghan civilians, see Human Rights Watch, “The Human Cost: The Consequences of Insurgent Attacks in Afghanistan,” April 2007, available at <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/afghanistan0407webwcover.pdf>

⁶ See, for example, Garamone or Donna Miles, “Official Reaffirms Commitment to Preventing Civilian Casualties,” *DefenseLink*, October 8, 2008, available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=51435>

the fiction of a “bloodless” use of force⁷ has trapped the United States between the Scylla of military exigency and the Charybdis of public sentiment.

This paper will briefly examine the issue of airstrikes during close air support (CAS) operations in the Afghan theatre. It will give a broad overview of the use of airpower in OEF, then examine the controversy surrounding American airstrikes in Afghanistan. It will take the position that given the existing constraints on the American war effort (troop shortages, the vast and difficult Afghan terrain, limited human intelligence, cross-border insurgent sanctuaries, and increased insurgent activity), CAS is vital to the prosecution of the Afghan war. It will further argue that, even as mounting civilian casualties are alienating the Afghan populace, excessive restraint in the use of airstrikes may be handicapping U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts.

Airpower and Counterinsurgency

The use of airpower can be divided into three broad but overlapping categories: logistical/air transport (airlift via airland or airdrop, including MEDEVAC and humanitarian assistance), intelligence/surveillance/reconnaissance (ISR), and airstrike/attack. These functions, in turn, should combine to “shape the theatre at the operational and strategic levels” and allow ground forces to “secure and stabilize the theatre.”⁸ Because of its higher cost, airlift normally provides a small portion of transportation capabilities during combat operations.⁹ The Afghan war, however, is being fought in remote areas. As the Afghan terrain is particularly rugged and inhospitable in the east, and the security situation throughout large swaths of the country precludes ground transport, “convoy mitigation” is the norm, and almost all troop movement is by air.¹⁰ Given that reliable intelligence is the *sine qua non* of effective COIN, and the avowed difficulty of collecting human intelligence (HUMINT) or infiltrating insurgent networks in Afghanistan, “a combination of unmanned aircraft systems, manned aircraft, and space-based platforms,” including Predator drones and JSTARS aircraft, are needed to provide signals intelligence (SIGINT), aerial reconnaissance, and perform various information operations (IO).¹¹ A variety of rotary and fixed-wing aircraft also conduct airstrikes (during which actual munitions are used), often in close air support of troops which have made contact with enemy forces (“troops in contact” or TIC) in kinetic operations, but also in planned operations to destroy known enemy positions.¹² In addition, attack aircraft regularly perform “shows of force” to deter insurgent activity, or

⁷ Cohen, 121.

⁸ David E. Johnson, *Learning Large Lessons: The Evolving Roles of Ground Power and Air Power in the Post-Cold War Era*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007), 194.

⁹ U.S. Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual No. 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication No. 3-33.5* (Washington, DC, 2006), E-1 – E-4.

¹⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman, “US Air Power in Iraq and Afghanistan: 2004 – 2007,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 13, 2007, available at http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/071213_oif-oef_airpower.pdf

¹¹ U.S. Department of the Army, E-2.

¹² Human Rights Watch, “Troops in Contact,” 3.

“aerial overwatch” to protect convoys or reconstruction activities.¹³ Airpower’s role in counterinsurgency may be relegated to an appendix in the U.S. military’s COIN manual, but American air dominance has been and continues to be crucial to sustaining combat operations in Afghanistan.¹⁴

Losing Hearts and Minds: Close Air Support, Collateral Damage and Controversy

Close Air Support

Close air support, which is one attack function of airpower, has increased in importance as a component of the Afghan war. From the very beginning of OEF, CAS (defined as “air action by fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft against hostile targets that are in close proximity to friendly forces and which require detailed integration of each air mission with the fire and movement of those forces”¹⁵) has allowed coalition forces to fight with fewer troops than normally deemed necessary for counterinsurgency and stability operations. OEF, in particular, depends heavily on Special Operations Forces operating in small groups with light arms. These forces which fight in the most dangerous regions of Afghanistan (the south and southeast), “often require rapid support in the form of airstrikes” when outnumbered.¹⁶ In response, air assets such as AH-64 Apache (U.S. Army) and AH-1W Cobra (U.S. Marine Corps) helicopters,¹⁷ AC-130H Spectre and AC-130U Spooky gunships, A-10 Thunderbolt attack and F-15 Strike Eagle strike and fighter aircraft (among others), and B-52 bombers are used for dozens of CAS operations every day. The rural and remote nature of the Afghan war also most areas of operations (AO) relatively favorable locations for airstrikes, as the likelihood of collateral damage is minimal.¹⁸¹⁹ In urban AO, by contrast, requests by ground forces for airstrikes would not be approved unless coalition troops were about to be overrun.²⁰

¹³ See, for example, “March 21 Airpower Summary: A-10s Deter Enemy Activity,” *GlobalSecurity.org*, March 22, 2008, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2008/03/mil-080322-afpn01.htm> or “Aug. 17 Airpower Summary: JSTARS Provide Ground Surveillance,” *GlobalSecurity.org*, August 18, 2008, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2007/08/mil-070818-afpn01.htm>

¹⁴ A November 2008 air power summary for a single day in the Afghan campaign, for example, records 66 American CAS missions flown in support of coalition and Afghan forces, numerous shows of force and aerial overwatch operations by A-10s, F-15Es and F/A-18Es, as well as nearly 7,000 pounds of airdropped “troop resupply;” “Nov. 10 Air Power Summary: F-15Es Deter Anti-Afghan Forces,” *Air Force Link*, November 11, 2008, available at <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123123630>

¹⁵ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Close Air Support*, Joint Publication 3-09.3, September 3, 2003, ix.

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, “‘Troops in Contact’,” 4, 31.

¹⁷ Although helicopters regularly provide CAS, the data used for this paper do not include figures for rotary-winged aircraft.

¹⁸ Jonathan G. Owen (Capt. USMC), interview by author, Washington, DC, November 10, 2008. Capt. Owen was a United States Marine Corps infantry officer who served with a Marine Expeditionary Unit in Afghanistan from November 2003 – June 2004, and has considerable experience with CAS.

¹⁹ Seth G. Jones, *RAND Counterinsurgency Study Volume 4: Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008), 121.

²⁰ Owen.

Furthermore, in the past three years, the role of CAS air strikes in OEF operations has expanded considerably. During 2007,²¹ for example, of the 12,775 CAS sorties flown by American air components, munitions (excluding 20 and 30 mm cannon or rockets) were dropped during 2,926—1.65 times more than in 2006. By contrast, only 86 sorties in 2004 and 176 sorties in 2005 resulted in munitions being dropped. Therefore, between 2004 and 2007, there was a *34-fold increase* in CAS operations that resulted in airstrikes, indicating a “dramatic increase in both the use of airpower and the intensity of combat.”²² The latter is reflected in the figures for coalition military fatalities, which have steadily increased since 2004. As of December 28, 293 coalition troops had been killed in OEF and ISAF operations in 2008, a 20.8% increase over 2007 and 34.8% increase over 2006.²³ In addition, while in previous years reduced fighting during winter months would bring about a drop in the number of airstrikes, in 2007-2008 “airstrikes increased even as the ground fighting lulled.”²⁴ Given the low number of coalition troops in Afghanistan (approximately 67,000 coalition soldiers,²⁵ of which 50,700 are part of NATO/ISAF, operating across a 650,000 km² land mass²⁶) and increased insurgent activity, American air dominance has become a lifeline for coalition forces.

Collateral Damage and Controversy

Coalition reliance on CAS has unfortunately come at considerable cost to Afghan civilians.²⁷ In 2006, 116 civilians were killed in 13 airstrikes²⁸ by American and ISAF forces; in 2007, 321 civilians were killed (a near three-fold increase over the previous year) and many more injured in 22 airstrikes. And during the first seven months of 2008, 119 civilians were killed in 12 airstrikes. This figure does not include deaths resulting from the August 22, 2008 AC-130²⁹ airstrike in the village of Azizabad, Herat Province,³⁰ which was determined by the U.S. military to have killed 33 civilians,³¹ but

²¹ Statistics for 2007 are as of December 5 of that year.

²² Cordesman.

²³ iCasualties.org, *Operation Enduring Freedom*, available at <http://icasualties.org/oef/>

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Troops in Contact,” 12.

²⁵ Ann Scott Tyson, “Gates Backs Buildup of U.S. Troops in Afghanistan,” *Washingtonpost.com*, November 22, 2008, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/21/AR2008112103504.html>

²⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), *ISAF Placemat*, October 6, 2008, available at http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/isaf_placemat_081006.pdf

²⁷ It should be noted that the vast majority of civilian deaths come at the hands of insurgents. In 2007, at least 1,633 civilians died as a result of armed conflict, of which 950 died because of insurgent attacks. During the first seven months of 2008, 367 of the 540 civilians killed died during insurgent attacks; Human Rights Watch, 5.

²⁸ Data is for fixed-wing aircraft only.

²⁹ While conducting CAS with rotary-winged aircraft would likely result in fewer civilian casualties, helicopters have very short loiter times due to fuel constraints, since unlike fixed-wing aircraft, they cannot be refueled midair. They are also much more vulnerable to ground fire and carry less ordnance; Owen.

³⁰ Human Rights Watch, “Troops in Contact,” 3.

³¹ Abdul Waheed Wafa and John F. Burns, “U.S. Airstrike Reported to Hit Afghan Wedding,” *The New York Times*, under Asia Pacific, November 5, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/06/world/asia/06afghan.html>

which aid workers, reporters and local villagers claim killed closer to 90 people.³² Airstrikes have also resulted in significant damage to Afghan villages, where homes are traditionally built with mud, mud brick, and straw plastering,³³ and collapse easily. In addition, many Afghans fearful of future air attacks have been forced to abandon their homes and become internally displaced.³⁴ As Sarah Chayes has noted in writing of the early days of OEF, aerial bombing has a profoundly traumatic psychological effect on even those who escape death or injury.³⁵

Civilian casualties, inherently iniquitous, are also a liability in the critical battle for “hearts and minds” and contravene COIN principles: “the more force used, the less effective it is.”³⁶ Too much force inevitably runs the risk of turning neutrals into enemies and replenishing the ranks of the insurgency.³⁷ It also provides a public relations windfall for the enemy, as the increasing use of precision-guided munitions (PGM) by the United States has made inaccuracy unacceptable.³⁸ In reality, however, a “precise and discriminate use of force”³⁹ is not always possible during CAS. In March 2007, for example, a series of incidents in which Afghan civilians were killed by coalition forces, including an airstrike which killed nine members of one family, resulted in protests by hundreds of Nangarhar University students.⁴⁰ In a July 2008 incident in Nuristan Province, 47 people (including 39 women and children) at a wedding procession were killed by an American airstrike.⁴¹ Those deaths and the coalition and Afghan government’s subsequent failure to redress the tragedy may well have resulted in local cooperation with insurgents in the attack on an American platoon base in Wanat.^{42,43} Each such tragedy unquestionably enflames the Afghan public’s emotions, erodes their goodwill while breeding resentment,⁴⁴ and adds to the increasingly pessimistic mood of

³² John F. Burns, “Afghan Toll Shakes Generals,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/19/weekinreview/19burns.html?scp=3&sq=azizabad&st=cse>

³³ Habitat for Humanity, “Habitat for Humanity Afghanistan,” available at <http://www.habitat.org/intl/ap/2.aspx>

³⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Troops in Contact,” 3.

³⁵ Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 13.

³⁶ U.S. Department of the Army, 1-22.

³⁷ David H. Petraeus (Gen. U.S. Army), “Learning Counterinsurgency: Observations from Soldiering in Iraq,” *Military Review* (January – February 2006), 5-6.

³⁸ Max Boot, *War Made New: Weapons, Warriors, and the Making of the Modern World*, (New York: Gotham Books, 2006), 367.

³⁹ U.S. Department of the Army, 1-22.

⁴⁰ Amir Shah and Rahim Faiez, “Coalition Airstrike Kills Afghan Family,” *Washingtonpost.com*, March 6, 2007, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/03/05/AR2007030500396.html>

⁴¹ James Sturcke, “US Air Strike Wiped Out Afghan Wedding Party, Inquiry Finds,” *Guardian.co.uk*, July 11, 2008, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/11/afghanistan.usa>

⁴² “Dawn Raid,” *The Economist*, July 17, 2008.

⁴³ Eric Schmitt, “Afghan Officials Aided an Attack on U.S. Soldiers,” *The New York Times*, November 3, 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/04/world/asia/04military.html?pagewanted=1&r=1&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

⁴⁴ See, for example, David Morgan, “NATO Troops Earn Resentment of Frustrated Afghans,” *Reuters*, March 27, 2007, available at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUKN2638527420070327>

the populace.⁴⁵ According to the Asia Foundation's 2008 survey, 12% of Afghans living in the southwest region, 11% in the east, and 9% in the southeast reported having experienced violence as a result of activities by foreign forces—in some areas nearly as often as from insurgent activity.⁴⁶ This unfortunately places the Afghan government in the untenable position of working with coalition forces while trying to retain the population's support.

Considerable Restraint

Behind the grim statistics of civilian deaths is the untold story of extraordinary restraint shown on the part of coalition forces in the use of airstrikes. Collateral damage has been almost exclusively the result of unplanned CAS, since “risk mitigations procedures,” such as “pattern of life analysis” (observing an area for hours to days, searching for civilians) and “eyes on the target” (using technical reconnaissance and ground observation) are part of the protocol for planned airstrikes.⁴⁷ Coalition forces also regularly “paper” Afghan villages with leaflets warning residents that coalition ground forces are moving into an area.⁴⁸ Yet even immediate, unplanned requests for CAS involve a 15-step process (including post-strike assessment) and multiple layers of authorization.⁴⁹ In practice this can mean several harrowing hours between TIC and an effected airstrike, if one is approved at all.⁵⁰ In the event, over three-quarters of CAS sorties flown in 2007 dropped no munitions. The United States and NATO have also increased the “number of analysts reviewing and vetting each strike,” changed tactics and munitions size in order to reduce the risk of collateral damage,⁵¹ and postponed attacks in cases where civilians were in danger.^{52,53} In fact, civilian casualties are usually indication of intelligence failure,⁵⁴ either about the presence of civilians or of insurgents, not a willingness on the part of OEF forces to accept collateral damage. Despite the fact that OEF's Rules of Engagement (ROE) regarding the use of aerial munitions are in theory more lenient than NATO's,⁵⁵ according to at least one Afghan war veteran, in practice the United States has been “extremely conservative in its application of force. So much

⁴⁵ The Asia Foundation, “Afghanistan in 2008: A Survey of the Afghan People,” October 2008, available at <http://asiafoundation.org/country/afghanistan/2008-poll.php>, 5.

⁴⁶ Nationwide, 6% of Afghans reported experiencing violence because of foreign forces, as compared to 8% as a result of insurgent activity; The Asia Foundation, 31.

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch, 29. ISAF commander General McKiernan has stated, “Providing support for troops in contact or the immediate use of close-air support is always more of a problem than a planned mission;” Garamone.

⁴⁸ See, for example, “Papering Afghanistan, Again,” *AirForce-Magazine.com*, November 6, 2007, available at <http://www.airforce-magazine.com/DRArchive/Pages/2007/November%202007/November%2006%202007/1060papering.aspx>

⁴⁹ See Joint Chiefs of Staff, III-29 – III30.

⁵⁰ Ground troops under fire, who are waiting for or have been denied CAS, sometimes request that air support aircraft release flares in lieu of munitions in order to illuminate an AO and make enemy forces more visible to coalition snipers; Owen.

⁵¹ Cordesman.

⁵² Human Rights Watch, “Troops in Contact,” 6.

⁵³ Mark Tran, “NATO Changes Tactics to Avoid Afghan Civilian Deaths,” *Guardian.co.uk*, July 30, 2007, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/jul/30/afghanistan.nato>

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Troops in Contact,” 32.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Troops in Contact,” 31.

so that it has been at the expense of American lives—as a result of a lack of timely air support.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, in response to public outcry over civilian casualties, in October 2008 NATO publicly announced what has in fact been standard procedure for some time: its commanders had been advised to “consider tactical withdrawal” rather calling for CAS in situations where civilians might be in harm’s way.^{57,58}

Restraint, however, carries its own costs. In November 2008 the commanding general of the 101st Airborne Division was quoted as having advised his troops to “back off” from engaging insurgents, should there be “any doubt at all that the enemy is firing from a house or building where there might be women and children.” Although the general’s spokesperson later clarified that operations would not cease at the mere possibility of civilian presence,⁵⁹ the original statement indicates an unfortunate consequence of extraordinary restraint. Insurgents, who have been regularly using Afghan civilians as human shields either by deliberately attacking coalition forces from villagers’ homes or by preventing villagers from fleeing a conflict area,⁶⁰ will be rewarded for doing so. More importantly, coalition forces which cannot rely on adequate CAS may be tempted to remain in the relative security of bases rather than go out on patrol.⁶¹ And according to the U.S. Army’s own COIN manual, such patrols are critical for ensuring security, collecting intelligence, and maintaining contact with the populace in order to demonstrate the “real legitimacy” of the security forces.⁶²

Conclusion

Despite the acknowledged shortcomings of air attacks within the current framework of U.S. counterinsurgency, for the time being air power in general and close air support operations in particular will continue to be indispensable components of the Afghan war. Constrained by a shortage of troops, vast and dispersed areas of operations, limited human intelligence, and proximate insurgent sanctuaries, CAS is a lifeline for coalition troops. Yet with the exception of nuclear weapons, arguably no military has used a weapon of war more judiciously than the American military’s use of airstrikes in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, even remarkable restraint has proven insufficient. While the physical and psychological toll of air strikes on the civilian population is undisputable, the American military’s hesitating use of CAS not only runs the risk of putting the lives of its troops in danger and affecting their willingness to patrol larger AO, but of encouraging insurgents to fight under the literal aegis civilian human shields. Frank

⁵⁶ Owen.

⁵⁷ Candace Rondeaux, “NATO Modifies Airstrike Policy In Afghanistan,” *Washingtonpost.com*, October 16, 2008, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/10/15/AR2008101503572.html>

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch, “‘Troops in Contact’,” 15. However, according to Human Rights Watch, the “changes implemented do not appear to have made a systematic difference as large numbers of civilians continue to die in airstrikes.”

⁵⁹ “U.S. Vows to ‘Back Off’ if Fighters Use Civilians as Cover,” *CNN.com*, November 12, 2008, available at <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/11/09/afghan.civilians/>

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch, “‘Troops in Contact’,” 25.

⁶¹ Owen.

⁶² U.S. Department of the Army, 1-22.

acknowledgement of civilian deaths and timely distribution of reparations might marginally mitigate public outrage, but neither are not long-term solutions. Irrespective of how it is applied American air dominance will not decide the Afghan war. Success or failure in tackling the underlying problems which have made coalition forces so air-dependent will.

Writing in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War, Cohen warned against “the fantasy of near-bloodless uses of force.”⁶³ As the second part of his characterization qualifies, air power is seductive because it “appears to offer gratification without commitment.”⁶⁴ A handful of friendly fire or civilian fatalities may well be absorbed into the costs of a three-day *blitzkrieg*. Counterinsurgency campaigns, however, are almost invariably long wars. As one RAND study of post-WWII insurgencies found, successful COIN takes an average of 14 years.⁶⁵ Winning against insurgents, therefore, requires commitment.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, as America’s commitment in Afghanistan drags on without victory, the world seems to be less willing to forgive its missteps.

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⁶³ Cohen, 121.

⁶⁴ Cohen, 109.

⁶⁵ According to the same study, unsuccessful counterinsurgency campaigns last an average of 11 years; Jones, 10.

⁶⁶ The U.S. Army’s *Counterinsurgency Field Manual No. 3-24* states, “By its nature, insurgency is protracted. The conduct of counterinsurgency always demands considerable expenditures of time and resources;” U.S. Department of the Army, 1-20.