



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on December 11, 2012

Afghan Targets May Include “Children with Potential Hostile Intent”

A recent comment by an U.S. Army officer about looking for “children with potential hostile intent” has increased concerns about targeting policy and the killing of civilians in Afghanistan.

The statement was attributed to Army Lieutenant Colonel Marion Carrington in a *Marine Corps Times* [article](#) of December 3 that appeared under the headline, “Some Afghan kids aren’t bystanders.” In recounting an incident in mid-October in which three Afghan children — ages 8, 10 and 12 — were killed in Helmond Province, the *Times* article described Marines directing a strike at “three shadowy figures that appeared to be emplacing an “improvised explosive device” in the ground. The Marines got clearance for air strike, the *Times* said and “took out the targets.”



The article appears to contradict earlier accounts of the killing. While the *Marine Corp Times* article indicates the children were the shadowy figures targeted in the strike, the International Security Assistance Force in Kabul issued a statement at the time of the incident saying it might have “accidentally killed three innocent Afghan civilians.” A *New York Times* [article](#) dated October 19 said the children were out gathering dung for fuel, and quoted the governor of a neighboring province who said the children were “wandering by” when they were struck by shrapnel from a strike on Taliban members who were placing the explosives in the ground. Major Adam Wojack, a spokesman for the coalition forces, said at the time that reports of the children killed were being investigated.

“I.S.A.F. did conduct a precision strike on three insurgents in Nawa district, and the strike killed all three insurgents,” Wojack said. “None of our reporting shows any civilian casualties or any children.” Yet a tribal council member who found the children’s bodies said he did not see any other bodies in the area. And while earlier reports had described the action as an air strike, the *New York Times* ran a correction in its October 19 article, noting that military officials said the “precision strike” was an artillery barrage.

The *Marine Corps Times* article cited statements by military officials claiming the Taliban often use children to carry out their missions or as a shield, and the children may have been recruited to plant explosives. *The Guardian* of London last week [cited](#) a statement by a U.S. official who said the Marines has seen the children digging a hole on a dirt road and “the Taliban may have recruited the children to carry out the mission.”

There were 36 documented cases of underage recruiting in the war in 2011, the *Marine Corps Times*



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said, citing an April 2012 United Nations report. Eleven children, including an eight-year-old girl, were killed in Afghanistan while carrying out suicide attacks, the report said. Human Rights Watch also reported a sharp increase in the Taliban's deployment of children in suicide bombings, some as young as seven.

"It kind of opens our aperture," said Army Lt. Col. Marion "Ced" Carrington, whose unit, 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, assists the Afghan police. "In addition to looking for military-age males, it's looking for children with potential hostile intent." That set off alarm bells among some counterterrorism experts and human rights groups.

"I have great respect for people who put themselves in harm's way," Amos Guiora, a University of Utah law professor who spent years in the Israeli Defense Forces, told *The Guardian*. "Carrington is probably a great guy, but he is articulating a deeply troubling policy adopted by the Obama administration, he said. "That is beyond troubling. It is also illegal and immoral."

"This is one official quoted," said Pardiss Kebriaei, a lawyer with the Center for Constitutional Rights whom *The Guardian* identified as a specialist in targeted killings. "I don't know if that standard is what they are using but the standard itself is troubling," she said, adding, "If you are looking to create a paradigm where you increase the 'aperture' — that scares me. It doesn't work, operationally, morally or practically."

The Obama administration has frequently come under criticism for the way it counts civilian casualties, as well as for its deliberate targeting of terrorists and their supporters for extra-judicial killings — the administration disputes the term "assassination" — in locations outside any battlefield. The president's secret list of persons designated for targeted killing is said to include U.S. citizens operating outside the United States. [Anwar al-Awlaki](#), an American-born Muslim cleric who published an online Jihadist magazine, was targeted and killed by a drone strike in Yemen. Samir Khan, an American citizen and the editor of Awlaki's magazine, was traveling with Awlaki and was killed in the same attack. A later drone strike killed Awlaki's 16-year-old American-born son Abdulrahman.

Obama has also implemented a policy for counting civilian casualties designed to keep the count artificially low. John Brennan, the president's counter-terrorism adviser, claimed in a 2011 speech that not a single non-combatant had been killed in a year of U.S. air strikes. Another senior administration official told the *New York Times* that civilians killed by drone strikes in Pakistan numbered only in "single digits," despite reports of hundreds of deaths from various sources. But the *Times* in a May 29, 2012 [report](#), based on interviews with more than three dozens current and former cabinet members, counselors, and advisers to the president, said administration policy has been to count all military-age males killed in a strike zone as combatants unless there is explicit posthumous evidence to the contrary.

"Al Qaeda is an insular, paranoid organization — innocent neighbors don't hitchhike rides in the back of trucks headed for the border with guns and bombs," an administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the *Times*.

Such a loose definition of combatants lends itself to a wide range of prospective targets, from children digging in the ground to farmers with a truckload of fertilizer, who might be mistaken for bomb makers. There is virtually no limit to the number of activities that might show "potential hostile intent."

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