



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on October 10, 2015

Kunduz Hospital Bombing: Another Reason to Get US out of Afghanistan

On September 28, the Afghan Taliban launched a massive attack on Kunduz, a city of more than 300,000 in northeastern Afghanistan, wresting control from the U.S.-backed Afghan government. Kunduz became the first major Afghan city to be retaken by the Taliban since the start of the war, and may be a sign of things to come if the Afghan War continues its present trajectory. At the time of this writing, U.S. and Afghan forces are hitting back against the Taliban in Kunduz, but have so far failed to dislodge them.



A major casualty of this latest stage of America's war without end in Afghanistan was the bombing, on October 3, of a major hospital in Kunduz operated by Doctors Without Borders, a French relief agency that, like the International Red Cross, frequently sets up shop in active combat zones.

Sometime after midnight on October 3, the hospital facility came under repeated attack by an American AC-130 gunship, which bombed, strafed, and partially destroyed the building, killing and wounding dozens of medical workers and patients alike. More than 30 individuals, presumed victims of the attack, are still missing.

Initial reports of the circumstances surrounding the attack varied. Some U.S. government and military sources claimed at first that the Afghani forces had called in the strike, but later retracted the claim, admitting that the decision to attack the hospital had come from entirely within the chain of command of the U.S. military. Doctors Without Borders pointed out that, as late as September 29, they had communicated anew to all warring parties, including the U.S. military, the location of their facility, and angrily denied claims by the Afghan forces that Taliban had been using the hospital as a base of operations and its patients and workers as human shields. Christopher Stokes, the general director of Doctors Without Borders, said:

[Doctors Without Borders] is disgusted by the recent statements coming from some Afghanistan government authorities justifying the attack on its hospital in Kunduz. These statements imply that Afghan and U.S. forces working together decided to raze to the ground a fully functioning hospital — with more than 180 staff and patients inside — because they claim that members of the Taliban were present. This amounts to an admission of a war crime.... If there was a major military operation going on there, our staff would have noticed. And that wasn't the case when the strikes occurred.

Two days after the attack, Doctors Without Borders issued another scathing denunciation:

Their [U.S.] description of the attack keeps changing — from collateral damage, to a tragic incident, to now attempting to pass responsibility to the Afghanistan government.... There can be no justification for this horrible attack.



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Faced with continued diplomatic and political fallout from the tragedy, President Obama apologized on October 7 for the incident, promising a thorough internal investigation. Doctors Without Borders, not satisfied, has demanded an investigation of the incident by the International Humanitarian Fact-Finding Commission (IHFFC). This organization, headquartered at Bern, has permanent observer status in the United Nations General Assembly, and investigates alleged breaches of the Geneva Convention.

The Kunduz hospital bombing is likely to be a source of anguish and embarrassment for the United States for some time to come. Despite allegations to the contrary, there is little reason to believe that the attack was other than a tragic mistake committed in the heat of battle, as the U.S. government maintains, not a deliberate criminal act. Both the Afghan and Iraq wars have been replete with attacks on civilian targets mistaken for enemy combatants.

Such incidents, unfortunately, are part of the fog of war, even in an era of high tech surveillance and intelligence-gathering. The United Nations itself — now posing as an impartial party qualified to investigate such tragedies — committed many atrocities, now forgotten, during its war in the Katanga region of the Congo in 1960. One of the worst offenses was the bombing of a Red Cross hospital at Shinkolobwe. Despite the prominent red cross painted on the roof, UN planes bombed the building, killing men, women, and children. Doctors who witnessed this and other attacks on civilians in Katanga claimed that it was all part of a deliberate terror campaign on the part of the UN. The full truth of what happened in Katanga, as is generally the case with war, will probably never be known.

Because of the certainty of tragedies like hospital bombings and other attacks on innocent civilians, and because of the near-impossibility to determine the truth of such incidents, given the tendency of governments and militaries to close ranks around their own, the morality of waging war at all should never be taken for granted. The decision to resort to war will unavoidably lead to the death of innocents, so often glibly dismissed as “collateral damage.”

Regardless of the intentions of the men who actually carried out the Kunduz hospital attack, it is undeniable that, were there no war in the first place, many people who died in that incident would still be alive — along with thousands of other innocent men, women, and children in both Afghanistan and Iraq who have fallen victim to missiles from predator drones, fire from helicopter gunships, and bombs intended for insurgents. Not only that, while many were, as characterized, hardened terrorists, some insurgents in both countries were guilty of nothing more than defending their own country against a hostile invader — something few American men would shrink from were the roles reversed.

Questions that the Kunduz hospital bombing should be prompting us to ask include: Why are we still fighting in Afghanistan, after 14 years? Have we decided to make Afghanistan a permanent American project? If not, what will it take for us to pull up stakes and leave? The answer routinely given by America’s political establishment, regarding both Afghanistan and Iraq, is that, right or wrong, we are now bear moral responsibility for the chaos in both countries, and need to “see it through” until the mission is completed. In practice, this has meant continuing to use our military to prop up the regimes in place and preventing groups like the Taliban and ISIS from taking over.

But the reality has been that U.S. occupation has made the situation worse in Iraq, and has done little beyond prolonging the agony in Afghanistan. Despite years of waging war on the Taliban, that extremist group has simply moved across the border into neighboring Pakistan and continues to prosecute the conflict from its safe haven. The moment the U.S. pulls out of Afghanistan, the Taliban will doubtless renew their attempts to seize power, and Afghanistan’s endless war will return to pre-9/11 levels of ferocity.



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These are difficult facts for many Americans — particularly those who have fought, or who have family who fought, in Afghanistan — to accept. But they are the almost inevitable consequences of interventionism, especially in regions as geographically and culturally remote from us as Afghanistan. As long as our program of endless military interventionism without regard for long-term consequences continues, incidents like the Kunduz hospital bombing will continue, and innocents will continue to be sacrificed on the altar of modern [Bellona](#).

Photo shows Doctors Without Borders staff in shock in wake of bombing: Doctors Without Borders



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