

Tomgram: Laura Gottesdiener, The Wrath of the U.S. Along the Euphrates River

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You would barely know it, living in this country, but the essence of modern warfare is what our military tends to call “collateral damage”: the killing or wounding of civilians, not combatants. The Global War on Terror -- more than 15 years later a no-name [set of conflicts](#) still spreading across the Greater Middle East, parts of Africa, and now the [Philippines](#) -- has been typical of this. Civilians have died in startling numbers, both directly and thanks to the hardships these conflicts have brought on. Vast populations have been uprooted from their homes -- at one point [more than a million](#) people from the Iraqi city of Mosul alone -- and often sent [fleeing](#) across borders. In other words, from Afghanistan to Libya, the war on terror has (not to mince words) been murder on civilian populations.

In mainstream news coverage, real attention is paid from time to time (and quite rightly) to the continuing brutality of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the civilian deaths [caused](#) by their insurgency. And that’s even more the case with the civilian carnage caused by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. When it comes to the U.S. role in civilian deaths, however, it’s been another matter. Clearly, it’s a subject the Pentagon would prefer that we not think about and yet the human toll is all too real. As I [wrote](#) back in 2015, “In 2004 and 2006, the *Lancet*, a British medical journal, published [studies](#) based on scientific surveys of ‘excess Iraqi deaths’ since the American invasion of 2003 and, in the first case, came up with an estimated 98,000 of them and in the second with 655,000 (a [much-criticized figure](#)); such studies by medical and other researchers have never stopped. More recent counts of such deaths have ranged from [500,000](#) in 2013 to [one million](#) or 5% of the Iraqi population [in 2015].” The latest range of figures [offered](#) by the independent website *Iraq Body Count* for “documented civilian deaths from violence” since the 2003 U.S. invasion of that country is 177,941-199,231 (a conservative figure, given that word “documented,” and yet far higher than the one for combatants). And keep in mind that that’s just Iraq.

From the beginning, *TomDispatch* has made an effort to focus its attention regularly on the “collateral damage” from our conflicts. It’s been our conviction that we Americans should feel some responsibility for such carnage in a war that so infamously began with the “collateral” deaths of almost 3,000 innocent American civilians and shows [no signs of ending](#) in our lifetime. This website may, for instance, be the only news source that bothered to [keep track](#) of the number of wedding parties obliterated by U.S. air power since 100 or more revelers were [wiped out](#) in a village in Eastern Afghanistan by B-52 and B-1B bombers as 2001 ended. The total: at least eight weddings in three countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Yemen), including brides, grooms, and even musicians hired to play at the ceremony.

In the same spirit, [TomDispatch regular](#) Laura Gottesdiener, who [covered](#) the destruction of a hospital in Afghanistan by U.S. air power for this site back in 2015, turns to the American war against ISIS in Syria and the civilian mayhem taking place on the road to the “capital” of the Islamic State, Raqqa. *Tom*

Burning Raqqa

The U.S. War Against Civilians in Syria

By [Laura Gottesdiener](#)

It was midday on Sunday, May 7th, when the U.S.-led coalition warplanes again began bombing the neighborhood of Wassim Abdo’s family.

They lived in Tabqa, a small city on the banks of the Euphrates River in northern Syria. Then occupied by the Islamic State (ISIS, also known as Daesh), Tabqa was also under siege by U.S.-backed troops and being hit by daily artillery fire from U.S. Marines, as well as U.S.-led coalition airstrikes. The city, the second largest in Raqqa Province, was home to an airfield and the coveted Tabqa Dam. It was also the last place in the region the U.S.-

backed forces needed to take before launching their much-anticipated offensive against the Islamic State's self-proclaimed capital, Raqqa.

His parents, Muhammed and Salam, had already fled their home once when the building adjacent to their house was bombed, Wassim Abdo told me in a recent interview. ISIS had been [arresting](#) civilians from their neighborhood for trying to flee the city. So on that Sunday, the couple was taking shelter on the second floor of a four-story flat along with other family members when a U.S.-led airstrike reportedly struck the front half of the building. Abdo's sister-in-law Lama fled the structure with her two children and survived. But his parents and 12-year-old cousin were killed, along with [dozens](#) of their neighbors, as the concrete collapsed on them.

As an exiled human rights activist, Wassim Abdo only learned of his parents' death three days later, after Lama called him from the Syrian border town of Kobane, where she and her two children had been transported for medical treatment. Her daughter had been wounded in the bombing and although the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led troops had by then seized control of Tabqa, it was impossible for her daughter to be treated in their hometown, because weeks of U.S.-led coalition bombing had destroyed all the hospitals in the city.

A War Against Civilians

Islamic State fighters have now essentially been defeated in Mosul after a nine-month, U.S.-backed campaign that destroyed significant parts of Iraq's second largest city, killing up to [40,000 civilians](#) and forcing as many as [one million](#) more people from their homes. Now, the United States is focusing its energies -- and warplanes -- on ISIS-occupied areas of eastern Syria in an offensive dubbed "Wrath of the Euphrates."

The Islamic State's brutal treatment of civilians in Syria has been well reported and publicized. And [according to](#) Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, the commander of the U.S.-led war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the battle to "liberate" these regions from ISIS is the "most precise campaign in the history of warfare."

But reports and photographs from Syrian journalists and activists, as well as first-person accounts from those with family members living in areas under U.S. bombardment, detail a strikingly different tale of the American offensive -- one that looks a lot less like a battle against the Islamic State and a lot more like a war on civilians.

These human rights groups and local reporters say that, across Syria in recent months, the U.S.-led coalition and U.S. Marines have bombed or shelled at least [12 schools](#), including [primary schools](#) and a [girls' high school](#); a health [clinic](#) and an obstetrics [hospital](#); Raqqa's Science [College](#); residential [neighborhoods](#); [bakeries](#); post [offices](#); a [car wash](#); at least 15 [mosques](#); a cultural [center](#); a gas [station](#); cars carrying civilians to the hospital; a [funeral](#); water [tanks](#); at least 15 [bridges](#); a [makeshift](#) refugee camp; the ancient [Rafiqah Wall](#) that dates back to the eighth century; and an Internet café in Raqqa, where a Syrian media activist was [killed](#) as he was trying to smuggle news out of the besieged city.

The United States is now one of the deadliest warring parties in Syria. In May and June combined, the U.S.-led coalition killed more civilians than the Assad regime, the Russians, or ISIS, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, a nongovernmental organization that has been monitoring the death toll and human rights violations in Syria since 2011.

"This administration wants to achieve a quick victory," Dr. Fadel Abdul Ghany, chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights recently told me, referring to the Trump White House. "What we are noticing is that the U.S. is targeting and killing without taking into consideration the benefits for the military and the collateral damage for the civilians. This, of course, amounts to war crimes."

And nowhere is this war against civilians more acute than in ISIS-occupied Raqqa, where trapped families are living under dozens of airstrikes every day.

Hotel of the Revolution

Located at the confluence of the Euphrates and Balikh rivers in northern Syria, Raqqa was first settled more than 5,000 years ago. By the late eighth century, it had grown into an imperial city, filled with orchards, palaces, canals, reception halls, and a hippodrome for horse racing. Its industrial quarters were then known as “the burning Raqqa,” thanks to the flames and thick smoke produced by its glass and ceramic furnaces. The city even served briefly as the capital of the vast Abbasid Empire stretching from North Africa to Central Asia.

Toward the end of the thirteenth century, wars between the Mongol and Mamluk empires annihilated Raqqa and its surrounding countryside. Every single resident of the city was either killed or expelled. According to Hamburg University professor Stefan Heidemann, who has worked on a number of excavations in and around Raqqa, the scorched-earth warfare was so extreme that not a single tree was left standing in the region.

Only in the middle of the twentieth century when irrigation from the Euphrates River allowed Raqqa’s countryside to flourish amid a global cotton boom did the city fully reemerge. In the 1970s, the region’s population again began to swell after then-President Hafez al-Assad -- the father of the present Syrian leader, Bashar al-Assad -- ordered the construction of a massive hydroelectric dam on the Euphrates about 30 miles upstream of Raqqa. Wassim Abdo’s father, Muhammed, was an employee at this dam. Like many of these workers and their families, he and Salam lived in Tabqa’s third neighborhood, which was filled with four-story apartment flats built in the 1970s not far from the dam and its power station.

Despite these agricultural and industrial developments, Raqqa remained a small provincial capital. Abdalaziz Alhamza, a cofounder of the watchdog group Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, which is made up of media activists from Raqqa living in the city as well as in exile, [writes](#) that the local news normally didn’t even mention the city in its weather forecasts.

In the mid-2000s, a drought began to wither the local cash crops: cotton, potatoes, rice, and tomatoes. As in other regions of Syria, farmers migrated from the countryside into the city, where overstretched and ill-functioning public services only exacerbated long-simmering dissatisfactions with the Assad regime.

As the 2011 rebellion broke out across Syria, Wassim Abdo and thousands of others in Raqqa, Tabqa, and nearby villages began agitating against the Syrian government, [flooding](#) the streets in protest and forming local coordinating councils. The regime slowly [lost](#) control of territory across the province. In March 2013, after only a few days of battle, anti-government rebels ousted government troops from the city and declared Raqqa the “first liberated provincial capital” in all of Syria. The city, then the sixth largest in Syria, [became](#) “the hotel of the revolution.”

Within less than a year, however, despite fierce [protests](#) and opposition from its residents, ISIS fighters had fully occupied the city and the surrounding countryside. They declared Raqqa the capital of the Islamic State.

Despite the occupation, Wassim’s parents never tried to flee Tabqa because they [hoped](#) to reunite with one of their sons, Azad, who had been kidnapped by ISIS fighters in September 2013. In retirement, Muhammed Abdo opened a small electronics store. Salam was a housewife. Like tens of thousands of other civilians, they were living under ISIS occupation in Tabqa when, in the spring of 2017, U.S. Apache helicopters and warplanes first began [appearing](#) in the skies above the city. U.S. Marines armed with howitzers were deployed to the region. In late March, American helicopters [airlifted](#) hundreds of U.S.-backed troops from the Kurdish-led militias known as the Syrian Democratic Forces to the banks of the dammed river near the city. Additional forces approached from the east, transported on American [speedboats](#).

By the beginning of May, the Abdos’ neighborhood was under almost daily bombardment by the U.S.-led coalition forces. On May 3rd, coalition warplanes reportedly launched up to 30 [airstrikes](#) across Tabqa’s first, second, and third neighborhoods, striking homes and a fruit market and reportedly killing at least [six](#) civilians. The following night, another round of coalition airstrikes battered the first and third neighborhoods, reportedly killing at least [seven](#) civilians, including women and children. Separate airstrikes that same night near the city’s center reportedly killed

another six to 12 civilians.

On May 7th, multiple bombs reportedly dropped by the U.S.-led coalition struck the building where Muhammed and Salam had taken shelter, killing them and their 12-year-old grandson. Three days later, the Syrian Democratic Forces announced that they had fully [seized](#) control of Tabqa and the dam. The militia and its U.S. advisers quickly set their sights east to the upcoming offensive in Raqqa.

But for the Abdo family, the tragedy continued. Muhammed and Salam's bodies were buried beneath the collapsed apartment building. It took 15 days before Wassim's brother Rashid could secure the heavy machinery required to extract them.

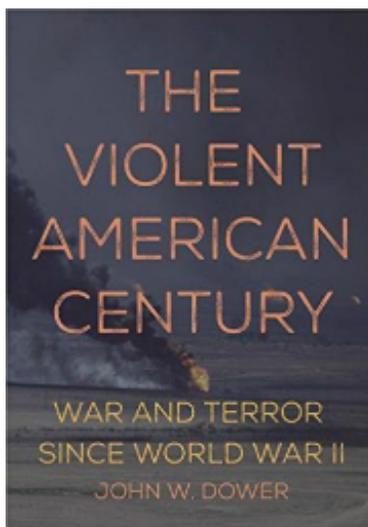
"Nobody could approach the corpses because of the disfigurement that had occurred and the smell emanating from them as a result of being left under the rubble for such a long period of time in the hot weather," Wassim told me in a recent interview.

That same day their bodies were finally recovered. On May 23rd, his parents and nephew were buried in the Tabqa cemetery.

"In Raqqa There Are Many Causes of Death"

A few days after the Abdos' funeral, the U.S.-led coalition began dropping leaflets over Raqqa instructing civilians to flee the city ahead of the upcoming offensive. According to photos of leaflets published by Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, the warnings [read](#), in part, "This is your last chance... Failing to leave might lead to death."

ISIS fighters, in turn, prohibited civilians from escaping the city and planted landmines in Raqqa's outskirts. Nevertheless, on June 5th, dozens of civilians heeded the coalition's warnings and gathered at a boat stand on the northern banks of the Euphrates, where they waited to be ferried out of the city. Before the war, families had picnicked along this riverbank. Teenagers jumped into the water from Raqqa's Old Bridge, [built](#) in 1942 by British troops. A handful of river front cafés opened for the season.



"The river is the main monument of the city, and for many people there's a romantic meaning to it," Syrian journalist Marwan Hisham, currently [co-writing](#) *Brothers of the Gun*, a book about life in ISIS-occupied Raqqa, told me.

But on June 5th, as the families were waiting to cross the river to escape the impending U.S.-backed offensive, coalition warplanes launched a barrage of airstrikes targeting the boats, reportedly massacring as many as [21 civilians](#). The coalition [acknowledges](#) launching 35 airstrikes that destroyed 68 boats between June 4th and June 6th, according to the journalistic outlet Airwars. Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend later boasted about the tactic, [telling](#) the *New York Times*: "We shoot every boat we find."

The day after the attack on fleeing civilians at the boat stand, the long-awaited U.S.-backed ground offensive officially began.

Buy the book

After three years of ISIS rule, Raqqa had become one of the most isolated cities in the world. The militants banned residents from having [home internet](#), satellite [dishes](#), or Wi-Fi hotspots. They arrested and [killed](#) local reporters and banned outside journalists. On the day U.S.-backed troops launched their ground offensive against the city, ISIS further sought to restrict reporting on conditions there by [ordering](#) the imminent shutdown of all Internet cafés.

Despite these restrictions, dozens of Syrian journalists and activists have risked and still risk their lives to smuggle information out of besieged Raqqa -- and their efforts are the only reason most Western reporters (including myself)

have any information about the war our countries are currently waging there.

Every day, these media activists funnel news out of the city to exiled Syrians running media outlets and human rights organizations. The most famous among these groups has become Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, which [won](#) the 2015 International Press Freedom Award for its reporting on the ISIS occupation and now publishes hourly [updates](#) on the U.S.-backed offensive. All this news is then compiled and cross-checked by international monitoring groups like [Airwars](#), whose researchers have now found themselves tracking as many as a half-dozen coalition attacks resulting in civilian casualties every day.

It's because of this work that we know the Raqqa offensive officially began on June 6th with a barrage of airstrikes and artillery shelling that reportedly [hit](#) a school, a train station, the immigration and passport building, a mosque, and multiple residential neighborhoods, killing between six and 13 civilians. Two days later, bombs, artillery shells, and white phosphorus were reportedly unleashed across Raqqa, hitting -- among other places -- the Al-Hason Net Internet café, [killing](#) a media activist and at least a dozen others. (That journalist was one of at least [26](#) media activists to be killed in Syria this year alone.) Other bombs reportedly hit at least [eight shops](#) and a mosque. [Photos](#) also showed white phosphorus exploding over two residential neighborhoods.

White phosphorus is capable of burning human flesh to the bone. When exposed to oxygen, the chemical ignites reaching a temperature of 1,500 degrees Fahrenheit. It's so flammable that its burns can [reignite](#) days later if the bandages are removed too soon.

U.S. military officials have not denied using white phosphorus in the city. The Pentagon has, in fact, published [photos](#) of U.S. Marines deployed to the Raqqa region transporting U.S.-manufactured white phosphorus munitions. Its spokesmen [claim](#) that the U.S. military only uses this incendiary agent to mark targets for air strikes or to create smoke screens and therefore remains in accordance with international law. But in the days after the reported attack, Amnesty International [warned](#): "The US-led coalition's use of white phosphorus munitions on the outskirts of al-Raqqa, Syria, is unlawful and may amount to a war crime." (Amnesty similarly accused the U.S. of potentially committing [war crimes](#) during its campaign against ISIS in Mosul.)

Following the reported white phosphorus attacks on June 8th and 9th, Raqqa's main commercial and social avenue -- February 23rd Street -- reportedly came under [three](#) straight days of bombing. Syrian journalist Marwan Hisham, who grew up in that city, recalls how that street had once been lined with cafés, entertainment venues, and shops. Its western edge runs into Rashid Park, one of the city's main public spaces. Its eastern edge stretches to the ancient Abbasid Wall.

Between June 9th and June 11th, as many as 10 civilians were killed in repeated bombings of February 23rd Street and its major intersections, according to [reports](#) compiled by Airwars. (These sorts of air strikes, ostensibly aimed at limiting the mobility of ISIS fighters, were also employed in Mosul, parts of which are now in ruins.) On those same days, four adults and four children were reportedly [killed](#) in airstrikes on Raqqa's industrial district, another [21](#) civilians were killed in the west of the city, and at least 11 more civilians, again including children, when airstrikes reportedly [destroyed](#) homes on al-Nour street, which is just around the corner from the al-Rayan Bakery, bombed less than two weeks later.

On that day, June 21st, a Raqqa resident named Abu Ahmad was returning from getting water at a nearby well when, he later [told](#) Reuters, he began hearing people screaming as houses crumbled. He said that as many as 30 people had died when the apartment flats around the bakery were leveled. "We couldn't even do anything," he added. "The rocket launchers, the warplanes. We left them to die under the rubble." Only a few days earlier, coalition warplanes had destroyed another source of bread, the al-Nadeer [bakery](#) on al-Mansour Street, one of Raqqa's [oldest](#) thoroughfares.

In July, the U.S.-led coalition bombed the ancient Abbasid Wall, and U.S.-backed troops [breached](#) Raqqa's Old City. U.S. advisers [began to operate](#) inside Raqqa, calling in more airstrikes from there.

More and more names, photographs, and stories of the coalition's victims were smuggled out by local journalists. According to these reports, on July 2nd, Jamila Ali al-Abdullah, her three children, and up to 10 of her neighbors were **killed** in her neighborhood. On July 3rd, at least three families were **killed**, including Yasser al-Abdullah and his **four children**, A'ssaf, Zain, Jude, and Rimas. On July 5th, an **elderly** man named Yasin **died** in an airstrike on al-Mansour Street. On July 6th, Anwar Hassan al-Hariri was **killed** along with her son Mohammed, her daughter Shatha, and her toddler **Jana**. Five members of the al-Sayyed family **perished** on July 7th. Sisters Hazar and Elhan Abdul Aader Shashan **died** in their home on July 12th, while seven members of the Ba'anat **family** were killed on July 13th, as was Marwan al-Salama and at least **ten** of his family members on July 17th.

Hundreds more were reportedly wounded, including Isma'il Ali al-Thlaji, a child who **lost** his eyesight and his right hand. And these are, of course, only some of the reported names of those killed by the U.S.-led coalition.

"In Raqqa, there are many causes of death," the journalists at Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently **wrote**. These include "indiscriminate airstrikes by international coalition warplanes, daily artillery shelling by Syrian Democratic Forces, and ISIS mines scattered throughout the surrounding landscape."

For those who survive, conditions inside the city only continue to worsen. Coalition bombing reportedly destroyed the two main pipes carrying water into the city in the 100-degree July heat, forcing people to venture to the banks of the Euphrates, where at least **27** have been reportedly killed by U.S.-led bombing while filling up jugs of water.

A Coalition in Name Only

The United States has launched nearly 95% of all coalition airstrikes in Syria in recent months, meaning the campaign is, in fact, almost exclusively an American affair. "The French and British are launching about half a dozen strikes a week now," Chris Woods, director of Airwars, explained to me. "The Belgians maybe one or two a week." In comparison, in Raqqa province last month the U.S. launched about twenty air or artillery strikes every single **day**.

In June alone, the U.S.-led coalition and U.S. Marines fired or dropped approximately **4,400** munitions on Raqqa and its surrounding villages. According to Mark Hiznay, the associate director of Human Rights Watch's arms division, these munitions included 250-pound precision-guided small diameter bombs, as well as MK-80 bombs, which weigh between 500 and **2,000 pounds** and are equipped with precision-guided kits. The bombs are dropped by B-52 bombers and other warplanes, most taking off from the al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Incirlik Air Base in Turkey, or the USS *George H.W. Bush*, an aircraft carrier **stationed** off Syria's coast in the eastern Mediterranean.

Hundreds of **U.S. Marines**, most likely from the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, are also positioned outside Raqqa and are firing high explosive artillery rounds into the city from M777 Howitzers. In late June, the Marines' official Twitter feed boasted that they were conducting artillery fire in support of U.S.-backed troops **24 hours** a day.

The result of this type of warfare, says Airwars' Chris Woods, is a staggering increase in civilian casualties. According to an analysis by the group, since President Trump took office six months ago, the U.S.-led campaign has reportedly killed nearly as many civilians in Syria and Iraq as were **killed** in the previous two and a half years of the Obama administration.

And for surviving civilians, the conditions of war don't end once the bombing stops, as life today in the city of Tabqa indicates.

As of mid-July, according to Wassim Abdo, Tabqa still has neither running water nor electricity, even though displaced families have begun returning to their homes. There's a shortage of bread, and still no **functioning** schools or hospitals. The Tabqa Dam, which once generated up to 20% of Syria's electricity, remains **inoperable**. (U.S.-led coalition airstrikes reportedly damaged the structure repeatedly in February and March, when they **burned** the main control room, causing the United Nations to **warn** of a threat of catastrophic flooding downstream.) The U.S.-backed troops in Tabqa have, according to Abdo, banned the Internet and U.S. officials admit that children in the area are being infected by diseases carried by flies feeding off corpses still buried in the rubble.

Meanwhile, less than 30 miles to the east, the battle for control of Raqqa continues with tens of thousands of civilians still trapped inside the besieged city. Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend has indicated that the U.S.-led coalition may soon [increase](#) the rate of airstrikes there yet again.

From Wassim Abdo's perspective, that coalition campaign in Syria has so far killed his parents and nephew and ruined his hometown. None of this, understandably, looks anything like a war against ISIS.

"My opinion of the international coalition," he told me recently, "is that it's a performance by the international community to target civilians and infrastructure and to destroy the country." And this type of warfare, he added, "is not part of eliminating Daesh."

Laura Gottesdiener is a freelance journalist and a news producer with Democracy Now! Her writing has appeared in Mother Jones, Al Jazeera, The Nation, Playboy, Rolling Stone, and frequently at [TomDispatch](#). Special thanks on this piece go to Alhasan Ghazzawi.

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