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War and Violence in Afghanistan: A Legacy of Social Suffering

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It has been nearly twenty years since the Twin Towers fell on September 11, 2001. At the time I was only three years old and far too young to understand what was happening. In fact, I have no recollection of what was happening and have no answer to the age-old question, "Where were you when 'it' happened?" 'It' needing no other explanation. Everyone knows what 'it' is, what 'it' *was*. Instead, I grew up in the aftermath of the attacks; as the remnants of the towers were cleared away and people moved on with their lives. That day Islamophobic and xenophobic seeds took root at Ground Zero and Washington D.C. and spread throughout the nation, slowly growing, but ever present, in the wake of 9/11. Immediately following the events of September 11, former President George W. Bush delivered a statement from the Oval Office in which he described "*the pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge -- huge structures collapsing have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness, and a quiet, unyielding anger.*"[1] Yet this anger was, and has been, anything but quiet or unyielding. Directly following the events of September 11, Muslims all across the nation faced increasing rates of prejudiced and racialized stigmatization and stereotyping as a confused and scared America sought justice for the crimes commit against them. While Afghan Americans and other persons of Middle Eastern descent faced these prejudices on the homestead, countless others living abroad would soon feel the heat of the American government and military. As the United States military made its way East in their crusade against terrorism, Middle Eastern nations would come to face unprecedented violence and terror; furthering the embodied and lived experience of war in Afghanistan.

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[1] The White House Archives, "*Statement by the President in His Address to the Nation*," September 11, 2001, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/, (accessed 25 May 2020).

This article prompts the reader to consider the history of war and violence in Afghanistan, and how this legacy of violence has become an embodied and lived experience for those living within its borders. To develop the reader's understanding, I will document vignettes of war in Afghanistan from the late 20th century to the present interwoven with concepts borrowed from the anthropological and sociological disciplines as well as narrative tellings from Afghan civilians; their stories being the ultimate source on what it is to live with war as a part of an everyday experience. Since the last twenty years of war in Afghanistan have largely been propelled by U.S. military forces, this essay deals mainly with their involvement in Afghanistan and how the existing structural violence and social suffering has significantly been exacerbated during their time there. This article prompts the reader to challenge existing ideologies in the United States regarding the War on Terror through, first, an understanding of structural violence and social suffering, what these concepts mean, and how they become an embedded part of society; and second, to challenge the efficacy of hegemonic American military operations in Afghanistan and their resulting consequences for Afghan communities. The scope of this paper is limited to American military operations in Afghanistan, though the concepts explored in this article can be applied to other Middle Eastern countries under occupation by the United States military.

Afghanistan sits within a prime geographical location; acting as a physical link between major Islamic nation-states, and even a small border with China. Throughout history, this location put a target on Afghanistan as one of the most coveted areas of control as other empires sought to take advantage of this location to extend their political and economic reach. In the modern era, the desire of external political forces to mold the Afghan state in Western likeness is the origin of

social suffering and how violence and oppression would become an embodied experience for

civilians, an experience arising from 170 years of political upheaval, war, and failed attempts at

modernization brought about by British, Russian, and American desires for control over

Afghanistan.[2]

Before delving any further into the history of war and its resulting social suffering, a clear

definition of this term is need. Medical anthropologists describe social suffering as what links

> the individual experience of pain and distress to wider social events and structural
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> conditions that often are the ultimate sources of human misery. Social suffering, in other
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> words, refers to the immediate personal experience of broad human problems caused by
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> the cruel exercise of political and economic power, such as forced abortion, coerced
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> sterilization, terror warfare, political rape, exploitation, and abject poverty.[3]

The suffering the civilian population of Afghanistan is subjected to is a direct result of

international warmongering as well as internal governmental corruption and radical factions that

impose restrictive policies and distorted ideologies upon a population that does not have the

resources to push back against them. These "political and military conflicts have led to massive

disruptions of livelihoods, education, and networks of social support. Afghan families endure

pervasive poverty, economic instability, and persistent violence."[4] Social suffering is a product

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[2] Nunan, Timothy. "Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan," *Politics, Religion, & Ideology* 18, no. 2 (2017): 235-37.

[3] Singer, Merrill and Hans Baer. *Introducing Medical Anthropology: A Discipline in Action.* Plymouth: AltiMira Press, (2012).

[4] Mark Eggerman and Catherine Panter-Brick, "Suffering, Hope, and Entrapment: Resilience and Cultural Values in Afghanistan," *Social Science & Medicine* 71, no.1 (2010): 71-83.

of overarching bureaucratic and politically charged actions, not the actions of any single individual. It also happens gradually, introduced and then repeated again and again until it becomes a routinized part of everyday life; routines that have since been explored by social scientists to critically engage with and understand those whose voices often go unheard in the throes of war.

Following the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979-1989, it was estimated that nearly 1 million Afghans had died from "bombardment, execution, and the mass placement of land mines" while 6 million more were displaced from their homes as refugees.[5] There was no recovery period as civil war immediately followed throughout the next consecutive decade. Up until 1996, civilians were caught up in "the factional fighting among the Afghan Resistance Forces (mujahideen)" which led to tens of thousands of deaths and the further displacement of nearly 1 million people.[6] It was also during this time that the Taliban emerged. In 1994, the religiously and morally driven militant group arose; seeking to restore order and assert themselves as a new formidable administration. By 1996 they had captured the capital city of Kabul, and were in control of much of Southern Afghanistan, maintaining power and control through terror and a strict enforcement of newly enacted policies, often under the threat of bodily harm or death.

A memorable event from the Taliban's reign of terror on Afghan civilians is the Hazarajat blockade of 1997. Already geographically isolated by their mountainous surroundings, taking

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[5] Barbara Lopes Cardozo, et. al., "Mental Health, Social Functioning, and Disability in Post-War Afghanistan*,"
Journal-American Medical Association* 292, no.5 (2004): 575-84.
[6] Ibid.

control of the Hazara had been relatively simple. Throughout the late 19th century the Afghan government went to great lengths to destabilize the tribal state of Hazarajat, breaking down tribal institutions and forcing assimilation "through education policies privileging Persian and Pashtun history, and administrative reform, aiming to reduce their collective bargaining power and minimize political representation."[7] The subjugation and Pashtunization of the Hazara continued into the next century as Pashtuns migrants to the region become administrators, landlords, money lenders, and assumed other positions of power to exploit and extort the people of Hazarajat; creating a legacy of systemic inequality and structural violence, rendering an already vulnerable population open to further marginalization and hardship. So, when the Taliban implemented a blockade, movement in and out of the region largely ceased, cutting off the people within from much needed imported resources. This also cut off their ability to export goods, which significantly reduced their already small incomes. After several failed attempts to fight back against the Taliban, the Hazara people's hands were tied and forced to comply with their policies and orders if they were to survive. Even then, brutal massacres followed in 1998, resulting in the deaths of approximately two thousand Hazara.

What happened in Hazarajat is not uncommon in Afghanistan since 1979. Long term structural violence leaves many cities and regions susceptible to takeover by militant groups seeking to impose their rules and ideologies upon vulnerable populations. Sociologist, Johan Galtung notes that

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[7] Iesha Singh, "Exploring Issues of Violence within the Recent Context of Hazarajat, Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey* 20, no.2 (2001): 195-227.

while the object of personal violence perceives the violence, structural violence is silent

and insidious; it is not visible per se, being seen rather as a part of the given order---

having been normalized and being person invariant in the sense that is persists regardless

of changes in persons. Being embedded structurally, all are responsible for the

reproduction and reinforcement of such violence.[8]

When a physical act of violence is committed against someone, they are fully aware of it. It is a

tangible experience. It is present. There is a beginning and an end. However, with structural

violence, there is no telling when it began nor when it will end. It is ongoing. It is lasting. The

people affected most directly by it may not even realize that what has become a normalized part

of their lives is considered incredibly abnormal from an outsider's perspective. As it goes on,

unrecognized and unchallenged, it persists; rooting itself deeper and deeper within a given

society until it becomes nearly impossible to dig out.

To further explore the effects of structural violence, I will now turn to a several voices of Afghan

citizens as they explain what is like to live with war and violence as an everyday occurrence as

part of a 2006 study on the subject. The topics they discuss covers a broad range of material,

indicating just how deeply entrenched structural violence becomes in every facet of life;

including employment, housing and homelessness, social relationships, health, school systems,

governance, and social justice. Regarding poverty one father explains how a "*lack of work is the

root of all a man's miseries.*"[9] He blames this on the broken economy, a key sign of which is not

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[8] Ibid., p. 205
[9] Eggerman, Mark and Catherine Panter-Brick, "Suffering, Hope, and Entrapment: Resilience and Cultural Values in Afghanistan," *Social Science & Medicine* 71, no.1 (2010): 73.

owning a home. To not be able to provide for one's family, especially something as critical as roof over their heads, can be equated with a loss of social position. This in turn, strains social relationships, often in the domestic sphere between husbands and wives or parents and their children. As the aforementioned miseries a man faces as a result of job loss increases, so too does the likelihood for domestic abuse; at least according to one 16-year-old girl. She explains the connection as follows: "*my father's salary is not enough for us, he has takleef asabi (mental problem) and he beats us…if he finds a decent job then maybe he will calm down*."[10] This can be likened to something akin to a domino effect where a broken economy, the likes of which stem from systemic inequality as a result of political instability, creates a chain reaction affecting people down to the individual level.

Political instability and militant activity factor heavily into infrastructural damage; like the destruction of roads, schools, and healthcare facilities. There are signs of fractured infrastructure and "devastation everywhere: holes in the walls of the courtyards, potholes, broken gutters, torn trees, the lack of general upkeep of the home" where women sweeping remnants of nearby explosions or rockets is not an uncommon sight.[11] Contrary to the American experience, where wars are only fought in far off places and never on their own soil, war is on the doorstops of Afghan citizens. Despite the constant threat of being caught up in a firefight or a bomb blast, they must continue to live in spite of it. So, they travel to work along broken and polluted roads, send their children to underfunded and overcrowded schools where 2 in 10 children also work in addition to their studies, and cook their meals if they can manage enough money to pay for

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[10] Ibid., p. 75.

[11] Parin Dossa, "Structural Violence in Afghanistan: Gendered Memory, Narratives, and Food," *Medical Anthropology* 32, no.5 (2013): 438.

food.[12] To live under these circumstances is to internalize what is dangerous and hazardous to physical, emotional, and mental wellness as normal; so much so that social suffering has become an embodied health experience. Alongside the fear of financial instability and inaccessibility to critical facilities, prolonged exposure, or even the threat of exposure, to violence significantly increases anxiety and stress levels. Amidst the individuals surveyed in this study, researchers found that "idioms of psychological distress were rooted in the body, and clearly differentiated between anger, stress, melancholy, and anxiety. *Takleef asabi* [lit. disorder of the nerves] indicated irritability and anger. The terms *fishar payin/fishar bala* [lit. low/high pressure] described lethargy and agitation as well as blood pressure. *Jighar khun* [lit. liver-blood – sorrow, regret, depression] referred to a state of acute dysphoria, often due to losing relatives as a result of war, while *tashwish* denoted everyday worry. Expressions such as *delam naram hast* [lit: my heart is noisy] or *delam az-zindagi sard shoda hast* [lit: my heart has become cold from life] were common, tied to feelings of embarrassment [*sharmandeh*], loss of honour [*'izzat*] and frustration [*na'amedy*].[13] Despite the prevalence of these conditions and the environmental conditions that cause them, and the experiences recounted by the individuals in this survey are still lived and felt today, eighteen years later.

The experiences felt by those impacted by the state of decentralization in Afghanistan would only continue as the United States military became a constant presence throughout the 21st century. Now, Afghan citizens would face terror on all sides; bombarded and besieged by internal and external lethality, yet both sides of the opposition viewed their cause for war as

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[12] Mark Eggerman and Catherine Panter-Brick, "Suffering, Hope, and Entrapment: Resilience and Cultural Values in Afghanistan," *Social Science & Medicine* 71, no.1 (2010): 74.
[13] Ibid., 75.

justified and the collateral damage accrued as a necessary part of war in their quests for restored order. This begets the question: where is the threshold between collateral damage and war crimes? This war the United States has claimed as necessary and just for nearly twenty years has only continued to cause irreparable damage, exacerbate existing inequality and suffering, and rack up a death toll in the tens of thousands. So, how did this happen? How did retaliation against one act of terror in 2001 spiral out into a twenty-year war with such lasting and deadly effects?

I argue that it is due to Western society's penchant for civilizing the proverbial 'other,' wherein the cultural practices of another country differ so significantly from their own, that the responsibility then seemingly falls to foreign influence to come in and create change through any means necessary to impose their ideas of freedom, civility, and personhood onto individuals who not only do not want it, but never asked for it in the first place.[14] For example, the American media is obsessed with this romanticized telling of the plight of the Afghan woman. Rather than focusing foreign resources on shifting public support for policy change that favors women, the U.S. is enamored with the idea of liberating Afghan women from the burqa; a head to toe garment that masks bodily and facial features. This infatuation is one of the two problems related to gendering the Afghan woman; describing it as a limited set of analytical concepts that occupy the forefront of foreign policy discussion as well as a general lack of knowledge of everyday life and the subjectivity of Afghans altogether.[15] Reducing the marginalization of

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[14] US Imperialism and Culture Change
James Petras, "Cultural Imperialism in the late 29th Century, *Global Policy Forum*, February 2000
https://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/154/25597.html (accessed 25 May 2020).
John Carlos Rowe, "Culture, US Imperialism, and Globalization," *American Literary History* 16, no. 4 (Winter, 2004): 575-95.
[15] Anila Daulatzi, "The Discursive Occupation of Afghanistan," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 3. (2008): 419-35.

women to the burqa is to render all other contributing factors to their suffering obsolete. They

are obsessed with "one factor solutions for complex challenges, never asking …[in the words of

Marshall Sahlins and Eric Wolf]… 'what is the matter, only who is the matter.'"[16] Recall the

domino effect from earlier in this article that describes the chain reaction from a lack of

organized government, to housing instability, to unemployment, to strained social relationships

that result in domestic violence and abuse. To limit the discussion of the suffering of Afghans to

the Afghan woman is to ignore all other oppressed groups, including men and children. This is a

significant problem with America's approach to Afghanistan, particularly so when their military

is sent abroad. This problem lies in their inability to holistically understand and approach

cultures outside of their own. Deployed troops are severely lacking in an appropriate education

of global cultural difference, linguistic practices, and intercultural relations. Herein lies a key

issue. Not understanding the culture in which they are being deployed creates a wall between the

U.S. servicemen and Afghan communities, fostering an 'us vs. them' mentality, tension in an

already tense environment, and the dehumanization of civilians.[17]

Before exploring the consequences of this, a brief discussion of the Rules of Engagement (ROE)

is necessary. These rules serve as an ethical and moral code that authorizes the use of force

against enemy combatants; emphasizing the when, where, against whom, and how said force can

be used in a militaristic setting.[18] Reports from military officials claim that the Rules of

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[16] M. Jamil Hanifi, "Interrogating Conventional Wisdom about Terrorism," *Anthropology News* 46, no. 6 (2005): 7. [Hanifi here refers to a quote from a Marshall Sahlins and Eric Wolf paper cited in the article).

[17] Scott Jaschik, "Embedded Conflicts," *Insight Higher Education*, 7 July 2015 https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/07/army-shuts-down-controversial-human-terrain-system-criticized-many-anthropologists (accessed 25 May 2020).
Ryan Evans, "The Seven Deadly Sins of the Human Terrain System," *War on the Rocks*, 13 July 2015 (accessed 25 May 2020).

[18] Kristin Bergtora Sandvik, "Regulating War in the Shadow of Law: Toward a Re-Articulation of ROE," *Journal of Military Ethics* 13, no.2 (2014): 118-36.

Engagement need to be reformatted and simplified to a very specific set of standards. U.S.

military leaders have complained that soldiers did not understand ROE, and that creative

application of the ROE was not uncommon, for example in creating free-fire zones, which

became a justification for targeting civilians.[19] This manipulation of the ROE is one of the

contributing factors to the astronomical amount of Afghan civilian deaths since 2001.

Reformatting the ROE to a very specific set of standards would hold the United States military

accountable for their actions; potentially resulting in the decline of civilian deaths in

Afghanistan. When appropriately drafted and implemented, the ROE will be of central

importance to force the protection of civilians by military personnel.[20]

Civilian deaths are not uncommon in times of war. Many of the lives claimed are justified in the

name of altruism; a few for the good of many. However, the data on civilian deaths tolls in

Afghanistan reveals it is not just a few, but many; far, far too many with the numbers climbing

with each passing year. The United States Congressional Research Service compiled a list of

data encompassing the death tolls of civilians in Afghanistan as well as the deaths of American

military personnel. Over an eleven-year span from 2001 to 2012, there were 2,155 Americans

killed on Afghan soil.[21] In comparison, on September 11, 2001, a total of 2,997 Americans were

killed between New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington D.C. when terrorists linked to al-

Qaeda hijacked commercial airplanes and crashed them into the Twin Towers, an open field, and

the Pentagon.[22] Together these numbers total 5,152 American deaths on both U.S. and Afghan

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[19] Ibid., p. 121.
[20] Ibid., p. 118.
[21] Susan G. Chesser, "Afghanistan Casualties: Military Forces and Civilians", *Congressional Research Service* (2012): 1.
[22] "cnn.com. "September 11 Terror Attacks Fast Facts.", CNN Editorial Research, November 19, 2013. https://www.cnn.com/2013/07/27/us/september-11-anniversary-fast-facts/index.html (accessed 25 May 2020).

soil. These are the numbers, specifically those from 9/11, that the American public remembers

when the U.S. military goes abroad to fight for their freedom. These are the lives they demand

retribution for; meanwhile the countless civilians killed in Afghanistan as a result of their war go

unnoticed and unquestioned.

Before delving into the statistics regarding the deaths of Afghan civilians, two thing require

clarification. One, the number of American casualties on Afghan soil has been tracked and

recorded since 2001. Two, the United Nations did not start a record of Afghan civilian casualties

until 2007; meaning the number of civilian deaths between the years 2001 and 2006 are

unknown.[23] Over the course of a short, five-year period from 2007 to 2011, 11,864 Afghan

civilians were killed.[24] In only five years nearly 5.5 times as many civilians died on Afghan soil

than American military personnel over the course of eleven years. If the number of casualties

from 9/11 is also factored into the overall American death toll, there were still 2.3 times as many

Afghan civilian deaths in five years than American military personnel and civilians combined

over the span of eleven. These numbers are compounded roughly tenfold by population

disparities of roughly 33 million people in Afghanistan to approximately 330 million people in

the U.S.

Six years following the Congressional Research Service's report, the Watson Brown Institute

published an updated spreadsheet regarding death tolls across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq

between October of 2001 and October of 2018 as a result of U.S. military intervention. This

[23] Susan G. Chesser, "Afghanistan Casualties: Military Forces and Civilians", *Congressional Research Service* (2012): 3.
[24] Ibid.

updated calculation combined statistics from the United Nation's annual and semi-annual reports

after 2007, journalists, non-governmental organizations, and the Congressional Research

Service. However, even with these new figures, the tally remained an incomplete estimate of the

human toll of killing in these wars.[25] This is deeply concerning when the new approximation of

civilian deaths in Afghanistan is 38,480.[26] What is even more concerning is that this updated

figure does not account for indirect deaths; deaths that occur as a result of environmental

destruction and degradation that contribute to long term, indirect consequences regarding the

health of the communities living in or near conflict zones. These deaths are a result of being cut

off from accessible food sources, clean water, health facilities, electricity and other forms of

critical infrastructure.[27] These types of deaths existed long before the arrival of the American

military as explained earlier in this article as a result of internal conflict and prior occupation by

foreign powers. However, since the American military's arrival and long-term occupation of

Afghanistan, they have heavily contributed to the existing structural violence through their

destructive actions.

The introduction of drone technology in Afghanistan quickly has become one of the predominant

causes of direct civilian deaths, as well as a leading cause in irreparable structural damage that

drastically impacts the quality of life for surviving communities.[28] While these aerial attacks

significantly reduce the amount American casualties by not requiring these servicemen and

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[25] Neta C. Crawford, "Update on the Human Costs of War for Afghanistan and Pakistan, 2001 to mid-2016," Costs of War Project, *Boston University*, (2016) https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2016/War%20in%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%20UPDATE_FINAL_corrected%20date.pdf (accessed 25 May 2020).
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Kai Chen, "Invisible Victims of Drone Strikes in Afghanistan," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 27, no. 4 (2015): 456-60.

women to be on the ground, they significantly increase the amount of Afghan civilian deaths.

Annually, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism releases reports on the number of drone and air

strikes in Afghanistan; as well as in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. In Afghanistan, from

January of 2015 to January of 2020, there were a total of 13,072 air strikes recorded by the

Bureau; of which killed an approximate total of 4,126 to 10,076 people, 300 to 909 of which

were civilians.[29] These approximations are once more due to the fact that an administrative

body, in this case "the U.S. Department of Defense, did not keep track of civilian casualties yet

made the unsubstantiated claim that such casualties were minimal."[30] The government officials

in charge of these operations are the most removed from the resulting damage and harm that they

inflict. To consider 7.27 to 9.02% of total deaths as minimal collateral, is to debase the lives of

those that were killed. This is what I will argue makes drone technology particularly lethal as it

increases an individual's ability to dehumanize those they are targeting when they are spared

from witnessing the bodies that are blown apart or woefully injured. Drone technology grants

them the advantage of long-distance attacks, removing themselves from the ensuing chaos and

carnage as a result of the missiles fired. It is not their families or friends suddenly killed by

being in the wrong place at the wrong time, just a set of coordinates to fire upon. They can move

on to the next job while the people directly impacted by the attack are quite literally left to pick

up the pieces. In the Watapur region of Kunar, one local farmer's experience followed a drone

strike that happened less than a mile from him: "*a truck made its way along a remote*

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[29] The Bureau of Investigative Journalism. https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/ (accessed 25 May 2020). [subpages: Drone Warfare https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/projects/drone-war (accessed 25 May 2020); Drone Strikes in Afghanistan https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/drone-war/data/afghanistan-reported-us-covert-actions-2020#strike-logs (accessed 25 May 2020): Afghanistan Drone Data https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Q1eBZ275Znlpn05PnPO7Q1BkI3yJZbvB3JycywAmqWc/edit#gid=1283746305 (accessed 25 May 2020).

[30] Kai Chen, "Invisible Victims of Drone Strikes in Afghanistan," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 27, no. 4 (2015): 457.

road…when he heard a buzzing overhead, and looked up to see a drone above him…Minutes later, he heard an explosion. Reaching the site, he realized the mangled vehicle belonged to his cousin. Among the bodies, he recognized his brother and his brother's family. 'There were pieces of my family all over the road…I picked up those pieces from the road and from the truck and wrapped them in a sheet to bury them.'"[31] Following an investigation into this particular attack, it was revealed that six 'insurgents' were killed at the expense of eleven civilians, including four women and four children.[32]

Drone technology is but one way in which the dehumanization of Afghan lives becomes salient. Recall the lack of cross-cultural understanding between the U.S. military and Afghan peoples furthering the buildup between 'us and them.' It is because of this that U.S. military personnel come to view Afghans as walking sources of information that can be used to their advantage, rather than complex thinking, feeling individuals with their own personal, familial, and communal lives to worry about and attend to. One American soldier recalled an experience where the consequences of this perspective had deadly consequences. For providing information to their troop, a young Afghan boy was executed: "…*living with that situation, knowing I could have affected that situation had I really been thinking of him as a person and not as an intelligence asset…what I realize now is how easily people stop looking at people as humans, especially if they're from a really different culture, like the Afghans are….I just think I stopped caring about them, really, about their well-being…I think what I've learned is just how easily*

[31] Alice Ross, "Who is dying in Afghanistan's 1,000-plus drone strikes?" *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 24 July 2014* https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2014-07-24/who-is-dying-in-afghanistans-1-000-plus-drone-strikes (accessed 25 May 2020).
[32] Ibid.

you can get sucked into dehumanization."[33] In a video released by *The Guardian* titled, "Lost in Translation," the audience observes another instance where Afghans are valued only for information. In the video, the US 173rd Airborne's Charlie Company sought information regarding an attack on their base by the Taliban that had occurred nearby. Upon arrival, they were clearly frustrated and demanded to speak to the village elders. Once one joined them, he is probed for information on the attack. In his response, he acknowledged the fighting that had happened nearby and explained that though they would like to cooperate with the Americans, they cannot as they have no security of their own to keep them safe if they provide any detailed information.[34] Their village had already suffered at the hands of the Taliban, and they did not want to endure any more by putting themselves in a compromising position by helping the Americans. This response angered the American troops. In English (as the elder only spoke Pashto) they cursed and voiced their frustrations, blatantly disrespecting the elder they sought help from after having originally approaching him with signs of respect, greetings, and exchanging handshakes. This interaction highlights how American military personnel only value what benefits them and their current task. All other information and concerns expressed by their sources are considered irrelevant and disregarded. It is these overlooked concerns that are often a direct result of the long-term social suffering outlined in this article. By remaining complacent in its existence, the U.S. military only perpetuates it.

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[33] Marian Eide and Michael Gibler, *After Combat: True War Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2018, p. 175
[34] *The Guardian,* "Lost in Translation," October 16, 2008. YouTube Video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yzxkE72vkA (accessed 25 May 2020).

Though this article does not propose a solution for the existing conflict in Afghanistan, it beseeches its American readers to consider the role their country has played in the continual social suffering of Afghan communities caught in the throes of an unrelenting war. It forces them to come to grips with a reality beyond their comprehension as Americans have never been subjected to such conditions, let alone lived in a world where these conditions are normalized as a part of everyday life. When we take a closer look at the history of war in Afghanistan alongside the residual internalized violence that perpetuates systems of inequality and social suffering, we are forced to pay attention to their lives and their stories rather than our own preconceived notions and idealized perspectives on war. Instead, we ought to be questioning what our military has done to propagate and exacerbate existing levels of violence as well as how we can begin to hold these actions accountable. Only then can we can begin the process of combatting structural violence and social suffering in Afghanistan.

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