

US airstrikes in Afghanistan hit ten-year high in 2019

By Niles Niemuth
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The US Air Force reported Monday that it carried out more airstrikes in Afghanistan in 2019 than any year in the last decade. Manned and unmanned aircraft dropped 7,423 bombs, topping the previous decade high of 7,362 in 2018.

Nearly two decades into its criminal neocolonial occupation, the United States government is dropping an average of 20 bombs on the country per day. The rise in airstrikes has resulted in an increase of civilian casualties at the hands of the US military with a UN report from December finding that American attacks from January to October had claimed the lives of 579 civilians and wounded 306, a third higher than in 2018.

Among the US massacres which made headlines last year was a drone strike at the end of November which killed an entire family, including three women, in Khost province. The attack came just one day after President Donald Trump made a Thanksgiving Day photo-op appearance at Bagram Air Base, flying in and out in the dark of night. In September a drone strike in Nangarhar province, along the border with Pakistan, killed 30 farm workers and injured 40 others as they were sleeping after a day's work picking and shelling pine nuts.

Highlighting the scope of ongoing US operations, one of the US Air Force's electronic surveillance jets used for coordinating airstrikes and ground attacks crashed in central Afghanistan on Monday, killing the two-man crew. While the Taliban took credit for shooting down the aircraft, the Pentagon told CBS News that the cause was under investigation but that there are "no indications the crash was caused by enemy fire."

By conservative estimates, the 18-year-old US-led war and occupation of the country has directly resulted in the deaths of more than 157,000 people, including 43,000 Afghan civilians, with hundreds of thousands of

others dying from the effects of the fighting. More than 3,500 US and other NATO soldiers have lost their lives in Afghanistan and thousands more wounded over the years. Seventeen American soldiers died in Afghanistan in 2019, the highest number since 2015.

Even as the number of US troops in the country has fallen to 12,000—down from a peak of 100,000 during Barack Obama's surge in 2009—and 4,000 more expected to leave the country soon, the Pentagon has pursued a dramatic increase in the pace of airstrikes as part of the Trump administration's efforts to pressure the Taliban into agreeing to a settlement in the longest war in American history.

Trump threatened last year that he could quickly kill "10 million" Afghans and wipe the country of 35 million "off the face of the Earth," while insisting that he hoped for a negotiated agreement. The Afghan-Pakistan border was the chosen site for the dropping of the largest nonnuclear weapon in the US arsenal, the Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb, in April 2017, demonstrating that there were no restraints on what the US military would do in pursuit of American imperialist interests.

Talks which were abruptly called off by Trump via Twitter in September 2019A on the eve of a purported peace conference at Camp David resumed in December with the Taliban offering to scale back attacks on US and Afghan-puppet forces for a limited period of time. The Taliban now holds more territory than at any time since the US invasion began in 2001, with 67 percent of districts and 51 percent of the population under their control or actively contested, according to an estimate published by the *FDD's Long War Journal*.

An online poll recently conducted by *Pajhwok Afghan News* found that 90 percent of Afghans want a peace deal with the Taliban and 68 percent desire a

ceasefire ahead of possible intra-Afghan talks.

Trump met with Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani at the World Economic Forum summit in Davos, Switzerland last week, telling the Afghan leader that only a “significant and lasting reduction” in attacks by the Taliban would facilitate negotiations. So far, the Taliban has refused to the negotiate with the US-backed government, instead focusing on direct negotiation with US representatives in Doha. The Sunni fundamentalist movement which controlled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 continues to insist that it will not share power with the Ghani regime, which is propped up thanks to US military support and funding.

Despite the expenditure of trillions of dollars and millions of lives, two decades of imperialist war in Afghanistan, across the Middle East and throughout Africa, has done nothing to achieve the aim of securing control over strategic oil and mineral-rich regions and geostrategic energy transit routes.

However, American imperialism is not backing down—a ceasefire or peace deal and a withdrawal of combat troops would not bring about an end to US intervention in Afghanistan. As seen in Iraq and Syria, American imperialism will seek to maintain and expand its military foothold, with the use of special forces and drone assassinations and deploying ground troops in violation of territorial sovereignty.

This was made clear in testimony Tuesday by John Sopko, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, who told members of the House Oversight Committee that efforts would be necessary to safeguard “U.S. taxpayers’ investments” in the country from risks which will follow in the “day after” a peace deal is signed.

The Trump administration’s effort to negotiate a settlement with the Taliban has nothing to do with bringing an “end to endless wars” as Trump has claimed, it is instead aimed at preparing the stage for even bigger conflicts. Two decades after the launching of the so-called “war on terror” the stage has been set for open conflict against “great powers,” foremost China and Russia. In fact, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper told reporters in December that the drawdown of troops in Afghanistan would facilitate their redeployment throughout the Asia-Pacific to confront China.

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