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## The road to impunity



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**Published :** Apr 4, 2017, 12:13 am IST


**Updated :** Apr 4, 2017, 6:52 am IST

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The US President has given his forces “expanded targeting authority” against Al Qaeda and its local affiliate Al Shabaab in Somalia.



 Civilian casualties in the push against ISIS had already started climbing in the waning months of the Barack Obama presidency. (Photo: AP/File)

As the war to dislodge the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) from its strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa intensifies, allegations about rising civilian casualties from American aerial bombing are escalating. Incidents where innocent non-combatants are being killed are so frequent that there is apprehension of a new “Trump effect” in the way the United States military is conducting warfare with lesser restraint, fewer shackles and scant discretion.

We seem to be entering a deadly phase of impunity in which international humanitarian and human rights laws and principles are being violated routinely by everyone, chiefly the US, and civilians are being pounded mercilessly in the name of countering terrorism.

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According to the transparency-promoting non-profit organisation Airwars, “for the first time, US-led strikes appeared to be killing more non-combatants than Russia’s notoriously brutal air campaign”. The American coalition is currently “out-killing Russia” by a factor of five to one civilians as the battle against ISIS reaches its urban redoubts.

The moral high ground and holier-than-thou attitude that the US had adopted towards Russia last year as the latter conducted a searing aerial campaign against Al Qaeda and other rebel groups in Aleppo, Syria, carry a sardonic tinge now. The language of catastrophe, horror and ruthless destruction which the Americans deployed to tarnish

Russia's military intervention is coming back to haunt them.

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Moscow is the first to pounce on the irony. The Russian defence ministry has reacted with schadenfreude at the "absurd statements of the Pentagon justifying civilian casualties" and demanded an explanation as to "why the US-led coalition made strikes with their 'smart' bombs on buildings with civilians dooming them to a terrible death?"

The Trump administration has defended itself by denying any specific change in guidelines for drone and fighter jet bombings in Iraq and Syria since the 45th President entered the White House. Washington contends that a jump in "collateral damage" is due to densely populated ISIS-ruled cities being sought to be liberated and terrorists resorting to time-tested tactics of using civilians as human shields.

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Indeed, the casual brutality of ISIS and the callousness for human life that its extreme jihadist ideology espouses leave little doubt that it will not only go down fighting but also drag civilians living under its evaporating "caliphate" to doom.

Since the Iraqi government and its American advisers had been touting the final assault on Mosul for months, ISIS chalked out elaborate plans to put up a last stand by maximising civilian casualties to fuel hatred of the "infidel" Christians and Jews. Each time a powerful American bomb shatters a residential neighbourhood in Mosul, ISIS will have "martyrs" to celebrate and a compelling argument to recruit for the future on the basis of revenge.

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Civilian casualties in the push against ISIS had already started climbing in the waning months of the Barack Obama presidency. But Mr Trump is doubling down on this trend with greater firepower owing to his obsession to eliminate ISIS at any cost. He has sent an unwritten but clear signal to US commanders in the field to call in airstrikes more freely than before and to worry less about securing multiple layers of permissions from the various agencies of the American national security bureaucracy.

If Mr Obama's warfare was lethal but under some checks, Mr Trump promises to unleash the US military without control. Mr Trump's claim that the US no longer triumphs in wars since "we don't fight to win", and his budgetary proposals to steeply slash funding for the state department and civilian foreign aid programmes while hiking defence spending by \$54 billion, convey a starkly militaristic outlook.

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Mr Obama was about carefully weighing the political and social costs of the use of force. Mr Trump is raw brute power with gloves taken off. He does not even pretend to have foresight or afterthought about the resulting spread of anti-Americanism in targeted countries.

Outside the main flashpoints of Iraq and Syria too, Mr Trump has authorised the US military to go out all guns blazing. The US President has given his forces "expanded targeting authority" against Al Qaeda and its local affiliate Al Shabaab in Somalia. The US Africa Command has praised the shift as "helpful for us to have little more flexibility to prosecute targets in a more rapid fashion."

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In Yemen, a botched US operation against Al Qaeda which Mr Trump authorised over a dinner conversation within days of his taking the presidency led to at least 30 civilian casualties and several unanswered riddles. One can expect similar cases of increased civilian casualties by US missions in Afghanistan as the Taliban offensive spreads.

Part of the problem with American-caused civilian deaths in warzones is the elaborate obfuscation and disputation of facts. According to the US-led coalition against ISIS, only 229 civilians were killed unintentionally since it commenced operations in August 2014. Airwars, which is a neutral and credible watchdog, has countered this ridiculously conservative estimate with a body count of at least 2,831 civilians attributable to the US and its allies.

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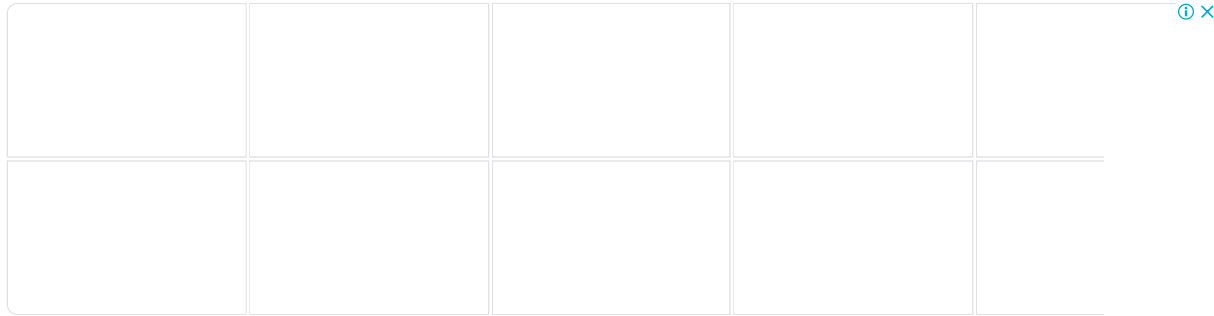
Denial or passing the buck on to ISIS is an easy way out for the US in theatres where violence is endemic and hardly any impartial investigation is possible until the fighting stops. The same “fake news”, which the Western media has labelled as a Russian trademark, is also handy for Western governments to wash their hands off war crimes they are committing.

The Trump bump in civilian deaths is, of course, paltry compared to the enormous losses sustained during the George W. Bush-era “global war on terrorism”. The Nobel Peace Prize-winning Physicians for Social Responsibility have tallied that the US invasion and occupation of Iraq from 2003 to 2011 took one million lives, which amounts to five per cent of the total population of the country.

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Unlike Mr Bush, Mr Trump is averse to invading countries full throttle and is disinterested in massive nation-building misadventures. So, unlike the last Republican presidency, this one is relatively not as calamitous. Yet, what if there is a 9/11-like terrorist attack or something smaller in scale but spectacularly chilling to Americans? Chances of an all-brawn-no-brain Trump overreacting with indiscriminate military aggression cannot be ruled out. The road to impunity has been paved.

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