

NINETY-THREE YEARS OF BOMBING

by Gavin Gatenby

In Iraq, few days pass without the US Air Force bombing civilian targets. In a high-profile atrocity in May, 2004, a bunch of trigger-happy fly-boys shot up a village wedding in western Iraq, killing 45 guests including many children, and a Baghdad singer loved by millions, but these things happen almost daily in towns like Najaf, Samarra and Fallujah, and in other places too far from public gaze to warrant media attention.

The explanation – on the increasingly rare occasions that one is given – is always that these are precision strikes against “terrorists” – (newspeak for resistance fighters), but the injured that reach the hospitals and the bodies that turn up in the town morgues are largely women and children. The explanations don’t play well on the Arab Street where they’re received as confirmation of the persistent anti-Arab bias of the West – a view that is essentially correct.

Editor’s Note: Since Gatenby wrote this column August 20, 2004, further proof of this “anti-Arab bias of the West” has surfaced in the form of the Downing Street Memo of a meeting of PM Tony Blair with members of his inner circle. It appears that beginning in May, 2002, the US and RAF doubled the rate at which they dropped bombs on Iraq in an attempt to provoke Pres. Saddam Hussein into giving them an excuse for ‘regime change’ by way of war. According to The Sunday Times, by the end of that August, the raids had become a full air offensive. (www.times online.co.uk) This, was part of the effort to deceive people about the necessity of invading Iraq.

In his article, Gatenby asks what civilian population was first bombed by airplanes? Did you think “Guernica, the Basque town reduced to rubble by aircraft of the Germans. . . during the Spanish Civil War?” Gatenby responds, . . . That answer is wrong, and symptomatic of a Euro-centric view of history that’s led western politicians to gravely underestimate the nationalist feeling and visceral distrust of the West that now has the US-led coalition bogged down in Iraq.

In fact the Guernica answer is wrong by a quarter of a century. It was the Italians, hell-bent on acquiring an African empire, who got the ball rolling. In 1911 the Libyan Arab tribes opposed an Italian invasion. Their civilians were the first to be bombed from the air, when the infant Italian air force bombed the oases of Tagiura and Ain Zara in a reprisal attack. The French followed in 1912, sending six planes to a “police action” in their bit of Morocco.

Pilots soon discovered that far from being a discriminating technique, aerial bombing was most effective against soft civilian targets – towns, bazaars, livestock and crops. In 1913 the Spanish began dropping shrapnel-type bombs on rebellious Moroccan villagers. Over the following years they graduated to poison gas.

The British, struggling to suppress nationalist movements in their vast empire, soon got in on the act. From 1915 onwards, the Royal Air Force bombed Pathan villages on India’s North-West Frontier. In May 1919 they attacked the cities of Afghanistan, dropping six tons of bombs on Jalalabad and inflicting 600 casualties in a dawn to dusk raid on Dacca. Then, on Empire Day, they hit Kabul with history’s first four-engine bomber raid. The British Government even offered poison gas bombs to their Indian Viceroy. Fortunately, he declined the offer. [Churchill complained of people being “squeamish” about the use of gas, which would cause “a lively terror” in the natives.]

Bombing the natives saved the RAF when post-WWI austerity measures looked like killing it off. The fly-boys proposed an experiment: if they could bomb a Somali tribal leader dubbed “The Mad Mullah” into submission at a fraction of the cost of a ground expedition, they’d survive. The aerial assault worked, and a delighted Winston Churchill told the RAF to take on rebellious Iraq, over which Britain had assumed a League of Nations mandate.

They called it “control without occupation”, and, under Arthur “Bomber” Harris, the RAF took to “police bombing” Iraqi Arabs and Kurds with enterprise and enthusiasm. By 1922 the



RAF was deploying high-explosive and phosphorous bombs, an early form of napalm, anti-personnel shrapnel, “crows feet” shrapnel designed to kill and maim livestock and incendiaries to set alight thatch rooves. They even used bombs with time-delay fuses to prevent tribesmen from tending their crops under cover of darkness but when they stooped to machine-gunning women and children who had taken refuge in a lake, even the bellicose Churchill protested.

On other occasions, bombing was used to punish recalcitrant impoverished villagers for “non-appearance when summoned to explain non-payment of taxes”.

In 1924, in a draft report to parliament (complete with photos of what had been Kushan-al-Ajaza), Harris boasted that the RAF could wipe out an Iraqi village and a third of its inhabitants in 45 minutes.

1925 was a landmark year. The French bombed dozens of Syrian villages and even parts of Damascus, but probably the worst pre-Guernica incident occurred at Chechaouen, a Muslim holy town in Spanish Morocco. There, American mercenary fliers of the French Flying Corp indiscriminately bombed the undefended town in revenge for a severe defeat suffered by the retreating Spanish army. The *London Times* reporter called it “the most cruel, the most wanton, and the most unjustifiable act of the whole war,” and reported that “absolutely defenseless women and children were massacred and many others were maimed and blinded.”

Thus it went on, until the Second World War, and afterwards, through the eight years of the French war in Algeria, the Israeli repression of the Palestinians and the bombing of Iraq during the 12 years of post-Gulf War sanctions. The technology has “improved”, but the political intention, and the outcome, in terms of dead civilians, remains the same. . . .

They didn’t teach you this stuff at school or show it to you on TV during phase one of the Iraq war, but don’t imagine the Arabs and Afghans don’t remember.

[Unless they are the Iraqi children under 5 years of age that British MP George Galloway spoke of at a recent hearing in D.C. He said that they died from sanctions and the invasions of Iraq “without even knowing they were Iraqi, although that was the reason they died.”]

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My Rana

Do you know my Rana?

She’s 10 years old.

She’s a bit shy but a beautiful eye.

She is very good at embroidery,

Especially the cross stitch.

She looks after her brothers.

She cooks too.

This is a lovely child!

Have you seen my Rana?

She’s missing.

Poem on a quilt panel for an Iraqi child, Eyes Wide Open

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THINK PEACE

Peace & Justice Organizations

Amnesty International Chapter 23 (Houston)
www.amnestyinternational.org; 281.584.9707

Anti-draft Web Sites

www.leavemychildalone.org; www.objector.us
www.avoidthedraft.com; www.peace-out.com;
comwww.freewebs.com/the_intermind/.

CodePINK Alert Women for Peace-Houston

Active against corporate rule & militarism. Holds we are losing all that builds for compassion & community. 713.417.6121; 713.748.8133
www.codepinkalert_houston@att.net

Decade of Nonviolence-1.979.830.0136.

Working to create a culture of peace through events, workshops, educational materials.

Fellowship of Reconciliation-USA.

845.358.4601. Founded in 1914, is now an interfaith, international movement. FOR provides programs, publications, training & coordinates actions to help people respond to conflict nonviolently, seeking reconciliation through compassionate action. www.forusa.org. Publishes *Fellowship Magazine*.

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713.641.4941. With programs/actions working to create a just & nonviolent community. 7445 Santa Fe, Houston, TX 77061

Friends Committee on National Legislation

Your Eye on the Congress & White House Tells you when to contact government officials. on issues of human dignity; www.fcnl.org

G.I. Rights Hotline - 900.394.8544.

Provides information to service members about military discharges, grievance & complaint procedures, & other civil rights issues.

Houston Nonviolent Action/WRL

713.661.9889; 850 Jacquet Drive
Bellaire, TX 77401

Houston Peace & Justice Center-

713.522.9850/2990 Richmond, Houston, TX 77098
Coalition of groups believing in nonviolence; with events, helps build community among peace groups in Houston & educate the public on peace & justice issues & activities.

Houston Peace News - 713.524.2682

Newspaper: To promote democratic debate on issues of human dignity & global survival. Monthly Calendar: \$15/year. Send check to HPN, PO Box 8763, Houston, TX 77249-8763

Iraq Veterans Against the War-

703.304.5075 www.ivaw.net/;
Katya@mintwood.com.
Veterans who have served since Sept. 11, 2001 including Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, committed to saving lives and ending the violence in Iraq by an immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces. The governments who sponsored these wars are indebted to the men and women who were forced to fight them and must give them the benefits owed them when they return home. Email ivaqvct@mail.com to fill out the membership form.

Latinos por la Paz (LPLP)-

713.444.0246 Houston, TX.
artisansystems@houston.rr.com

Military Families Speak Out-617.320.5301

People with loved ones in the military opposed to war & occupation of Iraq. www.mfso.org;

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Progressive Action Alliance

713.641.4941 Promotes progressive candidates, ideas, & issues through action, advocacy, education, & networking. Issues: election & media reform, ending Iraq occupation, creating a Department of Peace, economic and social justice, changing US policy of endless war to one of international cooperation under the rule of US & international law.
www.progressiveactionalliance.org.

Sept. 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows

Those who lost loved ones 9-11 advocate nonviolent options & actions, not war, to end cycle of violence. www.peacefultomorrow.org;
Colleen@peacefultomorrow.org; 212.598.0970

United for Peace & Justice (national org)

www.unitedforpeace.org; 212.868.5545

Veterans Against the Iraq War

www.vaiv.org/vet/index.php; 201.876.0430

Veterans for Peace

www.veteransforpeace.org;
vfp@igc.org 314.725.6005; Fax: 314.725.7103
Dedicated to the abolishment of war. Houston: artisansystems@houston.rr.com

Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Inc.

www.vvaw.org; 773.276.4189

War Resisters League;

www.warresisters.org/

Women’s International League for Peace & Freedom - Houston. Organizes Houston’s

Summer Peace Camp, etc. 713.726.1266.

ACT FOR PEACE

Contacting Government Officials

U.S. Capital Switchboard.202.224.3121

Executive Branch offices; fax 202.456.2461

Comment Line: 202.456.1111

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