

THE TWO STRANDS OF (NON) ACCOUNTABILITY ON KUNDUZ

Contrary to much sloppy reporting, General Campbell did not change his story about the Kunduz strike in his testimony Tuesday. As I noted Monday, towards the end of his press conference that day, Campbell admitted, “Afghans asked for air support from a Special Forces team that we have on the ground to train, advise, and assist, in Kunduz,” which is precisely what some people claim was “new” yesterday.

The question, then, should turn to what the relationship between the US Special Forces who called in the strike and the Afghans who asked for it was – and what the thinking of both was. On that point, Campbell dodged, claiming that (and any details about Rules of Engagement) would come out in the investigation. Campbell was very insistent that SOF was only on the ground for a train, advise, and assist mission. But that clearly addressed their general status, not what they were doing at the moment the strikes were called in. And DOD-sourced reporting from last week made it clear US forces were doing more than training, advising, and assisting just days before the attack on Médecins Sans Frontières.

U.S. Special Forces traded fire with Taliban insurgents in the northern city of Kunduz, the U.S. military said Friday, a rare direct ground engagement for American troops stationed in the country.

The clash on Thursday marked the first time U.S. ground forces are known to have directly fought the Taliban since the militants stormed Kunduz on Monday. It came as the U.S. stepped up airstrikes this week against Taliban targets in Kunduz province and elsewhere

in the country's north.

U.S. Special Forces advisers "encountered an insurgent threat in Kunduz city" and "returned fire in self-defense to eliminate the threat," said U.S. Army Col. Brian Tribus, spokesman for American and allied troops in Afghanistan.

About 100 U.S. and coalition special-operations forces advisers were deployed to Kunduz earlier this week to provide tactical guidance to their Afghan counterparts as they fought to reclaim the provincial capital from the Taliban.

So on Friday, DOD was willing to admit our TAA mission actually involved direct fire. The first reports from the field said that in response to direct fire, SOF called in air strikes. But as MSF called for investigations into a war crime, DOD switched *that part* of the story to a strict TAA role, without telling us where the forces who called in the strike were, or what they were doing.

Without answering that question, two stories have made it clear that whoever called in the strikes didn't do what they should have *with regards to vetting the strikes*. There's this WaPo story that notes AC-130 strikes, like that used in this attack, rely on visual targeting assist from the ground.

Unlike other military fixed-wing aircraft, an AC-130 is requested differently. While a jet requires a map coordinate to engage its target, the AC-130 relies on direction (a compass heading) and a distance to the enemy target from the friendly forces engaged on the ground. In short, it relies on visual targeting.

This difference might explain why the hospital was targeted even though Doctors Without Borders said it had

given U.S. and Afghan forces its map coordinates before.

"It's a visual acuity aircraft," said a U.S. close-air support pilot who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of his active-duty status. "An AC-130 finds the friendly force, then fires over their left or right shoulder."

The pilot went on to add that an AC-130 does not enter enemy airspace and look for targets. It specifically has to be guided onto the target by a force on the ground and will fire only after identifying friendly and enemy forces, he said.

It also notes that normally (Thursday's events notwithstanding) when SOF comes under fire they (among other things) call in air strikes.

These "train, advise and assist" missions are a staple of U.S. Special Forces capabilities and have been conducted extensively in recent years. In combat situations, rather than return fire, U.S. troops on these missions are more likely to help direct communication, casualty evacuation and direct air support from an AC-130, for instance, if it is available.

As a result, there has been little direct contact between U.S. troops and the Taliban since most U.S. forces were relegated to the sidelines when official combat operations ended last year.

Last night, another passive voice-ridden NYT story reports that General Campbell, after promising full transparency, went around DC saying something rather different than what he was saying publicly: that what the WaPo says should have happened probably didn't.

The American commander in Afghanistan

now believes that United States troops who called in an airstrike that decimated a Doctors Without Borders hospital probably did not follow rules that allow for the use of air power only in dire situations, according to American officials familiar with the general's thinking.

Under those rules, airstrikes can be authorized to kill terrorist suspects, to protect American troops, and in response to requests for help from the Afghan Army in battles that could significantly alter the military landscape in Afghanistan – such as the recent Taliban takeover of Kunduz – but not necessarily smaller firefights. The idea behind the rules of engagement was to give American troops leeway but not see them dragged back into daily, open-ended combat.

In private discussions with officials in Washington, Gen. John F. Campbell, the commander, has expressed his belief that the decision by Special Operations forces operating “in the vicinity” of the Afghan troops in Kunduz likely did not meet any of those criteria, according to the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the incident.

The Special Operations forces also apparently did not have “eyes on” – that is, were not able to positively identify – the area to be attacked to confirm it was a legitimate target, before calling in the strike, the officials said.

If the NYT reporters who wrote this are aware that the MSF strike was the 12th in Kunduz province last week (to say nothing of the direct engagement by US forces), they failed to hint at that fact – perhaps because it would undermine much of this story.

In any case, even if Campbell's non-transparent judgements are honest – that what caused the attack from the US stand point was a violation of procedures and/or rules of engagement – that shouldn't end the story (but it appears to be doing so).

The one part of the story that has changed since Saturday was that the Afghans, and not the Americans, determined a strike was necessary (though that strike had to go through normal channels). Which ought to lead some focus back to what the Afghans were initially saying, which is that Taliban fighters were at the MSF compound (something MSF has vigorously refuted).

"When insurgents try to use civilians and public places to hide, it makes it very, very difficult, and we understand how this can happen," Koofi said. "You have two choices: either continue operations to clean up, and that might involve attacks in public places, or you just let the Taliban control. In this case, the public understands we went with the first choice, along with our international allies."

In Kunduz, the acting governor, Hamdullah Danishhi, also suggested that the airstrike was warranted.

He said Taliban fighters had been using the Doctors Without Borders compound to plot and carry out attacks across the city, including firing rocket-propelled grenades from the property.

"The hospital campus was 100 percent used by the Taliban," Danishhi said. "The hospital has a vast garden, and the Taliban were there. We tolerated their firing for some time" before responding.

And some focus on the raid Afghan Special Forces launched on the hospital in July is also in order.

Afghan special forces raided a hospital run by medical aid group Médecins Sans Frontières in northern Afghanistan, in search of a suspected Al Qaeda operative being treated there, a commander of the elite force said on Thursday.

Raids on hospitals are rare because they are protected by international law and those run by foreign aid agencies in Afghanistan provide crucial support to war victims, who may travel for days to get assistance.

It was unclear if Wednesday's raid by a contingent of special forces from the capital, Kabul, had succeeded in capturing its target, Kunduz special forces commander Abdullah told Reuters.

"I was told he was an al Qaeda member being treated at the MSF hospital," Abdullah said.

Even if Afghan forces genuinely believed the Taliban was operating from within the hospital, there would be a lot of hoops they'd have to jump through before treating it as a legitimate target. If Afghan forces had SOF strike the hospital because they didn't like that it accepted all people, then it'd be a clear war crime.

The point is, assuming US forces weren't directly engaged in the fighting and didn't themselves call in the strike, there are two levels of accountability here: on the Afghans who asked for the strike, and on SOF, which vetted it and carried it out.

If the Afghans deliberately targeted a hospital on unsound grounds, then the strike is in no way an accident – and may have been enabled when Americans failed to follow procedure.

There seems to be a strong desire to ignore the Afghan side of the equation (in part because the Afghans and the US military both want Obama to

approve continued troops in Afghanistan). But no one should be declaring this an “accident” or “mistake” without fully accounting for the Afghan decision to call in the strikes. And that hasn’t happened yet.

GENERAL CAMPBELL NOT A FAN OF AN INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION INTO MSF STRIKE [UPDATED]

General John Campbell, who is in charge of military operations in Afghanistan testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee Tuesday. There was a telling exchange between him and Jeanne Shaheen.

After talking about how much everyone regrets the *accident* of targeting Médecins Sans Frontières, Shaheen asked Campbell if he would support an independent inquiry into what happened (that MSF continues to demand). Here’s the exchange:

Shaheen: I appreciate your talking about the effort to conduct an investigation on our part but do you have any reason to object to having an independent investigation done by the UN or another independent body of what happened?

Campbell: Ma’am, I have trust and confidence in the folks that will do the investigation for NATO, the folks that’ll do the investigation for DOD and the Afghan partners, and so all the very tough questions that we’re asking they will get after that. My investigating officer again is a

Brigadier General, Rich Kim, I have all the trust and confidence that he will, he will get answers to all of those questions, and he'll continue to work that very hard and will continue to be transparent and provide all of that to this committee and to the American people as we move forward.

Shaheen: But as I understand your answer, then, you would not object to and would cooperate with an independent body, other than NATO or our Department of Defense in doing that kind of an investigation.

Campbell: I would let my higher headquarters or senior personnel make that decision. We are reaching out, again, to Doctors without Borders and the personnel that were on site, making sure that we get all side of the story, I did talk again to the investigating officer this morning, he has done that, he has talked to a few, he's continuing to try to get out to locations where he can talk to doctors, nurses, survivors of that to make sure he gets all of that.

All of which is a roundabout way to say he's been sent out here to try to squelch calls for an investigation by anyone besides a Brigadier General. Later in the hearing, Campbell dodged a question from Mike Rounds about how long this might take, though did say he would probably have a preliminary investigation done in a month.

Someone must have been panicked by Shaheen's question because Dan Sullivan, in using his term to clean up some issues, addressed Shaheen's question and helped the General shoot down the possibility of an investigation.

Sullivan: Senator Shaheen had asked about a UN investigation, possibly, into

the hospital accident. Does the UN usually investigate major deliberative – deliberate attacks on civilians in Afghanistan when they're conducted by the Taliban?

Campbell: Sir, I haven't seen it in the past. Quite frankly I don't know –

Sullivan: I don't think they do, typically. Do you think it would seem fair or balanced if the UN conducted an investigation which was clearly on something that was accidental? – the hospital bombing – when they don't investigate deliberate Taliban killing of civilians. Do you think that would be viewed as fair or balanced or as something the Command needs or would welcome?

Campbell: Sir I can't comment on how the UN would do that. What I can comment on as I said up front earlier is I have complete trust and confidence in the team that we have to be thorough, transparent. And if there were mistakes made, we'll make sure that those come out, if there's people we have to hold accountable, we'll make sure we'll do that. I have every trust and confidence in the US and the NATO investigation ongoing, uh, –

Sullivan: I think so do, most of us here do as well. Not, I don't, I certainly don't think an additional investigation by the UN would be warranted or be welcome by this committee.

In other words, people *really* don't want an independent investigation of this.

Update: Sullivan is wrong about whether the UN investigates Taliban killing of civilians. ~~While the UN hasn't done a lot of recent human rights reporting – aside from a report on the status of women – when it did do reporting~~ It includes the

Taliban's targeting of civilians in its findings, as in this 2008 report.

27. Over the past four months, the Taliban and other anti-government elements have killed approximately 300 civilians. Roughly three quarters of these civilians were killed in suicide attacks. While the majority of suicide attacks appear to target legitimate military objectives, many of these attacks are nonetheless unlawful because it should be obvious that they will result in far more civilian than military deaths.

28. Most of the other civilians killed by the Taliban die as a result of targeted assassinations. While these killings are fewer in number, they are significant in terms of intimidating and repressing the population. Often, killing one teacher will close an entire area's schools, killing one proponent of the Government will intimidate many others, and killing one worker will end humanitarian access to a district. These assassinations are completely unlawful, and their consequences are dramatic. The Taliban have also engaged in a high level of unlawful killing of non-civilians.

There's far more discussion of the Taliban's war crimes, including discussions of specific incidents, in this 2009 report.

Update: I understated how much work the UN is doing on human rights violations in Afghanistan, as Sarah Knuckey lays out at Just Security.

The UN's mid-year and annual reports on civilian casualties in Afghanistan typically detail anti-government attacks. The photo on the front cover of the most recent UN report on Afghanistan, for example, shows the

horrific scene directly after an anti-government element attack in April 2015, in which 32 were killed and 126 injured. The report's executive summary begins with the testimony of a schoolteacher who witnessed the attack and describes "the blood, the human limbs, the corpses, and the other wounded people all over the street." Pages 41-77 of the report detail Taliban violence, describing suicide attacks, the use of improvised explosive devices, indiscriminate and deliberate attacks on civilians, and the war crime of murder. It includes a section specifically on suicide and complex attacks, in which 1,022 civilian casualties occurred in just the first six months of 2015.

Many other UN reports also detail the findings of its investigations into Taliban/anti-government element attacks: July 2014 (the cover shows a child injured by a Taliban attack on the Serena hotel), February 2014 (the cover shows a child injured in an IED attack), July 2013 (the cover shows children running from a Taliban attack), February 2013 (the executive summary begins with a gruesome witness account of an IED attack, obtained through UNAMA interviews) , February 2012 (cover shows the aftermath of a suicide attack), July 2012 (cover shows the consequences of an IED attack that killed 13 and injured 57), and so on. A great many UN press statements also regularly condemn Taliban violence.

There are also examples of other parts of the UN system reporting on Taliban attacks. In 2009, for example, a separate part of the UN – the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions – carried out investigations in Afghanistan, including into killings by the Taliban, and detailed reckless as

well as deliberate Taliban attacks, including Taliban assassinations of civilians.

Update: This post has been significantly updated with the transcripts of the two exchanges and links to UN reporting on Taliban targeting of civilians.

AFGHAN FORCES ASKED US SPECIAL FORCES ON THE GROUND IN KUNDUZ TO CALL IN STRIKE ON MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES

As a lot of outlets are reporting, the head of Special Forces in Afghanistan, General John Campbell, just “corrected” the original claims DOD made after the deadly strike on the Médecins Sans Frontières hospital in Kunduz that US Special Forces were being attacked by stating that the Afghans called in the strike, not US forces.

This is supposed to correct the claim US special forces said they were being attacked – made by people all the way up to Defense Secretary Ash Carter:

SEC. CARTER: I want to be careful about what I say, because I don't want to get out in front of the investigation. But I think, Lita, in answer to your question, I think our current understanding, again, understanding that an investigation is going on and early facts can be misleading, is that yes,

there was American air action in that area, and that American forces there were engaged in the general vicinity.

And at some point in the course of the events there did report that they, themselves, were coming under attack. That much I think we can safely say, Lita, at this point.

Ultimately, though, the statement changes very little. In his statement, Campbell emphasized that American forces on the ground have the inherent right to self-defense. And, after several qualifying questions, Campbell finally clarified what his statement didn't make clear but should have: that the Afghans asked Special Forces *on the ground in Kunduz* to call in a strike.

Q: To make it crystal clear: there were no US JTACs, under fire, at the tactical level, when this air strike was called in?

General John Campbell: What I said was that the Afghans asked for air support from a Special Forces team that we have on the ground to train, advise, and assist, in Kunduz. The initial statement that went out was that US Forces were under direct fire contact and what I'm doing is correcting that statement here.

When asked if the Special Forces were *with* the Afghans who claimed to be under fire – and about any Rules of Engagement that should have prevented such an attack – Campbell just said those details would come out later in the investigation.

There are two other details in Campbell's statement that hints at where this is going. First, Campbell said "several civilians were accidentally struck" in an attack purportedly targeting the Taliban. At last count there were at least 22 people killed in the attack,

including 3 children. I'm a bit concerned about Campbell's understanding of the word "several."

In addition, Campbell made a human shield argument about the Taliban – softened only slightly from those used over the weekend.

Unfortunately the Taliban have decided to remain in the city and fight from within, knowingly putting civilians at significant risk of harm.

The statement all seems to be more about shifting blame on the Afghans rather than the US special forces who somehow didn't correct their claim that a hospital was attacking them, and to lay the claim that those same people are just advising Afghans rather than actually fighting. (Campbell is back in DC to testify to Congress, so these claims will become very convenient immediately.)

But overall, the explanation remains the same. US special forces on the ground in Kunduz called in strikes that – in probably 3 attacking passes – took out a hospital.

Update: MSF General Director Christopher Stokes is no more impressed than me.

Today the U.S. government has admitted that it was their airstrike that hit our hospital in Kunduz and killed 22 patients and MSF staff. Their description of the attack keeps changing – from collateral damage, to a tragic incident, to now attempting to pass responsibility to the Afghanistan government. The reality is the U.S. dropped those bombs. The U.S. hit a huge hospital full of wounded patients and MSF staff. The U.S. military remains responsible for the targets it hits, even though it is part of a coalition. There can be no justification for this horrible attack. With such constant discrepancies in the U.S. and Afghan accounts of what happened, the need for

a full transparent independent investigation is ever more critical.

IS RUSSIA ELIMINATING AMERICA'S MATERIAL SUPPORT FOR TERRORISM PROBLEM

In this post, Moon of Alabama linked to this Jerusalem Post article, which says more plainly what a number of people admit obliquely: Qatar and Saudi Arabia are funding the Nusra Front.

The Nusra Front, the Syrian branch of al- Qaida, which controls 10-15 percent of non-contiguous parcels of Syrian real estate, is of special interest to the IDF. Together with some local militias Nusra is in charge of most of the 100-kilometer border with Israel on the Syria side of the Golan Heights. In recent years, Nusra slightly toned down its militant ideology due to the influence of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which provide it with financial support.

OK then.

Not only are our Gulf allies funding al Qaeda, but they are sufficiently close to them so as to get them to pretend to moderate their extremism. Which is another way of saying they're sufficiently close to get them to cooperate to help the Gulf nations snooker their allies.

Of course, the Israelis have an incentive to point to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, so as to avoid admitting they, too, are backing Nusra.

Still, this plain admission raises the same

questions I raised back in August when the people inserting DOD-trained rebels into Syria were genuinely surprised that their expectation that Nusra would welcome those rebels, rather than kidnap them, was wrong.

I think it's quite likely that the US got affirmative HUMINT from one of our partners in the region that Nusra Front would not attack. Both the Saudis and Israelis are real possibilities to have provided this intelligence, given that we rely on the Saudis for a lot of our intelligence on Sunni terrorist groups and the Israelis have been cozying up to the group. And I'm frankly agnostic whether that intelligence would have been offered cynically – again, as a ploy to suck the US further into Syria – or in good faith.

Likewise, I wonder whether we got disinformation from our allies – the material supporter of terrorists – about whether or not Nusra had confiscated a chunk of the weapons and pick-ups from the next batch of rebels we sent into Syria.

All that's stuff that was readily available. But here's a detail I did not know. CIA reportedly ended its support for its Syrian rebels earlier this year.

Be that as it may, and regardless of the Russian strategy, it also needs to be emphasized that even though the targeted rebels were not ISIS, they were not secularist "moderates" either. According to most news outlets however, the rebel positions hit by the Russians were part of the "Free Syrian Army", the armed branch of the allegedly secular opposition. Interestingly, this statement is based on one single testimony made to Reuters by the leader of a group which has been provided with US weapons as part of a covert CIA

programme that was ended earlier this year.

If the CIA had stopped outfitting rebels partnering with Qatari and Saudi backed al Qaeda groups, I can see how they'd want to hijack DOD backed rebels to get US arms (and, effectively, bodies).

Which brings me back to this comment John Brennan made at the end of May, asked explicitly in the context of ISIS.

Dealing with some of these problems in the Middle East, whether you're talking about Iraq, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Libya, others, these are some of the most complex and complicated issues that I've seen in my 35 years, working on national security issues. So there are no easy solutions.

I think the president has tried to make sure that we're able to push the envelope when we can to protect this country. But we have to recognize that sometimes our engagement and direct involvement will stimulate and spur additional threats to our national security interests.

"Sometimes our engagement and direct involvement will stimulate and spur additional threats," said the CIA director overseeing a covert operation of supporting fighters that ended up having ties to al Qaeda that either had been or would shortly be discontinued.

We're making a lot of noise about Russia taking out those men the CIA had formerly trained. Is it just noise?

Apparently some Syrians on the ground are already questioning whether the US has sold them out.

The official added that the airstrikes were bolstering the popularity of Jabhat

al-Nusra, with its combined message of American duplicity against Muslims and the prospect of fighting an old foe – many of al-Qaida’s veterans once fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

While there are reasons to question the source (really! how many al Qaeda members who fought Russia 20 years ago are left, much less on the ground in Syria?), it’s a good question...

Update: The Daily Beast believes the CIA program is still active.

The rebels attacked by Russian forces on Wednesday and Thursday were in western Syria, alongside al Qaeda affiliates and far from any ISIS positions. That suggests the rebels were not there to fight the self-proclaimed Islamic State, as the Obama administration called the top priority. Instead, they were battling the Assad regime as part of a still-active CIA program for rebels which has run in tandem with the disastrous and now-defunct train and equip Pentagon program.

SAUDIS AND AMERICANS DISAGREE OVER WHETHER US IS INVOLVED IN TARGETING IN YEMEN

I noted earlier that Saudi Arabia had expressed concern about civilian casualties – when Russia caused them.

Which is why the conflict between these two

statements is so interesting. Here's Saudi Foreign Minister (and former Ambassador to the US) Adel al-Jubeir on Wednesday.

"We are very careful in picking targets. We have very precise weapons," Adel al-Jubeir told CBS News' Norah O'Donnell. *"We work with our allies including the United States on these targets."*

Al-Jubeir said collateral damage is "extremely regrettable" and should be avoided.

"But can we prevent it 100 percent? I don't think you can. This is warfare," he said. [my emphasis]

Here's a statement from earlier today from NSC Spokesperson Ned Price.

We are deeply concerned about recent reports of civilians killed in Mokha, Yemen on September 28. We were also shocked and saddened by the deaths of the Yemen Red Crescent Society volunteers in Taiz on the same day. We take all credible accounts of civilian deaths very seriously and again call on all sides of the conflict in Yemen to do their utmost to avoid harm to civilians and to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law. *The United States has no role in targeting decisions made by the Coalition in Yemen.* Nevertheless, we have consistently reinforced to members of the Coalition the imperative of precise targeting. We also have underscored the importance of thoroughly investigating all credible allegations of civilian casualties. We call for an investigation into these reported civilian casualties and for the findings to be reported publicly.

More broadly, these incidents underscore the urgency of seeking a durable

solution to the crisis in Yemen through a peaceful political dialogue as soon as possible. [my emphasis]

Whichever it is, it sure is hard to square either one of these comments with the joint statement earlier today expressions shock over Russian inflicted civilian casualties.

Update: I'm curious whether Jubeir's statement precedes the withdrawal of the Dutch proposal for an outside review in Yemen. The CBS article is time stamped 3:10 PM, which seems late in the day to have influenced the UN action, but the video it includes is timestamped 11:40, which may well have been early enough.

Update: Meanwhile, the US just bombed a Medecins sans Frontieres trauma center in Kunduz, killing at least 9 MSF staffers.

DAYS AFTER BOMBING A WEDDING PARTY AND SQUELCHING UN INVESTIGATION IN YEMEN, SAUDI ARABIA WORRIES ABOUT CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

On Monday, coalition forces in Yemen bombed a wedding party, killing over 130 people.

The death toll from an air strike on a wedding party in Yemen has jumped to 131, medics said on Tuesday, in one of the deadliest attacks on civilians in Yemen's war that drew strong condemnation from the U.N. secretary-

general.

[snip]

On Tuesday, a medical source at Maqbana hospital, where most of the casualties were taken, said the death toll had climbed to 131 people, including many women and children.

The United Nations and international rights groups have expressed alarm at the escalating number of civilian deaths in Yemen – at least 2,355 out of more than 4,500 people killed from the end of March to Sept. 24, according to figures released by the U.N. human rights office in Geneva on Tuesday.

On Wednesday, Saudi Arabia succeeded in pressuring western governments to withdraw a Dutch resolution to conduct an inquiry into the civilian casualties caused by both sides in Yemen.

In a U-turn at the United Nations Human Rights Council, Western governments dropped plans Wednesday for an international inquiry into human rights violations by all parties in the war in Yemen that has killed thousands of civilians in the last six months.

The change of direction came as the Netherlands withdrew the draft of a resolution it had prepared with support from a group of mainly Western countries that instructed the United Nations high commissioner for human rights to send experts to Yemen to investigate the conduct of the war.

[snip]

The Dutch resolution also called for the warring parties to allow access to humanitarian groups seeking to deliver aid and to the commercial import of goods like fuel that are needed to keep

hospitals running. Deliveries of aid and other goods have been slowed by the coalition's naval blockade of Yemeni ports.

But in the face of stiff resistance from Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners, and to the dismay of human rights groups, Western governments have accepted a resolution based on a Saudi text that lacks any reference to an independent, international inquiry.

On Friday, Saudi Arabia condemned civilian casualties. Just those caused by Russian airstrikes targeting Saudi backed rebels seeking to overthrow Bashar al-Assad.

As Russia continued striking targets in Syria, the U.S. was joined by the U.K., France, Germany, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in saying a bombing campaign begun by Vladimir Putin's government on Wednesday "led to civilian casualties" and didn't target Islamic State militants. The statement came hours before Putin was due to meet German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the French and Ukrainian presidents, Francois Hollande and Petro Poroshenko, to discuss a Ukrainian cease-fire pact in Paris.

"These military actions constitute a further escalation and will only fuel more extremism and radicalization," the countries said in the statement. "We call on the Russian Federation to immediately cease its attacks on the Syrian opposition and civilians and to focus its efforts on fighting ISIL," according to the statement, which used an acronym for Islamic State. Russia has said it is only targeting "terrorist" groups.

It's a nice statement. And civilian killings surely do fuel extremism.

But Saudi Arabia – and, for that matter, the US, which has bombed its share of wedding parties (though often because it relies on Saudi intelligence) – is probably not the country that should be condemning civilian casualties right now.

Update: Billmon has been checking and he was only able to find the statement actually posted on Turkey's Foreign Minister's website.

Update: Meanwhile, the US (which also claims to be concerned about civilian casualties) told Judge Ellen Hueville that Ali Jaber, whose brother-in-law and nephew a US drone strike killed, does not have standing to ask for an apology.

Update: Lee Fang asked McCain about the Saudis killing Yemenis.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., spent the most time discussing the issue with me. But his answers were perplexing.

"They may be bombing civilians, which is actually not true," McCain said, when asked about civilian casualties in Yemen.

"Civilians aren't dying?" I asked.

"No, they're not," the senator replied. "Oh, I'm sure civilians die in war. Not nearly as many as the Houthis have executed," McCain continued, referring to the Shiite militia waging an insurgency against the Sunni government in Yemen.

Asked about the recent reports of Saudi forces bombing a wedding party in Yemen, McCain said, "I'm sure in wars terrible things happen and the Houthis however are an extremist group backed by the Iranians who are slaughtering Yemenis."

WITH ONE BOMBING RUN RUSSIA GETS THE US TO ACKNOWLEDGE CIA'S "COVERT" REGIME CHANGE FORCES

For some time, a number of us have been tracking the collective forgetfulness about CIA's acknowledged covert forces on the ground in Syria. I often point back to the day two years ago when Chuck Hagel confirmed our covert efforts in Syria in a congressional hearing, as well as Senate Foreign Relations Committee member frustration with their inability to get details on the acknowledged covert ops (that already numbered in the thousands, according to Tom Udall) there. Jim and I have written a slew of other posts about CIA's covert forces there (one two three four five six seven are just a small sampling).

More recently, Adam Johnson caught NYT and Vox pretending CIA's efforts don't exist at all.

This past week, two pieces—one in the **New York Times** detailing the “finger pointing” over Obama’s “failed” Syria policy, and a **Vox** “explainer” of the Syrian civil war—did one better: They didn’t just omit the fact that the CIA has been arming, training and funding rebels since 2012, they heavily implied they had never done so.

To be fair, some intelligence reporters have done consistently good reporting on CIA's covert war in Syria. But the policy people – especially the ones reporting how if Obama had supported “moderate” rebels sooner – usually pretend no one knows that Obama did support Qatar and

Saudi-vetted liver-eating rebels sooner and they often turned out to be Islamists.

The selective ignorance about CIA's covert operations in Syria seems to have been eliminated, however, with one Russian bombing run that targeted them.

Russia launched airstrikes in Syria on Wednesday, catching U.S. and Western officials off guard and drawing new condemnation as evidence suggested Moscow wasn't targeting extremist group Islamic State, but rather other opponents of Bashar al-Assad's regime.

One of the airstrikes hit an area primarily held by rebels backed by the Central Intelligence Agency and allied spy services, U.S. officials said, catapulting the Syrian crisis to a new level of danger and uncertainty. Moscow's entry means the world's most powerful militaries—including the U.S., Britain and France—now are flying uncoordinated combat missions, heightening the risk of conflict in the skies over Syria.

Thus far, of course, US officials are insisting that the anti-Assad troops Russia targeted are wholly distinct from ISIS (even while they remain silent about whether they're Islamic extremists).

Secretary of State John Kerry met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and said he raised U.S. concerns about attacks that target regime opponents other than Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL. In Syria's multi-sided war, Mr. Assad's military—aided by Iran and the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah—is fighting both Islamic State and opposition rebel groups, some of which are supported by the U.S. and its allies.

[snip]

The U.S. and its allies were angry at the Russians on many scores: that they are supporting Mr. Assad; that they aren't coordinating their actions with the existing, U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition; that they provided terse notice only an hour before their operations; that they demanded the U.S. coalition stay out of Syrian airspace; and that they struck in areas where anti-Assad rebels—not Islamic State—operate.

"It does appear that they were in areas where there probably were not ISIL forces, and that is precisely one of the problems with this whole approach," said Mr. Carter, the U.S. defense chief.

This attempt to distinguish ISIS from the CIA-backed rebels will quickly lead to an awkward place for the Administration and its allies, not least because making any distinction will require providing details on the vetting process used to select these forces, as well as addressing the evidence of cooperation with ISIS or traditional al Qaeda in the past. Plus, the more the US argues these groups that *aren't* entirely distinct from al Qaeda *are* entirely distinct from ISIS, it will make the Administration's claim that the 2001 AUMF against Al Qaeda authorizes it to fight ISIS (in related news, DOJ just denied USAT's FOIA request for 3 OLC documents making that case) really wobbly. Any claim Russia makes that these anti-Assad forces are also Islamic extremists (and therefore entirely legitimate targets in the fight against ISIS) will be based on intelligence that is no more shitty than US intelligence that they're not, especially given that CentCom admits on the record it can't even trust (much less vet) the communications it is getting from rebels on the ground about *their* coordination with al Qaeda. It will devolve into a he-said-she-said about whose claims are more

suspect, Assad's or the Saudis' who've been pushing for regime change long before the Arab Spring gave them an opportunity to push it along.

And all the while, any pretense that CIA's involvement is covert will grow more and more laughable. Reporting like this – which claims Putin has “hijacked” Obama's war on ISIS when the content only makes sense if Putin has more urgently hijacked Obama's regime change efforts against Assad – will become more and more laughable.

Whatever Russia's entry does for the tactical confrontation (I have no hopes it will do anything but make this conflict even bloodier, and possibly expand it into other countries), it has clarified a discussion the US has always tried to obscure. There are plenty of US backed forces on the ground – which may or may not be Islamic extremists (see Pat Lang on this point) – whose priority is toppling Bashar al-Assad, not defeating ISIS. While there will be some interesting fights about who they really are in coming days (and whether CIA has already acknowledged that it inflamed Islamists with its regime change efforts), American priorities will become increasingly clear.

Make no mistake: I am not defending Russia, Syria, our vetted “moderate” rebels, Saudi Arabia, or anyone else. It's a volatile situation and none of the outside intervention seems to be helping. But one big reason we've been failing is because we've been lying publicly about the forces on the ground. Those lies just got a lot harder to sustain.

(As always on the Syrian quagmire, see Moon of Alabama's latest.)

COMMAND IN MIDDLE OF INTELLIGENCE SCANDAL ADMITS IT CAN'T VET A TWITTER PICTURE

As a number of outlets are reporting, CentCom released this statement yesterday afternoon.

U.S. Central Command was notified at approximately 1 p.m. today that a commander of a New Syrian Forces element operating in Syria surrendered some of his unit's Coalition-issued equipment to a suspected Al Nusra Front intermediary purportedly in exchange for safe passage within their operating area.

"Today the NSF unit contacted Coalition representatives and informed us that on Sept. 21-22 they gave six pick-up trucks and a portion of their ammunition to a suspected Al Nusra Front intermediary, which equates to roughly 25 percent of their issued equipment," said Col. Patrick Ryder, U.S. Central Command spokesperson. "If accurate, the report of NSF members providing equipment to Al Nusra Front is very concerning and a violation of Syria train and equip program guidelines."

Earlier this week, Al Nusra Front tweeted an image of a Coalition-issued rifle and claimed that the newest NSF members had handed over all their weapons upon re-entering Syria last week. Central Command conducted an analysis of the image depicted in the Tweet and determined the claim to be false. This determination was based on NSF members reporting that all personnel and equipment were under NSF control and

because the tweeted image was an old picture repurposed from the Facebook page of a previously deployed NSF fighter from a different training class.

“In light of this new information, we wanted to ensure the public was informed as quickly as possible about the facts as we know them at this time,” said Col. Ryder. “We are using all means at our disposal to look into what exactly happened and determine the appropriate response.”

That is, CentCom is explaining that when they claimed reports the rebels had handed over their weapons early in the week was a lie, they were wrong. They had based that assertion on the representations of our trained and vetted rebels, including the claim that a picture posted to Twitter was a recycled image (something that happens a lot in propaganda from Syria, from all sides). Given their caveat about whether this latest claim – that the rebels handed over six pick-ups and a bunch of ammunition – may not be accurate, it suggests they still don’t actually know. Which, in turn, suggests they didn’t have the means to vet the tweeted picture, nor do they have enough independent HUMINT coming from the region to be able to fact check what the latest batch of vetted and trained rebels tell them.

This may or may not have to do with the allegations that the intelligence at CentCom is cooked. It, at a minimum, speaks to collection *and* analysis issues, only the latter of which was covered in the complaint to the Inspector General.

Whatever the cause, though, it does raise real concerns about how blind CentCom is right now.

“IT’S GOOD TO BE BACK,” PETRAEUS SAYS BEFORE HE OFFERS A VAGUE APOLOGY AND OIL MARKET ADVICE

John McCain has officially launched David



Petraeus’ rehabilitation tour.

Petraeus testified today before the Senate Armed Services Committee on what to do in the Middle East. But you could tell how much this is about rehabilitation for the heartfelt thanks Petraeus offered McCain for bringing him in to testify. “It’s good to be back,” Petraeus said, before launching into the most hailed part of the hearing, this vague apology.

I think it is appropriate to begin my remarks this morning with an apology, one that I have offered before, but nonetheless one that I want to repeat to you and to the American public. Four years ago I made a serious mistake, one that brought discredit on me and pain closest—to those closest to me. It was a violation of the trust placed in me, and a breach of the values to which I had been committed throughout my life. There’s nothing I can do to undo what I did. I can only say again how sorry I am to those I let down and then strive to go forward with a greater sense of humility and purpose, and with gratitude to those who stood with me during a very difficult chapter in my life.

He didn't actually say what part of the scandal he was apologizing for, though some of the press seemed to be certain that it was about one or another aspect of it. His invocation of the pain he caused those closest to him suggests it was the affair itself. The timing – just over four years ago, August 28, 2011, was the day he gave his black books full of code word intelligence to Paula Broadwell for several days – suggests it was about actually leaking intelligence.

If the acts he apologized for were four years ago, though, it means this apology doesn't cover the lies he told the FBI on June 12, 2012 about sharing this intelligence. And it doesn't cover keeping those books with code word intelligence in the top drawer of his unlocked desk until FBI found them on April 5, 2013, the act – mishandling classified information – that he technically pled guilty too.

Though I wouldn't be surprised if the lawyer he shares with Hillary Clinton, David Kendall, advised him *not* to apologize for lying to the FBI, given that would involve admitting guilt for something he didn't plead guilty for.

So having apparently apologized for a range of things that didn't apparently include lying to the FBI, David Petraeus gave unsworn testimony to Congress.

The testimony was about what you'd expect. David Petraeus' surge was, according to David Petraeus, a huge success. Petraeus told of some great things Nuri al-Maliki did even while explaining some great things Haider al-Abadi is doing. Petraeus envisioned the break up of Syria while insisting that the same couldn't happen in Iraq (because the Sunnis in Iraq would have no oil revenues). All casualties in Syria were the fault of Bashar al-Assad, and not the US ally-backed forces Petraeus watched get armed while he was still CIA Director. Petraeus denied, without being asked, that the military had a policy of ignoring Afghan bacha bazi, as reported in NYT this week.

Not a word was mentioned about the chaos CIA-led intervention in Libya has caused, or what to do about it (Petraeus did mention Libya in a passing answer to a question), not even in discussions of why the Russians would never be willing to work under US command in countering ISIS, not even from the party that remains obsessed about Benghazi.

Nothing was mentioned about how all the men we've – Petraeus – has trained have been prone to flee.

The closest Petraeus came to discussing the support for Sunni extremism our allies – Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – give (and therefore their role in the region's instability) came when Petraeus discussed Turkey's increasing targeting of PKK that happened at the same time Turkey agreed to let us use Incirlik Air Base, though Petraeus didn't note any connection between those two things.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the hearing, though, came towards the end (after 2:11), when Thom Tillis asked a very reasonable question about how other countries (he didn't say, but he probably had China in mind) reliance on Iran once they start selling oil will become important strategically.

After claiming Tillis' break-even number for Iran's budget (which accords with public reporting) was incorrect, Petraeus put on his private equity guy hat.

I'm the chairman of the KKR global institute and a partner in KKR, one of the global investment firms, uh [hand gesture showing breadth] big private equity firms in our country. And, first of all, by the way, the analysis on crude oil export shows that not only would the price of WTI, West Texas Intermediate go up slightly, so the producers would be better off, it would also have an impact on Brent Crude prices, which would come down, the

global price, which is a lot of what we refine, and the price at the pump probably would go down. So it's very interesting – if you look at, I think it's the CBO that did the analysis of this. One of our analytical organizations here, I think, on Capitol Hill has looked at this. And it's a very interesting dynamic.

[Tillis tries to interrupt, Petraeus keeps speaking.]

Beyond that, I don't think we should get involved in markets as a country, unless we want to do something like sanctions. So again, you wouldn't do it – if you want to use sanctions for economic tools as a weapon, gives thumbs up sign] fine, but otherwise I think you have to be very careful about intervention in the global markets.

Tillis tried again, restating his question about whether we should drill as much oil as we can to hedge against increased Iranian influence.

We ought to produce all the oil that we can, if we're making a profit. If we can enable countries like Iraq to revive their oil industry as we did, it helps Iraq, it funds their gover—by the way they're running into fiscal deficit now. But again, this is really about market forces I think, much more than getting involved in this as a country.

Not much of Petraeus' answer made sense, but I can assure you, the head of KKR's Global Institute is pretty excited about natural gas.

Sure, the expertise of a private equity guy might be worthwhile to Congress, though that affiliation was not listed on the SASC website.

General David H. Petraeus, USA (Ret.)

Former Director Of The Central Intelligence Agency; Commander, International Security Assistance Force/Commander, United States Forces Afghanistan; Commander, United States Central Command; And Commander, Multi-National Forces-Iraq
NO ELECTRONIC TESTIMONY SUBMITTED

But it's all the more absurd given the rest of Petraeus testimony, most notably his silence about Saudi Arabia's destabilizing influence, given that we do play in global markets precisely through our unquestioningly loyalty to the Saudis.

I guess the Senate – which turned out in big numbers – finds this kind of analysis useful. But it is, once again, about David Petraeus more than it is about testimony that will help us adopt a sound policy in the Middle East.

SO THERE WAS ONE CULTURAL DIFFERENCE THE MILITARY RECOGNIZED IN AFGHANISTAN

Joseph Goldstein broke a devastating story this afternoon in the New York Times:

In his last phone call home, Lance Cpl. Gregory Buckley Jr. told his father what was troubling him: From his bunk in southern Afghanistan, he could hear Afghan police officers sexually abusing boys they had brought to the base.

"At night we can hear them screaming, but we're not allowed to do anything about it," the Marine's father, Gregory Buckley Sr., recalled his son telling him before he was shot to death at the base in 2012. He urged his son to tell his superiors. "My son said that his

officers told him to look the other way because it's their culture."

Goldstein goes on to reveal that Gregory Buckley, Jr's killer was in fact one of those boys whose screams he heard. The killer, Ainuddin Khudairaham, was one of many "tea boys" being held by the police commander on the base, Sarwar Jan. But Jan came to the base with a history. Again from Goldstein:

Lance Corporal Buckley and two other Marines were killed in 2012 by one of a large entourage of boys living at their base with an Afghan police commander named Sarwar Jan.

Mr. Jan had long had a bad reputation; in 2010, two Marine officers managed to persuade the Afghan authorities to arrest him following a litany of abuses, including corruption, support for the Taliban and child abduction. But just two years later, the police commander was back with a different unit, working at Lance Corporal Buckley's post, Forward Operating Base Delhi, in Helmand Province.

Lance Corporal Buckley had noticed that a large entourage of "tea boys" – domestic servants who are sometimes pressed into sexual slavery – had arrived with Mr. Jan and moved into the same barracks, one floor below the Marines. He told his father about it during his final call home.

As if that's not enough, Goldstein goes on to note that the only person punished over the killings by the tea boy was one of the officers who had gotten Jan arrested previously and contacted the new base where Jan was assigned to warn them of his pedophilia.

Goldstein's report blows the lid off a disgusting practice by the military to allow

Afghan officers to engage in what they refer to as “bacha bazi”, or “boy play” and to ascribe it to cultural differences rather than calling out criminal behavior. This practice of looking the other way has gone on for a very long time. An article Goldstein linked had this to say:

With the agreement on an action plan to combat the problem, the government will for the first time officially acknowledge the problem of child sex slaves. As part of the Afghan tradition of bacha bazi, literally “boy play,” boys as young as 9 are dressed as girls and trained to dance for male audiences, then prostituted in an auction to the highest bidder. Many powerful men, particularly commanders in the military and the police, keep such boys, often dressed in uniforms, as constant companions for sexual purposes.

/snip/

Asked about the military’s policy regarding commanders who abuse children, a spokesman for the NATO-led military alliance, Lt. Col. John L. Dorrian, said that if any members of the military encountered such abuse they would be obliged to report it. But in the past year, he said, he was not aware of any such reports.

When we go back to the reports on the trial where Ainuddin Khudairaham was convicted for the killings, we have the military scrambling to cover up the pedophilia that may well have prompted Ainuddin to act, as they provided a list of different accusations against Jan:

The investigation into what happened at FOB Delhi has been dogged by allegations that the police chief, Sarwar Jan, the shooter was working for was closely aligned with the Taliban. He previously had been removed as the police chief in

another district in Helmand province in 2010 after Marines suspected he was providing supplies to the Taliban.

Nevertheless, Sarwar Jan was installed by the Afghan government as the police chief in Garmsir district in the months ahead of the shooting. A Marine officer who worked with him in 2009 and 2010, Maj. Jason Brezler, sent a warning to deployed Marines in 2012 about the police chief, but he kept his position. To do so, Brezler sent classified information over an unclassified network, and reported himself.

Yes, Brezler is the person mentioned above as the one person to be punished over the killings. And in the Washington Post piece (from July, 2014) quoted above, we see that the real meat of Brezler's warning about Jan and his entourage of young boys is completely left out. And that seems to be as a product of the policy that Goldstein revealed today where the US military actively avoids calling out or punishing the abuse of young boys. But why would the military avoid calling it out? One hint comes from the the 2011 piece Goldstein linked and I quoted earlier:

The practice of bacha bazi is known throughout Afghanistan but is particularly notorious in Kandahar. The Taliban originally came to prominence in Kandahar when they intervened in a fight between two pedophile warlords over the possession of a coveted dancing boy. The Taliban also oppose the practice, and banned it when they were in power.

Ah, now it begins to make sense. The US has to back the monsters it is backing because they oppose the Taliban. The Taliban actively oppose the practice, so the US has to keep any actual occurrences of it quiet because they could provide ammunition against the coalition.

In the end, the US military chose to accept the practice of sexual abuse of young boys by Afghan commanders and to overlook it whenever it took place, ascribing it to a cultural difference. They even went so far as to punish those who took steps to point it out.

This practice comes off as particularly abhorrent when we put it into the context of other blunders by the US military relating to cultural differences. Just a few months before Buckley was killed, the military took the absurd step in January of 2012 to retroactively classify a report (pdf). The name of that report is particularly important with today's revelation by Goldstein: "A Crisis of Trust and Cultural Incompatibility". The report was prepared in response to the then growing trend of green on blue killings, where Afghan military and police personnel turned their weapons on US troops, often those who were training them. The report provided significant insight into how Afghans perceived US troops, and the results were not pretty. This depiction of the occupying US force as brutal and culturally insensitive likely was why the military tried to classify it even though it already had been released.

But the study also interviewed US troops for their views of Afghan personnel. And there is one brief mention of bacha bazi:

Several U.S. Soldiers reported that they had observed many cases of child abuse and neglect that infuriated them and alienated them from the civilian populace. They made it very clear that they wanted nothing to do with people who treat children so cruelly. Although not reported by the U.S. Soldiers who participated in this study, there have been numerous accounts of Canadian troops in Kandahar complaining about the rampant sexual abuse of children they have witnessed ANSF personnel commit, including the cultural practice of bacha bazi, as well as the raping and sodomizing of little boys. (One reason some Afghan civilians prefer insurgents over the ANSF are the latter's propensity to seize their little boys at checkpoints and sexually assault them.) U.S. Soldiers witnessing such barbaric acts may likely lead to violent confrontations with the perpetrators.

Viewed in the context of what we know now, it appears that those US soldiers who participated in the study already knew that they were not to report or even mention bacha bazi. Canadian soldiers appear not to have been under the same prohibition (they also were more consistent in calling out Afghan torture of prisoners), so the interviewers clearly knew the practice was widespread.

Just a few months before Gregory Buckley, Jr's death, the military attempted to hide a study that revealed how culturally disconnected US troops were from those they were attempting to train. And after that attempted silencing, Buckley and two others died at the hands of a victim of the only cultural difference the military was aware of, but chose to cover up in a different way.