

Afghan Civilians - NATO's Human Shield

by Anthony C Heaford - Last Updated 18 July 2022

In 2012 British Prime Minister David Cameron announced the successful completion of our mission in Helmand. The reality on the ground was NATO forces couldn't even drive down the road without being in fear for our lives. Six years into Britain's mission to establish security in Helmand, our commanders still described our resupply convoys to outlying bases as "Combat Logistic Patrols".

Between June and August 2012 I participated in five Combat Logistic Patrols, acting as a top cover machine-gunner for the force protection element of the convoys, missions referred to as Operation Mubarez. Before each patrol I was given criminal orders, both formally and informally, on how to deal with the threat Afghan children posed to our vehicles. Our escalation of force orders, intended to keep children away from the vehicles, were as follows:

1. Throw stones back at the children, to keep them away from the vehicles
2. Fire mini-flares (incendiary munitions) so they "bounce off the floor besides them"
3. Threaten the children with loaded pistols (cos they weren't scared of our rifles)



None of those tactics worked. Throwing stones back at the children only escalated the situation. The one time I saw a NATO soldier draw his pistol to threaten a child it resulted in said soldier receiving a bloody nose when a stone thrown by the children struck his face. I did not see anyone following the formal order to fire a mini-flare at the children thank God, given that that could be considered lethal force due to the mini-flare's incendiary character, burning at 1200-3000 degrees Celsius.

But even those criminal orders weren't the worst tactic I saw NATO or our Afghan partners use. The most shameful and illegal tactic I saw used to protect our convoy was the use of Afghan civilians as Human Shields. British commanders allowed our Afghan army allies to force civilians to stand between suspected Improvised Explosive Device (IED) emplacements and our British army armoured vehicles. I saw this once, on Friday 6th July 2012 as our convoy returned to Camp Bastion on Highway One, as seen in the photos below.

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Afghan civilians - our human shield - standing next to a culvert on Highway One on Friday 6th July 2012, somewhere between Gereshk town and the turn-off for Camp Bastion:

NATO's Civilian Human Shields:

British army / NATO Operation Mubarez, 06 July 2012

My NATO convoy was protected from a potential IED by a civilian human shield forced from passing cars & buses by our Afghan army allies & then made to stand by the culvert until our resupply convoy had passed by.

An IED had exploded behind us, splitting the convoy in two. Ours was the last vehicle to pass over the IED before it exploded.



Location: Highway One in Helmand, between Gereshk & Camp Bastion



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The culverts were an essential part of the road's construction to prevent floodwater from washing the road away, but they also provided the Taliban with an ideal place to plant their IEDs. And that's why they were enshrouded with barbed wire, an attempted to prevent human access to these miniature tunnels spaced regularly along almost every road.

But even with coils of barbed wire and roadside Afghan army bases to avoid, the Taliban did manage to plant IEDs in the culverts. One had exploded shortly before I took this photo, an IED in a culvert behind we'd just passed over. All the vehicles behind us were delayed as engineers cleared a new route for the tail end on the convoy to bypass the now impassable road. I didn't hear or see the explosion; it was reported to the driver and commander by radio but they did not pass the message up to me. So when I saw the six



civilians huddled around a motorcycle right besides a culvert I quickly ducked down to ask my commander what they were doing there.

“Don't worry about it” he replied, giving me time to return to the cupola and take their photo as we continued on our journey.

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Back at Camp Bastion I dropped down to speak with the driver and commander. They told me about the IED so I asked again what the group of civilians were doing by the culvert. There was a bit of hesitation but they told me the men had been taken off passing buses by our Afghan allies and forced to stand besides the culvert until our convoy had passed by. They were our Human Shield – placed in harms way to discourage the Taliban from detonating any IED that may have been there.



My Reporting Efforts

I refused the informal orders to stone Afghan children whilst in theatre. I did take a bag of stones with me on my first patrol (as instructed), but I very easily discovered a far better and effective method to keep children away from our vehicles: by taking their photo. As soon as the children saw my camera they would drop any stones they were holding and would simply turn and walk away. I tried sharing this tactic with my platoon back in Bastion but I was mocked and ridiculed, then later punished and threatened for my refusal to stone Afghan children.

I didn't challenge the formal orders to throw stones, fire mini-flares and threaten the children with pistols because they were given by a senior officer at a formal briefing in front of around one hundred British soldiers. No one else in that gathering objected to or raised any concerns about these orders either.

I said nothing about the use of human shields during my tour or for a long time after either. That silence was for a couple of reasons:

1. I hoped my reports about stones / mini-flares / pistols would be enough for the army to conduct a wholesale review of force protection methods
2. I genuinely did not want to damage the British army's reputation any further than was necessary by sharing such a damning revelation

When I did finally decided to report our use of Human Shields it was only after every other avenue available to have my concerns addressed had failed. The British army, government and law enforcement refused to address or take action on my reports and so I passed my reports of British military criminality to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC's Office of The Prosecutor replied, acknowledging my reports and saying others had already raised the same concerns. Under intense pressure from the US government, the ICC has since dropped their investigation of any coalition crimes committed during our twenty year occupation of Afghanistan.