

Afghan Rules of Engagement

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There's an AP story today that the U.S. commander in Afghanistan "will soon order U.S. and NATO forces to break away from fights with militants hiding among villagers." The order is expected to reduce "the use of air strikes, mortars and artillery in villages." There are three points to note here: 1. The order does not prohibit U.S. troops from using massive force when civilians are nearby if the troops are in "imminent danger," and indeed, the order allows massive force if necessary to avoid "undue danger" to the troops. So it is still the case that soldiers lives are valued more than those of Afghan civilians, the people who are supposedly being protected. 2. It is clear that what has driven this change in policy is not morality but military advantage. That is, the outrage expressed by Afghan public opinion by U.S. attacks on civilians — 829 were killed last year according to the UN — jeopardizes the entire U.S./NATO military operation. Even President Hamid Karzai, who owes his office to the United States, has denounced Washington's cavalier attitude toward Afghan civilian lives. 3. If these are to be the **new** rules of engagement, then that means that until this point it was approved policy that led to killing Afghan civilians in situations where U.S. troops were not in imminent danger and could have withdrawn without any "undue danger." By any reasonable standard these were war crimes approved at the highest levels of the U.S. government. The reason for U.S. disregard of Afghan civilian lives has not been random evil. It follows from the fact that U.S. officials have wanted to minimize U.S. casualties (so as to make the war acceptable at home) in a conflict that at its roots is political and hence not ultimately susceptible to a military solution. All the U.S. troops in the world can't protect a regime without popular backing.