



# Grievability and civilian harm in *Weaponizing Civilian Protection*

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## Abstract

This paper centres on the idea of grievability employed by Thomas Gregory in *Weaponizing Civilian Protection* (OUP 2025). Earlier work in international relations focuses on the *post mortem* dimensions of grievability. Gregory, in comparison, stresses the operations of grievability in life. His aim, to demonstrate how civilian protection was weaponized in Afghanistan, and how that weaponization functioned to devalue and dehumanize Afghan citizens. This is visible in (amongst other things) the practice of counting civilian casualties, which Gregory contends, was instrumentalized to enable officials to respond more effectively to claims of civilian harm, raising questions of who is countable and when. While Gregory's account of grievability is highly persuasive, questions remain about what kind of racialized logic underpins the civilian protection and mitigation measures discussed in the book, what a non-Western account of grievability might look like, and what might be required to ensure the principle of equal grievability.

**Keywords** Afghanistan · Civilian casualties · Counting · Grievability

*Weaponizing Civilian Protection: Counterinsurgency and Collateral Damage in Afghanistan* (Gregory 2025) charts what happened when the conflict in Afghanistan, beginning in 2001, was recast as a counterinsurgency and a new avoidance and mitigation framework introduced. Not only did this shift change how the conflict was conducted practically, with growing attention paid, for instance, to (re)building infrastructure, promoting good governance, improving local economies, and reducing, though not eliminating, kinetic operations. For Thomas Gregory, the shift also brought concerns about civilian deaths to the fore, leading to the introduction of

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various measures designed to recalibrate airstrikes, impose restrictions on ground engagements, accurately count civilian casualties, and dispense *ex gratia* payments for those killed or injured in the conflict.

What sense, however, should we make of these efforts by coalition forces to minimize and mitigate civilian casualties? Should we regard them as reflecting the intrinsic value of the civilian lives lost or harmed in the war? Or did they serve a different, even a possibly dehumanizing purpose? Marshalling a wealth of original empirical data, from declassified documents through to interviews with coalition officials, Gregory demonstrates that instead of making Afghan lives more grievable, a term I will return to later, the civilian protection avoidance and mitigation measures that were introduced operated necropolitically to ‘distribute death more efficiently’ (p. 35). On this reading, far from being driven by humanitarian concerns, civilian protection was, in fact, weaponized for martial ends, forming part of a counterinsurgency strategy designed to win over local hearts and minds.

To argue that civilian protection was weaponized in this conflict is, of course, to go against dominant approaches to the issue of civilian casualties. From an international humanitarian law or moral philosophy perspective, two of the more common approaches, civilian protection is generally regarded as a way to limit who is allowed to kill or be killed. The idea of non-combatant immunity, for instance, specifies that civilians should not be targeted in conflicts. Similarly, the principle of proportionality prohibits excessive harm to civilians, the principle of precautions mandates that measures must be taken to avoid or minimize incidental harm to them, while the principle of distinction requires belligerents to differentiate between civilians and combatants and between civilian and military objectives.

Gregory does not reject the importance of such codes, norms and/or principles outright, since they serve an important role both in challenging egregious violence and in evaluating the legitimacy of military action in general. Nevertheless, he regards them as of limited use in either assessing or understanding the conflict in Afghanistan. In part, because their malleability in practice allows belligerents to employ them both as ‘tools of legitimation’ and as ‘instruments of restraint’ (p.105). In part, because they are not well suited to understanding the martial logic adopted by the coalition in its fight against the insurgents, how it reconceived civilian casualties as a strategic problem and, amongst other things, how it sought to ‘recalibrate’ coalition violence such that some violence against Afghan civilians was deemed not just permissible but *necessary* to ensure mission success. Since the coalition approached civilian protection from a strategic rather than humanitarian perspective, the critical issue for Gregory is not whether it complied with existing rules and codes (legal and moral) or not. It is *how* it went about weaponizing civilian protection and what the implications of that weaponization were for Afghan civilian lives.

So, if neither existing legal nor moral approaches towards civilian harm are sufficient to understand what passed in Afghanistan, what alternative framework might be adopted instead? Here Gregory turns to Judith Butler’s (2004, 2009, 2020, 2022) distinction between grievable and ungrivable lives, the topic I concentrate on in this piece. His goal to evaluate whether Afghan lives qualify as grievable within the normative framework prevailing at the time or whether they simply figure as a dispensable necropolitical variable in a counterinsurgency struggle.



The idea of grievability emerges out of Butler's discussion of public grief in *Pre-carious Life* (2004) and is further developed in *Frames of War* (2009) where they suggest that the modes of 'public grieving' that are available within a certain society 'make clear the norms by which the "human" is constituted' (Butler 2009, p. 46). Grievability, for Butler, is thus connected with 'exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human' (2004, pp. xiv–xv), a connection that, we will see, is important to Gregory's argument.

Gregory is not the first International Relations scholar to adopt the idea of grievability. Maja Zehfuss (2009), for instance, draws on grievability to examine the obituaries posted on a Ministry of Defence website to remember UK military personnel killed in Operation TELIC in Iraq, exploring how grievable lives are represented in these obituaries and how the production of particular 'hierarchies of grief' facilitate war.<sup>1</sup> Like Zehfuss, Katharine Millar (2015, 2017) explores commemorative practices in relation to military dead. Millar, however, focuses on the representation of dead female soldiers in the US in obituaries and official national monuments. The prevailing norms of nationalism and patriarchal gender, she suggests, mean they are grievable as 'good soldiers' and 'good women' but not as 'good female soldiers' (Millar 2015). Maria Rashid (2022) also explores gendered practices, particularly the idea of 'appropriate' grief, in relation to grievable military deaths, in her case in Pakistan during the War on Terror, elucidating how the mourning of the wives and mothers of the dead was disciplined through militarized public rituals of grieving, designed not to acknowledge the women's suffering but to bolster the war effort.<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis in this earlier scholarship is on the *post mortem* or *posthumous* dimensions of grievability; that is, whether the *deaths* of particular populations matter (to us) or not and thus whether they are grievable or not. Gregory, by contrast, builds on remarks Butler (2020, 2022) has made more recently that grievability is not exclusively concerned with either the dead or death but is *also* a feature ascribed to the living. A grievable *life* is, on this reading, one that that matters, in the sense that it is deemed worth protecting, supporting, valuing, and caring for *prior to death*. By contrast, an un-grievable life is, in essence, a disposable life. Because such lives do not matter, they are not merely losable, but, in some sense, 'already lost' (Butler 2020, p. 121). Although the distinction between being un-grievable or grievable is most evident after death, in terms of how we react towards the demise of particular populations or persons (whether we acknowledge their deaths or not, whether these deaths register with us or not), the point is that it also conditions how we respond towards such populations or persons *in life*. (Un)grievability here determining, as Gregory observes, whether we are willing to put a particular population in harm's way or not, whether we are willing to safeguard them from violence or not, and/or whether certain lives might be lost to protect other lives.

What makes Gregory's deployment of grievability particularly original is how he builds on the idea of grievability operating in life to demonstrate how civilian

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the idea of a hierarchy of grief, death, or grievability, Gregory sees grievability and un-grievability as part of a continuum.

<sup>2</sup> Others have explored naming the dead (Lloyd 2017) and how the media constructs grievable deaths in different settings (Mhanna and Rodan 2019).



protection was weaponized in Afghanistan, and how that weaponization, despite its ostensibly protective nature, served to devalue and dehumanize Afghan civilians. Here grievability is called on to help illuminate and problematize the tactics used to regulate, manage, and legitimize the violence inflicted on them, the biopolitical considerations informing and shaping coalition's counterinsurgency approach, the necropolitical calculations that determined when and where civilian casualties might be warranted, and the ways in which measures aimed at civilian protection actually worked to bolster the ungrievability of the Afghan civilian population.<sup>3</sup> This is exemplified, for instance, in *Weaponizing Civilian Protection's* account of the way that counting civilian casualties was instrumentalized to enable officials to respond more effectively to claims of civilian harm (Chap. 5) and of how *ex gratia* payments were issued *not* to compensate victims but to mollify local concerns (Chap. 6).

Let me focus on counting for a moment. It is often assumed that body counts simply furnish data about who is killed in a particular conflict. But, as I have suggested elsewhere (Lloyd 2025), counting is performative, it has onto-political effects. To be counted a life or death must be regarded as worth counting. That is, it must be *countable*. I use the term countability here to refer to the general conditions of possibility that underpin acts of counting, conditions that are shaped by and shape the ways in which grievability is ordered.<sup>4</sup> Not counting a death is thus to signal that such a death does not matter, that the life lost is not a valued or avowed life. Indeed, a failure to count is often viewed as a means to dehumanize the dead.<sup>5</sup> If not counting the dead dehumanizes them, is counting necessarily sufficient to render a life grievable?

When Gregory explores when and where Afghan lives qualify for counting and when they cease to qualify as such, he exposes how (in my terms) countability operates in this setting. What his work also demonstrates is that counting alone is not always sufficient to humanize the dead, here Afghan dead. Rather it shows that the introduction of efforts to address and mitigate civilian casualties did not render those populations any more grievable in life or death. The practices and policies the coalition introduced were not, that is, designed to offer unequivocal recognition of the humanity of the victims involved. One of the criticisms Gregory levels at the avoidance and mitigation framework developed by the coalition is, in essence, that it failed to value civilian protection—and civilian lives—as *such*. Citing Jenny Edkins (2011, p. 2), he suggests, it entailed a 'politics that misses the person, a politics that objectifies and instrumentalizes' (p. 33). The martial logic underpinning coalition operations was, in other words, *not* predicated on the assumption that all Afghan killings could—or should—be eliminated, nor that all Afghan lives were valued or valuable *in their own right*. Measures that might have *appeared* to protect civilians were instituted *not* because the coalition recognized that Afghan civilians were lovable and grievable humans who deserved protection *as* humans. Minimising harm to Afghans

<sup>3</sup> Biopolitics is, of course, Michel Foucault's term for the political administration of life, while necropolitics derives from the work of Achille Mbembe, where it signals the form of (sovereign) power that determines who lives and who dies.

<sup>4</sup> I distinguish countability from accountability or what someone is counted *as* in a body count, e.g. civilian, combatant, child, adult and so on.

<sup>5</sup> My paper centres on the paradox that both counting and not counting the dead are adjudged to be ways to dehumanize them.



was rather, as Gregory amply demonstrates, simply a means to an end. A way to ward off local criticism and to prevent the recruitment of further insurgents. A tactic to prevent civilian deaths from becoming a problem. Even as they instituted civilian protection measures, coalition officials continued, the author argues, to objectify and devalue the lives of Afghan civilians. Faced with circumstances where, for instance, the lives of grievable coalition soldiers were at risk, the ungrievable lives of Afghan civilians were sacrificed to protect them. When military objectives changed such that mitigating civilian harm was no longer regarded as vital to mission success, civilian casualty counts were undertaken less meticulously and *ex gratia* payments ceased. Absent the underpinning strategic rationale, Afghan lives remained expendable.

As someone who uses Butler's idea of grievability in my own work, I am more than persuaded by the arguments Gregory puts forward in this excellent book. Drawing on grievability allows him to advance a more critical approach to the practices and policies employed by coalition forces than might have been possible using one of the more conventional, and more abstract, approaches to the study of civilian casualties. It does so because this framing allows Gregory to demonstrate, through engagement with his rich source material, *how* battlefield violence is conditioned by specific normative frames that place a differential value on human life. Frames that determine whether particular persons qualify as human or not, whether particular acts of violence are regarded as legitimate or not, and that condition the practices and policies operated by the coalition. Frames that distribute grievability unevenly for those involved in the conflict by determining who, at specific junctures, is killable and who is not, and who requires protection and who does not.

One important feature of these frames is their role in enabling and perpetuating what Gregory calls, following Foucault and Butler, 'biopolitical racism.' Within particular 'racialized schemes' certain populations are, he avers, unrecognizable, even inapprehensible, as human beings, and their 'lives are not intelligible as human lives' (p. 118). Racialized assumptions are thus intrinsic to the ways in which exclusionary conceptions of the human are produced, as well as to adjudications as to who 'to make live and to let die' (Foucault 2003, p. 241), who needs defending and who may be eliminated. For Gregory, these assumptions, schemes, and logics undergird the policies, practices, and violence undertaken by the coalition, with the net effect that coalition forces were unable to recognize Afghan civilians as human beings.

While I think that Gregory is right in his argument that racialized logics shape who is apprehensible as human, I nevertheless wondered what the content of this logic looked like at the particular time and place he is studying. Was it simply a variant of the idea that states ultimately value their own over those from other nations, and those most proximate to them over those further away geographically, as hinted at in the claim that the racialized logic in play was one that prioritized force protection over civilian protection (p. 155)? A version, perhaps, of the American journalistic adage that 'One dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth 50 Arabs, who are worth 500 Africans' (cited in Moeller 1999, p. 22). Or did Gregory uncover in his research anything more *specific* about the policies and directives developed by the coalition in Afghanistan that generated and/or reflected particular racialized or racializing assumptions about the Afghan population per se, beyond the notion that those inhabiting particular parts of the world are



widely viewed as more disposable or killable than others? Were their particular kinds of cultural assumptions, for instance, about Afghan lives and behaviours revealed in coalition policies and actions?

In the past scholars have been criticized for tending to foreground uncritically a western perspective on grievability, one that focuses on western experiences of loss and grief and where its concern with the deaths of non-western others spotlights, to borrow from Gregory in a different context, ‘our abilities to mourn *their* lives’ (2012, p. 335, original emphasis). *Weaponizing Civilian Protection* also foregrounds a western perspective, though it does so *critically* and *intentionally*. The book is written precisely to understand coalition efforts to minimize civilian casualties and so it deftly and valuably traces the ways in which western coalition thinking determined whose life, within a particular martial context, was grievable. What this analysis reveals very clearly is that Afghan lives ultimately did not matter to coalition officials; not, that is, unless their protection was critical to mission success. As a result of the martial logic within which they were embedded, the measures put in place to ‘protect’ such lives were not ‘evidence that their lives were now grievable, or more grievable than before’ (p. 127). The measures were not confirmation, that is, that the coalition recognized the grievability of Afghan civilian lives.

It is not Gregory’s aim in *Weaponizing Civilian Protection* to develop an account that decentres this western perspective or, indeed, decolonizes how civilian harm is studied and understood. Nevertheless, at various points throughout the book, he alludes to that possibility, though does not set out what it might involve. This got me thinking about what might be needed here. Would current dominant frameworks for exploring such questions need to be displaced, perhaps, and hybrid approaches that meld together different scholarly traditions developed? Would it be sufficient to understand civilian harm from the perspective of Afghan civilians, to engage with those actually involved in these events, or is more required maybe to counter the kinds of dehumanization documented in this book? Is the western framing of grievability outlined here the only way to understand it or are alternative non-western understandings of grievability also possible?

Gregory adopts the idea of grievability in *Weaponizing Civilian Protection* in order to expose how the lives of Afghan civilians have been *made* ungrievable by the policies and practices of the coalition through, for instance, their co-optation into neopolitical logic. This is what the book so valuably and ably demonstrates. It shows how the ungrievability of Afghan lives is determined by coalition (and wider governmental) forces working within and reinforcing a particular normative framework that, loosely speaking, values western lives over Afghan lives. The ungrievability of the latter is, that is, a manifestation of the differential distribution of grievability that Butler and others have repeatedly pointed to. But is any life, including an Afghan life, ever fully ungrievable per se? Or might it be the case that what is ungrievable in one context is grievable in another (and vice versa)? Put differently, might there be competing organizations of grievability, albeit some more widespread and potent than others, in operation at any one time? Recall that to be grievable a population or person must be recognizable, or at least apprehensible, to another population or person as human. Grievability, in this sense, is relational, albeit a condition of relationality that is itself configured and shaped by institutions, policies, and organizations.



Might one possible decolonial move thus be to contest the idea that western norms determine who counts as ungrievable by explicating the ways in which Afghan society *itself* understands both the lives and deaths of its own people?

Gregory, however, is not advancing a decolonial account of civilian harm. He is exploring civilian harm from the perspective of ‘the prevailing normative framework’ (p. 335), which posits Afghan lives as less meaningful or less valuable than the lives of (western) others. There is a very clear sense throughout *Weaponizing Civilian Protection* that Gregory regards the instrumentalization of Afghan lives for martial ends as wrong and that he believes that Afghan civilian lives should be valued *as* lives. Hence, the numerous vignettes he provides for those Afghans killed or injured during the conflict. Vignettes that humanize these subjects by naming them, providing details of their ages and occupations, and information about what they were doing at the time of an attack. Important as it is to oppose war, and the acts of violence against civilians that it involves, for Gregory this, on its own, is not enough. Efforts must also be made to tackle the conditions that enable war and violence, including the normative violence that determines whose deaths are allowable in the first place. This entails affirming, against the terms of the dominant normative framework, that all lives are grievable. Not just in the sense of grieving their loss when it happens. But also, in requiring the cultivation of a ‘less violent disposition towards them in life’ (p. 337). The challenge, of course, is how to do so against the backdrop of policies, practices, institutions and power relations that work against the principle of equal grievability.

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