**A Critique of “Afghanistan, Visualizing the impact of 20 years of war” by Al-Jazeera**

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URL: <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2021/afghanistan-visualising-impact-of-war/index.html>

As the U.S. prepared the withdraw its troops from Afghanistan last May, Al Jazeera evaluated the impact 20 years of war had on the Afghan people and the U.S. Using data, they crafted a sobering story that, alongside powerful images, gives readers insight into various facets of life affected since the 2001 invasion. This piece was produced by Al Jazeera’s interactive unit which has won prices for its data journalism in the past.

Al Jazeera reporters attempted to measure the rates of death of women and children, attacks against civilians, Taliban advances, and the human and economic cost. They compiled data from several sources, including the World Bank, Watson Institute, Afghanistan Analysts Network, the U.S. Congressional Research Service, and United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

The charts are very simple and present information concisely. Reporters alternate between three primary means of visualizing data: bar graphs, tables, and interactive maps. Two bar charts were used to represent the deaths of women and children. The chart headings, slightly bigger than the body text, are used to break up the two graphs and highlight important discoveries. In this instance, 2020 was the deadliest year for women in Afghanistan over the past decade, with 390 deaths documented.

After studying the respective graphs, I noticed that the attacks on women and children were missing a decade of research. However, the graphs included a note about how the methodology for death tolls before 2009 was inconsistent, thus 2000 through 2009 were not included in the count. I appreciated that the reporters included this detail because it reaffirmed my confidence in the reporting. It indicated that while compiling the information, the reporters had thoroughly evaluated the documents.

While reading, I was surprised by my lack of exhaustion. Many data-centered articles tend to overwhelm the reader with blocks of text and graphs. Whereas this story is visually driven: pictures of Afghans, U.S. soldiers, and the Taliban serve as transitions, indicating the focal point of the next section. For example, a picture of Afghan refugee children precedes “The human cost of war” section. I think the reporters were trying to indicate displacement because of death and famine.

The use of visuals driving the story is evident from the start. The headline is centered between a pair of blurry rifles, with an Afghan woman and child walking towards them – seemingly unphased. It instantly conveys that the war has been the reality and the norm.

The lead emerges afterward as a simple black text in a white block that reads, "Here's what 20 years of suffering has done to the Afghan people. As the U.S. withdraws its troops, we look at the latest figures on human suffering." Although the text stands out, the unsentimental opener sets a practical tone for the statistics that follow, in stark contrast to the engaging visuals.

I found the disconnect between the visuals and the text a bit off-putting. The reporters seemed overly reliant on the use of powerful images to humanize the subject matter. For example, the visual precursor to the subhead “US and NATO’s longest war” consists of US troops carrying an ally in a body bag, but the text focuses only on the length of the war and the number of missions. I realize that the image conveys the gravity of the numbers, but the writing lacked empathy, using only hard facts. Overall, I think the reporters could have struck a better balance between the visual and written elements of the story – perhaps even including human sources.

One other critique I have is the graphing for increasing attacks against civilians. Dissimilar to the section on women and children, where the graphs were spaced, this section had three visual data elements in a row. These groupings included attacks by year (as a bar chart), region (as a map), and organizations (as a pie chart). Although each was distinct, my eyes began to glaze over from the “information overload.” Furthermore, the pie chart is small that had I read the article on my phone I would not have noticed the percentages. To prevent this, I would stagger these graphs one after the other, increase the size, and incorporate chart headings. It would also be beneficial to make the map interactive. The ability to hover over different sections and have the cities pop up would have kept me engaged with the content.

Overall, I thought Al Jazeera did a solid job with the story. The reporters used pictures to guide the story in a unique way which complimented relevant data on a war that has affected Afghanistan, the U.S., and United Nations for two decades. Given the length of the war, my primary critique is that the story lacked personal accounts, which would have underscored the impact of the war.