

LIMITED

ACCOUNTABILITY

A transparency audit of the Coalition
air war against so-called Islamic State



Airwars



REMOTE CONTROL

Examining changes in military engagement

This report has been commissioned by **Remote Control**, a project of the Network for Social Change hosted by Oxford Research Group. The project examines changes in military engagement, with a focus on remote control warfare. This form of intervention takes place behind the scenes or at a distance rather than on a traditional battlefield, often through drone strikes and air strikes from above, with special forces, intelligence operatives, private contractors, and military training teams on the ground.

Airwars is a collaborative, not-for-profit transparency project monitoring and assessing civilian casualties from international airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and Libya. It seeks transparency and accountability from belligerents, while advocating on behalf of affected civilians. Airwars also archives all open-source reports of civilian casualties, and military claims by nations. With thirteen Coalition allies active in Iraq or Syria – along with the Iraq government, Russia, Iran and the Assad regime – there is a pressing public interest need for independent, trustworthy public analysis.

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Cover image: A British Royal Navy crewman directs a US F/A-18 Hornet on the flight deck of aircraft carrier the USS Carl Vinson in 2015. (Photo: US Navy/ Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Alex King)

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Executive Summary

- The present vogue for aerial conflicts – often assisted by proxies on the ground – looks set to dominate military thinking for some time. Recent examples include the international Coalition’s war against so-called Islamic State; Russia’s intervention in Syria; and the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen.
- With so many parties to the conflicts in both Iraq and Syria, at the most basic level families of civilians killed or injured in airstrikes have a right to know which nations were responsible. Greater transparency can bring significant strategic and tactical benefits – and help to distinguish the US and its allies from other belligerents such as Russia. Yet holding nations to account remains a challenge, with wide variations in transparency standards.
- Civilian casualties remain an inevitability of modern air wars – even where precision weapons are widely used. Official US government and United Nations data for Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere indicates that one civilian still dies at a minimum, on average, for every 7 to 10 precision airstrikes.
- The US-led Coalition in Iraq and Syria conducted 14,200 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria in the first two years of the campaign. Yet officials insist just 152 non-combatants died in these same actions, or one fatality per 93 airstrikes. In stark contrast, Airwars monitoring indicates that at least 1,500 non-combatants died as a result of Coalition actions during this period. With the public record indicating an underreporting of civilian deaths from Coalition airstrikes of 90 per cent, this suggests systemic failings among all militaries when it comes to counting casualties inflicted from the air.
- Analysis of the Coalition’s civilian casualty assessment process shows it to have been opaque, ad hoc, and significantly biased towards internal military reporting. Poorly-resourced investigators often concluded their limited assessments too quickly, with little evidence that credible external claims were properly engaged with. The majority (60 per cent) of alleged civilian casualty events were not being assessed at all as of May 2016.
- Self-reporting by pilots, operators and analysts has nevertheless led to the discovery of more than half of declared US civilian casualty events – suggesting that internal military monitoring can play a crucial role in identifying civilian casualties. Yet similar weight has not been given to credible external casualty monitoring.
- President Obama’s July 2016 Executive Order on Civilian Casualties appears to have led to key improvements in US monitoring and reporting of non-combatant deaths from its actions. Airwars is encouraged in particular by recent changes to CENTCOM’s tracking and assessment processes. This includes the decision to engage with external monitors tracking civilian casualties. There is significant value to this approach being applied to other theatres and conflicts moving forward.
- In contrast, it is unacceptable that major democracies such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Australia and Denmark have chosen to wage semi-secret conventional wars – with affected civilians on the ground, citizens at home and monitoring agencies unable to hold these governments to account.
- The most widely cited reason given by nations when refusing to disclose the dates and location of their airstrikes is national security or domestic security concerns. While these are legitimate worries, other states have made clear that improved public reporting has not led to an increase in such security concerns. British and Canadian defence officials in particular argue that greater public transparency on military actions can be beneficial when engaging domestic populations. The adoption of similar good practice by all Coalition partners can and should be pursued with some urgency.

Key recommendations

- While military rules of engagement must necessarily be set at a national level, Airwars believes there is significant value in both formal and ad hoc military coalitions having common rules and procedures when it comes to the monitoring of - and public accounting for – reported civilian casualties. Hard-won casualty mitigation lessons from Afghanistan and other recent conflicts are otherwise at risk of being lost.
- Current and future aerial military coalitions are urged to establish, as a norm, baseline public reporting and investigating standards for all parties. These must include:
 - The timely public reporting by each participating nation of both the date and near vicinity of all airstrikes.
 - Standardised, rigorous and transparent civilian casualty investigatory processes at both national and coalition level.
 - Prompt public disclosure of any investigation findings into alleged civilian casualties, at both national and coalition level.
- Heavy dependence upon internal, air-only assessments is likely to lead to an underreporting of civilian deaths from airstrikes. Consistent engagement at national and coalition level with external casualty monitors should therefore take place – with due weight given to reports of non-military origin.
- Coalition partners Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Australia – along with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Turkey – are all urged to declare in a timely manner both the dates and locations of their airstrikes. Claims that such declarations might jeopardise national or domestic security do not appear borne out.
- The widening gap between military and public reporting of civilian fatalities on the battlefield risks significant reputational harm, in addition to further risk to civilians and lack of accountability for victims. Independent assessments of classified data are needed to determine whether aerial civilian casualty monitoring by our militaries is presently fit for purpose. Key findings must be made public.
- The US State Department plays a key role both in monitoring and referring potential civilian casualty cases to the Coalition and to CENTCOM through its small casualty assessing team. With this function now codified by Presidential Executive Order and representing a significant positive step for addressing civilian harm, additional resources are required if the State Department's contribution is to be most effective.
- Airwars urges the incoming Trump Administration to retain the 2016 Presidential Executive Order on civilian casualties, which can not only play a significant role in reducing harm to civilians on the battlefield - and aid strategic and tactical military objectives - but also help to maintain the United States' position as a belligerent that declaredly places a premium on the preservation of civilian lives.

Battlefield civilian casualty monitoring in context

Introduction

In recent years, international powers have engaged increasingly in air-only conflicts. The US covert drone campaigns in Pakistan and Yemen; NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya; and Russia's ongoing aerial actions in Syria are all symptomatic of a move towards so-called remote or 'risk free' war – with belligerents often unwilling to expose their ground forces to combat. Such campaigns can involve ad hoc international or regional alliances - with each partner nation operating different rules of engagement, and often with wide variations in equipment and capabilities.

The most significant such recent conflict has been the international air war in Iraq and Syria against so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) - which began on August 8th 2014 with US airstrikes on ISIL positions at Sinjar. Since then, at least 16 foreign powers have been drawn into the broader conflict.¹ With so many world powers having carried out an estimated 25,000 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria to summer 2016 – alongside actions by aircraft of the Iraq government and the Assad regime – attributing responsibility for any non-combatant deaths is vital.

Yet international powers have adopted radically different approaches towards transparency. While some have revealed the location and dates of all their airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, others including major democracies have declared none. This has significant implications for affected civilians, both in terms of attribution and recompense. At the most basic level, affected civilians deserve to know which nation is killing and injuring their loved ones.

1 Foreign powers known to have carried out airstrikes in Iraq and Syria since 2014 include the United States, Canada, Australia, the UK, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Turkey, Israel, Iran and Russia.

This Airwars study for the Remote Control Project explores transparency and accountability issues within the US-led Coalition. It is based partly on in-depth briefings from senior officials from four sample belligerents (the US, Canada, the UK and Denmark) – and in part on two years of extensive Airwars modelling of the war against ISIL.

The report aims not only to provide a detailed understanding of how such ad hoc coalitions work – but also to identify transparency and accountability good practice for belligerents, and to offer policy recommendations for future airpower-based conflicts.

The Coalition air war against so-called Islamic State

The US-led air war against so-called Islamic State has been significant in its intensity. To July 31st 2016 (effectively two years into the campaign) Coalition aircraft had conducted 14,200 airstrikes on Iraq and Syria – with 52,328 munitions released. The US carried out more airstrikes in Iraq in 2015 alone than for 2006-12 combined. Officially the Coalition claimed 45,000 enemy dead for just five losses of its own (a Jordanian pilot and four US Special Forces) by December 2016. More remarkably, it had admitted to having caused only 173 civilian fatalities to November 2016 – an unprecedentedly low number for recent airpower conflicts. Yet on the ground, the emerging picture of civilian fatalities proved to be radically different.

By the time the United States publicly admitted on May 21st 2015 to the first two civilian deaths of the war against ISIL, Airwars had already tracked 130 separate reported Coalition civilian casualty incidents across Iraq and Syria. Between them, these had likely killed between 350 and 520 non-combatants according to our own estimates. When the first Coalition deaths were admitted in Iraq six months later, almost 400 additional civilians had credibly been reported slain.

The disconnect between military counts of civilian casualties and reporting from the field is profound. For the first two years of war, thirteen Coalition nations had between them conceded just 152 non-combatant deaths. Yet



US Navy personnel prepare bombs for upcoming missions against so-called Islamic State (US Navy)

to July 2016 up to 4,700 civilian fatalities had been alleged from these same international powers according to Airwars tracking. At least 1,550 of these deaths were likely attributable to Coalition military actions. Overall, it appears that less than seven per cent of civilian fatalities were properly being reported by belligerents. Even in the small number of cases admitted by the US, underreporting of deaths has often occurred. A Washington Post investigation found that at least eleven named civilians died in a May 2015 strike in Iraq – mostly women and children – in an attack the US claimed had only killed four.²

Relatively high Coalition civilian casualty tolls have also been estimated by others. The respected Syrian Network for Human Rights reports that to mid-October 2016, a total of 649 civilians had been killed in Syria alone by the US-led Coalition – including 244 children and

132 women.³ A major Amnesty International investigation published in the same month – which featured eyewitness testimony, satellite imagery assessments and munitions analysis – concluded that there was “compelling evidence” to show that 300 civilians had died in just eleven Coalition strikes in Syria.⁴ Iraqi Body Count estimated that as many as 2,500 Iraqi civilians may have died in the first two years of the Coalition’s air campaign in Iraq.⁵

Systemic military failings

Conflict casualty monitors are sometimes called upon to justify their ‘high’ casualty estimates. It must instead be for the US-led

2 ‘A desperate woman’s email from Iraq reveals the high toll of Obama’s low-cost wars’, Washington Post, June 9th 2016, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-desperate-womans-email-from-iraq-reveals-the-high-toll-of-obamas-low-cost-wars/2016/06/09/3e572976-2725-11e6-b989-4e5479715b54_story.html

3 ‘649 individuals Killed at the Hands of the International Coalition Forces including 244 Children and 132 Women’, Syrian Network for Human Rights, October 21st 2016, at <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2016/10/21/28324/>

4 ‘Syria: Cases of suspected civilian casualties in US-led combined joint task force attacks in Syria since 23 September 2014 [appendix]’, Amnesty International, October 26th 2016, at <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2450372016ENGLISH.PDF>

5 Iraqi Body Count email to Airwars, July 28th 2016



Dr. Ziad Khalaf was killed in an airstrike in Mosul on April 30th 2016 – one of a number of named civilian victims from actions the US has now admitted (Picture via Mosul News Agency)

Coalition to explain why its own casualty estimates are unfeasibly low – particularly when compared with other recent air campaigns.

Since 2009 the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has comprehensively modelled civilian fatalities from international airstrikes in that country. Its data – never publicly questioned by the US or its allies – shows that even after significant efforts to reduce harm from 2009 onwards, an average of one civilian has died for every ten or so recent airstrikes in Afghanistan.⁶

Official White House data also claimed that in secretive US drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia during President Barack Obama's tenure – an air campaign once

dubbed “the most precise in history” – one civilian died for every seven strikes. Public casualty monitors placed that ratio closer to one for one.⁷ And thousands of civilian fatalities have been credibly reported as a result of the recent Saudi-led air campaign in Yemen.⁸

Similar civilian fatality ratios if applied to Iraq and Syria – a hot war involving thousands of Coalition airstrikes on urban centres – would lead to expectations of 1,500 deaths or more in the first two years of strikes. This is precisely what the public record indicates.

⁶ See ‘The Strategic Costs of Civilian Harm: Applying Lessons from Afghanistan to Current and Future Conflicts’, Open Society Foundations, June 2016, at <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/strategic-costs-civilian-harm-20160622.pdf>

⁷ ‘Do Not Believe the U.S. Government’s Official Numbers on Drone Strike Civilian Casualties’, Foreign Policy, July 5th 2016, at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/05/do-not-believe-the-u-s-governments-official-numbers-on-drone-strike-civilian-casualties/>

⁸ Those same Arab partners – Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the UAE – were previously part of the Coalition’s anti-ISIL campaign in Syria – where it was claimed no civilians at all were harmed by their actions.

Year	Sorties with at least one weapon	Civilian Deaths	Strikes/One Civilian Death
2009	2050	359	5.71
2010	2517	171	14.72
2011	2678	187	14.32
2012	1975	126	15.67
2013	1407	118	11.92
2014	1136	104	10.92

Open Society Foundations table detailing civilian deaths from international airstrikes in Afghanistan (data via UNAMA and AFCENT) from 'The Strategic Costs of Civilian Harm'

Why then are military estimates of civilian casualties so low? While there are clear domestic and battlefield propaganda benefits to playing down civilian deaths, Coalition officials insist that mitigating harm to non-combatants has been a key part of their strategy in Iraq and Syria:

It wouldn't make operational sense to just go into this thing bombing left and right you know – wiping out ISIL at the expense of the civilian population. Because you're not achieving your military aims. So there's a humane aspect to it but also an operational aspect to it, political.⁹

Even so, air-only campaigns appear beset by systemic failings when it comes to assessing non-combatant deaths. Five years on from the air war which drove dictator Muamar Ghadafi from power, NATO still cannot say how many civilians it killed. While privately accepting non-combatants likely died in its airstrikes, officials still talk publicly only of civilians “*inadvertently affected by our actions*.”¹⁰

Outside investigators long ago reached more robust conclusions. As the United Nations inquiry into the Libya conflict noted, “Amongst the 20 NATO airstrikes investigated, the Commission documented five airstrikes where a total of 60 civilians were killed and

55 injured.”¹¹ A field investigation in 2011 by the New York Times also found up to 70 civilians had died in a sample of NATO strikes – including 29 or more women and children.¹²

The reason NATO itself remains unwilling to concede a single non-combatant death from its actions is, according to officials, because at the time the air-only alliance was unable to verify events down below. And in Libya's post-Ghadafi chaos, NATO has never been invited back to fact-check. As one official candidly noted to Airwars, “You cannot determine from the air alone the effect on civilians on the ground.”¹³

Yet in Iraq and Syria, this is precisely what the Coalition partners are attempting to do – with participating allies relying almost exclusively on aerial post-strike assessments. It is certainly true that internal analysis has played a crucial role in US civilian casualty admissions for both Iraq and Syria. Of the 62 incidents conceded by CENTCOM to December 1st 2016, 30 cases were never publicly reported at the time as far as Airwars can determine - meaning that the 51 fatalities admitted in these events would otherwise

⁹ Senior CENTCOM official to Airwars, Tampa briefing, May 2016

¹⁰ On the record email to author from NATO official April 18th 2016

¹¹ ‘Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Libya’, United Nations Human Rights Council, March 12th 2012, at <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/A.HRC.19.68.pdf>

¹² ‘In Strikes on Libya by NATO, an Unspoken Civilian Toll’, C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmidt, New York Times, December 17th 2011, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/world/africa/scores-of-unintended-casualties-in-nato-war-in-libya.html>

¹³ On the record telephone call between author and NATO official, April 27th 2016

never have come to light. Yet these same air-only assessments also appeared to be missing 1,500 or more additional likely civilian fatalities.

According to the Coalition, each member nation is responsible for the civilians it kills and injures – as well as for the awarding of any *solata* or compensation payments. Determining accountability in hundreds of alleged incidents is therefore vital. For this to happen – and in the absence of trustworthy internal monitoring systems, there needs to be public transparency from each of the participating nations. At a bare minimum this must involve the timely reporting of the date, location and target of each airstrike by its own assets. In addition, nations must properly monitor, assess and investigate possible civilian casualty incidents. As the UN's Human Rights Council heard in 2015, all states conducting strikes in Iraq and Syria "are under an obligation to conduct prompt, independent and impartial fact-finding inquiries in any case where there is a plausible indication that civilian casualties have been sustained, and to make public the results."¹⁴ This study seeks to assess how effective each member of the US-led Coalition has been in fulfilling those obligations.

14 'Human rights in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant', Ben Emmerson QC, UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism, 29th Session of the UN Human Rights Council, Geneva, June 16th 2015, at http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session29/Documents/A_HRC_29_51_AEV.docx

How the Coalition monitors civilian casualties

The monitoring, assessing and investigation of civilian casualty allegations has been primarily conducted by military personnel at CENTCOM - either at its Tampa headquarters or at Coalition forward command centres. As part of this study, Airwars was invited to attend a May 2016 briefing at Tampa, during which senior officials laid out in some detail the processes involved in tracking 'civcas' claims.

A total of 182 allegations had been tracked and assessed for credibility by the Coalition to May 20th according to officials. Of these, 25 cases had been investigated and deemed credible, with information on 55 fatalities caused by US forces released at that time. Another five credible cases were pending. The remaining 132 cases had been assessed by CENTCOM as 'Not Credible.' According to one optimistic official, this suggested civilian casualties were occurring "in only 0.239% of cases." Yet as the same official noted:

When we say 'Not Credible' we don't view that as 'It didn't happen, it could not have happened.' It's just, what is the evidence that we can gather? ... We are very very limited in what data we can gather as a Coalition.

Officials were frank in admitting that the quality of civilian casualty monitoring for Iraq and Syria was far lower than for other recent US conflicts – in part because of the predominantly air-only nature of the war. As one noted, even where US or allied troops were not present at an incident in Afghanistan, investigators could soon be on the scene: "We could move ground forces there very quickly, to try and find out as close to the truth as we possibly could. That is not possible right now in Iraq and Syria."

Instead CENTCOM and its allies relied primarily upon internal post-strike video analysis. In addition, allegations were drawn from a number of sources including the US State Department - which itself tracked claims from agencies including USAID, the United Nations and local casualty monitoring groups.

However, there was no consistent tracking of external casualty monitoring groups such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights or Iraq Body Count. "Our policy is not to go out and seek it. That's policy," one official stressed during the May briefing. "Our gathering method for allegations is not to seek out allegations. It is to receive allegations. We don't have a team that's dedicated to going out and looking for this."

This semi-passive approach to casualty monitoring helps explain the significant discrepancy between the 182 allegations which CENTCOM had assessed to May 20th 2016 – against the 429 alleged incidents tracked by Airwars in Iraq and Syria to that date. Nor was this omission the result of any quality threshold – with officials confirming that all alleged incidents which came within the monitoring team's orbit were assessed. This meant the Coalition had arbitrarily not examined almost 60 per cent of all claimed civilian casualty events from 21 months of war in Iraq and Syria – a significant concern.

There were other problems too with the Coalition's civilian casualty assessment process. A declassified CENTCOM document published in September 2015 showed that most claims were being dismissed within 24 to 48 hours – with little in the way of credible assessments beyond post-strike video analysis.¹⁵ Key witnesses and sources were also not being interviewed. As the director of Airwars noted in a New York Times article, "after a member of Iraq's Parliament warned in January 2015 that internally displaced civilians had been killed by airstrikes near Mosul, the coalition dismissed the report the following day, noting that there was 'insufficient information to determine time and location of the incident.' Yet the Iraqi lawmaker who issued the warning told my organization that his office was never contacted for more information."¹⁶

15 'Iraq/ Syria Civcas Allegation Tracker', declassified CENTCOM document, published September 3rd 2015, at <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/centcom-civcas-investigations.pdf>

16 'Does the U.S. Ignore Its Civilian Casualties in Iraq and Syria?', Chris Woods, New York Times, August 17th 2016, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/18/opinion/does-the-us-ignore-its-civilian-casualties-in-iraq-and-syria.html>



Burning supply trucks following a February 26th 2016 Coalition strike at Mosul, which also reportedly killed five civilians (Picture via NRN News)

Another challenge for Coalition assessors was determining where exactly alleged civilian casualty incidents had taken place – and whether airstrikes had occurred nearby. Public claims of incidents were often sketchy and even contradictory. A reported strike ‘near’ a stated location might refer to somewhere up to 100km distant. The Coalition’s own internal logs of strike locations were also not easy to navigate – and in turn led to quite vague military reporting. As an official explained:

When the aircrew come back [from a strike mission], as you drill into a geographic location, some of those areas have towns that consist of three or four people. So typically what’s going to be in the strike log is going to be the largest city nearby. And they’ll annotate, ‘Conducted a strike near Mosul.’ In fact it’s going to be some small town that’s 23 clicks [kilometres] outside of Mosul. If they put that on the strike log, once it goes through the ‘Enterprise’ [slang for the Combined Air Operations Centre] no one knows where that is.

Officials were keen to stress that if an incident was being investigated, “we do have the ability to go back and drill down into the detail.” That said, the Coalition’s published daily record of its airstrikes could be taken

only as an approximate guide to locations bombed – a particular challenge for external casualty monitors.

Finally, the Coalition was in no hurry to disclose those incidents where it had killed or injured civilians. The first admitted fatalities in Syria were eight months after the event. And in Iraq, it would take 15 months for the Coalition to admit its first non-combatant casualties. By July 2016 it was taking 173 days on average from the Coalition killing a civilian on the battlefield, to its publicly admitting that fact. According to CENTCOM officials, it had been hoped to speed up this process from early 2016 by devolving the reporting of civilian casualties to the Coalition task force. This eventually occurred in December 2016.

Overall then, Airwars assessed the Coalition’s civilian casualty monitoring processes in early summer 2016 as poor. While internal post-strike assessments were on occasion identifying civilian casualties, the wider system was significantly biased against the monitoring, detection and investigation of credible civilian casualty cases – particularly from external sources. Disclosure was also unacceptably slow. These systemic flaws – which appeared to be mirrored across

individual participating militaries – meant that Coalition civilian casualty estimates were not reflecting reality on the battlefield.

Signs of improvement

To its credit, CENTCOM subsequently took steps toward improving its civilian casualty monitoring. At the request of officials, in June 2016 Airwars supplied detailed information to CENTCOM on 438 alleged civilian casualty events it had itself so far tracked – including casualty estimates and approximate geolocations. A senior officer was then tasked to the complex process of reconciling this public data with the Coalition’s own records. As a result according to CENTCOM, a number of new incidents of potential concern were flagged which were then sent out for assessment and possible investigation.

In addition, CENTCOM engaged significantly with this study’s analysis of July 2016 airstrikes and civilian casualty claims – individually examining 47 alleged incidents against the public record to assess whether US or Coalition aircraft might have been involved. This detailed process – which included the provision of geolocation co-ordinates by Airwars – resulted in an additional seven incidents of concern being investigated by the Coalition.

The Coalition also responded more quickly to credible civilian casualty allegations – in one case announcing an investigation on the same day as an event. This was indicative of a more pro-active approach to civilian casualty claims, according to a senior CENTCOM official in a briefing to Airwars. And in December 2016 the Coalition began releasing timely monthly summaries of civilian casualty allegations, along with the status of any assessments or investigations.

It remains to be seen whether these welcome improvements will be sustained over time. For Coalition allies who make much of their precision strikes and a desire to preserve civilian life, there are demonstrable benefits to improving their casualty monitoring processes – not least because this will better help to distinguish them from other belligerents like Russia. There are early indications that President Obama’s July 2016 Executive Order – which to a degree formalised the US

monitoring of civilian casualties in its conflicts – was having a positive effect in this field, with CENTCOM more willing to work with external monitoring agencies to improve its own processes.

It is therefore hoped that President Trump’s incoming administration will see the continued strategic and tactical benefits of US forces minimising harm to non-combatants on the battlefield.

Transparency and accountability by Coalition partner: an assessment

Summary

To July 31st 2016 – effectively two years into the Coalition’s air war against so called Islamic State – international powers had already conducted 14,000 airstrikes against ISIL targets. The 13 declared nations between them have shared a common purpose – the military defeat of ISIL in both Iraq and Syria. Yet this remained an ad hoc alliance at its heart. Members were free to pause or end their involvement – as Canada, the Netherlands and Saudi Arabia had done. Rules of engagement were set at a national level, with partners free to choose which strikes they would prosecute and which they would not. Unilateral actions against targets of national interest were also permitted – with the US, UK and Turkey all at time prosecuting attacks outside the Coalition. The quality of pilot training, aircraft and munitions also varied significantly.

Of most concern for this study, there were no common rules within the Coalition for the monitoring or reporting of civilian casualties by member nations, leading to troubling variations between allies when it came to being held publicly to account for their actions.

As the Airwars chart shows, transparency and accountability standards have varied significantly – with nations clustered into three groups. Canada, the UK, the United States and France have consistently been the more transparent and accountable partners. Each has generally published significant information relating to the dates, locations and targets of their airstrikes – allowing monitors to check their actions against public reports of civilian casualties. The US, UK and Canada have also engaged directly with external monitors and NGOs on specific civilian casualty claims.

The second cluster includes the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and Denmark. These nations publish limited information on their actions, such as vague locational details or monthly munitions reports. Yet they have refused to provide the precise dates or locations of their military actions – significantly impeding accountability. A lack of transparency both

Transparency of action by Coalition member				
	Frequency of reports	Near location given	Date of strikes given	Munitions/ strike numbers released
Canada	As they occur	Yes	Yes	Yes
UK	Weekly	Yes	Yes	Yes
US	Daily*	Occasional	Yes*	Yes
France	Weekly	Occasional	Within a range	Yes
UAE	Occasional	Occasional	Occasional	Occasional
Turkey	Poor	Occasional	Occasional	Occasional
Denmark	Weekly	No	Within a range	Yes
Australia	Monthly	No	No	Yes
Bahrain	Occasional	No	Yes	No
Saudi Arabia	Occasional	No	Occasional	Occasional
Belgium	Occasional	Occasional	No	Occasional
Jordan	Occasional	No	Occasional	Occasional
Netherlands	Weekly	No	No	Occasional

* US reporting subsumed into coalition daily reports

Airwars.org, November 2016

limits the possibility of legal accountability for any violations of the laws of war – but also impedes public scrutiny, debate and oversight more generally.

The final and most troubling cluster includes Australia, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Belgium, along with Jordan and the Netherlands. While each has issued very limited information on their military actions against ISIL – for example some overarching data, or reports on occasional single incidents - in effect these six nations have waged war without any real public accountability for their actions. And while each claims to have killed no civilians in the air war against ISIL, it remains impossible to verify this against the public record.

Below we provide a detailed assessment of transparency and accountability practices by each Coalition member state – and include key recommendations for improvements.

United States

Relatively transparent, though casualty monitoring remains challenged

After two years of airstrikes against so-called Islamic State or ISIL, the United States remains the dominant partner within the international Coalition. Formidable airpower has been deployed, with the US launching strikes on Iraq and Syria from multiple nations across the region – as well as from its own aircraft carriers. Combat aircraft deployed include A-10 Warthog ground attack planes and AH-64 Apache helicopters; MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper drones; F-16s, F-35s, F/A 18 Hornets and Super Hornets; B-1, B-2 and B-52 bombers; and AV Harrier jumpjets.

In Syria in particular, the ‘Coalition’ war against ISIL often resembles a unilateral campaign by the United States. Official data shows for example that for the duration of the three-month 2016 campaign to capture Manbij in Syria from ISIL, 98 per cent of all Coalition airstrikes were in fact by the United States. Even in Iraq – where a third of air actions are by its allies – the US had carried out 6,422 strikes to July 31st 2016.

As the lead US agency, United States Central Command (CENTCOM) has promoted a certain degree of openness in the war since 2014. A Coalition media team - based in the Middle East and made up almost entirely of US personnel - issues daily bulletins saying when and generally where the alliance has struck, in both Iraq and Syria. Hour-long weekly press briefings with the Coalition’s chief spokesman are held remotely with the Pentagon press corps. Senior officials at CENTCOM’s Tampa headquarters also routinely brief journalists on the conflict. Overall the US has embraced the idea of a ‘running commentary’ in the war against ISIL – in sharp contrast to lower levels of disclosure by many of its allies.

Confirmed civilian casualties

As the dominant Coalition partner, it is a statistical likelihood that the United States is also responsible for the majority of civilian deaths from airstrikes against ISIL. The US is also the only Coalition nation to date to have conceded civilian casualties – with 119 fatalities admitted to November 9th 2016. Even so, the issue of US/ Coalition underreporting of civilian deaths by as much as 93 per cent remains one of the most contentious issues of the war. Airwars itself had estimated between 1,800 and 2,660 likely civilian fatalities to the same date.

The first Coalition civilian deaths of the war against ISIL were only confirmed on May 21st 2015, some 286 days and more than 4,000 airstrikes into the campaign. According to a CENTCOM statement, a US airstrike on the village of Harem near Aleppo in Syria six months previously had “*likely led to the deaths of two non-combatant children*.”¹⁷ It would be another six months before the US publicly conceded the first such deaths in Iraq, by which point Airwars had already tracked 280 alleged civilian casualty events across both Iraq and Syria.¹⁸

17 ‘CJTF-OIR Completes Civilian Casualty Investigation’ CENTCOM press release, May 21st 2015, at www.centcom.mil/news/news-article/ctjf-oir-completes-civilian-casualty-investigation

18 See ‘After 15 months of Iraq airstrikes, Coalition admits to killing civilians’, Airwars, November 21st 2015, at <https://airwars.org/news/after-15-months-of-airstrikes-coalition-finally-admits-killing-civilians-in-iraq/>



~~SECRET//REL USA, FVEY~~
DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
UNITED STATES AIR FORCES CENTRAL COMMAND
AL UDEID AIR BASE QATAR

JUN 28 2015

MEMORANDUM FOR RECORD

FROM: USAFCENT/CC

SUBJECT: Appointing Authority Approval – Possible CIVCAS IVO Al Hatra Checkpoint, Iraq,
13 Mar 15

I have reviewed the commander-directed investigation completed by Investigating Officer (IO) [REDACTED] and the subsequent legal review of the investigation. I concur with the findings and conclusions of the IO, who substantiated by a preponderance of the evidence that civilian casualties had occurred, and also noted an apparent communication error during the target approval process. I believe the strike was lawful, and the target approval process error, now addressed, did not affect the final outcome.

JOHN W. HESTERMAN III
Lieutenant General, USAF
Commander

The US publicly conceded its first civilian fatalities in Iraq some 15 months into the campaign – despite having internally confirmed the deaths five months earlier

Since January 2015 the US has since released seven separate batches of civilian casualty cases via CENTCOM press releases, totalling 167 additional civilian fatalities from 60 events. Thirty of these US events were never publicly reported by local Iraqis or Syrians at the time – a reflection not only of chaos on the battlefield, but of the relative value of US internal reporting mechanisms. Many of the incidents admitted by CENTCOM were the result either of human or intelligence error; or of civilians entering a ‘kill box’ after munition launch. Without US pilots, operators and analysts coming forward to declare their concerns, these incidents would never have been reported. Internal military monitoring can therefore play a key role in civilian casualty monitoring by belligerents. At issue is whether the Coalition remains overly focused on such internal monitoring – at the expense of credible external reports of civilian fatalities.

Limited US transparency

The air war against so-called Islamic State began as a unilateral US action in August 2014. CENTCOM has since reported on the war daily, a welcome policy which has sustained for more than two years. However US-specific strike reporting became more

opaque as the number of partners in the evolving international Coalition grew. In October 2014 the US stopped identifying which other nations had participated in strikes on a given day. And by March 22nd 2015, daily releases had ceased to distinguish between actions by the US and its partners, referring now only to strikes by ‘Coalition military forces.’

In effect this has prevented monitors from identifying whether the US itself might have been responsible for a specific civilian casualty allegation – a key obstacle to meaningful transparency and public accountability. CENTCOM officials have previously explained this approach as follows:

The US is a member of the Coalition and US Central Command’s decision to use the term “Coalition airstrikes” to encapsulate all air operations represents our best efforts to be transparent, by acknowledging and accounting for Coalition airstrikes without linking one Coalition nation to a particular airstrike against their wishes.’¹⁹

¹⁹ Cited in ‘Cause For Concern’, Airwars, August 2015, at <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/airwars-cause-for-concern-civilians-killed-by-coalition.pdf>

This opaque reporting has represented less of a challenge in Syria, where according to official data more than 95 per cent of strikes are by the United States. However in Iraq – where one in three Coalition airstrikes are by Coalition partners – the absence of US-specific reports has hindered efforts to attribute responsibility in civilian casualty events.

The State Department's role in US casualty monitoring

Though little reported, the US State Department also plays a key role in both monitoring and internally reporting potential civilian casualties relating to US or Coalition actions. Until recently this was an ad hoc function performed through the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL). However, with the issuing on July 1st 2016 of President Obama's Executive Order on civilian casualties from US military actions, this became a formalised role of the State Department.²⁰

According to a senior DRL official interviewed for this report, the State Department's small casualty tracking team monitors multiple external sources for 'credible' civilian casualty allegations – noting that "civil society networks also have a unique perspective [on a conflict], particularly those with people on the ground."

An initial assessment is conducted on these allegations, with those deemed credible passed on to CENTCOM for investigation.

There have been previous complaints that CENTCOM too often ignores casualty incidents referred by the State Department. As a September 2015 BuzzFeed field investigation in Syria noted: "According to one [US official], credible reports of civilian casualties that have been flagged internally and passed to CENTCOM appear to receive only 'minimal' follow-up. 'They don't want to admit it,' the official said, requesting anonymity because he wasn't authorized to

speak to the press. 'It's against their interest to admit there were civilian casualties in any strikes, and that's why the burden of proof is quite high.'"²¹

Despite its obvious value, the State Department's casualty tracking team also remains poorly resourced. To mid-2016 for example, there was only one State official seconded to CENTCOM at its Tampa headquarters who was tracking civilian casualty allegations. And even with its new formal function monitoring reports, officials suggested to Airwars that this has yet to deliver more resources.

Even so, the State Department believes its civilian casualty monitoring role contributes to an improving US transparency culture. As one senior official noted to Airwars, its now-official monitoring role has gone down well with the Defense Department "where there's an emphasis on formal procedure."

Recommendations

As the likely dominant partner in any international coalition it is a part of, the United States is in a particularly strong position to help define standards of public accountability and transparency. Indeed, the July 2016 Obama Executive Order on civilian casualties included an obligation on US military and intelligence agencies to "engage with foreign partners to share and learn best practices for reducing the likelihood of and responding to civilian casualties, including through appropriate training and assistance."

Assuming the Executive Order survives a presidential handover, there are clear benefits for affected civilians if the United States foregrounds best practices in its engagements with other militaries. As the high civilian death toll from Saudi airstrikes in Yemen continues to demonstrate, the United States can experience significant reputational harm as a result of the actions of its military partners. Making any US involvement in such *ad hoc* alliances conditional on agreed civilian protections and transparency of action - which

20 'Executive Order -- United States Policy on Pre- and Post-Strike Measures to Address Civilian Casualties in U.S. Operations Involving the Use of Force', White House, July 1st 2016, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/01/executive-order-united-states-policy-pre-and-post-strike-measures>

21 'The U.S.-Led Fight Against ISIS Has Killed Far More Civilians Than It Admits', BuzzFeed, September 2nd 2015, at <https://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/the-us-led-coalition-bombing-syria-has-killed-more-civilians>

go beyond baseline law of war obligations – would do much to prevent and mitigate harm to non-combatants on the battlefield.

We also urge the Department of Defense – and in particular CENTCOM – to end the present practice of subsuming US military strikes into overall ‘coalition’ public reporting. While we note the argument made by military officials that this behaviour represents a necessary compromise in such alliances, it effectively renders the US less transparent and publicly accountable than many of its allies. This would appear to be at odds with recent DoD and White House moves to improve accountability for battlefield civilian casualties.

Our final recommendation is that CENTCOM continues to improve its civilian casualty monitoring functions. As our report notes, by May 2016 CENTCOM investigators had failed to assess more than 60 per cent of all known alleged civilian casualty events across Iraq and Syria. Even where assessments took place they were often poorly researched; were conducted in too short a time frame; and were overly dismissive of credible external sources. By contrast, significant weight was generally attached to internal air-only assessments – which did result in a number of civilian casualty events being identified.

CENTCOM has recently made significant efforts to engage with external monitoring and assessing organisations, and we hope that this approach continues beyond the present conflict with ISIL. At CENTCOM’s own request it has sought to reconcile its own data with that of Airwars – an exercise which helped identify a number of potential civilian casualty events. We were also encouraged by CENTCOM’s decision to identify whether US aircraft had played a role in any of the 47 alleged civilian casualty events reported for July 2016.

While there have been clear demonstrations of will and some improvements made, there is still much room for better transparency and public accountability. The gulf between credible public and US/ Coalition estimates of civilian casualties in Iraq and Syria remains profound. And the delay between the US killing a non-combatant and publicly admitting it remains excessively long – presently averaging five months or more. We therefore urge CENTCOM and other US military

commands to continue to seek improvements in how they best track, assess and report on civilian casualties from the battlefield.

France

Fair transparency though little focus on civilian casualty issues

France was the first nation to join the US in its fight against ISIL, and remains the third most active member of the Coalition. It is also one of only three countries to have participated continuously in the campaign, alongside the US and UK. Between September 19th 2014 and November 8th 2016 France reported 978 airstrikes by its Mirages and Rafales in Iraq and Syria.²² The locations of a significant proportion of these strikes – though not all – have been publicly declared.

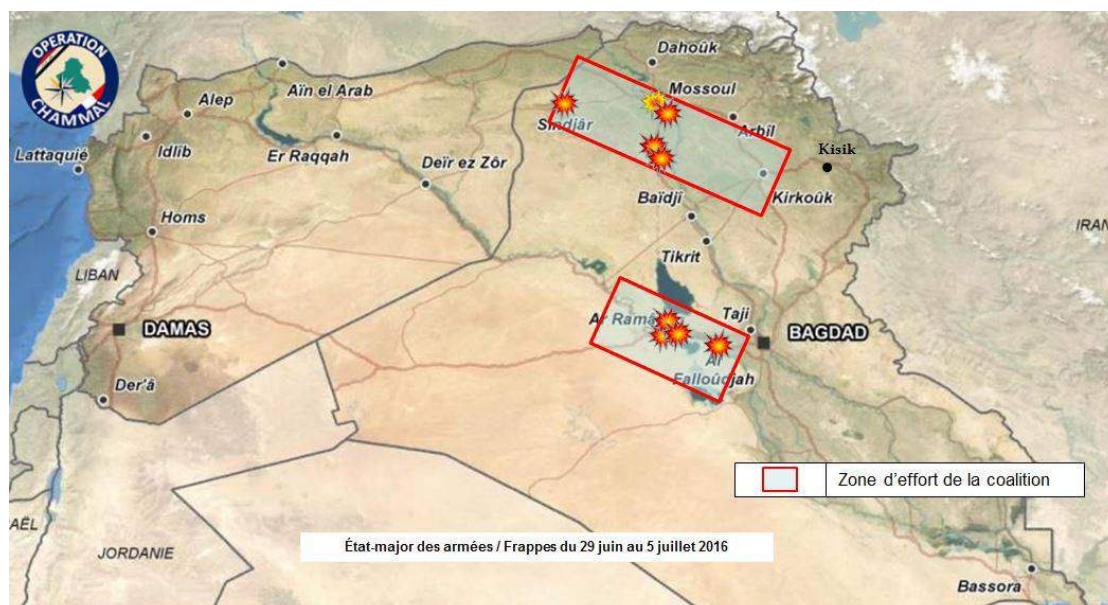
France initially reported its airstrikes in Iraq within 24 hours, stating what aircraft and weapons were employed, and which locations and targets were struck. It later moved to poorer weekly reporting via Facebook and press releases, with location reporting sometimes intermittent. These weekly summaries are at times supplemented with more detailed reports on specific military actions.

For the week of June 29th to July 5th 2016 for example, the Ministère de la Defense used Twitter and Facebook to report that it had carried out nine airstrikes in Iraq “*sur les secteurs de Ramadi, Mossoul et Qayyarah*.”²³ An accompanying map gave the locations of all nine strikes – making clear that France had also struck at Sinjar, Fallujah, and in the vicinity of Qayyarah.

France also used its weekly report to identify an airstrike by one of the Coalition’s more secretive partners, noting that on July 5th in the Mosul area, two French Mirages

22 ‘#Chammal - Depuis le 19 sept. 2014 • 4 738 vols en Irak / Syrie • 872 frappes sur Daech • 1 487 objectifs détruits’, État-Major Armées tweet, October 7th 2016, at https://twitter.com/airwars_/status/785415999684222976

23 ‘Point de situation des opérations: Irak/ Syrie Chammal’, Armée française, July 7th 2016, at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/armee-francaise-operations-militaires/point-de-situation-des-operations/1063856720326719>



French mapping reveals the location of airstrikes for June 29th - July 5th 2016.

accompanied by four Belgian F-16s “*hit several buildings simultaneously at a large site for making and storing homemade bombs.*”²⁴ That French revelation was significant – with Brussels itself insisting that “*the locations, timings and the effects of any mission... are classified and cannot be revealed.*”²⁵ In a similar disclosure, France had previously revealed that 15 aircraft from seven nations struck 20 targets in a December 2014 raid on Mosul. Only three nations (France, the US and Canada) have ever publicly confirmed carrying out attacks on that date.²⁶

While providing some helpful detail in its published reports, France’s present refusal to give the exact dates of airstrikes may be implicating it unnecessarily in incidents where civilian casualties have been alleged. On June 29th 2016 at Ramadi, Coalition and

Iraq government aircraft attacked a fleeing ISIL convoy in which civilians were reportedly present. On June 30th the wife of a ISIL official died alongside the target in Mosul. On the same day, at least 12 civilians died when a second ISIL convoy was attacked at Ramadi Island. And on July 1st up to 25 internally displaced Iraqis were reported killed in Zankura, Iraq, following alleged Coalition strikes and Iraqi government shelling.²⁷

In theory - based on its published report for that week - France may be implicated in some or all of these incidents in which 40 or more civilians may have died.²⁸ Without improved public transparency it is impossible to be sure.

Civilian casualty challenges

Along with almost all other Coalition partners, France continues to insist that its actions have killed no civilians – despite almost 1,000 airstrikes across Iraq and Syria. However a declassified CENTCOM document obtained by investigative reporter Joseph Trevithick

24 Ministère de la Defense, July 8th 2016, at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/irak-syrie/actualites/chammal-frappe-planifiee-contre-daech-dans-la-region-de-mossoul>

25 Cited in Cause For Concern: Hundreds of civilian non-combatants credibly reported killed in first year of Coalition airstrikes against Islamic State, Airwars, August 2015, at <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/airwars-cause-for-concern-civilians-killed-by-coalition.pdf>

26 ‘Chammal : participation à un raid de la coalition’, Ministère de la Defense, December 5th 2014, at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/irak-syrie/actualites/chammal-participation-a-un-raid-de-la-coalition>

27 See ‘Reported civilian and friendly fire deaths from Coalition airstrikes: 2016’, Airwars, at <https://airwars.org/civcas-2016/>

28 ‘Point de situation des operations 29 juin au 5 juillet 2016’, Ministère de la Defense, July 7th 2016, at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/armee-francaise-operacions-militaires/point-de-situation-des-operacions/1063856720326719>

showed that on at least one occasion, civilian casualties as a result of French actions may have occurred.²⁹

According to CENTCOM, surveillance footage for Mosul on February 3rd 2015 showed a “possible child entering a targeted bunker and then disappearing out of the field of view (FOV) approximately 19 minutes before Strike.” The dynamic attack was conducted by a French Mirage, callsign Rage 43. Claims of a child casualty were eventually deemed “not credible” by military intelligence officers, who decided “individuals struck were fighters”. Airwars researchers found no reference to a child fatality or indeed to any civilian casualties in Mosul for this date, although reports did note an intensification of Coalition strikes on the city.

In a second possible French incident in Mosul, four “unknown persons” were initially thought to have been injured after they entered a kill box during a Coalition targeted strike on a vehicle on December 16th 2014. CENTCOM did not identify which nation was responsible for the attack. But in its own reporting, France noted that “on 16th December a patrol was again requested by the CAOC [Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar] to destroy a target in the Mosul area.”

One challenge for reporters and investigators seeking improved French transparency has been a general reluctance to engage displayed by officials. Airwars asked the Ministère de la Defense in September 2016 how many potential civilian casualty events involving French aircraft had been assessed and investigated. Officials had not been able to answer that query ten weeks later, as this Audit was filed/went to press.

Recommendations

France remains among the most active members of the US-led Coalition – and has also consistently been one of the more transparent and publicly accountable partners. Even so, improvements can and should be made. In particular, French reporting of

airstrike locations is inconsistent – while the present refusal to give the precise dates of most strikes unnecessarily implicates France in casualty events in both Iraq and Syria.

Airwars therefore calls on the Ministère de la Defense to return to its original practice of reporting the dates and locations of all airstrikes as they occur. We also urge France to make public details of all alleged civilian casualty events investigated to date – along with their findings.

United Kingdom

Good level of accountability – though overly confident on civilian casualty claims

The UK began its campaign against so-called Islamic State in Iraq on September 30th 2014 under David Cameron’s Conservative-led government - and remains one of only three continuous members of the kinetic Coalition (alongside the US and France). British airstrikes in Syria formally commenced on December 5th 2015 following a parliamentary vote – although the UK had carried out a unilateral drone targeted killing of a British citizen in Raqqa three months earlier.

Britain has consistently been the most active member of the Coalition after the United States, with 1,048 declared airstrikes in Iraq and 67 in Syria to November 7th 2016. Strikes are conducted by manned Tornado and Typhoon aircraft, as well as by the RAF’s small fleet of Reaper remotely piloted drones.

Transparency and accountability

Overall, the UK is rated by Airwars as the most transparent active member of the US-led Coalition. Strike reports are published weekly, which often give significant information about locations and targets, along with the aircraft and munitions used. Additional detail on weapon use, enemy combatants killed and other key metrics has been released in response to parliamentary questions, media enquiries and freedom of information requests. Even so, the UK has on occasion issued poor quality information – declining to identify the location or even country hit in a strike.

²⁹ ‘Iraq/ Syria CIVCAS Tracker’, declassified CENTCOM document, September 2014 – April 2015, archived at <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/centcom-civcas-investigations.pdf>

Since January 2016 the Ministry of Defence (MoD) has also reviewed monthly submissions by Airwars of possible civilian casualty cases potentially involving UK aircraft. To July 31st 2016 a total of 43 such alleged events had been reviewed, with the MoD investigating each allegation for possible links to UK aircraft. The UK continues to maintain that no civilian casualties have so far been identified from its airstrikes.

This combined material has in turn enabled the tracking of most UK airstrikes against any known alleged civilian casualty events in the vicinity – a vital element for genuine accountability.

For example, on June 29th 2016 Coalition and Iraq government aircraft carried out a sequence of airstrikes near Fallujah on a convoy of up to 400 fleeing vehicles carrying ISIL fighters, their families and possibly other non-combatants. Actions that day were controversial given the presence of civilians. According to a narrative of events published by the military blog War Is Boring, “Baghdad informed the Americans [of the convoy], but CJTF-OIR [the Coalition] denied permission for its warplanes to attack the area in question, as the vehicles in question could be carrying civilians.”³⁰

The Washington Post reported that “According to CJTF-OIR spokesman Col. Chris Garver, U.S. aircraft eventually did participate in an attack on the convoy, although they specifically avoided the part of the column the coalition suspected of carrying civilians.” The Post also cited US officials as saying they “could not immediately determine whether there were civilian casualties” as a result of actions that day.³¹ The UK shortly afterwards publicly declared its own role in the Fallujah operation:

A Typhoon struck two vehicles and a large group of extremists with Paveway IV bombs west of Fallujah and two Reapers destroyed a further four vehicles and a group of fighters, using Hellfire missiles and a GBU-12 guided bomb. One Reaper observed the ISIL vehicles refusing to stop and pick up fellow armed extremists trying to escape on foot.³²

Airwars flagged the Fallujah event to the MoD as a potential civilian casualty incident. It initially responded only in broad terms, stating: “*After extensive research, we can confirm that there was no UK involvement.*”³³ When asked to clarify further given the known presence of civilians in the convoy, a senior MoD official stated: “We have reviewed the documentation for the convoy strikes on 29th June, which captures all of the targeting, legal and policy discussions leading to the decision to strike and summarises the decision. These demonstrate that the utmost care was taken in the approvals process for the UK strikes to ensure there were no non-combatants in the vehicles we were targeting. Analysis of the data we had about the vehicles at the time indicates that the convoy was re-deploying fighters for future activity, which in turn supports an analysis that they still presented a threat. All of this leads to a high-confidence assessment that UK strikes did not cause non-combatant casualties.”

For two other June 2016 incidents flagged by Airwars, the MoD was initially unable to locate the alleged event locations based on the public record. Airwars was then able to assist with geolocation for one of the incidents, which enabled the UK to make a more comprehensive assessment. As a senior MoD official noted, “After further assessment, we can state with a high degree of confidence that the refined locations you provided indicate that RAF activity was not related to the allegation of civilian casualties in Manbij on 27 June 16.”³⁴ The exchange

30 ‘Iraqis and Americans Butted Heads Over the ISIS ‘Convoy Massacre’, Arnaud Delalande, War is Boring, July 4th 2016, at <https://warisboring.com/iraqis-and-americans-butted-heads-over-the-isis-convoy-massacre-fd4ee9e243bb#.5vol316ns>

31 ‘Iraqi, U.S. aircraft bomb convoy of Islamic State fighters fleeing Fallujah with their families’, Washington Post, June 30th 2016, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/06/30/iraqi-gunships-u-s-jets-target-islamic-state-convoys-outside-fallujah-and-ramadi/>

32 Ministry of Defence daily report for June 2016 at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/raf-air-strikes-in-iraq-and-syria-june-2016>

33 Ministry of Defence letter to Airwars director Chris Woods, September 13th 2016

34 Senior MoD official to Airwars, October 31st 2016 email



An MoD poster highlighting the role of its Tornado aircraft in Iraq, summer 2015.

demonstrates the potential value which external monitors can bring to internal military casualty monitoring processes.

The issue of drones

One area where UK transparency has been lacking is in the reporting of airstrikes by the small British fleet of MQ-9 Reaper drones. Despite assertions to Airwars by Defence Secretary Michael Fallon that *"We adopt the same policy on location of airstrikes whether conducted by Tornados, Typhoons or Reaper"*, a comprehensive analysis of UK drone strikes in Iraq and Syria for 2014-2015 found otherwise.³⁵

Conducted by Dr Jack McDonald for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Drones in partnership with Airwars, the study clearly showed that the MoD had indeed treated its public reporting of manned and unmanned aircraft very differently, leading Airwars to conclude in April 2016 that *"Claims by government that there is no evidence or*

reports of RAF airstrikes having resulted in civilian casualties cannot at present be supported." As Airwars noted in a letter to Michael Fallon which outlined the drones research:

Dr McDonald has assessed MoD's public reporting of 392 locations, relating to 549 identifiable strike incidents to December 31st 2015. To summarise, his study finds that while 76 per cent of manned aircraft strike locations are reported with a high level of precision (the name of a specific town or village) only 13 per cent of unmanned strikes are reported with the same accuracy.³⁶

According to UK defence officials interviewed for this study, poorer reporting of UK drone strikes in Iraq and Syria related to operational security concerns. *"In the early stages we had concerns about Reaper being more vulnerable than manned aircraft,"* one MoD official told Airwars. *"They're slow and tend to hang around. There were some quite robust debates on how much geographical detail should be there [in published reports.] If you say they're striking in an area, you also risk giving away intelligence on observation."*

Over time such concerns diminished – and it is noticeable that in 2016 the UK significantly overhauled its public reporting of drone strikes. In June for example, the RAF conducted 25 Reaper actions in Iraq and two in Syria.³⁷ In its reporting, the MoD publicly identified the locations and dates of all of its drone strikes.³⁸

The UK's controversial 'no civilian casualties' claim

UK officials have very publicly boasted of Britain having caused no civilian casualties in Iraq and Syria - despite more than 1,000 RAF airstrikes since 2014. In April 2016

35 Letter from UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon MP to Airwars, February 19th 2016

36 Airwars letter to UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon, April 7th 2016

37 'Table 1: UK Reaper missions and weapons launched by location', UK Drone Strike Stats, Drone Wars UK, at <https://dronewars.net/uk-drone-strike-list-2/>

38 'RAF air strikes in Iraq and Syria: June 2016', Ministry of Defence, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/raf-air-strikes-in-iraq-and-syria-june-2016>

for example, the Foreign Office's anti-ISIL channel on Twitter stated: "coalition air campaign most precise in history of warfare. Zero civilian casualties from RoyalAirForce air strikes."³⁹ Government ministers too have made remarkable claims; with the Defence Secretary insisting to the BBC that a British-made missile was so advanced it "eliminates civilian casualties because it's so precise."⁴⁰

These bold public proclamations appear at odds with internal assessments by the MoD. Senior officials instead told Airwars that any assertion claiming no civilians have died should be understood "within the limits of what we know, and what information is available to us."

As this report notes elsewhere, recent Western air campaigns employing precision weapons have nevertheless resulted in civilians being killed on average every 7 to 10 airstrikes. For the UK to claim that no civilians have died in more than 1,000 of its own airstrikes therefore stretches credulity – and suggests MoD internal casualty monitoring is at present dysfunctional. In December 2015 MoD officials stated that the UK was not consulting external monitors in its assessments of civilian casualties – though this was later reversed.⁴¹ Officials have also told Airwars that – like CENTCOM – the UK does not 'actively' seek out allegations of civilian casualties.

Recommendations

The UK remains a key military power, with its actions likely to influence the behaviour of other nations in those alliances it participates in. The MoD's decision to report consistently and openly on its air campaign in Iraq and Syria is therefore a welcome one. As one senior UK defence official told Airwars: "Our approach? We certainly stick to our line of being as transparent as possible. We want

to be very very effective while avoiding civilian casualties. We're proud of that - and happy to be seen to be proud of that." Along with Canada, the UK has set a number of transparency benchmarks which we would urge other Coalition partners to adopt.

Where Airwars remains significantly concerned is in the MoD's monitoring of – and reporting on – likely civilian casualties from its airstrikes. Given the statistical improbability of the UK having killed no civilians in more than 1,000 airstrikes, this suggests the MoD's monitoring capabilities may not at present be fit for purpose. We therefore recommend that the MoD commissions an independent review – which is able to examine the validity of classified civilian casualty assessments. We also call for the key findings of such a review to be made public.

Finally we urge ministers and senior government officials not to overstate the case that civilians have been unharmed in UK actions. This wrongly implies that MoD actions can be pursued without risk of harm to local populations. That is demonstrably not the case.

Belgium

A secretive and generally unaccountable conventional military campaign

Operation Desert Falcon, Belgium's involvement in the war against so-called Islamic State, has been characterised by poor levels of transparency - with both Turkey and Saudi Arabia scoring higher on public accountability.

Belgium first began airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq on October 5th 2014, basing six F-16s at Jordan's Muwaffaq Salti Air Base. In July 2015 it became the first Coalition member publicly to suspend a campaign, agreeing in future to rotate with the Netherlands. During that first nine months, Belgium later confirmed it had released 324 bombs and missiles (approximately 93 airstrikes) and fired 681 20mm cannon shells at ISIL targets. On June 28th 2016 Brussels returned to the offensive, this time carrying out strikes in both Iraq and Syria.

39 UK Against Daesh tweet, April 29th 2016, at <https://twitter.com/ukagainstdaesh/status/726075391987843076>

40 Michael Fallon MP, Today programme, BBC Radio 4, November 23rd 2015

41 'Ministry of Defence U-turns on civilian death airstrike investigations', Sunday Herald, January 17th 2016, at http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/14210110.Ministry_of_Defence_U_turns_on_civilian_death_airstrike_investigations/

Limited public information has been issued for both campaigns. In 2014 the Belgian Defence Ministry reported an initial airstrike on October 5th 2014 and a second on November 3rd. Belgium then made no public statements until April 24th 2015, when it issued an overall tally of targets and sorties. In 2016 a similar pattern emerged, with almost no public statements issued. We only know of a specific Belgian airstrike at Mosul on July 5th 2016 for example, because the French defence ministry disclosed that information.⁴²

In late September 2016 the Belgian Air Component held a press conference where it did release some details of the new campaign. For example it stated that 44 per cent of 105 missions conducted since July 1st 2016 had been kinetic – around 45 Belgian airstrikes in total, or 15 per month. It was also revealed that Belgian F-16s were primarily using 500lb munitions in Iraq and Syria, as well as the 2,000lb GBU-31. Mapping showed that 83 per cent of Belgian strikes were clustered around Mosul – a particular hotspot for reported civilian casualties. Commanders also continued to insist that no civilians had died in Belgian airstrikes – though officials declined to engage when asked by Airwars to identify which if any of 47 alleged Coalition incidents in July 2016 its own aircraft might have been implicated in.

Seeking improved transparency

Belgium has consistently been among the least publicly accountable members of the US-led Coalition. Responding to requests for more transparency, a Defence Ministry spokesperson told Airwars in mid-2015 that “the locations, timings and the effects of any mission (not just those of Operation Desert Falcon) are classified and cannot be revealed” but that its actions had been “fully compatible with our obligations under international humanitarian law.”⁴³

42 Ministère de la Defense de France, at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/irak-syrie/actualites/chammal-frappe-planifiee-contre-daech-dans-la-region-de-mossoul>

43 Cited in Cause For Concern: Hundreds of civilian non-combatants credibly reported killed in first year of Coalition airstrikes against Islamic State, Airwars, August 2015, at <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/airwars-cause-for-concern-civilians-killed-by-coalition.pdf>

A later freedom of information request by the NGO Vredesactie secured a small number of Defence Ministry internal operational reports from the period. These indicate that Belgium conducted airstrikes in Iraq at unknown locations on October 23rd and 26th 2014; and on November 13th, 14th, 17th and 18th 2014.⁴⁴ Airwars tracking has identified two alleged civilian casualty events for these dates. On October 26th it was claimed that between 10 and 20 civilians died in a strike at Aouinat near Mosul. And in a better-reported incident, on November 17th 2014 between 13 and 16 civilians were reported killed at Qayyarah south of Mosul. It remains unclear whether Belgium or other Coalition partners were responsible for these reported fatalities.

In May 2016 Airwars made a short submission to the Belgian Parliament calling for the Government “to adopt Coalition best practice (as already amply demonstrated by close allies Canada and the UK), and to report in a timely fashion both where and when its airstrikes are carried out.”⁴⁵ The Belgian Government responded somewhat aggressively. “If there are international organisations that clearly have other goals than our internal security and want us to communicate as big Rambos and machos about how many victims we cause, then so be it,” defence minister Steven Vandeput told Parliament. “We don’t have much to gain with bragging about our operations abroad: not for our people on the ground, not in terms of our internal security. I believe the contrary is true, actually.”⁴⁶

Airwars was able to speak with Major General Frederik Vansina, commander of the Belgian Air Component, in late September 2016. He insisted there was no lack of transparency - just a different approach to that of other allies. He noted for example that Belgium had already suffered significant terrorist attacks

44 Defenseie, via Vredesactie freedom of information request

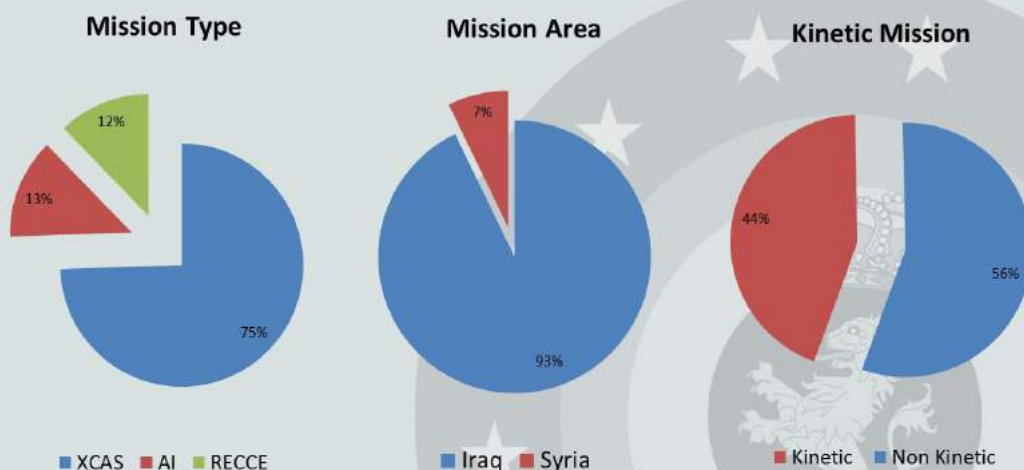
45 ‘Improving Belgian transparency and public accountability in the war against Daesh’, Airwars submission to the Foreign Affairs and Defence Select Committees of the Belgian Parliament, May 2016, archived at <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Improving-Belgian-transparency.pdf>

46 Steven Vandeput, Commissions Reunies des Relations Exterieures et de la Defense Nationale’, May 18th 2016, at <https://www.dekamer.be/doc/CCRI/pdf/54/ic425.pdf>



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A defence ministry slide showing a breakdown of Belgian F-16 activity in Iraq and Syria since July 1st 2016.

inspired by ISIL, “and we do not want to be too obvious.” General Vansina also noted that smaller contributors such as Belgium may face different challenges. And he suggested the Belgian people themselves were happy with the level of disclosure – noting that Belgians “do not have a need to check data about this war every day. That might just be the nature of the Belgian people.”

The general’s views appeared to place him at odds with elements of the Belgian media, parliament and civic society which had repeatedly challenged the military over its non-transparency. General Vansina also insisted that in any civilian casualty cases, complex investigations might take place - and that if errors are made “we take this very seriously.”⁴⁷

Recommendations

Airwars remains concerned at continuing poor levels of Belgian transparency and public accountability in the war against ISIL. Particularly in the wake of terrorist atrocities in Brussels and elsewhere, we of course take very seriously any national security concerns relating to public disclosures. That said, senior officials from the UK, Canada, the United States and Denmark consulted for this study all indicated that they were not aware of any enhanced national security concerns which had arisen as a result of greater transparency.

A more potent argument for weaker transparency among smaller Coalition nations may be the potential risk of harm to military personnel and their families. It has been argued for example that extremists may be able to link particular personnel or units to specific allegations. Other nations too have expressed similar concerns.

47 Major General Frederik Vansina interviewed by Airwars, Brussels, September 30th 2016

Even so, with so many foreign powers now conducting airstrikes in Iraq and Syria – alongside the Iraq government and the Assad regime – there is a paramount need for individual parties to the conflict to identify where and when they strike. Too many partners hide their actions within ‘Coalition’ data – while publicly taking no responsibility for specific actions. There are strong indications from other Coalition partners that greater transparency does not lead to greater operational or national security risk.

As a minimum, we therefore urge Belgium to adopt those practices already established by Canada, the UK and France – and to report in a timely manner the location and dates of all Belgian Air Component strikes. We also call on the Defence Ministry to publish the findings of any alleged civilian casualty events in Iraq and Syria, in which Belgian aircrews have been implicated.

The Netherlands

Deteriorating public accountability is a cause for worry

The Netherlands began its own campaign against so-called Islamic State on October 7th 2014. Strikes continued for 20 months before The Hague paused the campaign on June 28th 2016, swapping out for Belgium. A total of 1,800 Dutch bombs, missiles and bullets were released on ISIL during this period. Perhaps surprisingly, the Dutch campaign in Iraq and Syria has been among the most secretive of the international Coalition.

Initially, the Defence Ministry published weekly reports detailing how many missions had been carried out and weapons released in Iraq – though the location of strikes was never given. However from spring 2015 reporting became more intermittent, and continued to deteriorate. When airstrikes were extended to Syria in 2016 for example, weekly statements often failed to distinguish even which sovereign nation’s territory the Netherlands might be bombing. A terse press release issued on February 16th notes only that in the preceding week “Dutch F-16s conducted about 10 missions over Iraq and eastern Syria, where weapons were used against ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and

Syria] battle positions, military resources, and strategic strategic targets of the terrorist organisation ISIS.”⁴⁸ This approach contrasts sharply with that of the UK and Canada, which were able to report publicly in some detail the dates, locations, targets and munitions used in strikes.

Attempts by Dutch media and civic society to obtain greater detail on the air campaign have been firmly rebuffed, with most Freedom of Information requests rejected. Indeed, so poor is Dutch and Belgian transparency in the war against ISIL that Airwars now employs a full time researcher whose sole focus is improving public accountability in those two countries.⁴⁹

Possible Dutch civilian casualty incidents

Despite Dutch efforts to limit information, some challenging details relating to the air campaign have emerged. In September 2015 in conjunction with RTL Netherlands and other international media, Airwars published a declassified CENTCOM document which outlined 45 alleged civilian casualty events assessed by the Coalition.⁵⁰ French, Canadian, Australian and Dutch aircraft were all publicly revealed for the first time to have been involved in potential civilian casualty events.⁵¹

Dutch personnel were suspected of killing or injuring two civilians in an incident on the morning of December 26th 2014. According to the CENTCOM document, “while conducting

48 Weekoverzicht Defensieoperaties February 8th-14th 2016, Netherlands Defence Ministry, at <https://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws/2016/02/16/weekoverzicht-defensieoperaties>

49 Our Amsterdam-based researcher Eline Westra is funded by Stichting Democratie & Media, with the aim of improving Dutch and Belgian transparency and accountability.

50 ‘Iraq/ Syria CIVCAS Tracker’, declassified CENTCOM document, archived at <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/centcom-civcas-investigations.pdf>

51 ‘Canadian, Australian, Dutch and French aircraft linked to possible civilian casualties, CENTCOM file reveals’, Airwars, September 3rd 2015, at <https://airwars.org/news/internal-coalition-report-shows-45-alleged-civilian-fatality-events-investigated-in-iraq-and-syria/>

dynamic coalition airstrikes on ISIL fighters and technical vehicles NLD F-16AM [ie a Dutch F-16] may have unintentionally struck two unidentified persons on motorcycles who entered the target area during the strikes.”

The claim was deemed serious enough to trigger a formal investigation. This later concluded there was not enough evidence to indicate civilian fatalities, though neither CENTCOM nor the Dutch military has published that report. A Pentagon spokesman told Airwars in July 2015 that *“after reviewing all available evidence, the allegations of civilian casualties from Coalition airstrikes in these instances were unfounded.”*

During a parliamentary debate in January 2016, the defence minister revealed that a second alleged civilian casualty incident involving Dutch aircraft was also under review, though officials refused to say where or when that incident occurred. Nine months later, Members of Parliament (MPs) were informed that both claims were still under investigation and could not be discussed – despite almost two years having now passed in one case.⁵²

Parliamentary engagement

Ministry obfuscation sits at odds with the views of many Dutch MPs, who in February 2016 passed a cross-party motion calling for greater government airstrike transparency:

Parliament - having heard the consultation, and considering that within the Coalition no standard line exists on reporting military participation and accountability concerning civilian casualties and civil collateral damage; considering that greater transparency and better accountability are desirable - requests that the government

⁵² Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, Netherlands Minister of Defence, November 1st 2016, at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/kamerstukken/2016/11/02/beantwoording-kamervragen-over-de-begrotingsstaten-ministerie-van-defensie-voor-het-jaar-2017/beantwoording-kamervragen-over-de-begrotingsstaten-ministerie-van-defensie-voor-het-jaar-2017.pdf>

commits itself in the international Coalition to achieve greater transparency and better accountability.⁵³

Parliament’s unambiguous demand for improved transparency and accountability has to date been sidestepped by the defence ministry – with officials instead seeking “a more uniform approach to the way in which coalition partners report on military interventions, taking into account confidentiality and safety.”⁵⁴ Some have read this as a desire to have other Coalition partners *reduce* their own levels of disclosure to match the Netherlands’ own poor record.

In July 2016, MPs once more returned to the subject, asking why the Defence Ministry could not be as open as the United States or Canada in reporting its strikes. In response, the Minister stated that the Netherlands restricted reports on grounds of “National safety, safety of the soldiers and their family, and safety of Coalition partners. That is why no detailed information on exact locations of attacks, or the amount and type of weapons is published.”⁵⁵

Recommendations

The Netherlands remains one of the least transparent and publicly accountable of all Coalition partners. In our August 2015 report *A Cause for Concern*, Airwars was already noting that “From spring 2015 Dutch reporting became more intermittent, with details of the number of weapons released each week

⁵³ Motion tabled by Sjoerd Sjoerdsma MP of the D66 Party, February 10th 2016. Archived at <https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-27925-576.html>

⁵⁴ Political Military Coordination meeting of the Dutch parliament, April 22nd 2016. Cited at <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/binaries/rijksoverheid/documenten/kamerstukken/2016/04/29/voortgangsrapportage-nederlandse-bijdrage-aan-de-strijd-tegen-isis/nederlandse-bijdrage-aan-de-strijd-tegen-isis.pdf> (p 7)

⁵⁵ 7 juli 2016. Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2015–2016, 27 925, nr. 599 at <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/downloads/document?id=c7d96198-8552-4e81-ab7f-e2728213088c&title=Verslag%20van%20een%20algemeen%20overleg%2C%20gehouden%20op%207%20juli%202016%2C%20over%20-Nederlandse%20bijdrage%20aan%20de%20strijd%20tegen%20ISIS.pdf> (pages 7-8)



Dutch F-16s are loaded with munitions, October 2015 (Image courtesy of Netherlands MoD)

now rarely provided.” Since then, the Dutch contribution to the war against ISIL has effectively been rendered publicly invisible. ‘Weekly updates’ ceased to distinguish even which nation the Netherlands was bombing - and researchers and journalists have been firmly rebuffed when requesting even limited information.

Despite this, ministers continue to assert that their actions are transparent and accountable. “The Netherlands is actually not that closed, we’re not an oyster”, Defence Minister Hennis-Plasschaert claimed in July 2016. Ministers have also implied they are bound by confidentiality agreements with CENTCOM and other military partners. Yet the Coalition itself has made clear it is for each partner nation to decide individually what information on its own strikes it chooses to disclose.

Airwars therefore recommends the following measures to the Netherlands Defence Ministry:

- That in light of concerns regarding potential national security or operational security harm, the Netherlands Defence Ministry consults with fellow Coalition partners to see what impact - if any - improved transparency has had on operational or national security.

- In the absence of any such evidence, Airwars calls on the Ministry to release weekly (or more regularly if possible) the dates, location by town and target country of all Netherlands airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and other theatres relating to the war against so-called Islamic State.
- We call for the prompt public disclosure of all investigations into alleged civilian casualties reportedly resulting from Dutch airstrikes.

Denmark⁵⁶

Transparency weak overall – though improvements seen during campaign

Denmark initially began military actions against so-called Islamic State on October 16th 2014, ending the first phase of its campaign a year later. Strikes resumed on June 17th 2016, with the war also now extending to Syria. A total of 503 bombs and missiles were dropped by Copenhagen’s seven F-16s during the first phase of its military engagement, with 319

⁵⁶ Additional research by Rasmus Raun Westh

further munitions dropped between June and November 2016. Only two airstrikes in Syria had been publicly reported by that time.

Denmark at first significantly limited the amount of information it published. In its first mission update published on October 20th 2014, Defence Command said only that its F-16's had flown "11 missions in Iraq" and had "used bombs in connection with some of the missions". There was no mention of the date of strikes or locations hit.⁵⁷

Denmark also appears to have brought pressure on the wider Coalition to limit reporting of airstrike locations – a significant impediment to overall transparency. As investigative reporter Rasmus Raun Westh has noted, those first Danish strikes coincided with a change in the wording of press releases sent out by US Central Command. Prior to the Danish engagement, CENTCOM's summaries would list all participating nations on a given day. As of October 21st 2014 however, "out of respect for participating nations", CENTCOM left it up to individual countries to identify their own role in airstrikes.⁵⁸

"You shouldn't be able to track one specific attack in one specific area back to a Danish plane. We prefer to hide in the crowd," a defence ministry spokesman said at the time.⁵⁹ A later Freedom of Information request by reporter Charlotte Aagaard confirmed the Danish policy of rendering it impossible to identify Denmark's role in strikes, "neither directly or by through deduction", specifying that "the Danish contribution should not be

mentioned in Coalition press releases if fewer than three nations are mentioned in relation to the activity in question."⁶⁰

Under pressure from Danish media, mission updates were somewhat expanded in November 2014 to include the names of provinces and cities targeted – although dates and locations of attacks were still withheld. Three months later, Defence Command scaled back the level of geographic detail by omitting city names. And from March 2015 a caveat was added noting that strikes took place 'primarily' in for example Anbar province, thus leaving open the possibility of strikes elsewhere.

Transparency benchmark

Despite a reticence in saying where it bombed, Denmark nevertheless helped to set a new and welcome benchmark for Coalition transparency on civilian casualty reporting. On September 3rd 2015, Danish Armed Forces announced they may have killed civilians during an Iraq air strike four days previously.⁶¹ This was the first occasion on which any Coalition partner had proactively and in a timely manner announced potential civilian casualty concerns.

Suspensions had been aroused during a post-strike video review: "In certain parts of the video material, showing four people and a vehicle, actions are taken that could be considered as not openly hostile." A CENTCOM investigation with co-operation from Danish military lawyers was now triggered. In a brief statement issued one month later, Denmark's Defence Command announced that the investigation had found

57 'Mission update RDAF F-16 IRAK : Opdatering om dansk deltagelse i Operation Inherent Resolve,' Vaernsfaelles Forsvarkommando, October 20th 2014, at <http://forsvaret.dk/FST/NytogPresse/missionupdate/Pages/MissionupdateRDAFF-16IRAK.aspx>

58 'Denmark brings F-16s home on first anniversary of anti-Daesh mission', Rasmus Raun Westh, Airwars, October 6th 2016, at <https://airwars.org/news/denmark-brings-f16s-home-on-first-anniversary-of-anti-daesh-mission/>

59 'Politikere kræver mere åbenhed af Forsvaret', Rasmus Raun Westh, Dagbladet Information, October 23rd 2014, at <https://www.information.dk/udland/2014/10/politikere-kræver-mere-aabenhed-forsvaret>

60 'Danmark bad USA klappe i om krigsindsats', Charlotte Aagaard, Dagbladet Information, March 4th 2015, at <https://www.information.dk/udland/2015/03/danmark-bad-usa-klappe-krigsindsats>

61 'IRAK: Danske F16-fly har muligvis forårsaget civile tab i Irak', Forsvaret for Danmark, September 3rd 2015, at <http://www2.forsvaret.dk/nyheder/intops/Pages/Muligeciviletabilrak.aspx>



A 2,000lb bomb is attached to a Danish F-16 for the last Iraq mission of its 2015 tour (Danish MoD/ Ronny Rasmussen)

the strike “most likely” did not kill civilians, but instead that the four people targeted were “in the process of planting roadside bombs”.⁶²

According to senior Danish officials spoken to for this study, while the Defence Ministry chose not to make public its investigatory findings, a full briefing (including video evidence) was given to Parliament in closed session. One official with knowledge of the Iraqi incident told Airwars: “In this case the aerial footage was very clear. Pattern of life analysis also suggested that these were military actions – plus we knew of ISIL actions in the area.”

Denmark was also the first Coalition partner publicly to warn in August 2016 that the air war against ISIL was now entering a new and more dangerous phase in which strikes would increasingly focus on urban areas – with non-combatant casualties inevitable. In a lengthy

press release titled ‘The Risk of Civilian Casualties’, the defence ministry published comments from Major General Flemming Lentfer, who noted that an increase in strikes on fortified ISIL-occupied areas such as Mosul “means that although we can choose weapons and targets that can reduce the risk, we can get into a situation where we cannot avoid hitting civilians.”⁶³

General Lentfer’s remarks contrasted heavily with those of most other Coalition partners, who had consistently played down the possibility of civilian casualties - despite extensive battlefield evidence to the contrary.

The Danish Perspective

Airwars met with senior Danish defence officials prior to the resumption of airstrikes in both Iraq and Syria June 2016, where

⁶² ‘Ikke noget der tyder på civile tab ved dansk F-16-angreb i Irak’, Forsvaret for Danmark, October 2nd 2015, at <http://www2.forsvaret.dk/nyheder/intops/Pages/Ikkenogetdertyderp%C3%A5A5civiletavveddanskF-16-angrebillrak.aspx>

⁶³ ‘Risiko for civile tab’, Forsvaret For Danmark, August 11th 2016, at <http://www2.forsvaret.dk/nyheder/intops/Pages/Risikoforciviletav.aspx>

we expressed a hope that Denmark might move towards the practice of key Coalition allies in identifying the date and location of each airstrike. Airwars argued that for Syria in particular – where so many state and non-state actors were engaged – the need for public transparency was acute.⁶⁴

Officials appeared sympathetic, but expressed concern that as a small participating nation Denmark faced the risk of “enemy propaganda” - along with the potential for harm to military personnel and their families – if it disclosed too much information. Even so, the Defence Ministry conceded it was unaware of any local propaganda or national security threats generated as a result of publicity surrounding specific Danish military actions. As one Danish official noted, “it’s a question of finding the right balance of transparency.” Another noted that there was “a need to distinguish more between transparency and accountability. We are in fact accountable to Parliament and Government.”

More broadly on civilian casualty issues, officials were keen to emphasise the care taken in mitigating harm. “We are very careful to avoid civilian casualties,” one official told us. “But we should be aware that no matter how thorough we are, there is always a risk.” The Ministry also stressed that Denmark has a ‘red card holder’ at the Coalition’s air operations centre in Qatar: “If there is any doubt they can cancel a mission.”

However, when Danish reporting of its military operations resumed in June 2016, none of the hoped-for improvements in transparency were seen. Justifying the limited information released, a defence official told Airwars that “further details will not be disclosed due to operational safety concerns in respect to both Danish military personnel and the cooperation among the force contributing nations to Operation Inherent Resolve.”⁶⁵

Recommendations

Despite some improvements in reporting of airstrikes since 2014, overall transparency and public accountability for the Danish

campaign remains weak. In effect the government continues to ‘hide in the crowd’ - in marked contrast with other key Coalition partners.

While this limited accountability has generally been blamed locally on Denmark’s concerns for national and operational security, officials were unable to provide concrete examples to Airwars of any occasion when released information had been used for militant propaganda purposes - either domestically or internationally. Denmark’s campaign against ISIL in Iraq and Syria is also less transparent than recent previous operations in Afghanistan.

Airwars therefore calls on the Danish government to adopt those practices already established by the UK, Canada and others - and to report, in a timely manner, the date and near location of all airstrikes. In addition we urge Defence Command to make public the findings of any civilian casualty assessments or investigations relating to its engagement in Iraq and Syria.

Canada

Good levels of public transparency - though improvements needed in civilian casualty assessment process

Canada was an active member of the Coalition between November 2nd 2014 and February 10th 2016, at which point Justin Trudeau’s new government ended kinetic involvement. In total, the Hornets and Super Hornets of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) reported 251 airstrikes during a 15-month campaign against ISIL – all but five of which took place in Iraq.

For the duration of its campaign, Canada was consistently the most publicly accountable member of the Coalition – setting a good benchmark against which to measure other partners. As a matter of routine, CAF reported the location, target and date of all airstrikes conducted in both Iraq and Syria. For example, on the last day of Canadian strikes CAF reported the following:

⁶⁴ Airwars interview with senior Danish defence officials, Copenhagen, June 8th 2016

⁶⁵ Forsvarsministeriet email to Airwars, September 27th 2016

On 10 February 2016, while taking part in coalition operations in support of Iraqi security forces, two CF-18 Hornets successfully struck an ISIL fighting position north of Ramadi using precision guided munitions... two CF-18 Hornets successfully struck an ISIL weapons cache in the vicinity of Al Habbaniyah using precision guided munitions.⁶⁶

By identifying in a timely manner not only the nation, region and locale bombed - but also the targets believed struck - CAF provided enough information to enable Airwars and others to cross-reference whether Canadian aircraft may (or may not) have been potentially involved in any alleged civilian casualty incident.

For example, on November 19th 2015 at least ten civilians were reported killed when a Coalition airstrike on a ISIL IED factory caused significant damage to a next-door dairy, where civilians were working. One of the victims was later named as Yasir Nazir al-Tai Abu Mustafa, a 45-year old father of two. The attack led to fresh calls for the Coalition to be more careful in its targeting of the city.⁶⁷

Among the Coalition partners, only Canada individually declared a role in the attack - with CAF noting that “two CF-18 Hornets successfully struck an ISIS weapons production facility in the vicinity of Mosul using precision guided munitions.” Following engagement by Canadian media, Canadian Forces Major General Charles Lamarre later asserted that the Mosul strike had been reviewed and “did not reveal any information to suggest that civilians had been harmed or killed... The nearest structure to the strike was well outside of the explosive radius of the weapons used.”⁶⁸

Graphic video footage released by so-called Islamic State showed not only the apparent destroyed IED facility but also a badly damaged adjacent building - including dead and injured persons – which appeared directly to contradict General Lamarre’s position. Even so, the willingness of CAF promptly to declare the location of its airstrikes created some accountability on this occasion.

Canada also proactively challenged potential propaganda narratives relating to its airstrikes. On January 14th 2016, ISIL-controlled media alleged that Coalition aircraft had accidentally struck Iraqi military units at two locations, including Tikrit.⁶⁹ The only known Coalition partner to have carried out airstrikes in the vicinity of Tikrit that day was Canada, which had targeted “an ISIL fighting position.”

Airwars listed the alleged incidents in its public database, while making clear that based on available evidence they were most likely a ISIL propaganda exercise. A CAF spokesman then contacted Airwars with an on-the-record rebuttal of ISIL’s claims, which insisted Canadian aircraft had struck only at legitimate targets on the day:

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has no indications to suggest that friendly forces were harmed or killed as a result of the airstrike by CF-18 Hornets northeast of Tikrit on January 14, 2016. The CAF is aware that ISIL distributes videos and images with the deliberate intent of spreading misinformation in pursuing their objectives.⁷⁰

Despite such constructive engagement, flaws were revealed in Canada’s approach to investigating civilian casualty claims during its military campaign. A declassified CENTCOM document published in September 2015 showed Canadian aircraft had been implicated in the deaths of between six and 27 civilians at Kisik Junction, Iraq in

66 Archived at ‘Military reports – February 2016’, Airwars, at <https://airwars.org/daily-reports-feb16/>

67 See for example ‘A letter to the leadership of Nineveh #operations on behalf of the people of #Mosul’ [Arabic], NRN News, November 19th 2015, at https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=965300746842172&id=915633001808947

68 ‘Canadian airstrike alleged to have killed 10 civilians in Iraq’, CBC News, November 23rd 2015, at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/canada-airstrike-iraq-civilian-death-allegations-1.3331882>

69 Referenced at ‘Reported civilian and ‘friendly fire’ deaths from Coalition airstrikes January – June 2016’, Airwars, at <https://airwars.org/civcas-2016/>

70 Canadian Armed Forces statement, Email to Airwars, January 18th 2016



A Canadian pilot gets the thumbs-up prior to embarking on an anti-ISIL mission (Photo via Canadian Armed Forces)

January 2015.⁷¹ The alleged fatalities had been reported to Coalition Special Forces by a friendly Peshmerga fighter. CAF itself concluded there was no case to answer, with a spokesman telling Airwars that its internal review “uncovered no evidence of civilian casualties. Furthermore, it was re-confirmed that the target was a valid military objective from which ISIS was firing a heavy machine gun at Iraqi Kurdish troops.”⁷²

However an investigation by CBC News’ *The Fifth Estate* identified key flaws in CAF’s assessment, with the commander of Canadian forces in Iraq and Syria confirming that no interview had been conducted either

with the Peshmerga source, or the Special Forces unit they had reported their concerns to.⁷³

Canada was found by CBC News and Airwars to be implicated in a second incident, following a joint Australian-Canadian air raid on Fallujah on December 21st 2014. A woman and child were injured in the event according to Australian surveillance footage – yet ten months later CAF appeared oblivious to any possible role. “I’m not aware of any additional allegation of civilian casualties involving our Canadian airstrikes,” the commander of Canadian forces at the time told CBC in October 2015.

Considered together, these two cases suggest that despite good levels of airstrike reporting, CAF’s assessment and investigation of potential civilian casualty events in Iraq and Syria was neither as thorough or conclusive as public statements suggested.

71 ‘Canadian, Australian, Dutch and French aircraft linked to possible civilian casualties, CENTCOM file reveals’, Airwars, September 3rd 2015, at <https://airwars.org/news/internal-coalition-report-shows-45-alleged-civilian-fatality-events-investigated-in-iraq-and-syria/>

72 Ibid

73 ‘Canada In Iraq: The Hidden War’, The Fifth Estate, CBC News, October 30th 2015, at <http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/episodes/2014-2015/canada-in-iraq-the-hidden-war>

Interview with Major General Lise Bourgon

Major General Lise Bourgon of the CAF – who previously led Canada’s contingent in Iraq and Syria – kindly agreed to be interviewed on the record for this transparency study, along with key senior members of her former Operation Impact team who spoke on background terms.

General Bourgon stressed that CAF had consistently foregrounded the issue of mitigating potential harm to civilians during its 15-month campaign: “We were there at the request of the government of Iraq. And being there for the population was extremely important for us, so we took the targeting enterprise and we took the striking extremely seriously.”

Pressed on why CAF had not interviewed the Peshmerga fighter in the wake of the Kisik event, General Bourgon told Airwars: “We were trying to get a hold of that source, but we were not able to find him again.”

According to senior officials on the general’s team, there was a rigorous process of reviewing multiple internal and external sources to ensure civilian casualties had not occurred: “Once the [Canadian] aircraft landed on the ground, we would look at the entire material through the pilot’s eyes, the intelligence eye, the command eyes to ensure that there were no unforeseen circumstances of a strike.” If an allegation had been made of civilian casualties, CAF would consult where possible with Iraqi security forces that had been in the vicinity, and the Airwars public database of alleged events was also at times consulted.

On occasion, CAF also looked at what Islamic State was claiming in its own propaganda: “They were using their webpages for allegation and counter-messaging. So if ISIL had no information, it was a pretty clear indication for us that the allegation might not have been credible”.

General Bourgon was careful not to overstate any claims on possible civilian casualties: “I can put my hand on my heart. For the six months that I was there, I can tell you that I saw no evidence that there were civilian casualties in a strike that [occurred] when I

was there. Am I telling you that I can guarantee that there was not a civilian casualty? I’m not going to guarantee that.”

The general also confirmed to Airwars that despite the significant transparency exhibited by CAF in its reporting of airstrikes, there had been no known cases of domestic extremists using such material for their own propaganda purposes. This chimed with similar comments made by defence officials from the UK, US and others for this study - who also confirmed that they were unaware of published information about their military campaigns being leveraged by domestic or foreign militants.

This is an important point since Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark have all said that a key reason for withholding information on their own air campaigns in Iraq and Syria has been a fear of such actions by militants. The experiences of other Coalition partners – including Canada - suggest those fears are unfounded.

Recommendations

While there is always room for improvement in the public reporting of military actions, Canada set a vital accountability benchmark for twelve Coalition allies for the duration of its 2014-2016 Iraq and Syria campaign. According to senior officials, CAF also proactively sought out and assessed possible civilian casualty incidents in which CAF aircraft might have been implicated – recognition of the value which external monitors and assessors can offer.

Even so, we call on Canada to examine its internal civilian casualty monitoring processes, in order to assess whether it is accurately tracking likely civilian fatalities from the battlefield. In the view of Airwars, any assessments which focus overly on internal intelligence – particularly on air-only analysis – are likely to miss the majority of credibly reported civilian fatalities from airstrikes. Significant, high quality and credible material from the perspective of affected civilians is often now generated on the battlefield – and it is incumbent upon all belligerents to take such material fully into account when assessing potential harm to non-combatants from their military actions.

Australia

Poor transparency and accountability in most areas

Australia remains one of the least transparent members of the international Coalition fighting so-called Islamic State. Canberra has consistently refused to disclose almost any information relating to an estimated 405 airstrikes to October 2016 – with one notable exception.

This approach is surprising, given that as recently as 2012 Australia had adopted a far more open approach to civilian casualty reporting in Afghanistan against a similarly motivated enemy. As the then-defence minister told MPs: “The government is committed to transparency and providing information on civilian casualties in Afghanistan to the parliament and the Australian people.”⁷⁴ Canberra’s refusal to commit to similar transparency for Iraq and Syria therefore marked a worrying development.

Australia’s campaign against ISIL began on October 8th 2014 when its Hornets and Super Hornets began conducting airstrikes in Iraq. The campaign was extended to Syria in September 2015. Monthly munition release summaries show that 1,306 bombs and missiles were released to July 31st 2016. Of these, just 38 munitions (approximately 11 airstrikes) were in Syria. Yet this information on weapons released has marked the limit of Australia’s disclosure.

From the start of the campaign, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) refused to disclose the date, location or targets of any strike – ensuring no public accountability for its actions. Justifying this position, an ADF spokesperson told Airwars: “For operational security reasons, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) will not provide mission-specific details on individual engagements. The ADF

will not release information that could be distorted and used against Australia in Daesh propaganda.”⁷⁵

Yet just three days after this statement was issued in September 2016, the ADF provided just such ‘mission-specific detail’ following the deaths of up to 62 Syrian troops in a ‘friendly fire event.’ Admitting a role in the botched mission, the ADF noted: “Australian aircraft were among a number of international aircraft taking part in this Coalition operation around Dayr Az Zawr.”⁷⁶ Aircraft from the UK, Denmark and the United States participated in the Syria incident. All four nations later admitted that they had released munitions during the raid.

‘No further inquiry needed’

Australia has also consistently refused to disclose how many alleged civilian casualty events its aircraft may have been involved in. Even so, in September 2015, Airwars worked with ABC Australia and other international media, after a declassified CENTCOM document revealed Australian aircraft may have been involved at least two civilian casualty incidents.

In October 2014, a Coalition strike on an ISIL checkpoint near Ramadi may have hit a civilian truck. As the internal CENTCOM document noted, weapon system video from an Australian F-18 showed that “*it was apparent that a truck entered the target area between weapon release and impact.*” Following a review, a decision was taken that “*No further inquiry*” was needed.

A woman and child were also apparently injured in a joint Australian and Canadian airstrike at Fallujah on December 21st 2014, in an attack focused on a ‘suspected weapons factory.’ A post-strike assessment later spotted a woman and child walking through the immediate area some minutes after the last missile impacted. The child was then observed being taken to the local hospital, while the woman “walked to the median strip on the road and lay down, and was not observed any further.” Despite

74 Defence Minister Stephen Smith to House of Representatives, May 24th 2012, at http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/7b0b2bac-de69-42c1-8a98-2d16329f051f/0006/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf

75 Australian Department of Defence email to Airwars, September 15th 2016

76 ‘Coalition Airstrikes – Syria’, Australian Defence Department statement, September 18th 2016, at <http://news.defence.gov.au/2016/09/18/coalition-airstrikes-syria/>



An Australian fighter refuels over Baghdad (Photo via Australian Defence Force)

the apparent seriousness of the incident, it was quickly dismissed by both Australian and US military investigators who decided “there is insufficient information to warrant further inquiry... The lack of urgency and fact that the child walked apparently normally suggested his injuries were not life-threatening.”⁷⁷

CENTCOM’s assessment of the event also claimed that there were “no Iraqi allegations of CIVCAS.” This was incorrect. Airwars researchers identified major news reports from the time. BBC Arabic for example described medical sources at the city’s main hospital as “receiving 13 bodies and seven wounded, including women and children who fell during the incessant shelling.” Those

casualties were attributed both to the Iraqi military and to “air strikes launched by the international coalition on the city of Fallujah.”⁷⁸

The poor quality of the Fallujah investigation did little to instil confidence in Australia’s assertion it had killed no civilians in hundreds of airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. Even so, in September 2016 the Prime Minister announced that Canberra intended to weaken domestic Australian law so that airstrikes could now target “those who may not openly take up arms but are still key to Daesh’s fighting capability.”⁷⁹ A bill introduced the following month stated that its objective was in part to “clarify that certain war crimes

⁷⁷ ‘Canadian, Australian, Dutch and French aircraft linked to possible civilian casualties, CENTCOM file reveals’, Airwars, September 3rd 2015, at <https://airwars.org/news/internal-coalition-report-shows-45-alleged-civilian-fatality-events-investigated-in-iraq-and-syria/>

⁷⁸ BBC Arabic, December 22nd 2014, at http://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2014/12/141222_iraq_fallujah_casualties

⁷⁹ Joint statement from Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Defence Minister Marise Payne, September 1st 2016, at <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/2016/09/01/prime-minister-minister-for-defence-australian-defence-force-targeting-of-daesh/>

offences applicable in non-international armed conflict do not apply to members of organised armed groups.”⁸⁰

Commenting on the proposed changes, international law professor Ben Saul of the University of Sydney told Airwars he was concerned that the proposed law change might place civilian non-combatants at greater risk from Australian military actions: “The Bill removes certain war crimes liabilities when targeting ‘members of an organised armed group’ in a non-international armed conflict. Problematically that category is not defined in the Bill. There is a risk that it may over-expansively include civilians accompanying or indirectly supporting armed groups but who are not undertaking a continuous combat function, and who cannot be lawfully attacked under international humanitarian law. The Bill needs to be clarified to ensure that the amendments are consistent with international law.”⁸¹

Recommendations

Australia remains one of the least open members of the US-led Coalition – insisting that anything more than the most basic information “could be distorted and used against Australia in Daesh propaganda.” Yet the basis for this assertion is unclear. Military officials from other Coalition partners interviewed for this study (including the UK, Denmark and the United States) could not identify any occasions when greater transparency had led to an increase in militant propaganda or actions. It is anyway uncertain how releasing quite basic information about the date and location of Australian strikes could somehow benefit the enemy – since the Coalition more broadly already publishes such information every day.

Airwars therefore calls on the Australian government to follow those practices already established by other Coalition partners, and

to release in a timely manner the date and near location of all airstrikes against so-called Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria.

We also call on the Defence Ministry to make public details of all cases – including the locations and dates of alleged events - where it has assessed and investigated possible Australian involvement in civilian casualty incidents in Iraq and Syria.

Saudi Arabia

Semi-secret campaign with little public accountability

Along with Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia participated in the first night of Coalition airstrikes on Syria, on September 23rd 2014.⁸² For the next year the Saudis were a key US ally – at a time when only Arab Coalition partners were prepared to conduct attacks inside Syria. Approximately 135 airstrikes were conducted in total by the Saudis, Jordanians and Emiratis combined during this period.

However, on March 26th 2015 Operation Decisive Storm was launched in Yemen by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and others. This major air and ground campaign – aimed at forcing rebel Shia Houthis and former president Ali Abdullah Saleh from power – led to most Arab nation airstrikes in Syria effectively ceasing.

The Yemen campaign has seen extremely high levels of civilian fatalities caused by GCC actions – with the United Nations estimating that more than 65 per cent of all non-combatant fatalities in the war can be attributed to airstrikes. This contrasts sharply with Arab partner strikes in Syria which the Coalition claims have killed no civilians – despite the same weapons, aircraft and pilots being used. This suggests in turn either that the GCC has shown little interest in limiting civilian harm in Yemen – or that the US-led Coalition’s civilian casualty monitoring for Syria is failing to track most civilian casualty events.

80 Australian Criminal Code Amendment (War Crimes) Bill 2016, introduced October 12th 2016, at http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bld=r5736

81 Professor Ben Saul, Challis Chair of International Law at the University of Sydney, email to Airwars, October 21st 2016

82 ‘US Military, Partner Nations Conduct Airstrikes Against ISIL in Syria’, US Department of Defence, September 23rd 2014, archived at http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=83476



According to the New York Times, Saudi air strikes had ended by September 2015.⁸³ However, allied officials informed Airwars that Saudi Arabian airstrikes have on occasion continued in Syria into 2016 (along with those of at least one other Arab nation) “when they feel there’s a need to intervene.” This may help explain a recent statistical anomaly, whereby declared non-US airstrikes in Syria during 2016 have been slightly below overall official non-US strike data.⁸⁴ For July 2016 for example, the Coalition reported 13 non-US strikes in Syria. Yet the UK, France and Denmark – the three additional countries to

have declared strikes in Syria that month - only appear to have reported nine strikes between them.

Limited transparency

Saudi transparency during its Syria intervention has been patchy. Officials publicly announced the Kingdom's participation in strikes in September 2014, noting that "the Royal Saudi Air Force participated in military operations in Syria against Daesh, to support the moderate Syrian opposition within the international coalition."⁸⁵ Defence Minister (and later King) Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud also praised "my children pilots who did their duty towards their religion and their homeland."⁸⁶ A number of publicity photos were also issued

83 “The United Arab Emirates last carried out strikes in Syria in March [2015]; Jordan in August; and Saudi Arabia in September, according to information provided by allied officials last week.” ‘As U.S. Escalates Air War on ISIS, Allies Slip Away’, New York Times, November 7th 2015, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/world/middleeast/as-us-escalates-air-war-on-isis-allies-slip-away.html>

84 Data via CJTFOIR and UK, French and Danish defence ministries.

85 Cited in 'Royal Saudi Air Force Participated in Syria Actions' [Arabic], Alaan TV, September 23rd 2014, at <http://www.akhbaralaan.net/news/arabs/2014/9/23/royal-saudi-air-force-participated-in-the-operations-against-syria-isis>

86 Cited in Al Madina press [Arabic],
September 24th 2014, at

http://www.almadinapress.info/
أخبار 981- وهي: العهد- السعوي- بشيد- بمشاركة- الطبران- السعويين- في- ضرب- داعش

which – unusually for Coalition allies - visually identified the pilots involved. However, little information has subsequently been published detailing the Kingdom's military actions in Syria. Requests for clarification for this study - via the Saudi Arabian Embassy in London - were not responded to.

Recommendations

We urge the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Defence Ministry – as a matter of routine – to follow those practices already established by other key Coalition partners and to declare both the date and near location of all Kingdom airstrikes in Syria since September 2014.

In addition, we urge the prompt publication of a report by the Saudi Defence Ministry outlining all potential civilian casualty events in Syria involving Saudi personnel which have so far been assessed and/or investigated.

Finally we call on the US-led Coalition to re-assess all airstrikes and potential civilian casualties in Syria by GCC allies, in the light of UN-documented high non-combatant fatalities in Yemen by these same allies.

Jordan

An exaggerated role, with limited accountability

Jordan's kinetic campaign against so-called Islamic State began in Syria on September 23rd 2014 alongside US, Saudi, Bahraini and Emirati combat aircraft. In February 2015 Coalition officials publicly confirmed that Jordanian airstrikes had also been conducted in Iraq – making Jordan the only Arab Coalition partner known to have conducted strikes in both nations.⁸⁷

Given its immediate proximity to Syria, Jordan might have been expected to have contributed significantly to the campaign. However official data suggests Amman was the least kinetically active of the three Arab

partners, at least in the early stages of the Coalition's war against ISIL. The US reported daily actions by Arab and other allies daily to October 23rd 2014.⁸⁸ During this time, actions by the UAE were mentioned twelve times; by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia eleven times; and by Jordan on only five occasions.

The murder by ISIL of Jordanian pilot Captain Muath al-Kasabeh in January 2015 led to a significant increase in reported Jordanian airstrikes. In early February multiple actions were claimed, alongside propaganda videos showing the Royal Jordanian Air Force hitting ISIL targets. King Abdullah was also heavily featured in air force uniform. Air Force commander Major General Mansour Salem Jabour told reporters Jordan had participated in around 20 per cent of all Coalition sorties in Syria - and had conducted 56 strikes against ISIL in revenge for the death of their pilot.⁸⁹

However, these claims were exaggerated for public effect according to senior Pentagon officials. Asked to comment on whether Jordan had indeed conducted 56 airstrikes in response to the death of Captain al-Kasabeh, press spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby told reporters: "By our count, it was - it wasn't 56. It was one strike. You know, that's how - the way we count it, which is, you know, could be multiple aircraft, multiple munitions on a single target. Again, let's not quibble about the math."⁹⁰ Airwars tracking of official Coalition data also shows that between January 23rd and February 20th 2015, only eleven non-US airstrikes took place in Syria (which included declared strikes by both the Saudis and Emiratis.)

88 These ceased a month later following pressure from Western allies seeking less publicity See Denmark, page 26

89 'Air Force Commander offers a briefing on operations against terrorist Daesh' [Arabic], Royal Jordanian Air Force, February 8th 2016, at http://www.jaf.mil.jo/NewsView.aspx?NewsID=186#.V_YdGs4-Ag6

90 'Department of Defense Press Briefing by Rear Adm. Kirby in the Pentagon Briefing Room', US Department of Defense, February 10th 2015, at <http://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/607010/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-rear-adm-kirby-in-the-pentagon-briefing>

87 First reported in 'Feb. 26: Military Airstrikes Continue Against ISIL in Syria and Iraq', Coalition daily release, at <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/884979/feb-26-military-airstrikes-continue-against-isil-in-syria-and-iraq/>



King Abdullah II was pictured in combat uniform following ISIL's murder of a Royal Jordanian Air Force pilot. (Photo courtesy of the Royal Hashemite Court)

Jordan was also blamed by so-called Islamic State for the death of US aid worker Kayla Mueller during this period. Jordanian attacks at Raqqa on February 6th 2015 targeted buildings previously known to have been used by ISIL fighters. The terror group later claimed that hostage Kayla Mueller had died in one of the strikes. Jordan denied this, with foreign minister Nasser Judeh tweeting that the allegation represented “An old and sick trick used by terrorists and despots for decades: claiming that hostages human shields held captive are killed by air raids.”⁹¹

91 Nasser Judeh tweet, February 6th 2015, at <https://twitter.com/NasserJudeh/status/563763021168640000>

The White House also refuted the claim, insisting “the information that we have is that there was no evidence of civilians in the target area prior to the Coalition strike taking place.”⁹² Based on an initial assessment CENTCOM declined to investigate the allegation that Mueller had died in a Coalition action, noting that “Jordan officially denied the allegation... Analysis of photographs indicates individual was unlikely killed by air

92 White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest, February 11th 2015, archived at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRg3uMIVJ70>

strikes.” Claims that Jordan had killed Mueller were therefore dismissed as “Not credible. No further inquiry required.”⁹³

Reports claimed that Jordanian strikes had come to an end in Syria by August 2015 - with Amman’s attention switching to the war in Yemen.⁹⁴ Even so, Jordan remained an active Coalition partner in other ways. Strike aircraft from other allies operated daily out of Jordanian bases, and the US also located ground-based artillery and HIMARS rocket systems in the Kingdom. And according to allied officials, the Saudis and at least one other Arab partner conducted a small number of anti-ISIL strikes in Syria in 2016.

Recommendations

Jordan’s approach both to transparency and accountability for its airstrikes against ISIL has varied significantly. Press releases and detailed statements by senior military commanders – along with videos and photographs of specific strikes – have provided welcome insights into a number of events. Yet at other times, no such information has been released. It is presently unknown for example where or when Jordan has conducted airstrikes in Iraq.

Airwars therefore calls on Jordan to adopt good practice as already established by other key Coalition partners and to publish, in a timely manner, the dates and near locations of all Jordanian airstrikes conducted in Iraq and Syria since September 2014.

We also request that the findings of Jordan’s investigation into the death of Kayla Mueller – along with those into any other incidents in which Jordanian forces may have been implicated in civilian casualties – be placed in the public domain.

93 ‘Iraq/ Syria Civcas Allegation Tracker’, declassified CENTCOM document, published September 3rd 2015, at <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/centcom-civcas-investigations.pdf>

94 ‘As U.S. Escalates Air War on ISIS, Allies Slip Away’, New York Times, November 7th 2015, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/world/middleeast/as-us-escalates-air-war-on-isis-allies-slip-away.html>

United Arab Emirates

Reasonable disclosures meant UAE was most transparent of Arab partners

The UAE was a regular early contributor to the Coalition’s campaign in Syria - commencing airstrikes on September 23rd 2014 alongside the US and other Arab allies. Coalition daily reports published at the time show the UAE conducted airstrikes on 12 of the first 27 days of the Syria campaign - making it the most active Arab partner at that time.

The UAE made much of its initial intervention in Syria, with the defence ministry publishing official photos which emphasized the role of women crew members – including F-16 pilot Major Mariam al Mansouri. Their roles were contrasted sharply with those of women who were subjugated in ISIL-occupied areas.

The Emirates suspended its airstrikes in Syria shortly after the capture by ISIL of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh on December 24th 2014. Despite official claims that his aircraft had malfunctioned, ISIL insisted it had shot the F-16 down. According to news agency AFP: “Fearing for the safety of its air crews, the UAE raised concerns with Washington about its search-and-rescue resources in the region, officials have said.”⁹⁵

UAE strikes resumed the following February – when as an act of solidarity a squadron of F-16s conducted joint air raids on ISIL in Syria with Jordan. In a significant step up for transparency, Emirates raids in Syria were subsequently reported by the official UAE state news agency WAM, with Raqqa targeted on February 10th; ISIL command and control systems hit on February 12th; and oil refineries bombed on February 16th. A cross-check by Airwars of tracked civilian casualty allegations for February 2015 indicates that UAE aircraft were not involved in any known events in Syria during that month.

95 ‘Islamic State: UAE withdrew from air war after Jordanian pilot Maaz al-Kassasbeh captured, US officials say’, AFP, February 4th 2015, at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-02-05/uae-withdrew-from-air-operations-against-islamic-state/6071736>



Major Miriam al Mansouri, the UAE's first female combat pilot, pictured preparing for a mission in Syria in September 2014

On March 6th-7th 2015, the Emirates said it carried out an air raid on 'oil refineries' in Syria.⁹⁶ The Coalition itself reported no such strike for that date – though did note for March 5th-6th that "Near Dayr az Zawr, an airstrike struck an ISIL crude oil collection point." That same night, ISIL claimed that a maternity hospital was struck by the Coalition at al Bukamal in Dayr az Zawr province, which resulted in the deaths of up to five non-combatants, including a woman and two infants.⁹⁷ It is not known whether the Coalition or UAE have assessed or investigated this alleged incident.

The reported airstrike on March 6th-7th may have represented the UAE's final intervention in Syria. According to a later New York Times

report, "The United Arab Emirates last carried out strikes in Syria in March [2015]".⁹⁸

Recommendations

The United Arab Emirates has been the most transparent and publicly accountable of the three Arab partners in the Coalition. On occasion official reports have allowed for direct cross-referencing against the public record, enabling researchers to assess whether UAE aircraft might have been linked to potential civilian casualty events.

It would be a relatively simple step for the UAE to extend this approach to all airstrikes it conducts – and we therefore urge the defence ministry to publish in a timely manner the dates and locations of all UAE strikes.

⁹⁶ WAM [Emirates News Agency], March 7th 2015, at <http://www.wam.ae/ar/news/emirates-international/1395277583379.html>

⁹⁷ Event listed in 'Reported civilian and 'friendly fire' deaths from Coalition airstrikes 2015', Airwars, at <https://airwars.org/civcas-2015/>

⁹⁸ 'As U.S. Escalates Air War on ISIS, Allies Slip Away', New York Times, November 7th 2015, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/world/middleeast/as-us-escalates-air-war-on-isis-allies-slip-away.html>

We also ask for the disclosure of any assessed or investigated civilian casualty incidents in which UAE aircraft may have been involved.

Turkey

Ambivalent Coalition membership alongside unilateral actions

Turkey remains the most ambivalent member of the US-led Coalition – with almost all of its military actions viewed as unilateral by its purported allies. Indeed Ankara's claimed interventions against Islamic State since 2015 have often provided cover for assaults on Kurdish forces in both Iraq and Syria – groups which Turkey sees as terrorists. Civilian casualties have often been reported from such events. Complicating matters further, the United States in particular has come to rely on some of these same Kurdish fighters as its preferred proxy ground forces, particularly in Syria. This has led to significant tensions between supposed allies.

Turkey was first reported to have joined the international Coalition on July 23rd 2015 – when it began allowing the US-led alliance to use its eastern airbases (mainly Incirlik) to launch attacks on ISIL in Syria. Ankara also carried out its own airstrikes at the time – which were not primarily aimed at ISIL, but instead at Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants in northern Iraq. For example three civilians were reported injured in a dawn raid on border villages including Amidiyah.⁹⁹ A week later eight civilians died in a fresh attack in Iraq condemned as unlawful by Amnesty International.¹⁰⁰

In late August 2015 Turkey first carried out airstrikes under the auspices of the Coalition itself, whose daily reports now stated: "Coalition nations which have conducted airstrikes in Syria include Bahrain, Canada, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab

Emirates and the U.S."¹⁰¹ Even so the number of such events was limited, with Airwars presently estimating that no more than ten Turkish strikes have been in direct support of Coalition objectives.

Since late 2015 Turkey has significantly escalated its unilateral actions in both Iraq and Syria – with consequences both for civilians and for the war against ISIL. Against the wishes of the Iraqi government, a sizeable Turkish force established itself near Bashiqa north east of Mosul by December 2015.¹⁰² While reportedly there to provide training to local anti-ISIL forces, Turkish forces also allegedly participated in the besieging of Mosul prior to the October 2016 assault on the city. Iraqi MP Salim Jumrah complained for example that in July 2016 Turkish artillery shelling of Fadhiliya village near Bashiqa "killed and injured a number of civilians."¹⁰³

On August 24th 2016 Turkey also invaded northern Syria, in a campaign it dubbed Operation Euphrates Shield. While the operation was in part aimed at dislodging so-called Islamic State from the border region, much of Turkey's firepower was also directed at Kurdish forces in the area – some of which had only recently been key Coalition allies in dislodging ISIL from Manbij and other northern Syrian towns. A number of civilian casualties were confusingly attributed to both Turkish and Coalition actions during this period. Asked to clarify Turkey's status within the US-led alliance, a spokesperson informed Airwars that the Coalition viewed Turkey's actions as unilateral, noting that "we don't count the Turkish strikes into the coalition totals."¹⁰⁴

101 'Aug. 29: Military airstrikes continue against ISIL terrorists in Syria and Iraq', Coalition press release for August 28th-29th 2016, at <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/904064/aug-29-military-airstrikes-continue-against-isil-terrorists-in-syria-and-iraq/>

102 'Turkish soldiers training Iraqi troops near Mosul: sources', Reuters, December 4th 2015, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-turkey-idUSKBN0TN2HZ20151205>

103 Cited by NRN News, July 18th 2016, at <https://www.facebook.com/newsnrn/photos/a.339288426254838.1073741828.339282739588740/562466053937073/?type=3&theater>

104 Coalition spokesperson, email to Airwars, August 29th 2016

99 Iraq Hurr, July 25th 2016, at <http://www.iraqhurr.org/a/27152393.html>

100 'Fresh evidence of casualties underscores need for impartial investigation into Turkish airstrikes in Kandil Mountains', Amnesty International, August 11th 2015, at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/08/fresh-evidence-of-casualties-underscores-need-for-impartial-investigation-into-turkish-airstrikes-in-kandil-mountains/>

Recommendations

Turkey's reporting of its actions in both Iraq and Syria has been limited. Any related press releases are issued via the Duyurular section of the Ministry of National Defense website.¹⁰⁵ The semi-official Anatolian News Agency also carries occasional statements from the Defence Minister. While one international correspondent based in Turkey told Airwars that the government "have a policy whereby they don't supply details on operations in Iraq and Syria," Ankara has released daily information on its Euphrates Shield offensive in northern Syria.

Turkey's limited public disclosures – coupled with continued attribution challenges for monitors – has led to significant confusion in both Iraq and Syria. As Ankara's operations in northern Syria have continued for example, the US-led Coalition has often been blamed for civilian fatalities which upon assessment were deemed by Airwars to be most likely the responsibility of Turkish aircraft. In Iraq, it is often difficult to determine whether some reported civilian fatalities north of Mosul have been the result of Turkish artillery strikes – or were instead actions by the Iraqi military or other besieging forces.

Airwars therefore calls for the following:

- A clear declaration by both Ankara and the Coalition of all occasions when Turkish strikes have been deemed to be Coalition rather than unilateral actions.
- Consistent and timely public reporting by the Ministry of National Defense of all unilateral and multilateral Turkish military actions in Iraq and Syria - including the date, location and target of all airstrikes.
- The prompt disclosure by Turkey of any alleged civilian casualty incidents in Iraq and Syria it has assessed and investigated to date.

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.msb.gov.tr/>

Bahrain

Limited transparency – though a minor player

Bahrain participated in the first night of Coalition airstrikes on Syria, on September 23rd 2014.¹⁰⁶ The Kingdom publicly declared its role, noting at the time that "formations of the Royal Bahraini Air Force - in conjunction with its sister air forces in the Gulf Cooperation Council and allied and friendly countries - have carried out actions in the early hours of Tuesday to strike and destroy a number of sites and objectives related to terrorist groups and organizations."¹⁰⁷

Only one subsequent operation has been publicly reported. In response to the murder of a Jordanian pilot by ISIL in January 2015, Bahrain later sent aircraft to assist with strikes against ISIL. The official Bahrain News Agency reported at the time "the decision of the Kingdom of Bahrain to support our brothers in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan... by sending a group of Royal Bahraini Air Force planes to Jordan to participate in international efforts to eliminate terrorism."¹⁰⁸

It is not known how many airstrikes if any Bahrain conducted during this specific operation; and no details of any subsequent kinetic operations are presently known. The small Gulf state remains a vital contributor to the broader Coalition however, for example hosting the US Fifth Fleet.

¹⁰⁶ 'US Military, Partner Nations Conduct Airstrikes Against ISIL in Syria', US Department of Defence, September 23rd 2014, archived at http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=83476

¹⁰⁷ Cited by AFP Arabic, September 23rd 2014, at <http://www.alriyadh.com/978961>

¹⁰⁸ Cited by Bahrain News Agency [Arabic], February 17th 2015, at <http://www.bna.bh/portal/news/654625>

July 2016: a transparency case study

Context

In order to explore in greater depth the transparency and public accountability issues raised by this report we have focused in detail on a single recent sample month – allowing us both to provide more granular modelling of the later-stage war, and to reach out to Coalition partners for more detailed information on their recent military engagements.

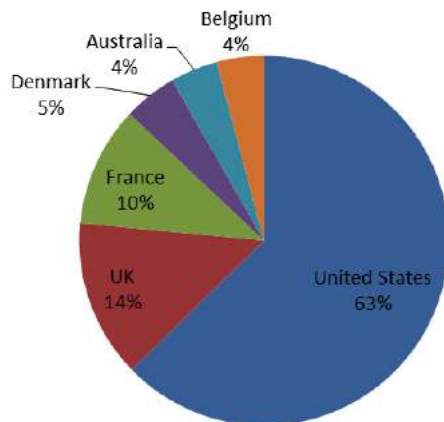
July 2016 saw in total some 683 Coalition airstrikes against so-called Islamic State. Unusually, most of these actions (352 strikes) were in Syria – with 331 actions in Iraq. According to US Air Force Central Command (AFCENT) which compiles strike data on behalf of the Coalition, some 2,411 munitions were used on ISIL during the month – approximately 3.5 bombs and missiles per ‘airstrike’.¹⁰⁹

The United States was by far the largest contributor to the Coalition campaign in July 2016, conducting 567 airstrikes in total, or 83 per cent of all declared military actions. Some 227 of these US strikes were in Iraq (where they accounted for 63 per cent of the total there) while in Syria the United States carried out 340 strikes - or 97 per cent of all Coalition actions there that month.

The UK was the second most active partner for July 2016, declaring 50 airstrikes in Iraq (15 per cent of the total there) and four actions in Syria. France followed with 38 strikes in Iraq (11 per cent of the total) and two in Syria.

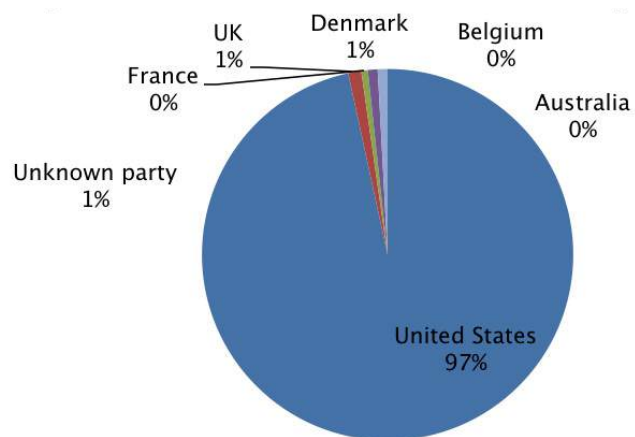
Additional actions were conducted by other Coalition partners including Australia (approximately 15 strikes in Iraq); Belgium (an estimated 15 kinetic actions); and Denmark, which conducted an estimated 17 strikes in Iraq and three in Syria.

Iraq: Coalition airstrikes July 2016



Approximately 37 per cent of Coalition strikes in Iraq in July 2016 were carried out by five US allies. Airwars estimates based on data supplied by Coalition allies.

Syria: Coalition airstrikes July 2016

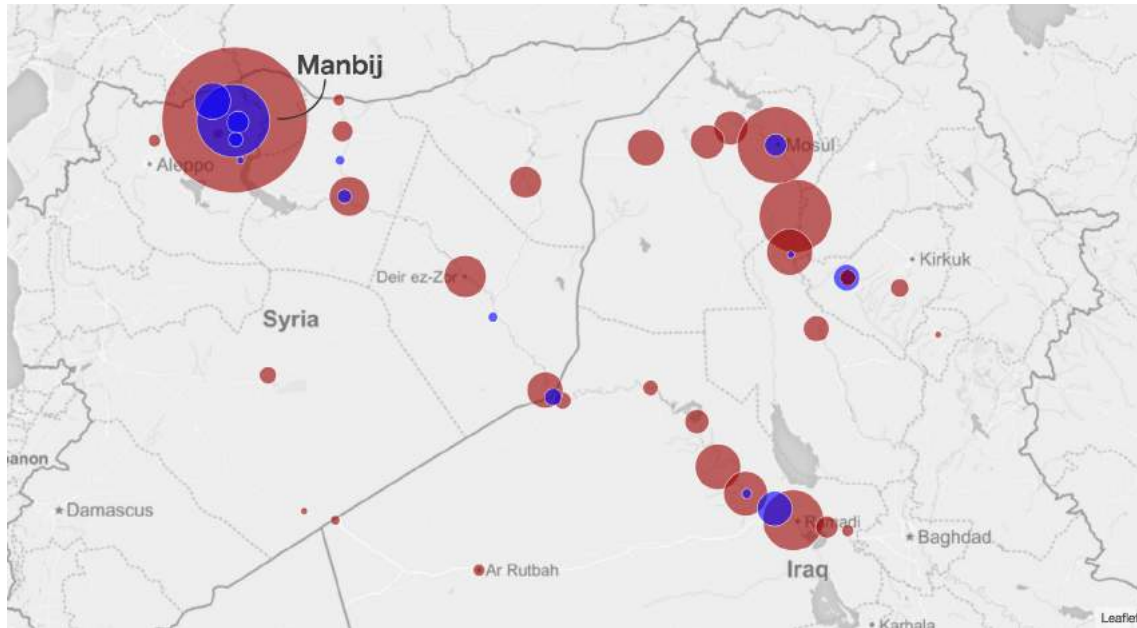


Only 12 non-US airstrikes were conducted by the Coalition in Syria for July 2016: 97% of declared actions were by the United States. Airwars estimates, based on data supplied by Coalition allies.

¹⁰⁹ 'Combined Forces Air Component Commander 2011-2016 Airpower Statistics – July 2016', AFCENT, at <http://www.afcent.af.mil/Portals/82/Users/221/33/733/07-%20July%2016%20Airpower%20Summary.pdf?ver=2016-08-19-041508-533>

The map below shows the distribution of airstrikes for the month as reported by the Coalition (in red) and the location of all known alleged civilian casualty events (in blue). Coalition daily reports show that the areas most heavily targeted in July 2016 were Manbij in northern Syria, along with Mosul, Qayyarah and Ramadi in Iraq.

In all but a few cases, civilian casualty allegations fairly closely matched the reported locations of Coalition strikes across the month. This geographical proximity indicated a potential correlation between civilian casualty allegations and declared airstrikes, which we were keen to examine with the assistance of individual Coalition allies.



Airwars modelling indicated a reasonable correlation between declared Coalition airstrikes [in red] and reported civilian fatalities [in blue] for July 2016

Reported civilian fatality events for July 2016

Airwars researchers identified 47 separate claimed civilian casualty incidents for July 2016, with 40 of the events in Syria and seven in Iraq. A total of 311 to 509 non-combatants were alleged to have died overall. Some 80 per cent of those claimed deaths (253-443) were in Syria - primarily associated with the US-backed assault on Manbij in northern Aleppo governorate. A total of 57 to 66 non-combatant deaths were alleged for Iraq. There were no alleged friendly fire incidents for the month.

In an initial published assessment for July 2016, Airwars noted that it “presently assesses 28 of these 47 events as fairly reported: that is with two or more credible sources, and Coalition strikes confirmed in the near vicinity. Between 208 and 387 civilians are presently assessed as likely having been killed in these incidents, compared with between 110 and 180 deaths in June.”

Almost all of these likely deaths were tracked in Syria. As the Coalition and in particular the United States focused its firepower on Manbij, reports of civilian fatalities fell steeply in Iraq. As Airwars’ monthly report noted at the time: “There was a marked decrease in incidents of concern in Iraq for July. Seven events were reported, a 114% drop from the 15 cases we tracked in June. Of these, Airwars presently assesses just one case as ‘fairly’ reported.”¹¹⁰ This suggested a strong correlation between the intensity of Coalition actions and civilian casualties.

In addition to these 47 known events, CENTCOM later disclosed two additional and previously unreported casualty cases, detailing the death of a civilian at Qayarra in Iraq on July 14th, and the injuring of a civilian at Manbij on July 31st as a result of US airstrikes.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ ‘International airstrikes and civilian casualty claims in Iraq and Syria: July 2016’, Airwars, August 22nd 2016, at <https://airwars.org/news/international-airstrikes-and-casualty-claims-in-iraq-and-syria-july-2016/>

¹¹¹ ‘November 9: Iraq and Syria civilian casualty assessments’, CENTCOM, at <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1000893/november-9-iraq-and-syria-civilian-casualty-assessments/>

Transparency Exercise

Airwars first examined the published records of all active Coalition partners, to determine which if any might have been involved in any particular alleged civilian casualty event. Bahrain, the Netherlands and Canada were discounted, since they had ceased kinetic operations by July 1st 2016. It was also not possible based on information available to determine whether four other allies – Turkey, Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia or the UAE – might have conducted airstrikes as a part of the Coalition during the month.¹¹²

Airwars then reached out individually to the defence ministries of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Denmark and Australia for more information on their actions in Iraq and Syria in July 2016. We outline the response of each nation below.

In summary, key engagement by the two most active Coalition partners with this study - the United States and United Kingdom – brought significant clarity to a number of alleged incidents. Assessors at both CENTCOM and the Ministry of Defence were able to say with some certainty whether aircraft had participated in a number of incidents. Seven new investigations were triggered as a direct result of the process according to CENTCOM officials, on top of a similar number already underway for the month. In addition, geolocation assistance by Airwars helped military assessors to identify the likely sites of a number of alleged civilian casualty events.

The French Ministère de la Defense also embarked on what it described as a major self-assessment to determine whether civilian casualties might have occurred. Unfortunately that study had not concluded by the time this report published.

By way of contrast, the refusal of Belgium, Australia and Denmark to engage on specific civilian casualty allegations meant that each nation remained implicated in events they may not have been involved in. Far from protecting military personnel from enemy

¹¹² Three non-US airstrikes in Syria for July 2016 remain unaccounted for. Alliance officials have indicated that Saudi Arabia and one other Arab Coalition partner conducted occasional airstrikes in Syria during 2016 – which may help to account for ‘missing’ strikes from the July tally.

propaganda, an absence of detail from many Coalition partners may actually have risked the opposite effect.

Airwars was also able to assess the quality of its own modelling as a result of feedback. Based on CENTCOM assertions, 22 of 47 incidents were reassessed by Airwars to some degree. Ten events previously classed by Airwars as Weak or Contested were

reclassified as Discounted - a change which did not affect our overall estimates of likely civilian deaths. However a further four events were reclassified from Fairly reported to Weak or Discounted, a move which led to an eight per cent reduction in the minimum estimate of civilians likely killed for the month. A further six events previously assessed by Airwars as fairly reported were downgraded to a less confident status.

July 2016 case study: response from Coalition partners

United States (CENTCOM)

Total number of airstrikes declared in July:	567
Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Iraq):	68.5% [227 strikes]
Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Syria):	97% [340 strikes]
Strike location disclosure:	Limited
Strike date disclosure:	Limited
Specific event follow-up:	Extensive

Broadly echoing earlier months, the United States conducted the majority of Coalition airstrikes in both Iraq (68.5%) and Syria (97%) in July 2016. However the US subsumed its own location, date and strike number details into broader Coalition published reports. This made identifying any CENTCOM role in a problem event particularly challenging in Iraq, where one in three airstrikes were by the US's allies. Syria was more straightforward. With so few airstrikes conducted there by America's allies, almost all civilian casualty events were likely to be the result of US actions.

With 47 claimed civilian casualty events across Iraq and Syria for the month, poor US-specific reporting meant that in theory at least, CENTCOM was potentially implicated in each event. The US was also the lead investigator for the Coalition in any potential civilian casualty event. Airwars therefore requested more specific information on US actions for the month. As we noted to CENTCOM: "Most of those alleged events (39 of 47) occurred in Syria and are likely to have been US actions if confirmed. However eight alleged events were reported for Iraq - where clarification on any US strikes in the vicinity would be particularly helpful."¹¹³

CENTCOM officials devoted considerable resources to engaging with this study. All 47 alleged events were assessed, and an initial response given. After feedback from Airwars

– including the provision of likely geolocation coordinates for 17 of the alleged incidents – CENTCOM then conducted a fresh round of analysis.

According to military officials, seven of 47 events were already under Coalition investigation for possible civilian casualties when they were flagged by this study. Four of these incidents have subsequently been confirmed totalling 45 fatalities between them - including an airstrike at al Tokhar on July 19th which the US says killed 24 civilians, and which others report killed 70 or more. As already noted, two further July cases had been internally reported by US personnel, which were also later confirmed.¹¹⁴

In addition, seven new investigations were triggered as a result of CENTCOM's engagement with Airwars. The remaining 33 events were dismissed either as 'Not credible', or it was deemed that no Coalition airstrikes had taken place nearby.

By cross-matching reports from other Coalition partners, Airwars has been able to determine that all seven alleged events being investigated by CENTCOM as a result of this study were the result of US actions. Of the seven incidents already under investigation, six were due to US airstrikes – with only one (at Hit in Iraq) also potentially caused by Denmark, Belgium or Australia.

While these findings might suggest that US actions are responsible for most if not all Coalition civilian fatalities in Iraq or Syria, they

may also indicate a greater willingness by the United States to subject its own actions to both internal and external scrutiny.

United Kingdom

Total number of airstrikes declared in July:	54
Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Iraq):	15% [50 strikes]
Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Syria):	1% [4 strikes]
Strike location disclosure:	Weekly, locations disclosed
Strike date disclosure:	Specific dates
Specific event follow-up:	Yes

The UK declared 54 airstrikes in July 2016 (50 in Iraq and four in Syria) which represented eight per cent of all declared Coalition actions. As in almost all previous months, the UK was the second most active alliance partner after the United States. Publicly reporting on a weekly basis, the UK detailed the date; location; target; and weapon and aircraft type used for each action in July.

When cross-referenced against the public record, we identified seven reported civilian casualty events (four in Iraq and three in Syria) in which RAF aircraft might have been involved. Between them, these events were alleged to have caused 67 or more civilian fatalities. As part of its regular engagement with the MoD, Airwars detailed the seven

July incidents and asked for clarification on any possible UK role. In response, UK defence officials stated that “*After extensive research, we can confirm that there was no UK involvement in... the events listed in your table.*”¹¹⁵

Five of these seven alleged events were separately ruled out by CENTCOM, which concluded there were no Coalition strikes in the near vicinity on the dates in question. An event at Manbij on July 24th-25th was under investigation - though now appears to have been the result either of US or Danish actions. And a July 27th incident at Hit in Iraq (the result of a US or possibly Danish, Belgian or Australian strike) had been investigated and ruled out by the Coalition.

France

Total number of airstrikes declared in July:	40
Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Iraq):	11.5% [38 strikes]
Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Syria):	0.6% [2 strikes]
Strike location disclosure:	Weekly, most locations disclosed
Strike date disclosure:	Weekly range given for most strikes
Specific event follow-up:	None

France declared approximately 40 anti-ISIL airstrikes in July 2016 – 38 in Iraq and two in Syria. Weekly reports were issued by the Ministère de la Defense via Facebook three times during the month. However for the week of July 6th to 12th 2016 a French tweet and accompanying map were the only public record of 11 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, which had reportedly destroyed 15 targets.

Airwars cross-referenced these French reports against its own published database of alleged Coalition civilian casualty events. The exercise highlighted seven potential incidents for July 2016 where French strikes

may have led to civilian casualties. The six events in Iraq and one in Syria had between them allegedly killed more than 50 non-combatants. In addition, the Syrian regime alleged that French aircraft had participated in a July 19th airstrike at al-Tokhar which resulted in the reported deaths of 73 or more civilians.¹¹⁶

A document outlining these potential problem events was provided for comment to the Ministère de la Defense on September 16th 2016. Despite continued assurances to the contrary by officials, no response had been received by the time this study was published.



Even so, by cross-referencing the events with data supplied by CENTCOM, it appeared likely that four of the seven events were not the result of Coalition actions. In the three other cases, while there was strong evidence to suggest civilians had died, the Coalition insisted it had not conducted strikes nearby at the time. CENTCOM’s investigation into the al-Tokhar incident had not been released by the time this report published.

Denmark

Total number of airstrikes declared in July:
 Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Iraq):
 Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Syria):
 Strike location disclosure:
 Strike date disclosure:
 Specific event follow-up:

20 [70 munitions released]
 5% [17 strikes]
 0.85% [3 strikes]
 Weekly, province only
 Weekly, range only
 Poor

Between June 29th and August 3rd 2016, Denmark reported dropping 70 munitions during attacks on ISIL, or approximately 20 airstrikes (17 in Iraq and 3 in Syria.) Unfortunately, Denmark did not take the opportunity to improve public transparency with the resumption of its airstrikes. Dates and near locations of these actions were not given, significantly impeding public accountability.

For July 20th-27th for example, Denmark reported “dropping 19 precision munitions. F-16s operated over the Iraqi provinces of Al Anbar, Salah Al Din, Irbil, Dahuk and Ninawa and the Syrian provinces of Ar Raqqa and Aleppo. Missions have included attacks in Iraq targeting Daesh buildings, armories and facilities that were used for storing cars fitted with improvised explosive devices (VBIED), as well as surveillance and intelligence gathering.”¹¹⁷

Across July 2016 Airwars identified 13 alleged civilian casualty events in which Danish aircraft *might* have been involved. By only publicly reporting on which provinces it had struck

in any given week, Denmark unnecessarily implicated itself in all such reported cases. For example, Denmark’s July 20th-27th disclosure of activity in Aleppo governorate potentially implicated its personnel in six separate reported incidents in and around Manbij that week - actions which allegedly killed 10 or more civilians.

By cross-referencing responses received from CENTCOM, Airwars was able to determine that eight of these alleged events did not appear to involve any Coalition aircraft. However on three occasions the US requested additional geolocational assistance – indicating that its assessment process remained open. One further event had already been investigated (Hit in Iraq on July 27th) with CENTCOM determining the incident was “not credible”, while a second incident at Manbij on July 24th-25th was now under investigation.

Whether Denmark was implicated in the Manbij event or any other was impossible to determine from its own published records. In response to a detailed query from Airwars,

defence officials refused to provide further information either on where or when Denmark had bombed in Iraq or Syria during July 2016:

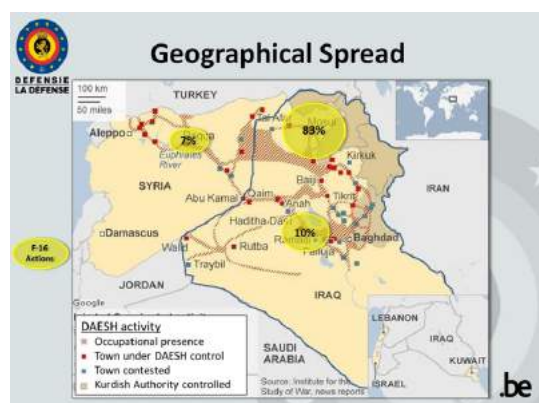
For your information the Danish Defence has no knowledge of any indications with regard to civilian casualties as a result of Denmark's participation in Operation Inherent Resolve... Further details will not be disclosed due to operational safety concerns in respect to both Danish military personnel and the cooperation among the force contributing nations to Operation Inherent Resolve.¹¹⁸

Belgium

Total number of airstrikes declared in July:
Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Iraq):
Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Syria):
Strike location disclosure:
Strike date disclosure:
Specific event follow-up:

Approximately 15
Unknown
Unknown
Partial
None
None

As noted already, Belgium has consistently been one of the least transparent members of the US-led Coalition, generally refusing to report on where or when its aircraft bombed in Iraq and later Syria. This meant that in theory at least, Belgium may have been implicated in any one of the alleged civilian casualty events tracked for July 2016. Airwars wrote to the Belgian defence ministry asking for clarity on its bombing campaign, and included details of all 47 alleged civilian casualty events for the month.¹²⁰



A defence ministry slide identifies the areas where Belgian F-16s carried out actions between July and September 2016

Just before issuing this statement (and in apparent contradiction) Denmark had self-declared its involvement in a 'friendly fire' airstrike in Syria on September 17th 2016 which killed as many as 83 Syrian Army troops. Less than 24 hours after the event Denmark openly confirmed its role in the attack – giving the location, date and type of aircraft used.¹¹⁹

Responding, the Ministry refused to engage on individual incidents. Instead it referred Airwars to a September 30th media briefing in Brussels, which Airwars attended. While this did provide some detail on the overall campaign, little direct attention was given to the issue of civilian casualties, beyond an assertion by the head of the air force that Belgian airstrikes had caused "No collateral damage." More helpful was the information that Belgium had conducted 105 missions over three months, 44 per cent of which had ended kinetically. This suggested an average of 15 Belgian strikes per month. It was also revealed that 83 per cent of Belgian actions had taken place in the vicinity of Mosul; 10 per cent in Iraq's Anbar province; and seven per cent around Raqqa in Syria.

Equipped with this information, Airwars was then able to reassess reported civilian casualty events for July 2016 for any indications of possible Belgian involvement, based on the location of allegations. Six possible incidents were initially flagged for concern. However when cross-checked against CENTCOM's own feedback, three of these incidents were shown as unlikely to have involved Coalition aircraft.

A July 27th airstrike at Hit in Iraq's Anbar province may have involved Belgian aircraft however. That incident had already been investigated by the Coalition, which had assessed it as 'Not credible' – meaning there was insufficient evidence to determine civilian casualties. Two other reported civilian

casualty events – at Raqqa in Syria on July 12th, and Mosul in Iraq on July 31st – might in theory also have involved Belgian aircraft. An absence of more specific defence ministry data on either the dates or the locations of its strikes continues to implicate Belgium in these three incidents of concern.

Australia

Total number of airstrikes declared in July:
Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Iraq):
Proportion of declared Coalition strikes (Syria):
Strike location disclosure:
Strike date disclosure:
Specific event follow-up:

Est. 15 strikes [52 munitions]
4.5% [15 strikes]
0 %
None
None
None

Other than its monthly data on munitions released, Australia has issued almost no information on its conventional war against ISIL in either Iraq or Syria.

Data for July 2016 showed Australia conducted no airstrikes in Syria – ruling it out from any involvement in most of the 47 alleged civilian casualty events for the month. That said, there were eight claimed incidents in Iraq, in which the Royal Australian Air Force was potentially implicated. Airwars supplied details of these incidents to the Defence Force in Canberra, and asked whether Australian aircraft might have been involved. In addition, we requested the following:

- Since the start of hostilities in 2014, how many alleged civilian casualty events potentially involving Australian forces in Iraq and/or Syria have been provisionally assessed and investigated?
- What are the dates and locations of these events?
- What were the findings of any assessments or investigations?¹²¹

113 Email from Airwars to CENTCOM's Director of Public Affairs, August 31st 2016

114 'November 9: Iraq and Syria civilian casualty assessments', CENTCOM, at <http://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1000893/november-9-iraq-and-syria-civilian-casualty-assessments/>

115 Ministry of Defence letter to Airwars, September 13th 2016.

116 'Syrian FM accuses France of killing 85 civilians in northeast Aleppo', Al Masdar News, July 20th 2016, at <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-fm-accuses-france-killing-85-civilians-northeast-aleppo/>

Australia refused to answer, stating that "for operational security reasons, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) will not provide mission-specific details on individual engagements. The ADF will not release information that could be distorted and used against Australia in Daesh propaganda. Australia's Rules of Engagement are designed to avoid civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure."¹²²

Despite this unhelpful response, Airwars was able to cross-check the eight alleged Iraq incidents against feedback from other Coalition allies. Six were effectively ruled out, with no Coalition strikes taking place in the vicinity on the dates in question. However a July 27th airstrike at Hit in Iraq which may have involved Australian aircraft had already been investigated by the Coalition. And a July 31st massed raid on Mosul by a number of allies may also have killed civilians according to reports.

117 'Mission Update nr. 6: Opdatering fra de danske styrker indsat i Operation Inherent Resolve', Forsvaret For Danmark, July 28th 2016 [Airwars translation], at <http://www2.forsvaret.dk/nyheder/intops/Pages/MissionUpdatenr6.aspx>

118 Danish Defence Ministry email to Airwars, September 27th 2016.

119 'Forsvarets kommentarer efter angreb i Syrien', Forsvaret For Danmark, September 18th 2016, at <http://www2.forsvaret.dk/nyheder/intops/Pages/TEST.aspx>

120 Airwars letter to Belgian Ministry of Defence, September 16th 2016

121 Letter from Airwars to Australian Defence Force, September 6th 2016

122 Email from Australian Defence Force to Airwars, September 15th 2016

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