

# A Reckless Disregard for Civilian Lives

Database indicates over 1,000 civilians credibly reported killed in first three months of Russia's air campaign in Syria



Fires blaze as rescuers aid a man at the site of an alleged Russian strike on Bdama, Idlib on December 22nd (via White Helmets)



## **Summary Findings**

- At 80,000 words, the [\*\*Airwars database\*\*](#) of **330 alleged casualty events to December 31<sup>st</sup> 2015** offers a comprehensive overview of Russia's recent reported actions.
- Despite Moscow's continuing assertions that no civilians have been killed in its ongoing Syrian air war, there are credible indications from open source reporting that **to December 31<sup>st</sup> only, between 1,098 and 1,450 non-combatants died in 192 separate Russian events**.
- Those killed are not anonymous statistics. Airwars lists **the names of 1,326 civilians allegedly killed by Russia**, in 330 separate overall claimed incidents to December 31st.
- There has been significant over-reporting of Russian actions, with **31% of alleged events (104 incidents) contested**: that is, where the identity of the belligerent is unknown. In most such cases it appears likely that civilians did die – though it remains unclear whether Russia, the Assad regime or on occasion the Coalition was responsible.
- Russia and the Coalition report carrying out a similar number of armed sorties. Yet **civilian fatalities from Russian strikes were six times higher**. There were 76 reported civilian casualty events allegedly involving Coalition aircraft across both Iraq and Syria between September 30<sup>th</sup> and December 31st. We assess the likely impact of these events to be **120-156 civilians killed by the Coalition in Iraq, and 58-67 civilians killed in Syria**.
- Airwars has identified **eleven contested events where both the Coalition and Russia are accused of killing civilians**. The Coalition may indeed have been responsible for some of these incidents, with confirmed strikes in the near vicinity on the dates in question. Other claims appear to be propaganda from the Assad regime or Russia.
- Protests by the US and allies at high civilian casualties from Russian airstrikes have been undermined by the **Coalition's own unwillingness to admit such casualties**. No civilian deaths have been conceded by any Coalition partner since Russia's air campaign began on September 30<sup>th</sup> 2015. Overall, despite more than 11,000 Coalition airstrikes and credible estimates of [\*\*over 1,000 civilians killed\*\*](#), only 21 such deaths have so far been admitted.
- The newly published [\*\*Airwars database\*\*](#) indicates that **Russia has systematically targeted civilian neighbourhoods and civilian infrastructure** - including water plants, wells, marketplaces, bakeries, food depots and aid convoys.

# **Summary findings on Russian airstrikes: September 30<sup>th</sup> to December 31st 2015**

Between September 30th and December 31st 2015, a total of **330 reported civilian casualty incidents** allegedly involving Russian aircraft have been identified by our researchers.

Claims are drawn from Syrian monitoring groups which include the [Syrian Network for Human Rights](#), the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), the [Violations Documentation Center](#); [Raqaa is Being Slaughtered Silently](#) and the [White Helmets](#). Reports are also assessed from media and social media sites; militant and rebel groups; and local and international NGOs and news organisations. These have been cross checked where possible against [official Russian military releases](#).

An overall total of between **1,826 and 2,426** civilian non-combatant deaths have been alleged from these 330 events, although as we explain below this overstates likely civilian deaths from Russian strikes.

Moscow has so far denied killing any civilians in its continuing air campaign in Syria. Despite these claims, it is our provisional view at Airwars that to December 31st only, between **1,098 and 1,450 civilian non-combatants** are likely to have been killed in **192 Syrian incidents** where there is fair reporting publicly available of an event – and where Russian strikes appear to have taken place in the near vicinity on that date.

Indeed, more civilians appear to have been killed by Russia in the three months to December 31st than from all credibly-reported Coalition civilian fatality events since August 2014.

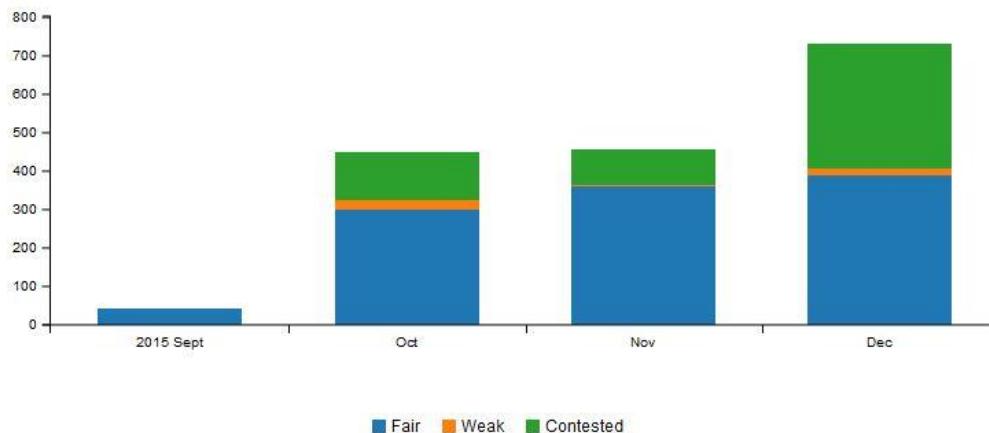
## **Total Civilian Casualty Claims for Syria, September 30<sup>th</sup> to December 31st 2015**

Number of reported Russian incidents across Syria in which civilian deaths claimed	<b>330</b>
Alleged civilian fatality range from all claimed events	<b>1,826-2,426</b>
Incidents with fair public reporting only,	<b>192</b>
Reported civilian fatalities from these fair reporting events	<b>1,098-1,450</b>
Women credibly reported killed	<b>133-155</b>
Children credibly reported killed	<b>259-301</b>
Credibly reported injuries	<b>1,706-2,107</b>

As well as inflicting excessive civilian casualties, Russia is credibly reported to have **extensively targeted civilian infrastructure in Syria** – with water treatment plants, bakeries, food distribution depots and aid convoys all struck (see page 7.) Civilian areas were also systematically targeted across rebel-held territories, often on consecutive days.

**More than 1,700 civilians are also credibly reported injured** in the 192 events we assess as likely having involved Russian aircraft – a reasonable indicator of the low-precision munitions presently favoured by Moscow. Minimum civilian injuries from Russian airstrikes are 55 per cent higher than likely fatalities. In contrast, the 185 likely minimum non-combatant injuries in this period from Coalition strikes are only three per cent higher than likely deaths.

## Russian airstrikes in Syria: Alleged civilian deaths and levels of reporting



A significant proportion (31%) of the 330 incidents allegedly involving Russia is contested – where it remains unclear whether Russia or other parties were responsible. **Between 589 and 831 civilians reportedly died in these 104 contested events.** The question here is not whether civilians died – the public record almost always indicates that they did – but only whether Russia, the Assad regime or on occasion the Coalition was responsible

Within this Contested category, eleven claimed incidents may have involved **Coalition** rather than Russian aircraft according to reports – an indicator of the chaotic situation in Syria today. Between 52 and 65 civilians died in these alleged events. While a few do appear to have involved the Coalition, other claims suggest propaganda efforts by the Syrian regime and by Russia to implicate the US and its allies in unpopular actions.

A further **49** likely civilian deaths are attributed to **26** alleged Russian airstrikes which are presently **weakly reported** or single-sourced. Finally, a small number of alleged events (eight, or 2.4%) have in our view been **disproven**, ie are highly unlikely to have involved Russian aircraft, or did not occur.

For reference we also include the latest known Russian airstrike civilian fatality estimates from the leading Syrian casualty recorders, to mid-March 2016:

### Estimated civilian deaths from Russian airstrikes to March 14<sup>th</sup> 2016

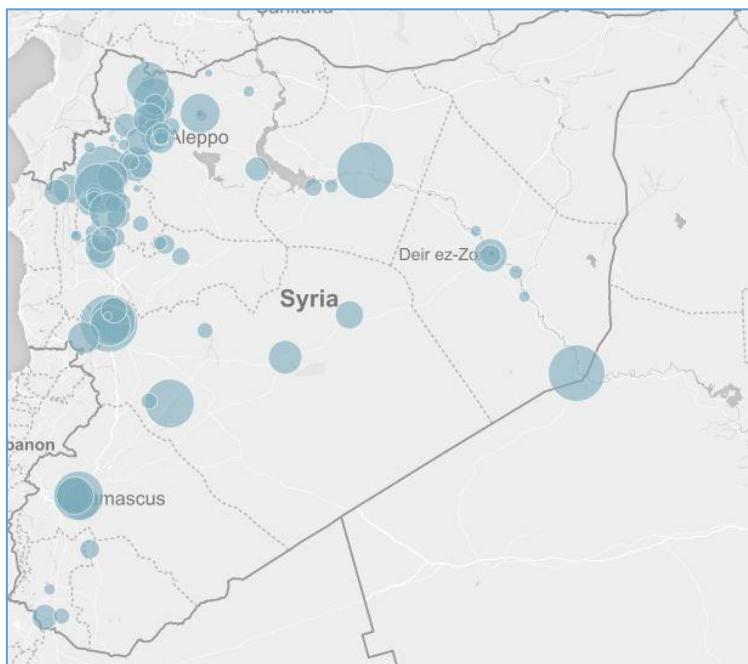
Monitoring group	Estimated minimum civilian deaths from Russian airstrikes
<a href="#">Syrian Network for Human Rights</a>	1,893
<a href="#">Violations Documentation Center</a>	2,049
<a href="#">Syrian Observatory for Human Rights</a>	1,733
Averaged estimate	<b>1,892</b>

## Russian strikes and reporting

The Russian Ministry of Defence publishes reports (in both [Russian](#) and [English](#)) of its military actions in Syria. These show that to December 25th, Moscow carried out [5,240 combat sorties](#). This compares with [4,913 Coalition armed sorties](#) across Iraq and Syria in the same period. However, understanding where Russia bombs has proved challenging.

The Coalition's own daily reports list strikes by vicinity - helpful when determining whether its aircraft may have been involved in alleged events. While also initially published daily, Russian summaries have become more sporadic. When reports are issued they often cover lengthy periods, and only briefly summarise Moscow's actions. Between [December 18<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>](#) for example, Russia says only that it conducted "*302 combat sorties engaging 1093 objects in the Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia, Homs and Deir ez-Zor provinces.*" No town or city locations are given.

Airwars plotting of likely civilian fatalities from Russian airstrikes



There are also challenges with some locations Russia claims to have struck. Geolocation analysis of published strike videos [by Bellingcat](#) has identified occasions when Moscow reports attacking one location, only for analysis to show the real target was elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> There are also occasions where Russia has not reported carrying out airstrikes in a governorate on a given day – even though its aircraft were filmed in action in that area. As a result of this poor reporting, Airwars is less able to determine from the official record whether Russian aircraft participated in any particular event.

New Airwars mapping of likely civilian deaths from Russian airstrikes to December 31<sup>st</sup> also supports the assertion that while Moscow did indeed strike Islamic State militants in Raqqa, Dayr ez Zawr and Al Bukamal, its primary targets were rebel groups and territories in the west of the country which threatened Bashar al Assad's regime.

<sup>1</sup> 'Geolocation and Analysis of Russian Ministry of Defence Syria Airstrike Videos', Bellingcat, at <https://bellingcat.checkdesk.org/en/story/736>

## Mass casualty events

In at least 192 of the events we have assessed to December 31<sup>st</sup>, Russian strikes most likely killed civilians. Between them, these events reportedly killed at least 1,098 civilian non-combatants - at least 392 of whom were women and children.

Often these civilians were killed in ones and twos – most likely ‘collateral damage’ as a result of rebels or other objects being targeted. On November 5<sup>th</sup> 2015 for example, [Abd al-Kareem al-Alawi](#) and another unnamed civilian died when Russian aircraft reportedly struck the town of Qaryatain in Homs governorate.



*Remains of an ambulance following alleged strikes by Russia at Al Bukamal November 5th  
(originally published by Daesh-linked Al A'maq Agency)*

Yet on the same day, as many as 71 civilians died and 100 more were injured when Russian warplanes allegedly launched two airstrikes on a market in Al Bukamal in Dayr ez Zawr. Among the many named dead were at least nine children. A disturbing video records a secondary strike on the market, as onlookers rushed to aid victims of a first attack.<sup>2</sup>

In 93 days of Russian airstrikes to December 31<sup>st</sup>, there were sixteen of these alleged Russian mass casualty events in which 20 or more civilians reportedly died. One of these events was the work of the Assad regime alone, and another five are contested – where it remains unclear whether Assad or Russia was responsible.

Public reporting does indicate that Russia carried out ten of these mass casualty attacks including Al Bukamal – which between them likely killed from 308 to 407 civilians. The frequency of these events actually increased as Moscow’s campaign progressed, indicating that the public outcry against Russian-inflicted civilian fatalities in Syria had little effect.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Al Bukamal – the moment Russian aircraft target civilians in a second raid’, published November 10<sup>th</sup> 2015, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZ9sgtVQKiQ>

## The deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure

A media official at Moscow's Embassy in London has unequivocally insisted to Airwars that "*The Russian military did not target civilian objects or objects of civilian infrastructure in Syria.*"<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, Coalition leaders have accused Russia of just that. Britain's Defence Secretary has claimed "*there is mounting evidence that [the Russians] are deliberately now targeting food shops, mosques, bakeries and driving the population out of its towns and villages north towards the Turkish border.*"<sup>4</sup> And NATO's Supreme Commander in Europe has accused Moscow of "*weaponising migration*" through its deliberate use of imprecise weapons.<sup>5</sup>

So who is right? An assessment by Airwars of all 330 alleged civilian casualty events to December 31<sup>st</sup> overwhelmingly indicates a systematic campaign – by both Russia and the Assad regime – which targeted not only civilian neighbourhoods but also the vital infrastructure which maintained them.

In November alone, bakeries were targeted in airstrikes at Al Atarib, Qaryatain, Benin and Saraqib. A water treatment plant at Al Khafsa was destroyed, while water wells at Maarat al Numan and Ghareya were bombed. Food trucks were targeted at Al Dana and Azaz, and medical facilities credibly reported hit at Sakik, Raqaa and al Bukamal.



Saraqib bakery – destroyed in a reported Russian strike on November 17<sup>th</sup>  
(via the Syrian Network for Human Rights)

This systematic targeting of bakeries, water wells, sewage treatment plants, food convoys, medical facilities and aid warehouses may indeed have amounted to a deliberate effort by both the Assad regime and by Russia to drive civilians out of rebel-held areas of Syria.

<sup>3</sup> Email to Airwars from the Press Office of the Russian Embassy in London, March 28<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in '*Michael Fallon Says Syria Could See 'The Next Sarajevo' If 'Lying' Russia Won't Stop Bombing Civilians*', Louise Ridley, Huffington Post, February 12<sup>th</sup> 2016, at [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/02/12/russia-syria-bombing-aleppo-michael-fallon\\_n\\_9221226.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/02/12/russia-syria-bombing-aleppo-michael-fallon_n_9221226.html)

<sup>5</sup> "These indiscriminate weapons used by both Bashar al-Assad, and the non-precision use of weapons by the Russian forces, I can't find any other reason for them other than to cause refugees to be on the move and make them someone else's problem." General Philip Breedlove to US Senate Armed Services Committee, March 1<sup>st</sup> 2016, at [http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Breedlove\\_03-01-16.pdf](http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Breedlove_03-01-16.pdf)

## The US-led Coalition and Russia

The US-led Coalition began its own air war in Syria on September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014. Prior to Russia's intervention the alliance had conducted 2,570 strikes against Daesh in Syria – 36 per cent of the overall total.<sup>6</sup>

The term 'Coalition' had however become misleading. Key allies Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had effectively quit by mid-2015 in order to engage the Houthis in Yemen – leaving the US almost alone in carrying out Syrian actions.<sup>7</sup> Official CJTFOIR data shows that the United States carried out 99.2% of 'Coalition' strikes in Syria in August. Russia's military engagement in Syria therefore initially impacted mainly on the Pentagon.<sup>8</sup>

Three weeks into its air campaign Moscow signed a 'deconfliction of operations' Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Coalition, the details of which remain secret. With Syria's skies increasingly crowded with international aircraft, that MOU was vital if accidents were to be avoided.

However the agreement brought little clarity for affected civilians on the ground. Four locations in particular (Raqqa, Al Bab, Palmyra and Al Bukamal) have been targeted by both Russian and Coalition airstrikes – sometimes on the same day.



Raqqa following an alleged Russian or Coalition strike, December 26<sup>th</sup> 2015  
(courtesy of *Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently*)

Determining which party is responsible for alleged civilian casualties remains a significant challenge. On November 20<sup>th</sup> 2015 for example, numerous Russian airstrikes targeted Dayr ez Zawr governorate in western Syria leading to significant claims of civilian fatalities. Among the locations reportedly bombed was Al Bukamal, where five civilians are said to have died (including the

<sup>6</sup> The Coalition reports 7,115 strikes in total to September 27<sup>th</sup> 2015, of which 4,545 were in Iraq. Via CJTFOIR Public Relations

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

<sup>8</sup> The vacuum left by departing GCC states was later filled to some degree in Syria by Canada, Australia, France, Turkey, the UK and the Netherlands.

pregnant wife of Abdul Qader Ibrahim Al Kadawi.) Despite credible claims to the contrary, Russia made [no public mention](#) of airstrikes in Dayr ez Zawr that day. The Coalition has [confirmed it did target the city](#) – noting that “*Near Abu Kamal, one strike struck an ISIL crude oil collection point.*” Given that two of those slain were said to work for the local electricity company - killed when an oil tank was hit – the Coalition may well be responsible for some of those civilians killed in Al Bukamal on November 20th, with Russia perhaps liable for other fatalities.

At other times, claims of Coalition involvement appear to be propaganda on the part of the Assad regime or Russia. Following a November 26<sup>th</sup> airstrike on a water treatment plant at Al Khafsa in Aleppo governorate which was [condemned by UNICEF](#), the official regime site [Sana](#) blamed the Coalition: “*American planes targeted Daesh militants in al Khafsa in Aleppo yesterday which caused problems at the water plant. Work has started to repair the equipment.*”

Yet as our own volunteer Christiaan Triebert noted in a recent paper, “*On December 2, 2015, the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) published [a video] ...This clearly shows the al-Khafsa II facility being targeted.*”<sup>9</sup>

Improved transparency from both Russia and the Coalition – particularly in relation to strike location reporting and alleged civilian fatalities – would do much to help affected civilians in Syria better understand which party to the conflict was responsible for deaths and injuries.

## Coalition double standards

Members of the US-led Coalition have been forthright in condemning civilian fatalities from Russian airstrikes – citing NGOs and monitors in Syria in support. Yet similar evidence gathered by these same organisations - of civilian fatalities from Coalition strikes - has often been publicly ignored.

State Department spokesman Mark C. Toner told reporters in December that “*NGOs have reported that Russian airstrikes in Syria have killed hundreds of civilians, including first responders; hit medical facilities, schools, and markets; and led to the displacement of over 130,000 Syrians in October and the first half of November. Of course, we're deeply, deeply concerned about these reports of high civilian casualties.*”<sup>10</sup>

And UK Defence Secretary Michael Fallon has noted: “*The Russians have been at it in Syria for a couple of weeks and independent reports estimate that they've killed several hundred people already.*”<sup>11</sup> Yet these same independent NGOs and casualty recorders have also identified hundreds of likely civilian deaths in Syria and Iraq from Coalition airstrikes – almost none of which have been acknowledged.

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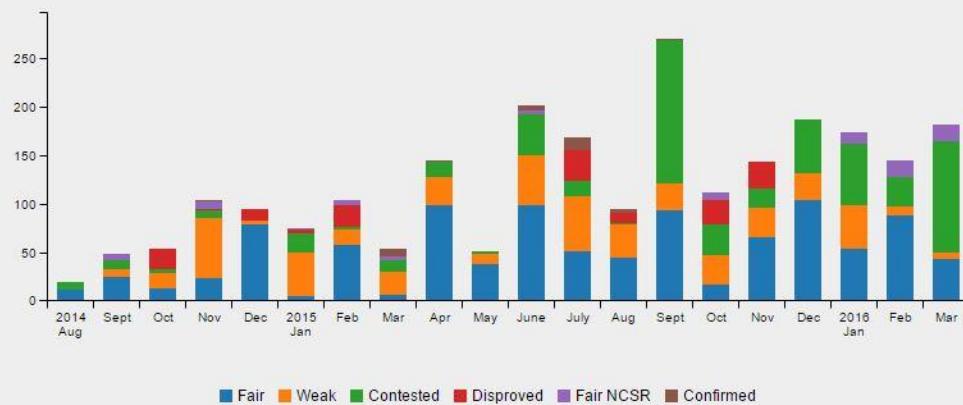
<sup>9</sup> ‘Syria’s Bombed Water Infrastructure: An OSINT Inquiry,’ Christiaan Triebert, Bellingcat, December 11<sup>th</sup> 2015, at <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/12/11/syrias-bombed-water-infrastructure/>

<sup>10</sup> ‘US State Department Daily Press Briefing,’ December 29<sup>th</sup> 2015, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2015/12/250902.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Cited in ‘Russia in Syria: Moscow air strikes ‘have killed thousands of civilians’ already, warns UK Defence Secretary’, Charlie Cooper, The Independent, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-in-syria-moscow-air-strikes-have-killed-thousands-of-civilians-already-warns-uk-defence-a6698751.html>

# Coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria: Alleged civilian deaths and levels of reporting

The chart shows all claimed civilian deaths from alleged Coalition airstrikes across both Iraq and Syria since August 2014, by category. Each event is individually reported in [Civilian Casualties](#).



Between September 30<sup>th</sup> and December 31<sup>st</sup> 2015 there were 76 claimed civilian casualty events allegedly involving Coalition aircraft across both Iraq and Syria. Airwars presently assesses 27 of the alleged Coalition events in this period as likely having killed civilians. The estimated impact of these events is 120-156 civilians killed by the Coalition in Iraq, and 58-67 civilians killed in Syria.

Yet not one civilian fatality has been admitted by any of the twelve partners in the US-led Coalition since Russian hostilities began. Indeed, it was six months before the US admitted any civilian deaths from its own air campaign against Daesh – with only 13 civilian fatalities in Syria conceded in the 19 months to March 29<sup>th</sup> 2016.

In contrast, Airwars presently estimates that at least 511 civilians have so far died in Syria and 525 in Iraq as a result of all Coalition airstrikes.

## Conclusion

Between September 30<sup>th</sup> and December 31<sup>st</sup> 2015, the public record indicates that Russian airstrikes in Syria killed an estimated 1,100 or more non-combatants. This is more than six times the number of civilians credibly reported killed by the Coalition across Iraq and Syria during the same period – despite both powers conducting a similar number of combat sorties.

This higher civilian fatality rate can in part be explained by Russia's extensive use of so called 'dumb' bombs (unguided weapons.) With less precision, more explosives are needed to achieve the same effect, leading in turn to greater non-combatant deaths and injuries.

However, evidence from the ground also points to Russia placing a far lower value on civilian lives in Syria during this period than the Coalition. Repeated attacks on civilian areas and infrastructure may have been a deliberate attempt to drive non-combatants from rebel-held territory.

Overall, Russia's air campaign in Syria has clearly demonstrated a reckless disregard for civilian lives.

## About Airwars

[Airwars.org](#) is a transparency project based in Europe and the Middle East which monitors international airstrikes in Iraq and Syria against Islamic State and other non-state actors. Thanks to funding from the [Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust](#), the [Open Society Foundation](#) and the [Network for Social Change](#), we employ analysts based in Iraq, Lebanon and the UK who monitor alleged civilian casualty events. Our [full methodology](#) can be seen here.

### Russia report team



London-based investigative journalist **Chris Woods** leads the Airwars project and authored this report. A conflict specialist, Chris previously worked as a senior producer with the BBC's *Newsnight* and *Panorama* strands. He also set up and ran the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's award-winning [Drones Project](#).



Our website and its data engines are designed and maintained by French data-journalist and volunteer **Basile Simon**, who works with BBC News Labs. New Airwars maps and graphics charting alleged civilian deaths - which we've launched alongside this report - are also designed by Basile.



**Kinda Haddad** is a Dutch-Syrian journalist based in the UK who monitors claims of civilian casualties in Syria for Airwars. A former BBC Panorama journalist, Kinda is also the founder of [Bulbulia](#), which seeks to improve the representation of expert Middle Eastern women in the media.



Based in London, **Alex Hopkins** archives official military reports of the war; helps assess alleged Russian strikes in Syria; and maintains our social media profiles. Alex is also a sub-editor for the *Guardian* and *Observer*'s syndicated news services.



Airwars employs a **Lebanon-based analyst** who helps us to monitor and assess alleged Russian civilian casualty incidents across Syria. They have asked for their identity to be publicly withheld for security reasons.



Geolocation of alleged civilian casualty events is provided by volunteer **Christiaan Triebert**. Presently studying for an MA at the War Studies Department of King's College London, Christiaan is also a contributor with [Bellingcat](#).