

Airwars

ANNUAL REPORT 2020



Annual report 2020

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COVER IMAGE:
Locals gathering
amidst the rubble
for a joint iftar
(fasting break)
meal during the
holy month of
Ramadan. Al Atarib,
Syria, May 2020.
(photo by Anas
Alkharboutli/dpa).

Summary: 2020 in review

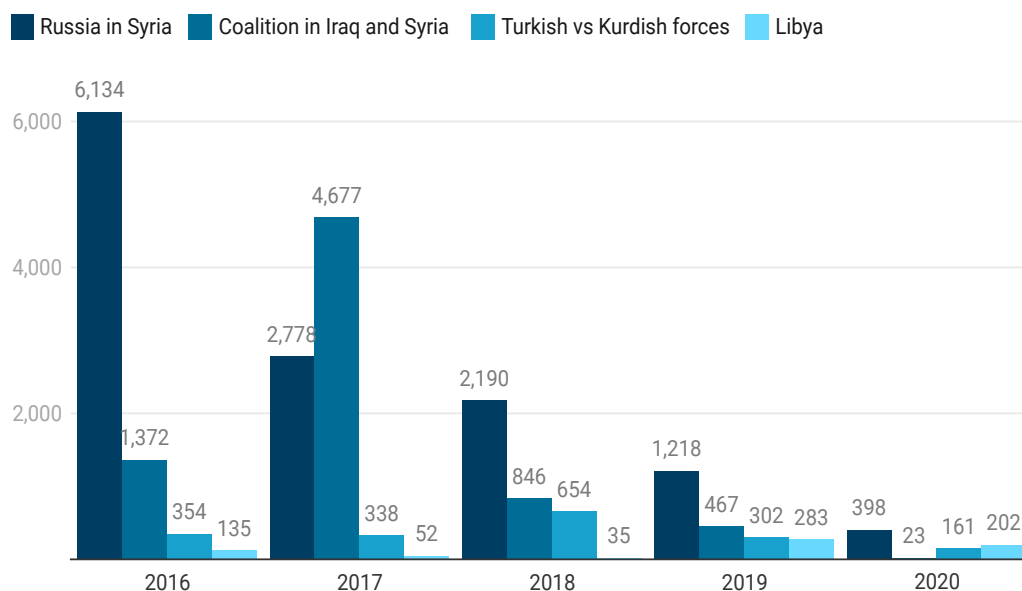
The beginning of 2020 saw the Covid-19 pandemic morphing into the most widespread global public health crisis in a century, affecting all aspects of public life, including the conflicts monitored by Airwars. The urgent need to refocus government attention towards tackling the pandemic - as well as risks to combatants themselves from the virus - led to a sharp fall in reported civilian casualties in many conflicts. There were also growing calls for [ceasefires or an end to wars around the world](#), in order to give public authorities the respite needed to manage the crisis.

This shift in attention is reflected significantly in the level of civilian harm tracked by Airwars. In total, a minimum of 784 civilians were locally alleged killed by international military actions across Syria, Iraq, and Libya (where we also track local actions) during 2020. This represents a 66% decrease on the minimum claimed deaths tracked by Airwars in the previous year.

Of these 784 civilian deaths, at least 364 (46%) reportedly occurred as a result of Russia's aerial bombing campaign on Syria's Idlib governorate during the first two months of the year. However, since a key ceasefire agreed between Ankara and Moscow came into effect on March 5th, which halted the Regime's campaign on Idlib and surrounding rebel-controlled regions, civilian harm allegations against Russia fell to their lowest levels since Moscow's intervention in Syria began in late 2015.

In Libya, 2020 proved to be a tumultuous year as Turkey escalated its military intervention on behalf of the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) - which in turn saw the 14 month siege of Tripoli finally broken. With the rival Libyan National Army (LNA) pushed back eastwards to Sirte, a groundbreaking ceasefire was agreed between the GNA and the LNA in June. Until this came into effect, the conflict in Libya had been the only one monitored by Airwars which had seen a significant escalation following the outbreak of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The result had been a devastating toll on Libya's civilians, in some of the worst months for civilian harm in the country since 2011.

Minimum reported civilian deaths per year by conflict



As highlighted by this chart, 2020 saw a major reduction in civilian harm across the board in conflicts tracked by Airwars.

New conflicts monitored

The year 2020 also saw the launch of Airwars' major new online resource for both [Somalia](#) and [Yemen](#), providing the most comprehensive look yet at US counterterrorism actions in both countries. This was built upon the [Bureau of Investigative Journalism's](#) own long-running monitoring of US strikes in Somalia and Yemen, which Airwars has now taken over.

In February, Airwars launched its database of all reported US counterterrorism actions in Somalia since 2007. With its emphasis on all-source monitoring and local language reports, the Airwars review found significantly higher levels of locally reported civilian harm than previously thought, with up to 280 non combatants allegedly killed in the country since the beginning of the US counterterrorism campaign.

This was followed in October by the release of [Airwars' database on Yemen](#), tracking all US counterterrorism actions under the presidency of Donald Trump. Approximately 4,400 unique sources were included in the new public database, sixty per cent of these in Arabic, that corresponded to more than 230 declared and alleged US military and CIA actions. Along with this database, a [major report](#) was released examining US actions in Yemen under Trump, as well as US military shortcomings on transparency and accountability for civilian harm since 2017. The report also analysed the effectiveness of the US campaign in Yemen as well as its impact on the lives of civilians in the country.

Advocacy impact

Despite the pandemic, our advocacy team had an active year in the US, the UK and Europe. Highlights of advocacy work undertaken included direct talks with Pentagon officials and US combatant commands; the beginnings of a Roadmap Process with the Dutch Ministry of Defence to review transparency and accountability practices regarding civilian harm; and continued dialogue with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, the Ministry of Defence; and UK Parliamentarians.

Following several years of patient engagement with the US-led Coalition in Iraq and Syria, Airwars also published [The Credibles](#) after obtaining the close locations of 99% of all officially confirmed or '[Credible](#)' civilian harm events. It marked a major transparency breakthrough and represents the most comprehensive locational data on civilian harm ever released by the US military. This groundbreaking investigation will help open the way for affected Iraqis and Syrians to seek restitution and closure.

Mohammed al Jumaily,

Editor, Airwars Annual Report 2020



CONFLICT MONITORING

Damage caused to tents of displaced persons by reported Russian airstrikes on the outskirts of Binnish town in Idlib countryside on August 3rd 2020 (Via Baladi News)

Syria

By Shihab Halep and Mohammed Al-Jumaily, conflict researchers

While 2020 saw a dramatic decrease in civilian harm in Syria from all belligerents in the conflict, the year also saw a number of other important developments. The Idlib ceasefire in March halted a devastating Regime-Russia onslaught in northwestern Syria, which claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians and had displaced hundreds of thousands more. Meanwhile, the year saw the US-led Coalition continue to shift its own focus towards lower-intensity counterterrorism operations, with the support of local Kurdish partners.

While reported civilian harm from Turkish actions fell in 2020 following the end of Turkey's campaign in northeastern Syria, Ankara's military involvement in the country remained a concern. The intensification of Turkey's military action in Ain Issa was particularly problematic for civilians in the area, with reports suggesting that many families had been forced to flee their homes as a result of regular shelling on the town.

Of all 784 civilian deaths Airwars tracked in 2020, at least 364 (46%) reportedly occurred as a result of Russia's aerial bombing campaign on Syria's Idlib governorate during the first two months of the year. However, since a key ceasefire agreed between Ankara and Moscow came into effect on March 5th, which halted the Regime's campaign on Idlib and surrounding rebel-controlled regions, civilian harm allegations against Russia fell to their lowest levels since Moscow's intervention in Syria began in late 2015.



A White Helmets rescuer carries a child after an alleged Russian strike on Abdo Salam school in Sarmin, tens of kilometers away from the frontlines on January 1st 2020 (via White Helmets)

Russian civilian harm incidents reach all-time low

Russian airstrikes continued from 2019 in support of the Syrian Regime's ongoing campaign against rebel forces in Idlib governorate, Hama's northern countryside, and the southern countryside of Aleppo. Even so, 2020 saw a significant decrease in the number of alleged Russian civilian harm events tracked by Airwars. Overall, the year saw 251 claimed Russian civilian harm events in Syria - a 65% fall on the 710 events tracked in 2019. This represented the lowest number of locally alleged incidents tracked by Airwars for a single year since the beginning of Russia's military intervention in Syria in September 2015.

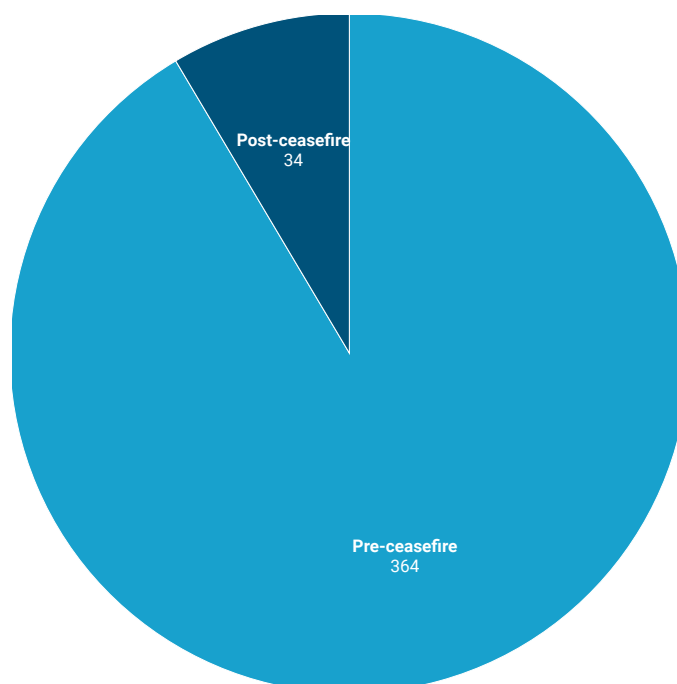
Despite the decrease in both alleged civilian harm and casualty incidents, the first two months of the year - when the campaign in northwestern Syria was at its most intense - was particularly catastrophic for civilians. According to the [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#), by the end of February at least 950,000 people were forced from their homes as a direct result of the offensive. The bombing campaign was largely focused on Idlib and its countryside. Approximately 60% of the year's 251 civilian harm events were in Idlib governorate, with a further 38% in Hama, and only 2% of claims in Aleppo.

The past year saw further allegations emerge of Russian airstrikes targeting civilian homes and infrastructure. January saw the highest number of locally reported civilian fatalities during the year. Airwars researchers tracked up to 248 alleged civilian deaths from 102 civilian harm incidents over the month. Meanwhile, the largest number of claimed Russian casualty events in Syria over the year was tracked during February, with 111 incidents tracked - leaving up to 228 civilians dead according to local sources.

The worst reported incident of 2020 allegedly involving Russian forces came on January 15th, when as many as 22 civilians were killed and more than 50 others injured in airstrikes targeting the vegetable market, "Souq Al Hal", in Idlib city. According to locals, this market is one of the busiest in the city.

Reported minimum civilian deaths from Russian actions in Syria: 2020

■ Pre-ceasefire ■ Post-ceasefire



Russian actions decreased dramatically following the cessation of hostilities March 5th, 2020.

Overall, the tempo of strikes during the first quarter of 2020 was extremely high. There were 222 alleged civilian harm events between January and March. The other nine months of the year saw only 29 further alleged civilian harm incidents resulting from Russian actions in the country.

This notable decrease came following a meeting between Presidents Erdogan and Putin in Moscow on March 5th. The Turkish and Russian leaders agreed on a ceasefire starting from midnight the following day.

The ceasefire came after escalating tensions between the two nations. Turkey had adopted the role of guarantor for Idlib, while Russia provided strong support for the Assad government's campaign on Idlib - a key reason for the rise in tensions. On February 5th, Erdogan gave Assad Government forces until the end of the month to stop their campaign on Idlib as well as to withdraw behind the Turkish observation point and the de-escalation zone.

During the campaign, Regime forces were able to gain control of about 3,100 km² - equivalent to approximately 45% of the areas which were under rebel control before the attack began. Much of the territory lost by rebel forces was key agricultural lands, posing a threat to food security in opposition-controlled areas. Among the main losses incurred by rebel forces were Khan Sheikhoun and Maarat Al Nu'man. These two towns and other captured urban centres housed a large number of displaced families from Aleppo, Hama and Homs, as well as eastern Ghouta.

Tensions escalated rapidly when 36 Turkish soldiers were killed after Regime and Russian forces targeted a Turkish convoy between the towns of Al Bara and Baliun on February 27th. A day later, Turkish forces significantly escalated their own military involvement in the Idlib campaign, leading to significant losses among Regime and allied forces.

While civilians continued to suffer from sporadic Russian strikes, the nine months after the ceasefire saw a record low of 29 civilian harm incidents. This significant drop in civilian harm claims as a result of the ceasefire is the most sustained period without a significant military campaign by Russia and the Regime since 2015. The reason for this prolonged pause in fighting could be due to a number of factors, including the shift in global attention to the Covid-19 pandemic; and Turkey's increased willingness to flex its military strength in Idlib.

In total, since the start of Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2015 to December 2020, Airwars had tracked 4,496 locally alleged civilian casualty incidents reportedly linked to Russian forces. Between 15,553 and 25,243 civilians were allegedly killed in these events. Of those killed, as many as 5,021 were children and 2,809 were women. As many as 40,183 more civilians were allegedly wounded by Russian actions. It should be noted that Moscow has yet to admit publicly to a single death as a result of its lengthy military intervention in Syria.

Turkish actions in Syria continued unabated during 2020

Following on from the devastating offensive launched towards the end of 2019 in northeastern Syria against Kurdish-led forces, which resulted in over 300 reported civilian deaths, Turkey had remained an active foreign actor in the country, from both a military and political standpoint. Despite the ceasefire and [political agreement](#) brokered by Russian president, Vladimir Putin, and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on October 22nd 2019, Turkish actions in the country continued throughout the year.

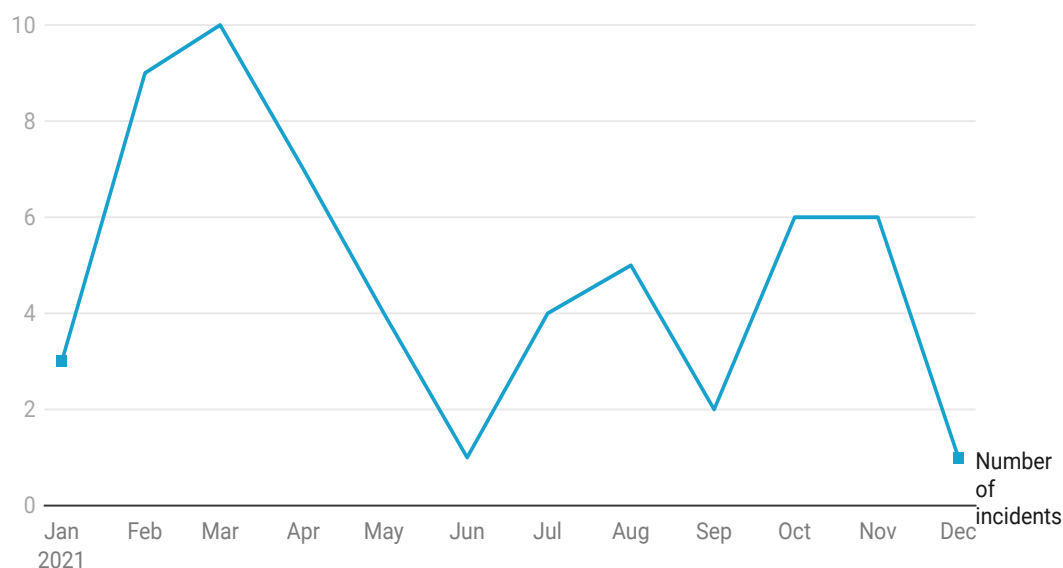
During 2020, Airwars tracked a total of 60 locally alleged civilian harm incidents from Turkish-led actions in Syria, resulting in at least 37 alleged deaths and the injury of up to 152 more civilians.

The beginning of the year saw Turkey's attention shift from Kurdish-led groups in northeastern Syria, to Regime-led forces in Idlib. In December 2019, a major military operation was launched by the armed forces of the Syrian Regime and its allies against Syrian rebel forces in Idlib and surrounding governorates. Despite ceasefire attempts brokered by Ankara and Moscow in early 2020, clashes continued between the two sides and advances by the Syrian Regime into Idlib continued.

By the end of January, Syrian Government forces had captured Maarat Nu'man, a town of significant strategic and symbolic significance, due to its location on the Aleppo-Damascus highway – as well as serving as one of the epicenters for anti-government protests in the country. Regime advances continued into February resulting in the encirclement of several Turkish observation posts as well as the complete capture of western Aleppo governorate and other strategically important towns.

However, a joint Russian-Syrian airstrike on a Turkish Army convoy in Baliun, killing at least 34 Turkish soldiers – the single deadliest attack on Turkish forces since the start of their involvement in the Syrian Civil War - prompted Turkey to launch Operation Spring Shield on February 27th.

Reported civilian casualty events from Turkish actions in Syria: 2020



Turkish civilian casualty incidents peaked at the end of February and March and then again in Summer and Winter periods of 2020.



Deadly incidents in Qurt Wiran and Willanli on July 27th 2020 prompted locals to protest Turkish action in Syria three days later. (Image via ANF)

Within the space of a few days, Turkey's [devastating](#) drone and artillery campaign had ravaged Regime forces, destroying hundreds of vehicles and [killing](#) more than 100 members of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and its affiliates. This unprecedented intervention in Idlib forced Russia's hand and prompted Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan to hold high-level talks in Moscow on March 5th. Six hours of negotiation concluded with a ceasefire agreement, which would take hold the next day and have profound implications for Idlib's millions of civilians.

Meanwhile, Turkish military action resulting in civilian harm continued throughout the year in other parts of Syria, particularly northeastern areas of the country - as well as in Iraq. Airwars data shows that the months of February and March were the worst for alleged civilian harm from Turkish actions. In February, local sources reported as many as nine civilian harm incidents in Syria allegedly resulted from Turkish-led actions - almost double the monthly average for the year of 4.8 civilian harm incidents, resulting in six civilian deaths and the injuring up to 22 others. March 2020 saw 10 civilian harm incidents allegedly resulted from Turkish-led actions, resulting in four civilian deaths and the injuring of up to 27 others.

July 2020 saw the worst single reported civilian harm incident allegedly involving Turkey. On July 27th, in the villages of Qurt Wiran and Willanli, northwest of Manbij, six civilians were killed and up to ten more injured after Turkish-led forces reportedly shelled the two villages simultaneously. Three of those killed were children, [Hawar news agency](#) named five of the victims as **Alia Diab** (60 years old), **Fatima Makhoul** (35 years old), **Fares Diab** (13 years old), **Ghofran Diab** (7 years old) and **Jamila Diab** (11 years). The incident sparked sizeable local demonstrations, protesting against Turkish actions in the area.

During autumn and early winter, Turkish actions in Syria began to escalate again, especially around the town of Ain Issa. October and November saw six civilian harm incidents reported in each month. Of these, half took place in and around Ain Issa. The increased Turkish bombardment of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions culminated in the establishment of a new Turkish military base near Ain Issa on November 19th. During this period, shelling of the Kurdish-held town reportedly became relentless. Five civilian harm incidents were claimed between November 17th and 28th. This escalation sparked initial fears that Turkey was gearing itself up for a new cross-border offensive, though this proved to be unfounded.

Kurdish-led actions in Syria

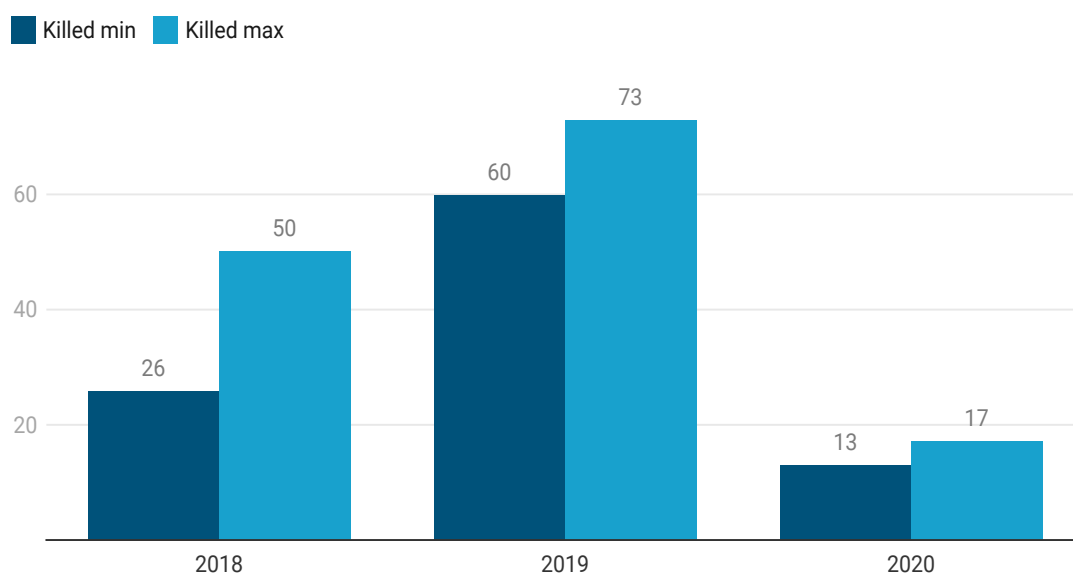
With no active military incursions by Turkey into Kurdish-held parts of Syria during 2020, Airwars tracked no civilian harm allegations attributed to Kurdish cross-border artillery strikes on Turkey. However, civilian harm allegations against Kurdish forces in Syria continued to be reported at a low rate throughout the year.

Airwars saw a notable fall in the overall number of civilians reportedly killed by Kurdish actions in Syria. In total for 2020, Airwars tracked 14 claimed Kurdish casualty events - a 75% fall on the 55 events reported during 2019. This decrease was reflected in the total number of fatalities, as overall between 13 and 17 civilians were reportedly killed by Kurdish actions - a 77% decrease on 2019's tally of between 60 and 73.

March saw the worst alleged Kurdish-led civilian harm incident of 2020. Five civilians were killed and more than 15 others injured in a missile and artillery attack targeting the local market in the town of Afrin, which was under the control of Turkish-led forces.

From September 4th onwards, Airwars did not track any civilian harm allegations against Kurdish forces.

Minimum reported civilian deaths from Kurdish actions in Syria by year



The US-led Coalition in Syria

The year 2020 saw a continuation of a trend observed at the end of the previous year, in which the number of International Coalition strikes decreased significantly, along with locally attributed civilian harm. Since the collapse of ISIS's territorial presence in Syria at the [end of March 2019](#), the Coalition's operations had shifted predominantly to supporting and conducting counterterrorism ground actions. As a result, Coalition actions became sporadic, leading to a dramatic decrease in civilian harm incidents.

In total for the year 2020, Airwars tracked only 12 civilian harm incidents reported in Syria and allegedly resulting from Coalition actions - an 84% decrease on the 75 events locally reported during 2019.

Across these 12 incidents, between 18 and 20 civilians were likely killed. This represented a 96% fall on the minimum 465 civilians likely killed in 2019, according to Airwars assessments. This decrease was unsurprising given that by the first quarter of 2019, the major war against ISIS was effectively over, with the terror group transitioning to an insurgency model after losing all territories in both Iraq and Syria.

The most deadly incident of the year occurred on October 22nd in the village of Jakara in the Salqin countryside of Idlib, near the Syria-Turkey border. According to the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), a drone strike on a gathering of al-Qaeda, on a farm in the area, killed up to 22 people, including five civilians. Among those also killed in the strike were a number of senior figures in al-Qaeda, [including former members of Jabhat al-Nusra](#).



Photo of the reported al-Qaeda and civilian gathering before a US airstrike took place in Jakara village, Salqin, Idlib on October 22nd (Via Eye on Hasaka)

It was later revealed that the strike was in fact conducted by CENTCOM, and was likely a unilateral US action. Major Beth Riordan, a spokeswoman for United States Central Command (CENTCOM) confirmed that US forces had carried out a drone strike on a meeting in Idlib against “a group of Al-Qaeda in Syria (AQ-S) senior leaders”.

The majority of operations conducted by the US-led Coalition were in support of SDF counter-terrorism raids in eastern Syria. Some of these also resulted in civilian harm, including an incident in the town of Basira on May 16th 2020. During that operation, US warplanes reportedly destroyed a house occupied by displaced Syrians, killing approximately five people.

While actions against ISIS targets as well as al-Qaeda-linked groups continued at a decreased rate, local sources had increasingly begun reporting strikes - allegedly by the Coalition - against Iranian-backed groups as well as Iranian officials and assets in the country.

In one of the most significant aerial operations against Iranian-backed groups in Syria, up to 25 fighters were killed including General Wisam al-Tufayli, a commander of the Iraqi Haidariyyoun group, and General Ali Zahbander, a commander within the Zainabiyoun Brigade, an Iranian backed armed group mainly consisting of Pakistani fighters. This incident occurred on March 12th when alleged US strikes were reported in Deir Ezzor after two American service members and a British national were killed in a rocket attack on Camp Taji in Iraq. Alleged Coalition attacks had then hit the Imam Ali military base, located close to the eastern Syrian town of Abu Kamal near the Iraqi border. Military positions in industrial regions in Syria, as well as the al-Hizam area, were also targeted in retaliatory Coalition air strikes.

Both the US-led Coalition and CENTCOM refused to answer queries from Airwars about whether they were responsible for strikes on Iranian-linked forces. While every month saw numerous local claims of US unilateral strikes in Syria against Iranian-backed groups, it should also be cautioned that Israel continued to conduct its own strikes in Syria against Iranian- and regime-linked targets, and that the US has not confirmed or denied any unilateral actions, despite local claims.

Overall, the US-led Coalition [officially declared](#) 84 strikes in Syria during the year. This was a very substantial fall from the 3,341 actions declared in 2019, representing a 97% fall in strikes carried out by the International Coalition. As a result, civilian harm in Syria was also significantly lower during 2020 compared to the previous year. In 2019 Airwars tracked 75 events, with a minimum likely civilian death toll of 465. In 2020 we tracked 10 events, with a minimum likely civilian toll of five deaths.

Iraq

By Mohammed Al-Jumaily, conflict researcher

Although civilian harm from foreign belligerents operating in Iraq was limited during 2020, Iraq found itself increasingly caught up in rising tensions between Iran and the United States. These reached boiling point with the US assassination in January of IRGC commander General Qassem Soleimani, and General Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy chairman of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU).

Frequent rocket attacks on US military and diplomatic assets in the country - as well as US and Coalition airstrikes on PMU positions - became a constant feature throughout the year, leaving Iraqis fearful that their country could be drawn into another devastating regional war. Meanwhile, the ongoing conflict between Turkey and the Kurdish PKK continued to put the lives of civilians in northern Iraq at grave risk.

Turkey ramped up anti-PKK campaign

Turkish actions in Iraq continued throughout the year against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliates. However, the intensity of Turkey's activity in Iraq varied considerably. This was reflected in the level of civilian harm reported from month to month. According to Airwars data, 21 locally alleged civilian harm incidents were tracked throughout the year from Turkish actions, resulting in a total of between 27 and 33 civilian deaths and up to 23 injuries.

This represented a 31% increase on the 16 civilian harm incidents reported the previous year. However, the number of civilian fatalities more than doubled on 2019's minimum of twelve likely civilian deaths.

Despite the notable increase in civilian harm, the first five months of 2020 had seen relatively few civilian casualty events attributed to Turkey, with four incidents reportedly taking place in northern Iraq. The worst of these took place on April 15th after Turkish drones reportedly targeted the Makhmour refugee camp, killing three women. Bewar Amin, head of Makhmour Camp's media department, told [Rudaw English](#) that "Two women were killed immediately by the Turkish airstrikes, and another woman succumbed to her grave injuries and passed away later on." Local reports named the victims as **Eyşö Ehmed Ferhan**, **Ezime Akdoğan** and **Hawa Akdoğan**.

The summer of 2020 saw some of the most intense military action by Turkey in Iraq in the last five years, as well as a sharp rise in reported civilian harm. On June 17th, Turkey launched a major joint air and ground offensive against the PKK in northern Iraq called Operation Claw-Tiger. According to the Turkish Ministry of Defence, the campaign targeted 150 suspected PKK positions with jets, helicopters, drones and artillery. The campaign posed a major risk to civilians living near the Turkish border, with the week following the beginning of the campaign being particularly harmful to civilians in Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniyah.

As a result, five civilian harm incidents were tracked in June alone, resulting in the reported killing of six civilians and the injury of at least 11 more. A Turkish strike on Kunamasi near a resort in Sulaimaniyah province on June 25th drew widespread international attention. That airstrike hit a vehicle carrying PKK fighters, but also struck a mini market belonging to a local family near the resort. According to some reports, two civilians were killed and up to five others were injured. A widely shared video on social media by Jîl Şwanî showed terrified children playing close by when the attack took place. These attacks drew condemnation from neighbouring countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The Iraqi Government also [condemned](#) the latest incursion by Turkey into Iraq's territory as a violation of the country's sovereignty.



Funeral procession for Iraqi border guards killed in Turkish airstrikes in Bradost on August 11th 2020 (Image via Bestoon Othman Khalid)

August then saw the worst reported number of civilian harm incidents in northern Iraq from Turkish actions since 2015. Airwars researchers tracked seven civilian casualty events, resulting in 15 reported civilian deaths. On August 11th for example, five civilians were killed along with five Iraqi border guards, and five PKK members in an airstrike in the Bradost region of Erbil province. Among those killed were [two high-ranking Iraqi military officers](#), prompting public outrage in Iraq. Following the event, Baghdad [cancelled](#) a visit by the Turkish Minister of Defence to Iraq, and summoned Turkey's ambassador.

While clashes between Turkish forces and the PKK continued throughout the last quarter of the year, the number of civilian harm incidents reduced significantly. From the beginning of September until the end of the year, two civilian harm incidents were locally reported, resulting in four civilian deaths and injuries respectively.

The US and international forces in Iraq: A year of high tensions following Soleimani assassination

The US targeted assassination of the commander of Iran's Quds Force, General Qassem Soleimani, and the Deputy Chief of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Committee, Hashd al-Shaabi, on January 3rd 2020 saw tensions between Iran and the United States escalate to new heights. Lauded as a national hero by many Iranians for his role in countering ISIS in Iraq as well as spearheading Tehran's rising influence in the region, Soleimani's death by an American drone at Baghdad's International Airport sparked uproar both in Iran and internationally - as well as fears of a broader conflict between the US and Iran.

While a major conflict did not materialise, Iran and its allies in Iraq staged numerous retaliatory attacks against US forces and assets in the country. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, on January 8th Iran fired ballistic missiles that reportedly caused traumatic brain injuries for up to 100 American troops at Al Asad base outside Baghdad.

Additionally, the Soleimani attack intensified calls within Iraq for the expulsion of US forces. In an extraordinary parliamentary session held on January 5th, the Iraqi Parliament voted to expel US troops from the country. While the vote itself was not binding, it was a clear demonstration of a rise in anti-American sentiments within the country.

Rogue militia attacks on US targets occurred throughout the year, with the US embassy in Baghdad in particular being heavily targeted. On January 26th, three rockets were fired on the embassy, wounding one staff member. Tensions resumed in March after 15 Katyusha rockets were fired at Camp Taji on March 11th, killing two US troops and one British soldier from the Royal Army Medical Corps, as well as injuring 12 other American soldiers, contractors and International Coalition personnel. This was followed by another rocket attack on the same target on March 14th, injuring five Coalition and two Iraqi soldiers.

Despite these tensions, 2020 saw low levels of reported civilian harm from US-led actions in Iraq. Airwars tracked only three publicly reported civilian harm incidents during the year allegedly resulting from US-led action in the country. The first of these occurred during the assassination of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Among those killed in the attack was Soleimani's son-in-law, who was listed by Airwars as a possible civilian, as his combatant status remained unclear. Additionally, according to [Janoubia](#), munitions landed near the air cargo hall, resulting in the burning of two vehicles and the "injury of a number of citizens". It is unclear if these rockets originated from US actions.

The second civilian harm incident took place just after the rocket attack on Camp Taji, on March 13th. According to reports, three civilians were killed and two others injured in American airstrikes on Karbala International Airport which was under construction at the time, along with three belligerents and the injury of nine others. The New York Times identified one of the victims as **Karrar Sabbar**, aged 23, who left behind a wife and two children. He worked as a guard and was sleeping in one of the airport's halls or one of the administrative buildings when the airstrike took place.



Damage caused to Karbala International Airport project which was still under construction when attacked by the US in an airstrike on March 13th, 2020 (via youm7)

In September, the Coalition [accepted responsibility](#) for one civilian death in the attack, noting that “Coalition forces conducted an airstrike against a Kata’ib Hizbolla facility. Regrettably, one civilian was unintentionally killed as a result of the strike.”

The third incident occurred in Abu Zuwair in Baiji on June 30th. This came after a US Army MQ-1C Gray Eagle armed drone reportedly crashed in the area, which led to shepherds approaching the fallen aircraft. However, another drone reportedly arrived and struck the same area, killing the four shepherds. According to other sources, the shepherds had carried parts of the drone to a pickup truck and were then pursued by a second drone and killed as they tried to leave the area.

Meanwhile, the US-led Coalition continued its operations against ISIS targets in Iraq throughout the year. April for example saw the UK declare its first actions against ISIS targets in Iraq since September 2019. The RAF was particularly active in April and May in the province of Kirkuk, where ISIS maintained a presence in rural areas of the governorate. And in October, Belgium rejoined the international Coalition as a kinetic partner.

Overall, the US-led Coalition declared 117 strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq during 2020. This represented a 65% decrease from the 331 strikes carried out the previous year. However, despite this fall in strikes, 2020 saw a rise in the number of locally reported civilian deaths. In the three incidents tracked by Airwars, up to eight civilians were killed. That compared with three known events in 2019, in which two civilians likely died according to local reports.

Libya

By Oliver Imhof, Libya & Somalia Researcher

Libyans witnessed an eventful 2020 - with the turnaround, escalation and potential end of its lengthy civil war. In early January, it had looked like the Government of National Accord was about to be defeated by Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) forces, which were slowly but steadily moving toward the centre of Tripoli. However a full-on military intervention by Turkey - facilitated by Syrian mercenaries - not only stopped the Libyan National Army in its tracks, but also reversed most LNA gains made since April 2019.



Resident of Tripoli in his bombed out house, posted on June 7th, 2020 (via Jalal Othman)

Until June 2020, Libya was one of the few conflicts in the world that worsened during the escalating global Covid-19 pandemic. While the virus spread around the world, Turkey expanded its influence in Libya by secretly funneling weapons and fighters into the country. In doing so it countered Russian and Emirati efforts to prop up Haftar's forces with their own weapons and mercenaries. The result was the bloodiest months since 2011, as Turkish drone strikes were met with indiscriminate shelling from LNA forces into Tripoli's suburbs, with little apparent regard for the local population. The Libyan civil war had become a conflict fought primarily by Turkish and Emirati drones in the air; and mostly by Syrian, Sudanese and Russian mercenaries on the ground.

Between 206 and 249 civilians were allegedly killed by 1,048 airstrikes in Libya in the first five months of 2020. In the previous year, a reported 1,668 strikes had led to between 283 and 422 slain civilians. The slightly higher ratio of minimum civilian deaths per strike can be explained by the more intense fighting in more populated areas of Tripoli.

The loss of life could have been even greater if the fighting had not effectively ceased in early June when the LNA - together with Russian, Syrian and Sudanese mercenaries - withdrew from Tripoli, leaving behind mines and booby-traps which then killed and maimed residents returning to their homes. Among the victims was the brother of former Airwars staff member Osama Mansour, who was injured along with his neighbour by a landmine.

While in 2019 the LNA and its allies had been the dominant force both in terms of airstrikes and civilian harm, the GNA and Turkey became much more active in 2020 due to changed circumstances on the battlefield.

The LNA and the United Arab Emirates together conducted 366 air and artillery strikes during 2020, according to local reports. These allegedly led to between 109 and 132 civilian deaths.

On the other side, Airwars recorded 257 GNA or Turkish strikes that reportedly led to between 56 and 69 non combatant deaths. That lower estimate of civilian casualties compared to the LNA/Emirati side may have been the result both of the less indiscriminate nature of Turkish shelling; as well as the lower payload of its TB2 drones.

In addition, actions by unknown or contested belligerents allegedly caused 39 to 46 further civilian fatalities from 424 strikes. One Egyptian airstrike near the common border with Libya also allegedly led to two civilian deaths on October 19th.

In October, both sides to the civil war formalised a UN-brokered ceasefire deal in Geneva which it was hoped could pave the way for a peaceful future. The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) which followed was committed to choosing a new government which would face the difficult task of reintegrating fighters into society while disarming militias and requiring foreign fighters to leave Libya.



An IED strapped to a teddy bear, allegedly left behind by LNA or Wagner mercenary forces in Tripoli (via Calibre Obscura)

A photograph of a man with a beard and a turban holding a young child in a desert setting. The man is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The child is looking off to the side. The background shows a dry, hilly landscape under a clear sky.

US-COUNTERTERRORISM CAMPAIGNS

Mabkhout Ali al Ameri with his 18-month old son Mohammed, shortly after a botched US raid on al Ghayil in January 2017 had killed at least 20 villagers, including Mohammed's mother Fatim Saleh Mohsen. © Iona Craig

Somalia

By Oliver Imhof, Libya & Somalia Researcher

The American counterterrorism campaign in Somalia remained very active in 2020, with only a slight decrease in reported actions compared with the previous year, despite the Covid-19 pandemic. The US officially declared 54 airstrikes or ground operations throughout the year, seven less than in 2019. In another 18 events, the US was an alleged belligerent. As well as pointing to potential continued CIA involvement in Somalia, some or all of those incidents might also have been conducted by AMISOM, or unilaterally by Kenya or Ethiopia.



12-year-old Fatima Kusow, injured in a US strike on Jilib on February 2nd 2020 (via Radio Morad)

Despite the high number of US strikes, both civilian harm allegations and reported militant deaths sharply decreased. Between 20 and 28 civilians were locally alleged killed in 2020 - down from the previous year's tally of 41 to 64 claimed civilian fatalities.

That said, without the Covid-19 pandemic 2020 would likely have been the most intense year of US bombing in Somalia since American counterterrorism actions began in 2007. However, fighting in Somalia effectively ceased for a period. Between May 17th and July 9th for example, no US actions were declared or alleged, possibly linked in part to a Covid-19 outbreak at a [US airbase in Djibouti](#).

The joint campaign between Somali and US forces increasingly bore more of a resemblance to traditional frontline warfare than to counterterrorism operations. Somali forces together with AMISOM managed to oust Al Shabaab from key areas such as Janaale during the year, with that operation alone supported by six confirmed US strikes. The Somali National Army was also capable of holding these cleared areas for the first time in years.

However, the jihadist organisation still controlled considerable parts of Lower Shabelle, Bakool and Bay provinces. ISIS on the other hand, was left with only a tiny pocket of territory in Puntland, as it faced pressure from Somali government forces, the US, and rival terror group Al Shabaab.

In a major transparency development in 2020, AFRICOM began publishing quarterly civilian harm assessments for the conflicts it engages in. As part of this new process, the command admitted having killed one civilian and injured three more [in Jilib on February 2nd, 2020](#). Additionally, it later acknowledged having injured another [two civilians](#) in Jilib on February 17th. Airwars welcomed these improvements in transparency and accountability.

AFRICOM additionally claimed to have killed at least 108 fighters during the year, compared to 323 such reported deaths in 2019. The great majority of US targets were alleged Al Shabaab militants, with only one strike in July reportedly targeting ISIS, in Puntland.

With the conclusion of the Trump presidency, Airwars found there had been a significant uptick in both strikes and civilian harm during his administration, compared to both Barack Obama and George W. Bush.

The Trump administration conducted up to 276 airstrikes or ground operations in Somalia between 2017 and 2021, of which 205 had been officially confirmed. Between the two previous Presidents, a total of 67 confirmed and alleged actions had been reported. In 2017, Trump had also scaled back transparency and accountability rules - meant to better protect civilians - for the US military in Somalia, according to [The New York Times](#). In four years of Trump, US actions had resulted in a minimum alleged 134 to 174 civilian deaths, compared to 59 to 157 claimed fatalities in ten years of Bush and Obama.

In one of the final actions of the Trump administration, hundreds of US forces were mostly withdrawn from Somalia in late 2020. The timing of that move was seen by some as controversial, with Somalia heading for elections in early 2021 and concerns about the wider security situation. Others welcomed the drawdown, seeing it as an indication that the Trump administration was willing to bring to an end many of America's long running and unresolved conflicts.

AFRICOM itself framed the departure of 700 personnel from Somalia as a repositioning while "maintaining pressure on violent extremist organizations in the region". Since that evacuation, US strikes have been flagged as part of [Joint Task Force - Quartz](#), the exact nature of which remains relatively opaque.

Civilian Deaths by US President in Somalia

President George W. Bush began a long running and controversial campaign against Islamist terrorists in Somalia, which his successors then continued. Drone strikes and other actions were conducted both by the US military and by the CIA. By the end of President Trump's term in office in 2021, local communities had alleged some 330 non combatants killed by US actions in Somalia since 2007. This graphic breaks down those alleged deaths according to Airwars' own assessment methodology, and includes civilian deaths officially conceded by the US military.

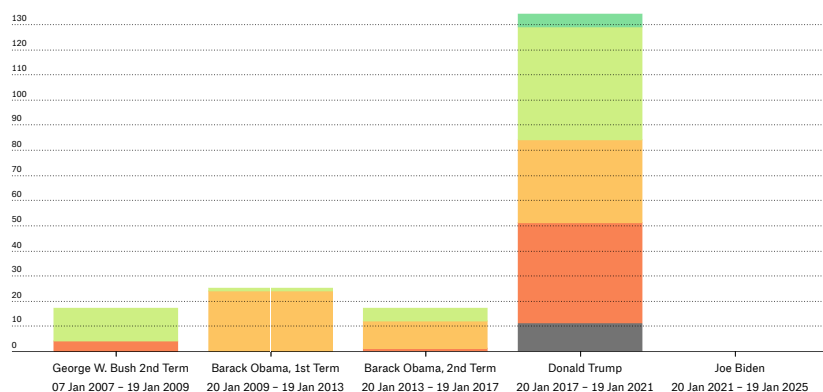
CHART LEGEND:

Confirmed ①
Fair ②
Weak ③
Contested ④
Discounted ⑤

VIEW THIS CHART AS:

☒ Multiples ☐ Stacked

① Best for comparing totals over time



Confirmed and
alleged civilian
deaths by term of
US President
since 2007

Yemen

By Mohammed Al-Jumaily, conflict researcher

The year 2020 saw a notable decline in declared US military actions in Yemen - with a total of 18 alleged US actions tracked in the country and none officially declared - the lowest levels of reported US activity in Yemen since 2011. Among these 18 claimed US actions, two involved allegations of civilian harm.



A reported child casualty of the January 29th 2017 US raid on al Ghayil (Image via @doamuslims)

Airwars identified a clear shift towards more covert and clandestine operations in the country in the later years of the Trump administration. This followed a trend that had begun in June 2019 - the last time CENTCOM had publicly declared a strike in Yemen. Yet since then, Airwars had tracked 32 allegations of US strikes in Yemen. Three of these were nevertheless publicly confirmed by US officials - indicating that the CIA may have again taken over the campaign.

January saw the most US activity in Yemen during the year, with six alleged strikes taking place. The most significant was the action that killed Qassim al-Rimi, which likely took place on January 27th 2020. Al-Rimi was a veteran militant who led al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) following the death of Nasir al-Wuhayshi on 12 June 2015. The incident in which he was killed was confirmed by a [White House statement](#).

However, Pentagon officials told media outlets that the strike was not conducted by the Department of Defense, leading to speculation that this was in fact a CIA or clandestine US action. According to one source, the incident that killed Qasim al-Rimi may also have resulted in associated civilian harm. However, this has not been officially acknowledged by the US. Additionally, a number of other non-officially declared actions reportedly took place in the same area, near Marib city at the end of January 2020 according to local sources, possibly reflecting further CIA or clandestine US military actions.

There were two other incidents during 2020 where there was an admission of responsibility by US officials yet a denial by CENTCOM. This in turn indicated that those attacks had been conducted either by the CIA, or were clandestine US military actions. The first occurred on January 2nd 2020, when US airstrikes targeted Abdul Reza Shahlai, a financier and key commander in Iran's Quds Force who had been active in Yemen in eastern Sanaa. The airstrike failed to kill him but did reportedly lead to the death of lower ranked IRGC member Mohammad Mirza. Mirza's death was the first combat fatality publicly acknowledged in Yemen by Iran's Quds Force. This notably occurred on the same day that the United States assassinated General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad - suggesting a deliberate 'decapitation' campaign against Iran by the United States.

No known sources stated that the CIA had conducted the strike, with the [Washington Post](#) - citing several officials - reporting the attack to have been a US military action. Even so, CENTCOM told Airwars that there were no US military strikes in Yemen during the month.

Dr Agnes Callemard, the UN Special Rapporteur for extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, cited both the Soleimani killing and the attempt on Shahlai in her annual report to the United Nations, noting that "The international community must now confront the very real prospect that States may opt to 'strategically' eliminate high ranking military officials outside the context of a 'known' war, and seek to justify the killing on the grounds of the target's classification as a 'terrorist' who posed a potential future threat."

The third known US incident in Yemen came in May 2020 in Wadi Obeida, in Marib Governorate. The [US Department of Justice](#) confirmed that "a counterterrorism operation targeting AQAP operative Abdullah al-Maliki... was recently conducted in Yemen". US Central Command, however, informed Airwars that no US military strikes had been conducted in Yemen in that same month or indeed at any point during 2020.

The fact that CENTCOM had not declared any actions occurring in Yemen in almost a year and a half - despite many credible and even officially-confirmed reports to the contrary - suggested that responsibility for the US drone campaign in Yemen had shifted to the CIA, a move which would have negative implications for both transparency and accountability.

The last known alleged civilian harm incident of the year occurred on April 11th 2020 after the house of Ali Bin Hassan Bin Gharib, a local tribal leader, in Shabwana in Marib Governorate was targeted by an alleged US drone strike. Local sources told Al-Masdar Online, YPA Agency, and Sahaftak that the strike had resulted in civilian casualties, partly destroying the house and some neighbouring buildings. There has been no official response from CENTCOM about the nature of this strike nor the veracity of those claims.

Along with the live monitoring conducted by the team, October 28th saw the launch by Airwars of a new investigation into the ongoing US counterterrorism campaign in Yemen. A new report, [Eroding Transparency](#), examined US air and ground actions against both Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and Islamic State in Yemen, since 2017 under President Trump, as well as incidents leading to alleged civilian harm.



A charred motorbike following a reported US drone strike in September 2017 that targeted suspected AQAP militants in al-Saru, Bayda Governorate (Image via @ShabbirTuri)

The report, authored by Mohammed al-Jumaily and Edward Ray, highlighted the lack of transparency and accountability standards for the US operations in Yemen that other recent US military interventions had been afforded. It also identified a significant recent increase in both clandestine and covert activity in the country.

Additionally, ahead of the publication of the report, Airwars presented CENTCOM on August 24th 2020 with its complete findings on recently claimed civilian harm from US actions in Yemen. This included more than 1,000 pages of archived source materials, in both English and Arabic, relating to all 41 declared and alleged US actions which had led to local claims of civilian harm in Yemen under President Trump to that date. Detailed geolocational findings were also presented.

Despite several assurances that officials would “provide you with the results of CENTCOM’s findings regarding these claims as soon as possible”, no official response to those 41 Yemen allegations were made until a week after the publication of the report. In its response, CENTCOM conceded its first civilian harm event in Yemen in almost four years for an incident, which occurred on September 14th, 2017 - admitting that two civilians were injured from a US action. The 23 other incidents classed by Airwars itself as likely were rejected as ‘non credible’. However CENTCOM offered no further details on how it had reached those determinations - in contrast to its more transparent assessment processes for Iraq and Syria.

A large-scale aerial explosion is captured, showing a bright orange and yellow fireball at the top, with a massive, billowing cloud of grey and white smoke rising from the impact point. Debris is visible falling from the smoke. In the foreground, the tops of buildings and utility poles are visible against the base of the smoke cloud.

INVESTIGATIONS

A March 2017 airstrike during the battle for Mosul against ISIS
© Reuters/ Alaa Al-Marjani.

By Joe Dyke, senior investigator

During 2020 Airwars produced several original and powerful investigations in conjunction with key European and US media partners, helping to better highlight civilian harm in the Middle East.

Thanks to a \$200,000 grant from the Reva & David Logan Foundation, in October Airwars also launched a two year investigations project focused on highlighting civilian harm concerns. Led by Joe Dyke - previously AFP's chief correspondent in the Palestinian Territories - the unit will produce several in-depth investigations each year.

Europe's Shame

In March Airwars teamed up with British, French, Belgian and Dutch media to reveal that European countries were ignoring compelling official evidence that their own airstrikes against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) had killed civilians.

Since the campaign against ISIS began in 2014 the United States had publicly admitted causing around 1,300 civilian deaths. In contrast, almost all European countries still deny causing significant fatalities as a result of their own strikes.

The '[Europe's Shame](#)' investigation began when Airwars identified via data analysis fourteen incidents in which US military investigators had concluded dozens of Iraqi and Syrian civilians were killed in non-US events.

Airwars was then able to show that European nations were responsible for most of those deaths. This was uncovered by crossmatching the US Defense Department's annual report to Congress on all confirmed civilian casualties from US actions, with a separate list produced by the anti-ISIS coalition Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), which is led by the US but includes other allied nations. The Pentagon report had admitted responsibility for 183 incidents, leaving an additional 14 in the OIR declarations that were therefore the responsibility of other nations.

Three of these fourteen incidents had previously been confirmed as Australian strikes, leaving 11 strikes in which more than 40 Iraqi and Syrian civilians were officially confirmed to have died.

Painstakingly investigating those specific incidents over several months, Airwars was able to piece together which European countries were likely responsible for which strikes, in partnership with the [BBC](#) in the United Kingdom, [Libération](#) in France, [De Morgen](#) in Belgium and RTL in the Netherlands.

Despite being released during the early weeks of the global coronavirus pandemic, the story featured on BBC Radio Four's Today Programme in the UK, and was front page news in several other countries.

The investigation highlighted the failure of European armed forces to properly assess and review civilian harm caused by their own airstrikes, feeding into Airwars' wider advocacy work with militaries in multiple countries. It may also aid the families of those killed seeking potential routes for compensation claims. Airwars also presented the findings to a webinar organised by [EveryCasualty](#), explaining the findings and methodology to other NGOs in the sector.

Islamic State: US military says RAF airstrikes may have killed civilians

By Jonathan Beale
Defence correspondent, BBC News

16 March 2020



BBC News was one of multiple European media that Airwars partnered with on the Europe's Shame report.



Seeing Through the Rubble

In October Airwars and Dutch peace organisation PAX jointly released a 12,000 word report highlighting the long-lasting effects of explosive weapons in urban areas.

"Seeing through the Rubble" shone a light upon both the historical and ongoing struggles for civilian populations in the Iraqi and Syrian cities of Mosul, Hawijah and Raqqa as a result of the US-led war against ISIS. The report concluded that using precision weapons in accordance with International Humanitarian Law was not enough in itself to prevent significant civilian harm, highlighting both the initial devastation and long-lasting effects of explosive weapons in urban areas.

As part of the report launch, Airwars also published [a full interview with the Mayor of Hawijah](#) - an Iraqi town where a Dutch airstrike had killed more than 70 people in 2015. The Dutch government only admitted responsibility for that event in 2019.

In the interview, Mayor Subhan Al Jabouri outlined the devastating and enduring human toll for Hawijah, as well as outlining the long-term impact on infrastructure such as schools. "The horror of this strike had a profound psychological effect on the victims," he said. "Some families were completely wiped out."

The interview was one of the few times an Iraqi official had spoken at length on the record about the devastating impact of international strikes during the war against ISIS.

The report was [covered in the Dutch media](#), and helped to inform ongoing advocacy engagements with the Dutch government, which is currently reviewing its civilian harm reporting procedures in the wake of the Hawijah disaster.

Media engagements

During 2020, several other reports created significant media focus on civilian harm. In February, [our new data on US strikes in Somalia](#) since 2007 against suspected terrorists received extensive US and international coverage. And in October Airwars' report on drone strikes carried out in Yemen by the Trump administration (see the Yemen section) was covered in [The Washington Post](#), [The Daily Beast](#) and other US media. In addition, in October Airwars partnered with [The Washington Post](#) in geolocating more than 1,300 civilians killed by the US-led coalition in Iraq and Syria (see Geolocational Achievements section.)



The Washington Post coverage of The Credibles dataset release

How the US military 'forgot' it had recently killed civilians in Yemen

Following publication of our Yemen report in October, Airwars discovered that the US military had forgotten its own admission of the killing of up to 12 civilians during a 2017 raid on a Yemeni village.

CENTCOM forces had led a ground raid targeting alleged senior Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operatives in January 2017, just days after President Trump's inauguration. US forces snuck into the village of Yakla, sparking a firefight in which dozens were killed. Several field investigations by human rights groups concluded that at least twenty and as many as 56 civilians died in the attack, including women and children reportedly gunned down from the air. US Navy SEAL Chief Petty Officer William Owens also died in the assault.

The United States Central Command (CENTCOM) had admitted the deaths of civilians just days after the attack; and CENTCOM's then commander General Joseph Votel [later told the US Senate Armed Services Committee \(SASC\)](#) during in-person evidence that he took personal responsibility for the deaths of "between four and twelve" civilians.

However in a public statement issued November 5th 2020, in response to Airwar's findings on the Trump administration's actions in Yemen, CENTCOM appeared to row back heavily on General Votel's earlier official admission, claiming only that "there may have been civilian casualties" during the Yakla raid.

Asked by Airwars to clarify whether it still stood by General Votel's testimony to the SASC, a contrite CENTCOM admitted it had effectively forgotten its own role in the recent deaths of Yemeni civilians.

"CENTCOM stands by Gen Votel's statement to the SASC, and we have subsequently found the appropriate documentation that credibly assesses between four and twelve non-combatant casualties died," Captain Bill Urban, CENTCOM's spokesman, told Airwars.

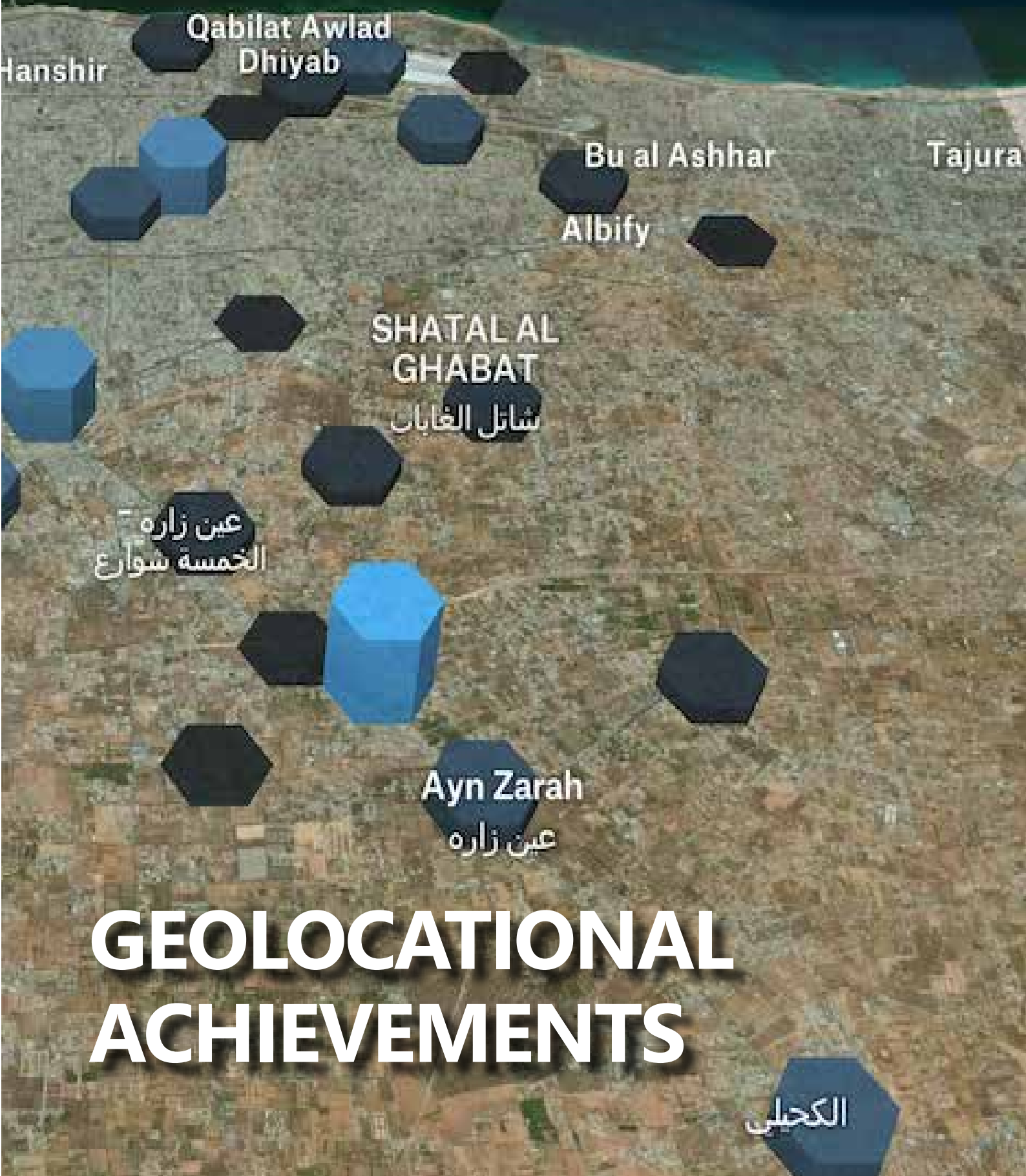
"Please accept our apologies for our errant 'may have' in yesterday's initial statement regarding the Jan 2017 raid...Our failure to provide an accurate assessment was an administrative mistake, and not an intent to deceive."

The incident highlighted concerns that militaries may not only fail to learn lessons from civilian harm claims, but even institutionally forget them once admitted.

Bonyan Gamal, a lawyer with the Yemeni human rights organisation Mwatana, described CENTCOM's mistake as "painful" for the families of those killed at Yakla, many of whom had hoped for an official apology or compensation from the US government.

"It is shocking and I think it will cause more anger. This raid caused such sadness and shock in Yemen," she said. "Yakla is in a very remote area in Yemen. They don't get basic services such as water, schooling, or even cell phone service. Nothing reaches there except US drones."

The full story can be read in the [News & Investigations section](#) of the Airwars website.



GEOLOCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Since our founding in 2014, Airwars has increasingly focused on the provision of geolocations of civilian harm events, to help improve military accountability. Staff and volunteers work together to identify the most accurate coordinates for events, based on the available public record.

2020 was a productive year for geolocation at Airwars. As well as majorly upgrading our public database of [Turkish](#) and [Somali](#) strikes, we also released a wealth of locational information relating to reported US strikes in [Yemen](#) under Donald Trump; and the unique mapping of more than 5,000 locally reported air and artillery strikes in [Libya](#) since 2012.

Yemen

As part of our [major review](#) of US military actions in Yemen under Donald Trump, Airwars geolocated and visualised 230 individual strikes and alleged civilian harm events. Employing an all-source approach to our work, we sought to reorient public research towards affected civilians on the ground in Yemen. Our geolocation work also led directly to CENTCOM admitting its first civilian harm event in Yemen in four years (see Yemen section.)

This wealth of new locational information presented major challenges as a consequence of the dynamic of the confrontation in Yemen, in which drone attacks often target individuals in sparsely populated desert landscapes, and with little to no documentation available in terms of audio-visual material. This was exacerbated by the lack of updated open-source material available on databases such as Wikimapia, Geonames, and Google Maps itself.

In the context of Yemen, we found that many officially named villages would contain “smaller” villages within them, or in some cases, tribal settlements within larger official areas. These often have little or no documentation of their existence except for the sources found in our research.

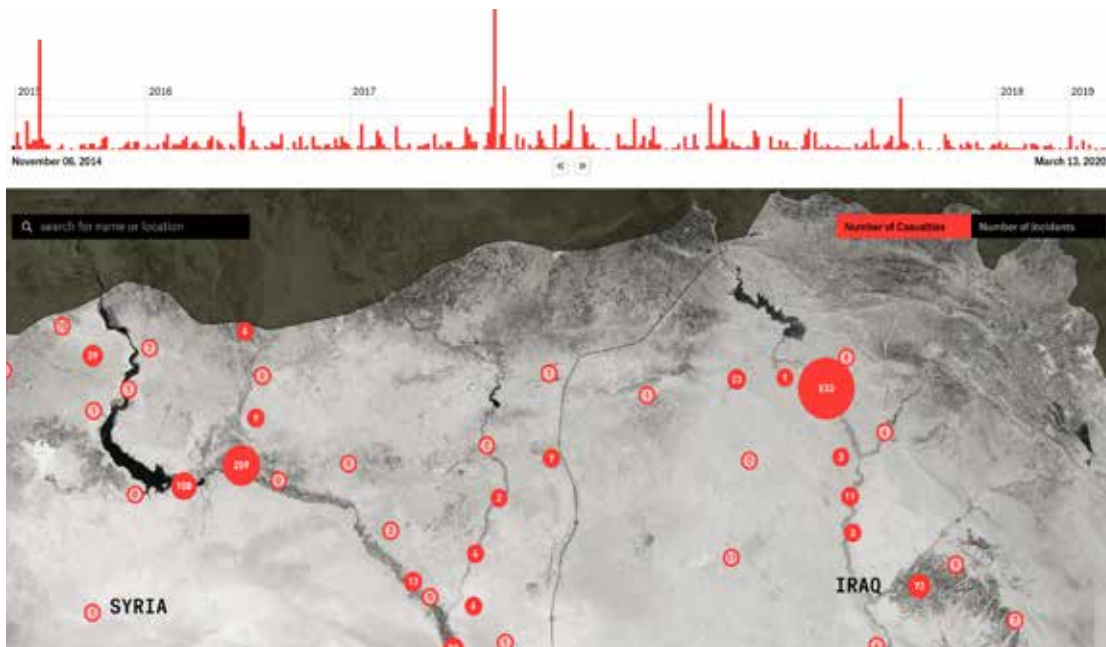
Our work was aided thanks to the [Humanitarian Database Exchange](#) which gave access to an additional 30,000 place names and geocoordinates in Yemen.

The Credibles

In late 2020, Airwars in collaboration with [The Washington Post](#) published the most comprehensive civilian harm locational data ever released by the US military, identifying the close locations of hundreds of officially confirmed events.

[The Credibles](#) was the culmination of more than three years of extensive engagement with US military officials, whereby Airwars secured the close coordinates of 340 publicly confirmed civilian harm events, which between them conceded more than civilian 1,400 deaths. These MGRS or Military Grid Reference System coordinates help to provide a better understanding of the war against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq, especially with limited on-the-ground reporting by local communities.

This locational data - some accurate to within just one metre - also helps ensure that such events can now be properly investigated - increasing the potential for restitution and reconciliation for affected families. The Coalition’s former chief spokesperson Col. Myles Caggins emphasised this further by stating that: “We see the addition of the geolocations as a testament to transparency, and our commitment to working with agencies like Airwars to correctly identify civilian harm incidents.



The Credibles marked a geolocation milestone for Airwars.

Comparing Airwars' geolocation data with that of the Coalition suggests that our own methodology - which combines information from what would be deemed as "unofficial" such as hyperlocal sources - can yield accurate results. This, in addition to liaison with the Coalition's civilian casualty assessment team, forms a synergy that increases the success of these geolocations. Even a 100-metre accuracy point on a map offers strong clues to an event. The Credibles confirmed both the strengths of open source geolocation; and the relative value of the Airwars methodology, which has consistently prompted military assessors to reopen previously closed investigations on allegations of civilian harm.

Libya

In January 2021 Airwars published the interactive mapping of 5,400 strikes in Libya since 2012, covering all known locally-reported strikes to date conducted by the various belligerents within the Mediterranean country. Led by our in-house geolocator Clive Vella, this project was extensively supported by our geolocation and research volunteers, who worked through the immense volume of events over a six month period.

At the same time, more than 300 locally alleged civilian casualties events were geolocated to their most precise locations. This hard work was then visualised in an interactive map by our design consultants [Rectangle](#), thus providing both a visual and spatial understanding of the conflict. Rectangle have noted how "the new maps visualise these incidents by civilian fatalities, militant fatalities, and strikes carried out by each belligerent. The maps are navigable by a histogram of the map data over time, to try to provide an overview of a particularly complex conflict."

Libya presented a challenge for two reasons; first the density of events that is in itself highly demanding of an already intense form of research; and secondly the sifting of information that is present in the conflict. The latter was instrumental in the delivery of many exact locations, which time expenditure wise, formed the energetic bulk of this dataset. The presence of Libya within the Mediterranean and the extent of coverage of its conflict generates a wide coverage of satellite imagery, that in turn gives access to before and after imagery that helps small organisations like Airwars effectively to function within their limited funding.



ADVOCACY

Airwars deputy director Dmytro Chupryna (right) at the Europe-Ukraine Forum (Via Foundation Institute for Eastern Studies)

Military Advocacy

By Chris Woods, director of Airwars

Engagement with US military commands

During 2020, Airwars directly engaged with US military commands on civilian harm claims relating to four conflict nations: Iraq and Syria, Somalia, and Yemen. Our aim as always was to improve military understanding of how, where and when civilians are harmed in war - so that recent events can be better understood, and future casualties reduced.

The US-led Coalition fighting ISIS in **Iraq and Syria** continued its own ongoing assessments of local allegations of civilian harm - reviewing 391 incidents of concern [across nine official reports](#) during the year. These covered allegations between November 2014 and July 2020.

In total, the Coalition conceded only 14 civilian harm events during 2020 - or four per cent of assessed cases. In the previous year, the Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) civilian casualty assessment team had determined that 66 events of 311 investigated were Credible and had resulted in civilian deaths or injuries, or 21 per cent of the total. It was unclear why this sharp 80% fall in Credible assessments had occurred. Of particular concern during 2020 was the Coalition's near complete dismissal of thousands of locally reported civilian deaths in Deir Ezzor, Syria during the final push against ISIS in early 2019.

Airwars remained the primary cited source both for overall historical claims of civilian harm assessed by OIR during 2020 (97% of 391 cases), and for those events deemed Credible by the Coalition (57% of 14 confirmed cases.) Airwars also published the near locations of 99 per cent of all Coalition-confirmed civilian harm events in Iraq and Syria - the result of several years of patient engagement with CJTFOIR (see our Geolocations section for more.)

Overall, by the end of 2020 the US-led Coalition had determined that its own actions had killed at least 1,410 civilians since 2014 in Iraq and Syria. Airwars' own database of locally reported claims indicates that at least 8,300 non combatants were in fact killed by Coalition actions.

Ahead of Airwars' launch of its database on US counter terrorism actions in **Somalia** in February 2020, the team shared with AFRICOM its provisional findings on civilian harm and held direct discussions with the US military command's civilian casualty assessment team. Airwars director Chris Woods also held substantive talks at the Pentagon on civilian harm concerns regarding Somalia with senior personnel, shortly after the data was launched.

AFRICOM also continued to improve its own civilian casualty assessment processes. It became the first US combatant command to implement a [public reporting portal for civilian harm allegations](#) - in Somali, Arabic and English. And it began issuing [quarterly civilian harm assessment reports](#), leading to several new admissions of civilian casualties in Somalia.

Airwars also engaged with CENTCOM on its new review of US counterterrorism actions and associated civilian harm in **Yemen** under President Trump. Following direct remote talks with CENTCOM, Airwars agreed to share its provisional civilian harm findings ahead of publication (see also our Yemen section).

However, despite two months of advance notice, CENTCOM did not respond in time for publication. It subsequently conceded one civilian harm event - its first such admission in almost four years - following work by the Airwars geolocation team. CENTCOM officials also revealed that despite a record number of strikes and civilian harm claims under President Trump, it had no formally constituted civilian casualty assessment team for Yemen in place. And as we note in our Investigations review, CENTCOM also had to admit that its officials had institutionally forgotten their own earlier public admission of up to a dozen civilian deaths in Yemen in 2017.

Engagement with the Pentagon

Along with US and international partners under the auspices of the [InterAction network](#), Airwars continued to engage with the Pentagon during 2020 on an expected Department of Defense Instruction (or DOD-I) on protection of civilians issues, as recently required by Congress.

Several in-person and virtual workshops were held during the year between NGOs and US military officials - focused for example on civilian objects; and on the challenges of protecting civilians during large scale peer to peer conflicts. Shortly before the US closed its borders as a result of Covid-19, face to face talks were also held in March 2020 on the expected DOD-I at the Pentagon between NGOs and Dr James Anderson, US Deputy Defense Secretary for Policy, as well as with senior DoD and combatant command officials.

Ahead of that meeting, Dr Anderson had issued an [official Memorandum](#) which had laid out DoD's own likely priorities for the forthcoming DOD-I. Airwars also joined with partner NGOs to publish [Civil Society Guidance for a Model Policy](#), the synthesis of almost two years of review and engagement, along with a [full package of NGO policy recommendations for the DOD-I](#).

Following the US elections in November, Donald Trump fired all of his former senior appointees at Defense, including Dr Anderson. This meant that the expected DOD-I, still in draft, did not appear. It was nevertheless hoped that the new Biden administration would take on the DOD-I; and in late December 2020 this featured as a priority issue in NGO recommendations on protection of civilians to the Biden-Harris Transition Team.

European Advocacy

By Laurie Treffers, conflict researcher and advocacy officer

Despite the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic forcing Airwars' vital advocacy work mainly to take place online, 2020 was a busy year for our European team. In the Netherlands, we began a so-called Roadmap Process with the Dutch Ministry of Defence, which is reviewing its own transparency and accountability practices regarding civilian harm in consultation with civil society organisations, including Airwars.

Meanwhile, as Belgium once again sent its F-16s to participate in Operation Inherent Resolve in Iraq, our European foundation Airwars Stichting joined a coalition of Belgian and international NGOs to help better ensure transparency and accountability for past and future Belgian military actions. At the end of the year, we also spoke with Dutch, Belgian, French and German Members of Parliament on the reverberating effects of explosive weapons in populated areas.

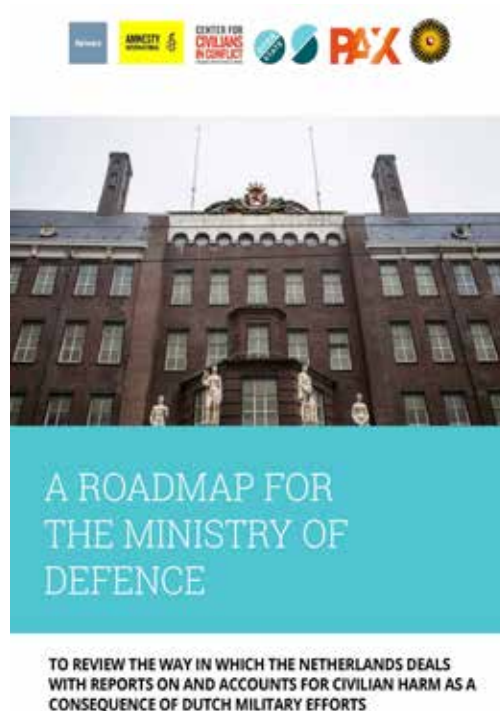
The Netherlands

In January, our Netherlands-based European advocacy team moved from the offices of PAX for Peace, which remains one of our key local partners, to Utrecht University's Centre for Global Challenges. Our partnership with UGlobe, which for example accommodates the [Intimacies of Remote Warfare project](#), is similar to Airwars' ongoing collaboration with Goldsmiths, University of London in the UK, and will help facilitate better engagement on the topic of civilian harm with academics and researchers.

Since the Dutch government took public responsibility in November 2019 for a Coalition airstrike on Hawijah, Iraq, in June 2015, which led to the deaths of at least 70 civilians, Airwars has been prominently cited in parliamentary and public debates on the matter. In 2020, we continued to report on developments in the Hawijah case.

In March for example, we published a [story on newly declassified documents](#) released by the Dutch Ministries of Defence (Defensie) and Foreign Affairs, and the Dutch Public Prosecutor's Office, which revealed a number of disturbing facts about 2015 Dutch airstrikes on Hawijah and Mosul. The documents indicated that the Red Card Holder – the Dutch military official with a potential veto over its strikes – was aware even before the airstrike on Hawijah in June 2015 that the expected damage from the strike could in fact be greater than the Collateral Damage Estimate (CDE) was indicating.

The fourth Dutch parliamentary debate on the Hawijah case took place on May 14th. Our live-tweeting of the nine-hour-long event was widely followed by international media. Our [news story from March](#), in which Airwars also revealed that at least one other Coalition ally had refused the airstrike on Hawijah, based on the available intelligence, was also referenced on several occasions by MPs. During all four debates, Airwars was mentioned no less than 54 times.



Left: The policy report Airwars and Open State Foundation handed to the Dutch Ministry of Defence on publishing airstrike data in June 2020.

Right: The proposed roadmap by civil society organisation to review Dutch transparency and accountability practices.

In June, Open State Foundation and Airwars sent the Ministry of Defence a joint policy brief on Open Defence: Publishing Airstrike Data. As a result, one month later the Ministry republished weekly reports of all anti-ISIS strikes as open data. Airwars deputy director Dmytro Chupryna [responded](#) to these developments: "While Airwars welcomes this next step towards a more transparent Defensie, the content of the data is still below standard." Airwars will continue to work with the Ministry of Defence to improve its transparency practices.

In October 2020, Airwars published our joint report with PAX for Peace, [Seeing Through The Rubble](#), which examined the long-lasting effects of explosive weapons on civilian populations in urban areas in recent international military campaigns in Mosul, Raqqa and Hawijah (see Investigations section). The report was officially launched at a virtual event for Members of Parliament in the Netherlands, Belgium and the United Kingdom, which was hosted by Ambassador Michael Gaffey of Ireland. A followup event hosted by Humanity & Inclusion also engaged with French and German MPs.

A key part of our advocacy work in the Netherlands in 2020 was the so-called Roadmap Process. Following a meeting between a consortium of NGOs and academics, and Defensie, on January 27th, the consortium began drafting a roadmap through which Defensie, in consultation with civil society, might review and improve its own transparency and accountability practices when it comes to civilian harm. After the summer, the civil society organisations and Defensie reached an agreement on several sessions and desired outcomes for the process.

The starting session of the Roadmap Process took place virtually on November 12th, attended by senior Dutch defence officials, including the Deputy Chief of Defence Lt General Onno. Airwars director Chris Woods emphasized in his opening statement that, despite the different perspectives among participants, there remains a shared goal among both civil society organisations and the Ministry of Defence to see fewer civilians harmed in conflict. The specialist sessions addressing several aspects of civilian harm tracking and investigation were scheduled to take place in the first half of 2021.

Belgium

In autumn 2020, Belgium again deployed its F-16s to participate in Operation Inherent Resolve - the long running war against the so called Islamic State. However the Belgian, Iraqi and Syrian publics still remained in the dark regarding potential civilian harm from previous Belgian deployments in the war against ISIS.

A joint investigation by Airwars, RTL Netherlands, the BBC, De Morgen and Liberation revealed in March 2020 that Belgium had consistently refused to acknowledge civilian casualties from its actions in Syria and Iraq, even where the US-led Coalition itself had graded civilian casualties in these particular events as 'credible' (see Investigations section). The Belgian Ministry of Defence refused to give a clear answer to Airwars' questions regarding these events, only stating that its forces were "certainly not involved in all events."

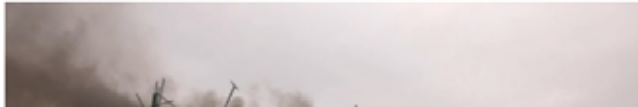
OPINIE STRIJD TEGEN IS

De mythe van nul burgerslachtoffers

Hoelang kan ons land nog volhouden dat de Belgische militaire acties in Syrië en Irak geen enkele burger hebben gedood, vraagt Laurie Treffers zich af.

Laurie Treffers
Conflictonderzoeker bij Airwars, een ngo die burgerslachtoffers monitort in Syrië, Irak en Libië.
Donderdag 24 september 2020 om 3.25 uur

Op-ed published in De Standaard on September 24th, 2020 by European advocacy officer Laurie Treffers on the latest Belgian deployment to the US-led Coalition against ISIS.



Six days before the start of the mission on October 1st, our European advocacy officer Laurie Treffers wrote an opinion piece for Belgian daily newspaper [De Standaard](#), asking how much longer Belgium could continue to insist that previous military actions in the fight against ISIS had led to zero civilian casualties.

And on September 30th, a group of eleven international and Belgian NGOs, including Airwars, Amnesty Belgium and Humanity & Inclusion, sent then-interim Minister of Defence Philippe Goffin an [open letter](#) regarding the [new Belgian weapon deployment](#). The civil society organisations called on the Minister to increase transparency and accountability for civilian harm, and to ensure cooperation with external monitoring groups and human rights organisations, as parliament had requested in a [resolution](#) in June 2020.



French and German Members of Parliament during the virtual event on the report *Seeing through the Rubble*, which was organised by Humanity and Inclusion in December 2020.

International advocacy

By Dmytro Chupryna, deputy director

Key political moments

During 2020, Airwars continued to build on its engagement with militaries, governments and institutions at a broader international level.

At the end of March, Airwars attended a virtual discussion organised by Crisis Action regarding the call for a global ceasefire by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres - to allow states to better focus on battling the Covid-19 pandemic. We co-signed a joint letter coordinated by Crisis Action to the UN Security Council to support the call for a [global ceasefire](#).

In response to sanctions by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on key senior figures within the International Criminal Court, Airwars joined with some of our US partners working on the Protection of Civilians (PoC) in an [open statement calling upon the US Government to end its targeting of ICC officials](#) - and expressing regret regarding the attack on the ICC, as well as the US's recent abandonment of key international mechanisms designed to protect civilians.

UN's Protection of Civilians week

Airwars marked the UN's Protection of Civilians week in May 2020 by virtually featuring [Conflicting Truth](#), a digital installation by the Scottish-American design team Rectangle. The project live-streamed the names of 8,337 civilian casualties which Airwars had documented in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Somalia in recent years. The Airwars/Rectangle project aimed to show that those killed and injured in conflict are not mere statistics – they are people with names, friends and families. Their loss inflicts severe pain on relatives and communities.

Airwars also joined other international partners and organisations in a [Civil Society Call for Action to Protect Civilians](#) during UN Protection of Civilians (PoC) week. The joint statement, signed by 22 organisations, called on the UN Security Council, member states, and the UN System to take urgent, bold and practical steps to respond to the challenges that continue to threaten civilians in armed conflict.

The project 'Conflicting Truth' commemorates civilians who died or were injured during the conflicts Airwars monitors in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Somalia.

Date	Location	Casualties
March 20, 2017	Idlib, Syria	35,815, 38,756
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March 20, 2017	Idlib, Syria	35,815, 38,756

Ahmad Mowaffak Kharaz
 Ahmad Mowaffak Kharaz
 Ahmad Mowaffak Kharaz

Annotated Media

March 20, 2017
 Idlib, Syria
 40-420
 50-56

US-led Coalition
 Confirmed

Level of Reporting
 Confirmed

Photo of Ahmad Mowaffak Kharaz, a child in Idlib, Syria, March 20, 2017. Photo by Reuters.

EWIPA Political Declaration

As a member of the International Network on Explosive Weapons (INEW), Airwars' advocacy team also worked with our network partners throughout the year towards improving the forthcoming international Political Declaration by states, which is expected to address the humanitarian harm arising from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

The Airwars team attended multiple meetings organised by INEW which were aimed at developing common approaches to states on the Political declaration and at agreeing on a joint position in tackling common pushbacks and misconceptions. As a part of these ongoing activities, Airwars submitted a letter to the UK Mission to the UN on the EWIPA declaration; presented our *Seeing through the Rubble* report to INEW partners; and also widely disseminated the report to delegations in several states to help inform ongoing discussion on the text of the declaration.



Airwars director
Chris Woods
(bottom right)
co-presenting
with PAX the
Seeing through the Rubble
report,
November 2020

Engagement with NATO

During 2020, Airwars continued our engagements with NATO with the aim of exchanging knowledge and expertise on civilian harm monitoring challenges and good practice. Airwars' in-depth reports were widely disseminated among NATO teams working on civilian harm and Protection of Civilians (PoC) issues. We also took part in a number of expert engagements with NATO, contributing to the discussion on NATO's role in minimising the impact of conflict on civilians.

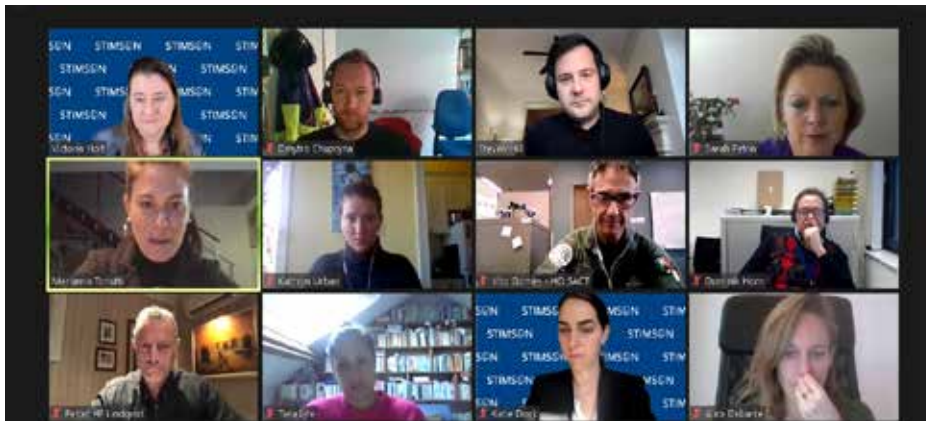
Airwars deputy director Dmytro Chupryna took part in NATO's 2030 Online Stakeholder Dialogue on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), Human Security and Humanitarian Issues and stressed the importance of the Protection of Civilians framework, which should in our view be implemented in all of NATO's operational theatres.

Dmytro also took part in a 4-day virtual NATO-Stimson Center Conference '[NATO & The Protection of Civilians: Toward Implementation](#)' which concluded with a number of expert workshops focused on a wide range of topics. Among these include NATO's ability to protect civilians in future operations and implement best practices and lessons.

Expert discussions

In 2020, Airwars took part in discussions about security dilemmas in Central and Eastern Europe. Airwars deputy director Dmytro Chupryna participated in the 13th Europe-Ukraine Forum, titled “New Possibilities, New Threats and presented on the discussion panel “Strength lays in numbers”, which examined how a data-focused approach can help change military narratives in understanding civilian harm; and broader protection of civilians, defence and security-related issues.

We also attended the 3-day virtual workshop “Building the Evidence Base: Addressing the Reverberating Effects of Military Operations on Civilian Life” organised by InterAction. The workshop gathered a number of experts undertaking systematic research on the effects of explosive weapons in populated areas. The workshop was focused on building relationships among researchers and academics, technical specialists, and policy advocates, to better inform military policy and practice.



NATO-Stimson
expert
workshops on
the protection of
civilians (PoC),
December 2020

UK advocacy

By Maysa Ismael, conflict researcher and UK advocacy officer

After smoothly moving to remote working as a result of Covid-19, Airwars' UK Advocacy continued its focus on improved UK government accountability and transparency regarding civilian harm, and towards enhancing the network of organisations working on protection of civilians. Despite the fact that in-person meetings with government officials and MPs became difficult, Airwars and partners managed to engage with officials where necessary.

Airwars' work with the UK government included participation in dialogue with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, the Ministry of Defence, and with Parliamentarians. At the same time, Airwars continued to coordinate with a wide group of partners in the UK working in the field of human rights and protection of civilians in armed conflict.

Engagement with the UK Government and Parliament

Despite being the third most active member (after the United States and France) of the International Coalition against ISIS, the UK has only admitted to one civilian death from thousands of strikes in Iraq and Syria since 2014. That death reportedly occurred in rural Syria in March 2018. Remarkably, the UK has yet to admit any civilian harm from its intense strikes during the fiercely fought urban battles of Mosul and Raqqa in 2017, despite having struck over 1,000 targets across both cities. Shortly before the first UK national lockdown, Airwars and partners held roundtable talks with senior MoD officials in Whitehall. However, due both to Covid-19 and to MoD personnel changes, current engagements are presently stalled.

Airwars took part over the past two years in discussions with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) regarding a review of the UK's strategy on the protection of civilians. After the Department for International Development (DFID) and FCO merger in August, [the UK Approach to Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict](#) was published. Despite several positive updates to the text, including a written commitment to investigate any credible reports that UK actions may have caused civilian harm, the paper did not include details on implementation procedures.

The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Foreign Policy and Development, which represents a strategic look by the UK Government at its foreign policy objectives - along with its future defence, security and international development strategies - was another area of intervention for Airwars in 2020. We partnered with the Center for Civilians In Conflict (CIVIC) to submit joint evidence for the Integrated Review. The paper included recommendations to the UK government to mainstream the Protection of Civilians in conflict; to establish robust systems for casualty tracking and investigation; and to improve UK public accountability for civilian harm.

Airwars is a collaborative, not for profit watchdog organisation focused on reducing battlefield civilian casualties. We track, document and archive airpower-dominated military actions, and local reports of civilian harm in conflict zones. Presently covering Iraq, Syria, and Libya - as well as US counterterrorism actions in Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan - we provide a vital counter-narrative to the dominant military assertion that civilian deaths are low in modern warfare.

Airwars contributes to truth-seeking and accountability through our pioneering work collecting, assessing, and archiving accounts from local journalists, citizens, and state and non-state actors - and leveraging that information for change.

This report was edited by Mohammed al-Jumaily, with contributions from Dmytro Chupryna, Joseph Dyke, Shihab Halep, Oliver Imhof, Maysa Ismael, Laurie Treffers, Clive Vella, and Chris Woods. Additional research, assessments, analysis and geolocation were provided for Airwars during 2020 by Samuel Brownsword, Latif Habib, Hermes, Alex Hopkins, Helen Hughes, Eleftheria Kousta, Riley Mellen, Giacomo Nanni, Edward Ray, Douglas Statt, Vasiliki Touhouliotis, Anna Zahn, James Foley and Amanda Dochy. Our 2020 work placements were Georgina Gambetta and Xavier Richer.

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