

Cause For Concern

**Hundreds of civilian non-combatants credibly reported
killed in first year of Coalition airstrikes against Islamic State**



Aftermath of a devastating Coalition airstrike at Hawijah, Iraq on June 3 2015, which reportedly killed up to 70 civilians (picture via Iraqi Spring)



Monitoring the international coalition's airstrikes against Islamic State (Daesh) in Iraq and Syria. Archiving official reports of the war. Verifying claims of non-combatant civilian casualties. Promoting accountability of the US and its allies.

August 2015

Acknowledgements

This Report is the result of a six-month study begun in February 2015, with the aim of building as clear a picture as possible of alleged civilian fatalities from Coalition airstrikes in both Iraq and Syria. The project has been made possible thanks to generous funding from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which enabled us to employ two highly-skilled experts. Research into civilian and ‘friendly fire’ deaths in Iraq has been conducted by our Baghdad-based researcher Latif Habib, while our London-based researcher Kinda Haddad has pursued claims of civilian deaths in Syria.

This Report is written by Airwars director Chris Woods with an additional feature by Kinda Haddad, and is intended to be read in conjunction with our [full database of events](#). All data modelling and mapping is the work of Basile Simon, who also designs and maintains our ever-expanding website.

We are particularly indebted to those monitoring groups, journalists and ordinary citizens in Iraq and Syria whose own courageous work informs many of the incidents we cover. In particular we would like to thank the [Syrian Network for Human Rights](#); the [Violations Documentation Center](#); the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#); Raqaa is Being Slaughtered Silently; and [Iraq Body Count](#), all of which have worked tirelessly to expose not just fatalities from Coalition strikes but also from the far greater carnage still unfolding in Iraq and Syria. We are also grateful to [Antiwar.com](#) for sharing their ongoing reports of Iraqi fatalities.

We are also grateful to the Coalition’s public relations team for their prompt responses to our many inquiries over the months, as well as to those individual participating militaries which regularly engage with us.

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Methodology

Because of the extreme security situation in Iraq and Syria, our own researchers and others have been severely limited in their ability to conduct field investigations into alleged civilian and friendly forces deaths. With most areas bombed by the Coalition under Daesh occupation, access remains almost impossible. Civic society has also broken down, with most journalists driven out or killed. As a result casualty claims can emerge in a fragmentary manner, with verification a particular challenge.

Social media sites often take on the role of reporting events - though as researcher Kinda Haddad notes on page 19, such claims sometimes come with health warnings. Many credible claims of non-combatant deaths are also made by casualty monitoring NGOs based in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere.

In parallel with this study which runs to June 30th 2015, Airwars has also assembled a publicly accessible database of more than 120 alleged incidents involving the reported deaths of hundreds of non-combatants and friendly forces in Coalition actions.

When flagging up potential non-combatant deaths or injuries from allied airstrikes, Airwars draws on a wide range of sources. These can include international and local news agencies, as well as more fragmentary social media sites including local residents' groups, Facebook pages (for examples martyrs' pages), YouTube videos of incidents, and tweets relating to specific events. On occasion we also include links to militant propaganda sources which we believe to be pertinent to a particular event. These are always clearly marked as such.

It is important to note however, that casualty monitoring in the context of Iraq and Syria's current troubles present significant challenges. We report information on alleged strikes and casualties in good faith, though are often unable to follow up or to further verify claims. As a result, Airwars uses a grading system to reflect the current quality of reporting for each alleged incident. These categories are:

"Airwars has assembled a publicly accessible database of more than 120 alleged incidents, involving the reported deaths of hundreds of non-combatants and friendly forces in Coalition actions."

Confirmed: Where the coalition or an individual ally has accepted responsibility for the killing of non-combatants or allied forces in a particular incident.

Fair: Reasonable level of public reporting of an alleged incident from two or more generally credible sources (often with biographical, photographic or video evidence). Crucially, there are also confirmed coalition strikes in the near vicinity for that date. We believe these cases in particular require urgent investigation.

Poor: Single source claims. Even so, these may feature biographical or photographic detail from a reputable source, with coalition strikes also confirmed in the vicinity.

Contested Events: Where there are claims of both Coalition and Iraqi or Syrian aircraft having carried out strikes at a location.

Disproven: Those cases where our researchers or others can either demonstrate that those killed were combatants, or where an incident did not in fact result in any civilian casualties.

Key Findings and Recommendations

- Despite claims by the US-led Coalition that its airstrikes in Iraq and Syria are *'the most precise and disciplined in the history of aerial warfare'*, there are clear indications from the field that many hundreds of non-combatants have been killed by the 12 international allies in the first year of their air war against Islamic State/ Daesh.
- Airwars is concerned that the Coalition's own monitoring systems miss many reports of non-combatant fatalities. To the end of June 2015, officials appear to have identified only one third of 118 alleged cases of concern.
- For 57 of these incidents, Airwars believes there is sufficient publicly-available evidence to indicate Coalition responsibility for civilian and 'friendly forces' deaths. Between them these events account for 459-591 alleged civilian fatalities, and the reported deaths of 48-80 allied forces. Each of these claims warrants a prompt and impartial Coalition inquiry.
- The Coalition's admission of only two *'likely'* non-combatant deaths to date – conceded some seven months after the event – indicates a worrying lack of urgency on the part of all Coalition members regarding civilian deaths.
- Almost all claims of non-combatant deaths from alleged Coalition strikes emerge within 24 hours – with graphic images of reported victims often widely disseminated across media and social media. In this context, the present Coalition policy of downplaying or denying all claims of non-combatant fatalities makes little sense, and risks handing Islamic State and other forces a powerful propaganda tool.
- Efforts to limit the risk to civilians on the ground continue to be hampered by an absence of effective transparency and accountability from almost all Coalition members. It is unacceptable that only one of twelve Coalition partners – Canada – has consistently stated in a timely fashion both where and when it carries out airstrikes.
- The need for transparency is vital from all participating nations, since each is individually liable for any civilian deaths or injuries it causes. As CENTCOM notes: *'If a claim of civilian casualties were found valid, that claim would be processed in accordance with the laws of the nation that conducted the strike.'*
- Casualty recording for Iraq is particularly weak. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq [already reports](#) more broadly on civilian fatalities from the conflict. In our view, there would also be merit in UNAMI also taking on the monitoring of Coalition-inflicted casualties for Iraq, as its sister mission UNAMA already does for Afghanistan.

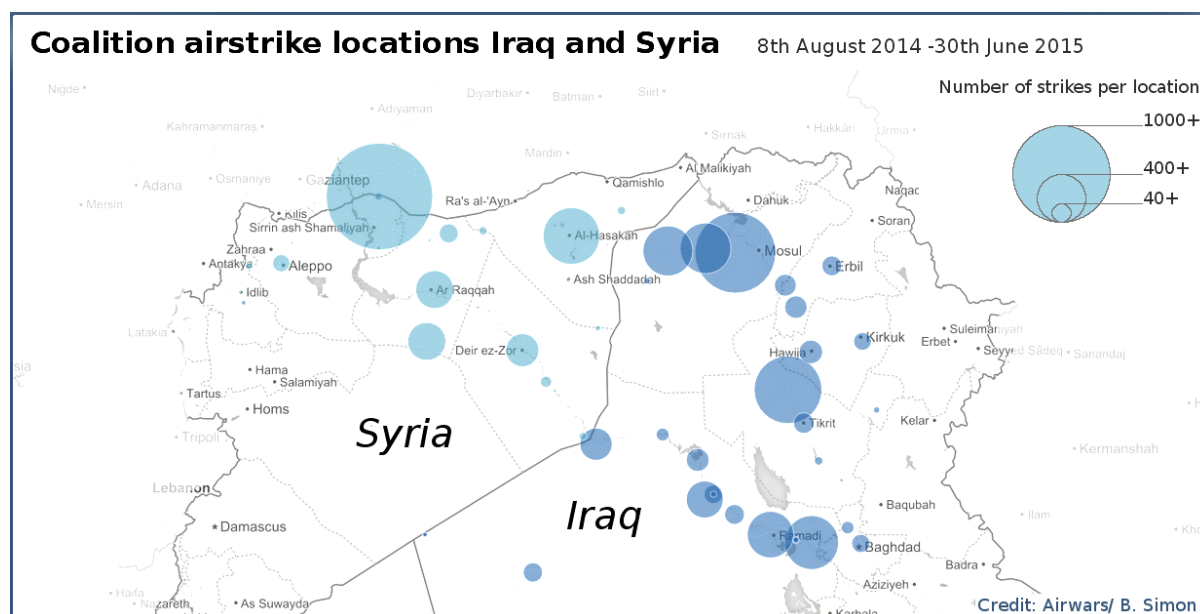
Overview

Despite claims of precision, civilians remain at significant risk from Coalition strikes in both Iraq and Syria

Table 1: Total Casualty Claims for Iraq and Syria, August 8th 2014 to June 30th 2015

Number of reported incidents across Iraq and Syria in which civilian deaths claimed	118
Alleged civilian casualty range from these Coalition strikes	459 - 1,086
Incidents with Fair Reporting only, and with confirmed coalition strikes in near vicinity	52
Reported fatalities from these Fair Reporting incidents	459-591
Additional claimed 'friendly fire' incidents	9
Alleged friendly forces fatalities from these events	111-185
Total incidents investigated by the Coalition to date	10

Between August 8th 2014 and June 30th 2015, the United States and its eleven Coalition allies had already carried out 4,924 airstrikes against Islamic State/ Daesh across both Iraq and Syria.¹ Almost 17,000 munitions were released², with CENTCOM estimating that more than 2,000 buildings had been destroyed alongside hundreds of enemy vehicles, checkpoints and fighting positions.³ Official estimates of the number of Daesh fighters killed in this period ranged from 10,000 to 13,000.⁴



¹ According to [coalition daily reports](#), to June 30th/July 1st 2015 some 3,034 airstrikes were carried out in Iraq, and 1,890 in Syria.

² 16,931 weapons were released to June 2015, "Airpower Summaries", AFCENT, at <http://www.afcent.af.mil/AboutUs/AirpowerSummaries.aspx>

³ "Operation Inherent Resolve: Targeted Operations Against ISIL Terrorists," US Department of Defense, at http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2014/0814_iraq/

⁴ For a summary of these claims see "Coalition airstrikes and casualties in Iraq and Syria: May 29th-June 5th 2015," Chris Woods, Airwars, June 7 2015, at <http://airwars.org/news/coalition-airstrikes-and-casualties-in-iraq-and-syria-may-29th-june-5th-2015/>

Cause For Concern: Civilians Killed in Coalition Strikes

The Coalition claims non-combatants on the battlefield are rarely affected by these airstrikes. Lt General John Hesterman, commander of Combined Joint Task Force Airpower, told reporters in early June that *'Our coalition airstrikes are the most precise and disciplined in the history of aerial warfare. We've been able to impact the enemy in a significant way and we do it in a way that minimizes civilian casualties, which our coalition nations rightly are very proud of.'*⁵

In almost a year of intense bombings, the Coalition has publicly conceded only one incident – two girls *'likely'* killed in a November 2014 strike in Syria. Six additional investigations are presently underway, while three more investigations have concluded – having found no *'preponderance of evidence'* at present to support claims of civilian deaths, according to CENTCOM.⁶

There now exists a worrying gulf between public and Coalition positions. As our own researchers and others have found, every week from both Iraq and Syria a steady flow of casualty claims emerges. The first such assertion was made just eight days into the bombing campaign, when news agencies claimed 11 civilians died at Mount Sinjar in Iraq - scene of heavy airstrikes as the Coalition sought to push back Daesh fighters.



Rescuers search for survivors of a US airstrike on al Nusra Front at Kafar Daryan, Syria on September 23 2015 (via SN4HR)

In total, to June 30th some **118 incidents of concern** had been flagged across Iraq and Syria by international and local news organisations, by monitoring groups and by social media sites, in which as many as 1,080 non-combatants have allegedly died. Some of these events are poorly reported. Others are contested – or did not involve the deaths of civilians as initially claimed.

Even so, Airwars has identified **52 incidents of significant concern** across both Iraq and Syria in which the level of public reporting appears reasonable, and where Coalition airstrikes are confirmed in the near vicinity for that date. Between 459 and 591 non-combatants are reported killed in these events.

Shared concerns

While counts vary, other monitoring groups also estimate that hundreds of civilians have so far died in Coalition actions – a far cry from the two deaths presently conceded by the alliance. Between the three key Syrian monitoring organisations, the current averaged estimate is of 215 civilians so far killed by the Coalition. And for Iraq, the UK-based monitoring group Iraq Body Count estimates that 369 non-combatants had died as a result of Coalition airstrikes to June 30th.⁷

⁵ "Press Briefing by Lt. Gen. Hesterman Via Telephone from the Combined Air and Space Operations Center, Southwest Asia," Department of Defense, June 5 2015, at <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5637>

⁶ On the record email from CENTCOM to Airwars, July 30 2015

⁷ All monitoring group estimates provided to Airwars July 2015.

Table 2: Estimates by monitor of civilian fatalities from Coalition actions to June 2015

	Iraq	Syria	Totals
Airwars [total range]	233-732	226-354	459-1,086
Syrian Observatory for Human Rights	-	173	
Syrian Network for Human Rights	-	198	
Syria Violations Documentation Center	-	276	
Iraq Body Count	369	-	
Averaged estimates	301-550	218-250	519-800

During the recent war in Afghanistan, airstrikes represented the single greatest threat to civilian life from international forces. Despite significant efforts to reduce those risks, independent monitoring by the United Nations found that even in 2014, one civilian was killed for every eleven airstrikes in that conflict.⁸ With almost 5,000 anti-Daesh airstrikes across Iraq and Syria to June 30th, estimates of 500 or more civilian deaths from Coalition actions should not come as a surprise. US and allied claims of almost zero civilian deaths are, in our view, untenable.

CASE STUDY: February 2nd 2015: Shadadi, Al Hassakah governorate, Syria

Ibrahim al-Mussul, a shepherd in his late 60s (pictured) was reported killed with his two daughters Jozah aged 27 and Zahra (25) in a major Coalition air raid on Islamic State-controlled oilfields. Eyewitnesses said that *'flames and the sound of explosions were seen and heard dozens of kilometers from the bombing site.'* Mr al-Mussul's home was in close proximity to the Gona oil fields, one of the main targets of the raid.



Ibrahim al-Mussul, killed with his two daughters in a likely Coalition strike in Syria on February 2 2015 (via SN4HR)

In a follow-up investigation by monitoring group the [Syrian Network for Human Rights](#), neighbour Mahmoud al-Hadidya described events: *'Their bodies were shredded. We found Ibrahim's hand next to the house, and we were still collecting bits of flesh and body parts into the early hours of the following morning.'* The family was buried in Hadidiya Cemetery.

The coalition has confirmed air strikes at the location for [February 2nd-3rd 2015](#), reporting that *'Near Al Hasakah, two airstrikes struck multiple ISIL oil pump jacks and destroyed four ISIL mobile drilling rigs.'* In the view of Airwars and other monitoring groups, there is a high likelihood Mr al-Mussul and his daughters died as a result of Coalition actions.

In his recent *Report on Islamic State* to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur Ben Emmerson QC reminded those international forces fighting Daesh that they too have obligations

⁸ AFCENT reported 1,136 strikes with at least one weapon released in Afghanistan for 2014. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan tracked 104 fatalities from these events. See "UNAMA REPORTS ON THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS," UNAMA, at <http://www.unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=13941&language=en-US>

Cause For Concern: Civilians Killed in Coalition Strikes

to civilians on the ground: *'All States engaged in military action against ISIL in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic are under an obligation to conduct prompt, independent and impartial fact-finding inquiries in any case where there is a plausible indication that civilian casualties have been sustained, and to make public the results.'*⁹

At present, such investigations appear neither prompt, independent nor impartial. One challenge for the Coalition has been in identifying and following up on specific allegations of civilian deaths. As our study notes, with the collapse of civic society in those areas occupied by Daesh, reporting is often fragmentary. Almost all credible reporting is also in Arabic – and it is not clear how well-resourced the Coalition's own casualty monitors are in this area. During correspondence between Airwars and CENTCOM for example, it was noted that external casualty monitors had identified up to three times more problem events than the 30 or so incidents the Coalition was tracking at the time.

One solution might be for oversight of casualty recording to be carried out by an external agency. As already noted, UNAMA has monitored conflict casualties in Afghanistan for the past six years, including deaths from international air strikes. There may be some merit to the UN's Assistance Mission for Iraq ([UNAMI](#)) taking on similar responsibilities – particularly if this will help apply downward pressure on civilian fatalities from Coalition actions.

“External casualty monitors had identified up to three times more problem events than the thirty or so incidents the Coalition was tracking at the time.”

It remains important to note that many thousands more Iraqi and Syrian civilians have perished since August 2014 at the hands of Islamic State and other militant groups – or indeed have been killed by Syrian or Iraqi government and allied forces. Between September 2014 and July 2015, monitoring group the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#) attributes 173 deaths to Coalition actions. During that same period, SOHR estimates that the Assad regime alone killed 4,879 civilians – mostly in indiscriminate airstrikes.¹⁰

There is no doubt that - relatively speaking - the Coalition goes to significant efforts to reduce the risk to civilians on the ground. Even so, the public record indicates that hundreds of civilians have been killed by the Coalition in its intensive air war against Islamic State.

The Coalition has often spoken of the power of Daesh propaganda as a weapon, and how it must be countered. Yet at the same time, the Coalition's near-total denial of having caused civilian casualties continues to damage its own credibility. Conducting prompt and effective investigations into all credible claims of civilian casualties- and publishing those findings - would go some way towards countering such militant propaganda, while addressing the very real concerns of Iraqi and Syrian civilians on the ground.

⁹ 'Human rights in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant,' Report to UNHRC, Ben Emmerson QC, UN Special Rapporteur on Counter Terrorism and Human Rights, June 22 2015, at http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session29/Documents/A_HRC_29_51_AEV.docx

¹⁰ "Exploiting the world's preoccupation of fighting Islamic State, Bashar al- Assad gives orders to his pilots to kill 1000 children," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, July 21 2015, at <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/07/exploiting-the-worlds-preoccupation-of-fighting-islamic-state-bashar-al-assasds-regime-continues-its-crazy-aerial-bombardment-killing-about-1000-children/>

Iraq

Overview

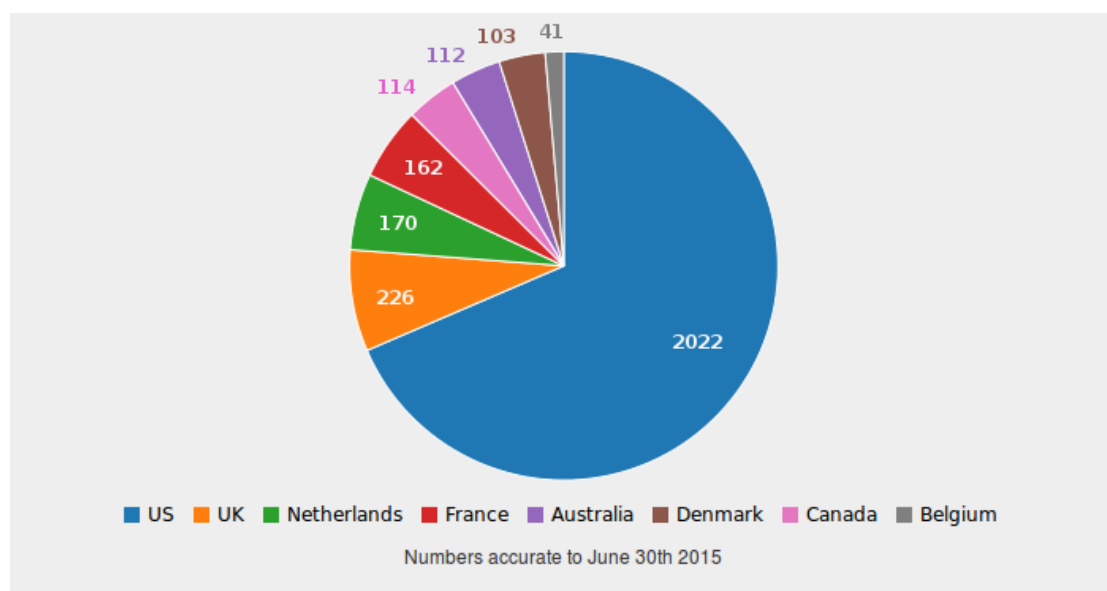
US airstrikes in Iraq against Islamic State/ Daesh began on August 8th 2014. Announcing the start of the campaign, President Barack Obama asserted that a primary goal was *'to help save Iraqi civilians'*.¹¹ While at first a unilateral operation, the United States eventually assembled a 60-nation coalition of partners - nine of which would take part directly in combat operations in Iraq.

France was the first ally to join the military campaign, carrying out an airstrike in north-eastern Iraq on September 19th. The **UK** began its own assault against ISIL on September 30th, followed by **Belgium** (October 5th), **Netherlands** (October 7th), **Australia** (October 8th), **Denmark** (October 16th) and **Canada** (November 2nd.) **Jordan** has also carries out airstrikes in Iraq as well as in Syria, though has released no further information about the dates or locations of attacks.

Between August 8th 2014 and June 30th 2015, the Coalition carried out [3,034 airstrikes in Iraq](#). With an average of 3.4 weapon releases per airstrike across the whole campaign, this suggests that approximately 10,000 munitions were released by Coalition aircraft in Iraq during this period.

US aircraft were responsible for some 68 per cent (2,022 strikes) of all actions in Iraq, with other Coalition partners carrying out a further 962 strikes to June 27th. The **UK** was the next most active partner, carrying out 226 airstrikes.

Chart 1: Airstrikes by Coalition partner nation to June 30th 2015 - Iraq only¹²



¹¹ "Statement by the President," Barack Obama, White House, August 7 2014, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president>

¹² All data via official CJTF-OIR and allied military reports. See our full archive at <http://airwars.org/daily-reports/>

Civilian casualties from Coalition strikes in Iraq

Coalition actions initially focused on Daesh forces concentrated in rural areas – for example around the Haditha Dam, or at Mount Sinjar. However, most airstrikes soon shifted to those urban conurbations seized by militants in the summer of 2014. Mosul is the most heavily bombed location in Iraq, with more than 670 international airstrikes recorded in the vicinity between August and June. Unsurprisingly, claims of civilians killed by Coalition aircraft also peak in the city - with more than 40 per cent of all reported civilian casualty incidents (representing 216 to 285 alleged deaths) recorded for Mosul.

Table 3: Reported civilian deaths from Coalition strikes in Iraq

Category	Number of events	Claimed fatality range
Incidents of concern (total)	53	578-732
Confirmed by Coalition	0	0
Fair reporting	17	233-311
Fair reporting (no confirmed Coalition strike)	6	35-55
Poorly reported	17	187-202
Contested	12	73-114
Disproven	1	50
'Friendly fire' incidents	8	105-179
Coalition investigations	6	Unknown

A total of 53 incidents of concern were reported across Iraq between August 8th 2014 and June 30th 2015, from which a total of 578-732 non-combatant deaths were allegedly attributed to Coalition actions. These break down as follows:

Seventeen events involve a **fair** level of public reporting, with Coalition strikes also confirmed in the near vicinity. Between 233 and 311 civilians allegedly died in these incidents, which we believe warrant urgent investigation by the Coalition.

A further six events (35-55 alleged deaths) involve a fair level of reporting – though the Coalition has not conceded carrying out strikes in the vicinity on that date. As we outline elsewhere, allied aircraft might still have been involved.

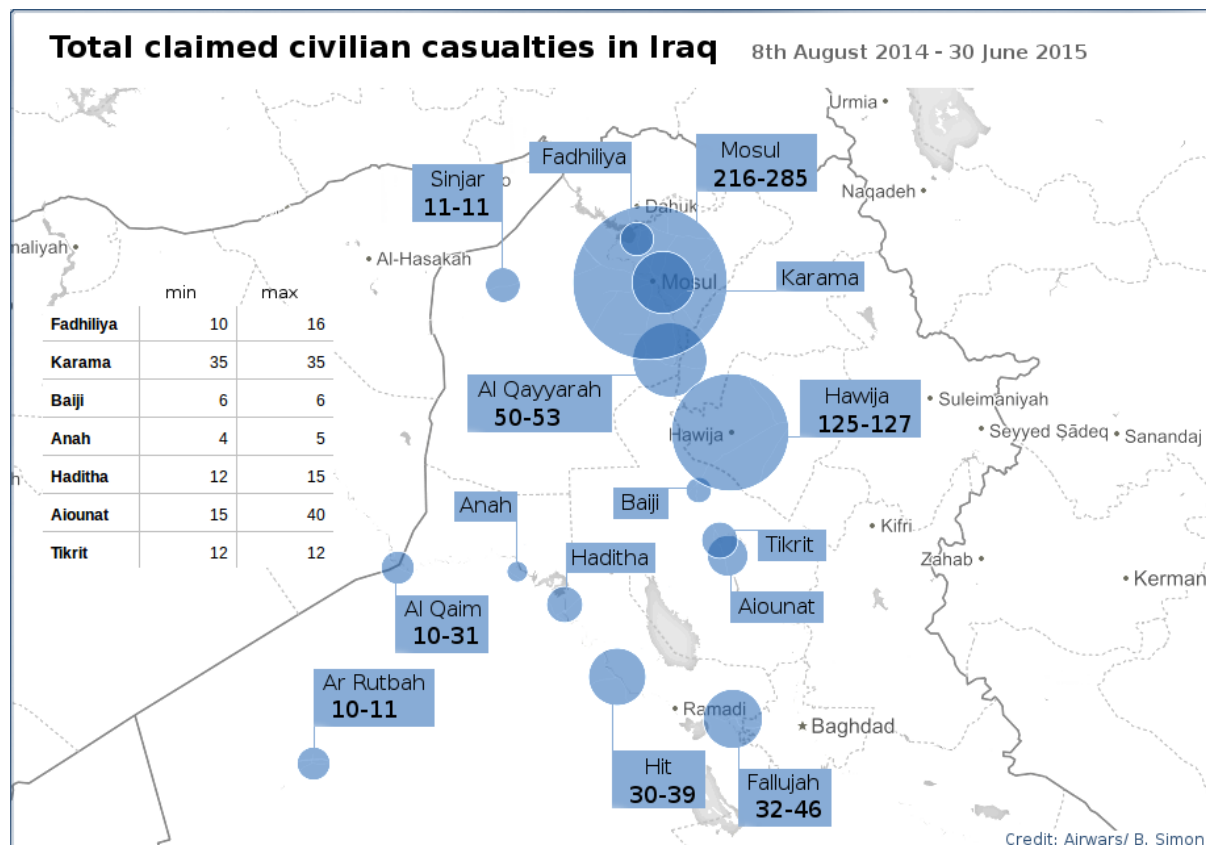


Eight year old Danya Laith Hazem, killed with four family members in a likely Coalition airstrike at Fadhiliya, Iraq April 4 2015 (Picture courtesy of family via The Guardian)

Cause For Concern: Civilians Killed in Coalition Strikes

Seventeen further incidents in Iraq are **poorly reported**. Generally single-source accounts, they account for 187-202 claimed civilian deaths.

Twelve more events (73-114 deaths) are **contested**. That is, while some sources claimed that the Coalition carried out a strike, others attributed an attack to Iraqi government forces. Finally one incident is in the view of Airwars **disproven** – where allegations of civilian deaths are not tenable.



The Coalition has conceded no civilian deaths in Iraq in almost a year of intensive bombing, though has initiated six separate investigations into alleged civilian fatalities. As a spokesperson recently told Reuters, “Since we started air strikes in August last year in Iraq, I have difficulty thinking of any civilian casualties in Iraq, and for thousands of sorties that is good. One is clearly too many.”¹³

Such assertions do not appear in any way to match reports from the ground.

However a CENTCOM official recently acknowledged that claims of up to 50 civilian fatalities as a result of a Coalition strike at Hawija on June 3rd were ‘credible’, and that a formal investigation had been opened (see our Case Study below). ‘Initially, we look at an event to see if there are credible reports that there were civilian casualties. If we find the reports credible, it then becomes a formal investigation. We have reached that stage in this,’ Colonel Steve Warren told reporters.¹⁴

¹³ “Air strike in north Iraq killed dozens, including civilians, residents say,” Reuters, June 4th 2015, at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/06/04/uk-mideast-crisis-idUKKBN00K27A20150604>

¹⁴ Cited in “Pentagon launches probe into possible civilian casualties in Iraq,” Jacqueline Kilmas, Washington Times, June 24 2015, at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jun/24/pentagon-probes-possible-civilian-casualties-iraq/>

CASE STUDY: June 3rd 2015: Hawijah, Kirkuk province, Iraq

In the worst alleged civilian casualty incident for Iraq to date, up to 70 non-combatants and many more militants were reportedly killed when Coalition aircraft struck an Islamic State IED factory in the town of Hawijah in early June. The secondary explosions which followed devastated the surrounding neighbourhood (picture courtesy of Iraqi Spring)



Eyewitness Hassan Mahmoud al-Jubbouri later [told Reuters](#) the area looked as if it had been hit by a

nuclear bomb, and described personally pulling the bodies of a family of six from the rubble.

Casualty counts varied significantly, with few details of individual victims so far emerging. Only one victim has been publicly named – [Kherallah Ahmed Al Saleh Al Thawabi](#), described as the owner of a car maintenance shop in the area.

The head of Kirkuk's Arab Council, Mohammed Khalil al-Jubouri, placed the total [number of dead and injured civilians at 150](#). The Iraqi Revolution website claimed 70 civilians had died, with more than 100 injured. And news agency Rudaw also reported 70 killed, describing 26 children and 22 women among the dead.

The coalition confirms that it carried out the strike at Hawijah, though a senior commander [later insisted](#) that only a 'fairly small weapon' had been used in the attack – and that any responsibility for civilian deaths 'rests squarely on Daesh.' However on June 24th the Pentagon announced a formal inquiry into what it now views as 'credible' claims of civilian deaths.

Syria

Overview

Coalition airstrikes began in Syria on September 23rd 2014, with raids against Islamic State carried out by the US, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Canada began its own strikes from April 8th 2015. Britain also carries out routine reconnaissance-only drone missions above Syria, and British pilots have carried out airstrikes while embedded with US forces.

In parallel with these attacks on Daesh, an American-only campaign also focuses on the so-called 'Khorasan Group', a faction of the Al Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front which it's claimed plots attacks on America and its allies. The US has publicly reported 22 airstrikes against the Khorasan Group to June 30th. Civilian fatalities have been alleged for as many as 16 of these strikes – including the only conceded non-combatant deaths of the air war - and Airwars includes this data in its overall tallies.

To June 30th, the Coalition had conducted 1,890 airstrikes in Syria which saw the release of an estimated 7,000 bombs and missiles. The United States carried out 94 per cent of these attacks (1,719), with just 109 allied airstrikes recorded.¹⁵ In many weeks, only US aircraft are carrying out strikes in Syria. Arab nations led by Saudi Arabia have instead switched to operations against Houthi rebels in Yemen – where reports of high numbers of civilian casualties from airstrikes persist.

Civilian casualties from Coalition strikes in Syria

Despite significantly fewer Coalition airstrikes in Syria than Iraq, the number of alleged events is markedly higher, with 65 incidents of concern reported between September 23rd 2014 and June 30th 2015. From these, a total of 291-354 civilian deaths have been attributed to Coalition actions. These break down as follows:

In the [only confirmation](#) of civilian deaths in either Iraq or Syria to date, the United States admits that in a November 6th strike on Harem, its aircraft 'likely' killed at least two young girls and injured a number of civilian aid workers. The target of that attack appears to have been the al-Nusra Front rather than Daesh. While admitting its error, the US insists the strike itself was 'conducted on valid military targets in accordance with current military authorizations, applicable rules of engagement, and the Law of Armed Conflict while adhering to the principles of military necessity, humanity, proportionality, and distinction.'¹⁶



Five year old Daniya Ali al Haj Qaddour, confirmed killed with her militant father in a US air strike on November 5th-6th 2014 at Harem.

¹⁵ Data to June 27th, supplied by CJTF-OIR to Airwars

¹⁶ CENTCOM briefing note to Airwars, July 30 2015

Cause For Concern: Civilians Killed in Coalition Strikes

As with Iraq, there are strong indications of significant numbers of civilians having being killed in Coalition strikes in Syria. Monitoring by independent groups such as [VDC](#), [SN4HR](#) and [SOHR](#) is often robust, with biographical and other evidence frequently provided. Eighty per cent of the 245 civilians so far named as dying in alleged Coalition strikes have been reported in Syria.

Table 4: Reported civilian deaths from Coalition strikes in Syria

Category	Number of events	Claimed fatality range
Incidents of concern (total)	65	291-354
Confirmed by Coalition	1	2-4
Fair reporting	35	226-280
Fair reporting (no confirmed Coalition strike)		
Poorly reported	17	39
Contested	8	16-20
Disproven	2	
'Friendly fire' incidents	1	6

Syria has also seen a number of troubling mass casualty events attributed to Coalition actions. On the first night of bombing on September 23rd 2014, US aircraft killed as many as 15 civilians in the village of Kafar Daryan. On December 28th at least 58 civilians reportedly died when the Coalition struck a temporary Daesh prison at al Bab (see below). And on April 30th 2015, 64 civilians died in a likely Coalition airstrike at Ber Mahli. In these three incidents alone, 106 non-combatant victims have so far been publicly named – 38 of them children. It remains unclear whether any of these events have been investigated by the Coalition.

Monitoring groups in Syria accept that the Coalition generally tries hard to limit civilian fatalities – particularly when compared with other actors in the brutal civil war.

Yet as Bassam al-Ahmad of [VDC](#) notes to Airwars, the Coalition still has its own obligations when it pursues Daesh amid civilian populations: *'We know that ISIS is taking civilians as human shields, and is building all its military bases in civilian neighborhood. But according to the Laws of War, the Coalition also has to take into account the general principles of international humanitarian law when conducting its strikes.'*¹⁷

"Syria has seen a number of troubling mass casualty events attributed to Coalition actions... It remains unclear whether any of these events have been investigated."

As the international air war against Islamic State enters its second year, there is little sign of the risk to civilians on the ground abating. As Airwars was publishing this Report, July 2015 emerged as the most intensive month yet of Coalition bombings with 371 strikes reported in Syria alone. Civilian casualty claims also peaked, with 14 new alleged events reported for Syria and eight for Iraq – a new and grim record.

¹⁷ Correspondence with Airwars, July 2015

CASE STUDY: December 28th 2014: Al Bab, Aleppo governorate, Syria

In one of the worst known incidents of mass civilian casualties reportedly caused by Coalition bombings, at least 58 non-combatants appear to have died when aircraft struck an Islamic State local headquarters, which was also being used as a temporary prison.

Among those killed were men imprisoned by ISIL simply for buying cigarettes. At least four women and a number of teenagers were also reported among the dead. Multiple sources have confirmed significant casualties. For example, US news agency McClatchy *'located two sources who confirmed a high civilian death toll from the strike. One witness, an activist in Al Bab, gave the death toll as 61 civilian prisoners and 13 Islamic State guards.'*

The use of al-Saraya as a holding facility for locals had been [widely reported](#) long before the US airstrike. Syrian NGOs were damning: *'There is no evidence that the International Coalition exerted any effort to ensure that there were no civilians near the building nor to be certain that the building itself was not a secret detention center for ISIL, as was widely known in town,'* noted VDC.

An image showing al-Saraya building in al-Bab city after being targeted, source of image Aleppo, al-Bab Lens page.



Troublingly, between December 28th 2014 and January 10th 2015 the Coalition concealed the fact it had carried out any airstrikes at Al Bab on the night. Only after *'repeated inquiries'* by McClatchy did a CENTCOM spokesman [finally concede](#) that *'Coalition aircraft did strike and destroy an ISIL headquarters building in Al Bab on Dec. 28.'*

On other occasions the Coalition has failed to identify strikes on a particular town or city, only for individual allies to then report such an attack. On October 18th/19th for example, the British reported an airstrike at Ramadi, while the French noted an attack on Tikrit. Neither city was mentioned in [CENTCOM's overall summary](#) of bombings for that date.

‘Friendly fire’ incidents

Overview

A significant element of Coalition operations has been providing close air support to ground forces confronting Daesh. In Iraq this can see the Coalition assisting regular Iraq Army forces; Shia militia; and Peshmerga irregulars. In Syria, supportive strikes have assisted YPG forces, particularly during the lengthy ISIL siege of Kobane and the subsequent Kurdish break-out.

A British report for June 11th 2015 gives a good sense of the mission: ‘Two Tornado GR4s provided close air support to advancing peshmerga near Sinjar who had come under fire from an ISIL sniper team located in an isolated building; this was demolished by a direct hit from a Paveway. The GR4s then flew south to assist the Iraqi army near Ar Rutbah, where they used a Brimstone missile to destroy a terrorist armoured personnel carrier.’¹⁸

With so many irregulars in the field, distinguishing between friend and foe can present significant challenges to Coalition aircraft. Islamic State also operates identical equipment to the Iraq Army. When Daesh seized much of northern Iraq in mid-2014, it also captured the military hardware of two entire Army divisions – including tanks, armoured personnel carriers and Humvees.

Airwars has identified nine separate alleged ‘friendly fire’ events between September 2014 and June 2015, in which Coalition aircraft reportedly killed friendly forces. All but one of these cases occurred in Iraq. Between them they are alleged to have killed up to 185 friendly forces - mostly Shia militia.

As with civilian casualty claims, these alleged incidents need to be treated with some caution. Based on available public evidence, Airwars assesses five of these events as having a reasonable level of public reporting, with Coalition airstrikes also confirmed in the near vicinity. These account for between 48 and 80 alleged fatalities. Two further cases are single-source only, while the most recent incident at Fallujah on June 6th 2015 remains contested – and appears most likely to have been the work of Islamic State rather than the Coalition.

Table 5: Alleged Coalition ‘friendly fire’ events to June 30th 2015

Date	Location	Alleged casualties	Reporting quality
September 29	Bayji, Iraq	30	Fair
October 7	Amarli, Iraq	4-24	Fair, though no confirmed strike
October 15	Kobane, Syria	6 + 1 civilian	Fair
October 19	Baghdad, Iraq	24	Poor
December 25	Bayji, Iraq	8-40	Fair
March 11	Ramadi, Iraq	29-50	Contested
March 23	Tikrit, Iraq	2	Fair
May 4	Abu Ghraib, Iraq	2	Fair
June 6	Fallujah, Iraq	6-7	Contested

¹⁸ ‘Update: Airstrikes in Iraq,’ UK Ministry of Defence, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-air-strikes-in-iraq>

Although the Coalition has never released data on such ‘friendly fire’ incidents, one of the alliance’s most senior commanders has conceded such events have ‘*probably*’ occurred. Lt General John Hesterman told a Pentagon press conference on June 5th there had already been over 100 incidents in which an initial identification of the enemy had turned out to be friendly forces. ‘*Even the very best aviators on the planet can look down and say, “those look like military guys,” and not be able to discern the difference between Iraqi forces and Daesh forces,*’ Hesterman noted.

He added that ‘*The blue-on-green [friendly fire incidents], there have been, you know, probably - I’ll have to defer to CENTCOM. There’s probably been a case or two, you know. Nobody’s perfect at this. We’re just historically better than we’ve ever been before.*’¹⁹ CENTCOM declined to provide further details when questioned by Airwars.

As with alleged civilian fatality incidents it is vital that individual Coalition members report promptly on both where and when they are bombing in Iraq and Syria, if nations are to be held to account for any targeting errors.

CASE STUDY: December 25th 2014: Bayji, Salah-al-Din province, Iraq

On Christmas Day 2014, the Iraq Army’s Brigade 52 (Task Force 15) was assaulting Daesh forces in the vicinity of Bayji. With them were Shia militia belonging to a Popular Mobilisation unit. The Coalition was reportedly providing close air support – which appears to have gone badly wrong.

A YouTube video posted by activist Nizar al-Ka’abi a week later (below) was titled ‘*The moment the International coalition aircraft bombed a Popular Mobilisation unit at Bayji by mistake.*’²⁰ Footage shows a number of major airstrikes followed by chaos. According to reports, between eight and 40 friendly forces died in the event.

On July 30th 2015, CENTCOM informed Airwars it had carried out an investigation into a December 25th 2014 incident ‘*near Fallujah.*’ The best match for this appears to be the Bayji event. According to a CENTCOM spokesman, ‘*We have no additional information available to provide at this time. Currently, CENTCOM plans only to release those investigations where the preponderance of evidence supports a finding that Coalition airstrikes resulted in civilian casualties.*’



¹⁹ ‘Press Briefing by Lt. Gen. Hesterman Via Telephone from the Combined Air and Space Operations Center, Southwest Asia,’ Department of Defense, June 5 2015, at <http://www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=5637>

²⁰ Archived at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzhngEaWxxo>

The challenges of assessing civilian casualty claims

Our Syria researcher **Kinda Haddad** has spent the past six months analysing reports of alleged civilian casualties from Coalition airstrikes. Here she explains why the work is so challenging.

Verifying civilian casualties caused by the Coalition is a complex journey through a maze of contradictory information, disinformation and propaganda – often produced by interest groups, militias and militaries.

Civilians are dying in unacceptable numbers as a result of military action by so many different actors in both Syria and Iraq. It's not just the Coalition, but also government troops; a large number of different opposition forces; Shia'a and Kurdish militias; and of course Islamic State or Daesh.

All of these actors have their own online news outlets, and have an active social media presence through which they disseminate information about various events that are of interest to them.

Iraq represents a significantly more challenging environment than Syria when it comes to collating evidence of civilians killed in Coalition airstrikes. There are presently no Iraq-based casualty monitoring groups, although Airwars is able to make great use of our Baghdad-based researcher Mr Latif Habib.

International news agencies also describe being very limited in what they can report from Daesh-occupied areas of Iraq. Local reporters have been threatened or murdered, with Iraqi news organisations often citing anonymous sources in their reports. This can make verification of a claim almost impossible.

CASE STUDY: February 8th 2015: south of Mousl, Nineveh province, Iraq

Critically ill mosque janitor Ahmed Abdul Aqi (picture courtesy of Mosul Ateka) had received special permission from Daesh to travel to Baghdad for urgent medical treatment, according to [Al Ghad Press](#): "He was so poor that he had to sell some of his wife's jewellery to pay for the trip by taxi." On February 8th Mr Aqi made the journey with his wife and daughter, driven by Ahmed Azzawi.

About 100km south of Mosul near Kanu, the vehicle was bombed in an alleged Coalition airstrike: "This was the third such incident in a week, which had turned that only route out of the town into a dangerous trap for innocent civilians," one local claimed. The taxi driver's cousin later confirmed to Airwars by email that Ahmed al Azzawi had died along with Mr Aqi's family.

While there appears little doubt the car was destroyed in an airstrike, it remains impossible to attribute responsibility at present. The Iraqi Ministry of Defence declines to say whether it carried out any strike at the location. And no public reports from the Coalition for [February 7th-9th](#) appear to match this incident.



Cause For Concern: Civilians Killed in Coalition Strikes

In the absence of organised monitoring, local people in cities such as Mosul and Fallujah regularly use social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to post details of alleged Coalition attacks. Additionally, martyrs' pages are often posted giving biographical details of those killed – for example in the case of Ahmed Abdul Aqi and Ahmed Azzawi outlined above.²¹

Understanding Syria

When Coalition airstrikes started in Syria in September 2014, there were already organisations on the ground that had been set up to monitor deaths resulting from Syrian government actions.

In Airwars we're able to make use of key research by organisations including [The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#), [The Syrian Network for Human Rights](#) and the [Violations and Documentations Centre](#). These groups have activists on the ground that wherever possible, provide videos, photos, the names of victims, and even eyewitness accounts of some of the more prominent incidents.

The problem for these organisations is that as the war has progressed in Syria – and as sectarianism has become a serious problem – it has become increasingly difficult to find reliable or neutral sources.

'At the beginning of the revolution we had very reliable sources and we were confident of the information that came out of Syria. As the war took on a more sectarian tone it has become harder and harder to verify information,' Bassam Al Ahmad, spokesperson for the Violations and Documentations Centre explained to Airwars.

'Not only is it dangerous for those on the ground, but the sources themselves have been forced to take sides and see everything through the prism of their allegiances. So getting neutral, verifiable evidence is growing increasingly hard.'

This is reflected in many of the online sources we cite in our own reports. Often, information about the same incident is contradictory and confusing.

That said, it's often clear from their use of language which way a source is leaning. If they are pro ISIS, they might refer to the organisation as Islamic State, or to the various provinces as 'states.' Those opposed to the group might refer to it as 'the Organisation of the State,' or simply as 'Daesh'.

When it comes to civilian casualties allegedly caused by coalition bombing, we have found that Kurdish outlets will often minimise or ignore such claims. In contrast, pro-ISIS or anti US sites will



Alleged Coalition strike near Turkish border at Atama, Syria March 8 2015 (via social media)

²¹ Mosul Ateka Facebook Marty's Page for Ahmed Abdul Aqi, at <https://www.facebook.com/Mosul.ateka/photos/a.622743347748151.1073741879.150747848281039/877987098890440/>

Cause For Concern: Civilians Killed in Coalition Strikes

generally maximise such allegations. In our own research and analysis we're keenly aware of this complex mosaic of allegiances and ideologies, and try to take note when assessing the credibility or otherwise of a claim.

One of the most powerful online resources is the [ISIS media machine](#). In the areas they control, it is they who often take control of what information comes out. They publish the press releases and videos of alleged incidents.

That material is often reproduced and disseminated by a wide range of other media including [Arab networks](#) and even [Israeli](#) and [British media](#). In the absence of alternative sources, ISIS is often a crucial source of news coming out of the regions they themselves control.

At Airwars we take all of these factors into consideration when compiling our reports. We will often research incidents many times over in order to find as many sources as we can. It can quickly become clear which alleged incidents are more credible.

False trails

Wherever victims are identified by name in alleged Coalition strikes, we research them more thoroughly. This can bring about some remarkable insights.

One such case was Dergham Karah Ali, a young man from Bansh in Syria's Idlib Province. He was identified by several sources including [VDC](#), [Syrian Martyrs](#), and the [Committee for the Defence of Freedoms and Human Rights in Syria](#) as a civilian victim of a Coalition strike on Bansh on November 25th 2014.

Further research showed that Dergham Ali was in fact a member of ISIS when he died. His story illustrates in a concrete and simple way the progression of the Syrian uprising from a peaceful, inclusive revolution to a sectarian conflict that has been tearing Syrian society apart for four years.

In a [video](#) dated February 5th 2013, Dergham Ali appears as a young clean-shaven man, with the Syrian flag slung across his shoulders as he sings a revolutionary song.



Dergham Ali (left) singing a resistance song in 2013²²

²² Posted February 5 2013, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dP1MurV0Ra4>

Cause For Concern: Civilians Killed in Coalition Strikes

The tune is addressed to ‘*all revolutionaries,*’ and speaks of an uprising ‘*that will resist and prevail.*’ It’s an inclusive song which aims to represent and speaks for all Syrians in opposition. Here are the first two stanzas in translation:

*Syria your people are tremendous
They’re resisting despite everything that has happened
We will not give up on our revolution
Until the butcher is executed
We are a people with a just cause
Sunnis, Druze and Shia
Muslim and Christian
We all curse Bashar*

Eighteen months later, a new [video](#) was published by the Ala’aina’ Foundation – an ISIS front. The short film is offered as ‘*a gift to the families of the martyrs of the town of Bانش in the Islamic state, those that were killed in the battles of Ain Al Arab [Kobane].*’



‘The Islamic State Martyr Dergham Karah Ali’²³

Among those the video honours is ‘Dergham Karah Ali Abu Hammam’. You can see him at about 7’40” into the film. It’s the same young man – but this time bearded and in military fatigues, as he leads other ISIS militants in song.

Another interesting case was that of Abu Khadija al Jolani, who was first listed by [Syrian Martyrs](#) as a civilian who had died following coalition bombing of Aleppo.

Aside from the fact his name sounded like a *nom de guerre*, an internet search showed al-Jolani to be an important leader of the Al Nusra Front in Aleppo. That group has also been targeted as part of America’s shadow war against Al Qaeda

The circumstances of al-Jolani’s death are still murky – it’s not clear whether he was killed by the Syrian Army or the US. What is clear is that he was not a civilian.



²³ Archived at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgfRRV3m5pA>

Coalition transparency & accountability

Twelve known members of the wider 60-strong international Coalition against Islamic State (Daesh) have taken part in kinetic actions against the terrorist group in Iraq and/or Syria.²⁴ All airstrikes are co-ordinated and assigned via CENTCOM's Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar, where liaison personnel from involved states are also based. However, each military member of the Coalition operates by its own unpublished Rules of Engagement.

As a CENTCOM briefing explains: *'Coalition air operations are governed by existing international law, coalition rules of engagement, and other guidance transmitted from US Central Command through the supported Combined Forces Land Component Commander (CFLCC) and the supporting Combined Forces Air Component Commander to the units conducting airstrikes. Among other functions, this guidance establishes coalition standards on targeting and the appropriate use of lethal force, which always must account for the possible risk of civilian casualties or collateral damage.'*

*'Each nation participating in the coalition may modify or supplement this coalition guidance, including rules of engagement, with its own "caveats," and each nation executes operations in accordance with its own legal requirements. Coalition missions are planned and executed with a full awareness of each nation's national caveats and capabilities.'*²⁵

All Iraqi strikes are co-ordinated with the Ministry of Defence in Baghdad. The Coalition insists it does not formally liaise with the Assad regime on airstrikes. However, with both Syrian government and Coalition aircraft at times striking the same cities on the same dates, it appears likely that some form of informal liaison will have evolved, if only to prevent mid-air collisions between aircraft.

Transparency remains vital from each of the participating nations, since each Coalition member is individually liable for any civilian deaths or injuries it causes. As CENTCOM notes: *'If a claim of civilian casualties were found valid, that claim would be processed in accordance with the laws of the nation that conducted the strike.'*

Yet as our report illustrates, more than half of Coalition members have a poor or very poor reporting history, making accountability for civilian deaths extremely challenging. Only the United States has admitted to *'likely'* causing two civilian deaths, despite the Coalition carrying out almost 5,000 airstrikes to June 30th. All other member nations either denied having killed any civilians, or did not respond directly when recently questioned by Airwars.



²⁴ Turkish airstrikes only began on July 24th and are not presently a part of Coalition operations

²⁵ CENTCOM on the record briefing to Airwars, November 5 2014.

Chart 2: Transparency of action by Coalition member

	Frequency of reports	Location given	Date of strikes given
US	Daily*	Occasional	Yes*
France	Weekly	Occasional	Within a range
Saudi Arabia	Occasional	No	No
UAE	Occasional	No	No
Jordan	Occasional	No	No
Bahrain	None	No	No
UK	Weekly	Intermittent	Yes
Belgium	Occasional	No	No
Netherlands	Weekly	No	Within a range
Australia	Monthly	No	No
Denmark	Weekly	No	Within a range
Canada	As they occur	Yes	Yes

*US reporting subsumed into overall Coalition daily reports

The Coalition itself publishes a daily summary of its collective actions in both Iraq and Syria. These state the areas bombed; the number of ‘airstrikes’ carried out at any location (presently averaging some 3.4 weapon releases per incident); the objectives targeted; and any known outcomes. Additional monthly data is also provided by [Air Force Central Command](#).

Yet except in the case of airstrikes in Syria against the al Nusra Front/ Khorasan Group (which are always attributed to US forces) the Coalition makes no attempt to disambiguate its airstrike data. Instead it is up to each member of the Coalition to decide what information about its own airstrikes – if any – it publishes.

This has led to a wide variance in the quality of reporting, which has significant implications. For most of the time it remains impossible for affected civilians to determine which member of the 12-nation Coalition might have bombed them – or even to determine whether the Coalition was responsible for any event. Airwars believes this absence of transparency and accountability to be a major flaw in Coalition actions.

A CENTCOM spokesperson, speaking on behalf of the Coalition, told Airwars: *‘Like you, we applaud Canada’s willingness to acknowledge each individual airstrike. However, as we have said before, we have multiple Coalition partners providing air support and each has their own limitations concerning when, how or even if they wish to acknowledge their participation in air operations.’*

Yet without transparency, there can be no accountability among individual Coalition members for the civilians they kill. Airwars calls on the Coalition to require all members to publish in a timely manner the details of where and when they are bombing. We also echo those calls made recently via the UNHRC that all States fighting Islamic State *‘conduct prompt, independent and impartial fact-finding inquiries in any case where there is a plausible indication that civilian casualties have been sustained, and to make public the results.’*²⁶

²⁶ Cited in ‘Human rights in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant,’ Ben Emmerson QC, Report to UNHRC, June 22 2015, at http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session29/Documents/A_HRC_29_51_AEV.docx

Transparency by Coalition nation

United States

The US ([Operation Inherent Resolve](#)) remains the dominant partner in the air war against Islamic State, responsible for 94 per cent of all airstrikes in Syria and two thirds of bombing missions in Iraq. Strikes are carried out through Central Command, or CENTCOM.

For the first six weeks of operations the US displayed a good level of transparency, reporting promptly on where, when and with what assets it carried out attacks. Additionally, Air Force Central Command (AFCENT) publishes monthly [Airpower Summaries](#) for Iraq and Syria. These feature helpful data on the number of weapons released, and ISR and fuelling missions flown.

However, as the alliance expanded to 12 members CENTCOM began reporting for the Coalition as a whole rather than on US operations. This practice continued when reporting responsibility passed to [CJTF-OIR](#) in December 2014. For Iraq in particular this is problematic, since it is impossible to determine on most occasions when and where US aircraft are bombing – and therefore whether American forces might be responsible for particular problem events.

Recommendation: That the Pentagon resumes its earlier practice of additionally reporting on US-only strikes for both Iraq and Syria

US response: A CENTCOM spokesperson told Airwars: *'The US is a member of the Coalition and US Central Command's decision to use the term "Coalition airstrikes" to encapsulate all air operations represents our best efforts to be transparent, by acknowledging and accounting for Coalition airstrikes without linking one Coalition nation to a particular airstrike against their wishes.'*



A US B-1B Lancer after refuelling over the Middle East, July 2015 (USAF/ Staff Sgt. Sandra Welch)

France

The second international partner to join the allied air war, France has also been one of the most active allies in Iraq, conducting 162 airstrikes with its Rafales and Mirages to June 30th. France has also lent its aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* to the campaign, and provides ISR for the Coalition.

[Operation Chammal](#) initially provided a good level of transparency, with the Ministry of Defence reporting airstrikes within 24 hours, and stating what aircraft and weapons were employed; and which locations and targets were struck.

However France has since moved to weekly reporting, and has also significantly limited the information released. Target locations are now rarely given, although a weekly tally of strike numbers is still issued.

Recommendation: That France re-adopts its earlier policy of reporting regularly on where, when, and with what assets it carries out airstrikes in Iraq.

French response: Did not reply to queries from Airwars.



Security personnel guard a French combat aircraft in the Middle East (Ministère de la Défense)

United Kingdom

Britain ([Operation Shader](#)) began reporting with fair levels of transparency on its mission in Iraq, noting the aircraft and weapons used; the locations struck, and the targets engaged. However over time, UK reporting has deteriorated (although it remains second only to Canada in terms of overall transparency.) Locations are almost never given for British Reaper drone strikes, other than vague references such as 'somewhere in Iraq'. With half of all UK strikes carried out by drone, this can make holding the UK to account for its actions extremely challenging.

The UK maintains a single evolving webpage for its reports, which it presently updates every 7 to 10 days. The Ministry of Defence has on occasion significantly amended or even removed earlier copy, making the process of accurately tracking some reports difficult. The UK also does not report on airstrikes in Syria carried out by British air crews embedded with allied forces.

Recommendation:

- That the UK adopts Canada's best-practice
- That the UK reports the locations of its Reaper drone strikes
- That the UK ends its practice of heavily amending or deleting previously public records of airstrikes

UK response: MoD officials told Airwars that they do not intend to provide '*running commentaries*' on airstrikes, though do aim to provide regular public updates. An official also stated that it was '*a long standing UK policy not to comment on Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets (including Reaper) for obvious reasons.*'



RAF Tornado over Middle East after refuelling from an Australian KC-30A tanker (Australian MoD)

Belgium

Despite being a European democracy and a member of NATO, Belgium's mission ([Operation Desert Falcon](#)) was one of the least transparent among all twelve Coalition members. Belgium was also the first country officially to end its participation in the war (on July 3rd 2015), although Coalition officials have subsequently told Airwars that Belgian aircraft may return to the campaign in mid-2016.

After reporting an initial airstrike on October 5th 2014, and another on November 3rd, Belgium made no public statements on its ongoing operations until April 24th 2015. Even then it reported only an overall tally of targets and sorties.

Belgium's announcement that it was withdrawing its F-16 squadron caught a number of close allies by surprise. Only days earlier, the Netherlands MoD [had reported](#) it would be co-operating more closely with Belgian aircrews moving forward. In total Belgian F-16s dropped 141 bombs and missiles during a nine-month campaign in Iraq - an estimated 40 airstrikes.

Recommendation: That Belgium retrospectively publish locations and dates for its airstrikes in Iraq, now that its campaign has ceased

Belgian response: A Defence Ministry spokesperson told Airwars that *'the locations, timings and the effects of any mission (not just those of Operation Desert Falcon) are classified and cannot be revealed.'* In addition the Ministry insisted that no *'collateral damage'* incidents had occurred involving Belgian aircraft, and that its actions had been *'fully compatible with our obligations under international humanitarian law.'*



Weapons-ready Belgian F-16 in December 2014 (Belgian MoD)

Denmark

The government of Denmark was initially heavily criticised for its refusal to state where it was bombing in Iraq, and on which dates.

Following a campaign by local journalists reporting has now improved somewhat, with [weekly summaries](#) detailing the numbers of sorties carried out and weapons released.

However Denmark still refuses to declare where it bombs, with a military spokesman once [telling Dagbladet Information](#) that the Danish military would prefer *'to hide in the crowd.'*



Danish commanders visit their troops in the Middle East, summer 2015 (Danish MoD)

In a written response to questions from parliament's Defence Committee, then-Defence Minister Nicolai Wammen suggested that in the case of civilian deaths or injuries from Danish strikes, affected family members could seek redress in Denmark's courts: *'Compensation lawsuits [in relation to the Danish contribution to the war on ISIL] can be filed at the Danish courts in accordance with The Danish Administration of Justice Act.'*

Wammen also confirmed that no agreement had been made between the Danish and Iraqi governments to ensure compensation for civilians killed by Danish air strikes. When asked what options were open to relatives of civilian victims in seeking to clarify whether an attack had been carried out by Denmark, Wammen responded that *'relatives can contact the Iraqi authorities, a Danish authority or the Coalition.'*²⁷

Recommendation: That Denmark adopts Canada's best-practice, reporting regularly on where, when, and with what assets it carries out airstrikes in Iraq.

Danish response: Did not reply to queries from Airwars.

²⁷ Cited in 'Minister: Forsvaret skal oplyse om civile drab i krigen mod IS,' Rasmus Raun Westh and Charlotte Aargard, Dagbladet Information, January 26 2015, at <http://www.information.dk/522484>

Netherlands

The Dutch are among the most active members of the international Coalition against Daesh, with 600 bombs and missiles released in Iraq to July 2nd – an estimated 180 airstrikes.

The Netherlands initially maintained a reasonable record of transparency, publishing [weekly reports](#) in which it stated how many missions had been carried out in Iraq, and how many weapons released. The Ministry of Defence declines to say which locations it bombs, however.

From spring 2015 Dutch reporting became more intermittent, with details of the number of weapons released each week now rarely provided.

Recommendation: That the Netherlands adopts Canada’s best-practice, reporting regularly on where, when, and with what assets it carries out airstrikes in Iraq. In the interim, that the Dutch MoD restores its practice of reporting weekly on how many weapons are released.

Dutch response: A spokesperson for the Netherlands MOD told Airwars: *“Only military targets that meet the criteria of international humanitarian law are targeted. This targeting process is thoroughly planned. For each deployment of combat aircraft, the risk of civilian casualties has to be minimized. Specific details of the tracking of civilian casualties, rules of engagement and targeting guidelines will not be shared in public. All Dutch weapon releases [are] assessed by the Royal marechaussee (military police) and, if the marechaussee so decides, by the (civilian) public prosecution office.”*



A Dutch F-16 refuels over Iraq, June 2015 (Netherlands MoD)

Australia

Australia is a fairly active member of the Coalition in Iraq, having dropped 400 bombs and missiles in airstrikes since October 8th 2014 – an estimated 120 airstrikes. Australia also helps provide aerial refuelling for the Coalition along with some Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance. And it is helping both to train and to arm forces opposed to Daesh on the ground.

However reporting by the Ministry of Defence for Operation Okra is presently very weak, with only [monthly reports](#) indicating the number of weapons released and sorties carried out by its F/A-18s.

Recommendation: That Australia adopts Canada’s best-practice, reporting regularly on where, when, and with what assets it carries out airstrikes in Iraq.

Australian response: A Ministry spokesperson told Airwars: *‘For operational security reasons, the Australian Defence Force (ADF) will not provide mission-specific details on individual engagements against Daesh. The ADF will not release information that could be distorted and used against Australia in Daesh propaganda. Australia’s Rules of Engagement are designed to avoid civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure.’*



An Australian F/A-18 Super Hornet over night-time Iraq (Australian MoD)

Canada

Canada (Operation Impact) has the most transparent approach of participating militaries, [releasing timely details](#) of where and when it carries out strikes with its F/A-18 Super Hornets. Senior officials also present regular media briefings, which are made available via YouTube and downloadable PDFs.

Canada is also one of the more active participants in the war against Daesh. Since November 2nd it has carried out 134 airstrikes in Iraq. And from April 8th 2015 three Canadian airstrikes have been reported for Syria.

Canada has set a commendable transparency benchmark for other Coalition members to follow – disproving claims that issuing details of strikes in some way degrades operational effectiveness. However, the MoD’s practice of using a ‘rolling summary’ format to describe its strikes can still present some challenges, since the MoD deletes detailed comments after a time and replaces them with one-line summaries.

Recommendation: That Canada maintain an unedited archive of its reports in the interests of long-term transparency and accountability

Canadian response: A spokesperson for Canada’s MoD told Airwars that *‘To this date, there has been no confirmation of civilian casualties associated with our airstrikes.’* The only ‘friendly fire’ incident Canada has investigated involved the death of Sergeant Andrew Doiron, who was reported accidentally killed by Kurdish ground forces. The official also noted that *‘Each airstrike statement is archived and can be provided in response to media or public queries.’*



Canadian crew loads a bomb onto an aircraft in the Gulf (Canadian MoD)

Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain

At times accompanying the US in its Syrian strikes are the aircraft of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and most recently Canada.

Actions by the Arab allies can occasionally be intense, for example on the opening night of Coalition bombings on September 23rd 2014. When Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh was shot down over Syria in December and later savagely murdered by Islamic State – the only recorded Coalition air fatality to date – both Jordan and the UAE aggressively stepped up operations. According to Daesh, one of those strikes then accidentally killed American civilian hostage Kayla Mueller.

However, overall these non-US actions represent only a small proportion of attacks in Syria. From December 2nd 2014 the US carried out 1,358 airstrikes in Syria. Over that same period, its five allies between them conducted only 44 strikes (three per cent.)²⁸

Even so, it remains almost impossible to determine where or when these strikes took place. While Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have each issued occasional reports, no overall data is available.

Between September 23rd and October 20th, CENTCOM did name Arab allies in its daily reports, when they assisted in Syrian airstrikes. However this practice has since been discontinued.

Recommendation: That Arab allies follow the best-practice lead set by Canada, and report promptly on the location and number of strikes in Syria.



Major Mariam al-Mansouri from Abu Dhabi in an F-16 Desert Eagle, in September 2014 (UAE Air Force)

²⁸ Data provided weekly to Airwars by the Coalition.

About Airwars

Airwars.org is a transparency project based in Europe and the Middle East. Our aim is both to track and archive the international air war against Islamic State. With a dozen nations now bombing, there is a pressing public need for independent, trustworthy monitoring.

In addition we also seek to report – and where possible follow up on – credible allegations of civilian casualties. Thanks to generous funding from the [Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust](#), we employ a part-time specialist in Iraq to monitor aspects of the air campaign there. We also employ a part-time Syrian analyst based in the UK.

Airwars fully supports the goals of [Every Casualty](#), the international NGO which campaigns for the recording of victims by all parties to conflicts. We are also part of the associated Casualty Recorders Network, an international alliance which strives for best practice among its [50 members](#).

Who we are



London-based investigative journalist **Chris Woods** leads the Airwars project. A specialist in conflict issues, Woods previously worked for the BBC's Newsnight and Panorama. He also set up and ran the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's award-winning [Drones Project](#). His book, *Sudden Justice: America's secret drone wars* charts the history of armed drone use since 9/11.



Our website and its data engines and graphics are designed and maintained on a voluntary basis by French data-journalist **Basile Simon**, who presently works with BBC News Labs. Basile has also assisted the Bureau's Naming the Dead project, and he has worked with the Centre for Investigative Journalism teaching info-sec.



Latif Habib is our Baghdad-based researcher who monitors and follows up reports of civilians killed in Iraq by allied airstrikes. Latif has worked as a researcher and field producer for many major international news organisations, including the BBC.



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