

[Reports of Civilian Casualties from Coalition Strikes on ISIS are Vastly Inflated](#)

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Having commanded the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve effort to defeat the Islamic State over the past year, I would like to offer [Foreign Policy](#)'s readers some perspective on the execution of the campaign. Specifically, I would like to address some points raised by Airwars's Samuel Oakford in his [recent article](#) on civilian casualties in Syria.

The global Coalition to defeat the Islamic State shares Oakford's concern for the welfare of civilians, but commanders must also equally protect our partner forces and Coalition service members who are putting their lives at risk every day to protect and free civilians in Raqqa and throughout Islamic State-held Iraq and Syria.

In accordance with the law of armed conflict, the Coalition strikes only valid military targets after considering the principles of military necessity, humanity, proportionality, and distinction. I challenge anyone to find a more precise air campaign in the history of warfare. The Coalition's goal is always for zero human casualties. We apply rigorous standards to our targeting process and take extraordinary efforts to protect non-combatants.

Assertions by Airwars, along with claims by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and media outlets that cite them, are often unsupported by fact and serve only to strengthen the Islamic State's hold on civilians, placing civilians at greater risk. The civilian casualty numbers quoted in Oakford's article are based on unsubstantiated allegations rather than facts. The Coalition deals in facts, so here they are.

We conduct a detailed assessment of each and every allegation of possible civilian casualties. We hold ourselves accountable with an open and transparent process to assess allegations of civilian casualties, and we publish these findings on a monthly basis for the world to see.

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Our critics are unable to conduct the detailed assessments the Coalition does. They arguably often rely on scant information phoned-in or posted by questionable sources. The Coalition would be pilloried if we tried to use similar supports for our assertions. Still, their claims are often printed as fact and rarely questioned.

That said, the Coalition does not shy away from the accountability placed on us by our leaders, the media, and human rights organizations. Oakford fails to mention that as of

this summer, the Coalition has worked directly with Airwars to ensure we assess every allegation of possible civilian casualties available.

Out of the 270 allegations obtained from Airwars that have been assessed thus far, 258 have been assessed as non-credible. Of those, 119 were assessed as non-credible because the Coalition did not conduct a strike near the area of the allegation. Another 60 of those allegations were so vague in regard to the date and location of the alleged casualties that they were impossible to assess. The remaining 79 allegations were found to be non-credible due to lack of sufficient evidence or are still being assessed.

To date, based on data collected between August 2014 and July 2017, the Coalition conducted a total of 24,160 strikes that included 51,038 separate engagements.

The percentage of all Coalition engagements that resulted in a report of possible civilian casualties is 2.29 percent. The percentage of engagements that resulted in a credible report of civilian casualties was 0.32 percent.

Not since World War II has there been a comparable urban assault on a city like Mosul or Raqqa.

The Islamic State had nearly three years to prepare for the defense of these cities and then cowardly used civilians as human shields to protect themselves even further. They booby trap houses, they weld doors shut to hold civilians hostage, and they shoot civilians that attempt to flee to the safety of our partners' lines. The Islamic State has tortured, beheaded, and burned those that did not agree with them and they have gunned down women and children fleeing Mosul and Raqqa. They post the evidence of their evil for the world to see on social media.

There is no doubt that civilians are at risk every day from the Islamic State, our partner forces' operations to defeat the Islamic State, and Coalition strikes in support of them. As the battle intensifies in the heart of Raqqa, more civilians will be at risk as the Islamic State holds them hostage and refuses to let them flee. However, if they are not liberated they will also surely die, either at the hands of the Islamic State or from starvation.

The Coalition has done, and continues to do, everything within its power to limit harm to non-combatants and civilian infrastructure. But let us be clear: the Islamic State brought misery and death to this region, and it is responsible for the plight of civilians in the areas its fighters hold. The Coalition was invited to this region with the full knowledge that if the Islamic State is not defeated, the human cost will be even higher; it will be paid not just in Iraq and Syria, but in our homelands across the globe.

The assertion that the Coalition should reduce strikes or pause operations to enable the evacuation of civilians treats the Islamic State as an actor that respects human rights. In reality, the Islamic State repeatedly demonstrates complete disregard for human life.

Any pause in operations will give the Islamic State more time to strengthen their defenses and take the initiative from our partners, putting more people in harm's way.

A pause will also further reinforce the Islamic State 's tactic of using civilians as human shields, prolonging the fighting and increasing the danger to non-combatants.

This is exactly what the Islamic State wants — to attack the strength of the Coalition, create doubt, and diminish support for a just mission against an evil enemy.

As we saw in Mosul, a prolonged battle in dense urban terrain is devastating for ground forces and civilians alike. This is something only the Islamic State wants to see.

Although a commander's imperative is to accomplish the mission and protect his own troops, he constantly and conscientiously manages the pace and intensity of operations, balancing the need to accomplish the mission with the risk to his own forces and the protection of non-combatants and infrastructure.

The only way to save the people of Raqqa is to liberate them from the Islamic State. The Coalition will continue to take great care in our targeting to protect civilians from harm but we must maintain our course. We must maintain the initiative and we must liberate the people of Iraq and Syria from this real and mortal danger.