Airwars

Annual Report 2019



Summary: 2019 in review

The year 2019 once again saw our specialist researchers and analysts tracking significant levels of civilian harm in the six conflict nations monitored: Syria, Iraq and Libya; and new additions Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan, where we now track US counter terrorism operations.

In total, a minimum of 2,214 civilians were locally alleged killed by international military actions across Syria, Iraq, Libya (where we also track local actions), and Somalia during 2019 - a 42% decrease on the minimum claimed deaths tracked by Airwars in the previous year. Of these 2,214 deaths, at least 470 (21%) reportedly occurred as a result of Coalition strikes in the first quarter of 2019, during the final brutal assault to oust ISIS from Deir Ezzor governorate.

However, as Airwars marked its fifth anniversary it was clear that our organisational focus had begun to shift. In <u>March 2019</u>, ISIS was finally defeated as a territorial entity in Syria. With the terror group's occupation now downgraded to an insurgency, our researchers were now tracking many more claimed civilian deaths in almost every other conflict theatre than the Coalition in Iraq and Syria. Consequently, our focus with the Coalition and partner militaries began shifting towards post-conflict restitution and reconciliation engagements.

Minimum locally alleged civilian deaths during 2019

A shifting focus: As this Airwars chart shows, locally alleged civilian deaths from Coalition strikes rapidly declined from March 2019, meaning that many more civilians were claimed killed in almost every other theatre than by the US-led alliance between April and December 2019



Cover image: A US airstrike detonates an al Shabaab VBIED, during a September 2019 attack by the terror group on Baledogle airfield in Lower Shabelle in Somalia (photo via Abdalle Ahmed Mumin @ Cabdalleaxmed) Syria's civilians may have finally gained some respite from Coalition bombing, but they remained at significant peril from other belligerents. At least 1,099 non-combatants were claimed killed by Russian and/or regime strikes throughout 2019, most of them perishing in the Syrian government's fierce Idlib offensive. Meanwhile, civilians came under renewed threat in October, when Turkey launched its invasion of northern Syria which it dubbed <u>'Operation Peace Spring'</u>, with 264 non combatants locally alleged killed from both Turkish strikes and YPG counterfire.

In Libya - in what is increasingly becoming an internationalised conflict - locally alleged civilian deaths rose by a staggering 720% in 2019 on the previous year when Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) launched its Tripoli offensive in April. The intensity of 2019's bombing can be shown by the fact that more than 48% of all locally reported civilian fatalities in Libya's civil war since 2012 occurred during the nine months between April and December 2019.

In <u>April</u>, Airwars also took over from the the Bureau of Investigative Journalism its long running monitoring of US counter terrorism drone strikes and civilian harm claims in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan, which dates back to 2002. Our team of English- and Arabic-language researchers, together with casualty assessors, are now reviewing this significant dataset using Airwars' own internationally-respected methodology. Somalia will be the first of these conflicts to go online in early 2020, followed by Yemen, and then Pakistan.

Throughout 2019, Airwars also continued its advocacy work with the Coalition's civilian harm cell - and other militaries in the alliance. Some 57% of referrals deemed Credible throughout the year came from Airwars, as the Coalition admitted to a further 66 new civilian harm events during the year - which it said had resulted in at least 222 deaths and 108 injuries of non combatants. However, much work remains; the alliance has conceded just 137 deaths from its strikes during 2017's brutal battle for Raqqa - a fraction of the minimum 1,600 toll revealed in a major 2019 investigation by <u>Airwars and Amnesty International</u>.

Elsewhere, Airwars made important and timely media interventions in 2019. Our <u>major study of the US's media coverage</u> of the war against ISIS from a civilian perspective, launched in Washington DC in July, identified key systemic failings in reporting, while offering practical steps for editors to improve this.

In changing attitudes to civilian harm - whether by engaging with militaries; with governments and parliaments; with the media; and with the public - Airwars continues to believe that we can increase pressure on militaries to embrace measures that will lead to the better protection of civilians in war, and a reduction in battlefield deaths and injuries.

Chris Woods, director of Airwars

Conflict monitoring

Russia in Syria: at least 1,000 civilians claimed killed

By Alex Hopkins, research manager

As with the previous year, Russian strikes in support of the Assad government continued to pound Syria. In total for 2019, Airwars tracked 710 claimed Russian casualty events in Syria - a 3% fall on the 730 events in 2018. However, the minimum number of civilians locally alleged killed in these 710 events fell by 50% on 2018's toll. In total, Airwars research shows that **between 1,099 and 1,745 civilians were claimed killed** across these 710 events, compared to a minimum of 2,169 such deaths in 2018. This fall in fatalities can be attributed to a sharp decrease in the larger scale casualty incidents seen in 2018.

Nevertheless, as the regime - supported by Russian airpower - embarked on an increasingly ferocious assault on rebels in Idlib and Hama governorates, civilians trapped on the ground were left with almost nowhere to run. Some 81% of 2019's 710 events were in Idlib, with a further 13% in Hama, and 5% in Aleppo.

Alleged Russian/regime casualty events in Syria, January 2018 to December 2019.

As this Airwars chart shows, ceasefires in Syria can have a significant impact on the volume of civilian harm allegations against Russia. In Oct-Nov 2018, we tracked no civilian harm events as a Russia-Turkey agreed demilitarised de-confliction zone held. However, in May 2019, an earlier ceasefire brokered by Russia was left in tatters as the regime and Russia pounded rebels in Idlib. A new truce came into force on August 31st - but allegations leaped again in the last quarter of 2019





The White Helmets attend the scene of an alleged Russian airstrike on Ma'arat al-Numan, Idlib, on July 22nd (via the White Helmets)

Overall, the tempo of strikes over the first quarter of 2019 was relatively low. In total, there were 44 civilian harm events between January and March. But May saw a <u>303% leap</u> in civilian casualty events as Russia and the regime bombarded rebels in Idlib – leaving in tatters an earlier ceasefire deal brokered by Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The number of civilian harm events remained in triple figures until September. In total, between May and September, Airwars tracked 454 alleged civilian harm events involving Russia - 64% of all such incidents during 2019.

Reports of bombings on civlian homes and infrastructure remained the norm, with civilian fatalities reaching their height for 2019 in July, during which our researchers monitored 121 incidents, killing up to 432 civilians. The chaotic nature of the bombing meant that it was often impossible to determine whether Russia or the regime was responsible for the harm, with conflicting claims against both belligerents. There was little dispute however, that significant numbers of civilians were being killed.

The very worst incident of July - and indeed of all of 2019 - came on July 22nd, when as many as 42 civilians were reported killed in airstrikes on Ma'arat al-Numan, Idlib. In December 2019, <u>the New York Times</u> published transcripts of voicelogs which, it said, definitively proved Russia was responsible for the attack.

<u>August</u> saw reported civilian deaths fall by 53%, though at least 203 non-combatants were still locally alleged killed throughout the month. Reports showed that the most vulnerable people were repeatedly struck. The <u>White Helmets</u>, for example, said that Russian jets bombed homes for displaced people in Qaral al Rahma, near Hass, idlib on August 16th, killing up to 19 civilians. One of the victims was reportedly "a foetus, born prematurely," who died alongside all of his family. His father was named as **Abdul Jabbar Othman**.



Bodies are lined up following an alleged Russian airstrike on homes for IDPs near Hass, Idlib, August 16th (via the Syrian Network for Human Rights)

A Moscow-backed ceasefire, which came into force on August 31st, saw an immediate and drastic decline in civilian harm claims. Our researchers tracked only five events during <u>September</u>, the lowest number in any one month since December 2018.

However, the last quarter of 2019 saw allegations on the rise once again. In October the number of incidents more than tripled - and allegations continued to climb in November and December. Up to 170 civilians were claimed killed in 87 incidents during December, for example.

In just one troubling event, up to 12 civilians including five children and two women were reported killed and seven others injured in Jobas, Idlib in Syria on December 24th, when Russian warplanes attacked a school building that was being used as a shelter for displaced people. Among the victims were five members of the Hammadi family.

In total, since the start of Russia Syria campaign in September 2015 to December 31st 2019, Airwars had tracked 4,245 civilian casualty incidents linked to Russian forces. Between 15,125 and 24,683 civilians have been locally alleged killed in these incidents. Of these numbers, as many as 4,869 were children and 2,736 women. As many as 39,005 more civilians were allegedly wounded by Russian actions. It should be noted that Moscow has yet to admit a single death as a result of its lengthy military intervention in Syria.

The US-led Coalition in Syria: Despite ISIS's last stand, a 44% fall in likely civilian deaths

By Mohammed Al-Jumaily, conflict researcher

During 2019 - for the first time in the five years that Airwars has been tracking anti-ISIS actions - we saw a sharp move away from Coalition civilian deaths. Following the defeat of the terror group in Syria on March 23rd, there was a significant winding down in Coalition strikes - and a similar fall in civilian harm claims. By April, we were tracking more civilian deaths in almost every other theatre than the US-led Coalition in Syria and Iraq.

In total for 2019, Airwars tracked 68 alleged civilian harm incidents attributed to the International Coalition in Syria - a 64% decrease on the 189 incidents during 2018. Across these 68 incidents, our current estimate is that **between 465 and 1,113 civilians likely died** in 50 incidents where we assessed the reporting as 'Fair'. This represents a 44% fall on the minimum 832 civilians likely killed in 2018. Reported strikes in Syria fell by a similar percentage (43%): some 1,907 air and artillery strikes were declared during 2019, down from 3,341 the previous year.

Number of civilian harm events and minimum number of civilians likely killed in alleged Coalition strikes across Iraq and Syria, 2014 - 2019

The year 2017, with the simultaneous battles of Raqqa and Mosul, marked the most intense period of the US-led Coalition war against ISIS. In 2018, minimum likely civilian deaths from Coalition actions fell by 82% on the previous year. Such deaths fell again by 45% in 2019, bringing them to their lowest level since 2014.



The beginning of 2019 saw the US-led Coalition shift its focus to the Euphrates pocket in eastern Syria, which ISIS still held. As the campaign progressed, ISIS militants were eventually confined to the Syrian town of al-Baghuz al Fawqani in the Middle Euphrates River Valley, near the Iraq–Syria border, which became the territorial last stand of the group. The town was eventually <u>captured on March 23rd</u>. However, this final assault had a devastating impact on civilians trapped on the ground.



Bodies strewn across the plains of Baghouz following the assault on March 19th (Image via Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently)

Between January 1st and March 31st, Airwars tracked 45 alleged Coalition civilian harm incidents in Syria. A minimum of 413 civilians likely died in Coalition actions during the first quarter - some 89% of all likely civilian deaths from US-led actions in the country for the entire year.

Among the most deadly incidents was a reported massacre in al-Baghouz on <u>Tues-day 19th March</u>. Sources reported that Coalition air and ground attacks on the town resulted in the deaths of between 160 and 300 civilians. According to <u>Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently</u>, ISIS used hundreds of civilians as human shields during the raids. <u>The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights</u> reported that among the dead were ISIS members and their families, including 45 children.

From April onwards, as the Coalition's operations shifted predominantly to counter-terrorism ground actions, civilian harm plummeted. Indeed by the last quarter of 2019, we were monitoring hundreds more locally alleged civilian deaths attributed to Russia and to Turkish and YPG forces in Syria; and to all belligerents in Libya, than we were the US and its remaining kinetic allies (the UK, Iraq and France) in Syria.

However we continued carefully to monitor US actions in Syria. From August, we began to track reports of alleged US unilateral airstrikes. One of the most concerning incidents occurred on <u>August 31st</u> in Kafr Jalis, Idlib. CENTCOM confirmed that it had conducted a unilateral US airstrike on what was reportedly an Al-Qaeda command centre. <u>The Syrian Human Rights Committee</u> instead reported that 29 civilians were killed, identifying 22 by name - of whom six were children.

Most significantly, on <u>October 26th</u>, US forces conducted a ground raid targeting ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi in Barisha village in the Idlib countryside. Up to nine civilians were likely killed in that raid, including up to three women and three children. Al Baghdadi himself was said to have killed three of his own children, when he detonated a suicide vest.



The aftermath of the raid on Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Barisha (via Idlib Plus)

Turkey in Syria: over 300 civilians alleged killed in new offensive

By Mohammed Al-Jumaily, conflict researcher

There was no respite for non-combatants in northern Syria, when on October 9th, Turkey launched a fierce new offensive, known as '<u>Operation Peace Spring</u>', against the Kurds.

The offensive came against a backdrop of repeated Turkish threats to unilaterally invade northern Syria. The Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) stern resistance to Turkey's demands to expand the area covered by the <u>Syria Buffer Zone</u> exacerbated tensions, and the SDF's initial dissatisfaction with the status quo of the agreement turned into open hostility.

Unilateral Turkish actions had continued sporadically since the end of the Afrin campaign in March 2018, angering the Kurds. Between January and September 2019, Airwars tracked five alleged civilian casualty incidents resulting from Turkish actions in Syria - and 14 in Iraq. However the crisis point came in Syria on <u>October</u> 7th, when the chaotic withdrawal of US forces as ordered by President Trump, appeared to give Turkey the green light to launch 'Operation Peace Spring'.



Turkish-backed militants arriving in northern Syria to join the fight against Kurdish forces (via almonitor)

The offensive was deadly for civilians trapped on the ground. In total, from October 9th to December 31st, Airwars recorded 207 civilian harm incidents involving both sides. **Between 246 and 314 civilians were locally alleged killed** from air, artillery and ground actions, with up to 924 more non combatants wounded.

Turkish forces and affiliated groups on the ground launched devastating attacks on key towns and urban settlements under the control of the SDF, capturing territory formerly held by Kurdish-led forces. The most severely affected cities included Ras al-Ain in Hasakah; Tal Abyad in Raqqa; and Kobani in Aleppo.

Operation Peace Spring differed from Turkey's 2018 Afrin campaign in that Kurdish forces appeared more prepared this time, and were thus able to launch <u>deadly</u> <u>counterstrikes</u>. This was in part because the SDF's campaign against ISIS had de-es-calated significantly following the group's territorial defeat in March.

Most of the civilian harm incidents tracked by Airwars resulted from actions by Turkey and its proxies. However, 26% of all incidents were attributed to Kurdish counterfire – a jump from the Afrin conflict, where 13% of such allegations were attributed to Kurdish forces.

The worst incident occurred on October 13th, when up to 19 civilians, including four journalists, likely died and as many as 74 more were wounded in an alleged Turkish airstrike on a convoy heading from al-Jazira to Ras al-Ain. While there were sporadic reports that the convoy contained both civilians and combatants, most sources asserted that only civilians were among the casualties. Meanwhile, the most lethal Kurdish counter-attack came on <u>October 11th</u>, in the Turkish border town of Nusaybin, where YPG rocket and mortar attacks likely killed up to eight civilians and wounded 35 more.



A woman pushes her wounded son's wheelchair in Ras al-Ain amidst Turkish-backed shelling (via dersi4m)

Multiple ceasefires <u>did little to stop</u> the violence. Just a day after an initial ceasefire was announced on October 18th, an alleged Turkish airstrike on <u>Bab Al Kheir</u> <u>village</u>, Hasakah, killed up to eight civilians and wounded 24 more. The ceasefire also failed to protect humanitarian workers from harm, such as <u>Zau Seng</u> - a medic with the Free Burma Rangers, who was killed by an alleged Turkish mortar strike on <u>November 3rd</u> in Tal Temr, Hasakah.

Disturbingly, there were also numerous accusations of <u>war crimes</u> committed by the Turkish military and Turkish-backed fighters. The most notorious case was the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army's (SNA) <u>execution of Hevrin Khalaf</u>, a Syria Future Party politician. Khalaf was traveling on the M4 highway, where SNA militants reportedly stopped her car, executing both her and her driver, <u>Farhad</u> <u>Ramadan</u>, and mutilating her body. In another case on <u>October 20th</u>, YPG forces reportedly handcuffed and executed seven civilians, including three from the same family in Ras al-Ain, on charges of conspiring with Turkish-backed forces.

The intensity of the conflict had begun to wane by the end of the year. In December, there were 10 civilian harm events, compared to a staggering 138 in October alone. Nevertheless, reported Turkish strikes continued to cause civilian harm. On <u>December 2nd</u>, 11 civilians including eight children died in an alleged Turkish artillery shelling near a primary school and a market in Tal Rifat. <u>UNICEF</u> condemned the attack, noting that all eight children were under the age of 15.



A child injured in an alleged Turkish attack on Tal Rifaat on Dec 2nd, 2019 (via ANHA).

The US-led Coalition in Iraq: Post-conflict restitution and reconciliation

By Laurie Treffers, conflict researcher and advocacy officer

Since the Iraqi government declared victory over ISIS in Iraq in <u>December 2017</u>, Airwars has monitored a dramatic decline in civilian harm events linked to the US-led Coalition. Consequently, we have turned our focus to post-conflict research in Iraq, as we seek meaningful ways to help reconcile local populations with an unimaginably violent past.

However, we have continued to track and fully research all reports of civilian harm in Iraq, as and when they have occurred. During 2019 there were just three civilian casualty incidents linked to the alliance, the same number as in the previous year. The Coalition confirmed responsibility for two of these events, both of which were previously untracked by Airwars. The Coalition said that one civilian was wounded near Qayyarah-West Airfield on <u>March 10th</u>. In a second confirmed event, one civilian died and another was wounded on <u>March 20th</u> in a small-arms incident near Anbar. Additionally, Airwars research showed that a child was likely killed and a man injured in Rutba on <u>March 24th</u>.

Despite ISIS's declared defeat in Iraq, the Coalition still publicly reported 331 air and artillery strikes for the year - a 31% increase on the 252 strikes conducted during 2018. Alarmingly, the Coalition <u>slashed</u> public transparency for its military actions in December 2018, ending four and a half years of identifying where, on which date and what it was striking. This has made it impossible for Airwars to assess where or on which specific dates those 2019 strikes occurred, and in turn to cross-match any potential civilian harm events.



Ruins of a family home in Mosul after two confirmed Coalition strikes on June 13th, 2017 killed 35 civilians (Image courtesy of the AI Saffar family. All rights reserved).

Post-conflict work in Iraq: Justice for Mosul and Hawijah victims

During 2019, victims and survivors of a number of controversial airstrikes finally received an official admission of responsibility from Coalition partner nations - including a mass casualty event in Iraq in 2015 which likely killed more than 70 civilians.

In early 2019, ABC News Australia reached out to Airwars regarding an <u>admission</u> of civilian harm by the Australian Defence Forces (ADF). Australian defense officials had confirmed their participation in one of two <u>airstrikes</u> in Mosul in June 2017, which between them had killed 35 civilians, according to surviving family members.

Our Baghdad-based researcher was crucial in establishing communication with surviving family members. Airwars conducted an extensive <u>interview with Amjad Al</u> <u>Saffar</u>, a family elder, during which the names of 35 victims including 14 children and nine women were handed over by the family. Airwars has also assisted family members in their search for an official apology and legal representation in Australia.

Meanwhile in the Netherlands, national news organisations NRC and NOS published a joint <u>investigation</u> on October 18th into a major civilian harm event in Hawijah, Iraq back in June 2015 This concluded that Dutch F-16s were responsible for the bombing of an ISIS IED factory, causing massive secondary explosions that had killed at least 70 civilians according to locals. The investigation incited a national debate into why Dutch involvement in a mass casualty event had been kept secret for more than four years, and on November 4th the Dutch Ministry of Defence publicly accepted responsibility for the strike.

Simultaneously, the Dutch government admitted conducting an <u>airstrike</u> on the house of university academic Mohannad Al Rezzo in Mosul on September 20th 2015. Professor Razzo died along with his 18-year-old son Najib Mohannad Al Rezzo; his brother Bassim's wife Miyada Rezzo; and their 21-year-old daughter Tuka Rezzo in the attack - a case which had formed the centrepiece of Azmat Khan and Anand Ghopal's <u>award winning investigation</u> for the New York Times. The role of Dutch aircraft had never been revealed, however. In her letter to Parliament on November 4th, Dutch Minister of Defence Ank Bijleveld stated that the incident was the result of an error, and that intelligence analysts had mistaken the Razzo house for an ISIS headquarters.

Policy changes regarding Dutch transparency

Following the Dutch government's admission of causing civilian harm at Hawijah, Minister Ank Bijleveld <u>promised</u> to make significant policy changes regarding transparency - a long term advocacy focus for Airwars and our Dutch partners. Bijleveld for example stated that the Ministry of Defence would retroactively report on the number of missions, locations, target type and weapons released for the entire first deployment of the Dutch contribution to the anti-ISIS coalition from October 2014 to June 2016. In the event of future air operations, such weekly reporting would be standardised. Additionally, Bijleveld promised to ensure sufficient capacity at the Ministry to monitor possible civilian harm cases during future military actions. Parliament will also be confidentially briefed about investigations into civilian casualties as soon as possible, she said. The government also revealed that it was exploring possible compensation options for victims of Dutch military actions in Iraq.

The Dutch government nevertheless remains vague about the number of civilians killed at Hawijah. Indeed, possibly as a result of Dutch pressure, CENTCOM withdrew its earlier estimate that 70 civilians had likely died. Further investigation on the ground will be required to collect the names of all victims and to find their relatives.



Civilians in the rubble after the deadly Dutch airstrike on Hawijah on June 3rd, 2015 (via Iraqi Revolution).

Military advocacy

By Chris Woods, director of Airwars

The US-led Coalition

Our focus at Airwars is on all civilian harm resulting from the military actions we track - not just on those cases which might violate the laws of war. This has created some potential for us to engage with militaries, helping to improve understanding on both sides of how, where and when battlefield casualties occur, with the hope of reducing future harm.

Although reported civilian harm from US-led Coalition actions in Iraq and Syria fell significantly in 2019, we continued to work closely with the alliance's own civilian casualty assessment team as it reviewed hundreds of historical claims dating back to 2014.

During 2019, the Coalition officially published <u>eleven monthly civilian casualty</u> <u>reports</u> of its own, assessing a total of 311 alleged civilian harm incidents for Iraq and Syria since the start of the war against so-called Islamic State. According to CJTF-OIR, its source for 57% of these reviewed claims during 2019 was Airwars.

The alliance admitted 66 new civilian harm events during the year - which it said had resulted in at least 222 deaths and 108 injuries of non combatants. More than half of these events were Airwars referrals - with other cases resulting from investigations by others including Amnesty International.

In one particularly controversial case, the Coalition publicly conceded a June 2015 civilian casualty event at Hawijah, Iraq - while asserting that it would no longer include an official estimate of 70 civilians killed in that event. There were suspicions that this was due to pressure from the Dutch government - which had finally admitted responsibility for Hawijah, even while denying a high civilian toll [see Laurie Treffer's full report on page 24].

The Coalition also during the year classed a further 238 incidents as 'non credible' - asserting that, based on currently available information, it had determined civilian harm had not likely occurred. In a number of cases Airwars was able successfully to argue for several such cases to be re-opened - with the Coalition itself now noting in monthly reports that "we routinely reopen closed investigations based on new information that might help us attain more accurate results."

Overall, to December 31st 2019 the Coalition said that it believed that "at least 1,347 civilians have been unintentionally killed by Coalition actions since the beginning of Operation Inherent Resolve". Airwars itself estimated that over the same time period, US-led actions had killed a minimum of between 8,252 to 13,157 non combatants.

Total incident assessments conducted by Coalition	304
Incident assessments resulting from Airwars referrals	174 (57%)
Total assessments resulting in a Credible determination	66 cases (34 of which or 51% were Airwars referrals)
Total assessments resulting in a Non Credible determination	238 cases (140 of which were Airwars referrals)
Total civilian deaths conceded by Coalition during 2019	222 (or 292 if including 70 deaths at Hawijah)
Total civilian injuries conceded by Coalition during 2019	108

US-led Coalition in Iraq and Syria: civilian casualty assessments during 2019

Pentagon review process

Alongside our casework with the Coalition in Iraq and Syria, Airwars also engaged with Pentagon officials during the year in Washington DC - part of an ongoing DoD review of civilian harm assessment processes, as mandated by Congress. Along with other NGOs and international agencies, Airwars held a number of bilateral meetings and round table sessions with senior officials from the Pentagon, and from individual US military commands.

As part of that process Airwars submitted <u>25 better practice recommendations</u> to the DoD, based on several years of engagement with the Coalition's own civilian casualty assessment team. Collective recommendations were also submitted by those NGOs participating in the review process - with the DoD indicating that its new civilian casualty review policy would likely be in place by late 2020.

Engagement with other militaries

Airwars met with officials from several other nations and commands during 2019 - holding constructive talks with senior British and Dutch officials, and at their request meeting with commanders of a NATO unit keen to understand more about our civilian casualty review process.

The Australian Defence Force also continued its recent practice of reviewing historical incidents of concern - accepting partial responsibility in January 2019 for a <u>mass casualty event in Mosul</u> 18 months earlier, in which 35 civilians from one family had died.

Other nations unfortunately proved more reluctant to engage - with both the French and Russian militaries in particular refusing to discuss civilian harm concerns with Airwars.

Libya: Haftar's Tripoli offensive has devastating impact on civilians

By Oliver Imhof, Libya researcher

When Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar's self-styled rebel Libyan National Army (LNA) launched its Tripoli offensive in April 2019, his rationale was to take the capital as quickly as possible. Little to no blood was supposed to be shed in an attempt to bring the rest of Libya under his control. The Eastern Libyan strongman's hope was to take the city within days, or a few weeks at most.

From the fall of the Gaddafi regime in November 2011, <u>Airwars in partnership with</u> the New America Foundation had counted between 297 and 465 civilian deaths alleged from 2,662 air and artillery strikes by all parties to the fighting, up until the LNA's offensive began on April 4th 2019.



Destroyed civilian homes following an alleged LNA or Emirati airstrike on Tripoli on December 29th, 2019 (via Libya Alahrar TV)

Between April 4th and December 31st 2019, local sources reported **between 279 and 399 civilian fatalities** from 1,614 new strikes. Up to 687 more civilians were reportedly injured. To put it another way, 48% of all locally reported civilian fatalities in Libya's on-and-off civil war since 2012 had occurred in the nine months between April and December 2019.

Tripoli: a city transformed

Tripoli is a changed city as a result of Haftar's siege. "There are different aspects that have been affected. The quality of governance of services, which was already abysmal pre-April, has significantly deteriorated, with trash piling up on the streets. This is aside from the customary shortages in fuel, electricity, and water that aren't uncommon," explains Emadeddin Badi, scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington DC, and a former resident of Tripoli.

Marwan, who lives in the southern suburbs of Tripoli which are currently most affected by armed clashes, describes for Airwars what it's like to live under the constant threat of war: "All a young man like me cares about now is how he gets home safe every day. Or when you go to bed, all you're thinking about is the possibility that a rocket falls on you."

"I lost friends, relatives, loved ones in this war," he elaborates, "I'm doing an MA now, and I'm afraid to lose my dream, and my future and I can't do anything. That makes me want to run away, to live a decent life with equal opportunities."

Despite peace talks, the future of the Libya conflict remains unclear. International meddling has fueled the civil war and made reconciliation between the two local rivals even more difficult. Many fear a deterioration, with more troop and weapon deployments from abroad. This could further destabilise the region and lead to a re-emergence of ISIS or Al-Qaeda, which were once thought to be defeated in Libya.



Trash piling up in the streets of Tripoli as communal services deteriorated because of the war (via anonymous source)

A 720% rise in alleged civilian deaths - and a 647% leap in strikes

In total, **Airwars recorded between 287 to 416 civilian deaths during all of 2019** from 1,658 locally reported strikes. Between 500 to 690 civilians were also allegedly injured. During 2018, only 222 strikes and between 35 and 58 civilian deaths had been reported.

The vast majority of civilian harm during 2019 occurred from strikes either conducted by the LNA, or by its ally the United Arab Emirates. The two air forces are often indistinguishable, as many LNA strikes are conducted by Emirati drones that are apparently operated by either <u>LNA or Emirati personnel</u>.

At the beginning, the Tripoli offensive was fought mostly with old Gaddafi-era weaponry and some outside support. The conflict then quickly turned into a proxy drone-war, largely due to Emirati and Turkish support for the LNA and GNA respectively. Jordan, Russia, Egypt, France, and Saudi Arabia have also been reportedly providing military or financial support to Haftar's forces.

Local sources reported 967 LNA or Emirati strikes in 2019, which reportedly resulted in 180 to 271 civilian deaths. Both actors were accused of conducting two of the most devastating strikes last year, leading to mass casualty events in Tajoura on July 2nd and Murzuq on August 4th.

Over the same period local media reported 357 air and artillery strikes by the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA), or Turkey. Both parties can also be difficult to distinguish as Turkey supplied Bayraktar TB2 drones to the GNA, which are still operated by Turkish pilots, according to <u>GNA sources</u>. Between 50 and 70 civilian deaths were allegedly caused by GNA or Turkish strikes during 2019.

Airwars also recorded seven airstrikes conducted by the United States, of which four were officially confirmed. The confirmed strikes led to 43 deaths among ISIS fighters in the south of Libya, <u>according to AFRICOM</u>. No civilian harm was publicly reported from US actions in Libya during 2019. And before the Tripoli offensive, <u>one Egyptian strike</u> at the border between the two countries was reported, without mentions of civilian harm.

Due to the abundance of belligerents in Libya, many strikes could not clearly be attributed to any one party during 2019. Local sources reported 240 air and artillery strikes by unknown actors, leading to 13 and 18 civilian deaths.

For another 67 strikes, the belligerent was contested between two or various factions. These strikes reportedly led to 40 to 53 civilian deaths, many resulting from indiscriminate artillery shelling in and around the capital Tripoli.

Alleged strikes from all belligerents in Libya, 2018 - 2019

As this Airwars chart shows, alleged strikes by all belligerents in Libya rose by 647% in 2019 on the previous year as Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) launched its Tripoli offensive in April 2019



Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan

By Chris Woods, director of Airwars, and Alex Hopkins, research manager

In April 2019, Airwars took over from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism its long running monitoring of US counter terror airstrikes and civilian harm claims for Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. Airwars is investing significant resources bringing these three key conflicts across to our own standards - while ensuring that the Bureau's own decade-long project is properly archived and curated.

Somalia

The long running US campaign in Somalia against militant Islamists, which began in 2007, will be the first of the three counter terrorism conflicts to go online at Airwars, in early 2020.

The year 2019 saw both the highest number of declared US strikes in Somalia (63), and the highest ever claimed tally of militants - with up to 396 al Shabaab and ISIS fighters reportedly killed by the US in declared strikes during the year.

Despite a 30 per cent jump in declared US actions, civilian harm claims were down in 2019 - from as many as 51 alleged deaths in 2018 to a maximum of 44 civilian deaths in 2019 across 13 separate events. Eight of these incidents relate to declared US actions - killing up to 33 non combatants according to locals. As many as 10 more civilians died in four events where US involvement is unclear.

Reported civilian deaths from US Forces strikes in Somalia

Due to large variations in the quality of reporting, Airwars provisionally grades allegations of civilian harm using a standardised methodology across all belligerents and conflicts. The five categories are explained in full on our <u>Methodology page</u>. Individual events are recorded in the <u>Civilian Casualties</u> pages.



On April 4th 2019 for example (and as they later publicly conceded), Somali forces shot and injured four civilians in a minibus at Ukunji during a counter terrorism operation - though it remains unclear whether US ground forces also participated in that action.

To date, US Africa Command has conceded zero non combatant fatalities for 2019 - although Airwars has submitted comprehensive files to AFRICOM on all 13 alleged civilian harm events for the year.

Yemen

Airwars researchers are currently conducting both English- and Arabic-language research on over 430 reported US actions in Yemen. These air and ground operations, which have targeted Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), began in 2002 - and are conducted by both CENTCOM and the CIA.

Strikes spiralled when President Donald Trump took office, with the US conducting more attacks within the <u>first 100 days of the new presidency</u> than in 2015 and 2016 combined. However, since then, strikes have dropped significantly.

CENTCOM informed Airwars it had conducted nine strikes in Yemen during 2019: two in January; a cluster of six in March; and one in June. Only one of these strikes took place outside Al Bayda province. This marked a 75% decrease on the <u>36 strikes</u> CENTCOM said it had conducted during 2018.

The most prominent strike of 2019 occurred on January 1st in Marib province. The US asserted that the strike had killed al Qaeda operative Jamal al Badawi, who was indicted by a US grand jury in 2003 for his role in the <u>October 2000</u> bombing of the USS Cole.

Airwars researchers are currently focused on fully researching strikes in Yemen during the Trump years, from January 2017 to the present.

Pakistan

The US has been conducting strikes in Pakistan since June 2004. Those strikes are conducted by the CIA only, meaning that few details are publicly reported.

Airwars has taken over the Bureau of Investigative Journalism's own database of 465 alleged US strikes in Pakistan. These will undergo the same rigorous process as we are conducting with the Yemen and Somalia campaigns.

There have however been no publicly alleged CIA strikes in Pakistan against either Al Qaeda or the Taliban since July 2018 - just before Imran Khan, a longtime opponent of the US drone campaign, became the nation's Prime Minister.

Political advocacy

United Kingdom

By Maysa Ismael, conflict researcher and UK advocacy officer

During 2019, Airwars continued its advocacy efforts and active engagement with branches of the UK government, as well as with our civil society partners. Our engagement with the government included participation in dialogue with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Ministry of Defence (MoD), and with Parliament. At the same time, Airwars continued coordination and collaboration with a wide group of partners in the UK who are working in the fields of human rights, and protection of civilians in armed conflict.

These efforts faced some challenges caused by the changing political climate in the country, the general election, and the Brexit issue. Despite difficulties, Airwars' small team managed to achieve some significant breakthroughs in 2019.

Engagement with the UK government and parliament

Despite being the second most active member (after France) of the International Coalition against ISIS, the UK has <u>only admitted one civilian death</u> from its strikes. This death reportedly occurred in Syria during April 2018. Remarkably, the UK has yet to admit any civilian harm from its actions during the fiercely fought battles of Mosul and Raqqa in 2017, despite having struck over 1,000 targets across both cities.

Much of Airwars' UK advocacy work during 2019 focused on a follow up campaign to our <u>UK report</u> on British actions at Mosul and Raqqa, which contains a number of recommendations to help improve UK monitoring and reporting of civilian harm in future conflicts.

After presenting written evidence on the UK's role in the battles, Airwars participated in an oral evidence session at the Defence Select Committee of the UK <u>Parliament in January 2019</u>. Further meetings with the MoD followed throughout the year, in which Airwars, along with partner organisations, reiterated calls for improved mechanisms for understanding and recording civilian casualties, and for better public accountability.

Along with our focus on Iraq and Syria, Airwars has also begun to engage with the UK Parliament to address civilian harm in other conflicts. On October 21st, our advocacy officer represented Airwars in a high-Level parliamentary panel discussion, organised by the All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group, on 'Exploring Avenues for Accountability for Victims in Yemen'. Airwars' participation was particularly important given our new focus on US counter-terrorism actions in that troubled nation.

A further key element of our 2019 engagement with the UK Government has been a focus on its strategy for the protection of civilians in armed conflict. This has recently been under review by the FCO, which is setting out the actions the UK government sees as necessary to help protect civilians in armed conflict - building on work that is already ongoing both in the UK and internationally.



Chris Woods, Airwars director, presents at an APPG Drones session at the UK's Parliament. February 2019.

In May, Airwars participated in a discussion on 'The UK's Role in Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict', attended by representatives from the FCO, DFID, and the MoD. Since then we have engaged with FCO representatives with the aim of discussing concrete steps towards a more comprehensive Protection of Civilians (POC) strategy. In November for example, our Deputy Director participated in a meeting with the FCO's Multilateral Policy Directorate on the Government's review of its POC strategy.

The main focus of our own engagement is to help ensure that our key recommendations addressing transparency and accountability for civilian harm are properly addressed in the forthcoming review. We expect the new policy to be adopted during 2020, and Airwars remains keen for the UK to be as progressive as possible.

Collaboration with partners

Throughout 2019, Airwars continued to network with NGOs and academics in the UK, working collaboratively to coordinate advocacy efforts, and to engage with the UK government for the benefit of civilians. Our network includes but is not limited to Action on Armed Violence, Save the Children, British Red Cross, EveryCasualty, SaferWorld, the Oxford Research Group, and the Overseas Development Institute.

Airwars is committed to working with partners to help learn and exchange knowledge on different issues, including the field of casualty recording - and considers this an ongoing process that combines internal and external inputs and sharing lessons learned. In 2019 for example, we worked with other groups to address the lack of recording of female casualties in conflict, and also the lack of segregation by gender for children killed and harmed by military actions.

Airwars also remain involved in discussions related to broader security issues and policies, given the overlap between security policies and military actions in the conflicts we monitor. In December 2019 for example, we participated in a workshop organised by the University of Essex - 'Improving Peacekeeping at the Local Level' - which explored the need for robust peacekeeping in the protection of civilians. Our UK Advocacy Officer also participated in a two-day workshop organised by University of York on 'Alternative UK Security Politics', which brought together academics and practitioners to discuss the UK's security policies, and to examine alternative approaches.

European engagement

By Laurie Treffers, conflict researcher and advocacy officer

Alongside our emphasis on the United States and United Kingdom, Europe remains a key focus for Airwars research and advocacy. In 2019, we solidified our permanent presence by establishing Airwars Stitchting as a not for profit foundation based in the Netherlands.

Moving forward, Airwars aims to broaden engagement at the European Union level, as this could be a very efficient platform to improve transparency and accountability practices among several European states, most prominently Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark. We envision that we can help create a discussion in which countries assess their transparency practices by comparing their reporting on civilian harm to that of other EU countries, and in which there is space for Airwars' own knowledge and analysis.

The Netherlands

Airwars has established itself since 2016 as an independent authority on civilian harm in the Netherlands, and our continuous presence in the Netherlands has allowed us to give Iraqi and Syrian civilians a clearer voice.

The Netherlands has consistently been rated by Airwars as one of the least transparent countries in the US-led Coalition against ISIS, with the Dutch Ministry of Defence repeatedly refusing to talk with Airwars. It was not until Spring 2019 that Airwars was invited to substantial talks with MoD officials - and it was not until the Hawijah scandal that real change started happening (see page 13).





© 5 november 2019

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Minister verzweeg burgerdoden Hawija voor politiek gewin Chris Woods' op-ed in Dutch daily NRC, November 5th, 2019

Bombardement Nederland strijdt in Irak om burgers te helpen. Het verzwijgen van slachtoffers onder diezelfde burgers is een schande, schrijft *Chris Woods*.





After presenting written eviThroughout the national debate on Hawijah in the Netherlands, Airwars has been visible as a leading authority on civilian harm caused by aerial warfare, providing both media and members of parliament with factual information. Three parliamentary debates were held on the matter. Prior to these debates, Airwars helped brief MPs on how the US and UK have been improving their own transparency policies in recent years. Hours before the third so-called interpellation debate was scheduled to begin, Airwars published <u>analysis</u> of an incorrect statement the Minister of Defence Ank Bijleveld had made.

Besides political engagement, Airwars maintained a high media profile in the Netherlands during 2019. Dutch news programme <u>EenVandaag</u>, for example, interviewed Airwars Director Chris Woods - who also published an <u>op-ed</u> in the Dutch daily NRC, criticising the government for concealing its role in Hawijah for nearly five years from the Dutch public.

Germany

Countries such as Germany may not have been involved in direct fighting in the war against ISIS, yet still played a key role in gathering crucial intelligence that informed deadly airstrikes. Together with our partner the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), Airwars has sought to raise awareness and build political pressure in Germany, to release information that will provide a more honest portrayal of the impact of such intelligence-sharing. For example, Airwars presented at an ECCHR event in March 2019, on the role of Germany in a mass casualty event at <u>Al Badiya</u>, Syria in 2017. One of the deadliest confirmed civilian harm events in the war, most sources estimated that 150 or more civilians were killed when a shelter for internally displaced people was struck on March 20th 2017. The Coalition itself has admitted to at least 40 deaths.

Germany has acknowledged its role in the action by providing images of the target site to the Coalition command, as well as conducting battle damage assessment flights after the attack. However, there has been no public acknowledgement of any culpability for associated civilian harm. Airwars will continue to push for transparency on this and other civilian harm cases to which German military intelligence may have contributed.



Airwars presents with our partners at an ECCHR event in March 2019, on the role of Germany in a confirmed mass casualty event at Al Badiya, Syria two years previously. (Photo by ECCHR)

France

France was the first nation to join the US in its fight against ISIS, and remains the second most active member of the Coalition when both artillery and airstrikes are taken into account. Despite having a reasonable early record on conflict transparency, France has yet to admit to any specific civilian harm events since 2014.

In 2019, Airwars sought to improve contact with the French Defence Ministry, for example participating in a conference on the protection of civilians, held in December in Paris and co-organised by our colleagues at CIVIC. We are looking forward to closer engagement with the French Ministry of Defence, to help secure a more realistic portrayal of civilian harm caused by its military actions.



IRSEM/ CIVIC Conference - Placing the Protection of Civilians at the Heart of Military Operations - December 2019, Paris (Airwars image)

Engaging at the EU and international level

By Maysa Ismael, UK advocacy officer and conflict researcher

Airwars is keen to build on its engagement with militaries, governments and institutions at a broader international level. Additionally, plan to expand our partnerships and engagements with other international organisations focused on improvements in PoC policies.

The EU and the European Forum on Armed Drones

Airwars is part of the European Forum on Armed Drones (EFAD), a civil society network of organisations challenging the growing global use of armed drones. In May 2019, Airwars attended the annual meeting in Brussels, and in September joined an advocacy seminar focused on identifying key contacts working on civilian harm mitigation within the EU.

INEW

Airwars is a part of the International Network on Explosive Weapons, which seeks a ban of wide-area effect munition use in urban areas. In early October, we joined 183 countries at INEW's Vienna conference. Additionally, we submitted a letter to Karen Pierce, the Honorable Ambassador and Permanent Representative of the UK Mission to the UN New York, highlighting key issues and concerns regarding the protection of civilians and civilian harm.

The Security Policy Alternatives Network (SPA-N)

In 2019 Airwars joined the Security Policy Alternatives Network which was introduced by Saferworld as a civil society initiative to promote peace and rightsbased alternatives to hard security interventions. Airwars participated in the launch conference in Berlin in June 2019 and has continued to be a part of the network's bi-monthly meetings.

Engagement with NATO

Throughout 2019, Airwars continued its engagement with NATO, focused largely on the organisation's Protection of Civilians Policy, and mitigation of civilian harm. We held several productive meetings, including hosting a site visit from NATO's Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, and look forward to continuing this dialogue.



Airwars data is cited by the Norwegian Refugee Council, during a presentation at the Vienna Conference on Protecting Civilians in Urban Warfare (Airwars image)

Investigations into civilian harm and our engagement with the media

By Dmytro Chupryna, deputy director

During 2019, Airwars consistently showed that its often groundbreaking investigations can have a powerful impact on the reporting of civilian harm. We have repeatedly partnered with key US and international media on the most needed and controversial cases and stories.

French transparency

In cooperation with <u>Liberation</u>, Airwars published a major investigation by Marie Forestier on <u>French military accountability</u> for civilian harm in the war against ISIS.

France has launched the greatest number of Coalition strikes after the United States (if artillery figures are also included) – with over 1,900 actions declared since the beginning of the operation. At least 200 allegations of civilian casualties potentially involving the French military have been internally assessed, Forestier learned. Yet French army officials still refuse to make the results of those assessments public.

In this context, it remains hard for external observers to raise the alarm on allegations in which France might be involved. Therefore public pressure exerted via media coverage can be vital for our ongoing advocacy work, helping to increase transparency and accountability standards.



Raqqa: Amnesty and Airwars

In April, Amnesty International in partnership with Airwars published <u>a major</u> <u>new study</u> claiming that at least 1,600 civilians had died in US-led Coalition strikes on the city of Raqqa in 2017 – ten times the number of fatalities so far conceded by the alliance, which had admitted 159 deaths.

The project – which saw Amnesty field researchers on the ground for several months – featured in a new <u>interactive website</u>, and was described by Amnesty as 'the most comprehensive investigation into civilian deaths in a modern conflict.'The website combined photographs, videos, 360-degree immersive experiences, satellite imagery, maps and data visualisations to highlight the cases and journeys of civilians caught under the Coalition's bombardment. It brings to life the stories of families who lived and died, by taking users on a journey through Raqqa.

Amnesty researchers carried out site investigations at more than 200 strike locations and interviewed more than 400 witnesses and survivors. Moreover, Amnesty International's innovative Strike Trackers project also identified when each of more than 11,000 destroyed buildings in Raqqa was hit. Airwars researchers had independently tracked 429 locally alleged civilian harm events during the battle for Raqqa, and this comprehensive dataset formed a key part of the study.

Three Airwars team members were seconded to the Raqqa project, where they worked alongside Amnesty researchers to analyse open-source evidence – including thousands of social media posts and other material – and to build a database of more than 1,600 civilians credibly reported killed in Coalition strikes. The study also gathered names of more than 1,000 victims. Amnesty International directly verified 641 of those names on the ground in Raqqa, while there are very strong multiple source reports for many of the others.

Both Airwars and Amnesty continue to engage with both the Coalition and with Pentagon officials, to ensure that the reality of Raqqa is not forgotten.



US media coverage of civilian harm

In 2019 Airwars launched a major study examining US media reporting of civilian harm during the international war against ISIS. The report, <u>News In</u> <u>Brief</u>, authored by US investigative journalist Alexa O'Brien, includes clear, evidence-based recommendations to editors and journalists on the reporting of civilian harm in future conflicts, while proposing best practice standards.

The study found that reporters at media outlets strongly believe civilian harm should be a central component of broader war coverage - yet that non-combatant casualties from US airstrikes were often poorly covered during the conflict against ISIS. Coverage is critical not only for a proper understanding of war itself, but also to help ensure the oversight of US government and military strategy, policy, and operations, journalists said.

The report was launched by Airwars director Chris Woods and author Alexa O'Brien in Washington DC in July and received warm feedback from journalists and editors despite being challenging. Azmat Khan, co-author of The Uncounted, a New York Times Magazine investigation into civilian casualties in Iraq, joined the discussion, alongside host Peter Bergen, New America's vice president; and Greg Jaffe, national security correspondent for the Washington Post.

The launch was followed by meetings with editors and journalists to discuss the report's key findings. Those media organisations we engaged with included the New York Times, the Washington Post, The Intercept, The Atlantic, Associated Press, and Military Times.



Report author Alexa O'Brien outlines her findings at the Washington DC launch of News In Brief, kindly hosted by New America. Airwars is a collaborative, not-for-profit transparency organisation monitoring and assessing civilian harm from mainly international military actions, which is presently focused on Iraq, Syria and Libya, as well as US counter terrorism actions in Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan.

We archive all open-source reports of civilian casualties alongside military claims by nations; and also seek transparency and accountability from belligerents – while advocating on behalf of affected non combatants.

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