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Killing Civilians in Iraq and Syria

Edward Hunt

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The ongoing effort of the United States to eradicate the Islamic State by aggressively launching airstrikes against targets that include noncombatants is causing significant harm to civilians in Iraq and Syria.

Estimates of civilian deaths from airstrikes range from the hundreds to the tens of thousands. Although the U.S. government says that it has killed 603 civilians in airstrikes since the start of military operations in 2014, the monitoring group Airwars estimates that airstrikes have killed at least 4,500 civilians, including nearly 1,000 children.

Some of the strikes have been horrific. One attack in Mosul last March killed at least 100 civilians and injured countless more. “Dozens of Iraqi civilians, some of them still alive and calling out for help, were buried for days under the rubble of their homes in western Mosul after American-led airstrikes flattened almost an entire city block,” *The New York Times* reported.

Officials in Washington deny any wrongdoing. They insist that they are taking every precaution to protect civilians. They also argue that they are not intentionally killing civilians, despite the fact that President Trump promised during his presidential campaign to go after civilians. When it comes to terrorists, “you have to take out their families,” Trump said.

Others argue that civilian deaths cannot be avoided. Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, the commander of coalition forces, said during a press conference last March that civilian deaths result from the fog of war. “And this is why it’s not a war crime to accidentally kill civilians,” Townsend said, in a misinterpretation of the law.

Still, US officials know that they are responsible for killing civilians in Iraq and Syria. For over the past year, at least, they have been deliberately striking targets that they know will result in civilian casualties.

Clear evidence emerged in January 2016 after US forces bombed a site in a civilian area of Mosul that the Islamic State (ISIS or IS) had been using to store money. “US commanders had been willing to consider up to 50 civilian casualties from the airstrike due to the importance of the target,” *CNN* reported.

Around the same time, officials in the Obama administration loosened restrictions designed to limit civilian casualties. According to a report by *USA Today*, administration officials granted military officials permission to strike targets that came with higher probabilities of civilian deaths. “Before the change,” *USA Today* reported, “there were some limited cases in which civilian casualties were allowed.” With the change, “there are several targeting areas in which the probability of 10 civilian casualties are permitted.”

For others, US military forces were still dealing with too many restrictions. Upon entering office, President Trump moved to implement a more aggressive military campaign. “We have not used the real abilities that we have,” Trump said. “We’ve been restrained.” Expanding the Obama administration’s program of exterminatory warfare, which by that point had already killed about 60,000 IS fighters, Trump decided to implement what administration officials call “annihilation tactics.” According to Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Trump “directed a tactical shift from shoving ISIS out of safe locations in an attrition fight to surrounding the enemy in their strongholds so we can annihilate ISIS.”

The Trump administration’s tactical shift has had significant consequences for civilians. By surrounding targets to annihilate them, coalition forces have been killing far more civilians in Iraq and Syria. It “appears that the number of civilian casualties has risen in recent months,” *The Los Angeles Times* reported in April. *The New York Times* agreed, reporting in May that the “number of civilians killed in American-led airstrikes in Iraq and Syria spiked this year.” Earlier this week, *The Daily Beast* provided additional confirmation, reporting that “all parties agree that casualty numbers are steeply up.”

Military officials recognize the consequences of their actions. “We’re not perfect,” Lieutenant General Jeffrey Harrigan, the commander of US Air Forces Central Command, commented during a press briefing last May, when asked about civilian casualties from airstrikes. Commander Townsend has even suggested that civilian casualties are inevitable. Undoubtedly, “civilians will get caught in the crossfire,” Townsend said earlier this month. “Civilians will get hurt. Civilians will get killed.”

Still, US officials continue to insist that they are not to blame. They characterize civilian deaths as accidents or mistakes. In other words, they keep shifting the blame elsewhere, just as Townsend did when he once again blamed the fog of war. The entire situation is “sad and it’s an unavoidable part of war,” he said.

But civilian casualties are not unavoidable. They are not mistakes. For the past year, civilian casualties have been a direct result of US policy. By embracing policies that allow for civilian casualties, officials in both the Obama and Trump administrations have permitted US forces to kill civilians. Indeed, US officials are ensuring through their actions and policies that civilians in Iraq and Syria will continue to die.