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The U.S.-Led Fight Against ISIS Has Killed Far More Civilians Than It Admits

“America killed us, and it said ‘we didn’t kill civilians,’” a relative of one victim said. BuzzFeed News speaks to survivors on the border.

By: Mike Giglio

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The little girl was home in northern Syria at around 8:30 on a recent summer night when the missile streaked down from the sky. Her uncle, 21-year-old Talha Amouri, was outside when the explosion ripped through the house, knocking him off his feet. He dug through the wreckage for hour after frantic hour, pulling out members of his family. He found five of his nieces — ages 8, 7, 6, 5, and 3 — dead. But the youngest, 2-year-old Nariman, clung to life, her arms locked around her mother, who had also survived. Nariman was rushed to a hospital across the nearby border with Turkey, in the seaside city of Iskenderun, where she now lies helpless beneath a web of tubes and bandages.

“The girl is close to death right now,” Talha said outside the hospital on a muggy afternoon last week, his eyes welling with tears. He had been keeping vigil there around the clock, waiting to learn whether his niece would live or die.

Nariman’s fate has been shared by countless children in a civil war that has seen tens of thousands of civilians massacred by the Syrian government’s airstrikes. But in her case there was

one crucial difference: According to witnesses and monitoring groups, the missile was fired by the U.S.-led military coalition whose jets now cut through Syria's skies.

Nearly one year after the Obama administration launched its campaign of airstrikes to target ISIS and other extremists in Syria, claims of civilian casualties are piling up. The Syrian Network for Human Rights, a local monitoring group, said there have been 242 civilian casualties from strikes by the U.S.-dominated coalition bombing the country, while the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also puts the civilian death toll at more than 200. Airwars, a U.K.-based project to collect and evaluate claims of civilian casualties in Syria, has identified 86 events during which coalition-inflicted civilian deaths are alleged, said Chris Woods, the investigative journalist who runs it. Of those, he said, 53 incidents had at least two credible sources and warranted further investigation. These incidents alone accounted for between 280 and 340 reported civilian deaths, he said.



Yet after more than 2,400 attacks from the coalition's drones and fighter jets in Syria, the U.S. Central Command (Centcom), which oversees the campaign as well as investigations into civilian deaths, has admitted that just one bombing run in the northern town of Harem had "likely" killed two young girls. And according to a Centcom spokesperson, only five incidents are currently under formal investigation. "This tells us that something here is broken," Woods said. "We are tracking three times more alleged civilian casualty events than they have picked up."

The dangers of visiting Syria limit the ability of independent observers to confirm accusations of civilian casualties, especially in territory controlled by ISIS, where most of the strikes take place. Residents are forbidden from talking to the media or other monitors, and even those who flee to safety in Turkey fear that speaking out could endanger relatives who remain in Syria. But BuzzFeed News interviewed witnesses to, or family members of, alleged civilian casualties from eight suspected coalition airstrikes, who suggest that these incidents are taking place on a much greater scale than the U.S. admits. Most spoke — either on the border or by phone from Syria — on condition of anonymity.

Behind the scenes, even some U.S. officials say the numbers are likely higher. According to one, credible reports of civilian casualties that have been flagged internally and passed to Centcom appear to receive only “minimal” follow-up. “They don’t want to admit it,” the official said, requesting anonymity because he wasn’t authorized to speak to the press. “It’s against their interest to admit there were civilian casualties in any strikes, and that’s why the burden of proof is quite high.”

A second U.S. official, who works for the State Department, said he had seen multiple reports of civilian casualties, all flagged internally, that he found to be credible: “There’s no question.”

But he also said the reports were nearly impossible for Centcom to prove. During the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, civilian casualties from the U.S.-led coalitions were far higher — more than 15,000 in the former alone, according to the monitoring group Iraq Body Count. But the U.S. could investigate with troops and allies on the ground. In Syria, the coalition sticks to the skies and works largely on its own. “The reality, particularly in this case in Syria, is that our investigative authority is seriously limited,” the official said, likewise requesting anonymity to speak without permission.

Claims of civilian casualties have also surrounded the separate U.S.-led bombing campaign against ISIS in Iraq, which began in August 2014. There, however, the strikes come at the invitation of the Iraqi government and are cleared with the Iraqi military. The U.S. and its allies strike on their own in Syria, with neither approval from the Syrian government nor extensive cooperation with rebel groups, leaving the coalition to shoulder the blame for civilian casualties on its own.

Since ISIS and other extremists would use U.S. admissions of civilian casualties as propaganda, the State Department official said, he thought it best not to get into specifics: “You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t.”

“They don’t want to admit it. It’s against their interest to admit there were civilian casualties in any strikes.”

The U.S. government’s perceived silence on civilian casualties has helped to blur the line between its airstrikes and the Syrian government’s in the minds of many Syrians, especially grieving relatives. “America killed us, and it said we didn’t kill civilians,” Nariman’s uncle, Talha Amouri, said.

Sitting in the crowded cafeteria beside the Iskenderun hospital’s entrance, he said there were victims of Syrian government airstrikes inside too. “So what’s the difference between the regime and the Americans?” he asked.

It’s an unfair comparison: The U.S. takes care to avoid hitting civilians, while the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad actively targets them.

But confusion over civilian casualties among Syrians highlights the difficult situation the U.S. faces as it shares the skies with Assad’s air force. The Syrian government hasn’t approved

coalition strikes, but it also hasn't moved to stop them. Sometimes, each side bombs an area on the same day — the coalition striking military targets, the Syrian military often attacking civilians.

Some wounded Syrians taking refuge in southern Turkey aren't sure who hurt them. In a hospice in the city of Antakya, 23-year-old Mohamed Raja was missing his right arm and paralyzed from the waist down. He was riding his motorcycle to work in his home city of Palmyra, on the afternoon of July 9, when an airstrike hit an oil tanker as he passed. He and his family believe it was a coalition attack because of its precision. But the coalition has never announced any strikes in the city, while the regime bombed it heavily that day, making it unlikely that the coalition was to blame.



Airman 1st Class Deana Heitzman / 31st Fighter Wing Public Affairs

The strike that tore through Nariman's family came on the night of Aug. 11, in the border town of Atmeh. In addition to killing her five sisters it also wounded her pregnant mother, who suffered a miscarriage, and her older brother, who is recovering now in Syria, according to a local doctor and two relatives, as well as Fadel Abdul Ghani, the director of the Syrian Network for Human Rights. They also said three civilians were killed in a house nearby: a 55-year-old woman, her 21-year-old son, and her 17-year-old daughter, Fatima Yassin.

In a phone interview from Atmeh, Maan Amouri, Fatima's husband, recounted standing 50 yards from his home when the blast knocked him unconscious: "I only saw something red."

He woke after a few minutes and pulled the three corpses from the wreckage, he said. "We heard before that America supports human rights," he said, "but now I think they've created terrorism."

The strike appeared to target a makeshift weapons factory near the homes that was used by a rebel group called Jaish al-Sunna. It is not known as extremist, and it was unclear why it was hit: Previous strikes had focused on ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, the local branch of al-Qaeda. Jaish al-Sunna had been fighting the Assad government in a coalition with Nusra and other rebel groups.

“Although it has joined and played a role within [that coalition], the group is demonstrably not at all close to [hard-line] jihadist, but a movement that is perhaps more typical of a Syrian ‘mainstream’ rebel faction,” said Charles Lister, an analyst at the Brookings Doha Center.



The wreckage of one of the destroyed houses in Atmeh, according to the rebel who provided this photo to BuzzFeed News.

Talha Amouri and Maan Amouri believed the homes had been hit with missiles directly, but secondary explosions from the factory, which was located in an old chicken farm, or even a powerful initial blast, could have been responsible for destroying the homes.

A Centcom spokesperson, Maj. Genieve David, said the coalition conducted a strike that night “in the vicinity of Aleppo,” which is inclusive of Atmeh. She added in an emailed statement that Centcom had determined “there was no evidence of civilian casualties as a result of coalition airstrikes.” She said Centcom’s assessment included aerial photos taken the day after the strike, on Aug. 12. “A collapsed roof would be easily visible on this imagery, but there was no damage noted to any buildings surrounding the target, and there was no evidence of a collapsed roof,” she said. “Additionally, open source imagery from social media showed a large amount of weapons in the destroyed target building, the only building damaged in the strike. Such weapons storage would not be in a dwelling with children, so it was determined that there were no civilians or children in the target building.”

Woods, of Airwars, criticized this assessment. “What’s clear, as so often in these cases, is that with no boots on the ground Centcom’s civilian casualty assessment is from the air only. There’s no indication of any ground-based human intelligence. Yet there appears little doubt that the named civilians died that night.”

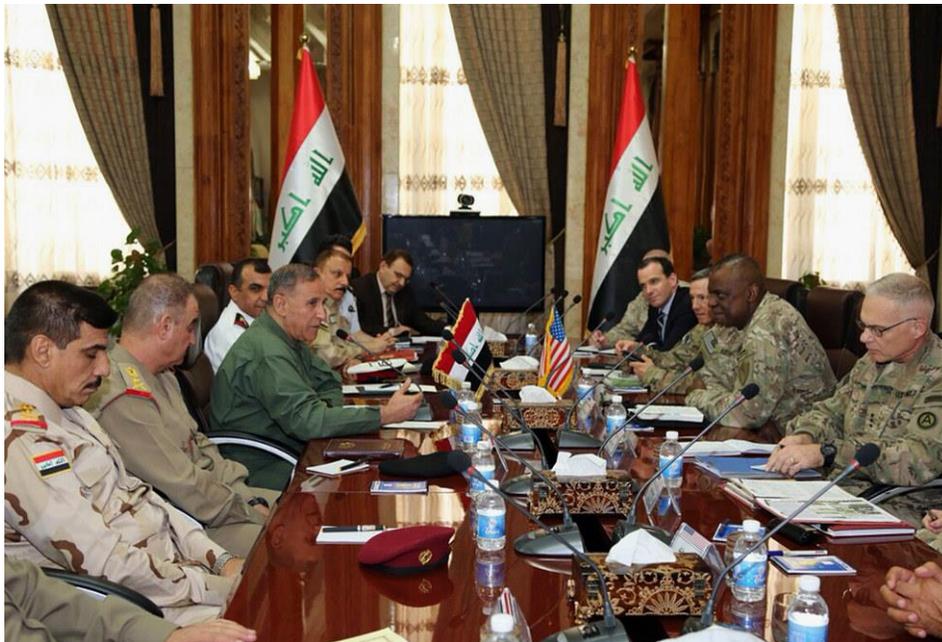
A 27-year-old rebel named Ahmad Zarzour told BuzzFeed News via Facebook chat from Atmeh on Wednesday afternoon, “I am looking at the destroyed homes right now.”

He sent photos of what he was seeing; they showed two piles of rubble that he said had been the modest houses and a third that he said had been the site of the weapons factory. “The weapons

factory is very close to the houses,” said Zarzour, who fights with a U.S.-backed battalion called Faylaq al-Sham.

Shown the photos, Talha Amouri and Maan Amouri said they were the family’s destroyed homes. Abdul Ghani, of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, said Zarzour was a “reliable source” who had worked with the network before. He added that most houses in the village were “very small,” and that the wreckage might be hard to notice from the air.

Some initial reports said several fighters were killed in the attack. The local doctor, who runs the field hospital where the victims were treated and declared dead, said the only casualties he saw were civilians. He said he had revived Nariman’s stopped heart before sending her on to Turkey. Speaking by phone from Syria, he turned his anger toward the U.S. “It is not appropriate for a government who claims to be supporting freedom to behave this way,” he said, requesting anonymity to protect his safety.



Gen. Lloyd Austin, commander of the U.S. Central Command (second from the right) meets with Iraq’s defense minister in Baghdad.

The first major accusations of civilian casualties in the U.S.-led bombing campaign came within 24 hours of the first strikes. On Sep. 23, Tomahawk cruise missiles rained down on the town of Kafr Daryan, in northern Syria. News reports said Jabhat al-Nusra militants had been killed. Human Rights Watch also interviewed witnesses who said that civilians, including at least two women and two children, died too. In the emailed statement, David, the Centcom spokesperson, said it had been “unable to determine whether any civilian casualties occurred.”

One Kafr Daryan resident recounted the terror of the strike. He saw the dead bodies of women and children, he said, as he joined the rush of people fleeing the town. “People started running,” he said by phone from Turkey, where he took refuge after the strike, requesting anonymity to

protect his safety. “We had never seen anything like this. Tomahawk missiles are scary and very loud. It was not like the usual [regime] bombings.”

Another witness, a 23-year-old activist who lived in a nearby village, rushed the opposite way, speeding to Kafr Daryan in a car with some friends to help the victims. The powerful missiles had hit a warehouse with weapons and Nusra fighters, he said, but also “flattened completely” some civilian homes nearby. “What we saw with our own eyes was unreal — the houses were completely gone,” he said. “Our job was to collect the body parts. The worst thing was the children. It’s still in my mind.”

Three months later, in the ISIS-controlled town of al-Bab, near the Turkish border, a coalition strike mistakenly hit a prison run by ISIS, monitoring groups and witnesses said. A report by the McClatchy news service included interviews with more than 40 residents of the area, who said the strike had killed over 50 people. Many had been arrested by ISIS for failing to follow its hard-line religious rules: an undertaker who missed sundown prayer, an 18-year-old who bought a pack of cigarettes.

Centcom determined that the reports “are not credible,” David said. One al-Bab native said in a phone interview from Germany, where he now lives as a refugee, that he knew many of the people who had died in the jail. “Their crimes were things like smoking, not praying, listening to music,” he said, requesting anonymity because he still has family in the town. “I saw people without heads, without hands. I can’t explain it.”

In another widely publicized attack, on April 30, coalition strikes on a village called Bir Mahli, in Aleppo province, killed more than 60 civilians, according to both the Syrian Observatory and the Syrian Network for Human Rights. Witnesses blamed the mistake on bad intelligence provided by Kurdish militia, who were working with the coalition to drive ISIS from the area. The coalition initially denied that it struck the village that day; then it said it had bombed ISIS positions there. Without admitting blame, a coalition spokesperson later told Airwars, “Prior to the airstrikes, Kurdish forces, who held the town before leaving after being attacked by [ISIS], reported there were no civilians present in that location.” David told BuzzFeed News that Centcom had carried out two assessments and found the allegations “not credible.”

A witness to the attack in Bir Mahli, a 67-year-old man who goes by the nickname Abu Khaled, described family after family killed in a series of strikes, giving names that match reports from monitoring groups. “They killed whole families,” he said, speaking by phone from southern Turkey. “The Americans will never apologize, and they will keep killing civilians. They could have stopped Assad at the beginning if they cared about human rights.”



Khawla Yassin al-Ali Courtesy of the al-Ali family

Amid these well-known incidents are many more, far smaller ones alleging civilian casualties from coalition strikes, which often fly under the radar. Yet Woods, of Airwars, said such cases better reflect how civilians experience the airstrikes as they go about their lives. “It’s in ones and twos, collateral damage, caught up in shrapnel,” he said. “That’s the day-to-day. A lot of civilians die every month simply because they’re in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

On the morning of May 6, Ismail Ali Hassan, 65, was walking to work in his village in al-Hasakah province when shrapnel from a coalition strike punctured his heart and leg and killed him, according to his son, Ahmed Ismail al-Hassan. “He didn’t support any group,” Hassan said by phone from southern Turkey. “He just wanted to work and take care of his family.”

Khawla Yassin al-Ali, 47, spent her days taking care of her paraplegic husband in their village outside the border town of Tel Abyad. She was killed by a coalition strike on June 19, said her son, Mohammad Adel al-Kharfan. “We are farmers,” he said. “I don’t understand why they bombed my home.”

David said Centcom was unaware of the two allegations and would look into them.

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When Centcom receives allegations of civilian casualties from coalition strikes, David said, the first step is to assess their credibility: Did coalition aircraft, for example, launch strikes in the

area in question at the time? From there, if “there’s a possibility it could be credible,” a commander will decide whether there should be a formal investigation, David said.

An investigative officer is then assigned to the case. He or she reviews information such as flight logs, airstrike videos, and testimony from civilian sources. There have been two such investigations completed in Syria, David said. Only one, on the strike in Harem, found that a civilian had likely been killed. In that investigation, which Centcom declassified after its completion, the investigator cited a report from the Syrian Network of Human Rights, short messages from two U.S. officials with contacts in Syria, as well as photos and videos posted by witnesses online. “Our investigators do the best they can based on the limited resources they have,” David said. “We do take allegations seriously.”

She added that the U.S. was open to offering financial compensation to the families of civilian casualties, as it has in places like Afghanistan in the past, but that it was difficult to do so without troops or a friendly government on the ground.

David said the U.S. has guidelines in place to guard against civilian casualties but didn’t clarify the specifics or how they compared to those in America’s other theaters of war. The Obama administration announced new rules in 2013 for drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, for example, saying they could only be launched with a “near certainty” that civilians wouldn’t be killed. But the White House said last year that those standards don’t apply in Syria. “Each campaign has different rules of engagement,” David said. “The coalition works hard to avoid injuries or deaths of non-combatants. Despite our extraordinary efforts to identify appropriate targets and ensure the coalition hits those targets and prevent non-combatant casualties, such casualties are impossible to avoid in some cases.”

Lama Fakhri, a senior crisis adviser at Amnesty International, cautioned that claims of civilian casualties from coalition strikes have at times proved false or exaggerated. “There is a disparity in the number of casualties reported by monitoring groups and the number of incidents the coalition is looking into. And [the true number] is probably somewhere in between,” she said. “The message here is not that local monitoring groups have it wrong. It’s that it’s really difficult to get information out of these places. When there are civilian casualties, we really need the coalition to come forward with information about what they are hitting and what precautions they are taking.”

“It’s incumbent on the U.S.-led coalition to explain what happened in these cases,” added Letta Tayler, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch. “Morally and strategically, it behooves the U.S. and its allies to apologize and provide condolence payments for [civilian] deaths. Absent such measures, the coalition could face a serious backlash, and that plays right into the hands of ISIS.”

“I saw the kid laying on the sidewalk, and I felt I couldn’t walk.”

Some civilians who fled ISIS territory in recent months said their perception of the coalition strikes had changed. At first many welcomed the strikes — and several recalled feeling safe enough to watch them as they hit ISIS military targets stationed outside residential zones. Then

ISIS adapted, moving fighters and assets into towns and cities to take cover among civilians. Coalition strikes followed suit. “People are now fleeing not just ISIS but ISIS and the U.S. strikes combined,” said Fakhri of Amnesty International, who recently researched the subject inside Syria. “People were terrified about the coalition strikes.”

One Raqqa native said ISIS fighters had recently taken over apartments in his family’s building in the city: “They are living among us.”

The man, a 27-year-old laborer, met for an interview in southern Turkey, requesting anonymity because he still travels to Raqqa. He was at home there on the afternoon of July 4, at about 3:30, when an explosion on the street outside sent his mother and sister scrambling inside the house, screaming and crying. “I heard the bombing sound and I thought our building was hit,” he said. “I cannot explain the feeling.”

According to the man and a neighbor interviewed by BuzzFeed, as well as monitoring groups, a missile incinerated a car that held one or two ISIS militants as it drove past a local school, which wasn’t in session. The strike was accurate, but the shrapnel killed civilians nearby, the two men said: a van driver and his passenger, a delivery man, a father and son on a motorcycle, a young boy. “They hit the target. But the people around the target were affected,” the neighbor said. “I saw the kid laying on the sidewalk, and I felt I couldn’t walk.”

The two men believed there had been one or two ISIS jihadis in the car — the carnage made the number unclear — because militants from the group later came to carry away the remains, leaving the dead civilians on the street.

July 4 marked “one of the largest deliberate engagements we have conducted to date in Syria,” according to a [coalition press release](#). The coalition said it launched 18 airstrikes in Raqqa province that day, destroying an ISIS tactical unit, three ISIS vehicles, and 16 bridges.

The coalition also released aerial video showing the simultaneous destruction of some of the bridges.

[youtube.com](#)

[youtube.com](#)

But while the coalition called them ISIS structures, residents said many were the city’s regular bridges, which civilians used too. The strikes appeared timed to minimize civilian harm, but residents and monitors reported collateral damage. Members of one family from Palmyra, who had fled to Raqqa to escape regime bombings in their home city and were planning to continue on to Turkey, were killed at one of the bridges, according to a relative in Syria who declined to be named. He claimed that his father and mother were killed along with his two brothers, his sister, and her two children. “They have no respect for human rights and international laws that call for protecting civilians,” he said of the U.S.

David said that Centcom had completed “a credibility assessment” regarding both July 4 allegations and “will make the results public in the near future.”

Two weeks later, in the early hours of July 16, a 28-year-old mother of three was sitting on her rooftop in a working-class Raqqa neighborhood with her small children. She was busy making *suhoor*, the pre-sunrise breakfast before the Ramadan fast, when an airstrike hit a nearby bridge, which was controlled by an ISIS checkpoint. She saw something like a flash, she recalled, and an outer wall of the house crumbled onto the kids. “It’s like a moment, a second,” she said, fearing repercussions from ISIS if she published her name. “I couldn’t move; my tongue couldn’t speak.”

Rushing the children to safety through the suddenly chaotic streets, the woman saw someone carrying the body of a neighbor who’d been driving across the bridge with groceries, his insides showing, clearly dead. She and her family spent the next week at a cousin’s home — where her 3-year-old son refused to leave the bathroom, thinking it was safer from airstrikes — before fleeing to Turkey. Meeting in a shared house in southern Turkey, with her son sitting timidly in her lap, she said he and his two sisters, ages 7 and 5, were scared to go outside. “We used to feel safe when we saw the American airstrikes,” she said. “Now my daughters are afraid to go to the school, because they say there is ISIS and there is American airstrikes.”

Centcom has said the coalition destroyed three bridges in Raqqa that day; David added that it had no record of the allegation and would look into the woman’s account. At her temporary home in Turkey, the mother stepped out onto the patio and pointed to a street sign, near enough to read, to show how close the strike had come to her family. “What’s my crime?” she said.