

CASE 9.

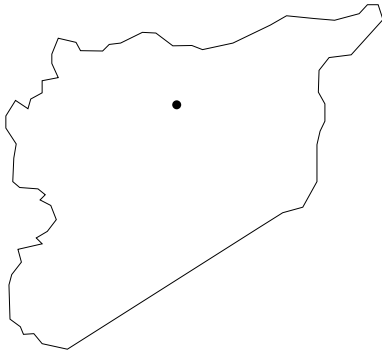
Airstrike:

Bombs destroy a shelter
in Al Mansoura
(Syria, 2017)

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COUNTRY

Syria



PERPETRATOR

The US-led International Coalition against ISIS

ACT

carried out an airstrike on a building in Al Mansoura

OBJECTIVES

- to destroy what it perceived to be an ISIS stronghold

CONSEQUENCES

The death of between 40 to 400 civilians, mostly IDPs, sheltering in the building

- ↳ undermining civilians' trust in the intentions and capabilities of the Coalition

Psychological trauma

In the first months of 2017, intense conflict raged in large parts of Syria. In the western parts of the country, government forces were fighting opposition forces. In the north, the International Coalition against so-called Islamic State = (ISIS) was stepping up efforts to push back and eventually destroy ISIS. To that end, the Coalition conducted daily air strikes on ISIS positions in the ISIS-held parts of the Raqqa Governorate, while Kurdish and other ground troops of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) advanced from the north, pushing back the militants.¹ These efforts were part of an intensified military campaign called 'Operation Wrath of Euphrates' during 2016 and 2017 to take over Raqqa, ISIS' declared capital, and the Tabqa dam, a strategic location some 40 kilometres west from Raqqa. The campaign constituted a combined effort by the SDF and the American-led anti-ISIS Coalition (Solvang & Houry, 2017).

Between November 2016 and February 2017, increased insecurity resulted in the mass movement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Palmyra and Raqqa, partly into the region around the town of Al Mansoura, one of the larger towns in the western Raqqa countryside and located approximately 30 kilometres from Raqqa itself. There, the new waves of refugees mixed with groups of IDPs that had fled violence elsewhere in the country. Some families found refuge at the abandoned Al Badiya school, a large, isolated three-storey building 1.5 kilometres from the Al Mansoura town centre, an area controlled by ISIS at the time. The school had opened in 2009, serving as a boarding school for students from the country's semi-nomadic

regions, but was soon overtaken by a new reality: When armed conflict erupted in Syria in 2011, the school closed, and not long after, displaced civilians began moving in (Solvang & Houry, 2017). The school had housed IDPs since 2012, mostly families from the Homs and Aleppo governorates (UN Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2017). By March 2017, between 200 and 400 people were estimated to be living in the school, some of whom had been living there for years, others having only recently arrived. Among the new arrivals were families of ISIS fighters directed there after fleeing from Raqqa and Palmyra.

9.1 Case: **Late night strike leaves at least 40 dead**

On the night of 20-21 March 2017, the inhabitants of the Al Badiya school – a mixture of ISIS families and non-ISIS affiliated IDPs, according to locals – were completely caught off guard when they became the object of deliberate targeting by the US-led Coalition against ISIS. At around 11.00 p.m., the building was struck with multiple high yield aerial bombs. They did not stand a chance: The explosions wreaked near-complete destruction of the three-storey structure, killing almost all people inside; parts of the building frame were all that remained (Solvang & Houry, 2017).

Awash, a 24-year-old woman who survived the attack, described the utter confusion she experienced that night:

On the day of the strike everything was normal. I was sleeping in the school. There were two strikes. My face and body got hit. I didn't hear the explosions, only felt them. My mother went out to the corridor to get my nephew. I tried to follow, but couldn't. I screamed out to my mother, to my brother, but couldn't find them. In the courtyard,

I found Ahed [Awash' 11-year-old niece] and her mother. She had no clothes on and shrapnel all over the body. After I covered her with the sheets I passed out and then woke up in the Raqqa hospital. (Solvang & Houry, 2017, p. 20)

Local casualty reports for the Al Mansoura event varied widely, from several dozen deaths to claims of as many as 420 people killed. Human Rights Watch noted a minimum of 40 fatalities, including 16 children, as the baseline after visiting the site twice. The report concluded: 'Forty are the ones that we were actually able to identify, but the actual number is much higher' (Oakford, 2018a).

Despite multiple local and international sources reporting on the large number of civilian casualties, the Coalition almost immediately denied that the strike had killed civilians. The commander of the Coalition himself stated:

We had multiple corroborating intelligence sources from various types of intelligence that told us the enemy was using that school. And we observed it. And we saw what we expected to see. We struck it. We saw what we expected to see. Afterwards, we got an allegation that it wasn't ISIS fighters in there; [...] it was instead refugees of some sort in the school. Yet, not seeing any corroborating evidence of that. In fact, everything we've seen since then suggests that it was the 30 or so ISIS fighters that we expected to be there. (US Department of Defence [DoD], 2017)

Only in June 2018, more than a year after the event, did the Coalition quietly admit to killing at least 40 civilians, finally acknowledging what a UN inquiry and human rights groups had long said was among the bloodiest events of the years-long bombing campaign (Operation Inherent Resolve [OIR], 2018).

9.2 Perpetrators: Taking responsibility?

The airstrike on the Al Badiya school raises many questions that have yet to be answered about the methodology of the Coalition in establishing the legitimacy of targets in civilian areas; their mechanism of evaluating and reporting on harm from their own actions; and about the apparent lack of after-action attempts to identify individual casualties, and provide assistance and redress.

Local sources unilaterally identified the US-led Coalition as responsible for the attack on the school. Local news outlet Qasioun reported that the school was hit by three Coalition raids at around 11.00 p.m., while other sources such as The New York Times specify the time of the attack at 'shortly after midnight' (Cumming-Bruce, 2017). The previous quote by the Commander of the Coalition demonstrates that the Coalition never denied striking the location. It did, however, come to a different conclusion on who was targeted in the attack. Lieutenant General Townsend maintained that 'we struck enemy fighters that we planned to strike there' (US DoD, 2017). His early denial of civilian harm in this event - despite multiple public claims - raises questions about whether his statements might have unduly influenced the Coalition civilian casualty cell's ongoing assessment of the event, and the treatment of subsequent civil society requests for the case to be re-opened.

The Coalition later reiterated its conclusion in its monthly civilian casualty report, published 7 July 2017, when it claimed that there was insufficient evidence showing that civilians were killed in the attack: 'March 20, 2017, near Al Mansura, Syria, via social media report: After review of available information and strike video it was assessed that there is "insufficient

evidence” to find that civilians were harmed in this strike’ (OIR, 2017).

Then, after a year of denial, the Coalition suddenly admitted to killing at least 40 civilians in its monthly civilian casualty report, released on 28 June 2018. The report stated that the incident was reopened after the receipt of new evidence from Human Rights Watch. The Coalition then determined that ‘a strike on Daesh militant multifunctional centre allegedly caused civilian casualties. Forty civilians were unintentionally killed’ (OIR, 2018, p. 2).

Operating in a legal void

By late 2017, the entire Raqqa province, including Al Mansoura and its environs, was under Coalition and SDF control. However, the US-led alliance chose not to conduct an on-the-ground investigation into Al Mansoura, relying instead on the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The admitted number of 40 fatalities was based on Human Rights Watch findings, though it was unclear what additional steps the Coalition had taken which had led them to reverse repeated denials issued over the previous 16 months. ‘The updated assessment of the Mansoura allegation was based largely on a video report from Human Rights Watch,’ a senior Coalition official told Airwars:

HRW visited the site and interviewed individuals present during the strike and after. Their accounts included specific details regarding the strike more likely to be known by somebody who had been present. Compelling, detailed, and accurate first-hand accounts tend to weigh heavily in favour of a finding of ‘credible’. (Oakford, 2018a)

The Al Mansoura strike provoked further controversy due to the discovery of the involvement of German reconnaissance aircraft. Several Coalition members, while

not carrying out strikes on their own, provided intelligence and logistical capabilities to assist bombings by other nations. In September 2017, the Australian Defence Force reported its involvement and partial responsibility for a previous civilian harm event for which it had supplied flawed intelligence though it had not conducted the attack – setting an important precedent (Oakford, 2018b). Whatever pre-strike surveillance the Coalition conducted at Al Mansoura, proved insufficient to protect civilians at the site. The Al Mansoura raid is the third-largest death toll admitted to by the Coalition, after an attack days earlier in March 2017 in Mosul which killed over 100 civilians, and an airstrike on Hawijah in June 2015 which had led to the deaths of at least 70 civilians.³ Although the Coalition has maintained that individual countries participating in the mission are responsible for their own actions, most individual countries refuse to report in detail on their own actions and routinely refer requests for information to the Coalition. This creates a legal void in which Coalition members appear to be operating without meaningful oversight (Shiel, 2019).

While the Coalition acknowledged its responsibility for the incident, it did not outline how such an incident occurred – and what safeguards were put in place for future actions. Human Rights Watch stated:

It’s positive that they are acknowledging this now, but it’s an incomplete step. [...] It is not enough to just say we killed some civilians. No one is saying it was intentional, but that is not the point of conducting the investigation. (Oakford, 2018a).

In 2019, the US explicitly accepted the responsibility for the attack and associated civilian harm in the Pentagon’s annual civilian harm report to the US Congress. Yet to this

date, the Coalition has not released any information on the type of munitions used to destroy the Al Badiya building, who provided the incorrect intelligence, why the Coalition in its After Action Reports failed to recognise the atrocity it caused, or what measures have been undertaken to identify individual civilian victims and their families.

9.3 Victims: **Displaced families with children**

The UN-mandated Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic stated in its report that between 200 and 400 people were living in the school at the time of the airstrike, of whom only a few survived the 20 March attack. The Al Badiya school opened in 2009 to replace mobile schools in the region for the children of herdsman, but had been closed in 2011. Since 2012, the school building had housed internally displaced families from the Homs and Aleppo governorates, and according to survivors of the raid, many of them had no affiliation to ISIS (UNHRC, 2017).

At the time of the attack in March 2017, some of the building's residents had been living there for years, while others had arrived only recently, possibly as part of mass movements of IDPs from Palmyra and Raqqa that occurred in January 2017 (Alaa, 2017). Prior to the airstrike, some families of ISIS fighters fleeing Iraq had also moved into the school. Local people reported ISIS fighters around the premises, possibly visiting their families. A notable member of the community and two survivors of the airstrike also indicated that ISIS had set up a mosque within the school, occasionally organising a Sharia course there. Despite the reported presence of these fighters, the school was predominantly inhabited by IDP families. An 11-year-old survivor said that children used to play in the school's courtyard,

suggesting that civilians could and should have been observed in the Coalitions' 'pattern of life' analysis (Solvang & Houry, 2017, pp. 6-7).

Local residents confirmed that ISIS members had been in the vicinity at the time of the strikes, but stressed that the location was not a military base of any sort. This corroborates with Human Rights Watch findings when they spoke to sixteen local residents during a visit to Al Mansoura in July 2017 (Solvang & Houry, 2017). According to the residents, displaced ISIS members and their families had moved into the school prior to the attack. Other residents noted that a vehicle with an anti-aircraft cannon had been operating in the area. Although families of ISIS fighters had moved into the school together with IDPs already living there, there is no publicly available evidence that the building itself was actively used for military purposes at the time, nor that any of its inhabitants were actively participating in hostilities.

Staggering death toll reports

Soon after the attack, detailed reports, including initial tallies of civilians harmed were published. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported:

One of the activists [...] witnessed 33 bodies being pulled out of the rubble of the school which was destroyed by the Coalition's warplanes before members of the "Islamic State" organization came and kept people away. Additionally, two people were pulled out alive. (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 2017)

A local resident, living about 100 metres away from the school, recalls the chaos in the aftermath of the attack: 'I was sleeping when loud explosions woke me. I heard about four bombs. I rushed to the school. There were bodies

of men, women, and children everywhere. About 50 people were rushed to the hospital' (Solvang & Houry, 2017, p. 20). Most of the bodies were recovered from the site. Reportedly, some of the dead had to be abandoned in the rubble, as ISIS prevented rescuers from doing their work.

Most sources stressed that the majority of the victims were women and children. Smart News was the only outlet providing specific figures, reporting an initial death toll of seven children and nine women. Smart News went on to say that,

according to another local source, the Islamic State organization demanded that civilians in the western and southern parts of al-Raqqa evacuate their schools and medical centres because they were being targeted by the coalition 'for the possibility of being headquarters of the organization.' (Smart News via Airwars, 2017)

There have been some claims of much higher casualties. According to Raqqa Post, the death toll may have been as high as 100: 'The school hosted more than 50 families from Maskanah, Homs and other places and there are reports, which are not yet confirmed, that over 100 were killed and many more were wounded. Rescue operations are still taking place' (Raqqa Post via Airwars, 2017). Baladi News put the number killed still higher at 200 civilians – 'mostly women and children' – with dozens more injured, adding that the school was completely destroyed (Baladi Network via Airwars, 2017).

As more reports came in, the claimed death toll continued to rise, with one local Mansoura group alleging that it had reached 275. Mansoura in its Peoples' Eyes claimed an even higher figure: '420 martyrs with people still looking for survivors' (Mansoura in its People's Eyes via Airwars, 2017). A subsequent report by Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently said that,

the initial death toll for the massacre at Al Badiya school in Al Mansoura committed by the international coalition at dawn yesterday is 183. The bodies are still being pulled out and the number is expected to rise as there were 105 families present at the school. (Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently via Airwars, 2017)

It is clear that local casualty reports for the Al Mansoura event vary widely, from claims of several dozen deaths to as many as 400 people killed. As Human Rights Watch noted, the 40 fatalities, including 16 children, is to be considered only as the baseline, as the actual number is likely much higher (Oakford, 2018a).

Part of the difficulty in determining the exact number of casualties lies in the fact that many of the bodies were buried under the rubble after the attacks. In addition, it has been difficult for locals in Al Mansoura to identify the victims as many of them were recently displaced people from other regions in Syria, unfamiliar to the people in Al Mansoura (Solvang & Houry, 2017). Among those casualties that could be corroborated by Human Rights Watch were several families from Maskanah, Tadmor (Palmyra) and from the Sukhna area. Victims were as young as the 2-months-old Adel, and as old as 60. Entire families, consisting of husbands, wives, grandparents and children perished in the attack.⁴

Aside from the significant number of casualties and the trauma for those who have remained behind, such large-scale violence in itself stimulates new displacement: Al Mansoura was just one strike in a campaign of increased aerial bombardment under 'Operation Wrath of Euphrates' by the International Coalition against ISIS, which overall has been estimated to have resulted in 160,000 people fleeing their homes in search of safety (ABC News, 2017).

The campaign has severely undermined trust in the Coalition among Syrians: According to Hussam Essa, founder of Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently, an online monitor of violence in Raqqa province,

People used to feel safe when the American planes were in the sky, because they knew they didn't hit civilians [...] They were only afraid of the Russian and regime planes. But now they are very afraid of the American airstrikes' [which are] targeting everywhere. (Morris & Sly, 2017)

9.4 Significance: **Unwillingness to acknowledge civilian harm**

Most civilian harm in the context of urban fighting is by its nature unobservable from the air, with civilians often taking shelter inside buildings. Nevertheless, the Coalition continues to rely primarily on aerial footage for both its pre- and post-strike analysis. While the means and methods to carry out on-the-ground investigations are available to the Coalition, it has routinely chosen not to engage with civilians on the ground (Woods, 2016; Mahanty et al., 2020). Of more than 3,000 alleged civilian harm events assessed by the Coalition since 2014, only once did it deploy field investigators: for the al Jadida, Mosul event of March 2017. In the case of the Al Badiya school, the Coalition only chose to reopen and reassess the case after a field study conducted by Human Rights Watch made their continued denial of civilian deaths impossible. This is not an isolated incident, but part of a larger problem.

In the report 'All Feasible Precautions?', Human Rights Watch quote the Combined Joint Task Force's press desk, noting that Coalition forces conducted 'a pattern of life [analysis] prior to

the strike but that video footage did not reflect any evidence of civilian activity prior or after the strike' (Solvang & Houry, 2017). This raises serious questions regarding the German and US intelligence that both failed to identify the presence of IDPs - some of which had been present in the area for years.

In 2018, Airwars researchers scrutinised Coalition civilian harm allegation assessments, and found that the modelling showed a strong bias towards certain classes of strikes potentially being assessed as credible. Events taking place out in the open - which are more likely to show a civilian entering a target area on strike footage - feature heavily in Coalition-confirmed events. With strikes on buildings, the footage may show the extent of the damage but not whether it housed ISIS fighters, or sheltered families inside. And even if such events are well-documented publicly, they are far less likely to be confirmed by the US-led Coalition due to an absence of visual confirmation. As Air Marshal Bagwell noted in an interview with Drone Wars UK, 'We cannot see through rubble' (Drone Wars UK, 2018). This inability of the Coalition to effectively model 'unobservable' civilian harm in urban fighting - even though this is likely how most non-combatant deaths and injuries occur - is in the view of Airwars likely to be a key reason why the Coalition continues to significantly undercount civilian harm (Woods, 2016; Mahanty et al., 2020).

This issue of undercounting civilians is especially pressing in densely populated areas such as Mosul, Raqqa and Deir-Ez-Zor. In Raqqa for example, Amnesty International and Airwars (n.d.) have estimated that at least 1,600 civilians perished in Coalition air and artillery strikes before the city's capture in mid-October. More than 21,000 munitions were fired on Raqqa in just 5 months - many times more than were released across all of Afghanistan by international forces for all of 2017. Despite the intense and continuous shelling,

the Coalition was slow to admit to civilian deaths in Raqqa, regardless of the number of allegations churned through and discarded by staff in the civilian casualty unit.

In the same monthly report that saw the Al Mansoura strike acknowledged, the Coalition classed more than 120 civilian harm allegations relating to the battle of Raqqa as ‘non-credible.’ Overall, the Coalition has, as of November 2020, only admitted to 8 per cent of 515 locally reported civilian casualty events for the battle of Raqqa. In contrast, Airwars rates more than 70 per cent of those cases as ‘Fair’ – that is, corroborated by two or more credible local reports, and with Coalition strikes confirmed in the near vicinity.

The disparity between what is reported by local journalists and activists on the ground, and the Coalition’s own investigations (which rely on post-strike video analysis and observable damage) is significant. As former US military analysts have testified, drone videos sometimes even have difficulties distinguishing a shovel from a rifle, let alone civilians from combatants (Linebaugh, 2013).

Consequences of underreporting

Underreporting by the Coalition was brought to public attention by local reporting in Iraq and Syria; by the work of Amnesty, Airwars and other NGOs; and by investigative journalism, notably The New York Times piece ‘The Uncounted’, which concluded that the numbers of estimated civilian deaths as a result of Coalition airstrikes could be as much as seventeen times higher than that reported by the Coalition itself (Khan & Gopal, 2017). Such underreporting of civilian harm, as well as the tendency among belligerents to be slow to account for their behaviour, has political and military implications. Politically, it undermines the effectiveness of parliamentary supervision over military interventions and participation in coalitions if parliaments are not

supplied with accurate information on civilian harm and harm mitigation measures. This is exacerbated by the Coalition’s insistence that individual countries participating in the mission are responsible for their own actions and the legal void this creates (Shiel, 2019; Woods, 2016).

In terms of the military, the underreporting of civilian harm as seen in Iraq and Syria is surprising when considering the mistakes of the Afghan war. As early as 2009, NATO itself concluded that the failure to prevent, minimise and mitigate civilian harm in the Afghan war had undermined the military-strategic goals of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission. The failure to acknowledge publicly but also internally that its own actions were a major cause of insecurity for civilians in Afghanistan, ultimately turned many of those civilians against the mission (Kolenda et al., 2016). Looking at the underreporting of the Coalition in Iraq and Syria, this raises the question of whether lessons earlier identified in Afghanistan were actually learned.

In the six years since the international war against ISIS began, there have been some key improvements in Coalition civilian harm processes. A permanent civilian casualty review team; standardised and improved assessments; and monthly casualty reports have led to the Coalition conceding at least 1,400 civilian deaths from its actions in Iraq and Syria since 2014. However, public estimates of civilian deaths are far higher – based on the experiences of Iraqis and Syrians themselves. Airwars for example estimates that at least 8,300 non-combatants have in fact died in Coalition strikes.

There are also legal and moral questions about the military necessity and proportionality of air and artillery strikes. As we have seen in the brutal battles for Mosul and Raqqa, the

Coalition's stated adherence to international humanitarian law, and the widespread use of precision weapons, were not enough to prevent mass civilian casualties. Meanwhile, scenarios such as the airstrike on IDPs in the Al Badiya school in Al Mansoura have made clear that intelligence-driven strikes can still lead to catastrophic civilian harm. Fundamental questions must be asked about whether the Coalition's approach in Iraq and Syria has represented the most proportionate means of warfighting. Future civilian lives depend upon frank answers.

Images



A satellite image of the Al Badiya school building in Al Mansoura, Syria. 4 January 2016, before the Coalition airstrike.
© Google (2018)

A satellite image of the Al Badiya school building in Al Mansoura, Syria. 30 May 2017, after the Coalition airstrike.
© Google (2018)

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Endnotes

- 1 The SDF are an alliance of anti-ISIS Kurdish and Arab forces.
- 2 The organisation Airwars uses and prefers the term 'belligerent' over perpetrator in its own publication, but has – for reasons of consistency – agreed to the term perpetrator here. See the Introduction for our discussion of adopted terminology.
- 3 The Dutch government took responsibility for these deaths, but not before November 2019 (Dutch News, 2019).
- 4 Airwars has compiled an overview of all the people known to have died during the bombing. See Airwars (2017) in the bibliography for the webpage where the names and additional information about victims can be found.