

The Smart Weapons Fallacy: Civilian Casualties From 'Precision' Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria

There's no such thing as a smart bomb. *By [Patrick Cockburn](#) / [CounterPunch](#)*

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The final elimination of Isis in [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#) is close, but welcome though the defeat of these monstrous movements may be, it has only been achieved at the cost of great destruction and loss of life. This is the new face of war which governments try to conceal: a

limited number of combat troops on the ground call in devastating air strikes from planes, missiles and drones, be they American or Russian, to clear the way for their advance.

Governments pretend that air wars today are very different from Vietnam half a century ago when towns were notoriously “destroyed in order to save them”. These days air forces – be it the Americans in Iraq, the Russians in Syria or the Saudis in Yemen – say that this mass destruction no longer happens thanks to the greater accuracy of their weapons: using a single sniper, a room in a house can supposedly be hit without harming a family crouching in terror in the room next door.

The sale of vastly expensive high precision weapons to countries such as Saudi Arabia is even justified as a humanitarian measure aimed at reducing civilian casualties.

The PR has changed but not the reality. Despite the claims of enhanced accuracy, drone pictures of west Mosul look very much like pictures of east Aleppo, Raqqa or large parts of Damascus where every building is gutted or reduced to heaps of broken bricks interspersed with craters. The problem for journalists or human rights organizations is that it is almost impossible to verify the claims of victims or the denials of alleged perpetrators at the time.

Witnesses, when they are not dead, have often fled or are too frightened to speak; governments, regular armies and air forces will probably get away with it if they stick to a straight denial that they have done anything wrong. Even if damaging information does eventually come out, the news agenda will have moved on and public interest will be slight.

I found it frustrating during the final weeks of the siege of Mosul, which went on for nine months, to know that there was very heavy civilian loss of life as Iraqi forces backed by air strikes closed in on the Old City, but it was impossible to prove it. I was in touch by mobile phone with two different individuals trapped behind Isis lines who faced the dilemma of either staying where they were and chance being killed by the bombardment, or trying to escape to government-held territory and risk being shot by Isis snipers.

The two men took different decisions, but neither of them survived. One was shot dead by Isis as he and his mother joined a group trying to escape across the Tigris using rubber tires because they could not swim. A second man was wounded in one air strike and killed by a second in the last weeks of the siege. Most of the two men's extended families were also dead by the time the siege ended.

Fortunately some reporters do go on looking at what really happened in battles like Mosul long after the rest of the media has shifted its attention elsewhere. Joel Wing, in the online journal [Musings on Iraq](#), writes that fresh information on casualties raises "the total number of dead during the operation [to capture

Mosul city and surrounding area] to 21,224 and 30,996 wounded. 17,404 of the former and 24,580 of the latter occurred in Mosul. The new numbers still highlighted the fact that there are many more undocumented casualties as the wounded should be four to six times higher than the fatalities figure. Even if you subtract the 5,325 people that were executed by the Islamic State, that would still mean there should be 60,000-90,000 injured from the fighting.”

The figure looks high but is credible, taking into account the use of conventional artillery and Russian multiple rocket-launchers in the attack on west Mosul. Casualties from air attack also went up because the rules on ground troops calling in air strikes were relaxed before the attack on west Mosul began. Isis was killing civilians who tried to escape from the shrinking Isis-held enclave and more people were confined in fewer houses so if one was hit the loss of life would be high.

Even before this happened many more civilians were being killed by air strikes than the US-led air coalition was admitting. The only way to get at the truth is to look at a large sample of air strikes on the ground and see if they were reported by the coalition and, if so, how accurate that reporting was.

This has now been done for the first time by Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal, who visited the sites of nearly 150 air strikes in northern Iraq between April 2016 and June 2017. In a lengthy study called [“The Uncounted”](#), published in *The New York Times* on 16 November, they reached devastating conclusions. They write that “we found that one in five of the coalition strikes we identified resulted in civilian death, a rate more than 31 times that acknowledge by the coalition”. They add that when it comes to civilian deaths this “may be the least transparent war in recent American history”.

The coalition denied that many of the air strikes that had killed people had ever taken place, but the reporters found that there were videos of several of them on the coalition’s YouTube channel, though these claimed to show the destruction of Isis targets. When they pointed this out, the videos were quietly withdrawn.

The picture that the coalition presented of its air offensive turns out to be a fabrication. In one sample of a residential area called Qaiyara, near Mosul city, the coalition claimed it had killed only one civilian in or near the town and the Iraqi air force said it had killed nobody. It turned out that there had been 40 air strikes on this area which had killed 43 civilians, of whom 19 were men, eight women and 16 children aged 14 or younger. In about a third of fatal strikes Isis had been in close proximity to the civilians, but in half of the cases there had been no discernible Isis presence.

Where there was evidence of Isis it was often flimsy and out of date: in one case a family of six was wiped out aside from a two-year-old child because a local informant had once seen a mortar near their house though it had been moved long before the strike.

The significance of the study is great because for the first time it can be shown what is really happening in a series of wars in the Middle East starting with Afghanistan in 2001. There is no such thing as precision air strikes.

The coalition claimed that only one in 157 of its 14,000 air strikes in Iraq since 2014 have caused a civilian death, but the evidence on the ground shows the real rate to be one in five. The comforting claim by American and British air commanders that smart weapons enable them to avoid killing civilians is simply untrue.

Patrick Cockburn is a Middle East Correspondent for the Independent. He has written four books on Iraq's recent history—The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the Sunni Revolution, Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq, The Occupation, and Saddam Hussein: An American Obsession (with Andrew Cockburn)—as well as a memoir, The Broken Boy and, with his son, a book on schizophrenia, Henry's Demons, which was shortlisted for a Costa Award.