

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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Syria: Flaws in the US-led Coalition's reporting on civilian casualties in Raqqa

Civilian Casualties Dismissed as Non-Credible

The Coalition publishes a monthly civilian casualty report, in which it lists the vast majority of allegations brought by human rights organizations as “non-credible”. Although these cases can be re-opened if additional information surfaces, the Coalition does not proactively seek new information. Instead, it relies on others to investigate incidents it should be investigating.

At the end of June 2018 the Coalition [announced](#) that, in light of new evidence from Amnesty International, it would re-evaluate four previously closed cases and examine one new case.

The Coalition and some of its members sometimes admit responsibility for civilian casualties reported by human rights organizations.

In June 2018, the Coalition finally admitted to killing more than 40 civilians in air strikes on a school in Mansourah (near Raqqa) in March 2017. Human Rights Watch [reported](#) the case in September 2017, but the Coalition had kept it classified as “non-credible” for 15 months in a row.

In March 2018, the Australian government [admitted responsibility](#) for the killing of two civilians in an air strike carried out by its air force in Mosul, Iraq, in May 2017, based on information Amnesty International gathered and Airwars published.

In May 2018 another Coalition member, the UK, for the first time [acknowledged responsibility](#) for one civilian death (in March 2018 in Syria), after carrying out hundreds, possibly thousands, of air strikes in Iraq and Syria since 2014.

Of the three Coalition members that bombed Raqqa – the USA, France and the UK – only the UK responded individually to Amnesty International's requests for information, claiming its forces were not responsible for the air strikes documented in the 5 June report. The UK did not however provide any of the

information Amnesty International requested, including exact locations of its air strikes and details of specific measures taken to verify targets and minimize harm to civilians. [Speaking to Parliament](#) in July 2018, UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson branded Amnesty International's report as "deeply disappointing and disgraceful", yet continued to fail to provide any concrete information on UK air strikes.

Unlike US, UK and French forces, one Coalition partner involved in the Raqqa operation has spent considerable time in the city during the aftermath. In its response to Amnesty International's report, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) conceded "*heavy damage and huge human and material losses borne by families in the city during the campaign*", before going on to say that "*the SDF, as the Coalition forces' ally on the ground, cannot take responsibility as a result of mistakes that were made and unsuccessful air strikes against Daesh [the armed group calling itself Islamic State] military targets*". The SDF did not provide information about how strike location coordinates were submitted and verified, nor did they respond to Amnesty International's criticism of their indiscriminate use of mortars in densely populated civilian areas.

Coalition Claims Do Not Stand up to Scrutiny

Coalition claims that it makes "painstaking efforts" to assess allegations of civilian casualties do not stand up to scrutiny.

The Coalition has failed to live up to its public pledge to include "site visits and interviews with witnesses, where possible" in its investigations. During its field work in both Raqqa and Mosul, Amnesty International interviewed hundreds of witnesses and survivors of Coalition strikes, not one of whom had been interviewed by Coalition representatives. Nor were any of the witnesses and survivors aware of Coalition representatives having interviewed anyone else.

There is no reason for the Coalition not to carry out site investigations and interviews with survivors and witnesses in Raqqa and Mosul, both of which are now under full control of Coalition partners. Indeed, Coalition officials and even US politicians have visited these areas for meetings with their local partners or other activities – but not to investigate.

Deliberate Vagueness

To date, the Coalition's reporting about its strikes during the Raqqa and Mosul operations is woefully inadequate. For example, it reports all strikes as taking place "near Raqqa" or "near Mosul" – as opposed to providing accurate strike locations. It also fails to provide meaningful information about the targets and the weapons deployed.

In a 5 June [response to Amnesty International](#), the Coalition stated that operational security prevented it from releasing more information about strikes. While security considerations may limit the level of details made public, they should not become a cloak to shield Coalition members from accountability. Publishing the information requested would not endanger operational security. Surviving IS fighters will already be aware of it, having witnessed the strikes for themselves.

Despite the Coalition's repeated mantra that it takes all possible measures to minimize civilian casualties, it has not provided any information about specific measures taken – before and after the strikes – to verify that targets are not civilians and to minimize potential harm to civilians near targets. We remain in the dark about target surveillance and verification methodology and choice of weapons.

If the Coalition has abided by its obligations under international humanitarian law in respect of each strike, as it claims to have done, then it should have no reason to shy away from this level of transparency.

The Deal with “Daesh”

Although the Coalition admitted “it was aware” of the truce between its SDF partners and the armed group calling itself Islamic State (IS) which allowed armed IS fighters to leave Raqqa, it claimed not to condone the deal as it “is not in the business of making deals with Daesh”.

Yet, as the party to conflict with air power and long-range artillery, only the Coalition could have guaranteed IS fighters safe passage out of the city. According to Amnesty International's information, Coalition representatives were present when the deal was agreed between IS and the SDF.

The deal also raises doubts about the justification – under military necessity – of strikes conducted in the hours and days before the agreement was made – strikes which killed many civilians.

Refusal to Engage

Coalition spokespeople and the UK Defence Secretary also accused Amnesty International of failure to reach out to relevant authorities to determine how strikes are conducted or whether the process for minimizing civilian casualties meets legal requirements.

Yet throughout the previous year, the Coalition had ample opportunity to engage

with Amnesty International on the concerns raised. It has either failed to respond, or has adopted a dismissive stance each time.

Prior to publishing [*“War of Annihilation”: Devastating Toll on Civilians, Raqqa – Syria*](#), Amnesty International wrote formally the US Department of Defense, and to the UK and French Ministries of Defence to request information about the specific strikes documented in the report, as well as others. To date, neither the Coalition nor the US, UK and French authorities have provided the information requested. The responses focus on rhetoric and general statements, but provide no concrete evidence or details.

Furthermore, Amnesty International had previously published another report raising concerns about the protection of civilians in the context of the Coalition air and artillery strikes in Raqqa ([*Syria: “I Won’t Forget this Carnage”: Civilians Trapped in Raqqa*](#), 24 August 2017). Coalition officials dismissed the report and failed to provide additional details.

Amnesty International also previously contacted the Coalition in mid-2017 prior to publishing a report on conduct of hostilities in Mosul and received no reply. Following publication of [*Iraq: Civilians killed by airstrikes in their homes after they were told not to flee Mosul*](#) on 28 March 2017 and [*“At Any Cost”: The Civilian Catastrophe in West Mosul - Iraq*](#) on 12 July 2017, Coalition representatives responded through the media, using the same dismissive language they later employed regarding our reporting on civilian casualties in Raqqa.

Meetings by Amnesty International’s staff with US, UK and French officials on several occasions in 2017 and 2018 have yielded no additional information.

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