

## News In Brief:

US Media Coverage of Civilian Harm in the War Against So-Called Islamic State



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Airwars is a collaborative, not-for-profit organization focused on reducing battlefield civilian casualties.

We track, document and archive airpower-dominated military actions, and local reports of civilian harm in conflict zones.

Presently covering Iraq, Syria, and Libya - as well as US counter terrorism actions in Somalia, Yemen and Pakistan - we provide a vital counter-narrative to the dominant military assertion that civilian deaths are low in modern warfare.

Airwars contributes to truth-seeking and accountability through our pioneering work collecting, assessing, and archiving accounts from local journalists, citizens, and state- and non-state actors - and leveraging that information for change.

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# II. Executive Summary



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A reporter in Mosul during the battle to evict so-called Islamic State. Image © Harry Chun

## II. Executive Summary

Civilian harm remains a reality in modern conflicts, despite a greater effort to protect civilians, and ongoing efforts by the United States and allies to improve precision targeting systems.

Coverage of civilian casualties during U.S. conflicts also remains a central component of war reporting—from Associated Press photographer Nick Ut’s picture of children fleeing Napalm bombing during the Vietnam War, to Azmat Khan and Anand Ghopal’s recent investigation into civilian harm in Iraq for *The New York Times Magazine*.

This report represents the first comprehensive analysis of U.S. media coverage of civilian casualties in the recent war against so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS). There is no doubt that some exceptional reporting on the subject took place. Yet, prior to this report, there was also anecdotal evidence that suggested that civilian harm from U.S.-led actions in Iraq and Syria had only been covered patchily by major U.S. media.

Commissioning this report from investigative journalist Alexa O’Brien, Airwars set out to both quantitatively and qualitatively measure the coverage of civilian harm during the war against ISIS. How effectively was the subject reported on between 2014 and 2018—in a major conflict that saw almost 30,000 locally alleged fatalities from U.S.-led actions? The U.S.-led Coalition has admitted itself to more than 1,300 deaths.<sup>1</sup> Did U.S. readers, listeners, and viewers obtain a proper sense of the costs of modern war?

To explore these questions Airwars conducted two studies on the frequency and character of existing U.S. newspaper coverage of civilian harm during separate periods of the conflict; and another study examining references to civilian harm at every Pentagon press briefing since the conflict began in August 2014.

Airwars also obtained almost one hundred responses about civilian harm and conflict reporting, collected via a confidential questionnaire and separately during at-length interviews. These are drawn from U.S. media professionals across the field, with a particular emphasis on field reporters and defense correspondents. This report contains the findings of the three studies and canvassing efforts.

<sup>1</sup>Airwars estimates that as of May 31, 2019 at least 7,978 non-combatants likely died as a result of U.S.-led actions—that is, predominantly but not solely airstrikes. See, Airwars, “US-led Coalition in Iraq and Syria,” Airwars, accessed on June 6, 2019, <https://airwars.org/conflict/coalition-in-iraq-and-syria/>; The Coalition itself has conceded at least 1,302 deaths. See, Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), “CJTF-OIR, Monthly Civilian Casualty Report,” CJTF-OIR, accessed on May 31, 2019, <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/Media-Library/News-Releases/Article/1862027/combined-joint-task-force-operation-inherent-resolve-monthly-civilian-casualty/>

Industry professionals at major U.S. media outlets believe as a whole that civilian harm reporting remains critical to news coverage about war—particularly when alleged against the U.S. military. They also overwhelmingly believe that the U.S. media has a responsibility to investigate all major harm events. That was the clear finding of a major survey commissioned for this report.

Yet, examining actual reporting on civilian harm in the war against ISIS indicates that without a mandate from managing editors, U.S. newsrooms often failed to meet their own expectations and standards. In the first two years of the war, for example, there was almost no coverage by major newsrooms of civilian harm resulting from U.S. actions in Iraq and Syria.

This report seeks to better understand the circumstances in which newsrooms cover civilian harm in the digital age—particularly at a time of shrinking budgets and competing resource pressures. In a war where reporters' lives were at risk—including from so-called Islamic State—how important was field reporting to covering this issue? In the absence of personnel in the field, how well did reporters back home keep the issue of civilian harm in the public eye? A review of U.S. Department of Defense press conferences found that the Pentagon press corps rarely raised civilian harm during hundreds of encounters with officials—believing perhaps it was the job of those in the field, even when such personnel were infrequently deployed on the ground.

## Media best practice

### ***Foreign Policy*: December 3rd 2014.**

The first major U.S. media report on civilian casualties during the war against ISIS appeared in *Foreign Policy* in December 2014, four months after fighting had begun. Authored by British investigative journalist Chris Woods, the article noted that at least 150 civilians had already been locally reported killed in Iraq and Syria, in more than 1,100 airstrikes. Woods also founded Airwars, which in early 2015 began systematically tracking civilian harm claims in Iraq and Syria—primarily at first as a resource for reporters, who were then largely absent from the field.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/03/pentagon-in-denial-about-civilian-casualties-of-u-s-airstrikes-in-iraq-and-syria/>



Among media professionals themselves, there is a strong belief that field reporters should be primarily responsible for covering civilian casualty issues. The subject is also fundamental to understanding the strategies, policies, and operations of the U.S. government and military, they said. But an “accountability beat” in news reporting that fact-checks both U.S. military claims about civilian harm events—and presumptions of low casualties from the use of precision munitions—has also largely been absent, reporters believe.

Institutional segregation between defense reporters who are focused on the tactics and capabilities of modern warfare, and the self-driven and siloed efforts of those journalists who document civilian harm events, also places at risk more critical and insightful reporting on military doctrine and strategy, as it relates to civilian harm.

Having identified key challenges associated with the coverage of civilian casualties in current U.S. wars, this report offers practical suggestions for improvement, aimed mainly at managing editors.

A civilian-harm focused mandate at U.S. media outlets would help marshal the necessary resources to overcome a lack of access and security on-the-ground, as well as a lack of timely responsiveness by the U.S. military to reporters’ information requests. Proper resourcing for reporters in the field—and in its absence, a clear designation of responsibility for home reporters—would also ensure that this critical topic is better covered.

Conflict-focused journalists often question the accuracy of U.S. military reporting on civilian harm, even as they admit to depending significantly upon that same resource. There is a desire among reporters, therefore, for reputable alternative civilian harm counts that could be used to credibly report on the subject during U.S. military conflicts—whether from independent monitors such as Airwars; from international agencies; or perhaps via a media industry-wide effort.

Finally, media professionals are clear that they wish for more specialized training—not just on the specifics of civilian harm coverage, but on wider issues including international humanitarian law and the effects of munitions.

Highlighted throughout this report are some examples of the best civilian harm coverage by U.S. media professionals during the recent war against ISIS. Their reporting ensured that the U.S. military and government were better held to account, and that the experiences of affected Iraqi and Syrian communities could be understood by the U.S. public. Their outstanding work epitomizes what civilian harm coverage in war can be.



## Key Findings:

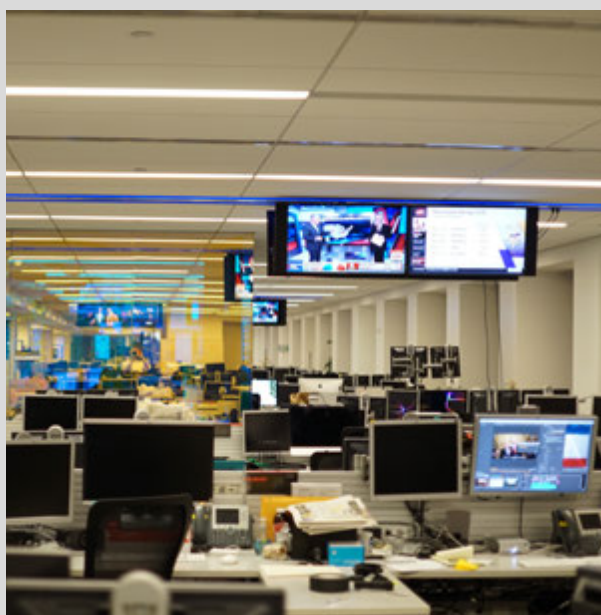
- A significant majority of media professionals believe that it is the responsibility of U.S. news outlets to investigate all major cases of civilian harm during war. Civilian harm is a very important issue and critical to the coverage of both war and oversight of U.S. government and military strategy, policy, and operations, they said. Yet, news reporting on civilian casualties from international and U.S. actions, was found to be largely absent during key periods of the conflict.
- Poor civilian harm coverage was often linked to the limited presence of reporters on-the-ground, except during key engagements; or to a lack of adequate sourcing. Yet, field reporters write or create most of the copy or content about civilian harm compared to their colleagues. They are also considered to be best suited to do so. Pentagon reporters say, for example, that they rely on field reporters to cover civilian harm—a factor to take into account when understanding challenges in Pentagon press pool engagements on the issue.
- Civilian casualty coverage by field reporters is not adequately prioritized in the pool of available resources. Under-prioritized and under-resourced field reporting contributed to an inability to properly cover the issue—especially from U.S.-led actions in denied areas controlled by so-called Islamic State.
- Civilian harm coverage lacks a relevant mandate by managing editors at major U.S. media institutions, industry professionals say. They also feel that the subject is generally siloed, fragmented, and largely self-directed by individual journalists. In the face of diminished field reporting in the war against ISIS, coverage of civilian harm was not properly coordinated by managing editors, and “internal politics,” mindsets, and biases risked affecting coverage, they added.

## Media best practice

### ***The Wall Street Journal:* January 6th 2015.**

Regular newsdesk coverage of reported civilian harm from U.S. actions against ISIS was a rarity throughout the war, studies indicate. In early 2015, Julian E. Barnes, reporting remotely from Washington, D.C., revealed that the Coalition was investigating three possible civilian harm incidents. This marked the first official admission of concern by the U.S.-led alliance.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-acknowledges-probes-of-civilian-casualties-in-iraq-syria-1420582071>



- The Pentagon press corps rarely verbally inquired about Coalition-related civilian harm during the conflict against ISIS, even when reporting from the field was limited. Department of Defense officials were for example the first to raise civilian harm in three-quarters of the press conferences or briefings in which the issue was broached since 2014.
- Challenges in the coverage of civilian harm were not solely due to resourcing or job demarcation issues, but also to sourcing concerns. In the absence of reliable or credible information about civilian harm via field reporters, media professionals say they increasingly rely upon open-source material and analysis, inter-governmental and humanitarian organizations, as well as international or regional monitors to collect and vet civilian harm information for them.
- Reporting on civilian harm by friendly forces may also be more challenging or a point of discomfort in U.S. newsrooms. Media professionals who were surveyed say they considered media reporting on civilian harm caused by so-called Islamic State, by Syrian government forces, or by the Russia military to have been conducted more satisfactory than coverage of civilian harm caused by the U.S., by other Coalition partners, and by the Iraqi military.
- Surveyed journalists also say that they rely on specialist non-governmental organizations—like Airwars—that monitor civilian harm outside the conflict zone, as well as those that investigate it on the ground, more than they rely on “official U.S. government or military” sources, evidencing the significant role that these organizations play in reporting on the topic. They also say that these organizations and eyewitness accounts have more credibility than “official U.S. government or military” sources regarding civilian harm.
- As a result, media professionals expressed support for a reputable and commonly accepted industry-wide methodology or standards for alternative civilian harm counts that can be used to help credibly report on the topic during conflicts.
- There are also concerns that the U.S. military’s responses—or lack thereof—to journalists’ information requests thwarted news coverage about civilian harm claims or made it more onerous and resource intensive to report on. Industry professionals said that the military’s responses were often not complete or timely enough to meet deadlines; and that as journalists they then had to conduct extensive and costly investigations or follow-ups to obtain the information required to perform due diligence.
- Finally, more than half of U.S. media professionals who were surveyed said that they are not sufficiently prepared to report on civilian harm with regard to specific related disciplines, and that they would benefit from training in such disciplines.

### III. Recommendations



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A journalist offers a boy living with his family in West Mosul brief instruction in videography, April 2017. Image © Kainoa Little

### III. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report—and the collective views of U.S. media professionals themselves—the following recommendations are aimed primarily at managing editors as practical suggestions towards improving reporting on the vital topic of civilian harm in future conflicts.

#### **Recommendation I: A Clear Editorial Mandate for Civilian Harm Coverage at Media Outlets**

Consistent, comprehensive, and balanced reporting on civilian harm is impossible without a relevant editorial mandate by managing editors or executives at major U.S. media organizations. Similar mandates in the past have improved news coverage of important topics. At the *Washington Post*, for example, editorial mandates by managing editors led to better coverage and tracking of civilians killed by U.S. law enforcement; or regarding detainees held at the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Without an editorial mandate, U.S. media professionals say that reporting on civilian harm is predominantly self-driven, as well as siloed or fragmented among various components of major news organizations. Because of a lack of coordination among relevant foreign bureaus that cover the subject in Iraq and Syria, as well as newsrooms that cover the U.S. military and defense at home, “internal politics” can overtake reporting, U.S. media professionals say.

As a result, coverage of civilian harm amounts to reporting on isolated incidents, leading to absent coverage during key portions of a conflict, and not providing enough context for what civilian harm indicates about the wars in which the U.S. is engaged.

The nature of civilian harm reporting is iterative and resource intensive, due in part to the lack of timely responsiveness by the U.S. military regarding journalists’ information requirements; as well as the logistical, access, and security challenges associated with any conflict. Journalists at U.S. media organizations, therefore, need clear support from editors to devote time and resources to covering the issue.

Journalists also note what they describe as a lack of accessibility to information related to civilian harm by the U.S. military, which may operate in tandem with commonly held biases or mindsets—including by managing editors and executives at major U.S. news media organizations. Such mindsets and biases concern, for example, the presumed accuracy of U.S. airpower and associated claims of low civilian harm. As one reporter at a major U.S. newspaper said, “It takes a lot more stakeholders to take on the Pentagon, and it takes a bigger decision to take on the implicit bias of assumptions of precision.” Such biases and mindsets also included presumptions about the unreliability of on-the-ground sources.

The “accountability beat” that fact-checks both U.S. military claims about civilian harm events, and more broadly the presumption of precision from munitions deployed in new ways—for example in urban environments with higher population densities—was also largely absent, U.S. news media professionals said. Airpower dominated conflicts, especially when conducted without large contingents of U.S. ground forces, necessitate even greater scrutiny and more consistent oversight by major media institutions.

Since civilian harm investigations by the Coalition are triggered in part by coverage by major U.S. media, a lack of reporting begets a vicious cycle, U.S. media professionals also say. If the major media does not cover civilian harm, then the Pentagon sees itself as not sufficiently compelled to investigate cases alleged against U.S.-led or U.S. unilateral actions.

A relevant editorial mandate on civilian harm at news outlets would marshal the necessary resources and time to make on-the-ground trips; to develop sources in anticipation of any impending lack of access; to pursue litigation to obtain public documents; to perform open-source investigations and analysis of civilian harm claims; and to perform due diligence in negotiations with the U.S. military for corroborating facts surrounding civilian harm allegations against it.

## Media best practice

### **CNN: January 13th 2016.**

The Pentagon press pool could have played a more significant role holding the U.S. Department of Defense to account for civilian harm, this report finds. There were key exceptions. In January 2016, CNN’s Pentagon correspondent Barbara Starr revealed that the U.S. had been prepared to tolerate up to 50 civilian casualties in a targeted strike on an ISIS bank in Mosul.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2016/01/11/politics/us-bombs-millions-isis-currency-supply/index.html>



The screenshot shows a news article from CNN. At the top, there is a banner for "U.S. MILITARY" with a background image of a military vehicle. Below this, the article title is "First on CNN: U.S. bombs 'millions' in ISIS currency holdings". The author is identified as Barbara Starr, CNN Pentagon Correspondent, with a small profile picture. The article was updated on January 13, 2016. Below the text is a map of Iraq, with the city of Mosul highlighted in yellow. Other cities shown on the map include Baghdad, Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.

## Recommendation II: Persistent and Well-Resourced Field Reporting and Balanced On-The-Ground Sourcing

The presence of properly resourced and prioritized field reporters remains a key part of ensuring that civilian harm coverage is consistent and balanced. Without adequate resourcing or prioritization, reporting on civilian casualties from U.S. actions risks being fragmented, one-sided, or even non-existent.

There is widespread consensus among U.S. media professionals regarding the continued and critical importance of on-the-ground and field reporting when covering the issue of civilian casualties in war. Airpower dominated conflicts in particular, with associated presumptions of precision and low collateral damage, are prone to unchecked analytical assumptions, without on-the-ground reporting to fact-check civilian harm allegations and U.S. government counter-claims.

Not only is the reporting of civilian harm a key component of conflict coverage, but field reporters and editors are best suited to write copy or to create content about civilian harm, industry professionals told Airwars. Field reporters write or create most of the copy or content about civilian harm issues compared to colleagues. Yet, U.S. media professionals also say that under-prioritized and under-resourced field reporting contributed to their inability to adequately cover civilian harm during the war in Syria and Iraq—especially from U.S.-led actions in denied areas controlled by so-called Islamic State.

More than half of U.S. media professionals who were surveyed said that field reporting regarding civilian harm was not adequately prioritized in the pool of available resources at the media outlets they worked for. Inadequate resourcing for field reporting on civilian harm meant existing bureaus and staff were unable to devote enough time to develop source networks; or to overcome access, security, and logistical challenges that civilian harm coverage requires, according to those interviewed.

Journalists reflected in interviews that under-resourced field reporting by U.S. media organizations often led to one-sided, or even non-existent civilian harm coverage.

U.S. media organizations rely heavily on freelancers—including local media—for foreign news, for war coverage, and for civilian harm reporting. Any decline in freelance reporting, therefore, results in a shortage of reliable and vetted information coming out of the conflict zone.<sup>2</sup>

While U.S. media professionals do see the under-resourcing of field reporting as part of a larger industry-wide trend, major media outlets were also cited as the primary institutions capable of covering civilian harm. If major U.S. news media do not cover the issues, those interviewed say, smaller organizations are generally incapable of picking up the slack.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Gelling, "Reporting on Syria is Nearly Impossible at this Point," Public Radio International, August 15, 2015, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-08-18/reporting-syria-nearly-impossible-point>.

### **Recommendation III: Coordination of Civilian Harm Coverage by Pentagon Reporters and Those that Cover the U.S. Military Back Home**

While there is consensus that field reporters are best placed to cover civilian harm issues during U.S. wars, this is not always possible. Managing editors should appropriately task and coordinate coverage of civilian harm from home, especially when on-the-ground reporting is diminished during conflicts—as with the war against ISIS.

If the issue is not properly assigned to designated reporting areas—for example, journalists who cover defense or the U.S. military back home—civilian harm coverage can fall through institutional cracks. Pentagon reporters might assume, for example, that field reporters are covering the issue.

Furthermore, veteran U.S. media professionals note that a lack of coordination between reporters who cover the Pentagon or military and those who empirically cover or otherwise document civilian harm events—whether on-the-ground or remotely—engenders a lost opportunity to critically and insightfully integrate reporting on U.S. military doctrine, strategy, and operations as they relate to civilian harm.

### **Recommendation IV: Support for Reputable Initiatives and Standards for Alternative Civilian Harm Counts**

In addition to official tallies provided by the U.S. military, there is support among media professionals for a reputable and commonly accepted industry wide methodology or standards for alternative civilian harm counts, which can be used to help credibly report on the topic during U.S. conflicts.

Reliable and trustworthy enumeration of civilian harm is critical to reporting on the topic, and to understanding its significance in terms of the strategy, policy, and operations of the U.S. government and military. Media professionals note that reputable and trustworthy alternative counts may also incentivize greater responsiveness on the part of the U.S. military to journalists' information requests about civilian harm.

While those interviewed for this report emphasized that they believed the U.S. military is interested in mitigating the loss of civilian life, they also said that its claims about civilian harm were less credible than those of reputable non-governmental and humanitarian organizations—in part because the U.S. military does not in their view consistently track civilian harm.

While not specifically mentioned by reporters, such an independent effort to establish casualty monitoring standards is currently underway by a consortium of international non-governmental organizations that track military conflicts and civilian harm, such as Airwars. The initiative, undertaken by a London-based charitable organization, EveryCasualty Worldwide, seeks to establish a commonly accepted standard and methodology for civilian casualty recording. The effort commenced in 2011, with 44 organizations participating globally in both its consultative and review phases, including the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and the World Health Organization.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> EveryCasualty Worldwide, "Standards for Casualty Recording," 2016, EveryCasualty Worldwide, [https://www.everycasualty.org/downloads/ec/pdf/StandardsforCasualtyRecording-Version1.0\(2016\).pdf](https://www.everycasualty.org/downloads/ec/pdf/StandardsforCasualtyRecording-Version1.0(2016).pdf).

The U.N. is also introducing its own standards on casualty monitoring, via the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). A new technical guidance framework was agreed in Beirut in March 2019, which OHCHR is initially rolling out via approved national U.N. monitoring agencies, such as the U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq.

Journalists remark that a reputable media industry-wide consortium might be one solution to the increasing requirements and challenges of covering the subject adequately in future conflicts. For instance, some suggest as a possibility pooling resources to vet civilian harm claims in airpower dominated and inaccessible conflict zones—like the war against so-called Islamic State.

## **Recommendation V: Training in Disciplines Related to Civilian Harm Reporting**

The issue of civilian harm can touch on many disciplines within journalism, and might have far reaching implications for victims and perpetrators; for reporters; for news organizations; and even for national policies.

Yet, more than three-quarters of surveyed journalists say they have never received training on how to cover civilian harm in military conflicts. Those same media professionals also say that they wish for such training, and that it would benefit both them and their coverage.

Interviewed media professionals reflected that staff layoffs and other industry-wide trends have left many news organizations bereft of the kinds of expertise they need to cover conflict and civilian harm both critically and insightfully. More than half said, for example, that they were not sufficiently prepared to report on civilian harm with regard to the military technologies that cause it.

Without knowledge and expertise about military operations, policies, and strategy, veteran reporters note that coverage of wars and civilian harm risks getting caught up in prevailing mindsets and body counts.

Veteran U.S. media professionals also say that training staff and freelance journalists about weapons platforms, munition damage assessments, intelligence cycles, and other relevant disciplines would provide for better coverage about civilian harm. They are also calling for training to be offered on how to best engage with the U.S. military and other government components, when seeking information regarding civilian harm and issues related to international humanitarian law.

Fluency in open source collection—including social media investigation and analysis—as well as training on security controls when dealing with sources in hostile environments, are also viewed by industry professionals as critical; as are trainings in safety protocols for reporters on-the-ground, and on the ethics of dealing with human sources in war zones.



# IV. Report



## IV. Report

### 1. Introduction: The War against ISIS and Reported Civilian Harm

The United States-led war against so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (also known as ISIS and ISIL) has lasted longer than World War I and involved what both U.N. officials and U.S. commanders have described as the most significant urban fighting since World War II.<sup>4</sup>

In summer 2014, former U.S. President Barack Obama informed the American public that he had ordered airstrikes against the terrorist group in Iraq.<sup>5</sup> By that fall, he notified the U.S. Congress of his intent to conduct long-term military action against so-called Islamic State in Syria as well—primarily by means of airstrikes and actions by U.S. special forces.

The stated goal of the war was to “degrade and ultimately destroy” so-called Islamic State, which initially occupied 34,000 square-miles between western Syria and eastern Iraq, with an estimated eight to 10 million civilians under its control.<sup>6</sup>

The U.S. military designated its international coalition for operations against ISIS, the Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), or as it was more commonly known, “the Coalition.” Under CJTF-OIR, 14 nations including the U.S. conducted a total of 14,570 air and artillery strikes in Iraq, and 19,785 in Syria to June 2019.<sup>7</sup>

The overall cost to non-combatants has been significant, with thousands reportedly killed by so-called Islamic State and local ground forces. In addition, according to Airwars data, locally alleged civilian deaths from U.S.-led Coalition airstrikes numbered up to 29,300 in almost 3,000 claimed incidents. As of May 31, 2019, Airwars estimates that at least 7,978 non-combatants had likely died as a result of U.S.-led actions. The Coalition itself has conceded at least 1,302 deaths by that same date.<sup>8</sup>

Given the significant scale of the conflict, Airwars commissioned this report to qualitatively and quantitatively examine major U.S. media coverage of civilian harm during the war against ISIS—and to offer evidence-based recommendations to editors to help improve on future reporting of civilian harm during conflicts. The report centers upon some of the most comprehensive canvassing ever conducted of U.S. conflict and national security correspondents on the challenges of reporting on civilian harm during war.

<sup>4</sup> U.N. *Daily News*, “Recovery in Iraq’s War-Battered Mosul is a ‘Tale of Two Cities,’ UN country coordinator says,” U.N. Daily News, Issue DH/7467, August 8, 2017, <https://www.un.org/News/dh/pdf/english/2017/08082017.pdf>;

Jim Michaels, “Iraqi Forces in Mosul See Deadliest Urban Combat Since World War II,” *USA Today*, March 30, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/03/29/united-states-mosul-isis-deadly-combat-world-war-ii/99787764/>.

<sup>5</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President,” The White House, August 7, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/08/07/statement-president>.

<sup>6</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on ISIL,” White House, September 10, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isis-1>.

<sup>7</sup> CJTF-OIR, “Fact Sheet,” CJTF-OIR, July 17, 2017, [https://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/20170717- Updated Mission Statement Fact Sheet.pdf](https://www.inherentresolve.mil/Portals/14/Documents/Mission/20170717-Updated%20Mission%20Statement%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf);

Airwars, “US-led Coalition in Iraq and Syria.”

<sup>8</sup> CJTF-OIR, “Monthly Civilian Casualty Report,” <https://www.inherentresolve.mil/Media-Library/News-Releases/Article/1862027/combined-joint-task-force-operation-inherent-resolve-monthly-civilian-casualty/>

Authored by the American investigative journalist Alexa O'Brien, the report is funded by the Reva and David Logan Foundation in the U.S. and the J. Leon Philanthropy Council in the United Kingdom. Airwars itself is a collaborative, not-for-profit organization aimed at tracking, assessing and archiving reported civilian harm claims from military actions in airpower dominated conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria, and Libya.

Reporting on civilian casualties in the war against so-called Islamic State has often been fraught. Declining foreign bureaus and newsroom staff at U.S. media outlets; a ferocious news cycle dominated by domestic politics; the quandary of credible sourcing for civilian casualty claims; little opportunity to embed with U.S. troops on-the-ground; and the expense and risk of security and logistics for reporters in the field in a war with fluid frontlines, and extremists and militants who target and kill journalists; have all contributed to a very challenging environment.

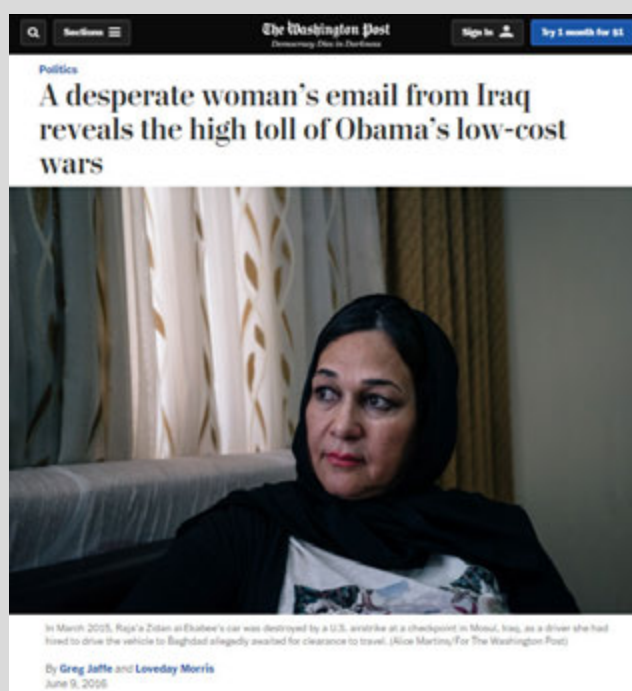
Coverage of civilian harm by major U.S. media outlets was at times exceptional during the conflict against ISIS. However, studies commissioned by Airwars evidence that reporting on civilian harm was at times non-existent or extremely limited during key periods. In the absence of relevant editorial mandates within newsrooms, reporting on civilian harm was largely driven by self-directed journalists, who increasingly came to rely on open source information—from commercially accessible satellite imagery, from social media, and from organizations like Airwars. These and other challenges that the U.S. media faced covering civilian harm in the airpower-dominated war against ISIS are outlined in the report that follows—along with recommendations to editors of suggested improvements.

## Media best practice

### **Washington Post: June 9th 2016.**

In a key investigation which combined both field and home reporting, the *Washington Post's* Greg Jaffe and Loveday Morris published a piece in June 2016, examining a case in which a number of civilians had been killed during a Coalition strike on an ISIS checkpoint. Nine months earlier, U.S. Central Command had already confirmed four civilian deaths in the incident—the first concession of non-combatant harm in Iraq since the war had begun. Officials raised the tally to eleven killed, following the *Post's* investigation.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-desperate-womans-email-from-iraq-reveals-the-high-toll-of-obamas-low-cost-wars/2016/06/09/3e572976-2725-11e6-b989-4e5479715b54\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-desperate-womans-email-from-iraq-reveals-the-high-toll-of-obamas-low-cost-wars/2016/06/09/3e572976-2725-11e6-b989-4e5479715b54_story.html)



## Scope of Report

This project represents the first comprehensive analysis of U.S. media coverage of civilian harm in the recent war against so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

It includes two studies on the frequency and character of existing U.S. newspaper coverage of civilian harm during separate periods of the conflict; and another study examining references to civilian harm at every Pentagon press briefing since the conflict began in August 2014. All three studies were commissioned by Airwars—two specifically for this report.

The study also includes almost one hundred survey responses, collected via a confidential questionnaire and separately during at-length interviews, about civilian harm and conflict reporting. These are drawn from U.S. media professionals across the field, with a particular emphasis on field reporters and defense correspondents.

### Survey

In order to better understand the circumstances in which U.S. media outlets do or do not cover civilian harm during conflicts, Airwars canvassed hundreds of media professionals, who reported on the war against so-called Islamic State at every major U.S. newspaper, wire service, network and cable news channel, as well as at other prominent digital publications.

More than 90 percent of respondents had covered civilian harm issues in the conflict. A third were primarily field reporters—and almost three-quarters of them had covered the war from Syria, Iraq (including Kurdistan), and/or Turkey. Half covered the war remotely, most of them from the U.S.

More than half of the respondents worked in print and/or digital news media, and a third in television or video. The remainder worked in audio or radio or as photojournalists. More than half identified as staff, and a third as freelancers.

Their range of experiences evenly spanned the gamut—from those at the very beginning of their news media careers, to veterans of more than twenty years, as well as those who had also covered other military conflicts.

### In-depth Interviews

In addition to the survey, twenty-seven members of the U.S. media—including print journalists, photojournalists, videographers, producers, and editors at major U.S. newspapers, network and cable news outlets, and prominent digital media including defense publications—were interviewed at length.

FIGURE 1.

Area	Defense Industry	1	Outlet	Books	2	Employment	Freelance	9
	Iraq	8		Cable TV	5		Staff	18
	National Security	8		Digital Publication	12	Format	Photo	2
	Pentagon	6		Magazine	2		Print	23
	Syria	12		Network TV	3		Video	8
	Turkey	3		Newspaper	13			
		Wire Service		2				

## The U.S.-led Coalition: 2014-2019

Self-reporting on civilian harm by the U.S.-led alliance was at first sporadic. In December 2016, however, the Coalition began systematically and publicly reporting on each civilian harm allegation it had assessed—eventually revealing details of more than 2,200 reviewed incidents, and confirming more than 1,300 deaths from its own actions. This approach contrasted sharply with previous U.S. conflicts. In 2003 for example, U.S. Army General Tommy Franks had told reporters after the invasion of Iraq that “We don’t do body counts.” The U.S. media was slow to adapt to this more open recent approach from from U.S. military officials—with the Coalition’s monthly civilian casualty counts rarely reported by major media.

Twenty had covered the conflict in Syria and Iraq from the field; fourteen covered U.S. national security or the Pentagon from Washington, D.C., and at least eight had covered other military conflicts.

In addition, eight experts on civilian casualty monitoring and assessments, weapons platforms and munition damage assessments, international humanitarian law, U.S. government policies regarding civilian casualties, and industry advocates for freelance war correspondents were also interviewed, bringing the total number to 35.

### Review of Major U.S. Newspapers

Airwars commissioned two studies examining major U.S. newspaper reporting on civilian harm during the conflict. The first, a 2017 unpublished study by postgraduate researchers at American University’s School of International Service in Washington, D.C., was completed prior to the commissioning of this report.<sup>9</sup>

For the second, a total of 3,066 articles published between October 1, 2016 and March 31, 2017 in five major U.S. newspapers—*The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *USA Today*—were reviewed for mentions of civilian casualties from international actions in the recent war in Syria and Iraq. Some 121 unique news articles were found to have explicit mentions of civilian harm from international actions and were further examined for the characteristics of those references (See Appendix).

### Review of Civilian Harm Mentions at Pentagon Press Conferences and Briefings

Some 919 Pentagon press conferences or briefings had occurred from the beginning of the war against so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq to the end of 2018—based on a review of transcripts available on the U.S. Department of Defense website. Each transcript was checked against an agreed list of 37 expressions relating to civilian harm (See Appendix).

The Airwars study found that 175 press conferences contained some mention of civilian harm relating to the war against so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. These press conferences or briefings were then further examined for the characteristics of these references.

<sup>9</sup> Heiden, K., Longenhagen, S., Macar, K., Mick, L., Ryder, J., Scalzo, K., Sinacore, B., & Youhana, R. (2017). *Airstrikes: On the Ground and in the News: American University Spring 2017 Practicum*. The study was supervised by Dr. Jeffrey Bachman, director of the Ethics, Peace, and Human Rights graduate program.

## 2. The Importance of Civilian Harm Reporting in U.S. Media Coverage of War

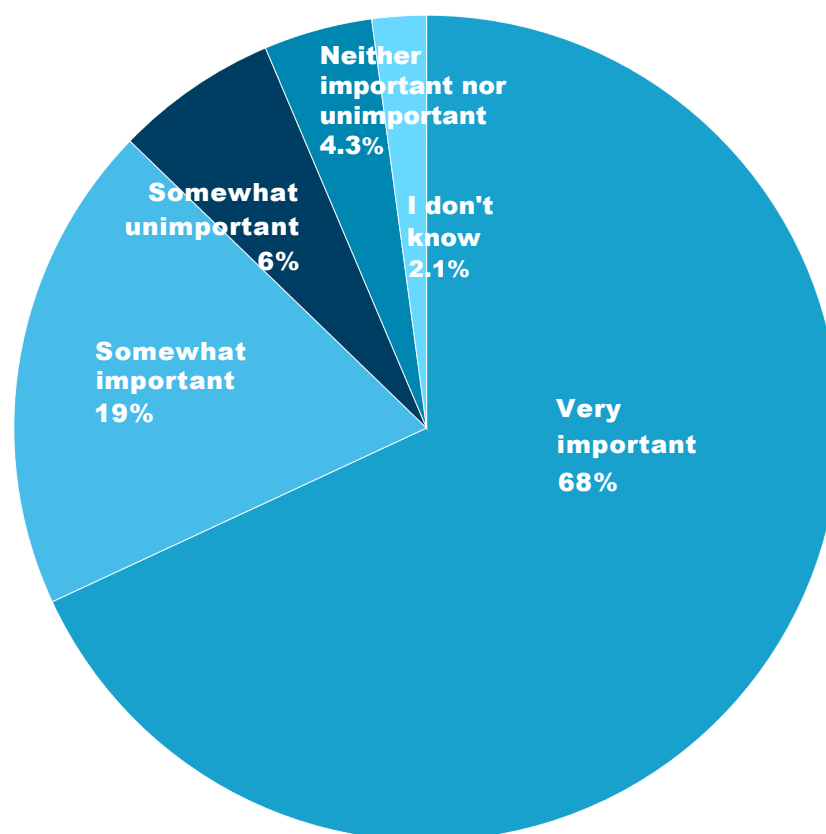
All types of media professionals in U.S. newsrooms—from correspondents abroad, to defense and general-desk reporters back home—regard civilian harm coverage as a key component of war reporting, foreign policy news copy, and investigative stories that provide oversight into government activities and operations, research conducted for this report confirms.

This finding generally tracks with recent polling that suggests the U.S. public is itself sensitized to the issue—with 64 percent of surveyed Americans noting in May 2019 that “The U.S. should not use airstrikes if it means killing innocent civilians.”<sup>10</sup>

More than two thirds of U.S. media professionals, who were surveyed for this report, say that civilian harm reporting is *very* important, with a further 19 percent saying it is *somewhat* important. Civilian harm “is integral to war coverage,” commented a cable news journalist. “Extremely important,” wrote another from a major U.S. newspaper.

FIGURE 2.

### How important is the topic of civilian harm in coverage of the recent war occurring in Syria and/or Iraq?



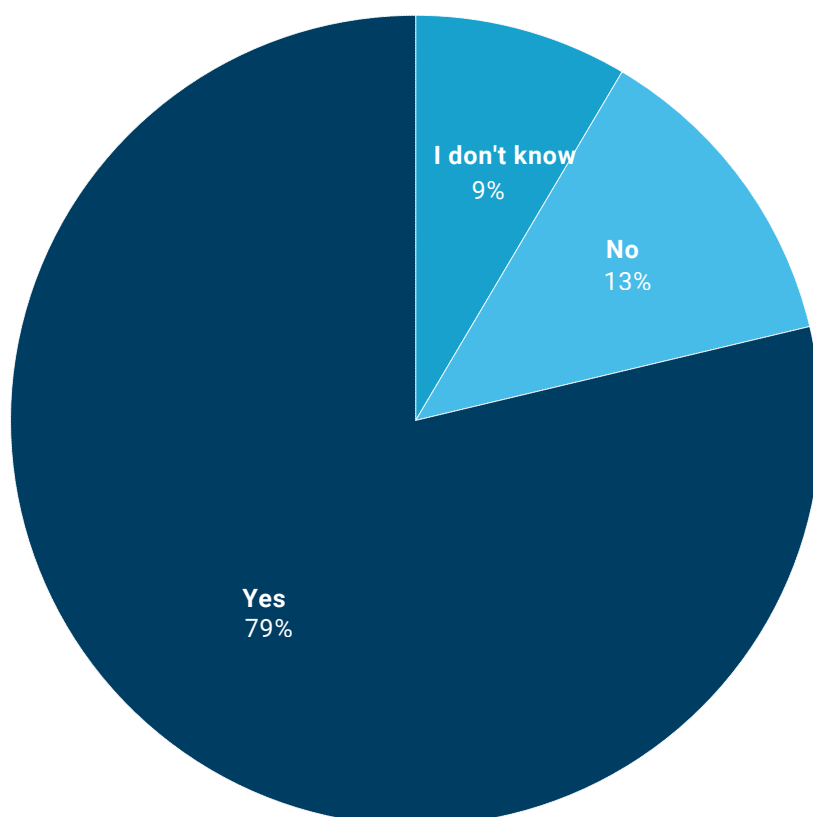
Coverage of civilian harm is also critical to broader war reporting, industry professionals say. A journalist who covers the military for a defense publication noted, “I’m a war reporter, I’m covering the people who conduct these conflicts. But I’m also covering the people, who are victims. I think it’s very important to see that discrepancy, because at the end of the day I do report on war, and I have to cover the entire breadth of that.”

<sup>10</sup> James Ron, Howard Lavine, and Shannon Golden, “No, Americans Don’t Support Airstrikes that Kill Civilians, Even When They Target Terrorists,” *Washington Post*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/06/no-americans-dont-support-airstrikes-that-kill-civilians-even-when-they-target-terrorists/>.

Another national security journalist at a prominent digital outlet said, “If you’re covering a war, civilian casualties is a major part of it. It’s how civilians experience the war. And if you’re a U.S. outlet and your government did something, I think it’s important to look into it.”

FIGURE 3.

**Is it the responsibility of U.S. media outlets to investigate all major cases of civilian harm in the recent war occurring in Syria and/or Iraq?**



When asked if it was the responsibility of U.S. media outlets to investigate all major cases of civilian harm in the recent war occurring in Syria and/or Iraq, more than three-quarters of journalists say, “Yes.”

“Journalism 101 always taught me that the most significant stories in our lifetimes always involves death,” noted a reporter who covers the U.S. military for a defense publication. “If something catastrophic happens, then you should cover it.”

Journalists also reflected that civilian harm coverage was an antidote to the distance that U.S. airpower dominated warfare might have in the minds of the public. “I always see the civilian casualty stories as an important way to remind people, ‘Hey, this is not antiseptic—for all the technological wizardry that the U.S. military has...it has a real cost and kids are being killed. Innocent people are being killed as a result of this war” said a reporter who covered the conflict for a major U.S. newspaper.

Media professionals considered reporting on civilian harm in the war against so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq as key to their duty to fact-check and scrutinize the activities and claims of the U.S. government and military. A foreign correspondent who covers the war for a major U.S. newspaper said, “It is the job of the media to scrutinize American power, wherever it falls, be it in Washington or Mosul.”

## Media best practice

### *Los Angeles Times*: May 1st 2017.

The most significant deployment of field reporters by major U.S. media organizations took place during the battle for Mosul, Iraq. Molly Hennessy-Fiske and William Hennigan of the *Los Angeles Times* filed several major stories noting concerns about high civilian casualties during that campaign—and also successfully pursued the Coalition on a number of specific cases, in order to secure official recognition of civilian harm.

<https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-coalition-airstrikes-2017-story.html>



Another reporter who covers the military for another major U.S. newspaper noted, "It's impossible to conduct the war—any war on-the-ground or in the air—without civilian casualties. But I felt where we could bring an oversight capability was that the U.S. military was making these outlandish claims about how few civilian casualties there were. That, to me, minimized the cost of war. I felt it was our responsibility to provide a correctness."

Journalists also said that civilian harm reporting brings oversight to government and military strategy, policy, and operations. "I think the U.S. military sometimes needs reminding of the impact that bad decision making or bad execution of a mission or whatever can have morally, but also strategically," said a reporter who covers defense at a major U.S. newspaper, noting also that civilian harm was counterproductive to U.S. military objectives on-the-ground.

The critical function that the U.S. media plays in Congressional oversight of the military was also emphasized by Daniel Mahanty, director of the U.S. Program at the Washington D.C. based non-profit, the Center for Civilians in Conflict. Mahanty remarked that 2017 reporting by Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal in *The New York Times Magazine* was a "watershed moment for not only Congress, but also the Department of Defense."<sup>11</sup> The investigation is understood to have played a role in convincing Congress to tighten scrutiny of Department of Defense monitoring of civilian harm, for example.

Reporting on civilian harm also scrutinizes and fact-checks the presumed accuracy and precision of U.S. military airpower, other journalists said. "I think that military conflicts get a great deal of attention, but not in the granular way that civilian casualties require," said author and war correspondent Nick McDonell. "There is a lot of noise being made by people in positions of authority about how few civilians are getting killed in a larger context and how the mission is important, but necessary and so on. And that narrative is powerful and needs disruption," McDonell added.

The documentary significance of civilian harm reporting in the war against ISIS was also emphasized by reporters at major media outlets. A journalist who covers Syria for a major U.S. newspaper said, "My mission, my job is to tell the world what is happening." A journalist who covers Syria for a wire service remarked, "I think this is documenting history...for people to know what happened."

<sup>11</sup> Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal, "The Uncounted," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/16/magazine/uncounted-civilian-casualties-iraq-airstrikes.html>.



### 3. Measuring Expectations Against the Reality of U.S. Civilian Harm Reporting

A majority of U.S. journalists believe that coverage of civilian harm is critical to broader reporting on military conflicts, research conducted for this report found.

Despite this view, actual reporting on civilian casualties by the U.S. media during the war against so-called Islamic State was found to be either absent or nearly so during key periods of the conflict. That was the finding of two separate studies that examined civilian harm coverage by five major U.S. newspapers: the first between October 2015 and March 2016, and a second review covering the same six-month period exactly one year later.<sup>12</sup>

An additional study commissioned by Airwars for this report demonstrates that the Pentagon press corps rarely brought up the subject of civilian harm during hundreds of Department of Defense press conferences since the beginning of hostilities against so-called Islamic State. U.S. military officials were the first to raise the subject of civilian harm in three-quarters of the press conferences or briefings relating to the anti-ISIS war where the issue came up. The Pentagon press corps itself rarely inquired about Coalition-related civilian harm. Even when U.S. military officials overtly flagged the issue, the press verbally followed up at most about half of the time.

Finally, U.S. media professionals who were surveyed said that they found that reporting on civilian harm caused by so-called Islamic State, by Syrian government forces, or by the Russia military, to be more satisfactory than coverage of civilian harm caused by the U.S., by other coalition partners, and by the Iraqi military. This could suggest that reporting on civilian harm by friendly forces may be more challenging; or that mindsets and potential bias may play a role in reduced reporting on civilian harm from U.S. actions.

#### U.S. Newspaper Coverage of Civilian Casualties

##### October 2015 to March 2016: An Absence of Reporting

United States newspaper reporting about civilian harm from U.S.-led actions in Iraq was nearly non-existent for a six-month period of the conflict between October 2015 and March 2016, according to a 2017 unpublished study by postgraduate researchers at American University's School of International Service in Washington, D.C.<sup>13</sup>

The five major U.S. newspapers published just five articles between them on reported civilian harm from strikes in Iraq for the examined period, according to the same study, conducted on behalf of Airwars prior to the commissioning of this report.

The American University study also found that coverage of civilian harm allegations from strikes in two Iraqi provinces was entirely absent for the same period. None of the 102 articles by the five newspapers—that made some reference to civilian harm by any party to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria from strikes—mentioned civilian casualties from U.S.-led actions in Nineveh or Al-Anbar provinces, where Coalition forces were conducting a majority of strikes in Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The *Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *USA Today*.

<sup>13</sup> Heiden et al., *Airstrikes*.

<sup>14</sup> Heiden et al., *Airstrikes*, pp. 38, 43.

The examined period of the American University study witnessed some of the fiercest fighting in and around Ramadi, the capital of Al-Anbar province, between the Iraqi military and so-called Islamic State fighters, with the support of Coalition and Iraqi airpower. The Iraq Army recaptured Ramadi from so-called Islamic State control with the help of U.S.-led actions in December 2015, and fierce fighting also occurred during the examined period between the Iraq Army and ISIS around Fallujah—again with the assistance of U.S.-led forces.<sup>15</sup> Airwars currently estimates that between 87 and 116 civilians likely died in Coalition actions in Al-Anbar province during this absent period.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, Nineveh province also witnessed intense fighting between ISIS and Kurdish Peshmerga forces.<sup>17</sup> The Coalition also declared 572 airstrikes in Mosul between October 1, 2015 and March 31, 2016. In this same period, between 147 and 238 civilians were likely killed by U.S.-led actions in Nineveh, according to Airwars estimates.

U.S. newspaper coverage of strikes in Ar Raqqa governorate, where the U.S. military conducted most of its strikes in Syria for the examined period, was also almost nonexistent. Just four articles by the five newspapers mentioned strikes in Ar Raqqa governorate.<sup>18</sup>

Ar Raqqa governorate, parts of which were under so-called Islamic State control, saw increasing bombardments by both Russia and the U.S.-led Coalition for the examined period.<sup>19</sup> In November 2015, for example, in the wake of terrorist attacks in Paris, France, Coalition actions included a major bombardment of the capital, Raqqa.<sup>20</sup> According to Airwars, between 41 and 43 civilians likely died from alleged U.S.-led actions in Ar Raqqa governorate, Syria, between October 1, 2015 and March 31, 2016.

### *Possible Reasons for Absent Coverage*

The lack of reporting on U.S.-led actions in two key provinces in Iraq, and Ar Raqqa governorate in Syria, for the period examined by the American University study, coincided with a deteriorating security environment for journalists on-the-ground, especially for local media.<sup>21</sup>

Interviews with media professionals and advocates on behalf of freelance war correspondents, conducted for this report, note that U.S. news outlets relied heavily on local media for news about the war and civilian harm during the conflict against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Institute for the Study of War (ISW), "Iraq Situation Report: October 2-5, 2015," Institute for the Study of War, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/iraq%20SITREP%202015-10-05.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Between October 1, 2015 and March 3, 2016.

<sup>17</sup> ISW, "Iraq Situation Report: December 15-21, 2015," ISW, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/iraq%20SITREP%202015-12-21%20high\\_1.png](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/iraq%20SITREP%202015-12-21%20high_1.png); ISW, "Iraq Situation Report: December 22, 2015-January 6, 2016."

<sup>18</sup> Heiden et al., *Airstrikes*, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson Center, "Timeline: U.S. Policy on ISIS," Wilson Center, April 27, 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-us-policy-isis>; Airwars, "A Reckless Disregard for Civilian Lives: Database Indicates Over 1,000 Civilians Credibly Reported Killed in the First Three Months of Russia's Air Campaign in Syria," Airwars, <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Reckless-Disregard.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> See for example CJTF-OIR, "Military strikes continue against ISIL terrorists in Syria and Iraq," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service (DVIDS), November 13, 2015, <https://www.dvidshub.net/news/181849/military-strikes-continue-against-isil-terrorists-syria-and-iraq>; Mark Piggott, "Isis: Jihadi John Confirmed Dead by Militant Islamic Group Daesh in Propaganda Magazine Dabiq," *International Business Times*, January 19, 2016, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/isis-jihadi-john-confirmed-dead-by-militant-islamic-group-daesh-propaganda-magazine-dabiq-1538886>.

<sup>21</sup> Oday Hatem, "In Iraq, Islamic State Exact Heavy Toll on Journalists and Their Families," Committee to Protect Journalists, April 15, 2015, <https://cpj.org/blog/2015/04/in-iraq-islamic-state-exacts-heavy-toll-on-journal.php>.

## Media best practice

### BuzzFeed News: May–November 2017.

For much of the war against ISIS, self-reporting by U.S. pilots and analysts was the primary source of confirmed civilian harm events—followed by field reporting from U.S. correspondents. Mike Giglio of BuzzFeed News secured more admissions of civilian harm incidents than any other reporter—in part because he provided the Coalition’s civilian casualty assessment team with details of problematic events, including witness testimonies and coordinates.

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/mikegiglio/the-us-isnt-paying-for-civilian-deaths-in-iraq-even-when-it>



In both 2015 and 2016, Syria and Iraq were the deadliest places for journalists to operate, with media professionals—including those who disseminate information online—threatened, kidnapped, and killed in relation to their work. In the summer leading up to the start of the period that American University researchers examined, Jalaa al-Abadi, a cameraman for the Nineveh Reports’ Network, was kidnapped and executed by so-called Islamic State, for example.<sup>22</sup>

Since 2014, escalating violence against media professionals in both Syria and Iraq, by ISIS and other militants, had resulted in a decline in those reporting on the conflict from the field, leaving information voids in their wake, according to Reporters Without Borders and interviews conducted for this report.<sup>23</sup>

Restrictions on civilian movement and activities, including for local media and human sources—especially in denied areas under both ISIS control and aerial bombardments—such as was found in Nineveh and Al-Anbar provinces in Iraq, as well as Ar Raqqa governorate in Syria—also likely impacted coverage for the examined period, those interviewed said.

#### October 2016 to March 2017: Improved Yet Clustered Reporting

Airwars commissioned a follow on study, specifically for this report, examining a more intense six-month period of the conflict exactly a year later.

Major U.S. newspaper reporting about civilian harm attributed to U.S.-led actions in Iraq during the later period of the war did improve. At critical points, sustained U.S. and international media coverage of large-scale civilian harm—for example, regarding the heavy assault on West Mosul’s al-Jadida neighborhood in March 2017—is thought to have contributed to a reduction in Coalition munition releases on Mosul, and a similar reduction in civilian casualty claims.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See for example International Federation of Journalists, “93 Media Professionals Killed in 2016,” International Federation of Journalists, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/africa/article/93-media-professionals-killed-in-2016.html>; U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, “UNESCO Condemns Killing of Journalists: Assassinated Journalists in Iraq,” UNESCO, [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco\\_condemns\\_killing\\_of\\_journalists\\_iraq\\_en.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco_condemns_killing_of_journalists_iraq_en.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Reporters Without Borders, “2016 Round-Up: 74 Journalists Killed Worldwide,” Reporters Without Borders, December 19, 2016, <https://rstf.org/en/news/2016-round-74-journalists-killed-worldwide>.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Oakford and Airwars Staff, “Death in the City: High Levels of Civilian Harm in Modern Warfare Resulting from Significant Explosive Weapons Use,” Airwars, May 2018, <https://airwars.org/report/death-in-the-city-high-levels-of-civilian-harm-in-modern-urban-warfare-resulting-from-significant-explosive-weapons-use/>.

However, reporting on civilian harm from international and U.S.-led actions was also nearly absent during two notable portions of this examined period. Furthermore, reporting on just two events represented more than half of all newspaper mentions of civilian harm from U.S.-led actions during this second time frame.

The period between October 2016 to March 2017 saw extremely heavy urban fighting in Iraq—particularly in East and West Mosul. The offensive to retake Iraq’s second largest city from ISIS, where a million civilians reportedly still lived, commenced at the beginning of the examined period. The highest reported level of civilian harm during the entire war against so-called Islamic State in Iraq also occurred during March 2017, the last month of the examined period, according to both public and Coalition casualty estimates.

Airwars tracked between 3,160 and 4,717 locally claimed civilian deaths from US-led actions in Iraq between October 2016 and March 2017, a significant portion in Mosul.<sup>25</sup> The Coalition itself has explicitly conceded 316 civilian deaths from its actions in Iraq during this six-month period.

During the same timeframe, the same five U.S. newspapers published 121 newspaper articles with explicit mentions of civilian harm resulting from international military actions in Iraq and Syria, 42 percent of them mentioning a U.S.-led action.

Between October and December 2016, Russian and Bashar al-Assad government forces were themselves heavily engaged in the battle for East Aleppo, as the U.S.-led Coalition and Iraqi forces fought for control of East Mosul. Yet, in these first three months of the examined period, when major military offensives were underway in both cities, the five U.S. newspapers were almost six times more likely to mention alleged civilian harm from Russian and al-Assad government actions than they were from the U.S.-led Coalition.

A previously published Airwars analysis concluded that “despite often significant differences in tactics and strategy” between Russia and the U.S.-led Coalition, “‘precision’ in and of itself does not lead to lower civilian harm in dense urban battlefields with high fire rates,” and that civilian harm outcomes in Mosul, Raqqa, Aleppo, and Eastern Ghouta were often similar, most likely due to a correlation between the intensity of bombardment, relative to the population density of each city.<sup>26</sup>

FIGURE 4.

### U.S. newspaper articles with mentions of civilian harm from actions in Aleppo and Mosul in 2016.

	Aleppo, Syria	Mosul, Iraq
October	22	0
November	13	5
December	10	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>8</b>

<sup>25</sup> Airwars, “US-led Coalition in Iraq & Syria;” Sarah Almutkar, “U.S. Airstrikes on ISIS Have Killed Hundreds, Maybe Thousands of Civilians,” The New York Times, May 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/25/world/middleeast/airstrikes-iraq-syria-civilian-casualties.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Airwars, “Death in the City: High levels of Civilian Harm in Modern Urban Warfare Resulting from Significant Explosive Weapons Use,” Airwars, May 2018, <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Airwars-Death-in-the-City-web.pdf>.

### U.S. newspaper articles with mentions of civilian harm from actions.

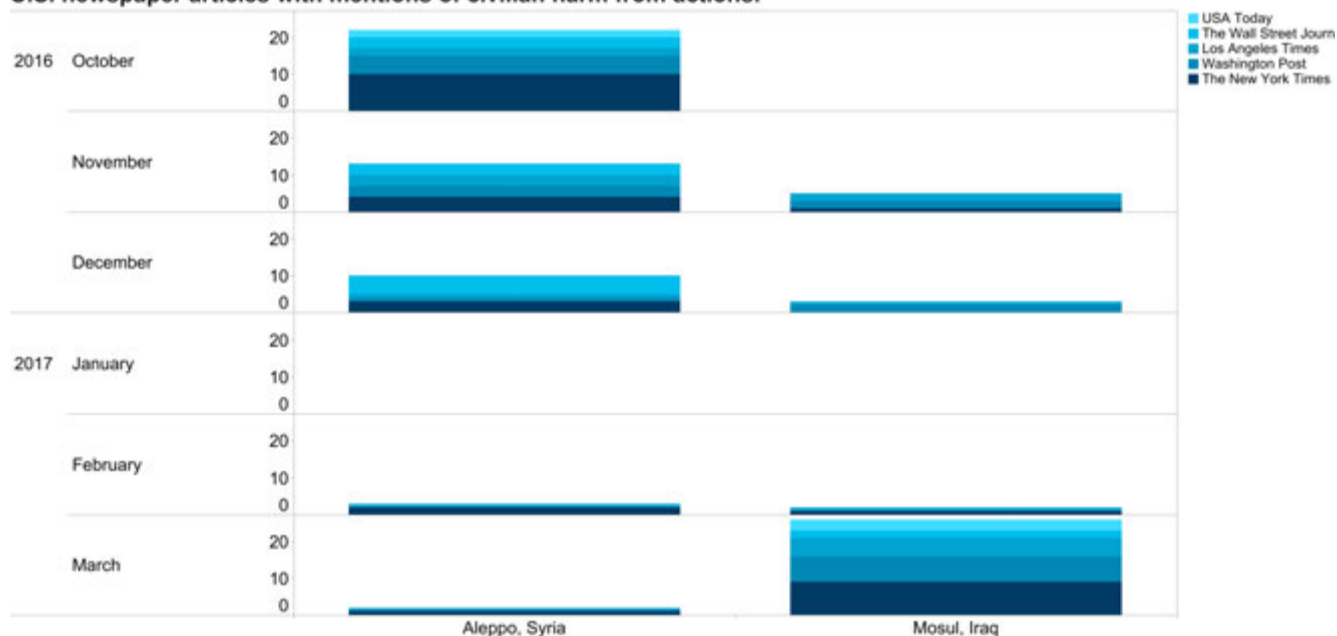


FIGURE 5.

In the case of Mosul, where—according to a later Associated Press field study—at least 9,000 civilians died at the hands of all parties to the fighting, the same civilian casualty event was referenced in at least 17 percent of all reporting by the five U.S. newspapers over the six-month period. This incident was a March 19, 2017 U.S. airstrike in Mosul, Iraq which led to the deaths of at least 105 civilians according to a later Pentagon investigation.<sup>27</sup>

There was also substantial coverage of a U.S. unilateral airstrike on alleged Al Qaeda elements on March 16, 2017 at a mosque in Al Jina, Syria, which led to credible reports of at least 37 civilians killed.<sup>28</sup>

Reporting about these two events represents more than half of total references to civilian harm attributed to U.S.-led actions by the five U.S. newspapers between October 2016 and March 2017.

While substantial mention of two high profile incidents by the U.S. media is understandable, the narrow focus raises serious questions as to whether the five U.S. newspapers were properly tackling the wider occurrence and significance of civilian harm alleged against U.S.-led actions, in terms of their frequency and scale.

Furthermore, a majority of coverage by U.S. newspapers in this second six-month period occurred at key points: between October and December of 2016 and in March 2017. There was almost no U.S. newsroom coverage of civilian harm from international actions for two of these months—January and February 2017—even though Eastern Mosul was captured from so-called Islamic State in late January; and Iraqi forces began their major offensive against Western Mosul in late February.

<sup>27</sup> Airwars, "CI559: Airwars Assessment," Airwars, <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualties/ci559-march-19-2017/>; Susannah George, "Mosul is a Graveyard: Final IS battle Kills 9,000 civilians," Associated Press, December 20, 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/bbea7094fb954838a2fd-c11278d65460>; Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Pentagon acknowledges more civilian deaths in U.S.-led Air Campaign Against Islamic State," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/06/02/pentagon-acknowledges-more-civilian-deaths-in-u-s-led-air-campaign-against-islamic-state/?noredirect=on>.

<sup>28</sup> Airwars, "CS578: Airwars Assessment," Airwars, <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualties/cs578-march-16-2017/>.

FIGURE 6.

**Number of U.S. newspaper articles that mention civilian harm from actions in Syria and Iraq.**

2016	October	31
	November	23
	December	19
2017	January	3
	February	6
	March	39
<b>Total</b>		<b>121</b>

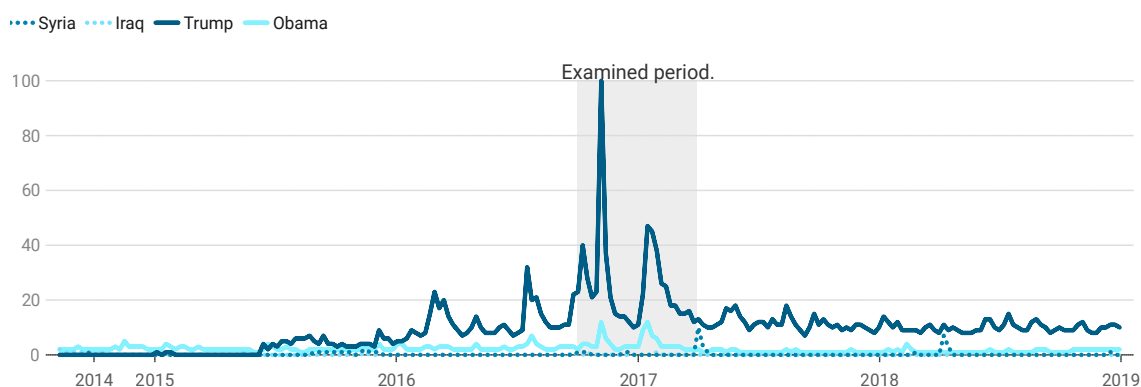
January and February 2017 in fact saw between 912 and 1,166 civilian deaths locally alleged against Coalition actions in Iraq, with explicit confirmation to date by the Coalition of 66 civilians killed as a result of its actions during these two months. In Syria, for the same two months of nearly non-existent coverage of civilian harm from U.S.-led actions, between 321 and 623 civilian fatalities were locally alleged against the Coalition, with the U.S.-led alliance so far confirming that 17 civilians died as a result of its actions during this time period.<sup>29</sup>

*Possible Reasons for Absent Coverage*

Based on interviews conducted for this report, tenable inferences for a lack of reporting by the U.S. media during these two critical months vary.

January and February 2017 coincided with a news cycle dominated by the recent election of U.S. President Donald J. Trump, and related controversies. A comparison of searches in the U.S. for the terms "Iraq," "Syria," "Trump," and "Obama" for the entire period of the war, evidence how the current U.S. president has overwhelmingly dominated the news cycle since his election, and especially in the two months after.<sup>30</sup>

FIGURE 7.

**Political coverage of current U.S. president Donald J. Trump has overpowered news cycle.**

A freelance foreign correspondent, who has worked for multiple prominent U.S. media outlets, said in an interview, "I'm sure it is worse now but in President Trump's first hundred days, I think Trump took up, I forget how much exactly, but it was four times more than any other president during that time period, and it's gotten worse...There is already so little print space or air time for these stories, and it's shrinking."

<sup>29</sup> Airwars, "US-led Coalition in Iraq & Syria."

<sup>30</sup> Google Trends data for search terms "Syria," "Iraq," and "Trump," between August 8, 2014 and December 31, 2018, accessed June 4, 2019, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?-date=2014-08-08%202018-12-31&geo=US&q=Syria,Iraq,Trump>

The perceived redundancy of civilian death stories in the battle for Mosul was another tenable reason provided for the lack of reporting during this period. According to a U.S. media professional, who was surveyed for this report, “The appetite for civilian harm stories from the Mosul offensive declined over time simply because they were so repetitive.”

The battle for Mosul was also extremely lengthy—almost twice as long as the Battle of Stalingrad during World War II. The observed collapse in coverage may reflect a resource challenge for newsrooms, along with concerns at exhausting personnel in the field.

However, it is also possible that the U.S. media simply failed to engage with the very significant civilian harm being reported during this key phase of the war—and to communicate this to readers, listeners and viewers. That the U.S. military itself reported far more on civilian harm from its own actions during this period, should be cause for concern.

### **The Pentagon Press Corps: A Missed Opportunity**

Defense correspondents can play a vital role in holding the U.S. military properly to account. An accredited pool of specialist correspondents, the Pentagon press corps, has access to press conferences and briefings from U.S. military commanders and senior spokespeople. In the absence of extensive field reporting, such media engagements may represent the only opportunity to interact with the U.S. military on civilian harm and other conflict-related concerns.

Yet, according to another study commissioned by Airwars for this report, Pentagon correspondents rarely brought up civilian harm verbally at press conferences or briefings during the war against so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

Less than a fifth of some 919 Pentagon press conferences or briefings—held since the commencement of hostilities in 2014—mentioned civilian harm in some context. The press mentioned civilian harm attributed in some manner to the U.S.-led Coalition three times more than Pentagon officials did. However, Pentagon officials were the first to raise civilian harm in three-quarters of the press conferences or briefings in which the issue was broached since 2014.

When officials did so, they were seven times more likely to reference civilian harm related to ISIS, to Russia, and to the Syrian government of al-Assad, than to the U.S.-led Coalition. Both parties mentioned civilian harm attributed to the U.S.-led coalition during the same press conference in one percent of some 919 such events over the last four-plus years.

The Pentagon press corp rarely verbally inquired about Coalition-related civilian harm. Even when Pentagon officials overtly flagged the issue, the press verbally followed up at most about half of the time. At a March 2016 press conference, for example, the CJT-OIR spokesperson began the session by notifying the press pool about potentially problematic recent U.S.-led actions against so-called Islamic State at the University of Mosul.

## Media best practice

### ***The New York Times Magazine:*** **November 16th 2017.**

The most detailed and influential media report on civilian harm from U.S.-led actions against ISIS appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* in November 2017—the result of an 18 month, predominantly field-based investigation by freelance reporters Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal. Their seminal report, “The Uncounted,” found that the true toll of civilian casualties from Coalition actions was far higher than the U.S. and its allies were admitting. Khan and Gopal’s work was later a key contributor to securing increased Congressional scrutiny of Pentagon civilian harm claims, witness testimonies and coordinates.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/16/magazine/uncounted-civilian-casualties-iraq-airstrikes.html>



The spokesperson told reporters: “In Mosul, we struck an ISIL headquarters and weapons manufacturing facility on Saturday, March 19th. Now, there have been some press reports of civilian casualties as a result of this strike. As with any civilian casualty allegation, we will review the information we have about the incident, and if the information is determined to be credible, we will investigate further.”<sup>31</sup>

At least 15 and as many as 100 civilians had allegedly been killed by U.S.-led actions in the Mosul incident, local reports in preceding days had claimed.<sup>32</sup>

The only press pool follow-up to the spokesperson’s statement in the next hour about possible civilian casualties concerned whether any of the facilities struck by the Coalition in Iraq and Syria that week, including those mentioned for March 19, were thought to be possible chemical weapons facilities.

#### *Civilian Harm Reporting Negatively Impacted by Lack of Pentagon Responsiveness*

Media professionals emphasized in interviews that in addition to field reporting, coverage about civilian harm relies on the U.S. military’s timely responsiveness to information requests from journalists. This was especially the case for remote reporting on civilian casualties in the war against so-called Islamic state in Syria and Iraq.

“The biggest challenge when it comes to civilian casualties is getting the ground truth about what the military knows about the collateral damage they have caused. That was the problem under the Obama administration where they were more cognizant of the consequences of civilian casualties. It is more so now because there is probably a change in tone and approach—not really from the military, because they are doing the same thing that they used to do—but there is less emphasis on getting at that issue,” said a journalist who covers the military for a major U.S. newspaper.

<sup>31</sup> Steve Warren, CJT-OIR Spokesman, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Warren via Teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq,” U.S. Department of Defense, March 21, 2016, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/699172/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-colonel-warren-via-teleconference%E2%80%A6/>.

<sup>32</sup> The incident remains under investigation by the Coalition according to Airwars. Airwars, “CI203: Airwars Assessment,” Airwars, <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualties/ci203-march-19-2016/>.



In cases where the Pentagon press corps inquired about civilian harm, defense officials verbally responded more than 60 percent of the time by generally explaining U.S. military policies concerning civilian harm.

The second most frequent category of response by Pentagon officials was to detail the behavior of non-Coalition belligerents, such as ISIS. In a quarter of instances where defense officials responded verbally to a press inquiry, they said they did not have information or any further details. Finally, in just eight percent of instances where Pentagon officials responded to a press inquiry, they confirmed that the U.S.-led Coalition had killed civilians.

FIGURE 8.

### When the press inquired about civilian harm, U.S. military officials responded by providing...

Commentary on policy	62%
Commentary on belligerent behavior	42%
No information or further details	25%
Awareness of reports of civilian casualties	17%
Confirmation an investigation process underway	19%
Confirmation that Coalition killed civilians	8%
Further explanation of events	2%

U.S. media professionals who were interviewed said that the Pentagon's lack of timely responsiveness to press inquiries and requests negatively impacted their ability to cover civilian harm during the war against ISIS. A freelance correspondent at a major features magazine said that the U.S. military continuously postponed responding, "I think they just thought my deadline would elapse."

A national security reporter at a prominent digital news outlet also remarked that the Coalition may intend to thwart U.S. media investigations into civilian harm allegations by not providing journalists with sufficient information required to perform due diligence: "They are like, 'No, there were no Coalition airstrikes in this area at that time'—but their assessment does not include the Iraqi military. And they could find out, but they don't."

Since civilian harm investigations by the Coalition were triggered in part by coverage from major U.S. media, the phenomenon risks a vicious cycle, those interviewed said. If the major U.S. media does not cover civilian harm, the Pentagon therefore sees itself as not sufficiently compelled to investigate cases alleged against U.S.-led or unilateral U.S. actions.

A number of those interviewed also said they believed the Pentagon exploited the information void from a lack of on-the-ground reporting during the war against ISIS. The U.S. military is "okay with saying, 'He said, she said.' They feel comfortable in that place where...they say 1,100 civilians were killed, and a group like Airwars says—I don't remember what their numbers are—but six times more...and who's right?" posited a journalist who covers the war for a major U.S. newspaper.

Another national security reporter at another prominent digital news outlet said when interviewed that if the U.S. military began properly tracking civilian harm, “they would potentially lose the important political benefit of the doubt.”

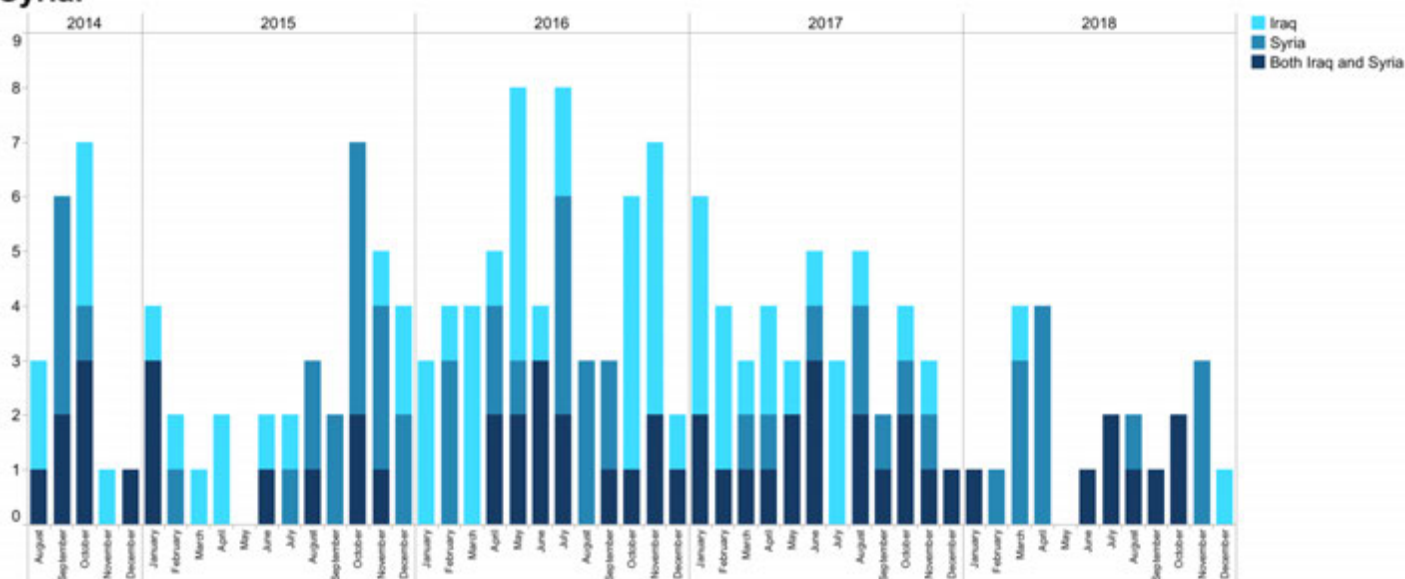
The reasons Pentagon correspondents may not be engaging on civilian harm, U.S. media professionals said in interviews for this report, is due to their being located in Washington, D.C. Even when they are abroad, such correspondents are typically embedded—that is, attached to U.S. military forces in the region, although not usually on the battlefield. So, they rely on field reporting to fact-check U.S. military claims. They also said that choosing to take on the Pentagon included more stakeholders; and required buy in from managing editors at the U.S. media outlets they worked for.

One explanation for poor coverage of civilian harm issues by Pentagon journalists is that they themselves generally depend on field reporting to cover civilian harm in airpower dominated conflicts like the war against ISIS, according to interviews with industry professionals. As a Pentagon reporter noted: “It’s almost impossible for somebody who’s covering the Pentagon—the building itself in Washington, which is where a lot of the Pentagon press are based—to be able to go on-the-ground. Given that we’re not there covering this stuff, we rely on stringers. We can rely on the people we have in the region. We also rely on Amnesty and Airwars and other non-governmental organizations who have people on-the-ground and that’s the way to collect information.”

The same journalist added, “The way the U.S. military wages war, particularly in places where we don’t have as many people on-the-ground...where they talk a lot about their smart bombs that only take out terror targets—a reporter covering this has to approach that sort of thing skeptically. If you don’t have people on-the-ground to go back in and tell you whether or not you ended up killing the people you intended to kill, or whether there were other casualties, the military itself ends up perhaps getting a little bit more careless about that.”

FIGURE 9.

### Pentagon press conferences per month that mention civilian harm in Iraq and/or Syria.



## Reporting on civilian harm by U.S. military allies: 2014-2019

While this report focuses on the role of U.S. media and correspondents, many of its findings and recommendations are likely to apply more broadly. In total, 13 international allies fought with the U.S. against ISIS. Media coverage of civilian harm issues by others varied wildly. Both the Dutch and Canadian media published significant investigations into their own nations' likely responsibility for civilian harm, for example. Yet, journalists from Middle Eastern allies such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan barely made mention of the subject, with a similar non-response from reporters in France. The continued importance of good field reporting—along with clear editorial mandates on the proper coverage of civilian harm—appear to have universal value.

For these reasons, managing editors at media outlets need to appropriately task and coordinate coverage of civilian harm, especially when on-the-ground reporting is diminished during U.S. military conflicts—as with the war against ISIS. If managing editors do not adequately assign, civilian harm coverage can fall through institutional cracks, because Pentagon reporters assume, for example, that field reporters are covering the issue.

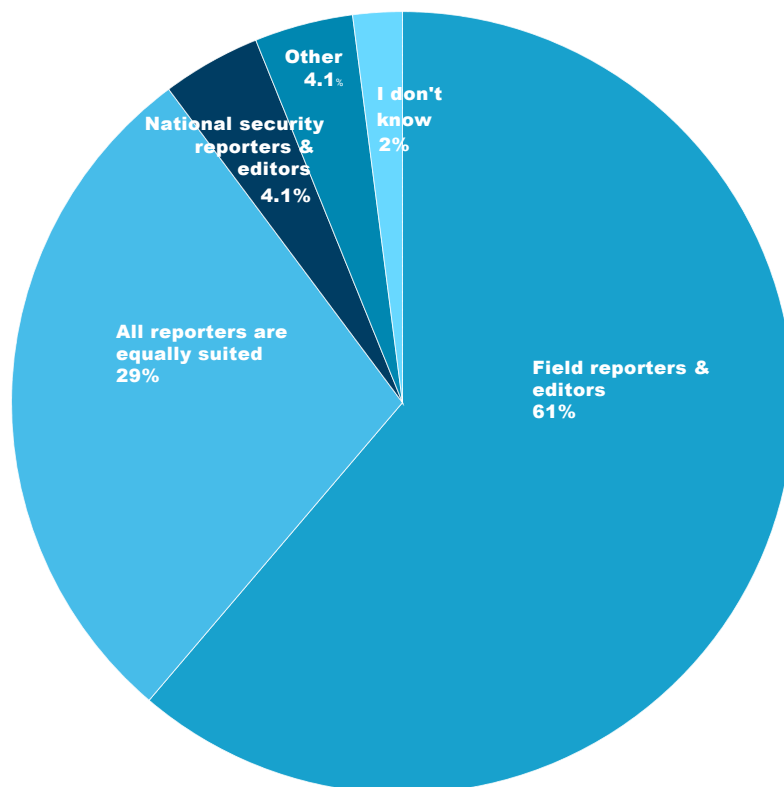
Furthermore, veteran U.S. media professionals reflect that the sharp segregation between reporters who cover the Pentagon or military, and who focus on the tactics and capabilities of modern warfare—and those who empirically cover or otherwise document civilian harm events, whether on-the-ground or remotely—engenders a lost opportunity to critically and insightfully integrate reporting about military doctrine, strategy, and operations as they relate to civilian harm.

## 4. Under-Resourced Field Reporting Negatively Impacts Civilian Harm Coverage

Media professionals interviewed for this report were quite clear—not only is the reporting of civilian harm a key component of conflict coverage, but also that field reporters and editors are best suited to write copy or to create content about civilian harm.

FIGURE 10.

### Field reporters are best suited to report on civilian harm in Syria and Iraq, say media professionals.

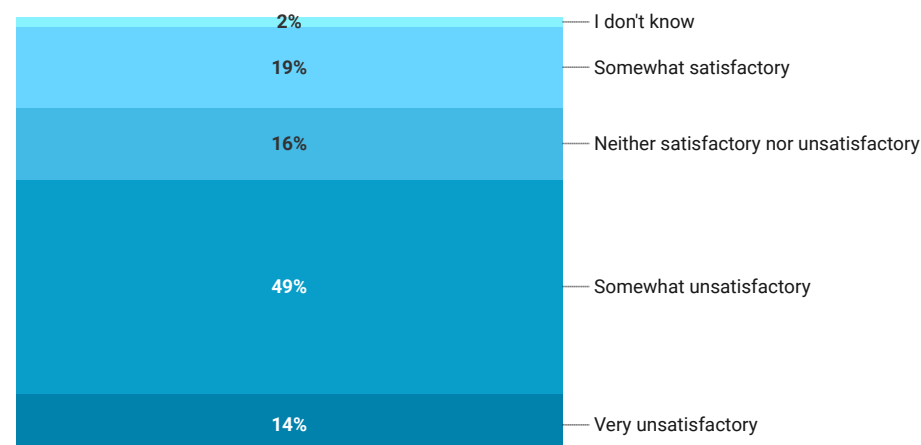


More than half of those surveyed also said that media coverage when done remotely without field reporting was either somewhat or very unsatisfactory.

"It's not enough to talk to people over the phone—or on Facebook or WhatsApp. Okay, this is good—it's great. We can just communicate. But the challenge that we have...is to be present on-the-ground. And in that way be more objective," said a journalist who covers the conflict for a major U.S. newspaper.

FIGURE 11.

### U.S. media professionals rate industry coverage of civilian harm in the recent war occurring in Syria and Iraq.



Discussing the experience of covering the battle for Mosul, a national security journalist at a prominent digital publication said in an interview that it “makes a lot of difference when you can see how intimate an area—that has become a battlefield—is. How people are living cheek to jowl; how big the buildings are; how many people roughly live in them. Are they fighting near a school? Are they fighting near a hospital?”

While on-the-ground reporting is critical to coverage of civilian harm by all categories of media, it is especially so for broadcast news, some respondents said. “The hardest thing for a broadcaster is the reliance on pictures,” remarked a foreign correspondent for a major cable news broadcaster. “Information is not as valuable, unless it’s coupled with pictures. Print reporters have a little bit of an easier time...They can use anonymous quotes. I’ve always found there was a direct link between how strong the pictures were, to how likely it was to get covered,” the foreign correspondent concluded.

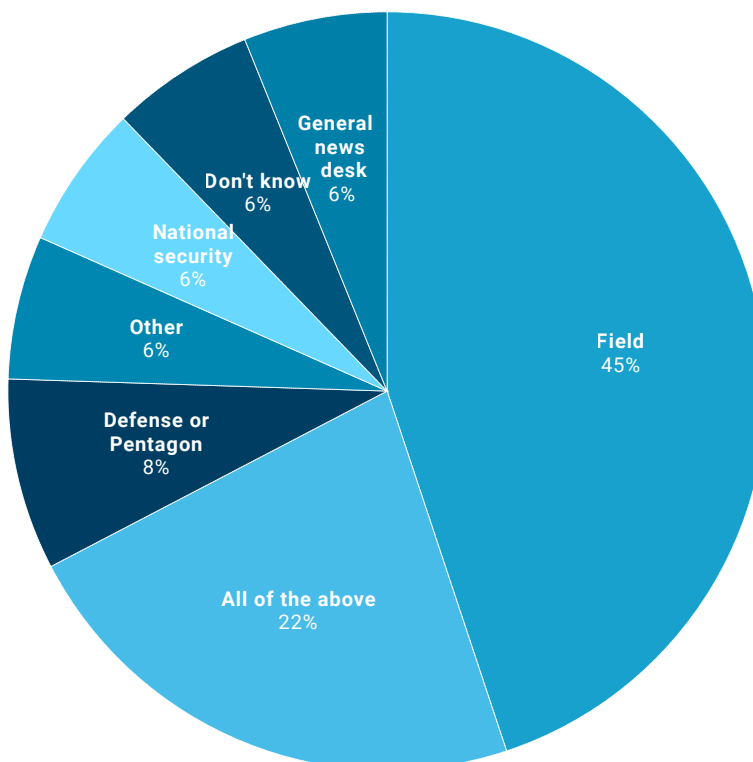
### Civilian Harm Covered Most by Field Reporters, Yet Often Under-Prioritized and Under-Resourced

Field reporters write or create most of the copy or content about civilian harm issues compared to colleagues—almost seven times more than national security or general news desk reporters and editors; and five times more than Pentagon or defense reporters and editors, say those who were surveyed.

Yet, U.S. media professionals also said that under-prioritized and under-resourced field reporting had contributed to their own inability to report on civilian harm during the war in Syria and Iraq—especially from U.S.-led actions in denied areas controlled by so-called Islamic State.

FIGURE 12.

### Field reporters and editors cover civilian harm more, according to U.S. media professionals.



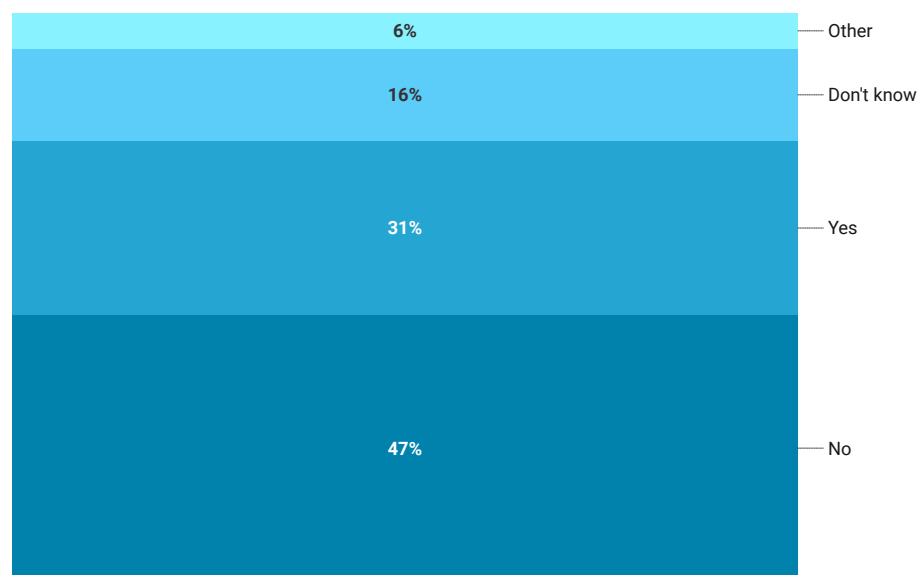
About half of U.S. media professionals who were surveyed also said that field reporting regarding civilian harm was not adequately prioritized, in the pool of available resources at the media outlets they worked for.

Inadequate resourcing for field reporting on civilian harm in the war against ISIS in turn meant existing bureaus and staff were unable to devote enough time to develop source networks; or to overcome access, security, and logistical challenges that civilian harm coverage requires, according to those interviewed.

“Having teams on-the-ground to develop those local connections in places...takes time and someone being there, working their network and building their sources to have that really deep, in-depth coverage that’s not just surface level,” said a photojournalist for a major wire service.

FIGURE 13.

**Field reporting about civilian harm in Syria and Iraq was not appropriately prioritized in pool of available resources, many U.S. media professionals say.**



Another conflict reporter at a cable network noted that small security details and the lack of news bureaus during the war meant media outlets could not “send people into hot battles or into fresh aftermaths.”

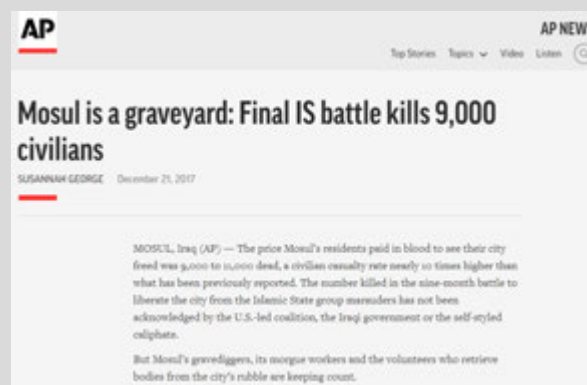
“When you’re looking at places like Iraq and places like Syria, if you don’t have bureaus or teams that are dedicated to covering those places on a daily basis, then how can you expect the coverage to be that good? Especially when teams had pulled out. I mean most of the bureaus in Baghdad shut prior to ISIS. Like you can’t expect coverage to be where it needs to be or where it should be,” the photojournalist for a major wire service added.

A freelance journalist for a major U.S. features magazine emphasized that field reporting enables media professionals to fact-check U.S. military claims about the location and alleged victims of civilian harm. In the absence of such field reporting the U.S. military risks becoming the primary source for many journalists, noted a veteran war reporter and assignment editor at a major cable news channel.

## Media best practice

### Associated Press and National Public Radio: December 2017.

Remote reporting and assessments of civilian harm can only reveal a part of the story. In late 2017, Associated Press and National Public Radio (NPR) separately devoted considerable field resources to uncovering the likely civilian toll from the recent battle for Mosul. AP's Susannah George found, based on an examination of city morgue records, that at least 9,000 civilians had been killed by all parties to the fighting—at least 3,000 of which likely resulted from Coalition and Iraqi actions at Mosul. Jane Arraf of NPR at the same time revealed that 4,800 death certificates had already been issued for civilians killed in the fighting—with many more bodies expected to be recovered from the rubble of Mosul.



<https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/12/19/570483824/more-civilians-than-isis-fighters-are-believed-killed-in-mosul-battle>

<https://apnews.com/bbea7094fb954838a2fdc11278d65460>

Journalists also reflected in interviews that under-resourced field reporting in the war against ISIS by U.S. media organizations leads to one-sided, or even non-existent civilian harm coverage.

In interviews media professionals relayed that the greatest challenge they faced was access to the battlefield. Such access was obstructed by logistics; by few or no opportunities to embed with military forces; and by a security environment where media professionals were targeted and killed by non-state actors such as ISIS.

Yet field reporting better facilitates opportunities to find and develop human sources, including eyewitnesses, with which to vet allegations of harm, and on whom to rely, when access to the battlefield is denied or otherwise restricted. It also enables field reporters to collect evidence, such as coordinates and photographs, in order to leverage and negotiate with the military for corroboration and/or confirmation of U.S. involvement in alleged events.

### A Differing Approach to Other Actors

Coverage of civilian harm by different belligerents can vary significantly, even within the same conflict. Many U.S. media professionals who were interviewed said that they could cover civilian harm from aerial bombardments by the government of al-Assad, and of Russia in Syria, better and more consistently than in so-called Islamic State controlled areas—partly because in the former they were in contact with on-the-ground sources in rebel-held areas, including eyewitnesses, medical staff, members of civil society, and militants.

Media professionals also argue that covering civilian harm from aerial bombardments of ISIS-controlled areas by the U.S.-led coalition was qualitatively different.

“We didn’t have the same kind of real-time civilians to corroborate information on civilian casualties,” said a journalist at a major U.S. newspaper. The terrorist group cracked down on civilian activists and other segments of society that journalists might normally be in contact with. The journalist also claimed that the Islamic State did not want to play up civilian harm by U.S.-led actions, because “they wanted to project power and not victimhood. So, they didn’t make it easy for people to report on civilian casualties, even as sources.”

Additionally, on-the-ground-sources in denied areas could not maintain regular contact or access evidence that they could share from strike locations, because the extremist group maintained secrecy and control over residents’ activities, and it would have been unethical for journalists to ask their sources to put themselves in harm’s way or to coax them.

A reporter who covered the conflict for a major U.S. newspaper said, “Islamic State areas are very difficult to track—and we traditionally haven’t had as many sources there. Whereas we had often a pretty extensive network of sources in rebel areas reporting on what’s happening with Russia or the Syrian regime. But often these stories of the recapture of Aleppo or the recapture of Eastern Ghouta or other major battles between the central government and the rebels—they got so much more attention that we were sort of scrambling day-by-day to find out who had died in those bombs and put a human face on those. Whereas the Islamic State sources didn’t get that same attention.”

A freelance foreign correspondent for a major U.S. newspaper, who had a source network in Mosul, Iraq during its occupation by ISIS—countered with a differing perspective: “For Iraq, I actually found it easier to cover.” Concerning reporting on the bombardment of western Aleppo, Syria, the freelance foreign correspondent added: “My colleagues were trying to depict the eastern part of Aleppo that was under the opposition as suffering more than the western part, while in fact they were both suffering. They were both victims of the other party. I found that reporting wasn’t neutral.”

Airwars monitoring of civilian harm claims—and subsequent Coalition admissions of responsibility—also challenge assumptions by reporters that it was necessarily ‘harder’ to cover civilian harm in so-called Islamic State areas. Overall, Airwars tracked, primarily from local Arabic sources, more than 2,800 locally alleged civilian harm events from U.S.-led strikes on ISIS-occupied areas, which were often documented in significant detail. Of the 302 civilian harm events confirmed to May 31, 2019 by the Coalition, one in five were Airwars referrals—indicating that the U.S.-led alliance itself accepted the value of local reporting, even in challenging circumstances.<sup>33</sup>

## **Importance of Freelance Field Reporters to Civilian Harm Coverage**

U.S. media organizations rely heavily on freelancers—including local media—for foreign news, for war coverage, and for civilian harm reporting. Any decline in freelance reporting could therefore lead to a shortage of reliable and vetted information coming out of the conflict zone.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Of the 302 civilian casualty events confirmed by the Coalition between August 2014 and May 2019, the alliance publicly declared that 64 incidents (21% of cases) were Airwars referrals.

<sup>34</sup> Gelling, “Reporting on Syria.”



## Media best practice

### NPR: November 9th 2018.

The 2017 battle to oust ISIS from its self-proclaimed capital of Raqqa was poorly covered by U.S. media—in part because of significant access challenges. Yet, the civilian harm was significant. A later Amnesty International/Airwars study found, for example, that at least 1,600 civilians died, the great majority as a result of U.S. actions. A year after the battle had ended, NPR's Ruth Sherlock, Lamia al-Arian, and Kamiran Sadoun published the first major U.S. news reports on the overall destruction and death toll at Raqqa, based on key field reporting.

<https://www.npr.org/2018/11/09/664360606/entire-families-wiped-out-u-s-airstrikes-killed-many-civilians-in-syria>



Reliance on freelance field reporting by U.S. news media is part of a larger trend influenced by the expense of maintaining foreign bureaus, and the flexibility possible from commissioning freelancers, said Elisabet Cantenys, executive director of A Culture of Safety Alliance (ACOS), a coalition working to embed safety concerns across newsrooms and among freelance and local journalists worldwide.

However, in response to the deteriorating security environment in Syria and Iraq, U.S. media organizations were reluctant to send staff into war zones. Many also established protocols against hiring freelancers—including locals—whose security they could not or would not guarantee, said U.S. media professionals in interviews.

While advocates lobbied U.S. media organizations to avoid hiring freelancers, who could not demonstrate that they had abided by safety and security standards, or who had not had training in such protocols, a few U.S. media professionals who were interviewed suggested that exploitative pay for freelancers contributed to cutting corners—increasing their risk profiles, especially early on in the war in Syria and Iraq.<sup>35</sup> On-the-ground reporting on civilian harm in conflicts—including finding reliable fixers and translators—is expensive, as is organizing logistics and security, including contingencies for extraction.

“After James Foley and others were taken,” recounted a freelance foreign correspondent for multiple prominent U.S. news outlets, media organizations “said we cannot send freelancers into these situations. It is dangerous for them, and they did not want to raise our fees. So, they just stopped giving us those stories.”

Some media professionals also said in interviews that unless a freelancer had an independent source of income, that reporting on civilian harm in Syria and Iraq was financially untenable. Interviewees also indicated that non-contemporaneous freelance investigative reporting about civilian harm in the war against ISIS was self-sustained at times, including from the personal funds of journalists.

<sup>35</sup> NBC News Staff, “Freelancing in a War Zone: Hazardous Work, Low Pay, Few Benefits,” NBC News, September 3, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/freelancing-war-zone-hazardous-work-low-pay-few-benefits-n198656>.

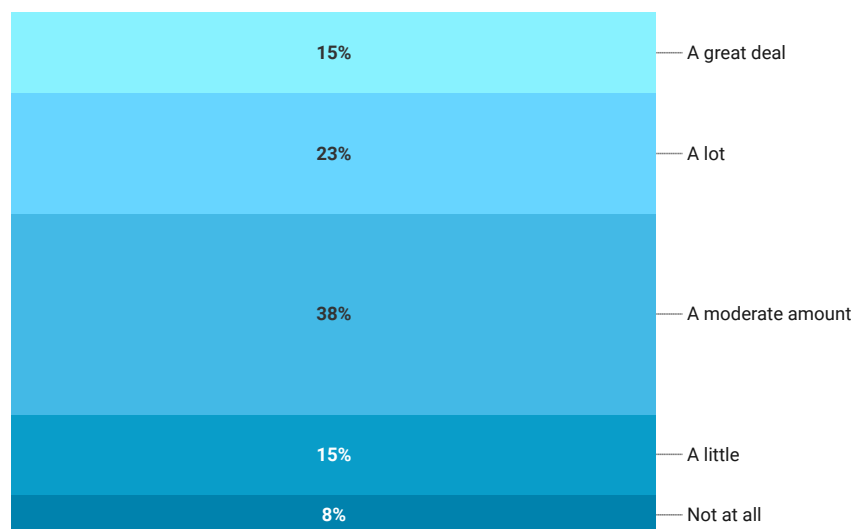
## The U.S. Media Relies Heavily on Wire Services to Cover Civilian Harm

Such challenges and developments in field reporting likely contributed to U.S. media professionals—excluding those that work for wire services—saying that their organizations relied heavily on U.S. or international wire services to cover civilian harm, in the recent war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

According to one freelance foreign correspondent interviewed for this report: “The bigger organizations are the ones who are able to spend more time working on stories. They have better funding. They have security. I mean agencies like AFP and AP had teams out every day during the whole Mosul offensive. So, they had a team in the field every day with a photographer, videographer, fixer, driver and a writer.”

FIGURE 14.

### Industry professionals were asked if their U.S. media outlets rely primarily on wire services.



Several reporters compared inadequate resources for on-the-ground reporting in Iraq and Syria during the war against so-called Islamic State, to the decline of domestic reporting by local media in the U.S. A freelance foreign correspondent said: “It’s essential in any sort of coverage—whether it be rural Alabama or Baiji, Iraq—it’s developing a local team that can do a good job of reporting and not having to rely on Western reporters.”

While media professionals do see the under-resourcing of field reporting as part of a larger industry-wide trend, major U.S. media organizations were also cited as the primary institutions capable of covering civilian harm adequately. If major news outlets do not cover the subject, those interviewed said, smaller organizations were generally incapable of adequately picking up the slack.

## 5. How Journalists Dealt with the Information Void

Civilian harm during the U.S.-led war against so-called Islamic State was significant. The Coalition itself has conceded more than 1,300 deaths—with external monitors like Airwars placing the actual toll significantly higher. Yet, as this report outlines, there were significant reporting challenges to covering this important story.

U.S. media professionals say that they came to depend in unprecedented ways on open source information—including commercially accessible satellite imagery and social media—to remotely report on civilian harm in the airpower dominated urban warfare of the conflict against ISIS.

New means arose primarily to overcome the security and logistical challenges of covering the civilian harm, exacerbated by under-resourced field reporting, and a lack of responsiveness by the U.S. military to journalists' information requests.

In the absence of reliable or credible ways to vet open-source material, interviewees said that their coverage of civilian harm in the war against ISIS increasingly depended on collection, vetting, analysis, and reporting by inter-governmental organizations like the U.N.; by humanitarian organizations, like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International; and by international specialist monitors, such as Airwars.

A journalist for a major U.S. newspaper said that without the benefit of such international bodies and organizations of repute commenting on civilian harm, the subject may not have been covered. The journalist added that such statements and reports by trusted organizations were a mainstay for civilian harm reporting, and in order for civilian harm in the war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq "to get more credit and credence" by the U.S. news media.

Another reporter, who covered the war for a major U.S. newspaper, said in an interview, "I think this war is different than other wars that we've ever had, and because it's just so heavily reliant upon U.S. airpower. I think non-governmental groups and others are getting better in response... They're compiling their own reports, and they are reading reporters in on those, including how they sourced them. That kind of information is invaluable. This is all very new—but more of that is essential" for civilian harm to be reported on.

Due to under-resourced or prioritized field reporting about the war against ISIS, broadcasters came to depend significantly upon social media for the images that they used to report on the conflict.

A foreign correspondent for a major U.S. cable news channel said in an interview: "When the Syrian civil war revolution first kicked off there was a very strong reluctance to use any video that we could not identify ourselves. There was a ton of stuff being put up on YouTube—a lot of it vertical [aspect-ratio] video—a lot of it just cellphone video—crappy video...If we did use it, we were always very careful to say we can't identify where this video came from....But, in the last couple years of the war it was a free-for-all. If a video was put up on YouTube it was used. It got a little better in the last year or two—where people were relying on the AP and Reuters to vet stuff because they had a lot more people on-the-ground and they were working with a lot more groups in the region."

Media professionals repeatedly emphasized in interviews that without monitoring organizations like Airwars, civilian harm coverage would have “fallen by the wayside,” as a journalist who covers the U.S. military for a digital defense outlet described it. The “work that Airwars was doing was a game changer,” noted a reporter at a major U.S. newspaper. “I really can’t imagine what would have happened without Airwars...It’s a great example, because the organization was so aggressively documenting stuff that the Coalition just had to deal with them,” said a national security reporter for a prominent digital news publication.

Media professionals said that Airwars was particularly useful when they conducted open-source investigations of their own, so they could negotiate with the U.S. military to perform due diligence. One journalist for a major U.S. features magazine said, “With the exception of Airwars, no organization was deliberately getting the Department of Defense to check whether or not it was them,” referring to attribution from U.S.-led actions in the war against ISIS.

Airwars was also able to provisionally assess information about civilian harm allegations. A journalist at a major U.S. newspaper noted, “People just didn’t know how to judge these civilian harm claims. Airwars had to fight quite hard to gain the reputation it has, and at that time...people were seeing the slow drip” of information coming out of the conflict, and “not really knowing how to assess what they added up to.”

### **Biases, Trust, and Sources in the Information Void**

Media professionals remarked on how positive biases regarding the accuracy and precision of U.S. airpower, and associated assumptions about lower civilian harm—both institutionally and by managing editors at media organizations where they were employed—worked in tandem with the information void to negatively impacted civilian harm reporting during the war against so-called Islamic State.

According to a journalist who covers the military for a major U.S. newspaper, “There is a general trust of the Department of Defense in the U.S. press—that when the Pentagon says something, there is an assumption that it is true most of the time. There is an assumption that people on-the-ground lie—that either they lie because they are scared or are threatened by the enemy; or they lie because they dislike the United States.”

The presumption that the Pentagon is generally “truthful,” and that information on-the-ground is generally “tainted,” as one journalist at a major U.S. newspaper put it, was questioned by media professionals, who asserted that the U.S. military does not itself consistently track civilian harm. “On the front end, they put in real effort to prevent civilian harm. What they are not interested in is grading their homework on the backend,” the journalist who covers the military for a major U.S. newspaper added.

Examining the sources that surveyed professionals say they rely on to report about civilian harm demonstrates the significant role that specialist non-governmental organizations that monitor civilian harm outside the conflict zone, like Airwars, and those that investigate it on the ground, have in news reporting on the topic. Surveyed industry professionals say that they rely on these organizations and eyewitness accounts more than “official U.S. government or military” sources, and that they have more credibility regarding civilian harm.

Critical or insightful reporting on institutional, governmental, or military mindsets about civilian harm and U.S. airpower additionally requires buy-in from managing editors, said media professionals, suggesting in interviews that more skepticism is required by managing editors at U.S. media outlets.

A journalist who covers conflict for a major U.S. newspaper, remarked, “When it comes to the top editors and their priorities, managing editors aren’t consciously saying, ‘Oh, you know it’s America, we are not going to do that.’ It’s just a bigger deal to take that on,” referring to coordinating civilian harm coverage and impugning the Pentagon, or the presumptions of the precision and accuracy of U.S. airpower. “It’s much more complicated, and it is a lot more stakeholders,” concluded the journalist, “It takes a bigger decision in a way to take that one on.”

A national security reporter at a prominent digital news outlet said in an interview: “There is also an institutional problem...The government has somehow succeeded in making the default assumption, when it launches an airstrike, that the people it strikes are guilty.” Another reporter, who covered the conflict against ISIS for a major U.S. media organization, also claimed that editors often assume the same.

FIGURE 15.

### Sources U.S. media say they use for civilian harm claims.

	Rank	A great deal	A lot	A moderate amount	A little	Not at all
Specialist non-governmental organizations outside conflict zone (e.g. Airwars, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Syrian Network for Human Rights, etc.)	1	33%	39%	18%	6%	4%
Non-governmental organizations investigating on the ground (e.g. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, etc.)	2	27%	41%	24%	6%	2%
Eyewitness accounts	3	37%	27%	12%	14%	10%
United Nations agencies	4	16%	37%	20%	24%	2%
Monitors in the region or locally on the ground (e.g. Mosul Eye, Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, etc.)	5	24%	24%	16%	22%	12%
International Committee of the Red Cross	6	14%	27%	31%	12%	16%
Official U.S. government or military	7	10%	20%	39%	27%	4%
International Coalition (CJTF-OIR)	8	12%	20%	35%	20%	12%
Iraqi military or government	9	10%	12%	31%	27%	20%
Kurdish military or administrations	10	8%	16%	33%	18%	24%
Unofficial U.S. government or military	11	4%	12%	29%	29%	27%
Syrian government or military	13	2%	12%	16%	20%	49%
Russian military or government	14	0%	12%	14%	31%	43%
ISIS	15	4%	2%	12%	33%	49%

FIGURE 16.

## U.S. media rank credibility of civilian harm sources.

	Rank	Very credible	Somewhat credible	Neither non-credible nor credible	Somewhat non-credible	Very non-credible
Non-governmental organizations investigating on the ground (e.g. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch)	1	71%	27%	0%	2%	0%
United Nations agencies	2	47%	49%	2%	2%	0%
International Committee of the Red Cross	3	67%	20%	6%	0%	0%
Specialist non-governmental organizations outside conflict zone (e.g. Airwars, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Syrian Network for Human Rights)	4	49%	37%	6%	2%	0%
Eyewitness accounts	5	37%	37%	18%	4%	0%
Monitors in the region or locally on the ground (e.g. Mosul Eye, Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently)	6	29%	53%	10%	0%	2%
Official U.S. government or military	7	1%	49%	12%	22%	4%
Unofficial U.S. government or military	8	16%	39%	22%	6%	2%
International Coalition (CJTFOIR)	9	8%	43%	14%	20%	8%
Kurdish military or administrations	10	8%	22%	24%	24%	2%
Iraqi military or government	11	0%	24%	20%	31%	14%
Russian military or government	13	0%	4%	12%	33%	31%
ISIS	14	0%	6%	8%	20%	49%
Syrian government or military	15	0%	4%	4%	22%	53%

## Support for Reputable Initiatives for Standards or Alternative Civilian Harm Counts

In addition to civilian harm counts and claims by the U.S. military, as well as estimates by external monitors, media professionals expressed support for a reputable and commonly accepted industry wide methodology or standards for alternative civilian harm counts, that can be used to help credibly report on the topic during U.S. conflicts.

While media professionals emphasized that they believed the U.S. military is interested in mitigating the loss of civilian life, they also said that its claims about civilian harm were less credible than reputable non-governmental and humanitarian organizations—in part because the U.S. military does not consistently track civilian harm itself, they said.

Those interviewed also said that reputable and trustworthy alternative counts may incentivize greater responsiveness on the part of the U.S. military to journalists' information requests about civilian harm.

While not specifically mentioned by reporters, such an independent effort to establish casualty monitoring standards has been undertaken by a consortium of international non-governmental organizations that track military conflicts and civilian harm, such as Airwars. The initiative, undertaken by a London-based independent charitable organization, EveryCasualty Worldwide, seeks to establish a commonly accepted international standard and methodology for civilian casualty recording. The effort commenced in 2011, with 44 organizations participating in both its consultative and review phases, including the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and the World Health Organization, among others.<sup>36</sup>

The U.N. is also introducing its own standards on casualty monitoring, via the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). A new technical guidance framework was agreed in Beirut in March 2019, which OHCHR is initially rolling out via approved national U.N. monitoring agencies, such as the U.N. Assistance Mission in Iraq.

A reporter who covers the military at a major U.S. newspaper said in an interview that a reputable proxy count for civilian casualties in the war against so-called Islamic State—or indeed any other similar airpower dominated conflict—is a “way to put some pressure on the Department of Defense—which seems to be sort of wildly inconsistent, in terms of the amount of information they release on strikes.” The context of the reporter’s commentary specifically spoke to the requirement journalists have for reliable information about civilian harm when reporting on the subject.

A national security journalist at a prominent digital news outlet also said, “Trying to establish other ways to try to say, ‘Yes, we can say that this probably happened, without the U.S. government,’ would be helpful.”

U.S. media professionals also consistently reflected on the importance of having a balance of sources for civilian harm reporting.

Journalists remarked that a reputable media industry-wide consortium, to pool resources to vet civilian harm claims in airpower dominated and inaccessible conflict zones like the war against so-called Islamic State, might be one solution to the increasing requirements and challenges for covering the subject adequately in future conflicts.

<sup>36</sup> EveryCasualty Worldwide, “Standards for Casualty Recording.”

## 6. Civilian Harm Reporting in Airpower Dominated Conflicts Requires a Mandate from Managing Editors

Consistent, balanced, and compelling civilian harm coverage in conflicts like the war against so-called Islamic State requires editorial mandates from managing editors at U.S. media outlets, industry professionals say. These have improved news coverage of other important topics, including civilians killed by U.S. law enforcement; and regarding the number and identity of those detained at the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

In the absence of a relevant editorial mandate, U.S. media professionals describe civilian harm reporting as siloed, fragmented, and as largely self-directed by individual journalists. A reporter who covered the conflict against ISIS at a major U.S. newspaper said, for example, “I’m not really judging. Some people are a lot more about that topic than others.” Another journalist, who covers the military for a major newspaper, added that civilian casualty reporting is also administration- and conflict-driven.

Media professionals additionally described civilian harm coverage as “fragmented” among relevant foreign bureaus that cover Iraq and Syria, as well as by newsrooms that cover the U.S. military and defense issues back home. Without coordination and prioritization of civilian harm coverage by managing editors, “internal politics” risk overtaking reporting on civilian harm at major outlets, those interviewed said. “At a certain point it is like the other people covering that area aren’t cooperating with and you are just going to be like, ‘Alright, do what you’re going to do and I’ll do what I’m going to do and do the best I can in my area,’” said a reporter who covered the war against ISIS for a major U.S. newspaper.

Those interviewed also said that individual bureau chiefs and newsroom editors at major U.S. media institutions often do not have the bandwidth or authority to task other bureaus and newsrooms regarding civilian harm coverage. This leads to what one reporter at a major U.S. newspaper described as “fragmented” and inconsistent reporting of civilian harm as well. “There were isolated incidents where we were able to cover it, but it wasn’t a thing that I am going to do a project on—or it wasn’t my daily focus. So that’s partly on me and partly on an organizational blind spot.”

The nature of civilian harm reporting is both iterative and resource intensive, due in part to a lack of responsiveness from the U.S. military regarding journalists’ requests for information; and also because of the logistical, access, and security challenges associated with covering U.S. airpower-dominated warfare. Journalists at media organizations therefore need the clear support of editors to devote the proper time and resources needed to covering civilian harm.

Without a proper editorial mandate, even those reporters keen to cover civilian harm issues may find themselves pulled in many directions. Media professionals said in interviews that they might forgo reporting on civilian harm, because it takes them away from coverage of other subjects that they are responsible for in their expanding portfolios. According to a reporter who covers conflict for a major U.S. newspaper, “Sometimes you can make that your standard own piece on civilian harm that you are going to work on. You chose to do that at the expense of other things. You might have a special interest yourself. You might have a rolling news story or just a need to do a daily update. But if you could do that—you don’t get many opportunities to do that. Then often when you go back—you have to spend quite a long time on it...it has to be worth diverting yourself from other things.”



## Low Editorial Priority

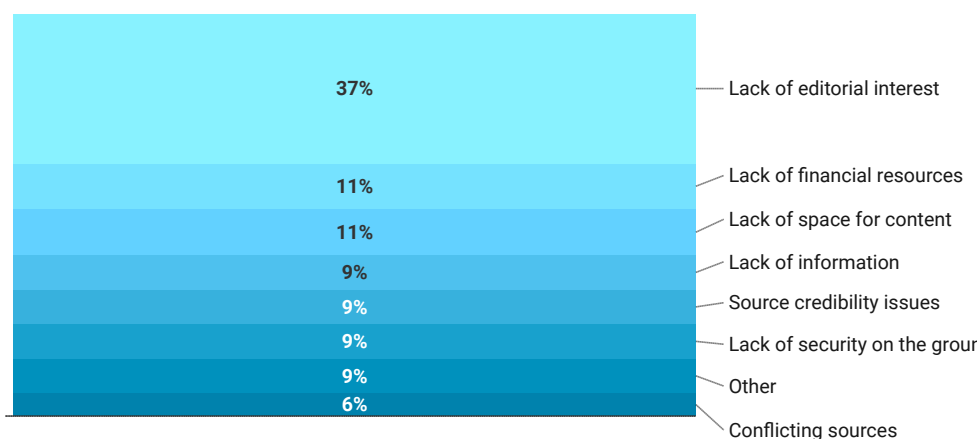
Without an editorial mandate on civilian harm coverage in newsrooms, support from managers often proves challenging. A lack of editorial interest was the number one stated reason that stories about civilian harm in the war against so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq were rejected, surveyed media professionals say.

Stories on civilian harm in the conflict were also three times more likely to be rejected because of a “lack of editorial interest” than for a “lack of space for content” or “lack of financial resources.

News content on civilian harm was also four times more likely to be rejected for a “lack of editorial interest” than a “lack of information,” for “source credibility issues,” or for a “lack of security on-the-ground,” the survey found.

FIGURE 17.

### Lack of editorial interest was number one reason stories on civilian harm in Syria and Iraq were rejected, U.S. media professionals say.



Finally, stories about civilian harm in the anti-ISIS conflict were six times more likely to be rejected because of a “lack of editorial interest,” than because of “conflicting sources.”

Narrowly focused newspaper coverage of civilian harm events, as well as the almost non-existent reporting of the issue during key periods—especially for coverage of civilian harm resulting from U.S.-led actions—supports the view that civilian harm is a low editorial priority at most U.S. media outlets. As one author and freelance foreign correspondent for multiple prominent U.S. media outlets noted, “The fact is that these stories aren’t being prioritized.”

For media professionals who were interviewed and who work in broadcast news, the low editorial priority given to coverage about civilian harm was additionally reflected as an overall component of the scarcity of reporting on the war itself.

According to a correspondent at a major network news channel, “There’s a recognition that we’re not covering the war. Like, the floor editors jumping up and down saying, ‘We need to be there, how are we not there?’ And looking over their shoulder and saying, ‘Look there is a war...We should be there.’ Then, the news organizations are saying, ‘Yeah we should be there, but there is also this other story here, so let’s do that right now.’ They recognized we f\*cked up.”

## Re-Framing the Perceived Lack of Public Interest in Civilian Casualty Reporting

Interviewed media professionals also attributed low editorial interest in civilian casualties in the war against ISIS partly to a disinterested public. “There is a kind of a click and ratings pressure, on the one hand,” said an assignment editor at a major U.S. cable news channel. “You won’t see civilian casualty reports that often,” the assignment editor continued. “You won’t keep spitballing them every day. You’ll save it up until you’ve got a pretty large death toll, and then maybe some type of an individual story you can peg it on and then put it out there,” the assignment editor concluded.

Veteran military and national security analyst William M. Arkin described this phenomenon in an interview as reporting on civilian casualties as “major industrial accidents.” Others interviewed also suggested that editorial interest in civilian harm was cyclical in nature, picking up, for example, after a mass casualty strike.

Yet, interviewed journalists also said that any perceived remoteness of civilian casualty issues in the recent war in Syria and Iraq was a direct result of the lack of on-the-ground reporting on the airpower dominated conflict, and the low levels of deployed U.S. forces. “The way America fights its wars right now,” said a national security journalist at a prominent digital outlet—that is “‘secret soldiers, airstrikes, local forces’—it’s sort of designed to be unaccountable to the public.”

Compelling civilian casualty journalism, noted several veteran media professionals, is more than reporting body count numbers, as important as those are in accounting for the cost of war.<sup>37</sup> Another journalist at a major U.S. cable news broadcaster and digital outlet said: “It often catches us by surprise what sort of stories—when it comes to civilian casualties—capture people’s attention, versus falling on deaf ears. It seems that audiences are less interested in numbers than they are in the human stories that strike a chord with them—a story that they can relate to. When it comes to civilian casualties, the best sort of formula that you can offer to capture people’s attention—to get a good audience response—is to combine human stories with the numbers.”

This presents a difficult challenge, especially for contemporaneous news reporters, because of the seeming repetition and volume of international actions in the war against ISIS, in which more than 34,000 air and artillery strikes had been conducted to June 2019. Without a frame, like an invasion or major event, coverage of civilian harm from U.S. airpower, said Arkin, can seem like reporting on “fouls at a ball-game.” Another journalist, who covers the military for a major U.S. news magazine, compared this to a crime reporter covering arrests.

Media professionals also noted that covering U.S. airpower is much harder without ground offensives. “When you have these major offensives, reporters are focused. Otherwise, they’re not looking at civilian casualties from the U.S. air war,” said a journalist for a major U.S. newspaper. In addition to framing, ground offensives enable newsrooms to logistically prepare in advance. Notably, this report found significant improvements in civilian harm reporting at Mosul, Iraq by U.S. media during the major 2016 to 2017 battle for that city, which included heavy use of U.S. air and ground forces.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Mahanty and Alex Moorehead, “Costs of War Can’t Be Assessed Without Official Civilian Casualty Estimates,” *Just Security*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.justsecurity.org/63488/costs-of-war-cant-be-assessed-without-official-civilian-casualty-estimates/>.

Another element of compelling news coverage of civilian harm is the relatability of civilian survivors and inhabitants of war zones, who are the subjects of news stories. Relatability was cited as an almost absolute requirement for compelling television coverage. “That the people involved are foreign. They do not speak English. They seem very different than the people living next door to the average viewer” complicates television news on civilian harm in war, said a correspondent at a major U.S. news channel.

Some additionally said that under-reporting on civilian harm stemmed from a lack of reporting about women and war. A few U.S. media professionals remarked that reporting on war from a female perspective includes the subject of civilian harm.

Troublingly, ethnic, cultural, and even racial biases were also thought to play a part in the low editorial priority given to civilian harm in the war against ISIS, according to several U.S. media professionals in interviews. “A hundred brown people and a hundred brown casualties mean less than one American life—one European life. The scale is so vastly out of balance... There is this complete removal from these scenarios and these situations. It is a bit of racism. It is a bit of lack of context. It is a bit of—we live in a bubble,” said a freelance foreign correspondent.

Discussing having covered U.S. airpower in other conflicts, a reporter at a prominent digital news outlet described inconsistencies in how civilian harm might be engaged and reported on, depending upon ethnicities: “A consistent thing that I heard from people who had either survived or their relatives had died from drone strikes, was that when America doesn’t acknowledge that these things happen is a grievous, grievous insult. That there is no apology. What I kept hearing a lot of was, ‘Well, Obama apologized when it was those two white people who died in that drone strike in 2015. But they don’t apologize to me. They don’t apologize to my family. They don’t apologize to anyone I know. They don’t apologize to anyone who lives in my country, even though this has been happening so consistently.’ How else do you interpret that but as frankly, racism?”

## Media best practice

### **Washington Post: February 4th 2019.**

By early 2019, ISIS was confined to a few square miles of Syria—and reporters were once again deployed to the field in numbers, to witness the end of the group as a territorial entity. The *Washington Post*’s Louisa Loveluck filed a number of key reports, which focused in part on the suffering of civilians. Meanwhile back in Washington, D.C., her colleague Missy Ryan secured a declassified Pentagon report examining the concerning gulf between public and military estimates of civilian harm during the conflict.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/after-bloody-insurgent-wars-pentagon-launches-effort-to-prevent-civilian-deaths/2019/02/04/ce5386d8-7fec-4fcf-9cda-60e06b638115\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/after-bloody-insurgent-wars-pentagon-launches-effort-to-prevent-civilian-deaths/2019/02/04/ce5386d8-7fec-4fcf-9cda-60e06b638115_story.html)



## Expertise, Training and Accountability

U.S. media professionals said in interviews that more accountable forms of war coverage that they believed existed in prior U.S. conflicts, no longer do so today. The “accountability beat,” as a reporter for a major U.S. features magazine described it, has all but disappeared from U.S. war coverage. Arkin described such reporting in an interview, saying that the U.S. media has failed to provide a genuinely expert accounting of the war against so-called Islamic State in a way that fact-checks the U.S. military and government: “Vietnam is an example of where the news media went and was able to say, ‘We’re losing,’ well before the government could see that we were losing. In Syria, I don’t see any comparable reporting, because what does losing even mean?” Arkin inquired, emphasizing prior on-the-ground reporting in accountability coverage of war.

Reporting on the war against ISIS, noted Arkin, has not “provided a sense to what the government is saying to itself, about the progress or lack of progress in the war, and it doesn’t present a holistic picture to place civilian casualties in perspective” with the U.S. military strategy on-the-ground.

Veteran military and defense journalists also say that the scarcity of accountability coverage about the conflict—including as it pertains to civilian harm from U.S.-led actions—stems in part from a lack of expertise about U.S. military strategy and operations in newsrooms.

In interviews, media professionals additionally reflected on how staff layoffs and other industry-wide trends have left U.S. media organizations bereft of the kinds of expertise required to cover conflict and civilian harm critically and insightfully. An assignment editor and veteran military reporter for a major U.S. cable news channel said that media organizations have “thrown out their institutional knowledge...They rely too much on digital media, and they get people who are too inexperienced. You even find young journalists in newsrooms complaining that there is no one to learn from.”

According to another veteran defense industry reporter, “It is absolutely essential, for anybody, who covers civilian harm, to understand the weapons used and what their real capabilities are, and how they’re used. But, I think it’s even more important for anybody covering this to understand the rules of engagement and the language that gets used, and the processes that are employed for those rules.”

Without knowledge and expertise about military operations and strategy, coverage of the war and civilian harm gets caught up in reflecting prevailing mindsets or body counts—including by the U.S. military or the non-governmental sector—noted Arkin.

In addition to articulating the need for greater acumen in civilian harm related collection and analysis disciplines, relevant to reporters when dealing with open source data, more than half of U.S. media professionals who were surveyed and interviewed say that they were not sufficiently prepared to report on civilian harm with regard to the military technologies that cause it. More than three-quarters had also never received training on how to cover civilian harm in military conflicts.

“I strongly recommend that trainings for general media be widened to cover all of the technologies that influence the kill chain, not just the delivery mechanism,” noted a U.S. media professional who covers the defense industry.

Those interviewed for this report said that properly reflecting capabilities and specialized knowledge in civilian harm related disciplines are a requirement for both compelling and insightful coverage on the topic—and for overcoming the challenges of reporting on airpower dominated conflicts. The vast majority who were surveyed said they also wanted such training, and that it would benefit both them and their coverage.

## V. Appendix



## Survey

The survey commissioned for this report solicited the opinions, perceptions, and experiences of U.S. media professionals, who had reported on the war against so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and/ or Iraq after August 8, 2014.

Researchers employed a mixed methodology for determining the list of media organizations to include in the initial sample including self-selection; Internet index searches; and searches of U.S. media publications in the ProQuest database for the entire time frame of hostilities and the search terms (Syria OR Iraq).

The term U.S. media outlet—used in the survey—is comprised of U.S.-based print, video, and audio outlets (both tangible and/or digital), including newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and/or websites that distribute news and/or information in any format including photographs. U.S. media also includes major wire services that are reprinted by U.S.-based media outlets, even when the wire service itself is not U.S.-based.

Once outlets were determined, mixed methodologies were employed to populate a target list of U.S. media professionals at news organizations, with bylines on stories about the war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq for the entire time frame of the hostilities.

An initial list of media professionals was further culled and rated to confirm that they had reported on the war, also noting their job description: for example foreign correspondent, Pentagon press reporter, digital news producer, assignment editor, general desk-editor.

More than 700 current or former journalists at some 50 U.S. media organizations that open-source research evidenced had a byline on a story regarding the war in Syria or Iraq were then contacted between March and May 2019 and provided with a link to a survey containing 52 questions. Survey responses were voluntary and confidential. Responses were anonymized by individual or organization. All responses were compiled together and analyzed as a group. A total of 78 U.S. media professionals responded to the confidential survey.

## U.S. Newspapers Study

### Timeframe

October 1, 2016 to March 31, 2017.

### Databases

ProQuest databases with the following pubid:

Publication Databases	pubid
The Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition	10482
The New York Times, Late Edition, East Coast	11561
Los Angeles Times	46999
USA Today	15008
Washington Post	10327

### Search Queries

PUBID(ININSERT NUMBER) AND **Syria** AND (civilian\* OR non-combatant OR civilian casualties OR non combatant OR women OR children OR innocent civilians OR innocent people OR **Syrians** OR IHL OR Laws of War OR International Law OR voluntary OR involuntary human shields OR humanitarian disaster OR humanitarian catastrophe OR collateral damage OR human suffering OR loss of life OR hostages OR bystanders OR CIVCAS)

PUBID(ININSERT NUMBER) AND **Iraq** AND (civilian\* OR non-combatant OR civilian casualties OR non combatant OR women OR children OR innocent civilians OR innocent people OR **Iraqi** OR IHL OR Laws of War OR International Law OR voluntary OR involuntary human shields OR humanitarian disaster OR humanitarian catastrophe OR collateral damage OR human suffering OR loss of life OR hostages OR bystanders OR CIVCAS)

### Results

The table below represents the exact result numbers obtained per database for each of the two queries above. To ensure that the search query duplicated the results for the earlier study (upon which this study and the report relied), search results using the methods explained above were employed for that study's time frame and included in the table below. Result numbers were then compared to the earlier study's result numbers outlined in its methodology.<sup>38</sup>

#### *Unfiltered by Document Type for "News"*

Publication Databases	pubid	Total results for Iraq search terms only and AU Study time frame	Total results for Syria search terms only and AU Study time frame	Total results for Iraq search terms only and proposed time frame	Total results for Syria search terms only and proposed time frame
The Wall Street Journal, Eastern Edition	10482	388	576	257	313
The New York Times, Late Edition, East Coast	11561	701	878	640	678
Los Angeles Times	46999	334	426	383	303
USA Today	15008	151	171	106	99
Washington Post	10327	1,220	1,603	539	596
	<b>Totals</b>	<b>2,794</b>	<b>3,654</b>	<b>1,925</b>	<b>1,989</b>
		<b>6,448 for AU Study timeframe</b>		<b>3,914 for proposed time frame</b>	

<sup>38</sup> Heiden et al., Airstrikes.

A total of 3,914 articles, including 3,066 unique news articles in five major U.S. newspapers, were reviewed for mentions of civilian casualties from airstrikes in the recent war in Syria and Iraq between October 1, 2016 and March 31, 2017. Some 121 unique news articles were found to have explicit mentions of civilian harm from airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. The 121 articles were coded for the following variables:

Newspaper; Did the airstrike occur in Syria or Iraq?; Title; Pub-Date; StartPage; Author(s); Explicit mention of CIVCAS caused by airstrike?; CIVCAS in headline?; How many specific airstrikes mentioned in article?; Number of unique CIVCAS per airstrike referred in article; Able to determine specific airstrike with Airwars data?; Airwars ID; Cited source(s) for CIVCAS or airstrike; Strike attribution Russia; Strike attribution Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad; Strike attribution U.S. or Coalition partners; Strike attribution Iraqi government; Strike attribution Turkey; Strike attribution so-called Islamic State; Strike no mention attribution given; No CIVCAS estimate or count given; General estimate of CIVCAS; Cite of General estimate of CIVCAS; Integer CIVCAS (no min/max); Cite of integer CIVCAS; Minimum integer CIVCAS; Cite of minimum integer CIVCAS; Max integer CIVCAS; Cite of maximum integer CIVCAS; Mention of international law; Mention of legitimate or illegitimate target; Mention of legitimate or illegitimate weapon; Article mentions CIVCAS and strike in Syria; Article mentions CIVCAS and strike in Iraq; Vicinity of CIVCAS from strike; Province of CIVCAS from strike; Neighborhood of CIVCAS from strike; Street; Mention of jet; Mention of helicopter; Mention of artillery; Mention of unmanned aerial vehicle; Mention of troops; Mention of chemical weapons; Mention of rocket launcher; Mention of conventional bomb; Mention of barrel bomb; Mention of fuel air bomb; Mention of cluster munition; Mention of ballistic missile; Mention of cruise missile; Mention of hellfire missile; Mention of anti-aircraft missiles; Mention of parachute bombs; Mention of incendiary weapon; Mention of military targets; Mention of humanitarian aid; Mention of residence; Mention of food supply; Mention of civilian gathering; Mention of local council; Mention of civilian infrastructure; Mention of mosque; Mention of school; Mention of medical facility/hospital; Mention of factory; Mention of refugee camp/internally displaced persons site; Mention of civilian car; Mention of civil defense workers; Mention of oil refinery

### **Pentagon Press Conferences and Briefings Study**

Researchers downloaded all 919 transcripts of press conferences and briefings from the U.S. Department of Defense website for the date range of August 8, 2014 to December 31, 2018.

#### Search Queries

To arrive at a final dataset of press conferences and briefings with explicit mentions in any context of civilian casualties cited during the war against so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, the following search query was used to locate 681 out of 919 transcripts.



"civilian" OR "civilians" OR "civilian non-combatant" OR "civilian non-combatants" OR "civilian casualty" OR "civilian casualties" OR "casualty" OR "casualties" OR "non combatant" OR "non-combatant" OR "noncombatant" OR "women" OR "children" OR "child" OR "innocent civilian" OR "innocent civilians" OR "innocent people" OR "innocent Iraqi" OR "innocent Iraqis" OR "innocent Syrians" OR "innocent Syrian" OR "IHL" OR "international humanitarian law" OR "laws of war" OR "international law" OR "human shields" OR "human shield" OR "humanitarian disaster" OR "citizen" OR "citizens" OR "collateral damage" OR "Syrian observatory" OR "airwars" OR "air wars" OR "amnesty" OR "human rights watch" OR "civcas"

Each transcript was then individually reviewed for at least one mention of civilian harm in Syria and/or Iraq. A total of 175 press conferences and briefings out of some 919 transcripts obtained from the U.S. Department of Defense website were identified with such mentions, and those transcripts were then coded for the following variables:

Transcript Title; Transcript URL; Date; Does the transcript mention civilian casualties in Syria or Iraq?; Country; Did the transcript contain reference to CC or a CC event that occurred In Iraq or Syria?; Did the transcript contain a reference to CC in regard to preparation for a future military action?; If applicable, how many unique civilian casualty events were mentioned?; How many separate mentions of civilian casualties (including generally) were in the transcript by the DoD and Press?; Did the DoD bring up CC first?; Did DoD respond to a press inquiry about CC?; How did the DoD respond to a press inquiry?; Category of location name?; What is the Location Name?; Did the DoD provide time frame?; What time frame did the DoD provide?; Belligerent attributed by DOD to?; Did the DoD identify munition?; What munition did the DoD identify?; Did the DoD mention Laws of War, ROE, IHL?; Did the DoD mention the CIVCAS Cell?; Did the DoD mention investigation into an allegation against the Coalition?; Did the DoD mention a damage assessment?; Did the Press bring up CC first?; Did the Press follow up on a DoD mention of CC?; If the press did not initially bring up CC, did they at any point In the transcript independently bring up CC?; How many separate Press/Journalist exchanges regarding CC were raised in transcript?; Did the Press provide CC figures?; Did the Press provide a location name?; Category of location name?; What is the Location Name?; Did the Press provide time frame?; Category of time frame Press?; Belligerent attributed by Press to?; Did the Press identify munition?; What is the munition that the Press identified?; Did the Press mention Law of War, ROE, IHL?; Did the Press mention the CIVCAS Cell? Did the Press mention investigation into an allegation against the Coalition?; Did the Press mention a damage assessment?

## VI. About this report

This report addresses U.S. media coverage of civilian harm in the war against so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, with the purpose of offering recommendations to managing editors to improve reporting on the subject in future conflicts.

Authored by the American investigative journalist Alexa O'Brien, the report is funded by the Reva and David Logan Foundation in the U.S. and the J. Leon Philanthropy Council in the U.K.

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