



LESSONS FROM MOSUL AND RAQQA

NEXT TIME, DO “EVERYTHING POSSIBLE” TO REDUCE CIVILIAN CASUALTIES

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SUMMARY: Any effort to assess the effectiveness of UK military operations in support of partner forces retaking Mosul and Raqqa should include consideration of the civilian toll from those operations. The UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) has repeatedly said that it does “everything possible” to avoid civilian casualties. But more can be done. This paper addresses how the UK government can learn from the challenges seen in Mosul and Raqqa and improve in avoiding, responding to, and acknowledging civilian casualties. It is a path toward keeping the promise of doing “everything possible.”


I am with CNA, a US research organization that takes academic types and retrains them for operations research and solving military problems. My remarks are based on my experience analyzing the waging of warfare, and particularly my research on understanding and reducing the costs of warfare, including civilian casualties. I have studied how civilian casualties take place and worked with militaries on how to better avoid them—in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria and with the Saudi-led coalition regarding operations in Yemen. I also spent two years at the State Department to apply my technical expertise to national security policy.

Your inquiry examines the effectiveness of UK military actions in support of the recapture of Mosul and Raqqa from Daesh/ISIS. These cities have been successfully recaptured, an effort in which a multinational coalition worked with partner forces on the ground to regain urban cities held by an irregular and unprincipled force. The fact that the populations in these urban areas are no longer living under a reign of terror is in itself a measure of effectiveness. At the same time, international observers visiting the cities in the aftermath of operations have been taken aback by the scale of damage: some said that they had not seen major cities so devastated by combat since World War II.¹ We also hear government estimates of civilian casualties that are both very low in magnitude

and quite different from independent estimates, such as those provided by Airwars.² This situation prompts a series of questions:

- What was the cost to the civilians living in Mosul and Raqqa when the coalition, including the UK, successfully retook the cities?
- Does the UK understand this cost, and if not, what is needed to accurately characterize it?
- Finally, are there ways to reduce this cost to civilians in future operations?

Many have commented that the official coalition civilian casualty numbers for Iraq and Syria are strikingly low and unrealistic given the nature of the conflict in 2017—primarily an urban fight waged largely with air-to-ground munitions. Past analyses have shown military civilian casualty estimates to be too low in general, just as independent estimates tend to be too high. This inaccuracy stems from the challenges of detecting civilian casualties with available military capabilities. The context of the Mosul and Raqqa campaigns exacerbated this detection challenge, featuring attacks on buildings using airborne sensors with few or no boots on the ground.



This detection problem means that when coalition nations such as the UK operate with these tactics, they will be unable to reliably identify when civilian casualties occur based on their own available information. And when they do identify civilian casualties, there is no guarantee that the accounting is complete. For example, the military may have full-motion video showing several civilians killed but be unaware of dozens more buried in the rubble.

This detection problem was a challenge across the coalition, but the UK appears to have been particularly affected. Because the UK's Operation Shader has been the second-largest contributor to the air campaign in Iraq and Syria, with more than 1,700 strikes over four years, the official UK reporting of one civilian casualty from those strikes strains credulity.³ At the very least, this means that the civilian casualty rate for UK strikes is dramatically lower than that for the coalition as a whole and also significantly lower than the lowest rate observed previously in Afghanistan under ISAF. Given that many of these airstrikes were in an urban setting with increased collateral risks, historically speaking, this low number is most likely at least partially a result of poor detection of civilian casualties when they occur.

There are two ways to remedy this situation. Militaries in nations such as the UK can bolster their own capabilities to detect civilian casualties after a strike, including by using drones such as Reaper and Predator for post-strike monitoring because they are able to detect civilian casualties when fighter aircraft cannot. They can also work more closely with independent groups to better consider external information to complement military assessments. A first step in this direction would be to not dismiss external allegations out of hand simply because they cannot be verified by military information sources. Both of these information sources would help with the detection problem. A more comprehensive set of information would put militaries in a better place to evaluate the effects of their operations.⁴


Low reported civilian casualty numbers are not just a matter of getting the numbers right. They are also a symptom of a bigger problem: the systemic difficulty of anticipating the likelihood and magnitude of civilian casualties when planning and conducting attacks. This problem in anticipating civilian casualties is seen in cases in which the coalition was surprised by external reports—such as an airstrike in Mosul in March 2017, which the US

later investigated and found had killed 105 civilians.⁵ At the time of the strike, planners were unaware that civilians were present.

The March 2017 incident in Mosul also illustrates another point: the risk of civilian casualties during coalition operations in both Mosul and Raqqa was heightened by the nature of working with partner forces. Partner forces' limitations in proficiency, lower level capabilities, and different tolerances for risk affected the pace of operations as well as the determination of military necessity. In Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen, whether with nation-state partners or with non-state groups, more attention is needed on civilian protection considerations for partner forces. Giving forces a weapon and a law of armed conflict brief is not sufficient for managing outcomes.

We can be more deliberate about how we work with partner forces, including in planning and shaping operations, in training and equipping partner forces, and in tactical execution. An example would be building in additional safeguards to ensure that collateral effects are sufficiently considered.⁶ We can also work with partner forces to help address a challenge exacerbated in urban settings: explosive weapons with reverberating effects that affect essential services such as water and power. Although the UK and other members of the coalition considered civilian casualties before strikes, those second-order effects were not considered in the same way, negatively affecting the welfare of the population. Using the knowledge of partners to avoid damaging infrastructure is a way to leverage the collective strengths of the technologically advanced and proficient militaries, such as the UK military, and local partners.

Another lesson seen in Mosul and Raqqa—a lesson indicated but yet not learned—is the need to monitor civilian casualty trends and make operational adjustments in stride. This was practiced in Afghanistan, where both the ISAF civilian-casualty tracking cell and US lessons-learned personnel monitored trends, and efforts were made to address areas of concern.⁷ For example, after the completion of the *Joint Civilian Casualty Study* in August 2010, I continued to receive updated civilian casualty data from ISAF and used that data to determine trends and potential areas of concern. In early 2011, several types of operations show increased risk of civilian casualties. After this finding was forwarded to ISAF, international forces made operational adjustments in



those types of operations to address those concerns. As a result, civilian casualty trends were quickly reversed. In contrast, the rate of civilian casualties in Raqqa and especially in Mosul rose over time, but there were no monitoring efforts with accompanying operational adjustments to address them. This monitoring and learning function was codified in policy by the US in its 2016 Executive Order 13732 on civilian casualties.⁸

This example highlights a critical gap for the UK regarding civilian casualties: the lack of a national policy. The US goes to great lengths to avoid noncombatant casualties in its operations. Over time, it recognized that compliance with international law and military doctrine was insufficient for doing everything possible to reduce civilian casualties in its operations. The executive order creates a national policy to reflect its practices, which the US considers as more protective than the requirements of the law of armed conflict. Although not all elements have been fully implemented to date—for example, Section 4 on civilian casualty monitoring has not been performed in practice—the national policy helps to focus institutions to best meet policy commitments for protecting civilians in war. The US policy codifies measures for reducing and responding to civilian casualties and for tracking, monitoring, and learning from them. It also explicitly

outlines the imperative to work with partner forces. The UN, in its recent annual report of the Secretary General on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, urged all nations to develop a national policy.⁹ The UK would benefit from such a national policy to help address the concerns discussed here.¹⁰

Working hard to protect civilians in armed conflict is consistent with UK values and principles. That is reason enough to strive to learn the lessons of Mosul and Raqqa and to do better. But there is another reason to improve protections for civilians—it is smart strategy. We have seen how groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS use civilian casualties as a recruiting tool and rallying cry.

We have also seen how civilian casualties in conflict can harm the conduct of a campaign by degrading the support of the host nation population, reducing freedom of action because of limitations imposed by the host government, and causing friction among coalition partners. The UK MOD has repeatedly said that it does “everything possible” to avoid civilian casualties.¹¹ But more can be done. This paper addresses how the UK government as a whole can have a part in better acknowledging, responding to, and avoiding civilian casualties to keep the promise of doing “everything possible.”

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Dr. Lewis has worked extensively to reduce civilian casualties in military operations, leading multiple studies to determine why civilian casualties happen and develop tailored, actionable solutions. This includes his role as lead analyst and coauthor (with Dr. Sarah Sewall) for the *Joint Civilian Casualty Study*, which GEN Petraeus described as “the first comprehensive assessment of the problem of civilian protection.” He contributed to the US national policy on civilian casualties and has worked with partners (e.g., the United Nations, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia) to improve policy and practice to better protect civilians.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Patrick Cockburn, "US, Britain, and France Inflicted Worst Destruction 'in Decades' Killing Civilians in Isis-Held City of Raqqa, Report Says," *Independent*, June 5, 2018.
- 2 Samuel Oakford, "They're Still Pulling Bodies Out of ISIS' Capital," *Daily Beast*, Mar. 12, 2018.
- 3 Jamie Merrill, "UK Parliament Launches Inquiry into RAF Strikes on Mosul and Raqqa," *Middle East Eye*, May 11, 2018.
- 4 The risks of partnering are also explored in All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Drones, *The UK's Use of Armed Drones: Working with Partners*, 2018.
- 5 Martin Chulov, "US Admits Mosul Airstrikes Killed over 100 Civilians During Battle with Isis," *Guardian*, May 25, 2017.
- 6 Such a national policy could also help address some policy concerns discussed in APPG on Drones, *The UK's Use of Armed Drones*.
- 7 Sarah Sewall and Larry Lewis, *Joint Civilian Casualty Study*, Aug. 31, 2010.
- 8 The White House, *United States Policy on Pre- and Post-Strike Measures to Address Civilian Casualties in US Operations involving the Use of Force*, Executive Order 13732, July 1 2016.
- 9 United Nations Secretary General, *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, S/2018/462*, May 14, 2018.
- 10 Such a national policy could also help address some policy concerns discussed in APPG on Drones, *The UK's Use of Armed Drones*.
- 11 Josie Ensor, "US-Led Coalition Responsible for Civilian Death Toll 'Not Seen Since Vietnam' in Fight Against Isil," *Telegraph*, May 22, 2018.

ABOUT CNA

CNA is a nonprofit research and analysis organization dedicated to the safety and security of the nation. It operates the Center for Naval Analyses—the federally funded research and development center (FFRDC) of the Department of the Navy—as well as the Institute for Public Research. CNA develops actionable solutions to complex problems of national importance. With nearly 700 scientists, analysts, and professional staff, CNA takes a real-world approach to gathering data. Its unique Field Program places analysts on aircraft carriers and military bases, in squad rooms and crisis centers, working side by side with operators and decision-makers around the world. CNA supports naval operations, fleet readiness, and strategic competition. Its non-defense research portfolio includes criminal justice, homeland security, and data management.

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