

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Drones: statement on the 2018 US civilian casualty study

Last week, the Pentagon announced the undertaking of a [major examination of civilian deaths in military operations](#). This brave initiative includes [a study](#) commissioned by Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that seeks to answer the central question: why is the military's estimate of civilian deaths so much smaller than outside tallies?

This is a question that is not unique to the US military, but to militaries all over the world, including the UK. A key example is the US-led anti-ISIS coalition effort in Iraq and Syria where airborne fighting with few, or no boots on the ground has produced [significant challenges in terms of detection](#). In this context, it is hard to guarantee when identifying civilian casualties that the accounting is complete. For example, militaries may have full-motion video showing several civilians killed, but not be aware of dozens more buried in the rubble.

[Last week](#) the Pentagon reported that 1,190 civilians had been killed by US strikes in Iraq and Syria since the beginning of the campaign in 2014. Airwars put the figure at more than 7200 dead - more than six times as high. General Dunford's study aims to try and understand why this discrepancy exists - with the key argument as articulated by an official, 'how do you possibly know if you are minimising civilian harm if you don't study it?'

The UK's Operation Shader has been the second-largest contributor to the anti-ISIS Coalition. However, [in over 1900 strikes in Iraq and Syria from 2014-2018](#) (70% being 500lb bombs), the UK has reported [only one civilian casualty](#). This single figure raises important questions about policy and process - the same questions currently being asked by the US study.

In July last year, the APPG on Drones culminated its [two year inquiry into UK drone operations with partners](#). The report examined current processes for civilian protection and called for the government to 'urgently re-evaluate its methodology by which civilian casualties are calculated in 'air-only' operations, & publish (for example, by making available to the Intelligence and Security Committee) the process by which civilian casualties are (a) calculated, & (b) investigated'.

The Commons Defence Select Committee is also asking the same questions about the processes in place for understanding and mitigating civilian harm in its ongoing inquiries into [Global Islamist Terrorism](#) and [UK Military Operations in Mosul and Raqqa](#). Giving [oral evidence](#) to the committee, Major-General Jones said: "The idea that you can liberate a city like Mosul or Raqqa without—tragically—civilian casualties is a fool's errand." Air Vice-Marshal Stringer endorsed that by saying, "with the best will in the world...we can't rule out the possibility that there will be some civilian casualties due to UK strikes that we are not aware of at the moment, or that there is that possibility in the future."

Working hard to protect civilians in conflict goes to the heart of UK values and principles - that is reason enough to start asking these tough questions. However, there is another reason to better understand and improve civilian protection - it is smart strategy. For every civilian we hit, we are missing our intended target while providing a support and recruitment tool for our adversaries. The UK Ministry of Defence has repeatedly said that it does 'everything possible' to avoid civilian casualties. But more can be done. Let's start by joining our allies in asking these tough questions.