

# The US-led War Against ISIS Is Killing 31 Times More Civilians Than Claimed. Report

“This may be the least transparent war in recent American history,” the reporters write.

By [Alex Ward](#)

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*The Pentagon claims that its air war against ISIS is one of the most accurate in history and that it is so careful in who it targets that the 14,000 US airstrikes in Iraq have killed just 89 civilians.*

*It turns out that the military’s assertion is a stunning underestimation of the true human cost of Washington’s three-year-old war against ISIS. An 18-month-long investigation by the [New York Times](#) has found that the US-led military coalition is killing civilians in Iraq at a rate 31 times higher than it’s admitting.*

“It is at such a distance from official claims that, in terms of civilian deaths, this may be the least transparent war in recent American history,” **Azmat Khan** and **Anand Gopal** [report](#).

From April 2016 to June 2017, Khan and Gopal traveled to nearly 150 sites in three ISIS-controlled areas in Northern Iraq. These were sites where the coalition conducted airstrikes against targets ostensibly linked to the militant group. In the places they visited, they found that the coalition vastly underreported how many civilians had died in the bombing.

The US-led coalition claims that one civilian has been killed in every 157 airstrikes. But Khan and Gopal report that, actually, the rate is one civilian death for every *five* airstrikes — a rate [31 times](#) as high as what the military claims.

Gopal and Khan tell the story of 56-year-old [Basim Razzo](#), an Iraqi man whose family was killed in an airstrike in September 2015. The coalition later put up a video of the airstrike on Razzo’s home on YouTube. The video claimed to be hitting a car bomb factory. Razzo’s family wasn’t counted among the civilian deaths until Khan and Gopal brought it up to coalition officials.

This raises many troubling issues about America’s air war against ISIS. First, a US-led military campaign is greatly underreporting the number of civilian casualties in Iraq. That also raises questions about how many civilians the US-led coalition might be killing in Syria, the neighboring country where the fight against ISIS is also taking place.

And, worse, killing civilians in ISIS’s territory could be a boon for its own recruitment.

## The anti-ISIS war keeps killing civilians

As Vox [reported](#) before, the US military has a civilian casualties problem.

For example, on May 26, Al Jazeera [reported](#) that more than 106 civilians, including 42 children, died during two days of bombing in Al-Mayadeen, Syria, by the coalition. The planes fired strikes at buildings that housed families of ISIS fighters.

US officials routinely note all the steps they take to ensure civilians aren't harmed in an attack, such as gathering detailed intelligence and attacking sites during times when few noncombatants are likely to be in the area. However, Khan and Gopal couldn't find a noticeable ISIS target near half of the strikes they visited.

Still, officials acknowledge, they take the necessary precautions to ensure civilians aren't casualties of the war — even though they sometimes are.

“We're not happy with it, and we're never going to be happy with it,” **Col. John Thomas**, a spokesperson for the military command that oversees the war, [told](#) Khan and Gopal. “But we're pretty confident we do the best we can to try to limit these things.”

Despite the advanced military techniques the coalition uses, however, it still cannot stop killing noncombatants because the US and its allies choose to fight ISIS primarily from the skies. It was inevitable that civilians would become collateral damage.

America is good at dropping bombs exactly where it wants to, but it can't control the explosion and those who might get hurt as the dust settles. The Pentagon knows this, of course, but it has historically done a very poor job policing itself and its allies to take all available measures to minimize innocent deaths.

Thanks to Khan and Gopal, we now have statistics showing just how poor a job the military has done — and just how many civilians are paying the price.

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